

The Anglo-Saxons

by Rob John

3. Althelstan - first king of England?

Narrator: One day, not long before he died, it is said that Alfred the Great - King of Wessex - called together the most important people in his court...

FX: *Music. Mumbling of assembled crowd*

Voice 1: What's going on? What's the king planning?

Voice 2: They say he wants to give someone a present.

Voice 1: A present? Who's he giving a present to?

Voice 2: I don't know but I think we're about to find out.

Official: Pray silence for the king.

Alfred: Today I wish to give this cloak, belt and sword to my grandson, Athelstan.

Voice 1: Athelstan. Which one is Athelstan?

Voice 2: That boy. The little prince.

Voice 1: Where?

Voice 2: Over there.

Voice 1: But he's just a child. Why's the king giving him a sword?

Alfred: Athelstan...

Athelstan: Yes, my lord.

Alfred: Come here. *[When the two are close Alfred says quietly:]* Today, not even our people here in Wessex know your name, but one day, when you are tall enough to wear this cloak and strong enough to lift this sword, you will be a great king and your name will be known throughout the land.

Athelstan: But grandfather, I don't want to be famous. I don't want to be a king.

Alfred: So, what do you want to be?

Athelstan: I just want to be...me.

Alfred: Hmm, that is a good answer. A wise answer. You will be king, but you will always be yourself. Now, turn round and face the people. My lords - look upon this child. This is Athelstan. You will remember that name.

Narrator: While he was still young we believe Athelstan was sent by his father, King Edward - the son of Alfred - to the Kingdom of Mercia. He was to be looked after by his aunt, Athelfleda, Queen of Mercia. She was strong and determined: she built castles and fortresses and led armies against the Vikings.

But when Athelstan was sent to live with her in Mercia, he was not happy...

Athelfleda: Let me look at you boy. You are...very small.

Athelstan: I'm not small. I am eight years old and I want to go home. I don't like it here.

Athelfleda: Why don't you like it here?

Athelstan: The people of Mercia hate my people - the people of Wessex. I don't feel safe.

- Athelfleda: You have much to learn! We do not hate you. The people here are just afraid - afraid of Wessex because Wessex is strong - just like Wessex fears the Vikings because *they* are strong. In this land everyone is afraid of everyone else. But what if one day everyone could stop fearing one other and come together as one?
- Athelstan: Could that ever happen, Aunt?
- Athelfleda: I don't know. What do you think little Athelstan?
- Athelstan: I'm not little!
- Narrator:** **Athelfleda was a powerful queen and also a good teacher. She taught Athelstan to love books and learning and her warriors taught him fighting skills. She taught him how to lead an army into war and she also taught him how to make peace.**
- Athelstan: Why do people call you a peace-weaver, Aunt?
- Athelfleda: Making peace is like making cloth, Athelstan. You have to find all the threads and slowly weave them together until you have something new and strong; something that will last.
- Narrator:** **Athelstan grew up to become a strong and wise young prince. When his father Edward died in 924, Athelstan became king of both Wessex and Mercia and many called him ruler of all England.**
- Athelstan: My lords, we have a long struggle ahead of us before I or anyone can claim to be King of all England. I have tried hard to make peace across the land, but there are those who still want to fight. An army led by Constantine of Scotland is massing in the north. Scots, Irish, Vikings are joining together to attack us. My lords! We will go to meet them and we will defeat them!
- FX: *Cheering, drumbeats and marching feet*
- Narrator:** **Athelstan's army met the forces, led by Constantine, at a place called Brunanburgh in 937...**

FX: Battle. Fighting fades to funereal drumbeat

Narrator: The battle lasted for two days and at the end, Athelstan was victorious. But many had died on both sides. Perhaps following the battle Athelstan remembered the words of his aunt, Athelfleda of Mercia...

Athelstan: We have won the battle. It is time to weave the peace.

Narrator: And just as Alfred had predicted, Athelstan became a great king. He helped the poor and passed laws to make the kingdom safer... He built churches and monasteries, promoted learning and had The Bible translated into English...

Most importantly, he started to bring the kingdom together. He invited leaders from all over the land to meet with him... and they came. A kind of peace was woven. And Athelstan had become the first true king of all England.