Alfred the Great
Max Adams

At Easter 878AD Alfred, king of the West Saxons, could claim lordship over no more than a few square miles of Somerset marsh. The kingdoms of Northumbria, East Anglia, Mercia, and now the whole south of England had been invaded and brought to submission by the *micel here*, the 'Great Host' of the Danish Vikings. By the time Alfred's grandson Athelstan died two generations later, all England south of the Humber was united in one kingdom, and the whole of the islands of Britain recognised his overlordship.

England is Alfred's legacy. His military and administrative triumphs stand alone in British history, and they are all the more remarkable for the circumstances in which he achieved them. Like Charlemagne before him and perhaps only Napoleon afterwards, he had the vision to build the foundations for a political and social entity whose fruits could only possibly be reaped long after his own death.

He was born at Wantage in 849AD, the fifth son of Aethelwulf, king of the West Saxons. Wessex was potentially the most wealthy of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, with rich forests, downland and fertile soils; but its long coast made it vulnerable to attack by sea, and it had traditionally been a wary rival of Mercia. Like its neighbours it had long maintained relations with the European continent, and Aethelwulf, perhaps more naturally a cleric than a king, had an especially international outlook. In 853 he sent the four year-old Alfred to Rome and two years later he himself made the political and spiritual pilgrimage, taking his youngest son with him. So Alfred had twice visited many of the courts of the European kings before he was seven years old; a later admiring Pope sent him a fragment of the true cross.

Alfred can have had no expectation of becoming king. However, one by one, between Aethelwulf's death in 858 and his own accession in 871, all his older brothers died. Peculiarly for the early medieval period, none of them died in battle. One must suspect a physiological family weakness; Alfred himself was ill for much of his life. He suffered terribly from piles, according to his biographer Asser, and another mysterious illness that crippled him with pain - it may have been a stress-induced bowel complaint, or a family predisposition to stomach cancer.

In any case, he inherited a kingdom at war. In the autumn of 865 the Great Host landed in East Anglia under their kings Ivar Boneless, Halfdan, and the sons of Ragnar Lothbrook. Previous raids over three-quarters of a century had been just that: war bands plundering for treasure and ransom. This army was different. It was bent on conquest.

Its tactics were simple. The Danes would seize a defensible site, moving rapidly up navigable rivers in their longboats, and then along Roman roads and ancient trackways in groups of mounted warriors. They would fortify the chosen site, ravage its hinterland, and sell peace to those who could

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afford it. In this way they took York in 867, Mercia in 868, and East Anglia in 869.

In 870 it was the turn of Wessex. The Great Host, numbering perhaps 10,000 men, wintered at Reading. In January 871 they were confronted at Ashdown in Berkshire by the West Saxon army under King Aethelred and his younger brother Alfred, still only 21 years old. The Danes fled, but within a fortnight had regrouped and defeated the West Saxons. Then in April Aethelred died, leaving Alfred to fight nine more engagements through that year. At the end of the campaigning season his army was exhausted and he was forced to sue for peace.

The military infrastructure inherited by Alfred was simply inadequate to deal with the speed and mobility of his enemies. Its basis was three levels of obligation. Individual lords or *thegns*, kept personal retinues. These bands of warriors, mostly mounted, would undertake engagements on their Lord's initiative. These might be against neighbouring *thegns* in a land dispute, or the result of a blood-feud, or to defend their land against Viking or Mercian attack. At a shire level ealdormen were required to raise a *fyrd*, consisting of the bands of individual thegns and others who owed military service. At a national level was the host, or *folc*, led by the king himself.

The extent to which a king could mobilise the entire national host depended on his personal authority and the political interests of his ealdormen and *thegns.* The speed with which they might take the field was quite another thing. Communication was difficult, and in mustering his army Alfred faced an understandable reluctance on the part of many warriors to leave home. Furthermore, an entire year's campaigning, such as Alfred undertook in 871 (and several times thereafter) put an intolerable strain on men who were needed for harvesting and ploughing and looking to the defence of their own families. Anglo-Saxon armies sometimes just decided to go home. And like a fire-fighter, Alfred might find himself chasing one enemy army while another landed two hundred miles away. So while he was in the field, he must also look to a long-term restructuring of the national defences.

Alfred had a respite of a few years from major Viking attacks. He used this time to reinforce his personal authority and to gain a deep insight into his kingdom. He must constantly have been on the move, from Devon in the west to Kent in the east, using his personal wealth and influence to bind *thegns* to him, and gaining an intimate knowledge of the complex geography of the kingdom.

In 875 a large part of the Great Host, under King Guthrum, made another attempt to conquer Wessex. Alfred's army fought several more engagements, mostly indecisive. Such indecision was a feature of early medieval warfare in which warriors rode to the battlefield, dismounted, and formed a close shield-wall which advanced on its enemy in a straight fight. Victory went to the holder of the battlefield, but a defeated enemy seems to have been able to reform quickly to fight another engagement. 'Great slaughter' is often described by the chroniclers; in reality, it must have been the exception.

This pattern of desultory pitched battle was broken in the second week of January 878, when Guthrum's army made a lightning advance from Gloucester and descended upon Chippenham with devastating effect. Alfred's fragile kingdom seems to have almost collapsed overnight. He fled to the safety of Athelney in the Somerset marshes with a small personal retinue and mounted a series of guerrilla raids on Guthrum's army while he attempted to re-group his forces. By May, astonishingly,

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Alfred had gathered sufficient forces from across the South-West to mount a massive counter-attack against the Danes, defeating them decisively at Edington in Wiltshire and forcing such punitive terms on Guthrum that he submitted to being baptised and withdrew his army to East Anglia.

From this point on Alfred's strategy was offensive. He captured and garrisoned London and was recognised as overlord by all Englishmen outside Danish territories. He began to fight naval actions against Danish raiders and embarked on a massive ship-building programme. He then planned and began to implement his greatest achievement, the network of thirty defended towns and forts across southern England that would ensure no part of the kingdom was more than a day's march from one of them. He chose their sites brilliantly: river crossings, nodes of Roman road networks, ancient hillforts commanding high ground. Only one was ever captured, and that when it was half-built. Alfred now had the crucial advantage of defensible bases from which to launch rapid counter-attacks.

He now began reforming his military structure, bullying and cajoling a recalcitrant Saxon nobility into agreement so that only half of his forces would ever be in the field at one time: it was the first English standing army. He innovated tactically too: aiming to cut the enemy from its supply chain, capturing their ships, and constructing double-forts to guard both sides of the major rivers. As he foresaw, by the end of his reign Wessex had become the least attractive place for the armies of the Vikings to attack, and they turned their attentions to the Continent. Alfred had overcome the most feared military force of the age.

After Alfred's death in 899, his children Edward the Elder and Aetheflaed built on these achievements to re-conquer England below the Humber and ensured the beginnings of English nationalism. For Alfred, rightly recognised as the greatest English king, military success was an essential means to a more important end: the instigation of a moral, religious and educational framework that survives as the basis of English society.

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