

## Topic: The Alfred Jewel and King Alfred

### Information for parents and teachers

The *Alfred Jewel* is made of gold, rock crystal and enamel, and is kept in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. It is thought to have been the handle of an 'aestel' - a pointer used to help reading manuscripts. It has an inscription AELFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN - 'Alfred ordered me to be made' which connects the jewel with King Alfred the Great (r. 871-899).

Alfred was the youngest child of King Æthelwulf of Wessex (d. 858) and Osburh, daughter of Osloc, the king's butler. Three of his elder brothers ruled Wessex before him; his sister, Æthelswith, was wife to Burgred, king of the Mercians. The Mercian alliance was reinforced by his own marriage to Ealswith, which resulted in five children who lived into adulthood.

Alfred's brother and predecessor as king of Wessex, Æthelred, left sons when he died in 871, but they were too young to defend the kingdom during a time of Viking attacks. Alfred's accession to the throne of Wessex could not therefore be challenged. Alfred faced a significant threat from Vikings at the start of his reign. Northumbria had been seized by Vikings in 866-7. East Anglia was taken in 869-70. Mercia was reduced in size by Viking conquests after attacks in 868-9 and 872-4.

Before Alfred became king of the West Saxons, he had already engaged in battle with Vikings, enjoying a significant victory at Ashdown. In early 871 the first 'great army' had been joined by a second force under Guthrum. From a base in Cambridge it launched attacks on Wareham and then on Exeter (876-7), resulting in a sworn peace and a payment of silver to the Viking army. However, Guthrum did not keep his promise and he launched an attack on Chippenham during the Christmas season and nearly captured Alfred. As a result, much of Wessex seems to have been taken by Vikings and Alfred fled for safety into the Somerset marshes. During this low point in his career, in an eleventh-century life of St Neot, recorded the tale (probably fictional) of how, brooding on 'God's just judgment', Alfred was berated by the wife of a swineherd for letting her cakes burn. Nevertheless, in May 878 Alfred had gathered enough supporters to defeat a Viking army at Edington (Wiltshire). Guthrum surrendered and was baptized with thirty of his followers. A text of some date after Edington and before Guthrum's death in 890 traces a frontier between their peoples and fixes terms for their relationship in legal matters, seemingly establishing a peace between two sides.

Nevertheless, Alfred's problems were not solved as he had to face another Viking army in 893-6. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's annal for 893, records that Alfred divided his army into two 'so that always half were at home and half on service', meaning that there were troops always on alert to deal with the Viking threat. The 896 annal records that Alfred ordered ships to be built of a large size, indicating attempts at an innovation to defeat Vikings at sea as well as on land. Alfred also encouraged the construction of a chain of forts around his kingdom, a policy which was continued by his children and which is recorded in a text called the *Burghal Hidage*.

Through the marriage of his daughter Aethelflaed, Alfred cultivated an important alliance with Mercia. His son-in-law Æthelred played a crucial role in the fighting of 893-6. Alfred was also an able administrator, and he made efforts to regularise law and to promote learning among his subjects. Alfred was himself the author of a number of works including a law book, a translation of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* and the *Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius. The biblical idea of wisdom drove Alfred's programme of spiritual and cultural revival and he recruited leading scholars to come and work at his court. As a result, some of the main sources of Anglo-Saxon history come from authors close to Alfred, including the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Asser's *Life of King Alfred*. The latter reports that despite his great military and governmental achievements, the king was dogged through his life by periods of ill health.

Alfred died on 26 October 899. He was around fifty years old. He was succeeded by his son Edward. Edward would move his father's remains to the New Minster at Winchester around AD 902. Alfred

would later be commemorated as one of the most famous English kings who secured the position of the Wessex royal line and sowed the seeds for the unification of England.