



Wikijunior

## Kings and Queens of England

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# Introduction

Welcome to the Wikijunior book on Kings and Queens of England.

In this book we start by looking at the very first Anglo-Saxon Kings of England. We then move on to show how the Crown changed hands many times as a result of conquest. We see some powerful kings and some weak ones. We see how the Crown has battled Parliament. We look at the period where power finally did transfer to Parliament through to the times of our current queen, Elizabeth II. At the end we also look at who the next kings of England may be.

We will find out about eleven Kings called Edward and nine called Henry. We will find out about a nine-day queen and a King Philip, who most people have now forgotten about. But first let's start way back in 871 with the Anglo-Saxons and the only king of England to be called "Great," Alfred.

# The Anglo-Saxons

The first kings of England were Anglo-Saxons. Before them, England was divided into a number of different kingdoms. The Anglo-Saxons united a number of these to form something like the country we know today, although Cornwall and the North were not controlled by them, and later the Danes controlled much of the east coast. Anglo-Saxon rule of England went on for around 140 years, before being challenged by a series of Danish kings. The first Anglo-Saxon king we look at is Alfred.

## Alfred the Great (871-899)

Alfred the Great was born between the years 847 and 849 in Wantage in what is now Oxfordshire. He died on 26 October 899. Alfred was the fourth son of King Ethelwulf of Wessex and became king of the southern Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex in 871, when his brother Ethelred I died. Alfred is famous for his defence of the kingdom against the Danes, who were also known as the Vikings. He is the only English monarch to be known as "the Great". He was the first King of Wessex to call himself "King of England". Alfred was an educated man who encouraged education and improved the kingdom's law system.



*Alfred the Great*

## Public life

Nothing is known about what Alfred did during the short reigns of his two eldest brothers, but when his third brother, Ethelred, became king in 866, Alfred became active in public life. In particular, he worked hard to free England from the influence of the Danes, and Alfred was appointed as Ethelred's successor.

In 868 Alfred tried unsuccessfully to relieve the middle England kingdom of Mercia from Danish influence. For nearly two years after that, though, the Danes did not attack Alfred's native Wessex. At the end of 870 this changed, and this period became known as "Alfred's year of battles". Wessex fought nine battles in 870 and 871, some of which were won, some lost. In April 871 Ethelred died, and Alfred became king. The Danes then defeated the English in a battle, whilst Alfred was away burying his brother, the old king. The English were then beaten again under Alfred's command in May.

After that Alfred agreed to a peace, and for the next five years the Danes were busy in other parts of England. But in 876, the Danes, under a new leader, Guthrum, attacked Wareham and then went on to Exeter. Here Alfred blockaded them, and after the Danes lost many ships in a storm, the Danes retreated to Mercia. Then, in January 878, they suddenly attacked Chippenham, where Alfred was. Alfred himself then retreated to Athelney in Somerset.

There is a story that whilst he was hiding in the marshes of Athelney, Alfred was given shelter by an elderly peasant woman who didn't recognise who he was. She left him to watch some cakes she had left cooking on the fire. Preoccupied with the problems of the kingdom and the war against the Vikings, Alfred uncaringly let the cakes burn, and the peasant woman complained and also beat him when she returned. When some of his knights returned and called him "Your Majesty", she realised who Alfred was, and she apologised, but Alfred insisted that he was the one who had to apologise. This story shows Alfred was a hero but human with mistakes and faults.

In the middle of May, Alfred and the Danes met at the Battle of Edington in Wiltshire, which Alfred won. England became split into two, the far south-western parts being controlled by the Saxons under King Alfred, and the rest of England, including London, being controlled by the Danes. This part became known as the Danelaw. By 879, the Danes had been forced out of Wessex and much of Mercia. For the next few years there was peace, partly because the Danes were being kept busy in Europe. Then, after a Danish uprising in East Anglia, which Alfred put down, he went on to take London in 885 or 886. Then in 892 or 893, the Danes attacked England again, but were ultimately repelled in 896 or 897, with only those Danes with connections to England remaining in East Anglia and Northumberland.

### **Marriage and children**

In 868 Alfred married Ealhswith, daughter of Aethelred Mucill, who was ealdorman of the Gaini, a people who lived in Lincolnshire around the town of Gainsborough. She was the granddaughter of a former king of Mercia, and they had five or six children, one of whom was Ethelfleda, who was later queen of Mercia.

### **Death and legacy**

After the Danes retreated, Alfred turned his attention to the royal navy, and ships were built according to the king's own designs. This is not, as some say, the beginning of the English navy, although both the Royal Navy and the United States Navy claim Alfred as the founder of their traditions. Alfred most probably died in 899, though the year is not certain. How he died is unknown. He was originally buried in the Old Minster, then moved to the New Minster, and then moved to Hyde Abbey in the year 1110.