

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 47:
THE MAN WHO SAVED ENGLISH**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 47: The Man Who Saved English. In this episode, we’re going to look at one of the most important figures in the overall history of the English language. The ninth century King of Wessex known to history as Alfred the Great. He is in fact the only English monarch to have the distinction of being called ‘the Great.’ And for purposes of our story, he is ‘great’ because he preserved the English language from conquest by the Vikings.

Last time, we explored the concept of Anglo-Saxon kingship, and we looked at the ongoing Viking invasions in the first half of the ninth century. This time, we’re going to move the story forward to the second half of the ninth century, and the period during which the Vikings shifted being pirates and raiders to being conquerors and colonizers. One by one, the Anglo-Saxon kings were defeated, killed or driven out of Britain altogether. And as the English kings fell, the culture and the language of the Anglo-Saxons began to be replaced by that of the Vikings. But it was Alfred who stemmed the tide of the Viking conquest.

I had originally planned to discuss Alfred’s role in the history of English in one episode, but it isn’t really possible to do the story justice in one single episode. So this time, we’re going to look at the arrival of the Viking conquerors and the overall events which led to the establishment of the Danelaw in Britain. And we’ll look at Alfred’s attempts to hold onto Wessex, and ultimately how he secured the Anglo-Saxon culture and language. So the focus of this episode will be more on the historical events of this period. And it will also focus on the battles over land and territory. And in fact, topography and territory is kind of an underlying theme of this episode.

Next time, we’ll focus more the language itself. We’ll look at the specific educational and literary reforms which Alfred implemented. And we’ll explore the way in which he promoted English as the primary written language of the Anglo-Saxons, even over Latin. So that’ll be next time.

Now let me begin at this point by making a quick correction to the last episode. In discussing the early history of Wessex, I mentioned that Egbert was the first king to briefly rule over all of the Anglo-Saxons. And I noted that he was an ultimate ancestor of the current monarch, Elizabeth II. But I said he was her 14th great-grandfather when I should have said he was her 34th great-grandfather. So I misspoke and I wanted to correct that of you were trying to do the math and kept coming up short.

Egbert is also a good starting point for this episode because he was the grandfather of Alfred. Egbert died in the year 839. And he was succeeded as King of Wessex, by his son, Aethelwulf. Aethelwulf of course was Alfred’s father. And in fact, Aethelwulf had five sons. Alfred was actually the youngest of those five sons. So there was no real expectation that he would ever become the king. He was sickly as a child, and really throughout his entire lifetime. He suffered from abdominal problems. Many modern scholars think he probably had Crohn’s Disease. So as far as the West Saxon royal family was concerned, Alfred was pretty much the last person anyone would have considered for a future king.

But ironically, the fact that Alfred was the youngest of five brothers, and the fact that he was sickly, may have actually been an asset in the long run. Sons with an expectation of becoming king were usually trained as warriors and leaders, but sons like Alfred were allowed to pursue other interests. And many of them were given an education with the ultimate intention of entering the monastery. We can't know for certain, but that may have been Alfred's presumed destiny. We do know that he took a particular interest in books and reading as a small child.

Near the end of his life, a biography of his life was commissioned. It was written by a Welsh monk named Asser who knew Alfred personally. And thanks to that biography, we know quite a bit about Alfred's early life.

One story that Alfred recounted concerned a beautifully illuminated book of Saxon poems which his mother owned. As a child, his mother promised the book to the first of her sons who could learn it by heart. Even though Alfred was the youngest child, he went to a teacher who repeated the book out loud until he had memorized all of it. He went back to his mother and recited the poems in the book, so the book became his. Unfortunately for Alfred, his mother died a short time later when he was still a small child. But this story illustrates how much the young Alfred loved books. It also suggests that Alfred couldn't read yet, since he needed a teacher to recite the poems to him. But we're told that he did learn to read and write English around the age of 12, even though he had to teach himself.

In later years, Alfred recalled that education had deteriorated so much in Britain during this period that there were no priests south of the Thames who speak and read Latin fluently, and there were very few who could do that in the rest of England." As a result, Alfred had a tough time finding a teacher, especially one who could speak Latin. Late in life, Alfred lamented that one of his greatest regrets as a child was that he didn't get the formal education that he really wanted. He desperately wanted to study and learn, but he couldn't find any teachers.

And this is very reminiscent of Charlemagne who we looked at a couple of episodes back. Charlemagne also inherited a kingdom where education and literacy had deteriorated, and he was also frustrated by his own lack of formal education. And all of that shaped his priorities as king and emperor later in life. And Charlemagne was apparently a role model for Alfred. In fact, Alfred was actually related to Charlemagne – at least by marriage. After Alfred's mother died, his father married the daughter of the Charles the Bald. You might remember that Charles the Bald was the grandson of Charlemagne, and he ruled the western part of Charlemagne's kingdom. So that meant that Alfred's step-mother was the great-granddaughter of Charlemagne.

The legacy of Charlemagne must have influenced young Alfred because when Alfred eventually became king, he initiated his own program to re-educate the English. And even created his own palace school in the tradition of the Charlemagne. Ironically, Charlemagne may have been indirectly responsible for some of the academic problems in Britain. The Carolingian Renaissance in France had drained some of the talent from the island, and it had contributed to the decline of Northumbrian scholarship .

But the real problem for Anglo-Saxon education was the Vikings. Those Viking raids had destroyed most of the prominent monasteries in Britain. And with the loss of the monasteries, the monastic schools had also fallen on hard times. As a result, book production was in serious decline. Literacy and handwriting had deteriorated. Scholars were few and far between. Modern scholars don't really like the term 'Dark Ages,' but this was truly a 'Dark Age' in Britain, at least as far as scholarship was concerned. And even the son of one of the most powerful kings in Britain couldn't find proper teachers.

In the 840s, the Vikings had devastated the eastern Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and they killed the King of Northumbria in 844. But at least they went away and took their spoils with them. But as we look to the second half of the ninth century, around the time Alfred was born in Wessex, all of that started to change. We're now entering a period which is sometimes called the second phase of the Viking invasions. This was the period during which the Vikings shifted from piracy and raiding to conquest and settlement. And conveniently, this second phase began in the year 850 – just as we turn our attention to the second half of the ninth century. In that year, a Danish fleet of 350 ships arrived in southeastern Britain. They settled on the Isle of Thanet near Kent late in the year. They built camps there and spent the winter on the island. In the words of the later Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, “hæþne men ærest ofer winter sæton” – literally ‘heathen men ere over winter sat’ or ‘The heathen men stayed over the winter.’

After the Winter ended, the Vikings went on the offensive. They attacked Canterbury and then headed up the Thames to London. In the word of the Chronicle, “bræcon Contwaraburg ond Lundenburg” – literally ‘broke Canterbury and London.’ And note that the Chronicle identifies London as ‘Lundenburg.’ And I mention that here because that suffix ‘-burg’ is going to become very important later in the episode.

Now after capturing both Canterbury and London, the Vikings headed further up the Thames. London was part of Mercia at the time. And the Mercian king was so frightened that he fled the kingdom with his army. It was at this point that the Vikings headed south and finally encountered the West Saxons, specifically Alfred's father Aethelwulf and his older brother Aethelbald. And the Chronicle says that the West Saxon army handed the Vikings a tremendous defeat.

Despite the occasional victory over the Vikings, the raids never really stopped. Ultimately, the Anglo-Saxons had two major problems when it came to the Vikings. They were still divided into four distinct kingdoms – Wessex, Mercia, East Anglia and Northumbria. So there was no unified defense. The other problem is that none of the kingdoms maintained standing armies. Each king had his own retinue around him, but when it came to warfare, the king had to raise an army. But many of the soldiers were also farmers. So if the fighting was protracted, the soldiers eventually had to return home to tend to crops and take care of their homesteads. So the Anglo-Saxons only enjoyed the occasional victory against the invaders, but it was never enough to stem the tide of the invasions.

Up to this point, I have generally referred to the invaders as the *Vikings*. But the Anglo-Saxons didn't actually use that term at all. As we just saw, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle sometimes called them the *Heathen Men*, or sometimes the *Northmen*, but it usually used the term *Danes* whether they actually came from Denmark or somewhere else.

The Anglo-Saxons did have a word which was very similar to *Vikings*, and it may have even been the original version of the word. That word was *wicingas*. One of the first known uses of the term was in the poem *Widsith* which may have its ultimate origins in a time before the Anglo-Saxons settled in Britain. The term is also used in a few other Anglo-Saxon texts. But it was always *wicingas* with a 'W' sound. The word *Viking* with a 'V' sound didn't actually exist in Old English. It is in fact, a Norse word. And English *wicing* and Norse *Viking* probably derive from the same source. So just as the Anglo-Saxons had trading centers called '*wics*' and the Norse had *Viks*, the Anglo-Saxons had *wicingas* and the Norse had *Vikings*. But the word *Viking* didn't really enter English until the 1800s.

As I noted earlier, the Anglo-Saxons preferred to use the term *Danes*. That choice is understandable because most of the Vikings who invaded the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were from Denmark. Swedish Vikings arrived later in Britain. And the Norwegians focused their efforts on northern Britain, Ireland, and eventually Iceland. But the Danes focused on Frisia, northern France and the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in Britain.

I should also note that these were English terms. In France, the Vikings were generally known as the *Normanni* which meant 'Northmen.' And as we know, one particular group of those Normanni came to occupy a large region in northern France. And that name *Normanni*, which was a generic term for the Vikings, soon came to refer to the people who lived in this particular region – the Normans. And we still know that region today as Normandy.

In Germany, the Vikings were sometimes referred to as the *Ascomanni* – the 'Ash-men' – referring to ships of ash wood used by the Vikings.

Regardless of what they were called, the Vikings continued to arrive in Britain. In the year 858, Alfred's father Aethelwulf died. Remember that Alfred had four older brothers. Well, by this point, the oldest brother was also dead. So the next two oldest sons basically split the kingdom with one ruling the traditional Wessex region in the west and the other ruling the more recently-acquired kingdoms in the east – Kent, Essex, Surrey and Sussex. By the end of the year 866, both of those sons had died. So that left two sons, Alfred and his older brother, Aethelred. So Aethelred being the older of the two became King of Wessex, and by this point the kingdom had been reunified. At this time, Alfred was a teenager around 16 years old. He wasn't the king, but he was now next in line. And his brother Aethelred was probably only a couple of years older than he was, so they were both teenagers. And in the brutal environment of the Viking Age when kings didn't tend to live into old age, that meant that there was now a very real possibility that Alfred might one day end up as king. He often accompanied his brother in battle, so he was learning what it took to be a military commander and a leader.

But by the time Alfred's brother Aethelred became king, a new and ever greater threat had arrived in Britain, and that threat was destined to shape the future history of the island. In the year 865, a massive Danish army arrived led by three sons of Ragnar Lodbrok.

I concluded the last episode with the story of Ragnar Lodbrok whose name meant 'hairy pants' or 'hairy britches.' He was the Danish Viking who plundered Northumbria, but was eventually captured and thrown into a pit with poisonous snakes where he died. As he died, he swore that his sons would avenge his death, and they would one day drink from the skulls of the Northumbrians. Well, those sons finally arrived in Britain in the year 865. And their arrival marks the ultimate origins of the Danelaw.

The important thing to understand about this invasion of 865 is that it was just that – an invasion. This wasn't a simple raiding party. And this wasn't a group of Vikings who built temporary camps on the islands to set out the winter. This new group of Vikings left their ships, they acquired horses, and they began to carve up the island. They had conquest on their minds.

One group of Vikings had arrived earlier in the year, but main force arrived in the Autumn of 865 in East Anglia on the eastern coast of Britain. This was the group led by three son of Ragnar Lodbrok's – Halfdan, Ivar, and Ubbe. This was a massive army. Estimates are that it consisted of around 10,000 men. The army is sometimes call the Great Danish Army or the Great Heathen Army.

A clear signal that this group of Danish Vikings were different from those who came before is indicated by what they did when they arrived. Like most Vikings, they engaged in local plunder, but they didn't just take their spoils and run. Instead, they spent almost an entire year preparing for their upcoming campaigns. The plunder was aimed at gathering the resources they would need to conquer the island. They gathered horses and assembled food, weapons and other supplies.

In 866, once they had acquired what they needed to proceed, they mounted their horses and headed north from East Anglia into Northumbria. The fact that the Danish army headed to Northumbria is a strong indication that revenge was at least a partial motivation here. That was where the Northumbrian king has sentenced their father to death. So that particular king was target number one.

But by this point, Northumbria had fallen into a state of civil war. Once again, the division of the Anglo-Saxons was a major liability. The Danes were able to waltz in and capture the primary Northumbrian city of York. Shortly afterwards, the two rival Northumbria kings who had been fighting each other decided to unify and combine their forces against the Danes, but it didn't do any good. The Danes were too powerful. The Northumbrian forces were defeated and both kings were killed in the fighting. This was the effective end of Northumbria as an independent kingdom.

The Danes then established a base at York. Prior to the arrival of the Danish Vikings, the town had been called *Eoforwic* by the Anglo-Saxons, but the Danes simply called it *Jorvik*. They shortened the first part of the name, and they replaced the English *-wic* at the end with the Norse *-vik*. Over time, *Jorvik* simply became *York*. And York gave them a base from which they could launch raids throughout the rest of the island.

The defeat of Northumbria also meant that one of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had now passed to Danish control. So we started off with four independent kingdoms, and now we have just three – East Anglia, Mercia and Wessex.

Over the next three years, the Danes used that base at York to carve up eastern Britain. Before I summarize those campaigns, I wanted to let you know that Louis Henwood has prepared a map for this episode. And that map illustrates these campaigns. So if you're visually oriented, you might want to check out that map at Episode 47 at historyofenglishpodcast.com.

So after the Danes conquered most of Northumbria, they moved southwest into Mercia in the central part of Britain. The king of Mercia realized that he couldn't defeat the Danish Army, so he contacted the king of the Wessex – Alfred's brother, Aethelred. Together Aethelred and Alfred led a Wessex army to Mercia to help out. Ultimately, the battle ended in a stalemate, and the Mercians paid the Danes to leave. The Danes returned to York and Mercia was spared at least for now.

After returning to York, they set their sights on the other kingdom to the south – East Anglia. That's where they had originally landed, and now they were headed south again plundering all the way. The king of East Anglia was named Edmund, and he tried to engage the Danes, but his army was soundly defeated. Edmund was captured and brutally killed using a method called the 'blood eagle.' I'll spare you the gory details, but suffice it to say that it was a manner of death which was certain to instill fear in any other king who might oppose the Danes. And the death of Edmund brought an end to the Wuffingas Dynasty in East Anglia going all the way back to Raedwald and Sutton Hoo, and even before that.

With the conquest of East Anglia, two of the four Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had now fallen to the Danes. Only Wessex and Mercia remained. And the Danes now controlled much of eastern Britain.

Rather than return to York, the Danish army decided to stay in East Anglia for the winter, and the following year 870, they headed southwest into Wessex. This was actually intended as a surprise attack. They headed down into the region around London, and then proceeded westward. Alfred's brother Aethelred was still the King of Wessex. So he and Alfred once again fought together to repel the Danes. In the first battle, the Danes were victorious and the Wessex army withdrew, but a second battle took place four days later. This time as the Danes prepared to attack the West Saxons, Alfred's brother remained in his tent with a priest to complete Mass. His duty to God came first.

While Aethelred remained in his tent, Alfred seized the moment and the initiative by leading the troops into battle himself. Supposedly he fought like a wild man. Many of the Danes were killed, and it ended up being a victory for the West Saxons – one of the rare Anglo-Saxon victories against the Danes during this period. It also helped to establish Alfred's reputation as a capable military leader, even though his brother was still the king. But the victory was short-lived. Two more battles were fought over the next few weeks with lots of casualties on both sides. But ultimately, Alfred and his brother couldn't defeat the Danes, so they withdrew. So despite some limited success against the Danes, the end result was basically the same.

But within a few days, Alfred's brother Aethelred died. And since Aethelred's two children were infants, the throne passed to Alfred – the youngest of the five brothers. At the age of 21, he was now the King of Wessex.

It was now up to Alfred to take on the Danes. In the year he became king, he fought no less than nine battles against the Danish invaders. Over the course of these battles, the Danes began to lose more and more men. For the first time, an Anglo-Saxon King was able to hold his own. The Danish leader Halfdan soon realized that Alfred was a formidable opponent, and perhaps a little more than he had bargained for.

Halfdan decided to make peace with Alfred, and after accepting a payment from Alfred to leave, the Danes withdrew from Wessex. Of course, this was just a temporary peace, and both sides probably knew that it was just a matter of time before the Danes would be back.

The Danes may have decided to leave Alfred alone for a while, but that didn't mean they were content with the territory they had conquered. The massive kingdom of Mercia was still there in the Midlands. So the Danes once again focused their efforts on that kingdom.

In 874, the Danish army drove into Mercia. The Mercian king Burgred fled Mercia just as his predecessor had done in the face of Viking invasions about 20 years earlier. Burgred fled all the way to Rome where he died sometime later. And with Burgred gone, the Danes appointed a puppet to replace him. The net result was the elimination of another Anglo-Saxon king, and much of Mercia was now under Viking control. So by this point, three of the four Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were effectively under Danish control. That left just one remaining kingdom – Alfred's kingdom of Wessex.

Shortly after the conquest of Mercia, the Danish Army split into two separate groups. Halfdan led half of the army back north into Northumbria. The other half remained in Mercia under the leadership of a Viking named Guthrum, and over time Guthrum emerged as the primary Danish leader in the east.

Having moved his portion of the Danish army back to Northumbria, Halfdan began to consolidate Danish rule there. Previously, the Danes had installed puppet rulers, but now those puppets were replaced with direct rule. And Danish law was applied directly to the region, thus the Danish law or 'Danelaw' was being established in the north, and eventually in the eastern parts of Mercia.

And I should remind you at this point that *law* was a Viking word. So in the Danelaw, the Old English *dooms* or *domas* were now replaced with the Danish *law* – or *lagu* as it was pronounced at the time.

The focus now began to shift to that other part of the Great Danish Army – the portion led by Guthrum. Guthrum was committed to defeating Alfred and conquering Wessex. He and Alfred fought several battles over the next few years. There were no decisive victories, and Alfred once again resorted to paying off the Danes to get them to leave. But that was always a temporary solution. The payment, or Danegeld as it was called, really just bought a temporary peace.

Eventually the attacks resumed. Alfred secured an occasional victory, but the Danes generally got the better of the West Saxons over time. Alfred's forces were starting to wear down. By 877, Guthrum's forces were pretty much entrenched in Wessex, but they couldn't secure a decisive victory against Alfred. He continued to hang on.

In January of the following year 878, Guthrum apparently made contact with one of those three sons of Ragnar Lodbrok named Ubbe who was leading his own contingent of Danish Vikings in Wales. The idea was to combine Guthrum's forces with Ubbe's forces and attack Alfred from two different directions.

In early January of 878, Ubbe arrived in Wessex with 23 ships and about 1,000 men. Guthrum then launched a surprise attack on Alfred and his court at Chippenham. This was winter, so it wasn't the fighting season. And it was the day of a Christian feast, so Alfred's forces apparently had no idea that an attack was imminent. Christian kings would never have considered fighting at that time, but the Danes weren't Christian. So Alfred's forces were taken by complete surprise, and Alfred had no choice but to flee with a small group of supporters.

That left Alfred with three options. First, he could counter-attack the Danes, but that was essentially a suicide mission. He might die a heroic death and become a martyr, but the last remaining Anglo-Saxons kingdom would fall to the Danes

The second option was to head to the coast, jump on a boat, and flee to the continent like the earlier Mercian kings had done. But again, that would give Wessex to the Danes. In fact, we know from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that many West Saxons did chose that option. In the words of the Chronicle, "micel þæs folces ofer se adræfdon" – literally 'many of those folks over sea were set adrift,' or to paraphrase 'many of the people were driven over the sea.'

But Alfred didn't choose either of those options. Instead, he chose a third option. He chose to stick around in Wessex, but avoid a direct confrontation with the Danes by hiding out in the marshes of Somerset in the western part of the kingdom. The wetlands in that region were so sparsely populated and so desolate that they could serve as an effective hiding place, especially for someone already familiar with the region. From that hiding place, Alfred could bide his time and hope that his fortunes changed. Maybe one day he could get gather enough troops to launch a counter-attack. It might not work, but it was better than certain suicide. So that was the option Alfred chose.

Alfred and his small group of supporters found their way to an island in the marshes called Athelney. They hid there for the next couple of months conducting a guerilla war against the Danes while trying to formulate a plan to defeat the invaders. Meanwhile, the Danes moved south and occupied most of the kingdom.

These were truly the darkest days for the Anglo-Saxons. At this point, the Danes had effectively conquered all of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The Anglo-Saxon culture and language were on the verge of being overtaken and replaced by that of the Danes. Alfred was still alive and still nominally the king, but the Danes effectively controlled Wessex. Alfred and his small retinue had been relegated to hiding out in the thickets and marshes. And from this precarious position, it seemed just a matter of time before Alfred would be caught and killed.

Alfred's time in Aethelney is the subject of much folklore. There is a very well-known story in Britain of Alfred and the burning cakes. This is a story told to schoolchildren for generations, and I would be remiss if I didn't mention it here. So basically, the story goes that Alfred was traveling incognito, and he took refuge in the hut of a poor peasant woman. When she needed to leave for a while, she told Alfred to keep an eye on some cakes or bread which she had in the fire oven. But Alfred was so consumed with planning his comeback against the Vikings, he just sat there lost in his own thoughts. He forgot about the cakes and let them burn. When the woman returned, she berated him for not listening and for letting the cakes burn, but Alfred treated her with respect and apologized for being neglectful.

Now this story didn't actually appear until the eleventh century, several generations after Alfred died. And many historians believe it is just a myth. If it is a myth, it was probably designed to illustrate how desperate the situation was at the time. Alfred was the last hope for the Anglo-Saxons. Yet he was relegated to hiding in the marshes and watching over cakes and being yelled at by a peasant woman for letting them burn. But in the end, the story relates that Alfred was a good man, unlike the savage Vikings. He treated the old woman with respect, and he acknowledged his own short-comings. So we get a glimpse of how Alfred was viewed by later Anglo-Saxons.

Before I move on from Alfred and the burning cakes, I should note that there is a very interesting linguistic aspect to that story. This is the quintessential story of the English king trying to combat Viking invaders in order to preserve English culture and the English language. Yet *burn* and *cake* are both Viking words. The current English words were either taken directly from Old Norse or were heavily influenced by Old Norse. And that illustrates how extensive the Norse influence on English was in later centuries.

In Old English, a *cake* didn't mean a desert treat. It was just a flat round loaf of bread. It began as a Germanic word – *kokol*. And it existed in both Old English and Old Norse. In Old English, the 'K' sound at the end shifted to a 'CH' sound, which was one of those standard Old English sound shifts. So *kokol* became *coecel* (/KO-eh-chel/). But Old Norse didn't have that sound shift. So the Vikings has the word as *kaka*. And the fact that modern English *cake* uses the 'K' sound at the beginning and at the end is a big clue that it came from the Norse version of the word. *Cake* also gave us the word *cookie*, but not *cook*. *Cook* is actually a Latin word.

Burn is very similar. It was also a Germanic word with very similar versions in Old English and Old Norse. It's believed that the English and Norse versions blended together over time to give us the modern word *burn*. So English has a deceiving history. The story of Alfred and the burning cakes points to the ultimate triumph of English, yet it requires us to use Norse words to tell it.

Another fascinating part of Alfred's time in Aethelney is how he was able to avoid capture. Historians aren't entirely sure how he was able to avoid the Danes who were almost certainly pursuing him. Part of the answer may lie in the name of the island where he sought refuge – *Aethelney*.

Athelney was a small island of about 24 acres, and it was surrounded by swamps and marshes. Today, many of the swampy areas in that region have been drained to increase the amount of arable land. But during the time of Alfred, the landscape was quite different. It was much more difficult to penetrate. It was very marshy with a lot of isolated islands. And Athelney was one of those islands. It was only accessible by boat, and it was so isolated that the Danes had a difficult time reaching it by land or boat.

So did Alfred just luck out and stumble across this little island in the marshes? Well, this is where that name *Athelney* may provides an answer. *Aethelney* was originally a compound word – a combination of *Æthelinga* and *ieg* (/ee-eh/). We saw that word *Ætheling* in the last episode. It meant 'nobles' in Old English. So princes were called *æthelings*. And it's actually cognate with *elders*. The other part of the compound was *ieg* which was an Old English word for an 'island.'

So *Athelney* meant 'the island of the nobles.' And some scholars think the island was called that because the Wessex nobles often visited there, and perhaps even maintained a royal estate there. And that might explain why Alfred was so familiar with the area, and it might also explain why he was able to avoid capture during his time there.

And since we're discussing topography, let me make a couple of other notes about that type of landscape. I noted that Old English used the word *ieg* which we see in that suffix at the end of names like *Athelney*, *Jersey* and *Hackney* – all of which were originally the names of islands.

That Old English word *ieg* was derived from an Indo-European word which meant 'water.' The original word also gave us the Latin word *aqua* which we still have in English meaning 'water.' And in early Old English, *ieg* also apparently retained the meaning of water because the early Anglo-Saxons combined the word *ieg* meaning 'water' with the word *land* to create a compound word meaning 'water land' – or land surrounded by water. That word was *ieg-land*. As you might have guessed, that was the original version of our modern word *island*, but there was no 'S' in the spelling in Old English. And for some reason, the *land* part became optional over time. So the Anglo-Saxons sometimes just used first part – *ieg* – to mean 'island.'

But the Normans arrived in 1066. And they had their own word for an island which was the word *isle*. And it's very tempting to assume that French *isle* is cognate with English *island*, but it's not. *Isle* was derived from the Latin word *insula* which gave us words like *insular* and *insulate*. And that's why there's an 'S' in *isle* – I-S-L-E. It goes back to the original Latin root word.

Well this is where linguistic confusion changed the Old English word *ieg-land* to the modern word *island*. After the Normans arrived and brought the word *isle*, English speakers apparently started to confuse the two words which had the same basic meaning. And the first part of *ieg-land* shifted to *isle* and became *island*. And the word *island* even picked up that letter 'S' from *isle* as well. So the modern word *island* is really a blend of the Old English and Old French words for *island*.

And before I move on, I should note that the original Latin word *insula* also gave us the Latin word *peninsula*. *Pæne* meant 'almost' in Latin. So *pæne* plus *insula* meant 'almost an island.' So it was a piece of land mostly surrounded by water, but still connected to the mainland, so not technically an island. And those two words combined to give us *peninsula*.

So let's go back to Alfred's camp on the island of Athelney. In Old English, that type of camp might have been called a *wæterfæsten* which meant 'a camp surrounded by water.' It might also be called a *wudufæsten* – 'a camp surrounded by woods.'

The first part of those compounds is pretty straight-forward. *Wæter* was 'water,' and *wudu* was 'woods.' The second part was *fæsten* and meant 'a camp.' Once again, *fast* is one of those words which was almost identical in Old English and Old Norse. The original sense of the word was 'firm or fixed.' And we still have that sense in a word like *steadfast* which is an Old English compound word. *Stead* actually derives from the same root as 'stand.' We also have it in the word *fast* as in 'to not eat for a certain period of time.' So from the sense of *fast* as something fixed or steady, it came to mean a type of fixed settlement like a camp. Thus, *wæterfæsten* or *wudufæsten*.

But I know what you're thinking. If *fast* originally meant 'fixed or firm or steady,' how in the world did it come to mean 'quick or speedy?' Those seem to be polar opposites. Well, it appears to be related to the idea of a chase. For example, a person chasing an animal in a hunt. If the person is quick enough to keep up with the animal, he is 'sticking close' to the animal or holding fast. So *fast* originally referred to the relationship between the one fleeing and the one chasing. And we still have that sense of the word in words like *fasten* and *fastener*. When we *fasten* something, we are tying it together. And we can do that with the help of a *fastener*. So from that sense of two things being tied together unseparated – in this case two runners – we eventually got the sense of something nimble and quick.

And speaking of *quick*, that's another Old English word. Much like the word *queen*, that 'QU' in *quick* makes it look like a French word, but in Old English it was C-W-I-C. And speaking of marshes and the word *quick*, I should note that English developed a word for very marshy soil shortly after the Normans arrive. That word was *quicksand*. But once again, that word doesn't

seem to make sense. We saw that *fast* originally meant something fixed and was used to describe a camp, but then later it came to mean something quick. And now we have *quicksand* which refers to a places where you get trapped and can't move. So what's going on there? Well, the word *quick* actually refers to the 'sand' or 'soil' itself. The original sense of the word *quick* was 'lively or animated.' It was once common to say that someone was '*quick with child*' to mean 'pregnant.' The cattle or livestock owned by a farmer was sometimes described as *quickstock* or *quickgoods* meaning 'property that is alive.' So *quicksand* was 'living or animated sand.' Not fixed or firm or 'fast' in the original sense of *fast*, but shifting and movable. And so it was extremely marshy and it could swallow you up. So *quicksand* could bring you to an immediate stop.

And this type of topography helps to explain why the swamps around Æthelney were such an advantage for Alfred and his men. It created lots obstacles for the Danes.

The Anglo-Saxons called this type of wetland topography the *mersc* – the original version of our modern word *marsh*, also found in *marshy* and *marshland*. The word *mersc* was probably derived from the Old English word *mere* meaning 'water' as in *mermaid*. A type of mallow plant was also very common in those salt marshes, and those mallow plants were called the *marshmallows* – another Old English word.

Another word possibly derived from the same root as *marsh* and *mere* was the word *moor* – M-O-O-R. The Old English word *mor* meant a 'swamp or bog.' So it had a meaning very similar to *marsh*. A Dutch verison of the same Germanic root word gave use the word *morass* which also originally meant a 'wet or swampy area.' But it later came to mean something that hinders your progress. So in the word *morass* we can see the connection between Alfred's hiding place and the Danes' inability to get to him. Alfred's *morass* – or *marsh* – turned into a *morass* for the Danes.

We can make a similar construction with the Celtic word *bog* which English borrowed much later. A *bog* was a swampy area, and someone mired in a *bog* might find himself 'bogged down.' Similarly, someone mired in a *swamp* might become 'swamped' or overtaken by the situation.

And in fact the word *mire* meaning 'to trap or bog down' was originally a noun, and it meant a 'bog or swamp.' It's actually a Norse word brought by the Vikings. It was originally *myrr*. It's cognate with words like *muck*, *mud*, *muddle*, *muggy*, and *moist*, and also with the word *moss* – a type of plant found in swamps. And as I said, the noun *myrr* gave us the verb *mire* meaning 'to become bogged down.'

And in fact, Old English had a word – *cwabba* – which meant 'to shake or tremble.' It later came to refer to ground that was shaky or trembly, or more specifically 'wet and marshy.' So very similar to quicksand. The word became *quag* in Middle English. And late Middle English combined those two words *quag* and *mire* – both meaning 'a bog' – and they produced the word *quagmire* – again a type of marsh or bog. And once again, the word evolved from a type of topography to a word meaning 'a difficult situation or predicament.'

So the point of that digression was to illustrate how Modern English has taken words meaning a swampy area and converted them into words meaning a bad situation. And that's given us phrases like *morass*, *quagmire*, *swamped*, and *bogged down*. And that's exactly what happened to the Danes after Alfred went into hiding in the swamps around Æthelney.

Alfred continued to fight a guerilla war against Guthrum's contingent of Danes. Meanwhile, the other group of Danes led by Ubbe which had come from Wales, they also got bogged down in Wessex. A Wessex earldoman was able to gather an army of West Saxons and they provided some effective resistance. In fact, Ubbe's force was eventually defeated, and Ubbe himself was killed. As a result of that defeat, Ubbe's Danes were never able to join with Guthrum's main group. And that was just the opportunity Alfred had been waiting for.

From Æthelney, Alfred had been planning the West Saxon resistance, and their eventual comeback. He had maintained underground communication with native militia in other parts of Wessex. It still isn't entirely clear how he maintained that contact. Presumably, he had a network of messengers who coordinated efforts between the various groups. In May of 878, Alfred was able to arrange a rendez-vous with those other West Saxon fighters. It appears that Alfred's reputation was so great, or the Vikings were so despised, that fighters began to flock to Alfred's gathering army.

Two days after the Wessex army was amassed, Alfred pushed forward and engaged Guthrum's forces at Edington. Alfred's forces routed the Danes in battle, and the Danes were driven back. It was a decisive victory, but unlike most other English kings who failed to seize the moment and allowed the Vikings to get away and re-group, Alfred didn't make that same mistake. He followed the Danes to their camp at Chippenham, and then his forces laid siege to the camp.

Two weeks later, the remaining Danish army in Wessex surrendered to Alfred. It was a massive and unprecedented defeat for the Danish Vikings, but more importantly for our purposes, it was a huge victory for the West Saxons, and it secured the ultimate survival of the Anglo-Saxon culture and language.

After Alfred's victory, he and Guthum agreed to a peace treaty. The most important part of the treaty was that the Danes agreed to leave Wessex. And that meant that Wessex was preserved as an independent Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

It is also important to keep in mind that the treaty did not bring an end to Danish rule in Britain. In fact, it did just the opposite. Alfred and Guthrum actually agreed to divide the Anglo-Saxon regions with the Danes retaining their base in the north and east, and Alfred retaining Wessex in the south and west. So the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were sacrificed to the Danes in order to secure Wessex. And that meant that the increasingly important trading center of London also passed to the Danes, at least for now. Going forward, the Danes would keep their customs and laws and language in the Danelaw, while the Anglo-Saxons would do the same in their region.

Another key part of the treaty was that Guthrum and the Danes agreed to convert to Christianity. And this is another illustration of how Alfred often thought in unconventional ways.

He realized that the Danish threat would continue in the east as long as the Danes were there, so he thought they would be more likely to honor the treaty going forward if they converted to Christianity. That meant that the Danes would abandon their pagan Germanic gods. And that also had important long-term consequences. It meant that the Viking settlers were better able to mix and integrate with the native Anglo-Saxons over time. It also meant that there was a lot of inter-marriage between the two groups. And that tended to result in a lot of language mixing. And we'll explore these consequences in upcoming episodes.

About three weeks after their defeat, Guthrum and thirty of his leading men were baptized in Alfred's presence. After a period of feasting, the Danes eventually withdrew back to the Danish lands in the east as promised.

Alfred had achieved a great victory, and he had preserved the Kingdom of Wessex. But he was smart enough to realize that agreements with Vikings were rarely permanent. He had won the war, but now he needed to win the peace.

So Alfred considered the weaknesses of his kingdom, and he set about trying to find ways to make it stronger. I noted earlier that the Anglo-Saxons had a couple of major problems when it came to their defenses. First, they were divided. But now under Alfred, they were more unified than they had been before, and in fact, as we'll see later, a large part of Alfred's reign from this point forward was aimed at unifying the various Anglo-Saxon peoples with a shared sense of 'Englishness.'

The other problem was that the Anglo-Saxons didn't really maintain a permanent army because most of the soldiers were farmers, and they had obligations at home. And the kingdom needed the food which they produced. So there was a specific fighting season.

But the Vikings had already established that they could attack at any time. So to deal with this problem, Alfred set about organizing a more permanent force. And he did that by creating a rotating military service. One group of soldiers would serve in the army while the other group tended to their farms. And after a while, they would rotate. And that meant that Alfred always had a standing army ready to deal with any threats. But it also meant that the farms could be maintained at the same time.

The other major reform which he initiated was the creation of walled or fortified towns. These fortified towns were called *burhs*. They were centers of refuge, defense, and eventually trade. But these new burhs weren't just built in random locations. The locations were very carefully selected. In some cases old forts, especially old Roman forts, were selected. In other places, new burhs were established. There was a particular focus on river routes to prevent Vikings from traveling to places deep inland. But in selecting where to build those burhs, the ultimate goal was to spread them out in such a way that no part of Wessex would be more than 20 miles from

one. Therefore, no part of the kingdom would be vulnerable. There was always be a place nearby to take refuge, and there would always be local garrison to deal with any threat.

Over time, these fortified towns or burhs began to grow, and they became centers of trade and commerce since they were fortified and safe. And many of those towns retained the word *burgh* as part of their name. You might remember from earlier in the episode that even London had that suffix in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. It was called *Lundenburg*.

So Alfred constructed his own burhs in Wessex at very strategic locations. The word *burh* was typically spelled either B-U-R-H or B-U-R-G. In Old English, the letters H and G usually represented that guttural consonant sound which English no longer has. And in Middle English, those letters were usually combined to give us the ‘GH’ spelling for that sound. So in Middle English, *burh* or /bur(ch)/ was often spelled ‘B-U-R-G-H.’

By the way, this was an old Germanic word for a fortified town. It was also used on the continent, and we still have in continental place names like *Luxembourg*, *Strasbourg* and *Hamburg*. And since hamburgers are ultimately named after the city of Hamburg, it means that the word *burgh* is a part of many modern diets. And this is very similar to the ‘-wich’ in *sandwich*. A couple of episodes back we saw that the word *sandwich* is derived from the place name *sandwich* which used ‘-wich’ as a suffix meaning a trading center. So *hamburger* and *sandwich* actually have etymologies tied to Germanic words for fortified towns and trading centers.

In Britain, that word *burgh* eventually lost that Germanic consonant at the end. And what happened to that word then generally depended on where the burh or town was located.

In the south and west, where Old English continued to flourish under Alfred and his successors, that final consonant, which is really just a breathy ‘G’ sound, tended to do what the ‘G’ sound often did on Old English. It shifted to a ‘Y’ sound, and it became *bury*. We see that in a name like *Canterbury* which was literally ‘the fortified town of Kentish people.’ And towns like *Malmesbury* and *Shaftesbury* were burhs established by Alfred. We also see it in the name *Glastonbury*.

But the Danes also created fortified burhs using the same Germanic word. And in places in the north and the east where Danish influence was greater, that word *burgh* tended to become *borough* (/burra/). It’s sometimes spelled ‘BOROUGH’ and sometimes just spelled ‘BORO.’ We see it in place names like *Gainsborough* and *Scarborough* in England. It also exists in Scotland, where it is usually rendered as ‘BURGH.’ So we have the city of *Edinburgh* which is spelled with that ‘BURGH.’

Now I noted that there was a geographic divide in how that consonant at the end of *burgh* evolved over time. But don’t take that geographic divide too literally. There are several exceptions with ‘burras’ in the south and west of England and ‘burys’ in the north and east, but the general divide does appear to be somewhat related to the ancient divide between Old English and Old Norse.

And just as that Old English word evolved into ‘burra’ in some town names, it also evolved into the word *barrow* meaning a mountain or hill.

Of course, the Germanic tribes back on the continent fought Latin-speaking peoples for many centuries. And since the Germanic tribes used burgs as fortified places, it’s not surprising that *burg* was borrowed into Latin. And the Latin version of that word has filtered back into English.

Since a burg was a fortified and guarded center, it was tough to break into, but sometimes outsiders were able to break through and plunder the burg. And Latin gave English a word to describe someone who breaks in and steals something – a *burglar*. Old English actually had a similar construction. A thief in Old English was sometimes called a *burgh-breche* – a ‘burg breacher.’

As we’ve seen, those early burgs developed into towns and cities over time. In French, the people who lived in towns and cities were distinct from the peasants who lived on the farms. So using that same Germanic word, French created the term *borjois* to mean a ‘town dweller.’ And it later developed into the term *bourgeoisie* meaning the free Frenchmen who lived in towns and cities, and later became a general term for the French middle-class.

Some linguists also think that the original Indo-European version of that word passed into the original Latin language spoken by the earliest Romans. Now we’ve seen before that Latin experienced its own set of sound shifts as it evolved from the original Indo-European language. And those sound shifts are basically the Latin equivalent of Grimm’s Law. Well, one of those common sound shifts within Latin was a shift from the original Indo-European ‘B’ sound to the later Latin ‘F’ sound. We’ve seen that before in words like English *brother* with its original Indo-European ‘B’ sound and Latin ‘fraternal’ with the Latin ‘F’ sound. And many linguists think this same sound change affected the original version of the word *burg*, and it produced Latin words like *fort*, *fortress*, *fortify* and *fortification*. And if true, that would make those words cognate with *burg*, *borough*, *burglar* and *borjois*.

So burgs or burhs were nothing new, but what was new in Wessex was the way Alfred structured those burhs. He had them constructed at a strategic distance from each other in a way that every part of the kingdom had relatively close access to one. They were also part of a larger restructuring of the Wessex society.

Since those burhs were now the key to the defense of the kingdom, Alfred actually began use them as the basis for new administrative units. And those new units were called shires. They replaced the system which had existed before. And to understand this process, we have to understand what the structure looked like before Alfred.

In the last episode, I mentioned that the most basic administrative unit was the hide. It was roughly the amount of land required to support a family, and it was typically around 40 acres in size. A hide also determined how much ‘food rent’ had to be paid to the king each year. Well, those hides served as the basis for larger administrative units. Those hides were grouped together into collective units of 100 hides each. And those units were called the ‘hundreds.’

They were similar to counties. And this type of system was the traditional system used not only in Anglo-Saxon Britain, but also used back in the Germanic regions on the continent.

Each hundred had a tribal court for settling local disputes. These were called the ‘hundred courts,’ and they typically met on a monthly basis. But now, Alfred set about dismantling much of that traditional system of the hundreds. The new units were the *shires*, and each shire was centered around one of those burhs which Alfred established. Each shire also had a shire court which was similar to the old hundred court.

The term *shire* had been around in Wessex for a long time. The Old English version of the word was *scir*. But originally, the word could mean any administrative area. But under Alfred, it began to take on a very specific meaning, basically the precursor of counties. In fact, the Normans basically just replaced the Old English word *shire* with their own French word *county*. But the term *shire* still lives on in lots of place names like *Berkshire*, *Hampshire*, *Staffordshire* and *Yorkshire*, just to name a few.

The Anglo-Saxons also continued to use the concept of the hundred for certain purposes. But the shires became the primary administrative units. The shire and the shire court were presided over by a royal official called an *earldoman*. The earldoman helped to collect taxes, and he mobilized the defense of the shire in case of attack. The shire also had a local official called a *reeve* who was responsible for checking the revenues of the king. But over time, the power of the earldoman gradually shifted to the reeve who became the primary local official. The reeve of the shire was known as the ‘shire reeve’ – or *scirgerefa* in Old English. And *scirgerefa* eventually became *sheriff*. So *sheriff* was originally a compound word meaning the ‘shire reeve.’

So Alfred had organized a permanent standing army. And he developed a system of burhs throughout the kingdom. And he structured the local governments around those burhs in new units called shires. But he did one more thing to protect Wessex from the Vikings. He was the first Anglo-Saxon king to develop a navy. So some consider him the founder of the English navy. Without a navy, the seas had been the exclusive domain of the Vikings. The Vikings could come and go as they pleased. And they could land at any point along the coast. So that made coastal defenses incredibly difficult.

But in the year 897, Alfred commissioned the construction of several ships to oppose future Viking invasions. And interestingly, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that he designed his own ships. In the words of the Chronicle:

“þa wæron fulneah to swa lange swa þa oðru” – literally ‘They were full-nigh twice as long as the others.’

The Chronicle continues:

“Sume hæfdon siextig ara, sume ma” – ‘Some had sixty oars, some more.’

“næron nawðer ne on fresisc gescæpene ne on denisc – ‘They were neither in the Frisian shape nor in the Danish.’

So these were unique Anglo-Saxon ships designed by Alfred. But this was one area where Alfred probably would have been better served to leave it to the experts. The incredibly long ‘long-ships’ were apparently very difficult to maneuver and manage. Nine of those ships engaged several Viking boats, and most of Alfred’s ships ran aground (‘very awkwardly’ in the words of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle). But some of the Viking ships also ran aground, so maybe the weather or the tides were also a factor. Many of Vikings were killed in the battle, and those that were captured were led to Winchester to Alfred’s court where Alfred hanged everyone of them. So as we can see, the Viking threat was not over.

Not only were new Viking raiders continuing to threaten Wessex, but Guthrum’s Danes in the east were starting to challenge Alfred again. So Alfred’s new defenses were going to be put to the test. As Alfred anticipated, the peace with the Danes was short-lived, and by the year 885, war with the Danes had been renewed. In that year, Guthrum attacked Wessex again, but this time Alfred was able to repel the Viking attack. And in the process, he actually captured London and took it away from the Danes. The details of what happened there are very vague. Alfred’s biographer Asser says that Alfred ‘occupied’ London. It is assumed that he had to fight for it, but there is no record of a battle.

Regardless of the circumstances, we do know that Guthrum was forced to make a new peace with Alfred. And Alfred got London in the process. The Chronicle then states that all people not under the subjugation of the Danes submitted to Alfred. And this is a very significant statement. It meant that even the western Mercians who were outside of the Danelaw now looked to Alfred as their leader. And it appears that they did this voluntarily. Even though they were Mercians, and Wessex was their traditional rival, it was better to be ruled by Alfred than the Danes.

This put Alfred in a delicate situation. He understood the traditional rivalry between the two kingdoms. And he realized that whatever goodwill he now had with the Mercians might be lost over time as he ruled over them. So once again he did something very smart. Rather than directly ruling Mercia, Alfred selected a Mercian nobleman as the ruler of Mercia including the city of London. Alfred then married the nobleman to his daughter, thereby bringing him into his family with a marriage alliance. So Alfred elected indirect rule over the Mercians. After this point, the walls around London were repaired and the town was soon repopulated. And over the next century, London boomed as a commercial center. And it finally began to emerge as the leading city of what would soon become known as England.

So even though Alfred elected indirect rule over the Mercians, the Chronicle and other sources make it clear that Alfred was now recognized as the ultimate leader of the Anglo-Saxon people outside of Danelaw. Coins were now being minted which identified Alfred as ‘King of the Anglo-Saxons.’ It was the first time coins contained that title since the time of Offa, and we know that Offa’s coins were an exaggeration because Offa was never recognized as king by all of the Anglo-Saxons.

But it does appear that Alfred could make that claim – at least for the Anglo-Saxons outside of the Danelaw. Alfred was the first person that we know of to call the English the *Anglecynn* – the English kin or English folk. The term *England* – or *Englaland* – doesn't appear for another century. But Alfred was now using that earlier version of the term.

Among the Anglo-Saxons outside of the Danelaw, Alfred was now seen as their liberator and defender. They were willing to let him be their king if he could protect them. Of course, nothing brings people together like a common enemy, but Alfred took advantage of this feeling of unity and similarity.

He knew that they were vulnerable to the Danes as long as they were divided, but as a unified people, they were better able to defend themselves. So he began to emphasize what they had in common with each other rather than the things which divided them. He appealed to a common sense of Englishness, to their shared culture, and especially to their shared language which was now in sharp contrast to the Norse language of the Danes. And Alfred used that common English language to create a national identity.

Next time, we're going to look at how Alfred promoted the English language in a way that had never occurred before. He revived Anglo-Saxon education, and he initiated a program of translating important Latin texts into English. In the process, English actually began to replace Latin as the primary written language of England. It was no longer just a local Germanic vernacular. It was now about to emerge as one of the great literary languages of Europe. But what is so amazing about this process is that Alfred himself was directly involved in it. He learned Latin as King just so he could translate Latin works into English himself. And he wrote extensively in his own words. And he explained why he felt it was so important to promote English as the language of the people under his rule.

Next time, we'll look at this process, and we'll listen to Alfred's words. And we'll also begin to examine the first impacts of the Norse language in the Danelaw.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.