

All About...

Alfred the Great



British Monarchs

Throughout British history, monarchs have been given unofficial titles based on their characteristics:

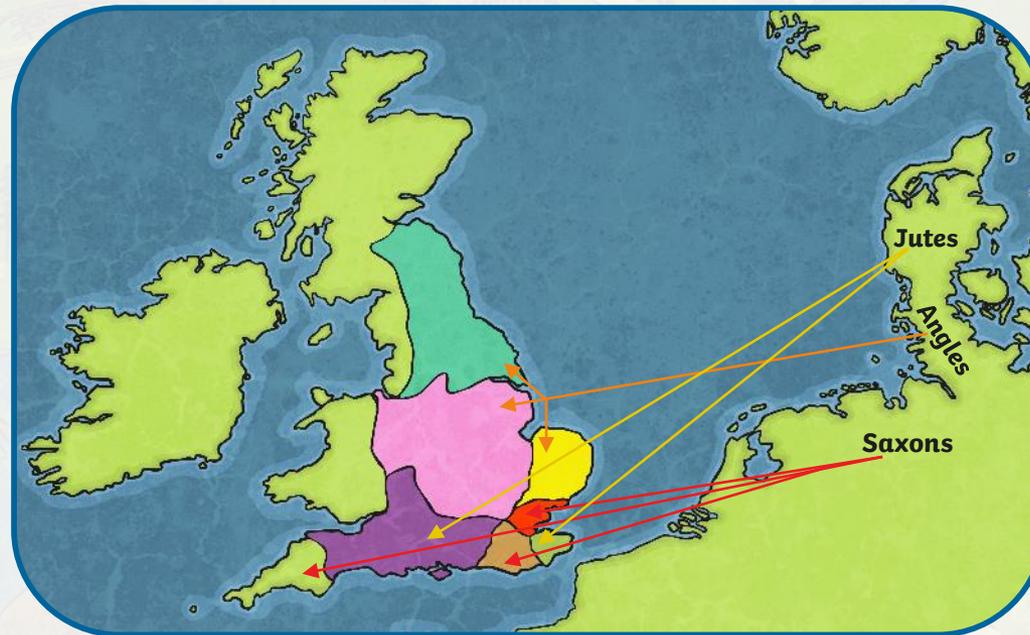
- William I – ‘William the Conqueror’
- John – ‘John Lackland’
- Richard I - ‘Richard the Lionheart’
- Edward I – ‘Edward Longshanks’



Today, we are going to learn about the only king to be given the unofficial title ‘Great’ and find out why he had this title.

Anglo-Saxons

The Anglo-Saxons were groups of people who lived in Britain over 1,000 years ago. They were made up of three tribes who invaded from Britain: Angles, Saxons and Jutes.



Anglo-Saxons

Anglo-Saxon Britain was divided into seven kingdoms. There was often fighting between the different kingdoms. The Vikings started to invade Britain and overran many kingdoms. Wessex was the only kingdom to survive Viking invasion.



Alfred

Alfred was born in 849 into the family that ruled Wessex. He was the youngest of five sons and a daughter born to King Ethelwulf. He grew up with the court, moving from place to place and learning how to fight in battles, hunt and be a good lord. Alfred was very keen on learning. His mother had an illuminated manuscript which she said she would give to the first of her sons who would learn to read it. Despite being the youngest, it was Alfred who won the beautiful book.

Alfred

All of Alfred's older brothers had to battle the Vikings. While Alfred and his father were away in Rome in 855, Ethelbad was left in charge. His oldest brother, Athelstan, had already died in battle. When King Ethelwulf died in 858, Ethelbad became king. Ethelbad died in 860 and next to the throne was Ethelbert. Ethelbert died in 866, leaving Alfred's last remaining brother, Ethelred, as king. In such a turbulent time, the throne passed from brother to brother instead of father to son to ensure there was a strong king and not a young child on the throne.

Alfred was nineteen when Ethelred took him with him to battle the Vikings for the first time. By 871, they had fought five battles together. However, in April, Ethelred died from illness, leaving the throne to Alfred. He was now twenty two.



Peace

Alfred was a good fighter and leader and he learnt from his defeat at the hands of the Vikings. He copied the Viking tactics and at the Battle of Edington in 878, Alfred and his army defeated Guthrun and his men.

Alfred realised that the constant battles were bad for both sides. He and Guthrun signed the Treaty of Wedmore which agreed terms of peace.

Guthrun was baptised as a Christian (the religion which Alfred followed) with Alfred as his godfather.



Even though Alfred arranged a peace treaty with the Vikings at Wedmore, the threat of a Viking invasion was never far away. During his reign, Alfred organised for forts and fortified towns, known as 'burhs' to be built. He was also the first English king to establish a fleet of fighting ships. He improved the ships, making them more like the Viking longboats but bigger.



The Anglo-Saxon army had always been different to the Viking army. Anglo-Saxon soldiers were usually farmers who were called to battle. Most couldn't stay away from their homes for too long without needing to go back and tend to the land. Alfred split the army into two groups. One group would go to battle for six months while the other farmed, then they would swap over.

This map shows the Anglo-Saxon burhs that became English towns and cities.



The Danelaw

Alfred continued to pursue cooperation with the Vikings. In 886, he negotiated a land settlement. A border along Roman Watling Street split the groups. North and east England would be ruled by the Vikings. This area became known as the 'Danelaw'. The Anglo-Saxons gained areas of West Mercia and Kent.



Fortresses

Despite the Danelaw, Viking raids still occurred and Alfred did several things to protect his kingdom.

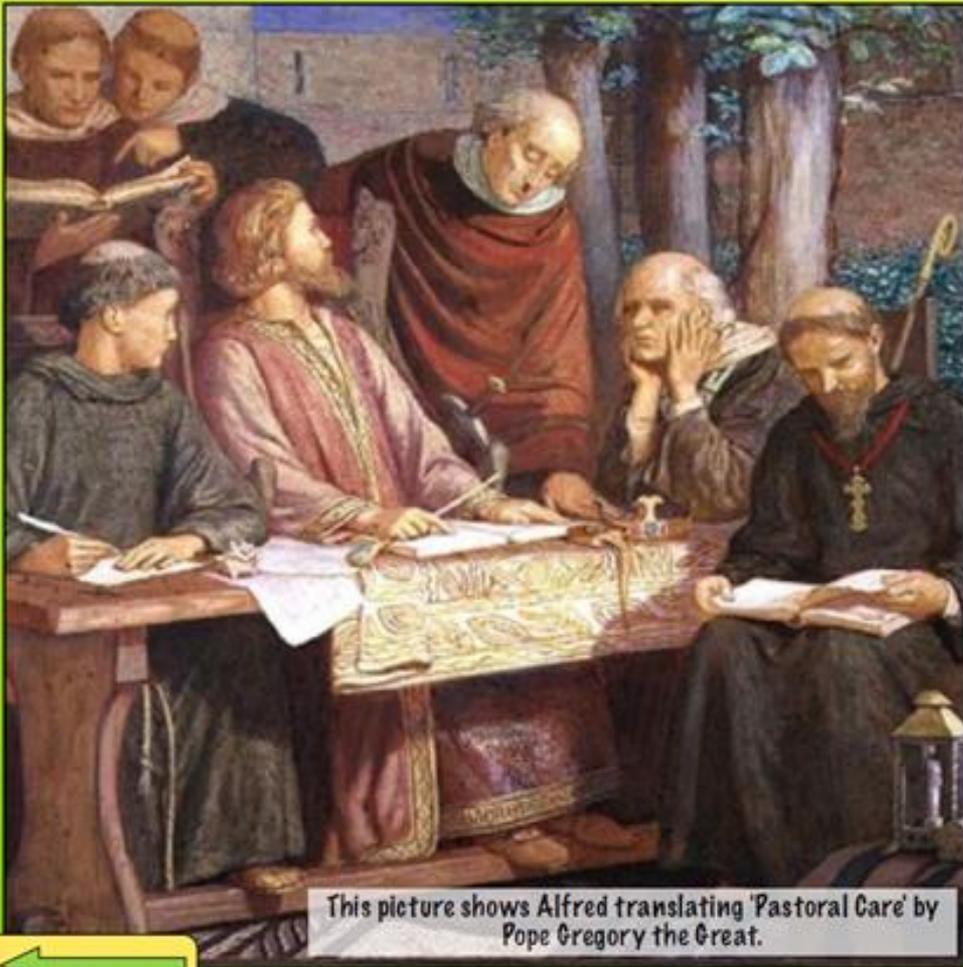
In the past, Royal marriages were arranged in order to create links between different kingdoms. Alfred had his daughter, Aethelflaed, marry someone from the kingdom of Mercia.

Alfred continued to build fortresses across Wessex. He organised rotas for his army so that when a Viking raid happened the forces could defend the kingdom. Nowhere in Wessex was more than 20 miles from a fortress.

Did You Know?

Do you know any towns or cities that end in 'borough'? This word comes from the Old English word 'burh' which means 'fortress'.





This picture shows Alfred translating 'Pastoral Care' by Pope Gregory the Great.

Once Alfred had made the country safer, he could turn his attention to the lives of the everyday people of the kingdom. When he had visited Rome as a child, he realised how much more educated the Italians were than the English. All of the works of the church were written in Latin, and Alfred translated lots of the great Latin works into the language of the ordinary people, 'Englisc'.

Alfred was a great advocate of learning and he set up a court school for his children and the children of nobles.

Alfred earned his title 'The Great' for several other reasons.

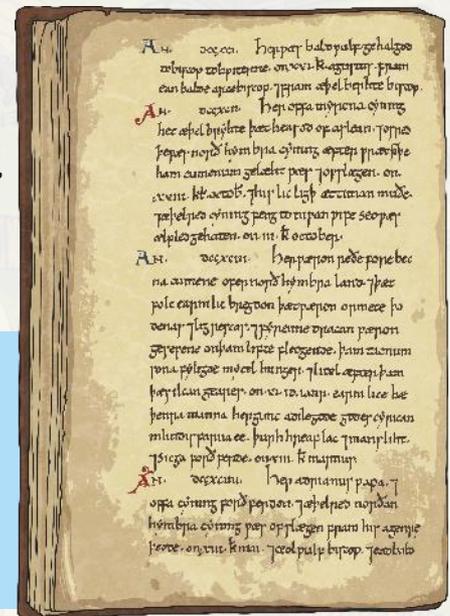
Important documents were usually written in Latin. Alfred organised for many of them to be translated into Anglo-Saxon, as he hoped that people in Wessex would become 'devoted to learning.'

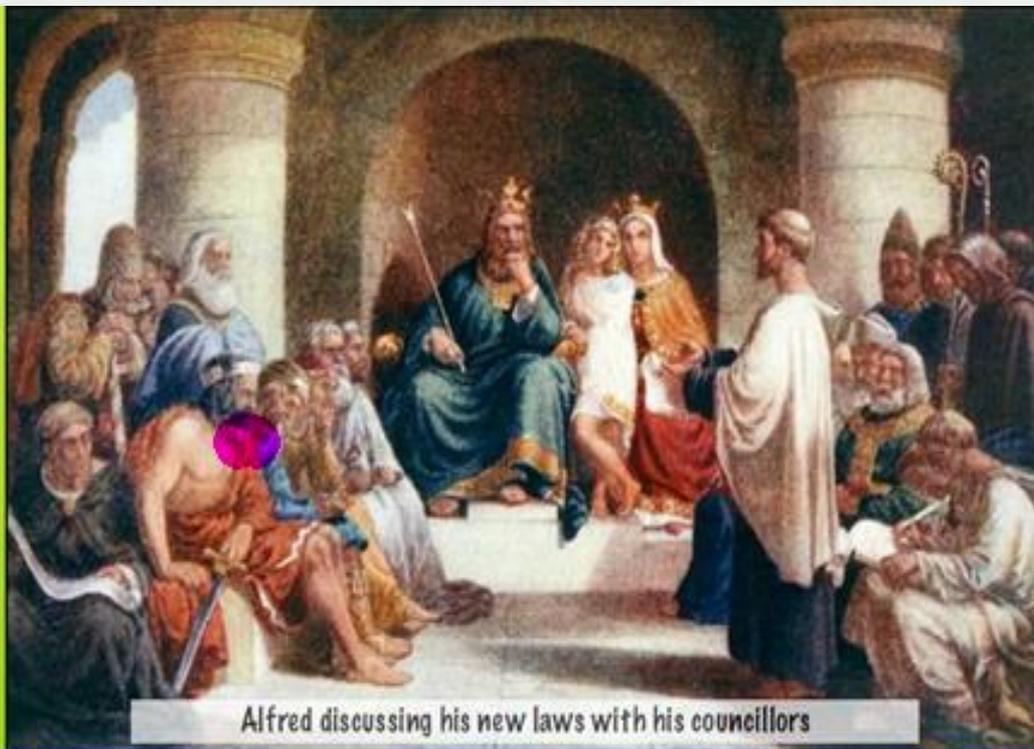
Alfred gave money for the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle to be written. This was a document which recorded important events in Anglo-Saxon history.

Alfred introduced laws to make the kingdom more stable. As the economy grew, he had more coins minted.

Did You Know?

Nine copies of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle still exist. Most of these are kept in the British Library. It is also available to view online.





Alfred discussing his new laws with his councillors

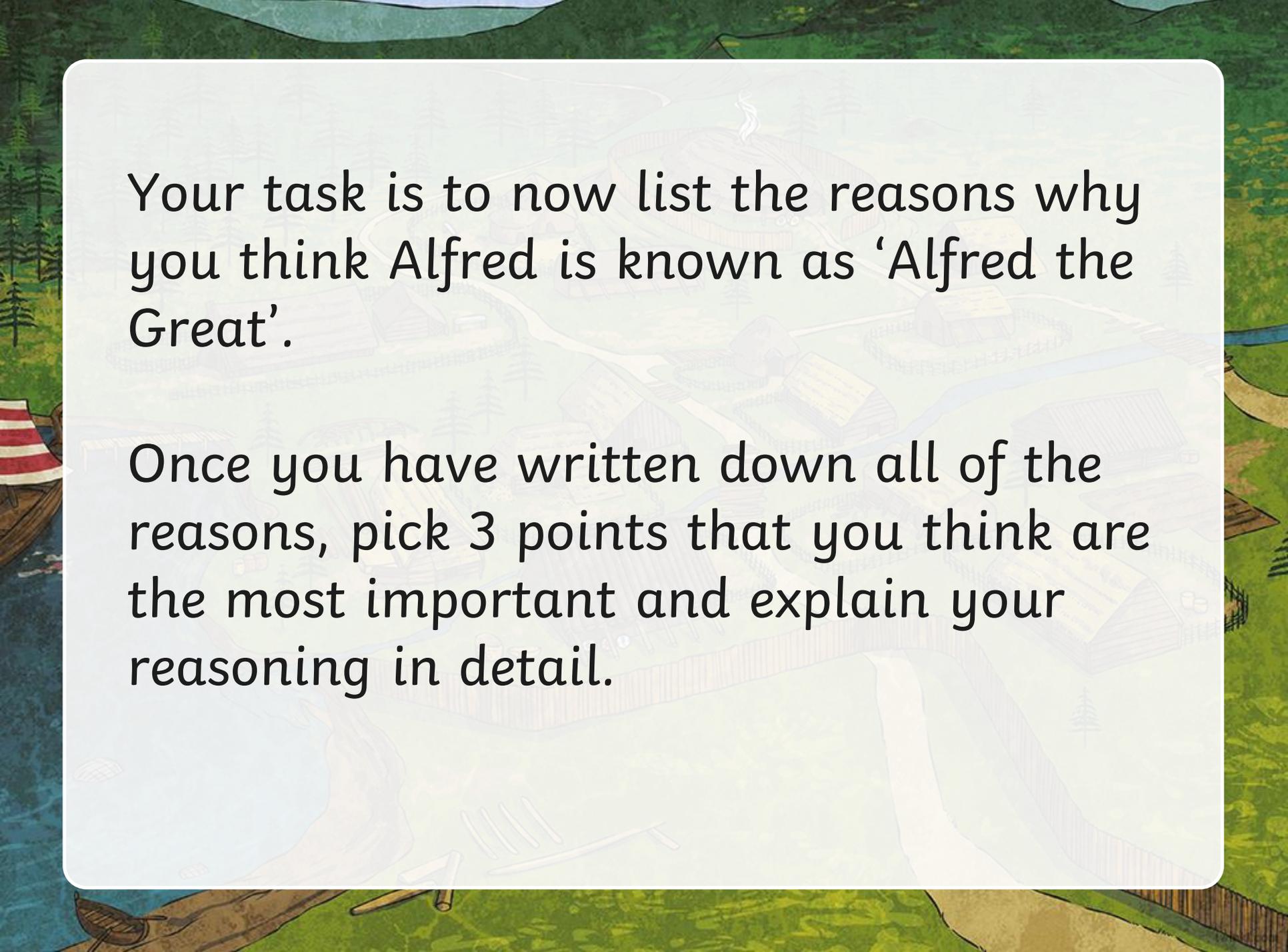
One of the most important changes King Alfred introduced were the new laws which had to be obeyed by all the subjects in his kingdom. This helped to unite the people that had so recently been split into different kingdoms. The laws were all written in English. Alfred was keen to get as many books written in English as possible. The best known of the books from his reign is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. This gives a year-by-year account of the history of England.

'The Great'

Documents and coins from the 890s refer to Alfred as 'King of the English', as opposed to 'King of Wessex'.

Alfred died in 899 when he was 50 years old. He was buried in Winchester, the capital of Wessex.





Your task is to now list the reasons why you think Alfred is known as 'Alfred the Great'.

Once you have written down all of the reasons, pick 3 points that you think are the most important and explain your reasoning in detail.



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