

# British History Series: Episode 5 Alfred The Great & The Vikings

Presented by Chris Green

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## Key Event: The Viking Invasion & Alfred's Fightback

**Period:** 8th–9th centuries

**Main Figures:** Alfred the Great, Ivar the Boneless, Guthrum

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## Background: England Before Alfred

- No unified England yet—just rival Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Mercia, Wessex, Northumbria, East Anglia).
- Mercia was dominant under King Offa (famous for Offa's Dyke).
- Vikings began raiding monasteries (e.g., Lindisfarne, 793 AD) for loot, not conquest—easy targets due to wealth and isolation.

## Viking Misconceptions Debunked:

- Not a single "race" but disparate Scandinavian groups (Danes, Norwegians).
  - Term "Viking" comes from Old Norse *víkingr* (to raid).
  - No horned helmets—a Victorian myth!
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## The Great Heathen Army (865 AD)

- Led by Ivar the Boneless (son of legendary Ragnar Lothbrok), 3,000 Vikings landed in East Anglia.
- Tactics: Demanded *Danegeld* (protection money), took horses for mobility, exploited civil wars (e.g., Northumbria).
- Conquered Northumbria (captured York), Mercia, and East Anglia—killing King Edmund (later St. Edmund).

**Quote:**

*"Once you've paid the Danegeld, you never get rid of the Dane."* —Rudyard Kipling

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**Alfred's Rise (871 AD)**

- Youngest son of King Æthelwulf of Wessex; became king after four brothers died.
- Fought Guthrum at Ashdown (871)—first Viking defeat in England.
- Forced into hiding in Somerset marshes (878), then rallied to win at Edington.
- Treaty: Guthrum baptized, Vikings confined to *Danelaw* (eastern England).

**Alfred's Reforms:**

- Built *burhs* (fortified towns) and a navy (first English fleet!).
  - Promoted education and law—later called "Alfred the Great" (only English king with this title).
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**Legacy & What's Next**

- Wessex survived as the last Anglo-Saxon kingdom.
- Alfred's children (Edward the Elder and Æthelflæd, "Lady of the Mercians") would reclaim the Danelaw.

**Fun Fact:**

Alfred's jewel (British Museum) reads *"Alfred ordered me made"*—a symbol of his legacy.