

British History Series: Episode 6 - The Birth of England

Presented by Chris Green

Key Figures:

- **Æthelflæd (c. 870–918):** Daughter of Alfred the Great, Lady of Mercia, and military leader.
 - **Alfred the Great (d. 899):** King of Wessex, defended against Viking invasions.
 - **Edward the Elder (d. 924):** Æthelflæd's brother, King of Wessex, collaborated with her to reclaim Viking-held lands.
 - **Æthelred:** Æthelflæd's husband, Lord of Mercia; ruled jointly with her until his incapacitation.
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Background: England in the Viking Age

- By 899, Vikings ruled half of England (Danelaw), including East Anglia, Northumbria, and the Midlands.
 - Alfred preserved Wessex but left a fragmented England. His descendants aimed to unite it ("Project England").
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Æthelflæd's Rise & Achievements

1. Marriage & Power:

- Married Æthelred of Mercia (881), blending Wessex-Mercian ties. Unlike Wessex, Mercia allowed women political roles—Æthelflæd co-signed charters.
- After Æthelred fell ill (902), she ruled Mercia *de facto* for a decade.

2. Military Campaigns:

- **Chester (907):** Defeated Vikings using beehives (!) to repel wall-diggers.
- **Tettenhall (910):** With Edward, crushed a Viking army near Wolverhampton, ending major Danish invasions.

- **Conquests (917–918):** Captured Derby and Leicester; Vikings of York submitted to *her*—not Edward—in 918.
 - 3. **Fortifications:** Strengthened Mercia with *burhs* (fortified towns) like Tamworth and Shrewsbury.
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Legacy & Historical Erasure

- **Death (918):** Buried at St. Oswald's Priory, Gloucester. Her daughter, Ælfwynn, briefly succeeded her—*the only mother-to-daughter rule transfer in English history*.
 - **Edward's Takeover:** Removed Ælfwynn, absorbed Mercia, but York rebelled, rejecting Wessex rule.
 - **Historical Bias:** Anglo-Saxon Chronicles downplayed her as "Edward's sister"; Irish/Welsh records hailed her as a "queen."
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Did You Know?

- Vikings called themselves *Northmen*—"Viking" meant "pirate" (a verb, not a group).
 - Æthelflæd's name means "noble beauty"; Æthelred means "noble counsel."
 - Mercia's acceptance of female rulers contrasted sharply with Wessex's patriarchy.
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Next Week: *The Birth of England* - How Edward's heirs completed Alfred's vision.