



## Alfred the Great

*Justin Pollard*

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In an era darkened by the terror of Viking invasions, England's first and greatest king was a beacon of light. "This is the story of England's birth. A great story, beautifully told." (Bernard Cornwell, author of [The Pale Horseman](#))

Alfred was England's first kin, and his rule spanned troubled times. As his shores sat under constant threat from Viking marauders, his life was similarly imperiled by conspiracies in his own court. He was an extraordinary character - a soldier, scholar, and statesman like no other in English history - and out of adversity he forged a new kind of nation. Justin Pollard's enthralling account strips back centuries of myth to reveal the individual behind the legend. He offers a radical new interpretation of what inspired Alfred to create England and how it has colored the nation's history to the present day.

## Alfred the Great Details

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Author : Justin Pollard

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## From Reader Review Alfred the Great for online ebook

### Jessica W says

Very interesting and an entertaining read. A lot of stuff about the Vikings and general Anglo-Saxon life in here too

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### Carol says

A readable and entertaining biography by popular historian and television producer Justin Pollard. Recommended.

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### Shawn Paterson says

I love Alfred.

“Very often it has come to my mind what men of learning there were formerly throughout England... and how there were happy times then.”

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### Marita says

As far as history of this period is concerned I am an ignoramus. The back cover says of Justin Pollard: " He offers a radical new interpretation of what inspired Alfred to create England and how it has coloured our island's history to the present day." I am unqualified to judge whether this is the case, but this compact biography, which focuses on Alfred's achievements, was perfect for my purposes. In fact, right from the very interesting Prologue I was hooked.

In the second chapter there is a lovely anecdote of how Alfred as a young child was very much taken with the illuminated capital letter of the first page of a small volume of poetry. His mother then offered to give the book to the child who would be the first to learn the contents. Towards the end of the book we learn that Alfred learned Latin in order to translate works into English, and that he promoted literacy. He set about finding the best scholars at home and abroad, and improved not only his own education, but that of his subjects.

And yes, there was a constant struggle with the Vikings. Alfred soon got the measure of them, and when he routed them, had them swearing oaths on their gods rather than the Christian one as they were more likely to uphold those. In battle he also learned to beat them at their own game by adopting some of their own techniques. He greatly improved England's defences and rebuilt London. He introduced legislation and various administrative measures.

I found the book to be both easy to read and interesting. The book is illustrated, has a map, a family tree, notes and a bibliography.

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## Nikki says

With my degree being mostly in medieval literature, and that of the Saxon period, it's not surprising that I'm a little more well-informed than the author of this book expects you to be, on the subject of Alfred. For example, I didn't know of him only because of the myth of the burning cakes: I actually knew the story of his mother giving him his first book, and the fact that he then later prioritised learning and knowledge.

Still, despite that assumption, it's a good book: it provides a clear context for Alfred's rule, following all the relevant threads of other ruling families, and commenting on what certainly seem to be key moments. It's a very readable book, not aimed at scholars but at readers of "popular history", so there aren't constant footnotes, etc, but the research certainly seems to have been done well.

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## Greg says

There is much to like in this history of Alfred the Great, and how much you like it depends on the expectations you carry into the book. To start, this is a narrative history written for the lay reader as an introduction to Alfred. Pollard attempts to write a memorable history that best represents Alfred, the shaping of his character, and the events that led him to become so influential in the history of Western civilization. That he is so influential is indisputable, what is disputable are the facts vs. the myths that have arisen regarding Alfred's life. As he is widely credited with formalizing the reintroduction of learning into popular society (as opposed to learning being relegated to the monasteries of the day), it is not surprising that the society which he helped create was not yet mature enough to record with factual certainty the events of his life. Much is open to conjecture, and if the reader is looking for a representation of scholarly debate as to the veracity of aspects of Alfred's life, then the reader will be disappointed. For my part, I was interested in a narrative history that would educate me on the main aspects of Alfred's life and legacy, and in this I was well satisfied.

A legitimate criticism of this work is that Pollard assumes as factual several versions of Alfred's life. The events of his escape from Chippenham as presented as authoritative, although in reading it I could only wonder whether Pollard was narrating into the story too much that is not supported by obvious fact. Similarly, Guthrum's transition into an ally is presented without a critical analysis of what may have caused this (and I was left puzzled).

There are moments of extreme clarity. Pollard is intent on sublimating the real Alfred from the "burning of the cakes" myth, and in this, he is highly successful. For instance, Pollard starts by describing this great king at his low point as the entry to the book. At Alfred's low point – "Only weeks earlier, he had been king of Wessex, ruler of what was once the most powerful Anglo-Saxon kingdom in England. Now all those kingdoms were gone, destroyed by an enemy that no one in Christendom seemed able to either understand or answer in kind. All that was left was the Isle of Athelney, the last refuge of a small band of Anglo-Saxons who still held allegiance to Alfred and who had not, at least yet, bent their heads to new Viking overlords. It was a very damp, very cold and very small kingdom that Alfred now ruled but this one solid piece of ground in the swamp would provide the first footings for what would become the kingdom of England. It would also lay the foundations for a way of life that affects everyone in the Western world today." (1) I can almost hear this paragraph narrated as the introductory scene into a great cinematic biography. It sets a perfect tone for the rest of the work. Pollard goes on to set the stage on why Alfred matters. To summarize, he says, "He was Alfred, king of Wessex, and the first man ever to have some right to call himself king of the English. His campaign was unique, waged not merely with weapons, but with a vision of a new type of kingdom, where protection and prosperity resulted not from physical force alone, but from education, public building, commerce and law. That a king in any age should prove so far-sighted is remarkable in itself, but history

shows that Alfred was more extraordinary still, for we can piece together the story of how he achieved this from first-hand accounts.” (3) Well done, and if the casual reader took nothing else than this from the novel, they would leave more enlightened the 99% of Americans today, for whom Alfred is an historical figure relegated to college and masters history students, and nothing more.

I have always heard of the providential nature of English weather in the sinking of the Spanish armada. What I was surprised to learn was that that was a repeat event. Likely to be crushed by an invading Scandinavian armada, ”From his position in Exeter, it looked to Guthrum as if the game was almost won. Within days Wessex would become the last major kingdom to fall and England would, in effect, become a Scandinavian nation.

It was at this point that nature intervened, as it has often done at moments of incipient national disaster. Just as the Viking feet sailed past the headland at Swanage, off the Dorset coast, a terrible storm blew up (in some versions of the chronicle it is a strange ‘mist’), as fortuitous for Alfred as the one that destroyed the armada sent against Queen Elizabeth I some seven hundred years later. The great Viking fleet was caught by surprise and foundered, their vessels being lost or, as the twelfth-century chronicler Geoffrey Gaimar gleefully put it, ‘one hundred and forty of their ships went to the devil.’” (153) One can read Alfred’s memory when he wrote later, “Faith, Hope and Charity – these are the three anchors which hold fast the ship of the mind amidst the dangers of the waves.” – Alfred the Great, Augustine’s Soliloquies (59)

His innovations on how to co-locate defensive and trade interests led not only to the defensive improvement of his territory, but introduced a new way of life for English people, and the development of fortified cities throughout the middle ages. “The burhs that Alfred ordered built were not to be simply fortresses; many were to be communities – fortified towns – placed at the junctions of the trade routes, which were also of course the routes that armies travelled. If each burh could be a little market town on a trade route, the trade that was attracted there would help pay for its own defence, and the people drawn there by that trade would provide the manpower (and have the motivation) to defend it. It was a self-supporting protection system that provided everybody with a local refuge – their own Athelney, which generated its own finances and manpower for defence, controlled the important nodal points in Wessex’s communication lines and promoted trade.” (212)

In the end, Alfred helped initiate the policies that led to England becoming a land of learned people. Alfred gathered intellectuals together for the first time... “Wisdom was the medicine that he believed would ‘cure’ his country of heathen attack and he expressed his attitude towards it with great simplicity: ‘I can not find anything better in man than that he know, and nothing worse than that he be ignorant.’” (242) In the intellectual history of Western civilization, all serious students of history must understand Alfred’s focus on learning as an inflection point. His motives were not purely altruistic. As one of his son’s decrees points out, “Written orders that could be understood by everyone could take the will of the king anywhere and, unlike the words of messengers or the memories of nobles, could not, as one grant from the reign of Alfred’s son puts it, ‘be brought to naught by the assault of misty oblivion.’” (254)

In the end, this is a highly informative and readable work. For those like me that have heard of Alfred, and love history, this will be a highly rewarding read.

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## **Pete daPixie says**

Out of the mirk and mists of the Somersaetan fen lands, across eleven hundred years, comes Justin Pollard's biography of 'Alfred the Great', published 2005. 'A delicious historical treat' is how Stephen Fry regards this work. It's not just penetrating biography but also eulogistic homily. Pollard's Alfred is a potent and clearly

focused figure with original insight based on sound historical research. Even the clearly mythical elements of the legendary man are given rational and insightful interpretation. The very original revelations of the coup on Monday the 6th of January 878 at Chippenham is historical detective work of the highest order. The author can even name the Saxon plotters who deposed Alfred in favour of the Viking Guthrum!

In this dark 9th century world, where vast heathen armies of 'Northmen' plundered Europe, as far south as the Mediterranean and North Africa, to destroy the Carolingian Empire of Charlemagne and systematically pick off and occupy the Saxon kingdoms of Britain (Northumbria, Essex, Anglia and Eastern Mercia), as well as Ireland. In January 878 Alfred was on his knees as a fugitive at Athelney, burning his cakes. From this position he earned the title 'Great'. In the following years, with Wessex standing totally alone, he dragged his nation up from the bootlaces. Drove the heathen armies to defeat, founded the English navy, planted the seeds of an English nation, personally promoted the English language, radically re-forged the administration of his realm, revised the laws of Ine, refounded the city of London.

Here in the twenty first century with 'Ingaland' searching for some self identity, the bones of Aelfred lie scattered and lost somewhere under a car park in Winchester.

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### **Robert Jones says**

Readable and interesting, this biography does an excellent job of providing the context for Alfred the Great's rule, especially the political environment and constant Danish threat. The map in the beginning was helpful, but I'd have liked to see updated ones, spread throughout, as the rulers of the various English territories changed hands. The author has done his research, though, and goes to great lengths to make sure you know it. He makes some weird assumptions about the reader, though. Like the repeated mantra that I only know Alfred because of the "burning cakes story." This isn't my first time learning about Alfred, and I've never heard about the burning cakes before. Besides, that story sucked. It's a good biography, though. If you want to learn about the birth of England, it's a great place to start.

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### **Laura Leilani says**

This book is astonishing. Alfred was an amazing man on so many levels but the amount of research that the author put into the book never stopped amazing me. Honestly I couldn't quiet finish the book, it was so much information, but made it 3/4 of the way before I gave up. I didn't stop reading the book because it was dull or dry but because it had so very many facts that it was too much for my brain to take it in. I have new respect for Alfred ( whom I had previously known nothing about) and for the English people for overcoming such seemingly impossible odds.

If you are interested in history this book isn't to be missed. The amount of information and the depth of research cannot be overstated.

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### **Kathryn Bullen says**

Thoroughly interesting account of Alfred's rise to kingship in Wessex and the powerful intricacies of surrounding kingdoms of Mercia, Northumbria, Welsh kingdoms and the eastern areas of the Danelaw. The ravages of large numbers of Vikings almost forces Alfred to spend weeks in the Somerset levels or to consider fleeing abroad. His subsequent pact with the Viking King Guthrum ushers in a new era; he cleverly

allows Guthrum to set up in East Anglia as an Anglo Saxon king under the name Aethelstan in return for being baptised.

Alfred begins to build the burhs, fortified communities a day's march apart which connected the army paths, to protect the land and to establish a more stable kingdom. He becomes "bretwalda", a term which meant he was effectively the ruler of Britain - a title belonging to the king who claimed nominal overlordship over the other kings of the various kingdoms. But he was never king over the whole of England - that was to come after Alfred's time.

His legacy was not even considered "Great" until the 16th century, and then not because of military victories or administrative reforms, but primarily because of his books - promoting learning, particularly of the English language through translations of important texts that he thought were important for men to know and through the commissioning of the Anglo Saxon Chronicle. It is in his wisdom that he is shown to be truly great, not in the myths of empire building which were built upon his name later in history. Alfred learnt through adversity to repair and build a new kingdom, for in his own words "in the midst of prosperity the mind is elated, and in prosperity a man forgets himself; in hardship he is forced to reflect on himself, even though he be unwilling."

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## **Brian says**

Pollard's biography of Alfred is classic narrative history. There is just enough context to give meaning to the central character's actions but not so much as to upstage him. The focus is always on Alfred's personality, his mistakes, his insights, and the impact he had on the England that he helped bring into being.

Alfred's story is, of course, also the story of the Vikings and Pollard is particularly good at depicting his attitude to the cunning and ruthless Norsemen whom Alfred must have believed had been sent by God as a scourge upon an age that had failed to live up to its responsibilities.

The medieval mind-set is often difficult for the modern reader to fully take on board. The hand of God is perceived in every twist of and turn of the plot; the imminence of divine judgement is always just around the corner; and in a world where life-expectancy was as much as thirty-five years less than for contemporary people, perhaps that is not so surprising. All of this, Pollard incorporates into his story. It forms the background against which the portrait emerges of the only English king to be given the soubriquet "Great". From Pollard's account it would appear to be a title justly deserved.

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## **Bill W says**

Alfred the Great is a wonderful book about the late ninth century king who saved Wessex (the last standing Anglo-Saxon kingdom in Britain) from Viking rule. Although a history, it reads like a novel. It is spellbinding.

The text carefully lays out what is actually known about Alfred from contemporary documents, what was once known but is now lost or survives only in copies of dubious faithfulness, and lore that is almost certainly untrue. But Alfred the Great is not a reference book and does not read like one. Instead it is a

fascinating account of King Alfred's life and reign.

One of Alfred's many strengths was his ability to learn from his mistakes (some very unfortunate) and from the missteps of his predecessors and contemporaries. He experienced betrayals and learned the value of real friendships. He also learned the tactics and value systems of his Viking adversaries. Gift-giving became an important tool of his statesmanship. His adoption, baptism and co-option of the defeated Viking chieftain Guthrum and his generals was an example of unprecedented, out-of-the-box thinking that brought a rare period of peace to Wessex.

Alfred was a devout ruler who thought about the long-term health of England. He saw public literacy as a way of enabling his subjects to play a larger role in their own defense, governance and economy. To that end, he fostered schools and imported important academics. He encouraged people to create and move to more defensible "urban" centers. He learned Latin so he could translate important books into English for his subjects. He translated the Psalms, law books, philosophy and other works.

From his commentaries and his embellishments of the texts (an unfortunate but apparently rather common practice among translators and copyists of the time) we learn something more about his personality and motivation than is known about most people of that era.

In his 50 years (Alfred died a very old man by late ninth century standards) Alfred became a learned and foresighted ruler to whom few of today's leaders compare. I absolutely loved this book and would recommend it to anyone.

"Then I say that true friends are the most precious of all this world's blessings." Alfred 849-899.

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## Jonfaith says

During the Anglo-Saxon period there existed an institution called the witan-- an assembly of elders who could remove an inept or unpopular king. Think about that for a minute.

The Ninth Century in what is now England met the definition set by Hobbes. It was panicky and bad. Suddenly on the horizon, longships! Matters were now worse. Or were they, in terms of the *longue duree* Braudel asserts elsewhere that the marauding of the Vikings removed wealth from such intense concentration and helped distribute such, which likely inspired artisanal efforts and possibly investment. The Danish kickstart of the swerve or Renaissance is left under-reported. The Danes trading networks for the Berber coast to the House of Rurik can't be ignored.

Well, anyway, there were a number of kingdoms in that nascent England and Alfred was the youngest of the heirs. Attrition was common in the Anglo-Saxon era and before Bob's your uncle, he's king. He proceeds with caution and prefers negotiations with the Danes, unfortunately this drains the coffers and suddenly the witan toss him aside and the Vikings are invited in to the vacuum to stabilize. Alfred lives in the woods for a while and becomes a folk hero of sorts. There's a popular revolt and Alfred is back. Populism has been the coin of many realms. Well, all of this from a Welsh scribe named Asser, who happened to be in the employ of Good King Alfred.

Learning from the repeated Viking raids and plunder, Alfred institutes a civil defense network, he invites intellectuals to his side and begins some serious nation building, including legal codes and the promotion of literacy. He also modernized their navy and consequently the Danes left, or did they? I hear you knocking, Norman Invasion

## **PastAllReason says**

Very well written book about Alfred the Great, a remarkable medieval king. The book evokes the time in which Alfred lived, and the roles that he played in shaping the future of what was to become England.

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## **Tim says**

Interesting book. There are a lot of very readable "history for the layman" books available these days, which is a great thing. I'd put this book in that category - it's an easy read, and it doesn't delve too deeply into historical uncertainties or points of contention amongst historians. Nor does it provide footnotes, although there are endnotes providing references for the direct quotations, and there is an extensive bibliography.

I'm no expert on Alfred - most of my knowledge of him comes from reading about other aspects of the period, or broad brush stroke general histories.

What I was looking for from this book was a good coverage of what we know of Alfred's life and the context, and enough pointers to seek out other sources for any area that struck me as interesting or contentious.

Unfortunately I didn't get everything I wanted. The overall narrative is pretty good - it's comprehensive, it's readable. There's a good introduction that briefly discusses the key primary sources and the problems of interpretation. But having raised those issues at the beginning, Pollard seems to have given himself a license to assume a particular version of events throughout the book.

There are many parts of Alfred's life, including details surrounding key events (such as the circumstances behind Alfred's flight from Chippenham on twelfth night in 878), that are obscure and open to multiple interpretations on the available evidence. Pollard generally takes one interpretation and writes as though it were fact. He may present the evidence for that interpretation (such as his explanation for the flight from Chippenham), which is good, but he doesn't discuss other interpretations or present arguments.

There is some excuse for this. He's writing a narrative history for the general reader, who doesn't want to be bogged down every five minutes in a detailed discussion of sources and historiographical disputes. However, I believe it is incumbent on any author writing history to make it clear when things are not clear, and to provide the references for the reader to find the alternate arguments.

This can be done without breaking up the narrative. It can be done with a brief sentence flagging the issue, with a foot or end note that contains references, or it can even be done in an appendix that the reader can refer to after completing the rest of the book.

An example of the problem is the flight from Chippenham mentioned above. This is a key event in Alfred's life. Circumstances changed from a tenuous stalemate and truce with the viking army of Guthrum to (apparently) sudden defeat and flight for Alfred, and the primary sources are more or less silent on the details.

Pollard presents an ingenious explanation of what was going on, and does a good job of showing circumstantial evidence to support it. However, he presents no alternatives, no discussion of evidence that

might suggest something different, and writes the rest of the book as if this explanation is an established fact - to the extent that some of his analysis of Alfred's character and later demeanour actually depends upon it.

I've never encountered Pollard's explanation for Alfred's flight from Chippenham to the Somerset Levels before, but I'm not an Alfred scholar. I have no way of knowing whether it represents a consensus view amongst historians, or a minority view, or whether Pollard came to it on his own. Without more references and context from Pollard, the only way to follow it up is a general review of the literature. Which is annoying.

In summary, this book is a fairly easy read, and seems to provide a reasonable overview of Alfred from birth to death, with enough information about contemporaneous events and figures to give some context to his life. Where it falls down is in the lack of references and historiographical context to both support Pollard's narrative and give the reader somewhere to go next.

For the casual reader wanting to fill in some of the background to later English history, or to discover something of who Alfred was and why he is considered an important figure, this book is probably good enough.

To anyone looking for an overview of what we really know about Alfred, or for a broad narrative with jumping off points to more detailed books and sources, it's likely to be something of a disappointment.

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