King Alfred the Great

King Alfred was born in Wantage, Oxfordshire, in 849. He was one of the sons of King Aethelwulf of the West Saxons, and he became king himself in 872.

What’s so great about Alfred?

King Alfred is the only English king who is known as ‘The Great’. So what made him so special?

• He was a brilliant military commander – he defeated the invading Danes (or Vikings) in battle and stopped them from taking over his kingdom of Wessex.

• He was also a peacemaker – he didn’t just beat the Danes in battle, but he agreed a peace treaty with them so that the Danes and the Saxons could live side by side without constant fighting.

Alfred and the Danes

Alfred’s first big victory against the Danes was at the Battle of Ashdown, in Berkshire, in 871. Although he won that battle, the Danes still went on attacking...
Alfred’s kingdom, Wessex. Alfred had to retreat to the Somerset marshes, but he didn’t give up the fight – he carried on attacking the Danes using guerrilla-style tactics.

**Fact**

**Guerrilla-style warfare**

This meant moving around constantly, living rough, and using raids and ambushes to take the Danes by surprise.

In 878, Alfred defeated the Danes again at the battle of Edington – this is the battle on which the Time Chronicles adventure *Stranger at the Gates* is based. After the battle, Alfred and the Danish king Guthrum agreed on a peace treaty called the Treaty of Wedmore. In 886, Alfred agreed an even more formal and important treaty with the Danes – the ‘Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum’. England was divided up so that the north and east (between the rivers Thames and Tees) would now belong to the Danes. The Danes’ area was known as the Danelaw. This treaty also meant that King Alfred’s own kingdom of Wessex was extended, taking in parts of southern England which hadn’t been part of Wessex before the treaty.

When it came to living side by side, it certainly helped that the Anglo-Saxons and Danes were very similar in language, customs, traditions and lifestyle. They even had a similar approach to things like medicine – including using willow bark as a simple painkiller, a detail which is included in *Stranger at the Gates*!

**The Alfred Jewel**

The brooch which Rodor wears on his tunic in *Stranger at the Gates* shows that he is an important person – it was a present from King Alfred himself. The brooch in the story is based on a real Anglo-Saxon artefact called the Alfred Jewel – a small but beautiful piece of gold and enamel work which is now displayed in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. No one knows what the real Alfred Jewel was used for – it might have been a piece of jewellery like a brooch, or it may have been used as a sort of pointer to help a reader keep his or her place in a book.

**King Guthrum**

**Guthrum and the Danelaw**

The Danish king, Guthrum, was King Alfred’s old enemy – but the two men managed to settle their differences and live in peace. Guthrum started as just one of several Danish chieftains, but largely through his skill as a warrior he became the most important Danish leader in England. He and Alfred were well matched – both clever and successful men, and skilful military leaders.

After the Battle of Edington, Alfred and the Saxons agreed to make peace if Guthrum would convert to Christianity. Guthrum agreed to do this, and he was baptised soon after the treaty was drawn up. King Alfred acted as his godfather, and Guthrum took on the Christian name Aethelstan – which was also probably the name of Alfred’s older brother. This gave a very strong sign that Guthrum and Alfred were going to behave peacefully towards each other from then on.

After the ‘Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum’ set out clear boundaries between Alfred’s lands and Guthrum’s lands of the Danelaw, in 886, King Guthrum kept to his side of the bargain. He never threatened King Alfred’s lands again.

**Some more websites to explore**

- Basic background information about King Alfred the Great: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/alfred_the_great.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/alfred_the_great.shtml)
- A site that goes into a bit more detail about Alfred: [http://www.royal.gov.uk/HistoryoftheMonarchy/KingsandQueensofEngland/TheAnglo-Saxonkings/AlfredtheGreat.aspx](http://www.royal.gov.uk/HistoryoftheMonarchy/KingsandQueensofEngland/TheAnglo-Saxonkings/AlfredtheGreat.aspx)
- Information about Viking money, including examples with the name and/or picture of King Guthrum: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings-money_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings-money_01.shtml)