

they could find, because they believed that the mysterious letters were magical signs that would work them harm if they were not destroyed. So great was the fear of the Danes that in many places this prayer was added to the church Litany: "From the fury of the Northmen, Good Lord, deliver us."

18. **The reign of Alfred the Great, 871-901.**—The youngest of Egbert's grandsons, who was named Alfred, was only twenty-two years of age when he became king. He was a great favourite among his people, but they were too wretched to have any rejoicing when he came to the throne.

Faster and faster came the Danes. Alfred fought them bravely, but their forces were overwhelming. The whole land was overrun, and Alfred could no longer hold the throne. But he had no idea of abandoning his country. After suffering a severe defeat, he withdrew to a marshy island called Athelney, in Somersetshire, and waited, training his men and planning how to get the better of the enemy.

After a time, when Alfred felt that his army was ready, he attacked the Danes at Ethandune, in Wiltshire, and won a decisive victory. The Danes were now ready for peace, and at Wedmore, in 878, agreed to acknowledge Alfred as their overlord, to be baptized as Christians, and to remain in the north-eastern part of England. They were also to give hostages and were to become peaceful farmers. These promises they faithfully kept. The region given over to the Danes was known as the Danelaw, as there they enforced their own laws.

The Danes, however, still continued to pour into England. Alfred was wise enough to see that the only way to prevent these constant invasions was to meet his enemies on the sea. Accordingly, he built a fleet of strong, swift ships, with which he attacked the Danes and defeated them. Then he constructed a line of forts along the sea-coast, and organized his army so that he would have on hand at all times a sufficient force to meet any danger that might threaten. The Danes finally saw that they were neither strong enough nor skilful enough to overcome the English king, and they left him in peace.