



Fig. 1: silver penny of Alfred the Great, minted in London and bearing a monogram of the letters 'LVNDONIA'. Issued in about 880. (Photo: Museum of London)

## King Alfred's London and London's King Alfred

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THIS AUTUMN marks the 11th centenary of the death, on 26 October 899, of King Alfred the Great. He remains the only English monarch to have borne the title 'Great' -- although the epithet was apparently only applied long after his death<sup>1</sup>. Whether or not one concurs with Sir Winston Churchill in concluding that Alfred was 'the greatest Englishman', there is little doubt that Alfred's reign as king of the West Saxons (871-899) and from

886 as *de facto* king of England outside the Danelaw was a pivotal point in the history of England.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the reputation of Alfred as the noble warrior-king and wise lawgiver survived, though much of the historical detail of his reign was forgotten. In the 16th and 17th centuries there was a revival of interest in the Anglo-Saxon past, encouraged among others by Arch-

1. In the 13th century Matthew Paris noted that 'in view of his achievements he was called the Great', and the title was generally applied to Alfred by historians from the 16th century onwards.

bishop Matthew Parker, who published the first printed edition of the biography of Alfred by the Welshman Asser<sup>2</sup>. In the 18th century Alfred's reputation as 'founder of the Royal Navy'<sup>3</sup> led to the inclusion of 'Rule, Britannia!' in Thomas Arne's gloriously unhistorical opera *Alfred*, and to the naming of the flagship of the first navy of the breakaway American colonies *Alfred*.

Alfred's fame reached its peak in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Queen Victoria's marriage to the 'Saxon' Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg encouraged a revival of popular interest in England's Anglo-Saxon past, and Imperial Britain increasingly saw its origins in the England of King Alfred. He was honoured not merely as victor over the Danes and lawgiver but as unifier of the English-speaking peoples. Victoria and Albert had their second son christened Alfred, and the name remained among the top dozen or so most popular names for English boys for the next sixty years.

At the unveiling of Hamo Thornycroft's impressive statue of King Alfred in Winchester in 1901 Lord Rosebery described Alfred as 'the ideal Englishman, the perfect sovereign, the pioneer of England's greatness'. Normally staid Victorian historians were not averse to using similar terms. Such views permeated schoolbooks and children's books as well. In 1922 Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopedia* praised him as 'The proud figure that stands at the gate of the English dawn'; the Ladybird book of 1956 treated him in heroic style. Such 'imperialist' language and assumptions have of course gone out of fashion in recent years. In 1990 students and faculty members of Alfred University, New York, objected to plans to erect a statue of King Alfred, on the grounds that he was just another DWEM ('Dead White European Male'). Yet the most recent biographers of Alfred seem to be united in their respect for Alfred's achievements.

Among those achievements is usually reckoned Alfred's contribution to the development of London -- though over the years there has been considerable uncertainty about what exactly his contribution was. A wall-painting in the Royal Ex-

change, painted in 1912, showed Alfred on a piebald horse amid Roman ruins approving the architect's plans for London; in *People in History* (1955) R J Unstead showed him directing the digging of a new city ditch; and the Ladybird book of 1956 portrayed him overseeing the building of the Tower of London(?).

The source of uncertainty is the entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 886, which records that 'gesette Ælfred cyning Lunden burg' -- 'King Alfred *gesette* London-*burg*'. The Old English word 'gesette' has been translated 'besieged', 'occupied', 'settled' and even 'founded'. Asser added to the confusion by writing that 'after the burning of cities and the massacre of peoples' Alfred 'restored the city of London splendidly and made it habitable again'. Although London does not appear in the *Burghal Hidage* (the late 9th/early 10th-century document defining the series of fortified towns that began as an Alfredian defensive measure), the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* 'Lunden-burg' and the role played by London in the later Danish wars encouraged the view that Alfred's chief purpose was to restore the Roman defences and to garrison the town. But unlike so many of Alfred's achievements, which were reflected in surviving monuments<sup>4</sup>, artefacts<sup>5</sup>, and documents, to earlier generations of historians Alfred's London seemed largely invisible. In default of other relics, it was assumed that the series of fine silver pennies and halfpennies bearing Alfred's portrait and, on the reverse, a monogram made up of the letters of 'LVNDONIA' (Fig. 1) had been issued to commemorate Alfred's London initiative of 886. Like the Alfred Jewel the 'London monogram' coin became an Alfredian icon and tended to be illustrated in any book on London's early history -- as well as any book about Alfred.

However, the last twenty-five years of archaeological excavation and historical research have dramatically changed our view of 'Alfred's London' -- although introducing new uncertainties. Readers of the *London Archaeologist* have been well placed to follow developments, since most have them have been reflected in its pages.

2. Professor Alfred Smyth's strongly-expressed view that the *Life of Alfred* attributed to Asser is a later forgery (A P Smyth *King Alfred the Great* (1995) does not seem to have received general acceptance -- see for example Richard Abels' discussion in *Alfred the Great: War, Kinship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (1998) 318-26.

3. A reputation inspired by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for 896, describing how Alfred commissioned a fleet of ships of a new design to combat Viking raids.

4. Notably the *burh* fortifications at sites such as Wallingford and Wareham.

5. Such as the 'Alfred Jewel' which advertises its origin 'Alfred had me made', and which became an icon of Alfred and of Anglo-Saxon England after its discovery in 1693.

6. M Biddle, D Hudson & C Heighway *The Future of London's Past* (Rescue, Worcester, 1973) 22-5. The first 'published' attempt to draw out this 'Alfredian' planned town may have been the plan included in the Museum of London's original Saxon Gallery displays in 1976.

In the 1970s, in the absence of excavated evidence, the search for 'Alfred's London' turned to the possible significance of the medieval street plan. In Winchester Martin Biddle's excavations had revealed what might be expected of a late Saxon planned town -- a grid of equally spaced streets demarcating narrow plots. In *The Future of London's Past*, the 1973 survey of the archaeology of the City of London commissioned by Rescue, Biddle drew attention to the possibility that an Alfredian plan for London might be traced in the grid-like pattern of streets to the south of Cheapside and around Eastcheap<sup>6</sup>. Then in 1978 in a brilliant reassessment of documentary sources Tony Dyson clarified aspects of Alfred's policy for London and its embodiment in the later street plan<sup>7</sup>. A meeting held at Chelsea in 898 or 899 between King Alfred, the Mercian *ealdorman* Æthelred and bishops Plegmund and Wærferth 'to discuss the restoration of London', together with an earlier grant of land to Wærferth, provided the context when streets might have been laid out around 'Æthelred's-hythe' -- the later Queenhithe. At the same time the first archaeological evidence to confirm an Anglo-Saxon origin for some of the City's streets began to come to light -- for Botolph's Lane in the east, and Bow Lane off Cheapside.

However, the lack of archaeological evidence for Saxon settlement within the City at any date before a broadly-defined 'Late Saxon' period soon began to cause concern -- for there were enough documentary references to London *before* Alfred's time that no-one would dream of suggesting that Alfred had founded London *ab initio*. Then in 1984, a turning point in the study of Saxon London, there appeared almost simultaneously papers by Alan Vince and Martin Biddle suggesting that middle Saxon London had lain to the west of the Roman city<sup>8</sup>. Excavations the following year at Jubilee Hall, Covent Garden began the process that has over the years since revealed the now-familiar *Lundenwic*, the trading town that flourished in and around the 8th century.

It was easy, then, to draw the conclusion that what

Alfred did in 886 was to move settlement from an undefended open site on the Strand to the defensible area inside the Roman walls. Yet as investigations continued it became clear just how oversimplified such a conclusion would be. The evidence from *Lundenwic* showed that it had flourished in the 8th century -- coins found were almost without exception 'sceattas', the small silver coins that preceded the introduction of the broader silver 'penny' at the end of the 8th century. In the City it soon became clear that not all the streets assigned to the 'planned grid' were of the same date, not all had roadside buildings from the beginning<sup>9</sup>. A series of timber stakes on the foreshore at New Fresh Wharf, at first thought to represent an Alfredian measure to prevent the beaching of Viking ships, became (after dendrochronological dating) the supports of a later Saxon wharf. When in 1990 Tony Dyson reviewed his earlier work on the 889 and 898 grants by Alfred he concluded that only two streets in the western part of the City and one in the east could definitely be assigned to Alfred's time<sup>10</sup>.

In the same year Alan Vince drew attention to other anomalies. For example, in 857 the Mercian king Burgred had granted to the Bishop of Worcester land in London 'close to the west gates'<sup>11</sup>. Such a description would suit land within the Roman walls much better than a site on the other side of the Fleet in apparently unfortified *Lundenwic*. Had the Mercian king already instigated a move back inside the walls following the Viking attack on London in 851? In the 19th century a lead weight had been found near St Paul's, struck with coin dies of Alfred's 'Cross and Lozenge' type, a type that both Alfred and Ceolwulf of Mercia issued between 875 and 880 -- did Alfred already have some presence within the walled city before 880?

Numismatists, meanwhile, were coming to the conclusion that Alfred's 'London monogram' coin must have been issued long before 886 -- perhaps at the time about 880 when Ceolwulf died or was deposed, and Alfred may have been able to claim sole control over part of Mercia<sup>12</sup>.

7. T Dyson 'Two Saxon land grants for Queenhithe' in J Bird, H Chapman & J Clark (eds) *Collectanea Londiniensia* (London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Special Paper 2, 1978) 200-15.  
8. M Biddle 'London on the Strand' *Popular Archaeol* (July 1984) 23-27; A Vince 'The Aldwych: Mid-Saxon London discovered' *Current Archaeol* 93 (Aug 1984) 310-12.  
9. Discussed in V Horsman, C Milne & G Milne *Aspects of Saxon-Norman London: I Building and Street Development* (London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Special Paper II, 1988).  
10. T Dyson 'King Alfred and the restoration of London' *The*

*London Journal* 15, no. 2 (1990) 99-110.

11. A Vince *Saxon London: an archaeological investigation* (1990) 20.  
12. Valuable numismatic contributions to the study of this confusing period are contained in two papers, S Keynes 'King Alfred and the Mercians' and M Blackburn 'The London mint in the reign of Alfred' in M A S Blackburn & D N Dumville (eds) *Kings, Currency and Alliances: History and Coinage in Southern England in the Ninth Century* (1998) 1-46 and 105-24.

The period between the apparent decline of *Lundenwic* even before the Viking raids of 842 and 851 and the plentiful archaeological evidence for the later 10th century within the City remains one of the most puzzling in London's long history. Yet recent work may be closing the gap. The Royal Opera House excavation produced a small hoard of Northumbrian coins, deposited in the mid 9th century, as well as a late, probably defensive ditch on the northern edge of the site<sup>13</sup>. Concurrent work in the City on the site of Bull Wharf (now Thames Court), close to Queenhithe revealed early buildings and foreshore structures -- and the first 'London monogram' coins to be found in a City excavation<sup>14</sup>. These three coins are all of the rare issue of halfpennies (the first ever to be struck, and almost the only ones before the late 13th century). The finds may reflect the needs of a busy trading environment for small change. Meanwhile, the excavations at 'Number 1 Poultry' took place at the north-eastern corner of the suspected western grid of the supposed Alfredian planned town<sup>15</sup>. Even here there was evidence of settlement in the late 9th or early 10th century -- although it did not seem to align with Cheapside. Perhaps, then the 'grid' -- as most recently set out in these pages by Gus Milne<sup>16</sup> -- is indeed a 'plan', one that was laid out from the start, but not fully occupied. The fate of later planned towns such as Winchelsea shows that not all well-intended new towns succeed.

Indeed, since in the year before he died Alfred was still apparently involved in discussions about 'the restoration of London' -- and was meeting his advisors at the royal estate of Chelsea rather than in London itself -- it seems very likely that his plans

for London were slow to get under way. What the full extent of his plans was will probably never be known, though one may speculate. The garrison of Alfred's new London proved its worth against further Danish attacks in the 890s. If Alfred had followed the lead of Charles the Bald, who constructed fortified bridges across the rivers of his Frankish kingdom to stop the passage of Viking fleets, he would surely have planned to construct a bridge blocking the river between London and the *burh* of Southwark on the south bank<sup>17</sup>. Yet though London Bridge served such a purpose later, a Danish fleet sailed upriver past London unimpeded in 893. Presumably there was no London Bridge at that date, and the earliest archaeological and documentary evidence seems to date to a hundred years later.

When he died 'six nights before All Hallows' Day' in 899 it is likely that Alfred's plans for London were incomplete. There are gaps in our knowledge both of those plans and of those parts of them that were achieved. And in spite of the recent excavations in *Lundenwic* and around Queenhithe the fate of London in the years leading up to 886 is still uncertain. In this centenary year it is appropriate to hope that future historical and archaeological research will serve to clarify the picture.

### Acknowledgements

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### Some recent books about King Alfred

Simon Keynes & Michael Lapidge (trans) *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1983).

Richard Abels *Alfred the Great: War, Kinship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Longman, London & New York 1998).

A P Smyth *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

Douglas Woodruff *The Life and Times of Alfred the Great* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1993).

(for children)

Brenda Williams *Alfred the Great* (Hamlyn Children's Books, London 1995).

13. L Blackmore, D Bowsher, R Cowie & G Malcolm 'Royal Opera House' *Current Archaeol* 158 (July 1998) 60-3.

14. R Wroe-Brown 'Bull Wharf: Queenhithe' *Current Archaeol* 158 (July 1998) 75-7.

15. P Treveil & P Rowsome 'Number 1 Poultry -- the main excavation: late Saxon and medieval sequence' *London Archaeol* 8 no 11 (1998) 283-91.

16. G Milne 'King Alfred's plan for London?' *London Archaeol* 6

no 8 (1990) 206-7.

17. On the assumption, that is, that 'the work of the men of Surrey' listed in the late 9th/early 10th-century *Burghal Hidage* was identical with the later Southwark -- and indeed that it was actually constructed rather than simply part of an overall plan. Apart from a single find of an Alfred 'London monogram' halfpenny, Saxon Southwark of this period is notably absent from the archaeological record!