

'In the Footsteps of King Alfred The Great' given by Chairman Kenny McLean

The Dunse History Society was entertained by a very informative talk 'In the Footsteps of King Alfred The Great' given by Chairman Kenny McLean on 29 February. Kenny had taken his holiday driving across the routes taken by Alfred and his men when protecting Wessex from Viking invasion during the 870s and 880s AD. Wessex was the richest and most populated of the seven Anglo Saxon kingdoms which later became consolidated with Alfred as the King. Alfred was born in the Royal Palace, Wantage in 849. In 868 he marries Elspeth the chief daughter of the Mercian Earl. That year a great Viking army reaches Nottingham in Mercia which they fortified and held until the Mercians bought their departure by the payment of Danegeld. By 871 the Vikings had invaded widely and were striking down into Wessex. The Wessex King Ethelred and his brother Prince Alfred were faced with saving their nation. A series of battles followed as the Vikings moved across Wessex: Ashdown, Uffington Castle; the Ridgeway; Basingstoke; Marten; then to Pewsey and Devizes. Some were won by the Vikings, others by the Anglo Saxons. Ethelred dies and Alfred becomes King. After a battle at Wilton which neither side won the Vikings were paid some Danegeld and withdrew to East Anglia. However, by 878 a serious event occurred when the Vikings invaded Wessex by coming to Exeter by sea and land. They subsequently attacked Chippenham and tried to capture Alfred. He escaped to West Somerset where he and his men spent 11 weeks in the marshes before fighting again at Athelney, Somerset and then to Oxford. Alfred then raised a militia army from several counties and was now fighting for the whole of Britain not just Wessex when his army launched a ferocious attack at Edington on Salisbury Plain. The Vikings held out for 2 weeks but were besieged and then capitulated. At Aller, Alfred made peace with the Vikings and their leader Guthrum and his men of the Great Heathen Army were baptised. Alfred and Guthrum then met at Edmore where they signed a peace treaty and the Vikings gave up much land they held in the south. Alfred had saved Wessex and gained peace for England. He made his capital at Winchester, the site of his Round Table, and for the next 10 years until his death in 899 built a series of fortified defensive structures to give the people places to be secure should there be further attacks. Alfred was not only a warrior but a wise advanced man. At a time when the Vikings were all over western Europe he saved the Englishness of our culture, our language, revived learning, justice and agriculture and created an organised country not seen since the Romans. He was buried in the Old Minster and reburied in Hyde Abbey, Winchester. It is significant that Alfred is the only British monarch, and few worldwide, to be called Great. Athelston, the grandson of Alfred united Wessex and Mercia and became the first King of England and of Britain.