

ANNALS
OF
THE REIGN OF ALFRED THE GREAT
FROM A.D. 849 TO A.D. 887

BY ASSER OF SAINT DAVID'S

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 849, was. born Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, at the royal village of Wanating [Wantage], in Berkshire, which country has its name from the wood of Berroc, where the box tree grows most abundantly. His genealogy is traced in the following order. King Alfred was the son of king Aethelwulf, who was the son of Ecgberht who was the son of Ealhmund, was the son of Eafa, who was the son of Eoppa, who the son of Ingild. Ingild, and Ine, the famous king of the West Saxons, were two brothers. Ine went to Rome, and there ending this life honourably, entered the heavenly kingdom, to reign there for ever with Christ. Ingild and Ine were the sons of Cenred, who was the son of Ceolwald, who was the son of Cuthwulf, who was the son of Cuthwine, who was the son of Ceawlin, who was the son of Cynric, who was the son of Creoda, who was the son of Cerdic, who was the son of Elesa, who was the son of Gewis, from whom the Britons name all that nation Gegwis*, who was the son of Brond, who was the son of Beldeg, who was the son of Woden, who was the son of Frithowald, who was the son of Frealaf, who was the son of Frithuwulf, who was the son of Finn of Godwulf, who was the son of Geat, which Geat the pagans long worshipped as a god. Sedulius makes mention of him in his metrical Paschal poem, as follows: —

When gentile poets with their fictions vain,
In tragic language and bombastic strain,
To their god Geat, comic deity,
Loud praises sing, *etc.*

Geat was the son of Taetwa, who was the son of Beaw, who was the son of Sceldi, who was the son of Heremod, who was the son of Itermon, who was the son of Hathra, who was the son of Guala, who was the son of Bedwig, who was the son of Shem, who was the son of Noah, who was the son of Lamech, who was the son of Methusalem, who was the son of Enoch, who was the son of Malaleel, who was the son of Cainian, who was the son of Enos, who was the son of Seth, who was the son of Adam.

* The Gewissae, generally understood to be the West Saxons.

The mother of Alfred was named Osburga, a religious woman, noble both by birth and by nature; she was daughter of Oslac, the famous butler of king Aethelwulf, which Oslac was a Goth by nation, descended from the Goths and Jutes, of the seed, namely, of Stuf and Whitgar, two brothers and counts; who, having received possession of the Isle of Wight from their uncle, king Cerdic, and his son Cynric their cousin, slew the few British inhabitants whom they could find in that island, at a place called Gwihtgaraburgh^{*}; for the other inhabitants of the island had either been slain or escaped into exile.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 851, which was the — third after the birth of king Alfred, Ceorl, earl of Devon, fought with the men of Devon against the pagans at a place called Wicgambeorg [Wembury]; and the Christians gained the victory; and that same year the pagans first wintered in the island called Sheppey, which means the Sheep Isle, and is situated in the river Thames between Essex and Kent, but is nearer to Kent than to Essex; it has in it a fine monastery.

The same, year also a great army of the pagans came with three hundred and fifty ships to the mouth of the river Thames, and sacked Dorobernia [Canterbury], which is the city of the Cantuarians, and also the city of London, which lies on the north bank of the river Thames, on the confines of Essex and Middlesex; but yet that city belongs in truth to Essex; and they put to flight Beorhtwulf, king of Mercia, with all the army, which he had led out to oppose them.

After these things, the aforesaid pagan host went into Surrey, which is a district situated on the south bank of the river Thames, and to the west of Kent. And Aethelwulf, king of the West Saxons, and his son Aethelbald, with all their army, fought a long time against them at a place called Ac Lea [Ockley], *i.e.* the Oak Plain, and there, after a lengthened battle, which was fought with much bravery on both sides, the greater part of the pagan multitude was destroyed and cut to pieces, so that we never heard of their being so defeated, either before or since, in any country, in one day; and the Christians gained an honourable victory, and were triumphant over their graves.

In the same year king Aethelstan, son of king Aethelwulf, and earl Ealhhere slew a large army of pagans in Kent, at a place called Sandwich, and took nine ships of their fleet; the others escaped by flight.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 853, which was the fifth of king Alfred, Burgred, king of the Mercians, sent messengers, and prayed Ethelwulf, king of the West-Saxons, to come and help him in reducing the midland Britons, who dwell between Mercia and the western sea, and who struggled against him most immoderately. So without delay, king Aethelwulf, having received the embassy, moved his army, and advanced with king Burgred against Britain[†], and

^{*} Carisbrooke, as may be conjectured from the name, which is a combination of Wight and Caraburgh.

[†] This is one the few instances to be met with of the name Britannia applied to Wales.

immediately, on entering that country, he began to ravage it; and having reduced it under subjection to king Burgred, he returned home.

In the same year, king Aethelwulf sent his son Alfred, above-named, to Rome, with an honourable escort both of nobles and commoners. Pope Leo [the fourth] at that time presided over the apostolic see, and he anointed for king the aforesaid Alfred, and adopted him as his spiritual son. The same year also, earl Ealhhere, with the men of Kent, and Huda with the men of Surrey, fought bravely and resolutely against an army of the pagans, in the island, which is called in the Saxon tongue, Tenet [Thanet], but Ruim in the British language. The battle lasted a long time, and many fell on both sides, and also were drowned in the water; and both the earls were there slain. In the same year also, after Easter, Aethelwulf, king of the West Saxons, gave his daughter to Burgred, king of the Mercians, and the marriage was celebrated royally at the royal vill of Chippenham.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 855, which was the seventh after the birth of the aforesaid king, Edmund the most glorious king of the East-Angles began to reign, on the eighth day before the calends of January, *i.e.* on the birthday of our Lord, in the fourteenth year of his age. In this year also died Lothair, the Roman emperor, son of the pious Louis Augustus. In the same year the aforesaid venerable king Aethelwulf released the tenth part of all his kingdom from all royal service and tribute, and with a pen never to be forgotten, offered it up to God the One and the Three in One, in the cross of Christ, for the redemption of his own soul and of his predecessors. In the same year he went to Rome with much honour; and taking with him his son, the aforesaid king Alfred, for a second journey thither, because he loved him more than his other sons, he remained there a whole year; after which he returned to his own country, bringing with him Judith, daughter of Charles, the king of the Franks.

In the meantime, however, whilst king Aethelwulf was residing beyond the sea, a base deed was done, repugnant to the morals of all Christians, in the western part of Selwood. For king Aethelbald [son of king Aethelwulf] and Ealstan, bishop of the church of Sherborne, with Eanwulf, earl of the district of Somerton, are said to have made a conspiracy together, that king Aethelwulf, on his return from Rome, should never again be received into his kingdom. This crime, unheard of in all previous ages, is ascribed by many to the bishop and earl alone, as resulting from their counsels. Many also ascribe it solely to the insolence of the king, because that king was pertinacious in this matter, and in many other perversities, as we have heard related by certain persons; as also was proved by the result of that which follows.

For as he was returning from Rome, his son aforesaid, with — all his counsellors, or, as I ought to say, his conspirators, attempted to perpetrate the crime of repulsing the king from his own kingdom; but neither did God permit the deed, nor would the nobles of all Saxony consent to it. For to prevent this irremediable evil to Saxony, of a son warring against his father, or rather of the whole nation carrying on civil war, either on the side of the one or the other, the extraordinary mildness of the father, seconded by the consent of all the nobles,

divided between the two the kingdom which had hitherto been undivided; the eastern parts were given to the father, and the western to the son; for where the father ought by just right to reign, there his unjust and obstinate son did reign; for the western part of Saxony is always preferable to the eastern.

When Aethelwulf, therefore, was coming from Rome, all that nation, as was fitting, so delighted in the arrival of the old man, that, if he permitted them, they would have expelled his rebellious son Aethelbald, with all his counsellors, out of the kingdom. But he, as we have said, acting with great clemency and prudent counsel, so wished things to be done, that the kingdom might not come into danger; and he placed Judith, daughter of king Charles, whom he had received from his father, by his own side on the regal throne, without any controversy or enmity from his nobles, even to the end of his life, contrary to the perverse custom of that nation. For the nation of the West Saxons do not allow a queen to sit beside the king, nor to be called a queen, but only the king's wife; which stigma the elders of that land say arose from a certain obstinate and malevolent queen of the same nation, who did all things so contrary to her lord, and to all the people, that she not only earned for herself exclusion from the royal seat, but also entailed the same stigma upon those who came after her; for in consequence of the wickedness of that queen, all the nobles of that land swore together, that they would never let any king reign over them, who should attempt to place a queen on the throne by his side.

And because, as I think, it is not known to many whence this perverse and detestable custom arose in Saxony, contrary to the custom of all the Theodiscan nations, it seems to me tight to explain a little more fully what I have heard from my lord Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, as he also had heard it from many men of truth, who in great part recorded that fact.

There was in Mercia, in recent times, a certain valiant king, who was feared by all the kings and neighbouring States around. His name was Offa, and it was he who had the great rampart made from sea to sea between Britain* and Mercia. His daughter, named Eadburh was married to Beorhtric, king of the West Saxons; who immediately, having the king's affections, and the control of almost all the kingdom, began to live tyrannically like her father, and to execrate every man whom Beorhtric loved, and to do all things hateful to God and man, and to accuse all she could before the king, and so to deprive them insidiously of their life or power; and if she could not obtain the king's consent, she used to take them off by poison: as is ascertained to have been the case with a certain young man beloved by the king, whom she poisoned, finding that the king would not listen to any accusation against him. It is said, moreover, that king Beorhtric unwittingly tasted of the poison, though the queen intended to give it to the young man only, and so both of them perished.

Beorhtric therefore being dead, the queen could remain no longer among the West Saxons, but sailed beyond the sea with immense treasures, and went to the court of the great and famous Charles, king of the Franks. As she stood

* Offa's dyke, between Wales and England.

before the throne, and offered him money, Charles said to her, "Choose, Eadburh, between me and my son, who stands here with me."

She replied, foolishly, and without deliberation, "If I am to have my choice, I choose your son, because he is younger than you."

At which Charles smiled and answered, "If you had chosen me, you would have had my son; but as you have chosen him, you shall not have either of us."

However, he gave her a large convent of nuns, in which, having laid aside the secular habit and taken the religious dress, she discharged the office of abbess during a few years for, as she is said to have lived irrationally in her own country, so she appears to have acted still more so in that foreign country; for being convicted of having had unlawful intercourse with a man of her own nation, she was expelled from the monastery by king Charles's order, and lived a vicious life of reproach in poverty and misery until her death; so that at last, accompanied by one slave only, as we have heard from many who saw her, she begged her bread daily at Pavia, and so miserably died.

Now king Aethelwulf lived two years after his return from Rome; during which, among many other good deeds of this present life, reflecting on his departure according to the way of all flesh, that his sons might not quarrel unreasonably after their father's death, he ordered a will or letter of instructions to be written, in which he ordered that his kingdom should be divided between his two eldest sons, his private inheritance between his sons, his daughters, and his relations, and the money which he left behind him between his sons and nobles, and for the good of his soul. Of this prudent policy we have thought fit to record a few instances out of many for posterity to imitate; namely, such as are understood to belong principally to the needs of the soul; for the others, which relate only to human dispensation, it is not necessary to insert in this work, lest prolixity should create disgust in those who read or wish to hear my work. For the benefit of his soul, then, which he studied to promote in all things from the first flower of his youth, he directed through all his hereditary dominions, that one poor man in ten, either native or foreigner, should be supplied with meat, drink, and clothing, by his successors, until the day of judgment; supposing, however, that the country should still be inhabited both by men and cattle, and should not become deserted. He commanded also a large sum of money, namely, three hundred mancuses, to be carried to Rome for the good of his soul, to be distributed in the following manner: namely, a hundred mancuses in honour of St. Peter, specially to buy oil for the lights of the church of that apostle on Easter eve, and also at the cockcrow: a hundred mancuses in honour of St. Paul, for the same purpose of buying oil for the church of St. Paul the apostle, to light the lamps on Easter eve and at the cockcrow; and a hundred mancuses for the universal apostolic pontiff.

But when king Aethelwulf was dead, and buried at Stemrugam [Steyning], his son Aethelbald, contrary to God's prohibition and the dignity of a Christian, contrary also to the custom of all the pagans, ascended his father's bed, and married Judith, daughter of Charles, king of the Franks, and drew down much

infamy upon himself from all who heard of it. During two years and a half of licentiousness after his father he held the government of the West Saxons.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 856, which was the eighth after Alfred's birth, the second year of king Charles III, and the eighteenth year of the reign of Aethelwulf, king of the West Saxons, Hunberht, bishop of the East Angles, anointed with oil and consecrated as king the glorious Edmund, with much rejoicing and great honour in the royal town called Burna, in which at that time was the royal seat, in the fifteenth year of his age, on a Friday, the twenty-fourth moon, being Christmas Day.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 860, which was the twelfth of king Alfred's age, died Aethelbald, king of the West Saxons, and was buried at Sherborne. His brother Aethelbert, as was fitting, joined Kent, Surrey, and Sussex also to his dominion.

In his days a large army of pagans came up from the sea, and attacked and destroyed the city of Winchester. As they were returning laden with booty to their ships, Osric, earl of Hampshire, with his men, and earl Aethelwulf, with the men of Berkshire, confronted them bravely; a severe battle took place, and the pagans were slain on every side; and, finding themselves unable to resist, took to flight like women, and the Christians obtained a triumph.

Aethelbert governed his kingdom five years in peace, with the love and respect of his subjects, who felt deep sorrow when he went the way of all flesh. His body was honourably interred at Sherborne by the side of his brothers.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 864, the pagans wintered in the isle of Thanet, and made a firm treaty with the men of Kent, who promised them money for adhering to their covenant; but the pagans, like cunning foxes, burst from their camp by night, and setting at naught their engagements, and spurning at the promised money, which they knew was less than they could get by plunder, they ravaged all the eastern coast of Kent.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 866, which was the eighteenth of king Alfred, Aethelred, brother of Aethelbert, king of the West Saxons, undertook the government of the kingdom for five years; and the same year a large fleet of pagans came to Britain from the Danube, and wintered in the kingdom of the Eastern Saxons, which is called in Saxon East Anglia; and there they became principally an army of cavalry. But, to speak in nautical phrase, I will no longer commit my vessel to the power of the waves and of its sails, or keeping off from land steer my roundabout course through so many calamities of wars and series of years, but will return to that which first prompted me to this task; that is to say, I think it right in this place briefly to relate as much as has come to my knowledge about the character of my revered lord Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, during the years that he was an infant and a boy.

He was loved by his father and mother, and even by all the people, above all his brothers, and was educated altogether at the court of the king. As he

advanced through the years of infancy and youth, his form appeared more comely than that, of his brothers; in look, in speech, and in manners he was more graceful than they. His noble nature implanted in him from his cradle a love of wisdom above all things; but, with shame be it spoken, by the unworthy neglect of his parents and nurses, he remained illiterate even till he was twelve years old or more; but he listened with serious attention to the Saxon poems which he often heard recited, and easily retained them in his docile memory. He was a zealous practiser of hunting in all its branches, and hunted with great assiduity and success; for skill and good fortune in this art, as in all others, are among the gifts of God, as we also have often witnessed.

On a certain day, therefore, his mother* was showing him and his brother a Saxon book of poetry, which she held in her hand, and said "Whichever of you shall the soonest learn this volume shall have it for his own."

Stimulated by these words, or rather by the Divine inspiration, and allured by the beautifully illuminated letter at the beginning of the volume, he spoke before all his brothers, who, though his seniors in age, were not so in grace, and answered, "Will you really give that book to one of us, that is to say, to him who can first understand and repeat it to you?" At this his mother smiled with satisfaction, and confirmed what she had before said. Upon which the boy took the book out of her hand, and went to his master to read it, and in due time brought it to his mother and recited it.

After this he learned the daily course, that is, the celebration of the hours, and afterwards certain psalms, and several prayers, contained in a certain book which he kept day and night in his bosom, as we ourselves have seen, and carried about with him to assist his prayers, amid all the bustle and business of this present life. But, sad to say! He could not gratify his most ardent wish to learn the liberal arts, because, as he said, there were no good readers at that time in all the kingdom of the West Saxons.

This he confessed, with many lamentations and sighs, to have been one of his greatest difficulties and impediments in this life, namely, that when he was young and had the capacity for learning, he could not find teachers; but, when he was more advanced in life, he was harassed by so many diseases unknown to all the physicians of this island, as well as by internal and external anxieties of sovereignty, and by continual invasions of the pagans, and had his teachers and writers also so much disturbed, that there was no time for reading. But yet among the impediments of this present life, from infancy up to the present time, and, as I believe, even until his death, he continued to feel the same insatiable desire of knowledge, and still aspires after it.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 867, which was the nineteenth of the life of the aforesaid king Alfred, the army of pagans before mentioned removed

* We must understand this epithet as denoting his mother-in-law, Judith, rather than his own mother, who was dead in A.D. 856, when Alfred was not yet seven years old. When his father brought Judith from France Alfred was thirteen years old.

from the East Angles to the city of York, which is situated on the north bank of the river Humber.

At that time a violent discord arose, by the instigation of the devil, among the inhabitants of Northumberland; as always is used to happen among a people who have incurred the wrath of God. For the Northumbrians at that time, as we have said, had expelled their lawful king Osberht, and appointed a certain tyrant named Aella, not of royal birth, over the affairs of the kingdom; but when the pagans approached, by divine Providence, and the union of the nobles for the common good, that discord was a little appeased, and Osberht and Aella uniting their resources, and assembling an army, marched to York. The pagans fled at their approach, and attempted to defend themselves within the walls of the city. The Christians, perceiving their flight and the terror they were in, determined to destroy the walls of the town, which they succeeded in doing; for that city was not surrounded at that time with firm or strong walls, and when the Christians had made a breach as they had purposed, and many of them had entered into the town, the pagans, urged by despair and necessity, made a fierce sally upon them, slew them, routed them, and cut them down on all sides, both within and without the walls. In that battle fell almost all the Northumbrian warriors, with both the kings and a multitude of nobles; the remainder, who escaped, made peace with the pagans.

In the same year, Ealstan, bishop of the church of Sherborne, went the way of all flesh, after he had honourably ruled his see four years, and he was buried at Sherborne.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 868, which was the twentieth of king Alfred's life, there was a severe famine. Then the aforesaid revered king Alfred, but at that time occupying a subordinate station, asked and obtained in marriage a noble Mercian lady, daughter of Aethelred, surnamed Mucel, earl of the Gaini*. The mother of this lady was named Eadburh, of the royal line of Mercia, whom we have often seen with our own eyes a few years before her death. She was a venerable lady, and after the decease of her husband, she remained many years a widow, even till her own death.

In the same year, the above-named army of pagans, leaving Northumberland, invaded Mercia and advanced to Nottingham, which is called in the British tongue "Tiggocobauc", but in Latin, the "House of Caves", and they wintered there that same year. Immediately on their approach, Burgred, king of Mercia, and all the nobles of that nation, sent messengers to Aethelred, king of the West Saxons, and his brother Alfred, suppliantly entreating them to come and aid them in fighting against the aforesaid army. Their request was easily obtained; for the brothers, as soon as promised, assembled an immense army from all parts of their dominions, and entering Mercia, came to Nottingham, all eager for battle, and when the pagans, defended by the castle, refused to fight, and the Christians were unable to destroy the wall, peace was made between the

* Inhabitants of Gainsborough.

Mercians and pagans, and the two brothers, Aethelred and Alfred, returned home with their troops.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 869, which was the twenty-first of king Alfred's life, there was a great famine and mortality of men, and a pestilence among the cattle. And the aforesaid army of the pagans, galloping back to Northumberland, went to York, and there passed the winter.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 870, which was the twenty-second of king Alfred's life, the above-named army of pagans, passed through Mercia into East Anglia, and wintered at Thetford.

In the same year Edmund, king of the East Angles, fought most fiercely against them; but, lamentable to say, the pagans triumphed, Edmund was slain in the battle, and the enemy reduced all that country to subjection.

In the same year Ceolnoth, archbishop of Canterbury, went the way of all flesh, and was buried peaceably in his own city.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 871, which was the twenty-third of king Alfred's life, the pagan army, of hateful memory, left the East Angles, and entering the kingdom of the West Saxons, came to the royal city, called Reading, situated on the south bank of the Thames, in the district called Berkshire; and there, on the third day after their arrival, their earls, with great part of the army, scoured the country for plunder, while the others made a rampart between the rivers Thames and Kennet on the right side of the same royal city. They were encountered by Aethelwulf, earl of Berkshire, with his men, at a place called Englefield; both sides fought bravely, and made long resistance. At length one of the pagan earls was slain, and the greater part of the army destroyed; upon which the rest saved themselves by flight, and the Christians gained the victory.

Four days afterwards, Aethelred, king of the West Saxons, and his brother Alfred, united their forces and marched to Reading, where, on their arrival, they cut to pieces the pagans whom they found outside the fortifications. But the pagans, nevertheless, sallied out from the gates, and a long and fierce engagement ensued. At last, grief to say, the Christians fled, the pagans obtained the victory, and the aforesaid earl Aethelwulf was among the slain.

Roused by this calamity, the Christians, in shame and indignation, within four days, assembled all their forces, and again encountered the pagan army at a place called Ashdune [Ashdown], which means the "Hill of the Ash." The pagans had divided themselves into two bodies, and began to prepare defences, for they had two kings and many earls, so they gave the middle part of the army to the two kings, and the other part to all their earls. Which the Christians perceiving, divided their army also into two troops, and also began to construct defences. But Alfred, as we have been told by those who were present, and would not tell an untruth, marched up promptly with his men to give them battle; for king Aethelred remained a long time in his tent in prayer, hearing the mass, and said that he would not leave it, till the priest had done, or abandon

the divine protection for that of men. And he did so too, which afterwards availed him much with the Almighty, as we shall declare more fully in the sequel.

Now the Christians had determined that king Aethelred, with his men, should attack the two pagan kings, but that his brother Alfred, with his troops, should take the chance of war against the two earls. Things being so arranged, the king remained a long time in prayer, and the pagans came up rapidly to fight. Then Alfred, though possessing a subordinate authority, could no longer support the troops of the enemy, unless he retreated or charged upon them without waiting for his brother. At length he bravely led his troops against the hostile army, as they had before arranged, but without awaiting his brother's arrival; for he relied in the divine counsels, and forming his men into a dense phalanx, marched on at once to meet the foe.

But here I must inform those who are ignorant of the fact, that the field of battle was not equally advantageous to both parties. The pagans occupied the higher ground, and the Christians came up from below. There was also a single thorn tree, of stunted growth, but we have ourselves never seen it. Around this tree the opposing armies came together with loud shouts from all sides, the one party to pursue their wicked course, the other to fight for their lives, their dearest ties, and their country. And when both armies had fought long and bravely, at last the pagans, by the divine judgment, were no longer able to bear the attacks of the Christians, and having lost great part of their army, took to a disgraceful flight. One of their two kings, and five earls were there slain, together with many thousand pagans, who fell on all sides, covering with their bodies. the whole plain of Ashdune.

There fell in that battle king Bagsecg, earl Sidroc the elder, and earl Sidroc the younger, earl Osbern, earl Frene, and earl Harold; and the whole pagan army pursued its flight, not only until night but until the next day, even until they 'reached. the stronghold from which they had sallied. The Christians followed, slaying all they could reach, until it became dark.

After fourteen days had elapsed, king Aethelred, with his brother Alfred, again joined their forces and marched to Basing to fight with the pagans. The enemy came together from all quarters, and after a long contest gained the victory. After this battle, another army came from beyond the sea, and joined them.

The same year, after Easter, the aforesaid king Aethelred, having bravely, honourably, and with good repute, governed his kingdom five years, through much tribulation, went the way of all flesh, and was buried in Wimborne Minster, where he awaits the coming of the Lord, and the first resurrection with the just.

The same year, the aforesaid Alfred, who had been up to that time only of secondary rank, whilst his brothers were alive, now, by God's permission, undertook the government of the whole kingdom, amid the acclamations of all

the people; and if he had chosen, he might have done so before, whilst his brother above-named was still alive; for in wisdom and other qualities he surpassed all his brothers, and moreover, was warlike and victorious in all his wars. And when he had reigned one month, almost against his will, for he did not think he could alone sustain the multitude and ferocity of the pagans, though even during his brothers' lives, he had borne the woes of many — he fought a battle with a few men, and on very unequal terms, against all the army of the pagans, at a hill called Wilton, on the south bank of the river Wily, from which river the whole of that district is named, and after a long and fierce engagement, the pagans, seeing the danger they were in, and no longer able to bear the attack of their enemies, turned their backs and fled. But, oh, shame to say, they deceived their too audacious pursuers, and again rallying, gained the victory. Let no one be surprised that the Christians had but a small number of men, for the Saxons had been worn out by eight battles in one year, against the pagans, of whom they had slain one king, nine dukes, and innumerable troops of soldiers, besides endless skirmishes, both by night and by day, in which the oft-named Alfred, and all his chieftains, with their men, and several of his ministers, were engaged without rest or cessation against the pagans. How many thousand pagans fell in these numberless skirmishes God alone knows, over and above those who were slain in the eight battles above-mentioned. In the same year the Saxons made peace with the pagans, on condition that they should take their departure, and they did so.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 872, the twenty-fourth of king Alfred's life, the above-named army of pagans went to London, and there wintered. The Mercians made "peace with them.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 873, the twenty-fifth of king Alfred, the above-named army, leaving London, went into the country of the Northumbrians, and there wintered in the district of Lindsey; and the Mercians again made treaty with them.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 874, the twenty-sixth since the birth of king Alfred, the army before so often mentioned left Lindsey and marched to Mercia, where they wintered at Repton. Also, they compelled Burgred, king of Mercia, against his will, to leave his kingdom and go beyond the sea to Rome, in the twenty-second year of his reign. He did not long live after his arrival, but died there, and was honourably buried in the school of the Saxons, in St. Mary's church, where he awaits the Lord's coming and the first resurrection with the just. The pagans also, after his expulsion, subjected the whole kingdom of the Mercians to their dominion; but by a most miserable arrangement, gave it into the custody of a certain foolish man, named Ceolwulf, one of the king's ministers, on condition that he should restore it to them, whenever they should wish to have it again; and to guarantee this agreement, he gave them hostages, and swore that he would not oppose their will, but be obedient to them in every respect.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 875, which was the 27th of king Alfred, the above-named army leaving Repton, divided into two bodies, one of which

went with Halfdan into Northumbria, and having wintered there near the Tyne, reduced all Northumberland to subjection; they also ravaged the Picts and the Strathclydensians. The other division, with Gothrun, Oskytel, and Anwind, three kings of the pagans, went to a place called Grantabridge [Cambridge], and there wintered.

In the same year, king Alfred fought a battle by sea against six ships of the pagans, and took one of them; the rest escaped by flight.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 876, being the twenty-eighth year of king Alfred's life, the aforesaid army of the pagans, leaving Grantabridge by night, entered a castle called Wareham, where there is a monasterium of holy virgins between the two rivers Fraun [Frome] and Trent [Piddle], in the district which is called in British *Durngueis*, but in Saxon *Thornsæta*, placed in a most secure situation, except that it was exposed to danger on the western side from the nature of the ground. With this army Alfred made a solemn treaty, to the effect that they should depart out of the kingdom, and for this they made no hesitation to give as many hostages as he named; also, they swore an oath over the Christian relics, which with king Alfred were next in veneration after the Deity himself, that they would depart speedily from the kingdom. But they again practised their usual treachery, and caring nothing for the hostages or their oaths, they broke the treaty, and sallying forth by night, slew all the horsemen that the king had round him, and turning off into Devon, to another place called in Saxon *Exeanceaster* [Exeter], but in British *Caer Wisc*, which means in Latin, the city of Ex, situated on the eastern bank of the river Wisc [Exe], they directed their course suddenly towards the south sea, which divides Britain and Gaul, and there passed the winter.

In the same year, Halfdan, king of those parts, divided out the whole country of Northumberland between himself and his men, and settled there with his army. In the same year, Rollo with his followers penetrated into Normandy.

This same Rollo, duke of the Normans, whilst wintering in Old Britain, or England, at the head of his troops, enjoyed one night a vision revealing to him the future. See more of this Rollo in the Annals*.

In the year 877, the pagans, on the approach of autumn, partly settled in Exeter, and partly marched for plunder into Mercia. The number of that disorderly crew increased every day, so that, if thirty thousand of them were slain in one battle, others took their places to double the number. Then king Alfred commanded boats and galleys, *i.e.* long ships, to be built throughout the kingdom, in order to offer battle by sea to the enemy as they were coming. On board of these he placed seamen, and appointed them to watch the seas. Meanwhile he went himself to Exeter, where the pagans were wintering, and having shut them up within the walls, laid siege to the town. He also gave orders to his sailors to prevent them from obtaining any supplies by sea; and his sailors

* It is necessary to inform the reader that many passages of this work are modern interpolations, made in the old MS. by a later hand. The "Annals" referred to in the text are supposed not to be a genuine work of Asser.

were encountered by a fleet of a hundred and twenty ships full of armed soldiers, who were come to help their countrymen. As soon as the king's men knew that they were fitted with pagan soldiers, they leaped to their arms, and bravely attacked those barbaric tribes: but the pagans, who had now for almost a month been tossed and almost wrecked among the waves of the sea, fought vainly against them; their bands were discomfited in a moment, and all were sunk and drowned in the sea, at a place called Suanewic [Swanwich].

In the same year the army of pagans, leaving Wareham, partly on horseback and partly by water, arrived at Suanewic, where one hundred and twenty of their ships were lost; and king Alfred pursued their land army as far as Exeter; there he made a covenant with them, and took hostages that they would depart.

The same year, in the month of August, that army went into Mercia, and gave part of that country to one Ceolwulf, a weak-minded man, and one of the king's ministers; the other part they divided among themselves.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 878, which was the thirtieth of king Alfred's life, the army above-mentioned left Exeter, and went to Chippenham, a royal villa, situated in the west of Wiltshire, and on the eastern bank of the river, which is called in British, the Avon. There they wintered, and drove many of the inhabitants of that country beyond the sea by the force of their arms, and by want of the necessities of life. They reduced almost entirely to subjection all the people of that country.

At the same time the above-named Alfred, king of the West Saxons, with a few of his nobles, and certain soldiers and vassals, used to lead an unquiet life among the woodlands* of the county of Somerset, in great tribulation; for he had none of the necessities of life, except what he could forage openly or stealthily, by frequent sallies, from the pagans, or even from the Christians who had submitted to the rule of the pagans, and as we read in the Life of St. Neot, at the house of one of his cowherds.

But it happened on a certain day, that the countrywoman, wife of the cowherd, was preparing some loaves to bake, and the king, sitting at the hearth, made ready his bow and arrows and other warlike instruments. The unlucky woman espying the cakes burning at the fire, ran up to remove them, and rebuking the brave king, exclaimed: —

Ca'sn thee mind the ke-aks, man, an' doossen zee 'em burn?
I'm boun thee's eat 'em vast enough, az zoon az 'tiz the turn.†

The blundering woman little thought that it was king Alfred, who had fought so many battles against the pagans, and gained so many victories over them.

* Athelney, a morass formed by the conflux of the Tone and the Parrett.

† The original here is in Latin verse, and may therefore be rendered into English verse, but such as every housewife in Somersetshire would understand.

But the Almighty not only granted to the same glorious king victories over his enemies, but also permitted him to be harassed by them, to be sunk down by adversities, and depressed by the low estate of his followers, to the end that he might learn that there is one Lord of all things, to whom every knee doth bow, and in whose hand are the hearts of kings; who puts down the mighty from their seat and exalteth the humble; who suffers his servants when they are elevated at the summit of prosperity to be touched by the rod of adversity, that in their humility they may not despair of God's mercy, and in their prosperity they may not boast of their honours, but may also know, to whom they owe all the things which they possess.

We may believe that the calamity was brought upon the king aforesaid, because, in the beginning of his reign, when he was a youth, and influenced by youthful feelings, he would not listen to the petitions which his subjects made to him for help in their necessities, or for relief from those who oppressed them; but he repulsed them from him, and paid no heed to their requests. This particular gave much annoyance to the holy man St. Neot, who was his relation, and often foretold to him, in the spirit of prophecy, that he would suffer great adversity on this account; but Alfred neither attended to the reproof of the man of God, nor listened to his true prediction. Wherefore, seeing that a man's sins must be corrected either in this world or the next, the true and righteous Judge was willing that his sin should not go unpunished in this world, to the end that he might spare him in the world to come. From this cause, therefore, the aforesaid Alfred often fell into such great misery, that sometimes none of his subjects knew where he was or what had become of him.

In the same year the brother* of Ivar and Halfdan, with twenty-three ships, after much slaughter of the Christians, came from the country of Demetia†, where he had wintered, and sailed to Devon, where, with twelve hundred others, he met with a miserable death, being slain while committing his misdeeds, by the king's servants, before the castle of Cynwit [Kenwith‡], into which many of the king's servants, with their followers, had fled for safety. The pagans, seeing that the castle was altogether unprepared and unfortified, except that it had walls in our own fashion, determined not to assault it, because it was impregnable and secure on all sides, except on the eastern, as we ourselves have seen, but they began to blockade it, thinking that those who were inside would soon surrender either from famine or want of water, for the castle had no spring near it. But the result did not fall out as they expected; for the Christians, before they began to suffer from want, inspired by Heaven, judging it much better to gain victory or death, attacked the pagans suddenly in the morning, and from the first cut them down in great numbers, slaying also their king, so that few escaped to their ships; and there they gained a very large booty, and amongst other things the standard called Raven; for they say that the three sisters of Ivar and Ubba, daughters of Lodbrok, wove that flag and got it ready in one day. They say, moreover, that in every battle, wherever that flag went before them, if they were to gain the victory a live crow would appear flying

* Probably the sanguinary Ubba.

† South Wales

‡ Kynwith castle stood on the river Taw.

on the middle of the flag; but if they were doomed to be defeated it would hang down motionless, and this was often proved to be so.

The same year, after Easter, king Alfred, with a few followers, made for himself a stronghold in a place called Athelney, and from thence sallied with his vassals and the nobles of Somersetshire, to make frequent assaults upon the pagans. Also, in the seventh week after Easter, he rode to the stone of Ecgberht*, which is in the eastern part of the wood which is called Selwood†, which means in Latin *Silva Magna*, the Great Wood, but in British *Coit Mawr*. Here he was met by all the neighbouring folk of Somersetshire, and Wiltshire, and Hampshire, who had not, for fear of the pagans, fled beyond the sea; and when they saw the king alive after such great tribulation, they received him, as he deserved, with joy and acclamations, and encamped there for one night. When the following day dawned, the king struck his camp, and went to Okely‡, where he encamped for one night. The next morning, he removed to Edington, and there fought bravely and perseveringly against all the army of the pagans, whom, with the divine help, he defeated with great slaughter, and pursued them flying to their fortification. Immediately he slew all the men, and carried off all the booty that he could find without the fortress, which he immediately laid siege to with all his army; and when he had been there fourteen days, the pagans, driven by famine, cold, fear, and last of all by despair, asked for peace, on the condition that they should give the king as many hostages as he pleased but should receive none of him in return, in which form they had never before made a treaty with any one. The king, hearing that, took pity upon them, and received such hostages as he chose; after which the pagans swore, moreover, that they would immediately leave the kingdom; and their king, Gothrun, promised to embrace Christianity, and receive baptism at king Alfred's hands. All of which articles he and his men fulfilled as they had promised. For after seven weeks Gothrun, king of the pagans, with thirty men chosen from the army, came to Alfred at a place called Aller, near Athelney, and there king Alfred, receiving him as his son by adoption, raised him up from the holy laver of baptism on the eighth day, at a royal villa named Wedmore, where the holy chrism was poured upon him. After his baptism he remained twelve nights with the king, who, with all his nobles, gave him many fine houses.

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 879, which was the thirty-first of king Alfred, the aforesaid army of pagans leaving Chippenham, as they had promised, went to Cirencester, which is called in British *Caer Cori*, and is situate in the southern part of the Hwicce, and there they remained one year.

In the same year, a large army of pagans sailed from foreign parts into the river Thames, and joined the army which was already in the country. They wintered at Fulham near the river Thames.

In the same year an eclipse of the sun took place, between three o'clock and the evening, but nearer to three o'clock.

* Now called Brixton Deverill, in Wilts.

† Selwood Forest extended from Frome to Burham, and was probably much larger at one time.

‡ Or Iglea. Supposed to be Leigh, now Westbury, Wilts,