

## Max Keen – Alfred the Fortunate.

Max Keen made a welcome return to the History Group, this time presenting the case for 'Alfred the Fortunate', aka 'Alfred the Great'. He entered dressed as a Viking warrior and explained about Viking costume, armour and weapons, emphasising the lethal aspects of the weapons, their weight and their impact. Wearing a copy of the 'Coppergate Helmet', found in York, and wielding an authentic copy of a Viking Axe, he invited the group to feel the weight of these. The Viking Axe was a double-handed axe and lethal in battle.



Max Keen as a Viking Warrior.



Max Keen as a Viking Warrior.

Max explained that Alfred was the only British monarch to be given the distinctive title of 'The Great'. Many rulers in Europe have this title, eg 'Peter the Great', 'Alexander the Great' and 'Catherine the Great' among others, but only Alfred has this distinction in the UK. Through the presentation, Max argued the case for Alfred to be renamed 'The Fortunate' as, on many occasions in his life, external situations and circumstances caused Alfred to experience a fortunate turn of events. He then proceeded, with wit, repartee,

various dialects and accents, and engagement with the audience to unfold the story of Alfred, from birth to death.

Alfred was an Anglo-Saxon king, the fourth son of Aethelwulf and Osburh. Destined for the Church, he became King at the age of 21 or 22, due to the death of his older brothers. Well educated, he became the main source of information for Asser's biography of him. He was also a courageous warrior, a strategic thinker and a compassionate victor, as evidenced by his sparing the life of Guthrun, his enemy, after the Battle of Edington, and standing as godfather to Guthrun, who converted to Christianity and was baptised. Alfred's deep Christian convictions informed the whole of his life.



Great in Winchester.

Max explained the intricacies of the Viking religious system and Viking society as well as the social structure and hierarchy of the Anglo-Saxons. Through the use of maps, photographs, diagrams, cartoons (!) and pictures he gave an overview of the political situation in England and Wales and the different kingdoms extant at the time of the Anglo-Saxons eg Wessex, Mercia etc.. Max also described the methods of battle and battle formations that played an important part in his victories and how Alfred later reformed Wessex, creating 'Burhs' (later 'boroughs'), releasing male citizens to remain in their communities instead of being constantly involved in warfare. Alfred also re-organised the army and the fleet, encouraged education and literacy and reformed the law.

Of particular interest to some of the audience was the photograph of the 'Alfred Jewel', found at Athelney on the Somerset Levels. Alfred had retreated to Athelney after Guthrum had attacked him at Chippenham. The 'Alfred Jewel' shows the only contemporary portrait of Alfred and has the inscription 'Aelfred made me'. It is believed to be the work of Alfred's own hands and intended as a gift. Some of the Art Appreciation Group had actually seen this exquisite artefact, made of rock crystal and

decorated with cloisonné enamel on a visit to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, last summer.



The 'Alfred Jewel'

(Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)

Another interesting photograph was of the page of the 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicles' of AD 878, written by Alfred's biographer, Asser, mentioning Alfred's sojourn at Chippenham. Max read the excerpt in Anglo-Saxon and then translated for us. There were several words in the original text that were still recognisable, including the name Chippenham.



A page from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles

**Excerpt from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles mentioning King Alfred at Chippenham.**

**A.D. 878** . This year about mid-winter, after twelfth-night, the Danish army stole out to Chippenham, and rode over the land of the West-Saxons; where they settled, and drove many of the people over sea; and of the rest the greatest part they rode down, and subdued to their will; -- ALL BUT ALFRED THE KING. He, with a little band, uneasily sought the woods and fastnesses of the moors.

Alfred has been called 'The Father of England', although it was his son, Edward, and grandson, Athelstan, who united England. Through this superb presentation, Max revealed the importance, relevance and influence of this historical figure even for us today.

Heidy Hague.