Born in 849 AD, Alfred was the youngest son of Aethelwulf, King of Wessex. He was a skilled huntsman, and loved poetry – although he did not learn to read until he was 12 years old! He had four older brothers: Aethelstan, Aethelbald, Aethelbeht and Aethelred. After all four of his brothers had died, Alfred became King of Wessex in 871. He was 22.

Alfred's reign came at a difficult time in Britain. For more than eighty years, the Vikings had been terrorising the British coasts in their longboats, raiding and plundering towns and villages. The Anglo-Saxons were appalled by the death and destruction caused by the Vikings, and they lived in fear of their attacks.

At this time, England was divided into four separate kingdoms: Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, and Wessex. Having decided that they wished to settle in England, the Vikings assembled an army and attacked the kingdoms one by one. In 866, just a few years before Alfred became King of Wessex, they invaded and captured the city of York. Next, they seized lands in East Anglia and Mercia. There was only one kingdom left unconquered: Wessex.

King Alfred gathered an army, and fought bravely against the Viking warriors and their leader, Guthrum. Time and again, Alfred and his men were forced to flee, but every time they would reassemble their army and continue to fight. On one occasion, legend has it that King Alfred was given shelter by a peasant woman. Not knowing who he was, the woman left him to watch over some cakes she was cooking on the fire. Alfred was so busy thinking about the war that he forgot all about the cakes – and they burned to a crisp! The woman scolded him when she returned.

Finally, Alfred gathered one last army of men from Somerset, Wiltshire and Hampshire. They fought Guthrum and his Viking troops with all their might – and this time, they won. The Vikings surrendered, and agreed to be baptised into the Christian faith.

Not only had Alfred saved Wessex from the Vikings, he also got Guthrum to agree to give him part of the kingdom of Mercia – including the city of London. Now that there was peace in England, Alfred set about establishing schools and rebuilding the monasteries that had been ransacked by the Vikings.

Alfred died in 899 and was succeeded by his son, Edward.
1. In which year was Alfred the Great born? ..........................................................

2. What were the four kingdoms of England called? ...........................................

3. Who was the leader of the Vikings? .................................................................

4. Why did the peasant woman tell Alfred off? ....................................................

5. What did Guthrum give Alfred after the Vikings surrendered? .........................

6. Which city was part of the kingdom of Mercia? ............................................... 

7. Who became King after Alfred? ........................................................................

8. Explain, in your own words, why you think Alfred came to be known as ‘Alfred the Great’. .................................................................
1. How old was Alfred the Great when he learned to read? ....................

2. Name one of Alfred the Great’s hobbies ........................................

3. What were the four kingdoms of England called? ..............................

4. Why did the Anglo-Saxons fear the Vikings? ..................................

5. Who was the leader of the Vikings? .................................................

6. Why did Alfred let the peasant woman’s cakes burn? .......................  

7. What two things did the Vikings agree to after they surrendered? ......

8. Which city was part of the kingdom of Mercia? ...............................  

9. Who became King after Alfred? ......................................................

10. Explain, in your own words, why you think Alfred came to be known as ‘Alfred the Great’. ..........................................................
1. What is surprising about the fact that Alfred the Great loved poetry? 

2. The Norse word ‘Aethel’ means ‘Noble’. How many people in Alfred’s family had this word as part of their name?

3. How many kingdoms was England divided into, and what were they called?

4. Who feared the Vikings, and why?

5. Which city did the Vikings conquer in 866?

6. Why did Alfred let the peasant woman’s cakes burn?

7. The story about the peasant woman’s cakes is a legend. What does this mean?

8. What two things did the Vikings agree to after they surrendered?

9. What did Alfred do once peace had been restored to England?

10. Explain, in your own words, why you think Alfred came to be known as ‘Alfred the Great’.
All about Alfred the Great – comprehension task

Answers

Sheet A:

3. Guthrum.         4. He forgot to watch her cakes and they burned.
5. Guthrum gave Alfred part of the kingdom of Mercia.
8. Answers will vary, but should mention Alfred’s defeat of the Vikings, bringing about peace for the Anglo-Saxon people.

Sheet B:

1. 12 years old.    2. Hunting or poetry.
4. The Anglo-Saxons feared the Vikings because they had been raiding their coastal towns for 80 years, causing death and destruction.
5. Guthrum.  6. Alfred let the cakes burn because he was so busy thinking about the war he forgot all about them.
7. They agreed to be baptised as Christians, and they agreed to give Alfred part of the kingdom of Mercia.
10. Answers will vary, but should mention Alfred’s defeat of the Vikings, bringing about peace for the Anglo-Saxon people.

Sheet C:

1. It is surprising because he could not read until he was 12 years old.
2. Five people: His father, and his four brothers.
4. The Anglo-Saxons feared the Vikings because they had been raiding their coastal towns for 80 years, causing death and destruction.
5. York.
6. Alfred let the cakes burn because he was so busy thinking about the war he forgot all about them.
7. Answers will vary, but should be along these lines: It is a legend because it could be true, but it happened such a long time ago that there is no proof of whether or not it is true.
8. They agreed to be baptised as Christians, and they agreed to give Alfred part of the kingdom of Mercia.
9. Once peace had been restored, Alfred rebuilt the monasteries and established schools.
10. Answers will vary, but should mention Alfred’s defeat of the Vikings, bringing about peace for the Anglo-Saxon people.