

# The Vikings – murderous invaders or peaceful settlers?

## Learning objectives

- Learn who the Vikings were, and where they came from.
- Understand the impact the Vikings had on England.
- Learn how the Vikings explored and settled other countries.

## What do you think?

What do you already know about the Vikings?

## Key term

**Danelaw\***: The areas of Anglo-Saxon England that were populated by the descendants of Vikings. These areas followed Viking laws and customs.

In AD 793, monks working peacefully at their monastery in Lindisfarne, Northumbria, were surprised by the appearance of sails on the horizon. The ships drew closer and hordes of warriors came ashore. They ransacked the monastery, stole its gold and jewels, and killed its inhabitants. The monks, who carried no weapons, were defenceless.

Some at the time described the invaders as 'pagans', or people without religion. Others called them 'Danes' or the 'Northmen'. It wasn't until the 11th century that they received the name 'Vikings', which means 'pirate raiders'. The raid on Lindisfarne was only the first of many; soon, the Vikings attacked other targets, and in larger numbers. For the next 250 years, Britain faced repeated attacks from the Vikings.



Figure 6.8: Viking raiders.

## Who were the Vikings?

The Vikings were different groups of people who came from the modern-day countries of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Life at home was probably very hard, with too many people and not enough land. It's possible that merchants who had traded with the Anglo-Saxons returned home to the Viking homelands and spoke of the fertile lands and riches to the west. It's not surprising that many chose to risk the journey across the sea to Britain.

## What made the Vikings such effective raiders?

The Vikings were highly effective sailors. Their ships used a combination of sails and oars, allowing them to travel long distances. They were also able to navigate rivers that were too shallow for most ships, allowing them to penetrate deep inland where people least expected it.



## The Viking invasion

In AD 865, the Vikings changed tactics. Instead of small hit-and-run raids that aimed to carry away loot and plunder, the Vikings launched a full-scale invasion. One by one, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were defeated, until only the kingdom of Wessex, ruled by Alfred, was left.

However, Alfred proved to be an impressive military leader and defeated the Viking army, forcing their leader to convert to Christianity. Because of his victory, Alfred gained the title by which he is commonly known – Alfred 'the Great'. However, he was unable to drive the Vikings completely from Britain. Instead, he divided the land into two kingdoms. The Anglo-Saxon kingdom covered most of southern England, while the Viking kingdom included much of northern England and East Anglia. This became known as the 'Danelaw'\*. Many Vikings settled there and, over time, became part of the general population, until it would have been difficult to tell who was a Viking and who was 'English'.

In Britain, the Vikings have had a lasting impact. The Viking city of Jorvik (modern-day York) had 10,000 inhabitants at its peak and was a major trading centre. You can still see the impact of the Vikings on place names today. Places with the suffixes '-by' or '-thorpe' (e.g. Whitby, Derby, Scunthorpe) were probably founded by the Vikings.

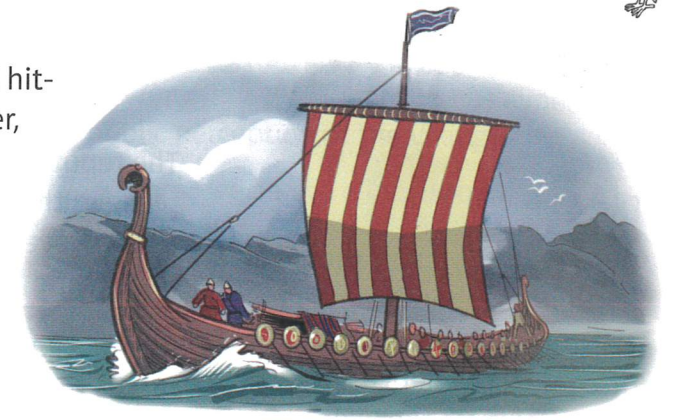


Figure 6.9: A Viking longboat.

## Did you know?

One recent study suggested that one million people in Britain today are direct descendants of the Vikings. In some areas, such as the Shetland Islands, as many as 30 per cent of the population are descended from Vikings.

**Source A:** An extract from the Peterborough Manuscript of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. This was written by monks from the ninth to the 12th centuries AD.

[Alfred]... made peace with the raiding-army, and they granted him as hostages the most distinguished men who were next to the king in the raiding-army, and they swore him oaths on the sacred ring, which earlier they would not do to any nation, that they would quickly go from his kingdom... And that year Halfdan divided up the land of Northumbria; and they were ploughing and were providing for themselves.

## Your turn!

- 1 Draw a 'push' and 'pull' diagram to show why the Vikings came to Britain. For 'push', include the reasons that made them want to leave their homeland. For 'pull', include what attracted them to Britain.
- 5<sup>th</sup> 2 Read Source A. Suggest a reason why this source is useful to historians wanting to find out about the impact of the Vikings in Britain.
- 5<sup>th</sup> 3 What else can you learn from Source A about:
  - a Alfred as a leader
  - b agreements Alfred made with the Vikings?
- 6<sup>th</sup> 4 What evidence is there in Source A that the Vikings were not just raiders and plunderers, but instead settled in Britain? Pick a quote and explain it.
- 6<sup>th</sup> 5 Explain how evidence such as place names and the remains of Jorvik also suggest that the Vikings eventually settled down.