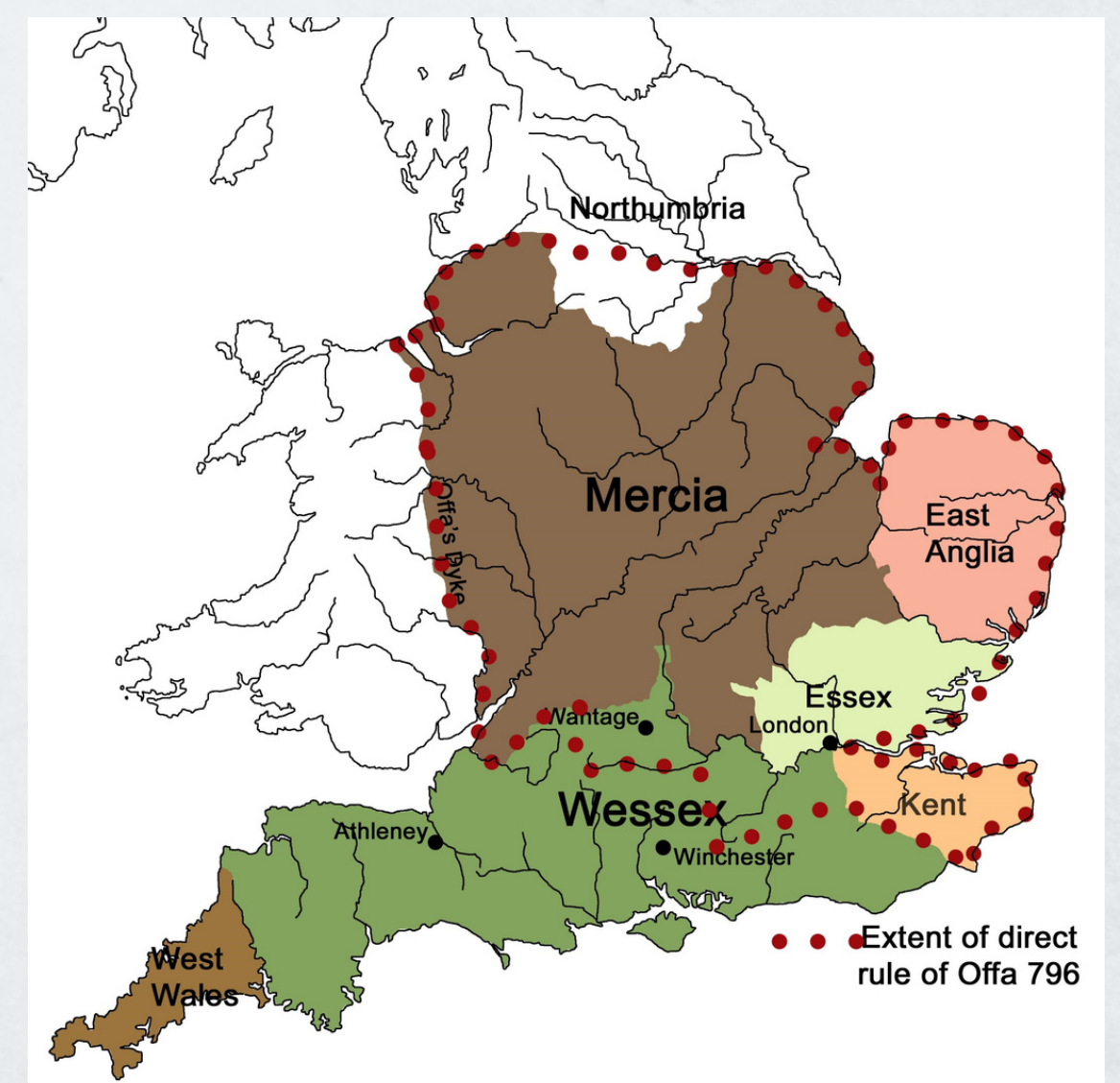


The Anglo Saxons & Vikings

Who were the Anglo Saxons?

The Anglo Saxons were a mix of tribes that came from northern Europe. When the Romans left in 410AD, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes came to England in search of farmland. By 600AD thousands of Anglo Saxons had settled here. As they took control of more land, they became organised into larger groups with a local chief or king. As some of the kingdoms became more powerful, they tried to take over neighbouring areas.

The first man to call himself the 'King of the English' was Offa, King of Mercia. Offa ruled from 757 to 796, but by the time he died, new raiders from Northern Europe were attacking.



The Vikings Arrive

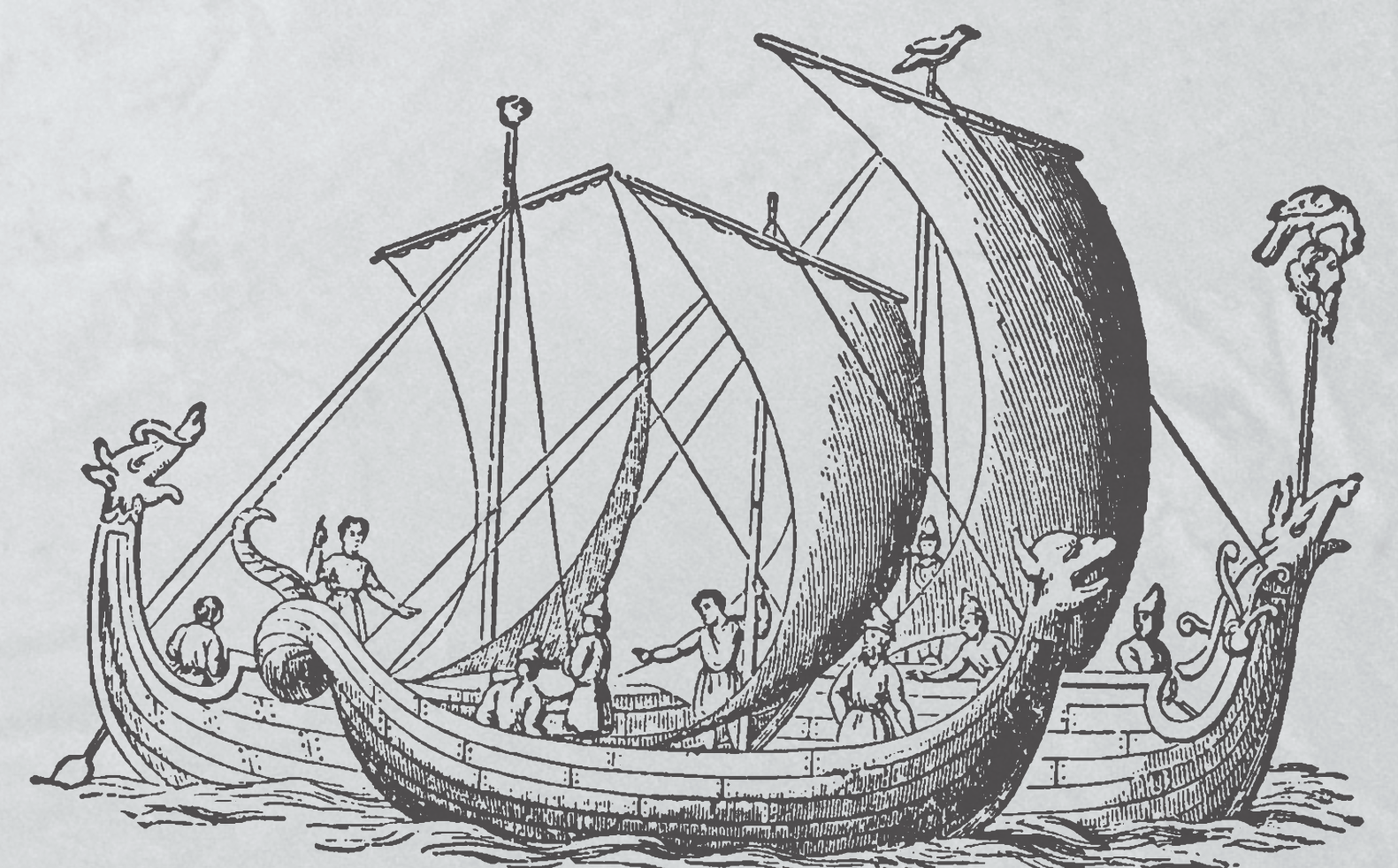
The first Viking raids began in 793 when they raided Lindisfarne Monastery. They were skilled sailors and fierce warriors who came from Denmark. Known as Danes, Northmen or Norsemen, at first they raided easy targets. But as time went on, they also wanted to find farmland and settle in England.

In 865 a large army, which the Anglo Saxons called the “Great Heathen Army”, arrived from Denmark. They attacked East Anglia and Northumbria, killing their kings and taking over the land. Soon they moved south to Mercia, until only Wessex remained under Anglo Saxon control.

The name Wessex comes from the old English for West Saxon. It covered the same area as the modern counties of Hampshire, Dorset, Wiltshire and Somerset. At times it extended north of the River Thames and it eventually covered Devon and Cornwall.

In 871 the West Saxons, led by King Æthelred and his younger brother (the future King Alfred the Great), defeated the Vikings at the Battle of Ashdown. The battle is described in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle and Asser’s Life of King Alfred, but exactly where it took place is not certain. Many consider Ashdown near Faringdon to be the location. However ‘Ashdown’ was also the ancient name for the area of the Berkshire Downs between Streatley and Wantage.

Although the Viking army had been defeated, more attacks followed. Conflicts between Anglo Saxons and Vikings did not end until the Norman conquest in 1066.



King Alfred the Great

Who was King Alfred the Great?

Alfred the Great (849-899 AD) was the most famous of the Anglo-Saxon kings. Alfred was born in Wantage in 849 AD and was the youngest of 5 sons of King Æthelwulf of Wessex, so as a child did not expect to become king. Alfred grew up within the royal court, was well educated and visited Rome twice as a child.

His father died when he was young and his brother King Æthelred died shortly after the battle of Ashdown. Alfred became king in 871AD when he was only 22.

For much of his reign, Alfred defended Wessex from Viking invasion. A surprise attack was launched in 878 and Alfred had to hide in the Somerset marshes. But in the spring he gathered a new army and defeated their leader, Guthrum, at the battle of Edington. This forced the Vikings to leave Wessex and return to East Anglia.



Count Gleichen's statue of King Alfred was commissioned by Lord Wantage and unveiled in Wantage Market Place in 1877.

Why was Alfred so Great?

Alfred defended Wessex from the Vikings despite overwhelming odds, which was an incredible achievement. His victories and the reorganisation of the Anglo Saxon military meant by the end of his reign in he had unified much of England.

Alfred was also a champion of religion and education, and saw the importance of learning. He translated important texts from Latin into Anglo Saxon, an early form of our modern English language, so that more people could read them.



The Anglo Saxon Chronicle and Alfred's Biography recorded details of his reign and the kind of ruler he was. They describe Alfred as a just and fair ruler, a diplomat and a wise administrator.

Because we know so much about him, some claim that Alfred has been credited with everything important in the Anglo Saxon period. The amount of information we have definitely helped give him his title. Nevertheless, because of his achievements, Alfred is the only English king to have earned the title 'The Great'.

Asser's Life of Alfred

Please watch the accompanying film.

How do we know so much about King Alfred?

Alfred was a patron of The AngloSaxon Chronicle, a patriotic history of the English from the Wessex viewpoint. It was designed to inspire those reading it to celebrate Alfred and his monarchy. It is one of the greatest sources of information about Saxon England, which began to be circulated about 890.

Alfred commissioned his own biography, written in 893, by the Bishop Asser of Wales. He is the only Anglo Saxon king to have a contemporary biography. Asser presented Alfred as the ideal but practical, Christian ruler. Alfred is described as a brave, pious, resourceful man who was generous to the church and anxious to rule his people justly.

The book contains lots of valuable information and it shows that Alfred was full of compassion, able to inspire his people, and understanding of his roles as king. This picture is confirmed by Alfred's laws and writings that reflect his ideas of kingship.

Asser's document does not write of any internal problems in Alfred's own reign, however, it does mention there were times when Alfred had to punish those who disobeyed him. Although Asser's life is a one-sided view of Alfred, since Alfred was alive when it was written, a lot of the information is likely to be true and it is a great source of information.

Replica of Asser's Life of King Alfred

Here we have a facsimile copy of Matthew Parker's copy of Asser's 'Life of King Alfred' produced in the 1500s. The original manuscript was destroyed in a fire in 1731 so this version is extremely important. Watch the accompanying video to find out the full story of the book.

This book was commissioned especially for this gallery. Scans were taken from the original in the Parker Library, then printed and bound by an historic bookbinder specialist here in Oxfordshire.

Replica of The Alfred Jewel

The Alfred Jewel is an aestle, or pointer, bearing the inscription AELFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN – 'Alfred ordered me to be made'. Alfred commissioned translations of religious texts from Latin into Anglo Saxon. Some of these manuscripts were distributed throughout his kingdom and were accompanied by these pointers, used to follow the text. The original Alfred Jewel can be seen at The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.



Anglo Saxon Homes

Most Anglo Saxons lived in small villages near rivers, forests and other important resources. These gave them everything they needed to care for farm animals, grow crops and make things to sell. No Anglo Saxon houses survive, but traces like postholes in the ground show their size and shape. They were squared off, and typically about 30ft x 15ft (10m x 5m).



Most homes had only one room, but there may have been an “upstairs” part at each end reached by a ladder. Walls were built by “wattle and daub” or upright planks slotted together. Some homes may have had windows, but there was no glass. There is also evidence of wooden floors, with a cavity underneath, possibly for storage.

The inside was often basic, with little furniture other than perhaps a trestle-table, a couple of benches, baskets, and some shelves. There was a central hearth for warmth and cooking, but chimneys did not appear until medieval times. The smoke simply seeped out through the thatch. The inside of the roof would be smoky and soot blackened, ideal for curing meat.

Beds were wooden-framed. They consisted of a cloth bag stuffed with wool, perhaps with blankets or fleeces on top.

Outside, there might be a number of smaller buildings associated with the houses: a midden or loo, sheds for tools, storage food and livestock. Water had to be brought daily in buckets from the nearest stream or well and after dark, candles or the fire gave the only light.

The room we have created here would have been suitable for a Thegn; someone who was given land by the king in exchange for providing military service during times of war. A Thegn's house would have been positioned within a fortified enclosure with a number of other houses or small out buildings near by. Thegns were wealthy enough to have fine items such as silver jewellery or glass dinking vessels. Can you spot the wooden chest for keeping precious items in? And the rolls of parchment with the quills?



Anglo Saxon Clothes

Anglo Saxons were very resourceful and used natural materials in the making of their cloth. Most Anglo Saxon women and many of the men would have known how to spin and weave the cloth that was used to make their clothes, blankets and rugs.

Wool was the most commonly used fibre but linen and silk were also spun and woven. The silk would have been imported and worn by only the richest people.

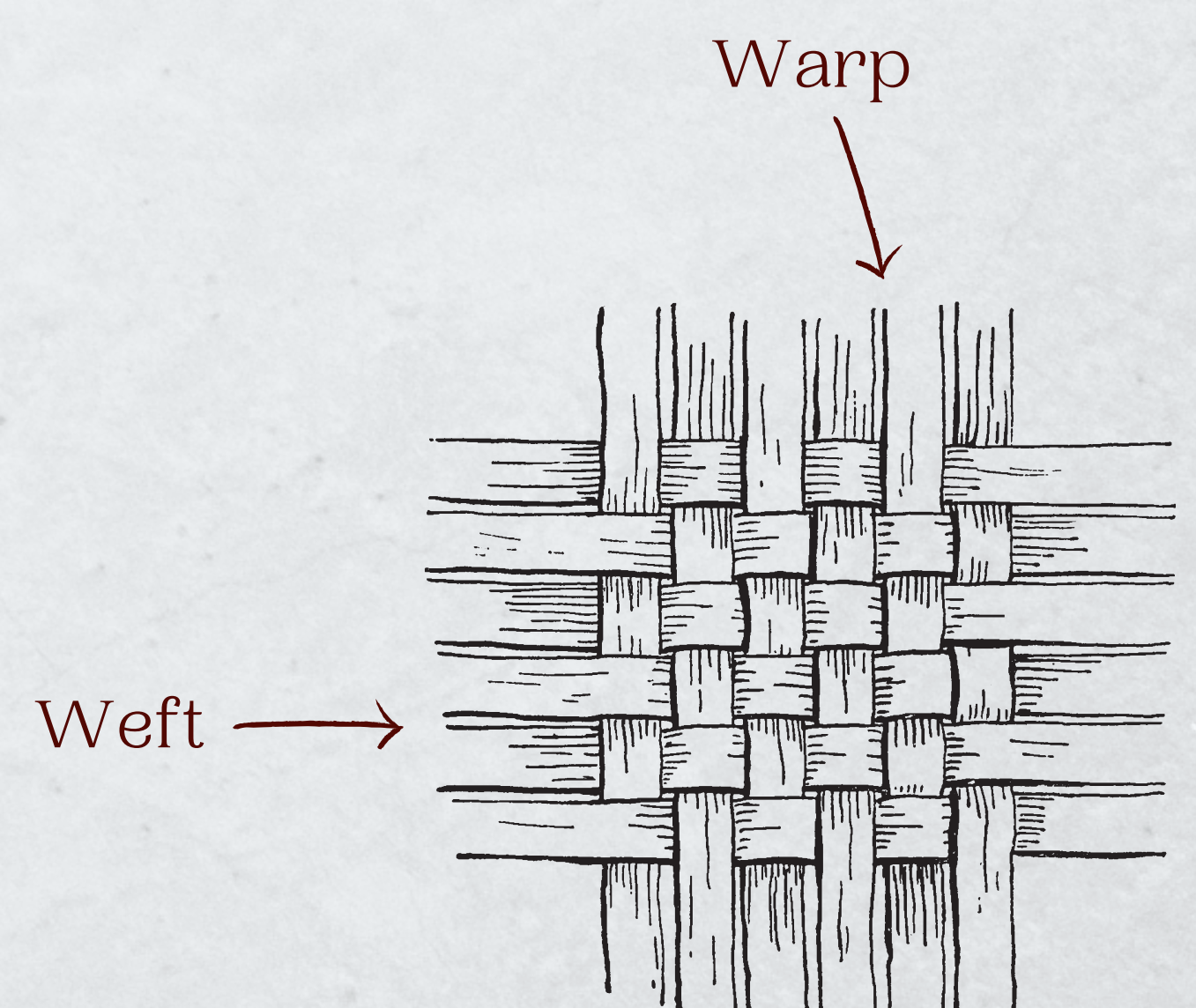
Weaving Cloth

Making cloth involved three main processes. Firstly, raw fibres were cleaned and prepared. They were washed and any grass, droppings or other objects removed by hand. Once this was done the fibres were combed ready for spinning.

Next, the wool was spun into thread, using a spindle and whorl.

Finally, the spun threads were woven into cloth using a warp-weighted loom like the replica one we have here. Vertical threads called warp threads were hung on the loom's wooden frame with clay weights attached to the bottom to keep them taut.

Horizontal threads, called weft threads, were then woven in front and behind the warp threads, creating cloth.



Adding Colour

Colour was added to the cloth by dyeing with plant material. Flowers, leaves and roots were used to produce a variety of colours. The most common plants used were madder, which produced reds, weld for yellows and greens and woad for blue. Other colours were made by overdyeing and lichen, nuts and berries also played their part in producing quite brightly coloured cloth.



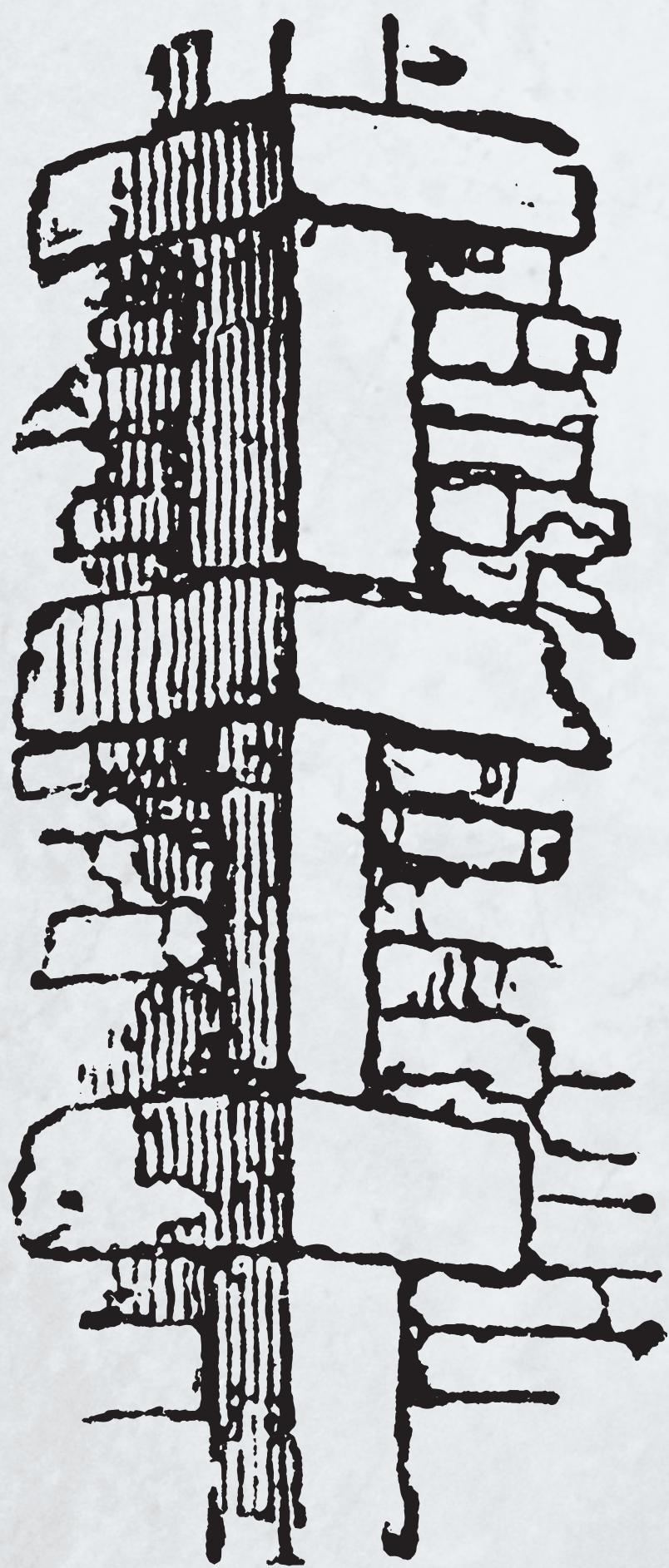
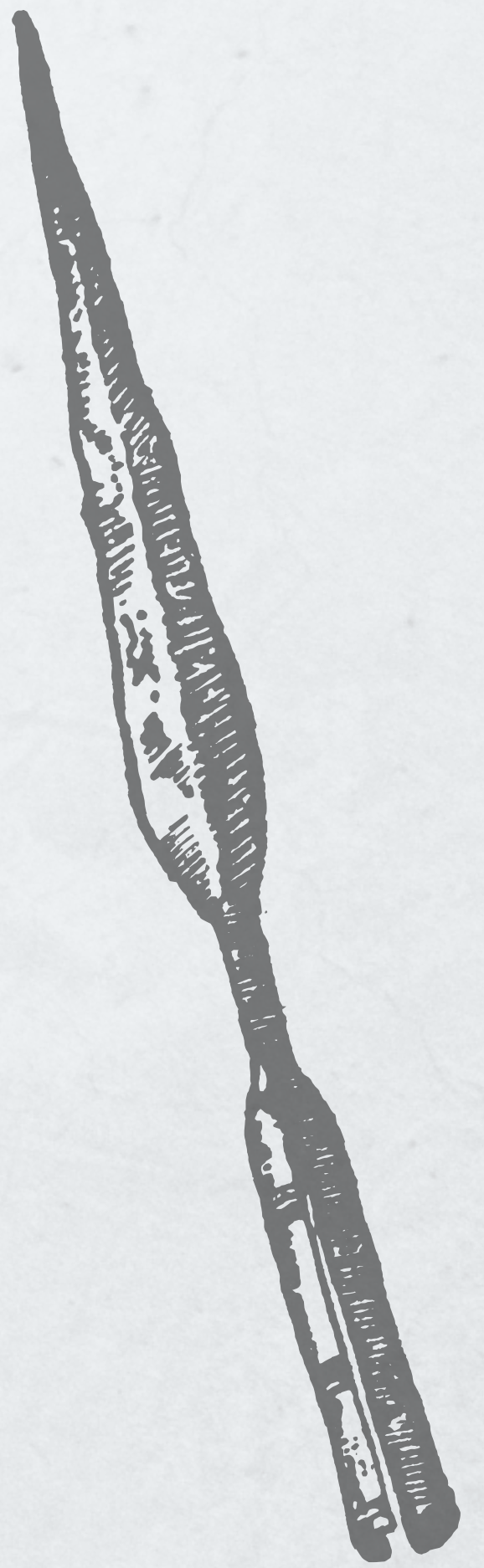
The plant material was heated in water and left to steep until the required shade was achieved. The cloth was then immersed and left to soak up the colour. Colours would have faded without a mordant to give colour fastness and other plants such as club moss root and oak galls could be added to give colours longevity.

Anglo Saxon War

The Fyrd

Attacks from Vikings and rival kingdoms meant that war was a constant threat for Anglo Saxons. Although rich nobles could train for battle, most men were farmers. In times of war these "freedmen" were required to fight and drafted into the militia known as the fyrd. Once assembled, the fyrd would march out to meet the enemy, but it could take a long time to gather all the men from across a kingdom.

This left them vulnerable to the Vikings, who carried out mobile hit and run attacks. By the time the fyrd arrived, huge areas could be devastated and the Vikings were able to retreat or take up a strong defensive position. After Alfred defeated the Vikings at Edington in 878AD, he used the break in fighting to reorganise the military and strengthen the Anglo Saxon defences.



Burhs

The most important part of Alfred's new strategy was to create a defensive system of fortifications called burhs. Alfred built 33 burhs (forts and fortified towns) at strategic locations across the country. Some were new, but others built on older Roman defences and Iron Age hillforts.

Each burh was spaced about 20 miles apart and connected by a road system known as "herepaths". It meant that any Viking attack could be reached within a day's ride.

Burhs were also important supply centres that contained blacksmiths, trading posts and food storage. This was so they could easily supply troops and hold out in a siege.

Alfred split his army in two so that there were always men defending the burhs. The other half could return home and farm the land. The 'Burghal Hidage' detailed the size of the burh and the number of men to be garrisoned there. Landowners from the surrounding area had to supply and feed these men depending on how productive their land was.

The Navy

Alfred also built a fleet of ships, hoping to defeat the Viking raiders before they landed. The ships were twice the size of the Danish ships and meant to be swifter and steadier.



Welcome to our

King Alfred Gallery

Step inside our Anglo Saxon
home and find out why King
Alfred was so great.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the following organisations for their support of this gallery:

The Friends of the Vale & Downland Museum
The Vale & Downland Museum Volunteer Team
King Alfred's Academy
King Alfred's Educational Charity