

**THE LADY OF
THE MERCIANS**
Stewart Ross





CONTENTS

- Page 7 **TO THE READER**
- Page 8 **THE STORY SO FAR**
- Page 10 **TIME LINE**
- Page 13 **Chapter 1 | WHO WILL LEAD US?**
Ethelred, Lord of Mercia, dies. Everyone is anxious.
Ethelfleda takes charge.
- Page 16 **Chapter 2 | A HOUSE DIVIDED**
King Edward pays a visit to his sister. They make plans
against the Danes. Ethelfleda questions Edward's power.
- Page 20 **Chapter 3 | PRAY GOD WE'RE NOT TOO LATE!**
Ethelfleda fortifies Mercia. Burgred warns of danger.
- Page 23 **Chapter 4 | MURDER!**
Ceolwulf, Wigstan and Ludeca go to Wales. They find Abbot
Egbert murdered. They bring back the Welsh queen.
- Page 26 **Chapter 5 | THE OATH**
Ethelfleda plans more defenses. Edward makes a promise
to Elfwynn.
- Page 29 **Chapter 6 | BURGRED'S BATTLE**
Burgred defends Tovecastra. He defeats the Danes.
- Page 32 **Chapter 7 | TRAGIC VICTORY**
Elfwynn and Athelstan fight. Ethelfleda leads her army to
Derventio. Her four thanes lead the battle and are killed.
- Page 35 **Chapter 8 | GREATER THAN JULIUS CAESAR!**
Edward is victorious over the Danes in the east.
But the northerners ask Ethelfleda to lead them.
- Page 39 **THE HISTORY FILE**
- Page 43 **NEW WORDS**



TO THE READER

The Lady of the Mercians takes place just after the death of Alfred the Great. The important characters in the story, including Lady Ethelfleda and her brother King Edward, are real. The main events, such as Leicester surrendering to Ethelfleda without a fight, are also true. In this way, I hope to bring to life one of the most important people in English history.

Stewart Ross

This book is gratefully dedicated to the pupils and staff of Gatehouse School, London.

THE STORY SO FAR ...

THE VIKINGS

The Vikings were a pagan people from Scandinavia, mostly from Denmark. They raided northern Europe from the 790s CE onwards. At first they came seeking plunder, such as gold, silver, horses and slaves, but by the middle of the 9th century they were settling down on land they had conquered in Scotland, Ireland and northern England. A number of them became Christian.

KING ALFRED

Alfred was King of Wessex, an Anglo-Saxon kingdom covering much of southern Britain. When he came to the throne in 871, his lands were under serious threat from Danish armies. Alfred, a wise, scholarly and able leader, defeated the Danes in battle and agreed a peace treaty with them. This divided the country between Anglo-Saxon territory and Danish territory, known as the 'Danelaw'.

KINGS OF THE ENGLISH

Before the Viking invasions, England was made up of several kingdoms. The largest three were Wessex in the south, Mercia in the middle, and Northumbria in the north. From time to time, a particularly powerful ruler called himself ‘King of the English’ or ‘King of the Anglo-Saxons’; but there was never a single kingdom of England.

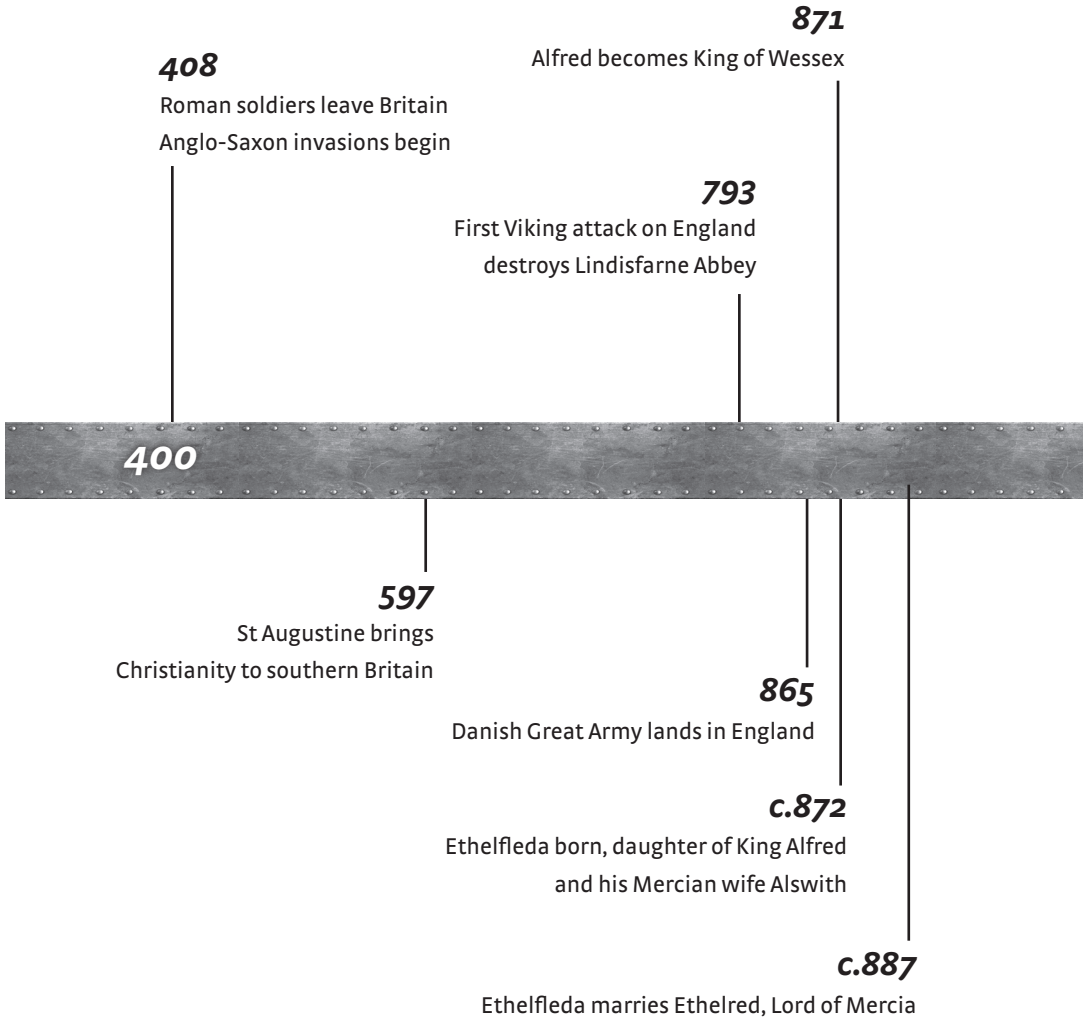
A KINGDOM OF ENGLAND?

Alfred realized the English could defeat the Danes and get their land back only if they all – especially the people of Wessex and Mercia – acted together. To help do this, Alfred arranged for his daughter Ethelfleda to marry Ethelred, Lord of Mercia. On Alfred’s death, his son Edward (known in history as Edward the Elder) became King of Wessex. He sent his son, Athelstan, to live with Ethelred so Athelstan could learn Mercian ways.

Some Mercians grew suspicious. Were the kings of Wessex using the war with the Danes to make themselves kings of all England? And was Ethelfleda part of this plan? ...

TIME LINE

CE (Common Era)



899

King Alfred dies; his son Edward becomes King of Wessex

916

Murder of a Mercian abbot leads to capture of Welsh queen

918

Ethelfleda's power spreads north

12 June: Ethelfleda dies suddenly at Tamworth and her daughter Elfwynn becomes Lady of the Mercians

December: Elfwynn is taken away to Wessex

1000

927

Athelstan, King Edward's son, becomes King of all England

924

King Edward puts down a Mercian rebellion in Chester and is killed

917

Ethelfleda and her brother Edward begin to conquer the Danelaw

911

Ethelred, Lord of Mercia, dies; Ethelfleda becomes Lady of the Mercians and continues building burhs to defend Mercia

909

Soldiers from Mercia and Wessex defeat Danes in battle

Chapter 1

WHO WILL LEAD US?

The heavy oak doors swung open with a crash. Out of the blackness of the night, a travel-stained messenger stepped forward into the firelight. Every face turned towards him, and the great hall fell silent.

Lady Ethelfleda looked up. The young man's grim expression spoke as loudly as any words.

'Yes, Cearl? What is your news?'

He swallowed. 'Grave news, my Lady. Great Ethelred, the Lord of the Mercians and your noble husband, is dead.'

For a while no one spoke. The silence was broken only by the sobbing of one of Ethelfleda's young handmaidens. The Lady herself had fallen to her knees, praying quietly for her husband's soul.

Abbot Egbert stood up beside his mistress. 'Men and women of the court,' he began, speaking with quiet solemnity, 'the Lady Ethelfleda has set a holy example. We too must pray that God forgives the sins of our dear departed Lord Ethelred, and welcomes him into Heaven with open arms.'

At his command, Ethelfleda's court bowed their heads. The abbot continued, 'O God, maker of Heaven and earth, have mercy on the soul of Lord Ethelred; forgive his sins, we pray ...'

All eyes were closed, and when the priest came to the end of his prayer all voices mumbled, 'Amen'. But not all minds had been concentrating on his words.

The servants at the back of the hall were anxious; the women of Ethelfleda's household were anxious; her daughter Elfwynn, kneeling by her right side, was anxious; and anxiety showed on the frowning face of her eighteen-year-old nephew Athelstan, standing to her left.

One question gripped them all: who would lead Mercia now?

When the prayers were over, Lady Ethelfleda got to her feet and gazed around the hall. Her grey eyes were clear, for she had not been weeping. The time for crying had passed. For several years, Lord Ethelred had been seriously ill and unable to speak, and his wife had prepared herself for his death long ago. She knew precisely what to do.

'Men and women of my household,' she said, speaking in a slow, calm voice, 'I thank you most warmly for your kind and generous thoughts and prayers. My Lord Ethelred was a fine man and he will be sorely missed.

'We must honour him in the best way we can – by continuing his struggle against the invaders until we have taken back all the land they have stolen from us. We will crush the Danes! Mercia will triumph!'

Her remarks were greeted with rousing cheers. As they died down, a huge bearded man with a livid scar above his left eye rose to speak. It was Thane Burgred,

one of the most powerful men in all Mercia.

Ethelfleda looked at him and smiled. ‘Yes, Burgred?’

‘My Lady,’ he said, ‘I am sure Mercia will triumph over the murderous Viking Danes. But who will lead us now Lord Ethelred is no more?’

Ethelfleda raised an eyebrow in surprise. ‘Who led you after my husband was taken ill, Burgred?’

‘You did, my Lady. But –’

‘But what, Burgred? Nothing need change. I led you before and I will lead you again.’ She noticed a frown beginning to wrinkle the thane’s brow. ‘The Lady of the Mercians may have the body of a woman, Burgred, but she has the heart of a lion. Follow me and you will not be disappointed. But woe betide any who dare oppose me!’

Burgred grinned and joined in the cheers that once again echoed around the great hall.

Ethelfleda raised her hand to acknowledge the greeting. As she did so, she became aware that her daughter and nephew had moved closer, one on either side of her.

Elfwynn spoke first. ‘In all my twenty-three years of life, Mother, I have never before witnessed a moment like this. You will make Mercia great again, won’t you?’

Before Ethelfleda could reply, Athelstan said, ‘Yes, Aunt, I’m sure you’ll make Mercia great again. But you will make England greater, won’t you?’

Ah! thought Ethelfleda. Which is more important to me, Mercia or England? What an impossible question!