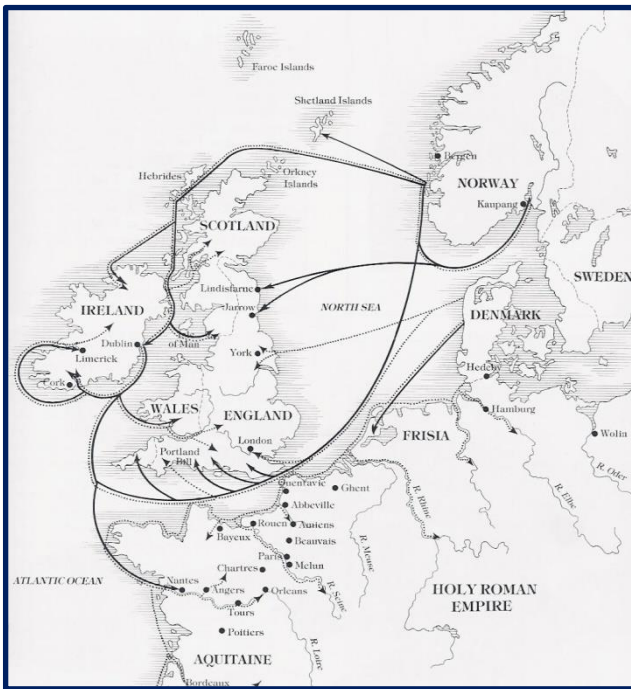


## The Vikings in Somerset

The Vikings were Scandinavian warriors who launched attacks from the sea all across Europe between the 700s and the 1000s. First, they came to raid, taking whatever they wanted through brutal violence. After that they brought whole armies to conquer lands and rule them as Dukes and Kings.



Routes taken by Viking invaders of Britain and Northern Europe © Weston Museum

The Vikings were brilliant ship builders and sailors, and could travel long distances on board their fearsome longships. This let them attack anywhere they wanted along the whole coastline of Britain, including Somerset.

**Somerset was then a part of Wessex, an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in southern England. For over 150 years Somerset would see a lot of bloody fighting between the Vikings and the soldiers of Wessex.**

In 836 King Egbert of Wessex led an army to Carhampton in west Somerset. There, he met an army made up of the crews of 35 invading Viking longships. In a bloody battle the King's army was beaten and retreated, leaving the Vikings free to plunder the countryside.

In 845 a Viking army landed near the mouth of the river Parrett, less than ten miles south of what is now Weston-super-Mare. An army from Somerset led by their Ealdorman (Earl) Eanwulf joined men from Devon to attack the invaders. The Vikings were beaten, and the towns and villages of central Somerset were saved from attack. Men from what is now Weston-super-Mare may well have fought in this battle.

Large raids like these were happening all across Britain. The Vikings would cause death and destruction and then leave. In 865 things changed when the Vikings launched a full scale invasion.

The Vikings landed in East Anglia and over the next nine years their armies would conquer that kingdom as well as Northumbria and Mercia. By the year 874 only Wessex was left to stand against them.



A Viking warrior as portrayed by an historical re-enactor © Weston Museum

In 876 the Viking King Guthrum started to attack Wessex. The Vikings won battles and took towns, forcing King Alfred of Wessex to pay them huge amounts of money to leave. Then, on 6 January 878, Guthrum made a surprise attack on Alfred at Chippenham in Wiltshire. Alfred and just a few of his men escaped and fled to Athelney in the Somerset marshes.

Guthrum and his army now dominated Wessex as far as the Somerset levels; including the area that is now Weston-super-Mare. His men raided the countryside but could not find and defeat Alfred in the dense marshland.

**A local legend says that around this time Viking longships sailed up the river Axe and landed near Bleadon to raid the area. An old woman hid from the Vikings and then waited for them to leave their longships unguarded. Once it was safe, she went to the ships and cut the ropes keeping them tied to the shore. The longships then drifted down towards the sea on the tide. The local people, seeing the Vikings cut off from their ships, were encouraged and attacked the Vikings, killing many of them.**

In May, Alfred came out of hiding and sent messages for his troops to join him. Once his army, which included soldiers from Somerset, had gathered, Alfred marched to meet Guthrum.

Not long after, the two armies met at Edington in Wiltshire. After brutal and bloody fighting, the Viking army was beaten. The surviving Vikings fled and were trapped and forced to make peace. This victory is one of the reasons we remember King Alfred as Alfred the Great.

Wessex had won this war, but the Vikings would return. Somerset would face more attacks.



*An artist's impression of a Viking longship under sail © Weston Museum*

In 914 the Vikings landed east of Watchet and also at Porlock. The men of Somerset again marched out to protect their homes. The Vikings were beaten, losing many men and the survivors had to swim out to their longships to escape. They then spent time recovering on Steep Holm island before leaving the area.

Watchet was raided again in 988 and 997. Local people were killed, houses were burned and villages ruined. The suffering of ordinary people during this time was terrible.

The Vikings then tried again to conquer the whole of England. This time they succeeded and Cnut was crowned King after taking London in 1016. The Anglo-Saxons took the crown back in 1042, but lost it again in 1066 to the Normans, who were themselves of Viking blood.

Today, the age of the Vikings is long over, but the effect these fierce warriors had on life in Britain can still be seen all around us.

Many of the place names we use today, especially in the north of England where they settled, have Viking origins. Stand on the front at Weston and you can see Flat Holm island, its name means 'island in an estuary' in the language of the Vikings.



*Flat Holm island from the air © Cardiff Council*

**You can also see the effect of the Vikings right here in the museum. The way that part of our Flatner boat was built is said to follow how Vikings built their ships. The upper planks of the boat are clinker-built (they overlap) in the same way that Viking longships were.**

The Vikings also changed our language and gave us many words we take for granted today. Skies, windows and dreams would all have different names if not for the Vikings.

