

Who were the Vikings?

The Viking age in European history was from about AD700 to 1100. During this period, many Vikings left their homelands in Scandinavia and travelled by longboat to other countries, like Britain and Ireland. When the people of Britain first saw the Viking longboats they came down to the shore to welcome them. However, the Vikings fought the local people, stealing from churches and burning buildings to the ground resulting in the people of Britain calling the invaders 'Danes', even though they came from Norway and Sweden as well as Denmark.

Were the Vikings all bad?

The name 'Viking' comes from a language called 'Old Norse' and means 'a pirate raid'. People who went off raiding in ships were said to be 'going Viking'. But not all the Vikings were bloodthirsty warriors as some came to fight, but others came peacefully to settle, because they were farmers and kept animals and grew crops. They were skilful at crafting and made beautiful metalwork and wooden carvings. This led to the Vikings sailing the seas trading goods to buy silver, silks, spices, wine, jewellery, glass and pottery to bring back to their homes.



In AD793 the Vikings famously attacked a monastery at Lindisfarne in Northumbria, north-east England. It was the start of a fierce struggle between the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings. The Vikings were pagans, not Christians like most people living in Britain at the time. They did not think twice about raiding a monastery. Christian monasteries in Britain were easy targets for the Vikings. The monks had no weapons and the buildings were filled with valuable treasures, like gold, jewels and books. There was food, drink, cattle, clothes and tools too – all very tempting to a Viking raider.

The 'great' Viking invasion

When the 'great' Viking army of AD865 sailed across the sea, they came to conquer rather than to raid. An army of Vikings sailed across the North Sea. This time they wanted to conquer land rather than just raid it. Over several years the army battled through northern England, taking control of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Northumbria, East Anglia and most of Mercia. This led to almost all the kingdoms falling to the Vikings by AD874. All except for Wessex due to king Alfred the Great beating the Viking army in battle.



After years of fighting the Vikings and Alfred made a peace agreement. But even after this agreement, fighting went on for many more years. An imaginary dividing line was agreed to run across England, from London in the south towards Chester in the north west. Thus, making the Anglo-Saxon lands to the west and the Viking lands, known as the Danelaw, were roughly to the east.