

A translation into modern English of ‘The Treaty between King Alfred and King Guthrum (878 or 886)’, with some notes below on some of the unfamiliar vocabulary:

‘This is the peace which King Alfred and King Guthrum and the **wise men** of all **Englishkind** and all the inhabitants that are in East Anglia [meaning, recent settlers and people long-settled there] have all agreed on and confirmed with oaths, for themselves and for their **followers**, born and as yet unborn, who want to have God’s mercy or ours.

First: concerning our **boundaries**: up the Thames and then up the Lea and along the Lea to its source, then in a straight line to Bedford, then up the Ouse to Watling Street.

Next: if a man is slain, all of us estimate a noble Englishman and a noble Danishman at the same amount, at eight half-marks of pure gold [equivalent to 1,200 shillings]; but the freeman who occupies rented land and the Danish freedmen are both estimated at the same amount, 200 shillings.

Next: if anyone accuses a king’s **officer** or **faithful man** of manslaughter, if he dares to clear himself, he is to do it with 12 of the king’s officers. If anyone accuses a man of lower status than a king’s officer, he is to clear himself with 11 of his equals and one king’s officer. And so on in every case involving [goods or property worth] more than 10 shillings—worth of goods or property; and if he dare not clear himself, he is to pay for it with three-fold compensation, according to the value [of the goods or property].

Next: that each man is to know who is his **warrantor** (**guarantor**) for men and for horses and for oxen.

And we all agreed on the day when the oaths were sworn that no slaves or freemen might go over to the Danishmen [that is, to visit or settle in Danishmen’s territory] without permission, and no Danishmen are to come over to us [that is, visit or settle in our territory] without permission. But if it happens that any Danishman needs or wants to trade with us, or we with them, for livestock and goods, that is to be permitted, on condition that **sureties** shall be given as a pledge of peace and as evidence that whoever is involved in the transaction **has a clean back**.’

(Note - Historians have argued about when the treaty was made, but most historians have suggested either 878 or 886 as the likeliest date. In both of these years, King Alfred had military successes which he intended to make memorable: in 878 the defeat of Scandinavian king Guthrum and his ‘here’ (army), in 886, the taking-control of London. King Alfred needed to mark such events for political and symbolic reasons. The earlier mentions of Guthrum in the Chronicle in the 870s could point towards a link with the peace of 878. The fact that the Treaty survives in a manuscript of the late eleventh century written in London and preserved in the archive of St Paul’s could strengthen the idea that 886 was the date of the Treaty).

Vocabulary:

Wise men, or counselors, in the Old English language **witan**, the word is related to the modern words 'wit' and 'wise'.

Meaning: the senior or wealthier or more powerful men summoned to assemblies by the king to discuss public affairs and give counsel.

Englishkind, in Old English **Angelcynn**. **Angel** meaning **English**, and **cynn** meaning ancestors, kin, relatives, family, folk, people, tribe, kind.

Followers in Old English **gingran**, meaning men loyal to a leader, for example 'disciples' in relation to Christ, or, the generation who come after us, or, men who have given oaths of loyalty to a king or lord.

Boundary, boundaries In Old English **mearc** (plural mearca or mearce) Physical features in the landscape, such as rivers, streams, roads or trackways, large stones or trees, that are taken to mark out political territories or the edges of someone's property.

The value of a man is the price that must be paid by someone who kills him to the relatives of the slain man in compensation for the death. A noble man is worth a lot more than an ordinary free man. Payments are estimated in currency (12 pence = 1 shilling) but can be paid in livestock or property to equivalent value.

A guarantor or warrantor is someone of higher status (a lord or senior relative) who promises to pay out the value of livestock or property on behalf of a man who has committed a crime.

A surety is a person who takes responsibility for someone else's carrying-out of a promise, e.g. to pay a debt or pay compensation.

Someone '**who has a clean back**' has no intention of cheating or stealing.