



The Vikings are coming! The Last Kingdom, the BBC's epic new drama about the marauding invaders, could be the next Game Of Thrones

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The year is 872AD, and on the north-east coast of England the peaceful lives of the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants are about to be shattered forever.

Looming on the horizon is a fleet of Viking longships, packed full of heavily armed warriors and moving swiftly towards the beach with just one aim in mind: to capture the land in front of them by whatever means possible.

As the Anglo-Saxon forces, alerted by lookouts, gather under Lord Uhtred, ruler of Bebbanburg, one of the three provinces of Northumbria, the Vikings led by the formidable Earl Ragnar sharpen their swords and prepare to attack.



Alexander Dreymon as Uhtred in *The Last Kingdom*, BBC2's lavish new eight-part historical drama charting the brutal battles for the four main kingdoms of England

This is the opening scene in *The Last Kingdom*, BBC2's lavish new eight-part historical drama charting the brutal battles for the four main kingdoms of England that saw Northumbria, East Anglia and Mercia conquered, leaving only Wessex in the south – ruled by King Alfred The Great, played here by *Ripper Street*'s David Dawson – resistant to Viking rule.

Most famous for burning the cakes but actually a very astute and brave monarch, Alfred's is *The Last Kingdom* of the title.



Based on the Saxon Stories novels by Sharpe author Bernard Cornwell, it's the BBC's answer to Game Of Thrones



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Rune Temte as Ubba known for his enthusiasm during battle scenes

Based on the Saxon Stories novels by Sharpe author Bernard Cornwell, it's the BBC's answer to Game Of Thrones, which swept the board at last month's Emmys, but with a strong foundation in fact rather than a complete reliance on fantasy.

The Vikings were indeed raiding eastern England at the end of the 9th century and continued to do so for almost 200 years afterwards as they gradually conquered as far as Wessex, only losing their grip on power here when the Normans invaded in 1066.

Much of what takes place in the show is rooted in reality, and the hero of the piece Uhtred – son of Lord Uhtred – is inspired by one of Bernard's very distant Anglo-Saxon forebears (see panel below), though his exploits are fictional.

As executive producer Nigel Marchant points out, 'Throughout the novels Bernard Cornwell kept certain genuine battles, historical figures and a lot of real-life Viking characters, whereas Game Of Thrones is pure fantasy. Bernard has simply woven this fictitious character Uhtred through the Saxon Stories novels.'

It's Uhtred who takes centre stage after his father Lord Uhtred, played by another Ripper Street star Matthew Macfadyen, is overrun by the Viking hordes. 'We first see him as a child being kidnapped by the Vikings, but then becoming part of their life and culture,' says Alexander Dreymon, the 32-year-old German-born actor who plays him.

'Much of The Last Kingdom is about the conflict in his heart: is he still an Anglo-Saxon, and therefore should he show loyalty to them? Or is he now a fully fledged Dane? The series is about loyalty, identity – and of course conflict.'

Incredibly, the hero at the heart of The Last Kingdom is based on a real relative of writer Bernard Cornwell who lived more than a thousand years ago.



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‘I was adopted and didn’t meet my real father until I was 58,’ Bernard, now 71, explains.

‘After I met him I discovered a family tree that goes back to the 6th century when Ida The Flame Bearer captured the rock on which the present day Bamburgh Castle in Northumberland is built.

My father’s surname was Oughtred, which can be traced back to the Saxon Uhtred The Bold, who was the elderman of Northumbria from 1006 to 1016 and a descendant of Ida’s family

who had ruled that part of the world for centuries from Bamburgh Castle.

‘So there’s a link between me and Uhtred, the hero of the Saxon Stories on which *The Last Kingdom* is based, even if I’ve taken a few liberties with him. But I can do that. He’s my great-great-great – and many times more great – grandfather, so he’s family, I can do what I like with him!’

Bernard, who also wrote the *Sharpe* series, has so far published nine *Saxon Stories* books, only two of which have been used for *The Last Kingdom*.

He says, ‘If the series takes off I can write more. And if I do, I’ll have Alexander Dreyfus in my mind’s eye. He’s done a fabulous job as Uhtred, just like Sean Bean did as *Sharpe*.’

Bernard says he has no burning desire to follow in the footsteps of other writers and demand a cameo in a future series of *Last Kingdom*.

‘But if they want a bearded idiot to sit at the back of a scene looking gormless then I might be their man!’

There’s romance too as Brida, a young Anglo-Saxon girl also kidnapped by the Danes, falls for Uhtred. ‘Brida and Uhtred are close, brought up together after they’re abducted by the Vikings,’ says Emily Cox who plays her and is soon to be seen in the new series of *Homeland*. ‘Initially they have a love/hate relationship because Brida’s loyalty towards her captors is stronger while Uhtred’s is more compromised. But beneath it all I think they love each other.’

Filmed over seven months in Hungary, the UK and Denmark and made by Carnival Films, the production company behind Downton Abbey, *The Last Kingdom* is a true epic. Attention to detail was paramount, and the work done ahead of filming scenes for the Battle of Eoforwic, or modern-day York, in episode one are a prime example.

They took four days to shoot and involved 200 Hungarian extras, all of whom carried individually made swords and shields and wore costumes specially made in a Hungarian workshop set up two months before filming began.

The scenes were choreographed to the smallest movement, with each swish of a sword and raising of a shield carefully planned in advance. 'We wanted there to be a proper narrative to the battle so that viewers could follow it,' explains director and executive producer Nick Murphy. 'It's a crucial battle that actually happened, and we wanted to get it right.'

Matthew Macfadyen thinks they did. 'Lord Uhtred is in the thick of the battle and it was extraordinary to film, the precision was remarkable. He was meant to be quite proficient in falconry and I had to take charge of a hawk and get it to land on my hand. Fortunately it had read the script and performed the manoeuvre perfectly.'

Handheld cameras were used so that much of the action looks like news footage. 'The crew would roam around the mocked-up battlefields for hours at a time, catching the actors off-guard and providing snippets of battle-hardened warriors that look frighteningly believable,' says Alexander Dreymon. 'You never knew when the camera was on you, and the result is that the battle scenes look truly authentic, more documentary than drama.'

The entire city of Winchester, seen as the capital of Wessex in the 9th century, was built in studios in the town of Goboljaras in Hungary. Using a walled settlement left over from a past production, the houses were modified – storeys were removed, verandas and thatched roofs added – to make them look Anglo-Saxon.

A fleet of fake Viking longships was constructed and then placed on platforms resting just beneath the surface of a vast Hungarian lake, so they could be set alight. And a fully functioning Viking longship, *The Sea Stallion*, was borrowed from a museum near Copenhagen and launched off the coast of Denmark for the opening invasion scenes. 'The ship was totally authentic,' explains Nick Murphy. 'It

had no decks, which made it a challenge for our camera team to work in any degree of comfort.'

The Last Kingdom was also tough on its leading man. Alexander suffered cuts and bruises, and the scars viewers will see on screen are real. 'I had injury after injury for the seven months of the shoot,' he says. 'Ubba the Dane is one of Uhtred's main adversaries and Rune Temte, who plays him, would bring his axe down on my shield as hard as he could. We had these heavy-duty plastic shields to begin with and he broke them all. So we started using wooden shields with iron rims and he broke those too. The fear you see in my eyes in those scenes is very real.'

But Alexander remained relatively unscathed compared to one of the stuntmen, who had to fall from a high window on to a tree. 'He slipped from a branch and landed on the concrete head first,' recalls Alexander. 'When it happened everything went silent, I thought he might be dead. But after a few minutes he got back up, despite having his head split open, and wanted to go again with the scene straight away.'

Until now Alexander has been on the fringes of fame. He had a torrid relationship with Doctor Who star Matt Smith in the BBC's 2011 film about the writer Christopher Isherwood, Christopher And His Kind, and has played the recurring character of Luke Ramsey in US drama series American Horror Story. But his first scene here sees him emerge semi-naked from a lake. Could he be the new Poldark?

'I'll be flattered if people see me as a sex symbol but I'm more interested in people liking the story,' he says. 'I've no interest in becoming a celebrity. I'm a private person and I think it's important to maintain a bit of mystery. I see some people on screen and all I can think about them is some scandal I heard. The less you know about me, the better.'