

# Etheldreda of Ely

Nearly a year has gone by since I last wrote about a saint and it's about time I did so again. This month is a good one to choose because on 23rd we commemorate Etheldreda, Abbess of Ely, whose posthumous fame brought such riches to the 'Isle of Eels' that we now have one of the most glorious of our cathedrals on the site of the abbey she founded, visible across the Fens like a great ship of faith.

Etheldreda, or Audrey, the names by which we know this saint today, was actually called *Æpelþryþ* (þ being a single letter in Anglo-Saxon times for what we now write as th). The later versions of her name are all post-Conquest, reflecting a world in which Anglo-Saxon name-elements and spelling conventions were no longer understood. She was born before the mid-seventh century, when England was a land of many small kingdoms. Her father was the King of East Anglia, and as a royal princess her expectation in life would have been one of dynastic marriage, cementing alliances, and producing royal heirs. In around 652, when presumably still quite young, she was given in marriage to Tondberht, chief of the South Gyrwas, a tribal group in the Fens, over which her father King Anna claimed authority. Tondberht's bridal gift to *Æthelthryth*/Etheldreda was the Isle of Ely, and it was here, only three years later, that she took up residence after Tondberht's early death. It was believed that she had remained a virgin: certainly, there were no children. But, retiring and pious as she was in her widowhood, the fact remained that she was still a young and dynastically eligible princess, and so in 660 she was married to Ecgfrith, King of Northumbria. At the time he was only fifteen years old and did not immediately insist on consummation. But when he later did so, *Æthelthryth*, supported by Wilfrid, Bishop of Northumbria, left her husband and became a nun at Coldingham near Berwick, then in the kingdom of Northumbria. This was a royal foundation, ruled by *Æthelthryth*'s aunt, *Æbbe*, sister of Oswald, king of Northumbria (died 642), who had been responsible for inviting Aidan from Iona to bring Christianity to his subjects.

In 673 *Æthelthryth* moved back to Ely, founding there a double monastery for men and women, which she ruled as abbess until her death in 679. Double-monasteries (of which Whitby was also one) were relatively common in Europe in the seventh century: the two communities lived separately on the one site, often ruled jointly by a woman of aristocratic status. On her death, *Æthelthryth* was succeeded as abbess by her sister Sexburg. Seventeen years later her coffin was opened and her body was found to be incorrupt. She had been much admired in life for her great austerity and devotion, and now the incorrupt nature of her body was taken to be confirmation of her sanctity. As a result, she was moved ('translated') to an elevated shrine, which became a popular focus of pilgrimage as well as a site of many miracles. She was greatly admired by leading Anglo-Saxon scholars and authors, such as Bede and Aldhelm, and was much venerated by later Anglo-Saxons, especially within monastic circles, as a model of virginity. The most famous story about her is that, as she lay dying of a neck tumour, she interpreted this affliction as divine punishment for all the necklaces she had enjoyed wearing in her youth; and that when her body was later found to be incorrupt, the tumour had healed, leaving a small scar.

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