

JUNE 25th. SAINT MILBURGA OF MUCH WENLOCK: TRANSLATION OF RELICS

Strictly speaking, this is the date of the 'Invention (Finding) of St. Milburga's Relics.'

Saint Milburga, a grandchild of the fierce pagan warlord, Penda of Mercia, was a second generation Christian. Her father, Merewald, after his baptism, sent her and her sisters for the best noviciate possible in Merovingian Gaul, and established Wenlock Abbey for her. Her royal connections, in the first fervour of the Christian Midlands, led to large swathes of land in the Midlands and north Wales being gifted to the Abbey, much of which remained intact even through the subsequent disruption of the Danish and Norman invasions.

Milburga was greatly beloved throughout Mercia, as the abbess of a double monastery, as a spiritual mother and teacher of the people who visited the monastery, or lived on its lands, and as a wonderworker and healer. When she reposed on February 23rd. 722, she was buried in the monastery church of The Holy Trinity, by the altar containing St. Gregory's relics.¹ The present parish church of the Holy Trinity stands on the 7th. century nuns church.²

Much of the monastery was destroyed by the Danes during the latter half of the ninth century when they over-ran Western Mercia in 874.³ According to the records, it would seem that monastic life was to some extent restored by the end of the century, because in 901 the Mercian rulers bequeathed land to the abbey, with a golden chalice for the shrine church,⁴ and the remaining nuns were among the signatories. Sometime during the continued disruptions of the tenth century the last of the nuns died, and their church was abandoned. It may be that the locals themselves, fearing for the relics, colluded in their being forgotten.

The men's church maintained its services and was extensively restored by Earl Leofric of Mercia, around 1050.⁵ This was on the eve of the Conquest and the community barely had time

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Goscelin says St. George, but there was no cult of St. George in Britain until the 11c. after St. George had been seen coming to the aid of the 'Franks' during the battle of Antioch in 1098. Historians largely agree that the original altar was more likely to be dedicated to St. Gregory cf. Arnold Forster in *Studies in Church Dedication* 1899. A parchment discovered in 1101 stated that St. Milburga was buried in the church of the Holy Trinity (recorded by Goscelin).

²An archaeological survey undertaken in 1901 brought to light the foundations of the seventh century church.

³874 is the date given in *The 4 Minsters* text, date sourced to William of Malmesbury. It is possible that, at this time, the relics of St. Milburga were briefly moved to Sutton for safe keeping. Sutton was the most northerly of the Shrewsbury parishes and somewhat detached from the others, so would not have been an obvious place to search. It is possible that Queen Aelflaeda (see footnote below) restored St. Milburga's shrine and gave the gold chalice to mark its completion. She was well known for safeguarding relics and restoring shrines: she removed the relics of St. Alkmund to Derby from Shrewsbury: they were returned after the Norman conquest.

⁴The rulers were Aethelred of Mercia was the son-in-law of Alfred the Great and his wife was Aethelflaeda, the firstborn of Alfred. They regained much of Mercia from the Danes and Aethelfaeda, a warrior queen in her own right, was lauded as 'Lady of the Mercians.' The charter states that: 'Aethelred and Aethelflaed, rulers of Mercia, to the community of the church of Much Wenlock; grant of 10 hides (cassatae) at Stanton Long and 3 hides (manentes) at Caughley in Barrow, Salop., in exchange for 3 hides (manentes) at Easthope and 5 at Patton, Salop. They also grant a gold chalice weighing 30 mancuses in honour of Abbess Mildburg. Latin, Much Wenlock. Wenlock was at that time a minster with a priest in charge. Its four female witnesses are likely to have been nuns.

⁵Leofric was great friend and ally of Edward the Confessor, and he and his wife Lady Godiva notably established the Coventry minster. Note that petty kings have now turned into Earls (a linguistic shift from ealdormen). Florence of Worcester: *Malmesbury Gesta Pontificum*. John of Worcester in his annals for 1057 reports Earl Leofric's death and records the monasteries endowments. The earlier accounts (before William of Malmesbury) imply he only gifted 'precious ornaments' and did not rebuild. William of Malmesbury, in his *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, describes Earl Roger's Cluniac establishment at Wenlock as 'quite abandoned when the earl filled it with Cluniac monks'. Why would Wenlock be abandoned if a minster had recently been built? Sarah Foot asserts that this gives greater reason to trust the earlier account of John of Worcester. As

to establish itself again before local life was disrupted by regime change. At the end of the eleventh century, in 1079, the new Norman Earl of Shrewsbury, Roger de Montgomery, brought Benedictine monks over from France, re-establishing the monastery as a daughter house (priory) of La Charite-sur-Loire.⁶

The new monks inherited a silver casket, said to contain the relics of the saint, but they were somewhat disturbed by the fact that the contents rattled when they carried it out for veneration. Earl Roger insisted they look inside and they found the remains of two secondary relics -ashes and rags which had previously been wrapped around something.⁷ After this disappointment, the monks began restoration work on the monastery buildings next to the derelict nuns church and Raymond, a servant, working on the project, found a document in an old box, written in Old English, in which a priest - Alstan - testified that the body of the saint was buried in the church near the altar. The monks dug over the old church site, looking for the foundations of an altar, and sent a letter to Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, asking for a blessing to continue.

On the Vigil of the Feast of St. John the Baptist, on the 23rd. of June, 1101, the brethren were singing Matins,⁸ when Raymond came up to the prior's stall, and told him that two boys, playing on the excavation site, had fallen, up to their knees, into a kind of circular pit. The prior left choir and went to the site with a light, but it was too dark to see anything, so he returned to the service. In the morning he assembled some of the brethren into a work party. As they excavated, a sweet odour balsam arose and the bones - 'beautiful and luminous' were revealed, together with some iron bands from the coffin. Further excavation revealed the foundations of the altar. On the third day, the 25th. of June, dressed in white and with bare feet, they retrieved the holy bones, washed them and laid them back in the old shrine. They then made a new shrine, and transferred the relics to it, but they remained in the old church until they could be removed to the monks' church, with all due ceremony.⁹

Immediately, miracles were reported. A patient of one of the brethren at the monastery, who had been diseased for five years, drank some of the water from the saint's bones and belched up an enormous tapeworm. This was dried and kept in a box in the monastery. A twelve year old girl who had contracted leprosy, was carried into the old church by her father and laid down by the altar, at the beginning of Vespers and she was healed by the end! The blind and lepers were especially graced by cures.

On the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary (The Meeting of the Lord) on the 2nd. of February, 1102, the new shrine was ready, and the relics transferred, in solemn procession, to the monastery church. The flow of miracles made it a major pilgrimage destination in the Middle Ages.¹⁰ A century later, the monastery church of Wenlock was rebuilt on the grand scale.¹¹ when Humbert was Prior (1221 – 1261) to accommodate the growing

useful account is in Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological & Historical Society Vol. LXXXIX 2014, From Minster to Priory: St. Milburga's, Wenlock, Lagram-Taylor.

⁶Between 1078 and 1083. The first Cluniac house in England was established at Lewes in c.1077–1078. The Cluniac foundation is recorded as 1079 in the Domesday book.

⁷Maybe the burnt remains had been saved when the church was torched by the by the Danes.

⁸Performed the night before a feast in a Vigil service.

⁹A Life of St. Milburga was commissioned from Goscelin of St. Bertin by the Wenlock community, and in 1101 the discovery of St. Milburga's relics prompted the writing of the *Miracula Inventiones Beate Mylburge Virginis*, by Odo, Cardinal Bishop of Ostia.

¹⁰By c.1169–1170 Wenlock was large enough to establish its own daughter house in Paisley, and small dependent houses at Dudley, St Helen's and Church Preen.

¹¹When Humbert was Prior (1221 – 1261). The Cluniac Visitation of c.1275–1276 records a community of 40 monks and 3 lay brothers. The new priory church one hundred feet in length and thirty feet wide with three

numbers of monks and pilgrims and the elaborate ceremonial for which the Cluniacs were famous. The church at Sutton was probably rebuilt at this time giving the monastery a presence on the edge of the county town.

St. Milburga's Well is still to be found near the entrance to the abbey. A conduit from it, it is said, supplied a beautifully carved fountain in the abbey precincts. The well has a history of the healing of sight impairments: even in the 20th. century, an old Shropshire Granny sent her granddaughter to the well to fetch water, so that she could read the Sunday Scriptures. Granny said: 'It be blessed water, and was washed in by a saint -and when saints meddle with water, they makes a better job of it than any doctor, let him be fit to bursting with learning.'¹²

The monastery was raised to the status of an abbey in 1245, becoming independent from La Charité in 1395. The feast of St. Milburga was inserted into the Cluniac Benedictine calendar and became common in English church calendars. Five ancient English churches were dedicated in her honour.

The success of Wenlock Abbey was emulated by Shrewsbury when they procured the relics of Saint Winifride, and a pilgrimage route was established between the two towns. It is promoted today by the pilgrimage Trust as the Abbesses Way.

In 1501 a magnificent shrine was built at the order of Henry VII, but within half a century his son would overthrow the ancient religion. In January 1540, Wenlock Priory was given to Cardinal Wolsey's physician and in 1547 the relics of Shropshire's saint were burned outside the abbey gatehouse.¹³ Today, Shropshire day is celebrated on the 23rd of February.

In the 1990s the Orthodox Community of the Holy Fathers of Nicaea restored the derelict ruin of the ancient church on Saint Milburga's estate at Sutton. St. Milburga's feast day is celebrated on the 23rd. of February and the Finding of the Relics is celebrated on the 25th. of June.

Troparion

O Holy Princess and Abbess Milburga You established a monastery to show forth Christ Your burial place was revealed by your fragrant relics You healed the sick and raised the dead Pray for us that our souls may be saved.

apses, a lofty vault and within it 'the wheel-like circle of lamps, crowns of light sparkling with jewels and tall candelabra with many branches' (in contrast to their Cistercian neighbours at Buildwas). There was a central bell tower, and most likely a dove for Reservation of the Blessed Sacrament, as at Canterbury & Salisbury. Four Minsters around the Wrekin, Walcott, 1877.

¹²Recounted by Catherine Milnes Gaskell, who lived in the old Prior's house not far from the well, tells in her book, *Spring in a Shropshire Abbey*, how one day she met young Fanny Milner, sent by her grandmother to fetch some well water.

¹³The prior's house and the infirmary were converted into a private house, which is still in use, but the rest was heavily plundered and reduced to ruins. The bells were melted down to make cannon for Henry VIII's battleships.