**Remembering Aethelthryth: a Saint for all Ages**

There are many thousands of saints, all with their own special stories, who have been worth remembering by some people for some time. Some of them are worth travelling great distances to remember and sometimes a saint is worth remembering for a very long time – St Alban or St Becket. But does a saint’s story remain unchanged over the centuries. And if not, why not? St Aethelthryth (or Etheldreda or Audry) has been a focus of pilgrimage for well over 1000 years but her story has changed over time.

The website of *St Etheldreda’s Church* in London, for many centuries the London home of the Bishops of Ely, gives a succinct history of the saint:

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*‘Princess Etheldreda, daughter of King Anna, a prominent member of the ruling family of the Kingdom of East Anglia, was born in 630. She wanted to be a nun but agreed to a political marriage with a neighbouring King, Egfrith, on condition that she could remain a virgin. When the King tried to break the agreement, she fled back to Ely, where, as well as founding a religious community, she also built a magnificent church on the ruins of one founded by the efforts of St Augustine himself but laid waste by war.’*

[*http://www.stetheldreda.com/index.php/history-of-st-etheldredas/#1*](http://www.stetheldreda.com/index.php/history-of-st-etheldredas/#1)

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We can see a more dramatic contemporary account of the saint’s life by looking at this video on the Ely Cathedral website

<http://www.elycathedral.org/media-centre/a-living-heritage> (P/W “Chestnut2010”)

A fascinating story of a woman who died over 1300 years ago others, but many in this room may pause for a moment and wonder how we know all this, dating back as it does to something until recently termed the ‘dark ages’. From where has the modern historian learned this story?

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**The Life of St Aethelthryth**

We could not have a better starting point for Aethelthryth’s story than Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History.* The essence of the story as told by Bede is as follows: Aethelthryth, the daughter of Anna was first married to Tondbert, a prince of South Gyrwas who died before the marriage was consummated. She was then ‘given’ to King Ecgfrith of Northumbria, who is thought to have been about 15 at the time. Despite their living together as man and wife for twelve years she remained a virgin, a fact vouched for by Bishop Wilfrid, who had been promised great wealth if he could persuade Aethelthryth to consummate the marriage. At length Ecgfrith reluctantly consented to allow his wife to retire to the family monastery at Coldingham. A year later Aethelthryth founded an abbey at Ely and was made its abbess by Wilfrid where she became the ‘*virgin mother of many virgins’* and lived a life of austere asceticism until her death from plague.

She was succeeded as abbess of Ely by her sister Seaxburh who sixteen years later decided to exhume Aethelthryth’s bones, have them put in a new coffin and translated to the abbey church. When they opened Aethelthryth’s coffin her body was found to be incorrupt, another fact vouched for by Wilfrid and her doctor, Cynifrid, who had served the abbess at her death. He reported that the tumour which he had lanced three days before her death was miraculously healed. He also reported that the linens in which she was buried all appeared:

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‘*fresh as on the very day when they had been put around her chaste limbs’*.

Some brethren had found a marble sarcophagus for her at Grantchester, and it was discovered that it fitted her body ‘*in a wonderful way’*, as though specifically made for her. There were some accounts of those touching the robes and original coffin receiving cures.

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Bede’s concern to authenticate his sources, and the fact that it is one of the few times he uses first hand testimony, suggest that his was the first authoritative hagiography of Aethelthryth. Bishop Wilfrid, himself later a saint, is an impressive source for Aethelthryth’s continuing virginity, and Bede has investigated the case personally; he ‘*asked Bishop Wilfrid... if it were true’* and he needed to because ‘*certain people doubted it’*. There is also a long verbatim quote from Cynifrid, Aethelthryth’s doctor, verifying that Aethelthryth’s body was uncorrupted at the time of her first translation. Again the evidence is personal and compelling, almost like a contemporary tabloid reporter, including details about his lancing of the tumour and that the ‘*gaping wound’* with which she was buried now showed ‘*only the slightest traces of a scar’*. Bede’s account preserves memories of Aethelthryth as a real person, a real woman, while he simultaneously starts the process of transforming her into one of the saints.

However, Bede was rarely just a dispassionate historian, and he has provided Aethelthryth with some carefully constructed symbolism. So, for instance, the virgin ‘intacta’ who cannot be violated by man, cannot be violated by disease either. The miraculous curing of her tumours is proof that God was reclaiming this perfect virgin for his bride. Aethelthryth lived three days after treatment, apparently prospering until God reclaimed her in symmetry with the Passion. The use of the pagan sarcophagus to house the Christian saint is symbolic of the conversion process ongoing in Britain at this time.

After the hagiographic account, Bede writes a hymn to Aethelthryth, which compares her with Agatha, Eulalia, Thecla, Euphemia, Agnes and Cecelia. This suggests that Bede was searching for an Anglo-Saxon virgin to set beside these classical Christian saints. Their standard hagiography concerned threats to their virginity linked either to religious persecution, or from a pagan spouse whom the saint successfully converts. The conversion of Anglo-Saxon England seems to have been devoid of suitable virgin martyrs, so to make his point about the centrality of female virginity, Bede must use the material he has, the rather untypical Aethelthryth.

The church at this time was starting its long struggle to impose on the laity its conception of marriage as indissoluble, yet the monasteries of Anglo-Saxon England housed many formerly married men and women. Aethelthryth’s virginity gives Bede an opportunity to show an idealised form of married female religious. He did not really approve of dissolving a marriage in order to enter a monastery, but if the participants are virgins then this represents the *least bad* example.

So despite being irresponsible of her secular duties, she does not obey her husband’s orders, and being married not once but twice, by embracing virginity so single-mindedly, Aethelthryth wins Bede’s support and admiration.

If we accept Bede’s version of Aethelthryth’s life as a reasonably accurate account, what interests us is how subsequent accounts over the following centuries differ; what has been left out and what added?

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**Aethelthryth & Alcuin**

The next great medieval scholar to turn his attention to Aethelthryth was none other than Alcuin, Bede’s great intellectual successor and advisor to Charlemagne. I will gloss over this fairly rapidly, as I cannot see his revised Aethelthryth had any immediate impact on the saints’ cult, but it is interesting nonetheless.

Alcuin wrote a poem *Versus de (Patribus Regibus) et Sanctis Euboricensis Ecclesiae* (Hereafter, *Versus de…)* as a tribute to the history of York, Northumbria and Anglo-Saxon England sometime between 781 and 797. This includes a re-telling of Bede’s life of Aethelthryth. It is a short version but with significant omissions, additions and changes of emphasis. In the first place, Alcuin fails to mention Aethelthryth’s first husband entirely, and says nothing of her role as abbess or as the founder of Ely Abbey. Instead Alcuin concentrates on the divine intervention necessary for Aethelthryth to maintain her virginity, and in Alcuin’s version, King Ecgfrith becomes a **supporter** of this chasteness rather than an opponant. As with Bede, however, the incorrupt body is the final proof of her virginity. Miracles are attributed to the original tomb, but not to its translated home in the monastery at Ely.

Alcuin wanted to promote an idealised example of chasteness within marriage, a concept which was growing within the Carolingian court in the late eighth century. It is Aethelthryth’s chaste example and the divine intervention necessary to fulfil it that Alcuin is citing, and a non-cooperative husband is unhelpful to this cause. Similarly, Charlemagne’s use of monastic foundation as a means of rewarding allies and even as a tool in imposing his rule on formerly pagan provinces, means that there is no requirement to encourage private monastic foundation. Hence Alcuin fails to remember either Aethelthryth’s foundation of the abbey at Ely or her role as abbess.

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**Aelfric, Aethelwold and Monastic reform**

The next stage in the story of how Aethelthryth is remembered comes around 960 when Archbishop Aethelwold of Winchester began revitalising monastic rule across the land by introducing his own strict Benedictine rule. We know from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that Ely was one of the first to be ‘re-founded’, and that St Aethelthryth is the only female Anglo-Saxon saint included in the *Lives of Saints*, written by Aethelwold’s pupil Aelfric.

Aelfric wrote in Old English for a mixed monastic and lay audience rather than an educated elite. Perhaps for this reason, Aelfric restructures Bede’s narrative into a clear and coherent whole. He removes most of the direct speech and repositions the elements in chronological order. Aelfric does not suggest that Ecgfrith supported their chaste marriage, but he does downplay his opposition to her entering a monastery. Aethelthryth is portrayed as abbess of Ely, but there is no mention of her founding the abbey, or of it being a double monastery ie housing both men and women. Indeed, she is specifically recorded as being *‘…(set) over many nuns’*.

After this relatively faithful re-telling of Bede’s original, Aelfric adds a coda to Aethelthryth’s story, concerning a common thane and his wife:

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*‘However, we will tell you of a certain thane,*

*Who lived thirty years with his wife in continence;*

*He begat three sons, and thenceforward they both lived*

*For thirty years without cohabitation,*

*Giving much alms, until the husband*

*Entered the monastic life, and God’s angels*

*Came just at his death, and carried his soul*

*With song to heaven, as the books tell us.*

*Many examples of such there are in books,*

*How oftentimes men and their wives have lived wondrously,*

*And dwelt in chastity, to the glory of Jesus,*

*Who consecrated virginity, even Christ our Saviour;*

*To whom be honour and glory for ever. Amen.’*

Aelfric has set out a coherent story of the saintly Aethelthryth who with divine intervention has remained a virgin through at least twelve years and two marriages; the coda tells of a thane who after having children lives chastely and is rewarded by God. Aethelthryth is portrayed as an impossible ideal requiring divine intervention, while the thane offers an easier and more practical model of behaviour. The view of marriage supported by the orthodox Aelfric was that sex was permissible only for the procreation of children, but should be forsworn thereafter. This is the type of behaviour which Aelfric is recommending for the ‘ordinary’ man rather than Aethelthryth’s perfection.

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The Church in Winchester settled on a small number of saints to use as exemplars for the reform movement, including St Aethelthryth and St Swithun. At Ely Aethelwold ‘*expelled clerics who had been living there in an unworthy fashion’,* re-formed the abbey on the male-only Benedictine model, and used Aethelthryth’s virginal image in his benedictional. The saint’s role as founder and leader of a previous monastic order is ‘forgotten’, and the flesh and blood of the real woman is transformed to an abstract, inspiring virgin saint.

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**The Liber Eliensis and Virginal Ely**

The *Liber Eliensis* was compiled in Ely and completed around the time of Becket’s canonisation in 1173. It is a complex work consisting of a number of different manuscripts, and includes monastic records and estate documents embedded within it. For our purposes, however the most important item is a book-length hagiography of Aethelthryth which introduces a wealth of new material. The most significant additions are that Ecgfrith, far from supporting his saintly wife’s ambitions as Alcuin has told us, actually mounts a raid on Coldingham to reclaim her. Her subsequent ‘flight’ to Ely is accompanied by numerous miracles and for the first time we discover that Ely abbey is actually based on a church founded by St Augustine on land given to Aethelthryth as part of the settlement of her first marriage. We learn that monks have been in constant attendance of Aethelthryth’s body, even during the worst of the Scandinavian attacks, and that the saint is ready to avenge insults to her monks or abbey.

There had been two significant developments in the time between Aethelwold’s re-foundation of Ely and the writing of the *Liber Eliensis*. The Norman conquest, which had been effectively opposed by the people of East Anglia, and the establishment of a bishopric at the abbey. The monks felt under threat, both from a king who distrusted the independent fen-dwellers, and from the bishop who was attempting to divert the income of the abbey to his Cathedral.

By establishing that Ely was built on land betrothed to Aethelthryth after her marriage to Tondbert, the *Liber Eliensis* both provides a justification for her first marriage, and establishes royal precedence and protection for the abbey itself. To reinforce the ancient sacredness of the location we discover it already had a church founded by St Augustine. Royal and saintly protection is coherently established for the abbey, setting it aside from the ambitions of both bishop and king. The text also establishes the monks’ role of never-ceasing vigilance; having defended the honour of their saint unbroken from the first foundation until the present day, they are clearly Aethelthryth’s chosen protectors and attendants.

Ecgfrith’s change of role, from supporter of Aethelthryth’s virginity to attempted kidnapper – and perhaps rapist – suggests that the king is no longer a supporter of the abbey, but its enemy. Just as God has defended Aethelthryth’s virginity, so will the saint defend the abbey’s honour. Those who dare to tamper with the saint’s body or invade the monk’s privileges are struck down for their pride. Whether it is the king asserting his secular will like Ecgfrith, or the Bishop invading the traditional rights and privileges of the abbey, the saint will defend her chosen representatives, the monks of Ely.

The *Liber Eliensis* established Ely Abbey as a place of ancient royal descent, successfully created a national cult to Aethelthryth and portrayed the monks of Ely as specially appointed and protected by her. Aethelthryth is once again a prestigious royal presence, the abbey a royal foundation and her tomb has been opened as a popular shrine. The Ely community has successfully created a memorable image of their saint, one which has sustained for a further 900 years.

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**Ely since the Liber Eliensis**

Aethelthryth's shrine continued to be a major pilgrimage destination for vast numbers of medieval pilgrims until it was destroyed in 1541. A slate in the Cathedral marks the spot where it stood and the Cathedral still celebrates her feast days. Some of her relics are held in St Etheldreda's Church in London, although her hand is held by St Etheldreda's Roman Catholic church at Ely.

In 1992 the Order of St. Etheldreda was founded under Royal patronage as a means of providing a regular source of funds to preserve the fabric and to share the life and work of the Cathedral for future generations. As the website says, this will enable everyone to enjoy St Etheldreda's inspired creation for centuries to come.

**What have we learned from Aethelthryth?**

We may think that a saint’s story is unchanging, but we can see that this is not always the case. While the accuracy of the modern video account of Aethelthryth’s life with which we opened may be debatable, it’s divergence from Bede is not the result of storytelling for its own sake. Rather, each version of Aethelthryth’s life has been written for a purpose, the hagiographers re-working the saint’s vita into forms that better reflected their own understanding of the greater glory of God – and often their own sectional interests. The successive versions of Aethelthryth’s life tell us little about the saint, but much about the writers and their concerns.

Each writer created a different memory of this distant Queen, one which fitted their own purpose. From Bede we receive the memory of a great lady, a forceful queen involved in the power plays of kings and bishops, who for Aethelwold becomes a depersonalised liturgical icon; Alcuin’s simple virgin becomes a vengeful, if ghostly spirit for the independent East Anglian monks.

Aethelthryth has been remembered in many ways, and continues to bring pilgrims to Ely; truly she is a saint for all ages.