

St Edith

Kate Pratt

The church in Bishop Wilton is dedicated to St Edith of Wilton. Feeling that there must be some reason for this, that it could not just be coincidence, I started looking for a link between Bishop Wilton and Wilton in Wiltshire. This has involved research into church dedications, St Edith's life and back into history for any connection – and it was there to be found.

Dedications

There is only one other church dedicated to St Edith of Wilton, and that is at Baverstock, a tiny hamlet of 20 houses about 4 miles from Wilton. There was a third church dedicated to St Edith at Limpley Stoke near Bath which lasted for 500 years, but the dedication was changed to St Mary in the 16th century. In her seminal work 'Studies in Church Dedications, or England's Patron Saints' written in 1899, Frances Arnold-Forster lists all 3 places – Baverstock, Limpley Stoke and Bishop Wilton – as having churches dedicated to St Edith.

The listing of church dedications is not straightforward. Patron saints are selected for many reasons – there may be a local connection, the parish church may be linked to a nearby monastery and honour the same saint, the naming may commemorate a visit by a missionary saint, or the gentry of the area may have a strong preference for a particular saint having been born on that day or for other reasons of their own. In the 14,000 churches listed by Arnold-Forster, about 600 saints are named, who range in popularity from the Blessed Virgin Mary to some Cornish saints with only a single dedication to their name. There are some 500 ancient churches whose dedication is not known.

As with Limpley Stoke, the dedication may change over the years with political or family changes. Also "the lady-chapel or chancel may have been placed under the invocation of one patron, and the rest of the building dedicated to another".¹ In our own church at Bishop Wilton there are 2 side chapels with their own dedications – the Lady Chapel on the South side and St Helen's on the North, now used as a vestry.

¹ F Arnold-Forster, 'Studies in Church Dedications' (1899) introduction p xi

According to Muncey, "At the end of the 12th century and throughout the 13th century Lady chapels were built, or rebuilt on a larger scale, and numbers of parish churches dedicated one of their altars to the Blessed Virgin Mary".²

Another complication with our dedication is that there is a second St Edith! St Edith of Polesworth was the great-aunt of St Edith of Wilton and sister of Athelstan. There are 15 churches dedicated to St Edith of Polesworth, across Staffordshire, Cheshire, Shropshire and Lincolnshire. It is possible that their locations reveal a pilgrim trail.

Village Feast

We do, however, definitely know that our church is not dedicated to St Edith of Polesworth but to St Edith of Wilton, thanks to the survival of the tradition of celebrating the Saint's Day as a village feast. St Edith of Polesworth died on July 15th 964. St Edith of Wilton died on Sept 16th 984; the preceding day – the Vigil of St Edith – is commemorated as her feast day. We are lucky enough to have reference to a document dated 22nd September 1441³ which confirms the date of Bishop Wilton's feast day:

"Whereas, the feast of the dedication of the parish Church of Bishop Wilton was wont to be kept on the fifteenth of September yearly, now, in regard the said day of dedication fell in autumn, when people were busy about their harvest, John, Archbishop of York, then translated the said feast of dedication until the Sunday then next ensuing, every year solemnly to be celebrated."

It is fortunate that this early evidence of the dedication to St Edith exists, as misleadingly, a dedication to St Michael is mentioned for Bishop Wilton, both in Allen's 'New & Complete History of the County of York' (1828) and in Baines' 'History, Directory & Gazetteer of Yorkshire' (1823). It must be assumed that an error was made initially, and copied by subsequent authors. The nearest church dedicated to St Michael is at Garton-on-the-Wolds.

King Henry VIII tried to abolish parish feasts in 1536: "he issued a proclamation that every saint's day should be abolished and that in future every parish

² R W Muncey, 'A History of the Consecration of Churches & Churchyards' (1930), p 83

³ G Lawton, 'Collectio Rerum Ecclesiasticarum' (1842) p 328

feast should be held on the first Sunday in October, a proclamation which fortunately was pretty generally disregarded".⁴

St Edith of Wilton

St Edith's mother, Wulfthryth, was a member of the community at Wilton Nunnery - though as a lay member not a nun - when she caught the eye of King Edgar and became his concubine or common-law wife. He took her to his manor house at Kemsing in Kent, where she gave birth to her daughter in 961. The marriage was dissolved a couple of years later, and Wulfthryth returned to Wilton with Edith where she became the Abbess in about 965.

Wilton, the ancient capital of Wiltshire, was also the site of an important royal residence. The Nunnery there was the equivalent of an elite boarding school for the daughters of the nobility who were educated as lay members, and there would be close connections with the palace. Edith was educated here, aware of her own position of importance both as daughter of the Abbess and of the King. We know about her life (and that of her mother) because the Wilton community commissioned a prolific French hagiographer, Goscelin, to write the 'Life of St Edith'; although this was probably not written until nearly a century after her death, the wealth of detail given convinces that he is recording the oral traditions still current within the community. It is recorded, for instance, that when Edith was challenged by Bishop Aethelwold of Winchester about her preference for wearing rather grand clothes, she replied that God paid attention to what was within not without; what her critic did not know was that she wore a hair-shirt under her finery.⁵ She also kept a private menagerie at the Nunnery, more associated with displays of royal wealth than with religious communities. Goscelin also notes that:

"Edith enjoyed the veneration of the dukes, magnates and matrons of her father's realm; greetings, letters and gifts poured in from foreign kingdoms and principalities; holy prelates begged for her intercession, and those envoys who were sent from Gaul or Germany, from Rome itself or even from the emperors to the

court of King Edgar gloried in commending themselves to his saintly daughter".⁶

Edith is reputed to have been offered the chance to be Abbess of 3 different nunneries, and even the crown of England, but to have refused all these offers, preferring to stay within the Wilton community where she was known for her good works, including that of building a church which she dedicated to her favourite saint, St Denys.⁷ It was at the consecration of this church that St Dunstan, the Archbishop of Canterbury, foretold her imminent death in the year 984, in her 23rd year. She was buried there at Wilton, and although minor miracles occurred immediately after her death, it was not until 13 years later that she started appearing to people in visions, telling them of the survival of her body in her grave. Goscelin records that she appeared to St Dunstan telling him to open her tomb, and when he did so, in the presence of her mother, its "fragrant perfumes gave off the breath of paradise".⁸

Cult of St Edith

Edith was elevated to sainthood by her half-brother King Aethelred. His son Edmund who succeeded as king also championed her, but the next king, Canute, was renowned as a devoted follower. He showed great reverence at her shrine, and actually dismounted instead of riding into the 'sacred courtyard' as even the priests were wont to do. Goscelin tells us that on one occasion, making the voyage home to his ancestral kingdom of Denmark, Canute was almost overcome by a fierce storm; he appealed to St Edith to save him and she calmed the wind and so he was rescued with all his fleet. When he returned to England he went to Wilton and gave thanks "with solemn gifts, and publicized this great miracle with prolific testimony."⁹ He paid for a golden shrine to be made for St Edith.

6 S J Ridyard, 'The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England' (1988) p143

7 Goscelin gives a fascinating description of the church - built of wood with stone foundations, the walls covered with horsehide, the roof vaulted, a triple side-chapel in the form of a cross, the whole decorated with brightly coloured paintings. Goscelin, op cit, chapter 20

8 There is necessarily some doubt about the dating of this event, as Dunstan died in 988, only 4 years after Edith. Ridyard concludes that Goscelin is attempting to enhance Edith's prestige by associating her translation to sainthood with St Dunstan, op cit p 40

9 Goscelin, 'Translatio Edithae' (1080) chapter 12. From Hollis, Barnes, et al, op cit

4 Francis Bond, 'Dedications & Patron Saints of English Churches' (1914) p 191

5 Goscelin, 'Vita Edithae' (1080), chapter 12. From Hollis, Barnes, Hayward, Loncar & Wright, 'Writing the Wilton Women' (2004)

Goscelin records the fact that 3 workmen stole most of the gold, using only a thin layer to cover the shrine; he names and shames them, and so, nearly 1000 years later, we know that Aelfmar, Winstan and Wulfstan were struck with blindness for their sins and forced to become beggars.

Queen Emma, wife of King Aethelred and later of King Canute, was also a benefactor to St Edith and the community at Wilton. Many miracles were recorded of the sick being healed at her shrine, and she is known as the patron saint of lepers. Edith is one of the few women saints of the late Anglo-Saxon period whose feast is entered in the early eleventh century calendars.¹⁰

The cult of St Edith strengthened after the death of King Canute in 1035. Wilton was a very wealthy convent at that time, due in part to the cultivation of its patron saint; it even managed to retain its status until the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII.

Ealdred

Another of St Edith's cult followers that Goscelin tells us about in his 'Life of St Edith' was Ealdred. He had a very successful career in the church, ending as the "closest to a 'prince-bishop' that England could produce"¹¹

Although his biography was not written, we do know a bit about his life. He was a monk at Winchester, becoming Abbot of Tavistock in 1027. In 1046 he was made Bishop of Worcester, which post he maintained until 1062. In that role he opposed the Welsh and Irish raiders who were ravaging the countryside, not as a fighter, but offering his support to the troops. In 1056 he was involved in forging the peace treaty with the Welsh king. He was a noted pluralist, because as well as being Bishop of Worcester he also administered the diocese of Hereford, the diocese of Wiltshire and the abbey of Winchcombe, thus "ruling a sort of ecclesiastical palatinate on the March which was politically convenient".¹² He was used as a foreign envoy for the state, travelling to Hungary, Italy and Germany as recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.

10 Stephanie Hollis, 'St Edith and the Wilton Community' (2004) p 269, footnote 125. From Hollis, Barnes, et al, op cit

11 F Barlow, 'English Church, 1000-1066' (1963), p 86

12 Barlow, op cit, p 87

In 1058 he went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and while crossing the Adriatic a storm blew up and he experienced the same near-disaster as King Canute. In terror of being ship-wrecked he called upon Edith "his fellow-citizen [and she] immediately beamed upon him and said: 'I am Edith', and suddenly restored calm; he proclaimed this when he returned to his own country".¹³

Bishop Wilton

It was reading the sentence quoted above in a book called 'Writing the Wilton Women' that provided the link between Bishop Wilton and Wilton in Wiltshire.

Ealdred, former Bishop of Wiltshire and venerator of St Edith, continued his rise through the church hierarchy to become the Archbishop of York in 1061. He attempted to combine this position with that of Bishop of Worcester, but was reprimanded for this by the Pope. He probably crowned King Harold, (according to Florence of Worcester), and it is certain that King Harold left the booty which he had taken from the Danes after the Battle of Stamford Bridge in Archbishop Ealdred's care when he marched south to meet William the Conqueror in 1066.¹⁴ And it was Ealdred who crowned William as King at Westminster on Christmas Day.

Ealdred was the last Anglo-Saxon Archbishop of York. He was very generous with gifts of land to all of his churches, and was a great builder, notably at Beverley, Southwell, York and Ripon. He died on 11th September 1069. After his death, the Danish fleet arrived in support of an uprising against the Norman conquerors, and much of York was destroyed, including the Minster. The first Norman Archbishop, Thomas I, was appointed in 1070 following the 'harrying of the North' during which much of the area north of the Humber was totally destroyed.

We know that there was a church and a priest in Bishop Wilton in 1086, as it was listed in Domesday Book. The south door and the chancel arch are Norman, but it is probable that there was a wooden church on the site before the first stone building.

13 M Wright & K Loncar, 'The Translation of Edith' (2004) p78

14 J M Cooper, 'The Last 4 Anglo-Saxon Archbishops of York' (1970) p 26

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What more likely than that it was erected at the instigation of the last Anglo-Saxon Archbishop of York?

We know that he was a follower of the cult of St Edith of Wilton, and when he was made Archbishop of York he would discover that he owned a manor and land at a place called Wilton. He was known to be a

generous man who gave land to the church and paid for the construction of churches. We have here all the pieces of the puzzle of the dedication of the church at Bishop Wilton to St Edith of Wilton.
