



The Story of St Swithun

A long time ago, in the 800's and before the present Cathedral was built; St Swithun was Bishop of Winchester. There used to be a beautiful but small cathedral built by the Anglo-Saxons on this site, with blue glass in the windows, green tiles on the floor and carvings and paintings on the walls. This was Bishop Swithun's Cathedral.

Bishop Swithun was a kind man and walked all over Hampshire making sure his people were safe and had all they needed. One day he was walking over the bridge and talking to people as he went when he came across a woman stood to one side and she was crying. Bishop Swithun stopped and asked the woman why she was so upset. Between sobs the woman explained that she'd been carrying a big basket of eggs to market to sell, but there were so many people on the bridge, someone had accidently knocked against her and she'd dropped the basket, breaking all the eggs.

Kind Bishop Swithun had a think and then took the woman's hand in his and told her not to worry. Suddenly, the eggs were whole again! It was a miracle!

Bishop Swithun knew he was getting old and that he wouldn't live for ever. It would soon be time for him to go to heaven. He told those in charge of the old Cathedral that he didn't want to be buried inside the Cathedral like the previous bishops and kings. He wanted a simple grave, outside the main doors of the Cathedral so that people could walk over his grave as they went in and out of the beautiful church and remember that they should love one another, just as Bishop Swithun had tried to do all his life.

Bishop Swithun died an old man and was buried according to his wishes, but so many people had heard about the wonderful things he had done, that each day people came to visit his grave. Each day it seemed that more and more people visited the grave of the Bishop.

One hundred years passed and the leaders of the old Cathedral decided that enough was enough. They needed to take action and so they did two things. First, Bishop Swithun became Saint Swithun. Second, they decided a simple grave was not grand enough for a saint and so they decided to move his bones. The king gave a beautiful silver box, encrusted with jewels in which the bones of the saint could be placed and placed inside the old Cathedral.

The day was chosen at the height of summer. The sun shone in a clear, blue sky. A warm breeze gently rustled the bright green leaves on the trees. The birds sang their best and most beautiful songs to herald the day. Six strong men from the city pushed the big stone slab over the grave to one side. They then dug down, deeper and deeper until their spades rang out as they hit the lid of the stone coffin. Clearing soil from around the edge, they managed to drop ropes down and under the coffin as it stood on large stones placed at the bottom of the grave, then using all their strength, they heaved the coffin out from the grave and placed it on the ground beside the hole. They slid the heavy lid off the top and lying in the coffin were the

bones of the Saint. Gently, each bone was carefully removed and placed in the beautiful Winchester Cathedral Education Page 2 silver box and when each bone was in its new resting place, the big silver lid was placed firmly on top.

The six strong men were brought forward again and they lifted the box on to their shoulders and turned to take it into the old Cathedral, but as they did this the sky turned as black as night. The breeze stopped blowing. The birds stopped singing. Everything fell silent and still. The men carrying the box paused for a second or two, but as the first man stepped over the threshold of the Cathedral, the sky was torn apart by the most ferocious thunderstorm anyone had ever seen. The men carrying the silver box paused again but then continued carrying the box through the doorway, up the nave and placing it carefully on the high altar at the east end. Having completed their task, they turned and look with amazement at the sight outside. The ground was covered with ice!

People talked far and wide about that day. People still talk about it today! The story grew as people began to say that the storm had been caused by St Swithun who was angry that his bones had been disturbed. Others said it was a warning that if it should rain on St Swithun's Day, it would rain for forty days! St Swithun's day is The 15th of July!

When the Norman's built the present Cathedral in the 11th Century, the silver box containing the bones of St Swithun was one of the first things to be brought into the new Cathedral. It was placed behind the high altar in the most holy and special part of the Cathedral. Many Pilgrims who had walked for days to reach Winchester Cathedral on Pilgrimage made their way to the shrine of St Swithun, the very special place where his bones rested.

Pilgrims visited the shrine until 1538. Henry VIII was on the throne and was broke. He'd spent all the money his father had left him waging war against the French. One of his advisors, Thomas Cromwell, suggested that the Church was too powerful and too wealthy. If the wealth belonging to the church was transferred to the Crown, King Henry, all his problems would be over!

It was early in the morning on Saturday 20th September 1538. Men working for Thomas Cromwell, marched through the Cathedral to the Shrine. The silver box with its precious contents was taken down from its lofty platform and opened. The box was tipped up and its contents scattered across the floor. Other men lifted their great hammers above their heads and brought them smashing down upon the shrine breaking it into pieces. No longer would Pilgrims walk for days to reach the Cathedral then fall to their knees before the shrine of St Swithun.

Are the remaining bones of St Swithun still somewhere in the Cathedral or graveyard? What a good place to hide bones! No one would think of looking there! Could it be that they might be found at some point in the future? Who knows? But this is where the story ends – for the moment.