

Winchester's Lesser Known Saints

by Tom Watson

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The saint most closely associated with Winchester Cathedral is Swithun whose cult was one of the most enduring from 971 to its destruction in 1538. Swithun is one of four dedications for the cathedral along with the Holy Trinity, St Peter, and St Paul. The ninth-century bishop and his cult are also the subject of a major scholarly study by Michael Lapidge [1] and a well-regarded booklet by John Crook, [2] as well as numerous references in articles and books.

There were, however, other saints with direct and indirect connections to the cathedral whose popularity as cults visited by pilgrims and celebrations in liturgy and litany were important in the late Anglo-Saxon and the early-to-central medieval periods. Some of these were considered sufficiently important to the Victorians to include representations of them on the Great Screen (1885-1891), and in the glass of the Lady Chapel (1897-1898). These twelve Winchester saints, some known and others barely a footnote, are the subject of this article. There would have been other saints celebrated over shorter periods during the 500 to 700 years being covered but this group has been generally listed in connection with Winchester Cathedral. The two saints whose relics are known to have been brought to Winchester are included.

Why were saints important? They were the point of holy intercession between men and women on earth with God in heaven. The saints were, at the same time, alongside God in heaven and accessible on earth through tombs and reliquaries. The historian Peter Brown explains: "This was because the saint in Heaven was believed to be "present" at his tomb on earth." The tombs of saints thus became "non-graves" where bones and other relics were handled for worship and intercession. [3] They were powerful supports for worship as well as economically important for cathedrals, churches and monasteries in attracting pilgrims.

In this article, the saints' names in the *Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (fifth edition, 2012) are used for consistency. There are some Anglo-Saxon spellings and others which derive from Old English. In all cases alternative spellings are listed below the ODS version. The most obvious exception to accepted usage is Ethelwold, almost universally spelt as Aethelwold.

Saints associated with Winchester during their lifetimes

Alfwold

A Winchester monk and later Bishop of Sherborne, little is known of Alfwold (d. 1058). He was devoted to Swithun and Cuthbert, setting up a shrine to Swithun in the church at

Sherborne and travelling to visit Cuthbert's shrine at Durham. According to the twelfth-century chronicler William of Malmesbury [4], Alfwold was an example to other clergy for his abstinence and plain living: for example, he ate off common wooden plates and bowls. The main claim of his holy powers was that after Godwin, Earl of Wessex, quarrelled with him, the earl was stricken with a sudden illness. He recovered after Alfwold's pardon. [5]

Feast Day: 25 March.

Alphege "The Bald"

Also known as Aelfheah

Two Alpheges are associated with Winchester as bishops in the tenth century. The less well-known Alphege, nicknamed "the Bald", was a monk before his consecration as bishop in which he served from 934-51. [6] There is speculation that Alphege was initially a monk outside England, or may have been a hermit. However, his importance in the history of the church was as a "prime mover of the monastic renaissance" and that he ordained two leaders of later monastic reform, Dunstan and Ethelwold, on the same day. [5] He was buried at the Old Minster and is mentioned in three early eleventh-century litanies. [7]

Feast Day: 12 March.

Alphege

Also known as Ælfheah



Great Screen



Lady Chapel south



Fox's chantry chapel

St Alphege has a south transept chapel only recently dedicated to his name by our current Bishop, Tim Dakin, in 2012. He was Bishop of Winchester in succession to Ethelwold in 984. He became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1006 and was brutally killed by Danes at Greenwich in 1012, after refusing payment of a ransom to his captors. Alphege was buried at St Paul's Cathedral in London, quickly becoming a national hero. [5] After Cnut became king, he translated Alphege's body to Canterbury in 1023 where it was buried to the north of the high altar and venerated by monks morning and night. [8] After the Norman Conquest, the new archbishop Lanfranc questioned the validity of the saint's cult but eventually approved its continuation: a *vita* (life) and office were written by Osbern of Canterbury in Alphege's honour. The cult developed further after Alphege's body was found in 1105 to be incorrupt when it was moved with other saints' relics to a new position behind the high altar. He occurs in many late Anglo-Saxon litanies. [7] In his last sermon Thomas Becket referred to Alphege as Canterbury's first martyr. However, Becket's cult soon overshadowed that of Alphege. [8]

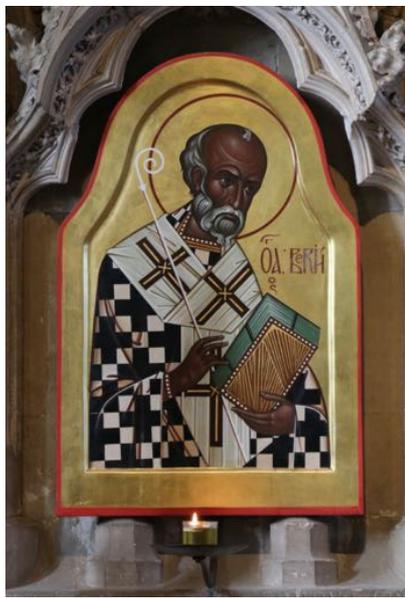
Feast Day: 19 April.

Images in Winchester Cathedral (shown above): Great Screen, Lady Chapel south window, Fox's Chantry Chapel.

Birinus



Fox's Chantry Chapel



Icon on the Feretory Screen



Lady Chapel (south)



Great Screen

Birinus was a Lombard missionary who arrived in England in 634-35 and was the first Bishop of Dorchester-on-Thames. He converted King Cynegils to Christianity and many people were baptised by Birinus up until his death in 650. Late in his reign as bishop, he

established a church at Winchester whose political importance to the West Saxons caused it to become an ecclesiastical centre. His relics were taken to Winchester in 690 by his later successor Hedda when the See of Dorchester was split and Hedda moved his seat to Winchester. Birinus's relics were moved to fresh shrines by Ethelwold in 980 and Henry of Blois in 1150. [5] The south-east chapel dedicated to Birinus was converted into the chantry chapel for Bishop Thomas Langton when he suddenly died of plague in 1501, [9] but the well situated in the south ambulatory aisle of the crypt is still named Birinus's well. His cult has been described as "a satellite" of the more famous St Swithun; veneration to Birinus, never very widespread, persisted at Winchester through the Middle Ages". [10] His feast day was included in Winchester calendars from the ninth century onwards but it was not, for instance, included in the neighbouring Sarum Calendar's events. [7]

Feast Day: 3 December.

Images in Winchester Cathedral (shown above): Fox's Chantry Chapel, icon on feretory screen, south window of The Lady Chapel, The Great Screen.



The St **Birinus Cross** in the Retroquire was designed by David John, and bears the inscription:

THE SAINT
BIRINUS
CROSS
The fragment of
the Shrine of Birinus
first Bishop of
Dorchester, set in
this cross was given
by Dorchester Abbey
to commemorate
the 1300th anniversary
of the transfer of
the See of Wessex
from Dorchester
to Winchester
1979

Birstan

Also known as Brynstan, Byrnstan, Beornstan

Birstan was the Bishop of Winchester immediately preceding Alphege the Bald, in 931-34. William of Malmesbury writes of his service to the poor, devotion to the dead through

prayer and tireless personal prayer. [4] Birstan died while at prayer. His memory was revived by a later episcopal successor Ethelwold who had a vision that Birstan was equal in heavenly glory to other Winchester bishop-saints Birinus and Swithun and thus should be regarded equally on earth. [5] Buried in the Old Minister, he was commemorated in four late tenth-century litanies and in Winchester (11th century) and West Country (12th century) liturgical calendars. [7]

Feast Day: 4 November.

Edburga of Winchester (or Nunnaminster)

Also known as Eadburh, Eadburga



Edburga was a daughter of Edward the Elder, King of Wessex, and his third wife Eadgifu. [She is one of four English saints named Edburga – of Bicester, Minster in Thanet, Repton (or Southwell), and Winchester]. Edburga was educated in Winchester at St Mary's Abbey (Nunnaminster) and remained there as a nun, known for her gentleness and humility, until her death in 960, aged thirty. Her humility was demonstrated by incidents such as secretly cleaning the shoes of other sisters or praying privately at the nearby St Peter's church in Colebrook Street. [11] There was a major royal cult devoted to her, which may have rivalled Swithun's, before and after 1066 in monasteries in Winchester and Wessex, especially those founded by Ethelwold. [5, 11] Probably in the 970s, Ethelwold transferred her remains to a silver [11] (or gold [7]) shrine at Nunnaminster at about the same time as the monastery's church was rebuilt from timber to stone. She was also celebrated in a *vita* written by Osbert of Clare. [7]

Feast Day: 15 June

Image of St Edburga: The Great Screen

Ethelwold

Also known as Aethelwold

Ethelwold is important amongst the 'lesser-known' saints for his leadership of the tenth century monastic revival, the creation of the highly successful cult of Swithun, and the example he set to the church. He was born in Winchester, served at the court of King Athelstan (924-39) and was ordained as a priest along with another monastic reformer, Dunstan. [12] After a period at Glastonbury Abbey, he was sent to revive the derelict abbey of Abingdon. In 963, he was appointed by King Edgar as Bishop of Winchester where he replaced secular canons with monks from Abingdon and Fleury to create the first monastic

cathedral, which remained in that mode until the Reformation of the 1530s. Ethelwold was a notable ascetic, thus setting an example of humility to his monks and clerks. There are many achievements to record – the establishment of Winchester Cathedral as a centre of learning with a major scriptorium offering its famed style of illumination, extensive building projects throughout his See, the congress which produced the *Regularis Concordia* of monastic observance in 970, the translation in 971 of the almost unknown ninth-century Bishop Swithun into an important cult, and the consecration of the extended Old Minster in 980. [1] Ethelwold was considered by contemporaries as an outstanding counsellor to the king, a benevolent bishop and the ‘father’ of monks. [5] However, his cult was modestly observed after his death in 983 despite his planning of it late in life. There were *vitae* of him by Wulfstan of Winchester and Aelfric, and he occurs in many late Anglo-Saxon litanies. [7]

Feast Day: 1 August.



Images in Winchester Cathedral (shown above): The Great Screen, east window of The Lady Chapel.

Fritheastan

Another tenth-century bishop-saint, Fritheastan served at the Old Minster from 909-31. Little is known of him or his works as a bishop or a holy person. [5] William of Malmesbury

records that he was one of seven bishops consecrated on the same day in 909 by Plegmund, Archbishop of Canterbury. [4] He resigned in 931 and died a year or two later. Appointed by Edward the Elder, Frithestan fell out with his successor King Athelstan over support for the late king's second son Eadwine in a succession dispute. He is absent from witness lists of charters signed by the new king from coronation in 925 to 928, indicating disfavour, but later reappeared. Frithestan was also remembered for establishing good relations between the Old and New Minsters. One regulation he introduced was that when a priest of either minster died, members of both would take part in the funeral observances. [13] Frithestan was buried in the Old Minster. By William of Malmesbury's day in the twelfth century the location of his tomb had been lost. [13] There was an attempt in Winchester to develop a cult of him as a saint, and he was listed in some martyrologies, but the cult never became popular. He occurs in only one late eleventh-century Winchester litany. [7] An Anglo Saxon stole made for Bishop Frithestan by Queen Aelfflaed, second wife of Edward the Elder, was taken to Durham by King Athelstan as a gift for the shrine of St Cuthbert in AD 934, and is one of the precious items now on display in the permanent exhibition at Durham Cathedral called "Open Treasure".

Feast Day: 10 September.

Grimbald



A monk from the abbey of Saint Bertin at Saint-Omer in Flanders (now Pas de Calais), Grimbald is regarded as a co-founder of the New Minster. He was invited to Winchester by King Alfred in 887 as a court scholar assisting the monarch on the translation of essential Latin works into Old English. He joined a small monastery (*monasteriolum*) at Winchester. [14]. Alfred acknowledged his advisory role ("my mass-priest") in the prose preface to the translated *Regularis pastoralis* of Gregory the Great. Asser, Alfred's biographer, wrote in 893 of Grimbald's skill at chanting and his scriptural knowledge. [15] Spurning Alfred's offer in 889 to become Archbishop of Canterbury, Grimbald lived out his days in the monastic community and was buried in the New Minister after it was dedicated in 903. His relics, and those of Judoc (also known as Josse), were the most notable in the church. Grimbald's relics were translated (moved) twice in the next century before ending up at Hyde Abbey in 1110, which was dedicated to St Peter and to him. [5] His saintly cult centred on Winchester and extended to Malmesbury and nine more Benedictine abbeys. However, it declined after the Norman Conquest other than at Hyde. He occurs in several late Anglo-Saxon liturgies. [7]

Feast Day: 8 July

Image in Winchester Cathedral (show above) : The Great Screen.

Hedda

Also known as Haedde, Haeddi, Heddi

Hedda was the first bishop of the West Saxons to reside at Winchester, in place of Dorchester-on-Thames. Originally from Whitby, he was ordained by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore, in London in 676. Bede wrote that Hedda was “a good, just man, who carried out his duties as bishop guided by an inborn love of goodness rather than by anything learned from books.” [16] The monk Pecthelm (or Pethelm) reported that “many miracles of healing occurred through Haeddi’s holiness at the place where he died” (in 705). People came to his tomb to gather earth that would be mixed with water to treat sick humans and animals. [17] “In consequence, there was a considerable pit created there by the continual removal of the hallowed soil.” [16] Hedda was an advisor to King Ine of the West Saxons on a law code which had provisions for enforcing baptism, payment of tithes and other ecclesiastical measures. [17] He translated Birinus’s relics from Dorchester-on-Thames to Winchester. Hedda’s cult was promoted in Wessex monasteries and at Crowland abbey in the Fens, where it is believed he ordained the hermit-saint Guthlac. [5]

Feast Day: 7 July.

Image in Winchester Cathedral (shown above): The Great Screen.



Foreign saints with relics in Winchester

Judoc

Also known as Josse, Jesse, Joyce

Judoc’s connection with Winchester is linked to Grimbold’s time, when tradition says the monk arranged for relics of this seventh century Breton saint to be brought from Ponthieu (now Pas de Calais). [15] Another version of the story is that in 903, monks of Ponthieu abbey fled from Norman raiders to England and brought Judoc’s relics with them to the newly-built New Minster. [5] The relics were enshrined in the New Minster, although hagiographers say that his body was incorrupt, and his hair and beard trimmed occasionally by followers. Judoc was a Breton noble, a son of the king of Brittany, who renounced wealth and position after a pilgrimage to Rome in order to become a priest-hermit. He lived alone in a coastal forest for the rest of his life. Two of his brothers were also saints (Judicael and Winnoc). Judoc’s cult spread across northern Europe and he is usually depicted holding a pilgrim’s staff with a crown at his feet, showing his renunciation of wealth and power. [5] Judoc’s importance as a saint in Winchester was emphasised in

annual feast days and this influenced his inclusion in other English liturgical calendars. He was included in many late Anglo-Saxon litanies. [7]

Feast Day: 13 December.

Justus of Beauvais

Justus of Beauvais was a third-century boy martyr. His incredible story, also mixed up with Justin of Paris's legend, is that as a boy of nine he declared himself a Christian at the time of the Roman emperor's Diocletian's persecution. A soldier struck off his head with a sword, but he continued to speak. [This is a category of martyr saints known as *cephalophores* (head carriers)]. He had given his life to avoid disclosing the hiding place of his father and uncle in the Beauvais region north of Paris. [5] In the late tenth century Winchester Cathedral claimed to have important relics of the boy-saint. One source says the relics were obtained during Ethelwold's reign as bishop; [7] another implies that a skull fragment was obtained during King Athelstan's reign earlier in that century. The saint's cult was popular in Winchester and was widespread in France, Belgium and Switzerland. [5] Other centres also claimed to have major relics. Justus of Beauvais occurs in several late Anglo-Saxon litanies. [7]

Feast Day: 18 October.

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