

THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE SAINTS RECONSIDERED

2: ST OSYTH & ST EDITH OF AYLESBURY

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Dr Hagerty argues that the earliest sources are to be trusted in their insistence that there was only one St Osyth, and that she had associations with both Buckinghamshire and Essex. The erroneous belief that she was buried at Aylesbury is to be explained by her being confused (as a result of her relics having briefly found refuge there) with her aunt, St Edith.

The most comprehensive critical treatment of the existing source documents concerning St Osyth has been that of Bethell.¹ The six sources appeared to date from or draw on documents of the twelfth century. He concluded that three were derived, through a twelfth-century redactor, William de Vere, from a 'Life' in a lost earlier document and the other three from another early 'Life'.² However, Bethell seemed to have accepted without question the conclusion of Hohler³ that there had been two Saints Osyth, and entitled his paper 'Lives of St Osyth of Essex and St Osyth of Aylesbury'. It is intended, by concentrating on the 'factual' information, rather than the 'hagiographical', and by setting the events described in the context of the times in which they were said to have taken place, to show that there is every reason to agree with the sources that there had been only one St Osyth. She had associations with both Aylesbury and Essex and it will be suggested that her association with Aylesbury had early submerged the memory of St Edith, founder of the seventh-century *monasterium* at that place.

As set out conveniently by Bethell,⁴ the main features of the life and death of St Osyth which can be distilled from the sources can be quickly summarised. Her father was Frithewald (Frithuwold, Fredewald or various other spellings),⁵ at the time of her birth ruling an unspecified region from a residence at Quar-

rendon near Aylesbury and still a pagan, and her mother was Wilburga (also several spellings), a Christian although a daughter of Penda, heathen king of Mercia. According to one of the sources studied by Bethell, Leland's notes extracted in the early sixteenth century from William de Vere, the site of the royal hall at Quarrendon was still pointed out by the local peasants in the twelfth century as a piece of ground on which nothing would grow and which was never used for secular purposes. Osyth was born at Quarrendon and was brought up a Christian by a maternal aunt, Edith, who had founded a *monasterium* at Aylesbury. Another maternal aunt involved in Osyth's upbringing was Edburga. At her father's insistence, Osyth, at the age of thirteen and a half, was married to Sigehere, king of the East Saxons, but refused to consummate the marriage. She subsequently became a nun with the acquiescence of Sigehere and founded a *monasterium* at Chich (now St Osyth) in Essex, to which she retired and near which she met her death at the hands of pirates, and was buried in the church of SS Peter and Paul of her foundation. Altogether this is a coherent and credible account, the life paralleling those of other high-born ladies of the period who also founded *monasteria* to which they retired and who were regarded subsequently as saints.

The name Frithewald was a good old pagan one, being recorded as that of the father of

Woden in four of the eight genealogies showing the descents of the royal families of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England from the ancestral gods.⁶ Frithewald, Osyth's father, who was probably of Middle Anglian or Mercian royal blood, figured in three late seventh/early eighth-century charters, versions of which still exist.⁷ The basic authenticity of the first (No. 1165 in Sawyer, full translation in Whitelock) is accepted by all the authorities and it is dated to 672/4. It covered a grant of lands by Frithewald, *subregulus* of Surrey, to Abbot Eorcenwold for St Peter's minster at Chertsey, and was confirmed by Wulfhere, king of Mercia and overlord to Frithewald, at his residence at Thame. The second (No. 69 in Sawyer), dated to 666/674, was the confirmation by Wulfhere (who died in 675) of grants of land by Frithewald, *subregulus*, and Eorcenwold to the church of St Peter, Chertsey. This was judged spurious by Stenton, an opinion accepted by later authorities. The third (No. 1181 in Sawyer), judged spurious by Stenton but considered by later authorities (e.g. Gelling) to embody some authentic material, was another grant of land by Frithewald, *subregulus* of Surrey, and Eorcenwold to Chertsey Minster and was dated to 727. Both the grantors were long dead by 727, so the date is certainly wrong for the grant; the extant version could, however, have derived from a charter written to justify a grant actually made earlier but for which the original charter had disappeared. There can be no reasonable doubt that lands were being granted to the *monasterium* at Chertsey by Frithewald and Eorcenwold, with the assent of Wulfhere, in the period around the dates 672/4 ascribed to the first mentioned charter. Eorcenwold was the founder of Chertsey and then (c.675–93) Bishop of the East Saxons with London as his see city;⁸ he was later regarded as a saint.

From the charter evidence, it would appear that Frithewald was then a Christian and, in fact, regional governor of Surrey under the overlordship of Wulfhere, king of Mercia, who came to power effectively after 657/8. It would seem that Frithewald, perhaps initially under Wulfhere's father, king Penda, and then under Penda his successor (Wulfhere's elder brother)

had served in a similar capacity in the region around Aylesbury, part of the territory of the *Ciltirnsaetan*.⁹ Into his period at Quarrendon would have fallen the birth of Osyth. At the time of her marriage, Frithewald had, perhaps, already become a Christian. When he was moved to Surrey is not known. What is clearly hinted in the sources is that he removed a reluctant Osyth from the *monasterium* at Aylesbury and forced her into the marriage.

There is no reason to doubt that Frithewald's wife, Wilburga, was a daughter of Penda, king of Mercia. The latter, although himself a heathen till his death in 655, appears to have tolerated Christians in his kingdom.¹⁰ Penda was credited with several daughters (and granddaughters) who founded *monasteria* and were sanctified. By all accounts, he was a vigorous character who lived to a good age for the times, certainly well into his seventies.¹¹ He could have had a numerous progeny, since, not being a Christian, he was not handicapped in the practice of enjoying as many concubines as he wished. In Anglo-Saxon royal circles, it was paternity that mattered and women generally only incidentally achieved mention in contemporary records, usually either as queens or the mothers of kings or, in Christian times, as saints. It seems clear that Wilburga, Edith and Edburga were sisters or half-sisters, all daughters of Penda, born before Penda's marriage to his recorded queen Cynwise, a marriage which probably took place after Penda had consolidated his power in Mercia between 626 and 633.¹² What is not so clear is who gave Edith the endowment for the founding of the *monasterium* at Aylesbury; the story appeared to be that her father was lukewarm about the project but gave land in Aylesbury to her mother who then passed it on to Edith. This would place the date of her foundation before the death of Penda, but probably not long before, at a time when Mercia was being infiltrated by Christianity in preparation for the 'official' conversion of the Middle Angles under Penda, son of Penda, in 653, and of the Mercians after Penda's death in 655.¹³ Osyth's other aunt, Edburga, lived at Adderbury (near Banbury), to which she gave her name¹⁴ and was said to have founded a

monasterium at Bicester where the church is dedicated to St Mary and St Edburga.¹⁵

One happening from the youth of Osyth that was recorded variously in detail in the sources was that, while on the way from Aylesbury to visit Edburga at Adderbury, the girl had a narrow escape from drowning when she fell or was swept off a bridge crossing a river which was in spate. This river might have been either the Ray or the Cherwell, both of which, on possible routes between Aylesbury and Adderbury, were crossed by Roman roads.¹⁶ The accounts suggested a narrow, plank, bridge, such as might span a river for pedestrian use alongside a ford. The probabilities favour rather the Cherwell which would be crossed around Twyford and, despite what was remarked by Hohler, that river in spate would have presented (and can still present) a dangerous hazard to a child. This incident was embellished with overtones of the miraculous. The details varied in the different sources but, in essence, she was already drowned when she emerged to the calls of rescuers (three days later) and was then resuscitated by the prayers of Edburga or Edith or both. A holy book which she was carrying was still under her arm when she arose from the flood and was in pristine condition. As discussed by Hohler, it is possible that the incident was compounded from tales told about other saints.

In her fourteenth year, an unwilling Osyth was married to Sigehere, king of the East Saxons. To accompany her, Wilburga sent two priests, Acca and Bedwin, who founded the minster at Chelmsford. Presumably these were the Acca and Bedwin who became bishops of Dunwich and Elmham respectively after 673.¹⁷ Sigehere was co-regent of the East Saxons with his uncle Sebbi under the overlordship of king Wulfhere of Mercia from c.663.¹⁸ Both Sigehere and Sebbi were recorded as kings witnessing Wulfhere's consecration charter making grants to the *monasterium* of *Medeshamstede* (now Peterborough); although placed under 656 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the text of the charter itself gives its date as 664, in the seventh year of king Wulfhere.¹⁹ It will be suggested that the marriage between Sigehere

and Osyth took place around this time.

Despite the claim in the sources that Osyth died a virgin, there is no doubt that Sigehere had a son. This son was Offa, who became king of the East Saxons around 704 and in 709 abdicated to go to Rome, where he took the tonsure, along with his overlord and friend Coenred, son of Wulfhere and grandson of Penda, who had similarly abdicated from the kingship of Mercia. Their departure was recorded by Bede²⁰ who described Offa, in youth, as a very handsome and lovable young man whom the entire nation greatly hoped would inherit and uphold the sceptre of the kingdom. One detects that Bede was disappointed at his relinquishing his kingly responsibilities but could not openly criticise his opting for the religious life. From Bede again, Offa, in becoming a monk, was following the example of his great-uncle Sebbi, who received the monastic habit from Waldhere, bishop of London in succession to Eorcenwold, in about 693, after reigning over the East Saxons for thirty years.²¹ Sigehere, Offa's father and one-time co-ruler with Sebbi, may have died in the 680s.

But was Offa son to Osyth? After Escwine, the first king of the East Saxons, Offa was the only one of his recorded descendants whose name broke the alliterative sequence of the names of the East Saxon royal family by not beginning with 'S'.²² Although the father of Escwine was also named Offa,²³ the name was Anglian rather than Saxon and, in the case of our Offa, surely confirms a Middle Anglian or Mercian mother. However, passages in three post-Norman Conquest chroniclers²⁴ have been interpreted to mean that Offa was betrothed at one time to Cyneswide, a daughter of Penda and Cynwise. Offa, son of Osyth, would have been related to Cyneswide through their common descent from Penda by two different partners, with Offa 'step-great-nephew' of Cynwise. It has been well authenticated that Cyneswide became a nun along with her sister, Cyneburga, after the latter was widowed by the death around 664 of her husband, under-king Alchfrid of Deira. Cyneburga died about 680, after which Cyneswide took her place as abbess

of the *monasterium* they had founded at what is now Castor.²⁵ According to Bede, Offa left his wife, not named, on departing for Rome in 709. The chronology, combined with the blood relationship between Offa and Cyneswide if Offa was son to Osyth, seems to negate their ever having been betrothed.

It seems most likely that, in fact, Cyneswide had been involved in the upbringing of her young kinsman. The passage in Florence of Worcester, the earliest and probably the most reliable of the three post-Conquest chroniclers, simply reads that St Cyneswide had advised and encouraged Offa, who had loved her, in his desire to go to Rome to become a monk. In the passages in the other two chroniclers, there appears an added phrase which has been interpreted to imply earthly love and hoped-for marriage. However, this phrase taken in the context in each passage can reasonably be interpreted to read that St Cyneswide had encouraged Offa to seek, and had looked forward to his finding, a heavenly love and marriage. Accepting these interpretations, the passages in these three chroniclers would be consistent with Offa having been son to Osyth.

It was recorded by Bede²⁶ that, during the plague of 664/5 which caused a heavy death toll in the island of Britain, Sigehere and his people abandoned the mysteries of the Christian Faith, relapsed into paganism and began to rebuild the ruined temples to restore the worship of idols. Meanwhile, Sebbi, co-king of Essex, and his people held loyally to the Faith. As soon as king Wulfhere learned that part of the province of the East Saxons had apostasised, he sent Bishop Jaruman from Mercia to correct their error and recall the province to the True Faith. In this, Jaruman succeeded. If Sigehere had previously been considered a lukewarm Christian, the marriage to the Christian Osyth may have been at the behest of Wulfhere, perhaps around the time of the granting of the *Medeshamstede* charter of 664 to which Sigehere was a witness. Was it the pagan interlude of 665 that led to the breach between Sigehere and his wife, Osyth? In view of her son being given the name of Offa, strange for one of the East Saxon royal

family, was he actually born after the break-up?

Whether this last was the case or not, a credible chronology of events can be constructed—Osyth would have been born in 649/51, been brought up by Edith at her *monasterium* (founded probably in the early 650s), been married in 662/664, and would have borne Offa in 663/6.

The sources differed in the details of how Osyth became a nun. Three of the sources related that she was veiled by two bishops—perhaps Acca and Bedwin—while her husband was absent, hunting according to one version of the story or involved in pagan rites according to another (these two versions not being incompatible). Osyth's initiation without her husband's prior consent would have been against Canon Law, as pointed out by Hohler, but may have been carried out under the pretext that the marriage had been nullified by his lapse into paganism. Perhaps it was this line of argument that, despite her child, led to the later claim that the marriage had not been consummated, which it certainly could not have been if, in Christian eyes, it had been nullified by the apostasy of the husband. It may have been this and her later death at the hands of pirates that justified her subsequent, conventional, description as a virgin martyr. According to the other three sources, from William de Vere, since no priest would defy Canon Law, Osyth dedicated herself as a celibate nun. Anyway, Sigehere seems to have accepted the situation and given her land on the site of a Romano-British villa at Chich for her use.²⁷ The date of foundation of Osyth's *monasterium* of SS Peter and Paul at Chich (and of her martyrdom in some sources) was either 600, 636 (the 'Aylesbury' date), 642, or 653 (the 'Essex' date).²⁸ The very multiplicity suggests that no date was known. None of these dates is consistent with the chronology suggested above. However, 653 is reasonable for the foundation by Edith of her *monasterium* at Aylesbury, for which 600, 636, or even 642 appear too early in the light of the probable political situation in the region of the *Ciltirnsaetan* at those times. As regards the foundation of Chich, the chronology of

events suggested above would place it after 665.

From the sources, Osyth met her death by beheading at the hands of a pirate band from northern Northumbria (not Danes or Vikings) led by Hubba and Ingwar. However, these two, and the other fearsome sons of a fearsome Viking father, Ragnar Lodbrok, were the best-recorded leaders of the Viking and Danish hosts that were the scourge of England in the late ninth century, two centuries after the death of Osyth. But it must be appreciated that the Essex coast was always vulnerable to pirate raids; according to Leland's notes, the monastery of St Osyth at Chich was spared during such a raid between 1160 and 1164.²⁹ Thus the story of the death of Osyth at the hands of pirates is entirely believable, only its ascription to Hubba and Ingwar being a later interpolation based on the destruction of her foundation during the invasions with which they were associated in English minds. Osyth's story was later embellished with details similar to those in the stories of other martyrs, namely that, after being beheaded, she took up her head and walked back to the church of her *monasterium* (where she left a bloody hand-print on the portal, which could be seen still four hundred and fifty years later). As to the date of her death, this would have been sometime in the late seventh or early eighth centuries. A possible context is the confusion that followed the death of king Ecgfrid of Northumberland and the destruction of his army when invading the land of the Picts in 685.³⁰

It is after Osyth's death that events less easily put into context were recorded in the sources. There is the story that her body was removed from Chich and buried in a lead coffin at Aylesbury, where it rested for forty-six years according to Leland's Notes³¹ and was then returned to Chich. In a single one of the sources, this removal was ascribed to her parents, Frithenwald and Wilburga but it is difficult to conceive in the context of the time why this should have been done.

A more credible context for the transfer of

her body would have been that of the Danish invasions of the late ninth century, when the relics of many saints were removed from their original resting places to locations hopefully safer. Chich, on the Essex coast, was vulnerable to sea-borne raiders and the removal of the body of St Osyth would have been very probable. Aylesbury could have been chosen as a refuge because of her earlier association with its *monasterium*, the inland location and its defences.³² Comparable and better-known removals were that of the body of St Cuthbert and the head of St Oswald from Lindisfarne, usually ascribed to 875 but more probably earlier, and that of the body of St Werburga from Hanbury (Staffs) to Chester also ascribed to 875. The *monasterium* at Chich was destroyed sometime late in the ninth century;³³ the most likely dates would have been 884/5 or 893/4, when major Danish activities in the immediate vicinity of Chich were recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Whether the body of the founding saint was removed before or after the destruction is not recorded; supposing the *monasterium* had merely been threatened in 884/5 but destroyed in 893/4, a date for removal between these Danish incursions would seem reasonable. Following the victories of king Edward the Elder, which included the occupation and refortification of Colchester in early autumn in 920, the area around Chich was firmly in English hands again in the following decades; it could then have been considered safe to return Osyth's body to Chich. In fact, Aylesbury had for some years up to 920 been under threat from raiders from the Danish armies of Bedford, Northampton and Leicester, a threat that was not entirely removed by Edward's construction of strong-points at Buckingham (917) and Towcester (early 920) and the occupation of Bedford (918). A raid from Northampton and Leicester in the summer of 920, recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, certainly came close to Aylesbury itself. These happenings may have encouraged the subsequent return of the body of St Osyth to Chich, noted by Leland to have occurred a credible forty-six years after its transfer to Aylesbury. Her church at Chich had been restored before the Norman Conquest and, in 1044, Aelfward the Golden, Bishop of

London, was smitten with leprosy when he attempted to remove St Osyth's relics therefrom.³⁴

There is evidence that the body of St Osyth was to be found at Aylesbury around the beginning of the tenth century. In a list of the resting places of saints attached to two existing fourteenth-century documents of the post-Conquest *L'Estorie des Engles solum La Translacion Maistre Geffrei Gaimar*,³⁵ the body of St Osyth was recorded as resting at Aylesbury and there was no reference to another St Osyth resting at Chich. Other entries in this list recorded the locations of some other bodies of saints as they were in the late ninth/early tenth centuries. For example, the body of St Oswald was listed as being at Bardney; it is known that the body was translated to Gloucester in 909. The late ninth/early tenth centuries was just the period when St Osyth's body would have been in Aylesbury, if it had been removed from Chich around one of the late ninth-century dates suggested above. The story in the sources of the return of the body to Chich, by a smith, indicated opposition on the part of the people of Aylesbury, opposition that was only overcome by miraculous intervention.³⁶ The presence of the body of St Osyth at Aylesbury and not at Chich was recorded only by the arguably late ninth/early tenth-century entry in the list attached to Gaimar. Later lists of the resting places of the saints in England, such as the late tenth/early eleventh-century list in the *Liber Vitae* of Hyde Abbey³⁷ and the list in the twelfth-century chronicle of Hugh Candidus,³⁸ which utilised both contemporary and earlier records, knew only the St Osyth whose remains were at Chich.³⁹

Thus, there is evidence to support Leland's statement that the body of St Osyth was removed from Chich to Aylesbury and returned to Chich forty-six years later, and evidence that these events occurred in the late ninth and the tenth centuries respectively. How then was it that, down the Middle Ages, Aylesbury should have regarded Osyth as its Saint, culminating, as described by Hohler,⁴⁰ in the unearthing by Robert Harom, Vicar of Aylesbury, in his

church in 1500/1 of human remains in a tomb that may always have been considered locally to have been that of St Osyth? That the church establishment was in no doubt that the remains of St Osyth rested at Chich was obvious from the mandate of 1502 from the Archbishop of Canterbury, reproduced by Hohler, ordering the suppression of the cult at Aylesbury and the punishment of the Vicar for the shameful deception he had perpetrated for a pecuniary motive.

In order to prove that the Vicar had practised no fraud, Hohler pointed out that a date of 3 June for the feast of St Osyth appeared in two calendars from St Albans and two from Oxford, in all of which the usual feast of St Osyth of Chich of 7 October was missing and the saint was described as virgin but not as martyr. In addition, he found the same feast of 3 June added to calendars of St Neots and St Mary Overy (which had 7 October in the original hand) and, less satisfactorily, it appeared as a Translation in a calendar of Chich which had the 7 October feast, with octave, as well. He cited a charter of Medmenham Abbey dated to 'Sunday in the feast of St Osyth in the twelfth year of king Edward, son of king Edward', and stressed that, in that regnal year, 7 October fell on a Saturday but 3 June on a Sunday, thus clinching the latter date as that of the feast of St Osyth intended. He drew attention finally to the fact that, before 1239, as testified by a charter of that year, the only annual fair in Aylesbury was (and had long been) held on the feast of St Osyth 'in summer'. On the basis mainly of the evidence quoted above, Hohler concluded that the persons of St Osyth of Chich and St Osyth of Aylesbury were distinct. Their legends had been conflated to the benefit of the former, at the expense of the latter.

However, the credible and coherent story of a single St Osyth with associations with both Aylesbury and Chich—her parentage and life, as well as the peregrinations of her body, described in the sources and confirmed by an arguably early tenth-century entry in a list of resting places—does away with any need to suppose there had been two saints of this name.

Nor could any of the pre-Conquest 'Lives' have even hinted at there having been more than one St Osyth since, surely, if one had done so, this would have been noticed by William de Vere or at least one of the post-Conquest redactors of the extant sources from those earlier 'Lives'. The most likely explanation is that, in Aylesbury, where the body of St Osyth had rested for a number of years around the turn of the ninth/tenth centuries, her memory had submerged that of her aunt, St Edith, founder of the *monasterium* there at a time more remote by over two hundred years. Accepting this view, it would have been St Edith's feast of 3 June that had later been ascribed, at Aylesbury and subsequently elsewhere, to St Osyth; the description of the saint with whom that date was linked as virgin but not martyr would favour Edith as against Osyth.

Camden, writing in the late sixteenth century, certainly conflated Edith and Osyth, starting his account of Aylesbury thus:

This town was heretofore chiefly famous for St Edith, a native of it, who when she had prevailed with her father Frewald to give her this for her portion, presently upon persuasion of some Religious persons, left the world and her husband, and taking on her the habit of a nun, grew so celebrated for her

sanctity that in that fruitful age of Saints, she is reported to have done several miracles, together with her sister Edburga, from whom Edburton a little village among the hills takes its name.⁴¹

Gibbs, the Victorian historian of Aylesbury, also concluded that Edith was the saint buried in Aylesbury who had been confused with Osyth because of the latter's body having rested there for a time.⁴²

Was it really St Edith's tomb that was revered in the church at Aylesbury as that of St Osyth? Could it be that the people of Aylesbury preferred to believe, or had ensured by substituting another body, that that of St Osyth had remained with them? How could the Vicar of Aylesbury, Robert Harom, have been sure that the remains he exposed in his church in 1501, so many centuries later, were those of Osyth rather than Edith or, in fact, not of somebody quite else? Perhaps we should accept that, in the Middle Ages, faith and belief were what mattered, irrespective of whatever might have been the mundane facts. If the people of Aylesbury believed that the relics of St Osyth rested with them, that was enough for them whatever the church establishment might say about the relics actually resting elsewhere.

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9. Sir Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Clarendon Press, 1975) 43f., 296.
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12. Bede, *op. cit.*, Book III, Chapter 24; Searle, *op. cit.*, 290f. Penda's queen and her younger daughter had the same name; I have spelt it Cynwise and Cyneswide (see later) in order to differentiate between mother and daughter.
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 37. W. St G. Birch, *Liber Vitae of Newminster and Hyde Abbey* (Hants Record Society, 1892) 90.
 38. Hugh Candidus, *Chronicle*, ed. W. T. Mellows (OUP, 1949) 62.
 39. Bethell, *op. cit.*, 93 n. 3, 103. The remains of St Osyth were translated at Chich and some part taken to London by Maurice, Bishop of London between 1076 and 1107. Richard de Belmius, next Bishop, suppressed the minster at Chich, served by four priests with Saxon names, and replaced it by a priory of Augustinian canons. The first prior, William of Corbeil, later Archbishop of Canterbury, sent part of the relics to Canterbury. Relics of St Osyth figured in a thirteenth-century inventory of St Paul's in London and a fourteenth-century one of Canterbury.
 40. Hohler, *op. cit.*, 66–70.
 41. Camden, *Britannia* (Edmund Gibson, London, 1695) 280.
 42. Robert Gibbs, *History of Aylesbury* (Bucks Advertiser & Aylesbury News Office, 1885) 93ff.