

Wihtburh

Wihtburh (or **Withburga**) (died 743) was an **East Anglia** saint, princess and abbess who was possibly a daughter of **Anna of East Anglia**, located in present-day England. She founded a monastery at **Dereham** in **Norfolk**. A traditional story says that the **Virgin Mary** sent a pair of female deer to provide milk for her workers during the monastery's construction. Withburga's body is supposed to have been uncorrupted when discovered half a century after her death: it was later stolen on the orders of the abbot of **Ely**. A spring appeared at the site of the saint's empty tomb at **Dereham**.

1 Family

Tradition describes **Wihtburh** as the youngest of the daughters of **Anna of East Anglia**, but she is not mentioned by **Bede**. He was well-informed about and described her elder sisters^[1] **Seaxburh of Ely**, **Æthelthryth** and **Æthelburh of Faremoutiers** and **Sæthryth**, her older half-sister.^[2]

2 Legend of Saint Wihtburh and the does

After her father's death (c.653), **Wihtburh** built a convent in **East Dereham, Norfolk**. A traditional story relates that while she was building the convent, she had nothing but dry bread to give to the workmen. She prayed to the **Virgin Mary** and was told to send her maids to a local well each morning. There they found two wild does which were gentle enough to be milked; they provided nutritious drink for the workers. This allowed the workers to be fed.^[3]

The local overseer did not like **Wihtburh** or her miracles. He decided to hunt down the does with dogs and prevent them from coming to be milked. He was punished for his cruelty when he was thrown from his horse and broke his neck. This story is commemorated in the large town sign in the centre of **East Dereham**.



The site of Withburga's tomb in East Dereham

3 Events following Wihtburh's death

Wihtburh died in 743 and was buried in the cemetery of **Ely abbey**.^[4] When her body was dug up 55 years later, it was found not to have decayed. This was considered a miracle and her remains were reinterred in the church which she had built in **Dereham**. The church became a place of pilgrimage, with people visiting **Wihtburh's** tomb.

In 974 **Brithnoth**, the abbot of **Ely**, elected to steal her body so that he could profit from the pilgrims' visits. **Brithnoth** and some armed men went to **Dereham** and organised a feast. When the **Dereham** men were properly drunk, the **Ely** mob stole **Withburga's** body and set off for home. **Dereham** men soon found out that this crime had taken place and set off after the **Ely** criminals.^[5]

The two sides had a pitched fight, using spears as well as fists. As the men approached **Ely**, however, the thieves had the advantage of knowing their way through the swamps and marshes. They were successful at reintering

Wihthburh in Ely.

When the Dereham men returned home, they discovered that a spring had arisen in Wihthburh's violated tomb. The water in this spring was considered to be compensation for the loss of their saint; pilgrims continued to come and now could drink from the water. The spring has never run dry. The water in Withburga's tomb can be visited to this day.

4 References

- [1] Yorke, p.70
- [2] Blanton, p. 129
- [3] Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society, p.21
- [4] Yorke (p.70) comments on the problem of this traditional date for Wihthburh's death, which would have meant she died at a great age.
- [5] Yorke, p70

5 Sources

- Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society. "Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society, vol. 3 (1852)". Retrieved 2010-05-31.
- Yorke, Barbara (2002). *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*. London and New York: Routledge. ISBN 0-415-16639-X.
- Virginia Blanton, "ing Anna's Daughters: Genealogical Narrative and Cult Formation in the Liber Eliensis," in *Historical Reflections* 30.1 (2004): 127-149.

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