

TWO LOCAL SAINTS:
Right-Believing Passion Bearers and Holy Martyrs Princes Æthelred and Æthelberht



Saint Æthelred and Saint Æthelberht*, brothers, princes of Kent, martyred c. 640 (Lectionary date), most probably c. 669. Feast: 17th October -Translation of their relics.

TROPARION (Tone 4):

O holy princes and passion-bearers Æthelred and Æthelberht, / in thy holy martyrdom thou didst show unto us the true Faith, /for in obedience to Christ was pour out thy blood as a fragrant balm, /and whose sacred relics were revealed by light divine, /pray for us, o good ones, that our souls be saved.

KONTAKION (Tone 1):

Let us praise the righteous martyrs: / the brothers Æthelred and Æthelberht, / for in their martyric deaths and in their holy relics / they exude, O Christ God, divine grace from Thee the well-spring of life!

‘Passion Bearer’ denotes a particular God-inspired saint, one who, rather than *resisting evil with evil*, and spilling blood, has faced his or her bodily death in a peaceful, Christ-like, manner. Passion Bearers are not explicitly killed *for their faith*, though they hold to that faith with piety and true love of God. Thus, although all martyrs are Passion Bearers, not all Passion Bearers are Martyrs in the strict understanding of the term. In the Russian tradition we find such jewels of peace-loving passion bearers as the princes and brothers, St. Boris and St. Gleb. Here, in Essex, was once venerated the holy relics of two other such princely brothers, the Passion Bearers, St. Æthelred and St. Æthelberht.

St. Æthelred and St. Æthelberht were of a family both royal and pious. Their great grandfather, King Æthelberht of Kent, was a saint (Feast: 25th Feb.); as was a great aunt, St. Æthelburh of Lyminge (Feast 5th April); their sister, Eormenbeorg (commonly: ‘Ermerburg[a’]; Feast: 19th Oct.); and three of their nieces, St. Mildburh of Wenlock (Feast: 23rd Feb.), St. Mildgyth (Feast: 17th Jan.), and St. Mildrith (= Mildrið, Mildthryth, commonly ‘Mildred’; Feast: 13th July). The story of the martyrdom of St. Æthelred and St. Æthelberht forms a not unimportant episode in the Life of St. Mildrith, as her monastery of Minster in Thanet was founded in expiation (*wergild*) for their murder.

Eorcenberht seized the Kingdom of Kent in 640 in precedence to his elder brother Eormenred. Both Eorcenberht and Eormenred were sons of Eadbald of Kent (*r. c.* 616–640). The story of the martyrdom of St. Æthelred and St. Æthelberht, contained in the Latin *Passio*, tells that Eormenred and his wife Oslafa had several children, including the two sons, Æthelred and Æthelberht, and a daughter Eormenbeorg, also known as Domne Eafe. Eafe married Merewalh, ruler of the Maegonsaetan, a people situated in the west Midlands in the Shropshire area. King Eorcenberht married Seaxburh, daughter of King Anna of East Anglia, and ruled as a Christian king: Eorcenberht was the first ruler to order the destruction of all pagan idols throughout his kingdom, and to establish the forty-day Lenten Fast to be observed by royal authority (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, iii, 8). Eorcenberht had two sons, Ecgberht and Hlothhere, and two daughters, Eormenhild and Eorcongota. On Eorconberht's death of the plague in 664, Ecgberht succeeded him as King of Kent.

The princes, Æthelred and Æthelberht, who were pious youths, lived at Eastry (nr. Sandwich) in Kent, in the royal palace, seat of the Saxon kings of Kent.

Eastry lies on the Roman road north from Dover to Richborough Castle. According to record, the royal residence was passed to the priory of Christchurch in Canterbury as *wergild* for the crime. The site of this ancient palace is believed to now be occupied by Eastry Court, close to the church.

A royal retainer named Thunor, possessed by the evil desire to secure the succession of King Egberht against a possible rival claim by the king's young cousins, had the youths secretly murdered, and their bodies hidden beneath the royal seat in the Hall at Eastry. Immediately, the princes' absence was immediately noticed, but they were nowhere to be found. The crime was revealed only by a column of divine light which appeared shining above the place of concealment of their holy bodies.

Witnessing the miraculous revelation, King Egberht soon learned of the crime from Thunor. The king, consumed with sorrow and remorse at the evil murders which had been perpetrated in his name, desired to have the saints buried at Canterbury. However, those charged with the task of carrying the holy relics to Canterbury found it impossible to move them. Egberht took advice from holy hierarchs, who recommended that the king have the relics taken to Wakering in the neighbouring Kingdom of the East Saxons (Essex) for burial, where a monastery already existed. During the seventh- and eighth-centuries there existed close family ties between the royal families of Kent and Essex- for example, King Sledd (of Essex) was married to Rricula, sister of St. Æthelberht (King of Kent). The site of the veneration of the saints' relics is identified as Great Wakering (*nr.* Southend-on-Sea), and only a few miles from the Saxon royal burial ground at Prittlewell. With this new destination, the bodies consented to be moved; and there, at Wakering, St. Æthelred and St. Æthelberht were venerated as passion-bearers and Holy Christian Martyrs.

Around the time of the martyrdoms, Egberht's mother, Queen Seaxburh, founded her own double-monastery at Minster in Sheppey, on the south of the Thames Estuary – directly opposite Wakering, on the north bank. Egberht then founded the monastery of Minster in Thanet, headed by Eormenbeorg, the sister of the murdered princes. Eormenbeorg was the mother of St. Mildtryhth [Mildthryð,] (Feast: 30th July), who afterwards succeeded her as abbess. Some sources also claim that another monastery was established at Eastry for the same reason. Another sister, Mildburh, remained among the Magonsaetan and was head of the monastery of Much Wenlock in Shropshire: St. Mildburh of Wenlock (Feast: 23rd Feb.); another sister was the holy nun, St. Mildgyth (Feast: 17th Jan.); and two aunts are also Saints – St. Seaxburh of Ely

(Feasts: 6th July; 17th October- translation), and St. Eanswith of Folkestone (Feast: 12th Sept.).

In the early Saxon period Great Wakering became the site of a minster church and monastic community. The place-name Wakering derives from the Old English Wœceringas meaning 'the settlement of the sons or people of Wacor or Wécer'. Wacor may have been one of the founding members of the minster. It is now known that the twelfth-century church of St. Nicholas is built on the site of the Anglo-Saxon minster; excavations in 2000 revealed part of a boundary ditch and other features in the eastern side of the churchyard; other recent excavations have uncovered a site of middle Saxon occupation including a fragment of ornamented stone-sculpture, and other Saxon artefacts and features have been found in the brickfields to the north and south of the village. The minster was supported by agricultural production and perhaps by other forms of small-scale industrial production and trade, so it is likely that the monastic community at Wakering would have been supported economically by a lay community. The saints' relics were venerated at Great Wakering for around three hundred years, from around the time of their holy martyrdom [c. 669] until they were translated [c.991] to Ramsey by Bishop Æthelwine.

Right-Believing Passion-Bearers and Holy Martyrs Æthelred and Æthelberht pray to God for us!

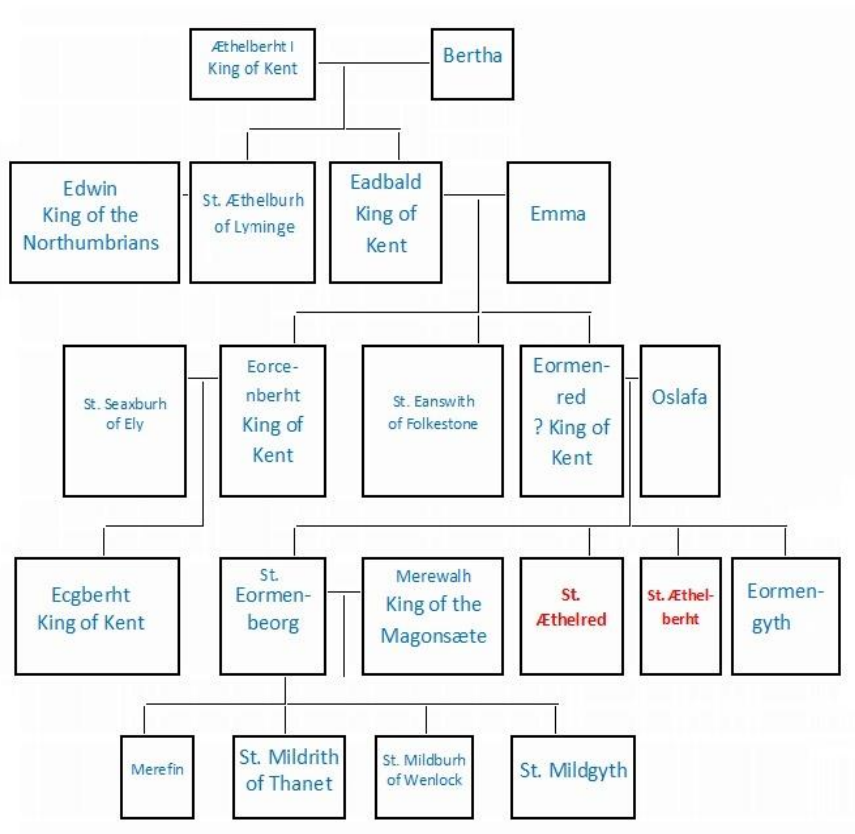
* Note: Modern spellings of Anglo-Saxon names vary. Saints Ethelred and Ethelbert are the most common renditions; Fr. A. Phillips gives Aildred for the former, D. H. Farmer, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, gives Ethelbricht for the latter.

The earliest account of the murdered princes is the *Passio* by Byrhtferth of Ramsey (c.970–c.1020) (BHL 2643), which forms cc. 1–10 of his *Historia regum*; later versions of the legend are recorded by Goscelin (BHL 5960) and William of Malmesbury . *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia* , ed. T. Arnold, 2 vols., RS (London, 1882–5), ii.1–13; WMalm, GR ii.209; M. Lapidge, 'Byrhtferth of Ramsey and the Early Sections of the *Historia Regum* attributed to Symeon of Durham', ASE 10 (1981), 97–122, repr. Lapidge, ALL ii.317–42; D. Rollason, *The Mildrith Legend: A Study in Early Medieval Hagiography in England* (Leicester, 1982), esp. pp. 15–21, 89–104; Blair, 'Handlist', p. 507. In addition, the history of the holy martyrs appears in Roger of Wendover's *Flowers of History*, compiled in the early thirteenth-century.

APPENDICES:

1. Family Tree of the Kentish Royal Family.
2. Map of the Thames Estuary.
3. *S. Mildryð*. British Library, Cotton MS Caligula A.xiv, ff. 121v-124v. Written in Old English, mid-11th cent., it appears to pre-date St. Mildrith's translation to Canterbury. One possibility is that it is copied from a text (now lost) that accompanied the relics from Thanet. The text breaks off (at Thunor's death) in mid sentence. Modern English trans. By Oswald Cockayne, in *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England* (1866), vol. iii, pp. 423-433.

1. Family Tree of the Kentish Royal Family



2. Map of the Thames Estuary showing proximity of places associated with the Holy Martyrdom of Saint Æthelred and Saint Æthelberht



GREAT WAKERING – site of the Monastery, home of the relics

PRITTLEWELL – Burial site of the East Saxon Royal Family

MINSTER IN SHEPPEY – Monastery, founded by St. Seaxburh

MINSTER IN THANET – Monastery of St. Mildrith

CANTERBURY

EASTRY – Seat of the Kentish Royal Family, the place of Martyrdom

HISTORICAL FRAGMENTS.

OF THE MONASTERY OF ST. MILDRED
IN TANET.

St. Augustinus baptised Æpelbriht, king of the Kentish Genealogy. men, and all his people, in the Name of the Lord. Next, Eadbald, king, was son of Æpelbriht and of his queen Berhta; and Æpelburh their daughter, otherwise named Tate, was given to Eadwine, king of the Norðhymbrians, for his queen; and St. Paulinus went with her, and baptized the king Eadwine and all his people. After Eadwine's death she returned to Canterbury and to her brother Eadbald, the king, and bishop Paulinus returned with her. She brought her best treasures to the church at Canterbury for prayers for herself and for the soul of the king her father. They may still be seen therein. Paulinus accepted the bishopric at Rochester by the will of God, and there ended his life, and was received into the kingdom of God. After that Eormenred and Eorcenbriht were kings. These and Eanswið were all children of Eadbald and of Imme his queen, daughter of the king of the Franks. St. Eanswið lies at rest at Folkestone, the minster, which she founded. Further, Eormenburh, by another name Dame Eafe, and Eormengið, and Æpelred, and Æðelbriht, were children of Eormenred and his queen Oslaf. Dame Eafe was given into the land of the Mercians to Merwald, son of king Penda, for his queen, and there they begot St. Mildburh and St. Mildrið and St. Mildgið and the holy child St. Merefin. And after that Merwald and his wife, for the

love of God and of mankind, separated from their conjugal estate, and gave their children and their worldly possessions to God. Their eldest daughter, St. Mildburh, lies at Wenlock, the monastery in Mercia, where her miraculous powers were often exhibited, and are still. St. Mildrið lies within the island of Tanet; her miraculous powers were often exhibited, and are still. St. Mildgið lies in Norðhymbria, where her miraculous powers were often exhibited, and are still. The holy child St. Merefin was led away to heaven in his youth. The saintly princes Æpelred and Æpelbriht were committed to King Egbriht for nurture and instruction, since they were orphans, and the king was their fathers brothers, Eorcenbrihts, son, by Sexburh his queen. In early youth they were very discreet and right wise, as was the will of God. This offended one of the kings counts, who was called punor, and was the kings most valued attendant upon his children. punor dreaded lest, if the young princes lived long, they would become dearer to the king than he would be. So he began secretly to hate them, and to accuse them before the king, and said, that if they should live they would deprive either him or his children of the kingdom. He began to pray that he might secretly slay the young princes, but the king would not give him leave, since they were dear to him and relatives. Yet punor often and from time to time prayed him to give him leave to do with the young princes as he would: and before long he did as he desired, and punor at night soon made martyrs of them within the kings royal residence, as secretly as he could. He supposed that they never would reappear, but by the power of God they were made known, for a beam of light stood up through the roof of the hall up to heaven, and the king himself about the first cockcrowing, was going out, and himself saw that wonder. Then was he terrified and afraid, and ordered punor quickly to be fetched, and demanded of him what he had done with his cousins,

The young
princes entrusted to the
king.

punor plots.

Murders the
young princes.

whom he had stolen from him. He answered him and said that he knew himself, and would not tell him, unless he needs must. Then the king said, by his friendship he must say it. He answered him and said that he had buried them within the kings hall, under his high seat. Then the king became much disturbed at the divine miracle and the light which he had seen; and thereby he quickly knew that he had angered God more than he had need. And so next day he bid instantly fetch him his councillors and thanes, that they should advise him what to them seemed best, or what was to be done. He and they then, with support of Deusdedit the archbishop, arranged that an order should be issued to fetch their sister in Mercia, into which she had been given in marriage, that she should choose her brothers wergild, or compensation to the relatives, of such things as seemed good to herself and to her nearest friends. And she so arranged as to choose by Gods help the compensation in the island which is called Tanet, that is to say, eighty hides of land, which she there received of the king. And it so happened, when the king and she, Dame Eafe, first chose the land, and they came over the river Wantsume, then the king asked her what part of the land she would take for her brothers wergild. Then she answered him and said that she desired no more than her hind would run round. This hind always ran before her when she was travelling. She said that it had been granted her that she should take so much as the hind directed her. Then the king answered her and said that he would gladly consent to that. She then so managed that the hind kept running before them, and they followed after her, till they came to the place which is now called punors Low; and so punor made his obeisance to the king, and said to him, Sir, how long wilt thou listen to this

punor confesses.

Eafe chooses the wergild.

dumb animal, which will run about all this land? Wilt thou give it all to the queen? And soon after these words the earth opened (beneath him).

Dame Eafe meets her daughter Mildrið, a candidate for admission to the nunnery of Minster in Tanet. She receives nuns vestments, and the abbess (usually the bishop) thereupon blesses her, with the words,

Benedicta et beata sis, etc.

When her mother had thus received her with this blessing, Mildrið stretched herself before the holy altar with extended limbs, and with a flood of tears prayed to the Lord. When she had ended her prayer, she stood up and bowed to her mothers knees, who then greeted her with the kiss of peace, and so did all the societies, and they brought her water for the hands in the Regular manner. To them, then, all sitting together, the abbess began to sing out of the Psalms of David, and thus to say: Suscepimus, etc., Psalm xlvii. 10, Vulg., as Anna the holy widow and the aged Simeon sung and made music when they embraced with their arms the great and illustrious child Jesus, and bore him into the temple, and made offering. She sang then the other verse, Confirma, Psalm lxvii. 29, Vulg. She sang the third, Salvos nos, Psalm cv. 47, Vulg. With these and many other divine words she earnestly instructed her dear child, and drew her to God. It was also easy to be done for her, as long as her conscience was all filled with the Spirit of God, she was not, as nobly born men now are, filled with presumption; nor with worldly pride, nor malice, nor envy, nor opprobrious words; she was not calumnious nor a wrangler; she was not a deceiver in any of those things which seemed good to her. She was mer-

Ritual of the admission of Mildrið.

Virtues of Mildrið.

ciful to widows and orphans, and a comforter of all the poor and afflicted, and in all respects of easy temper and tranquil. She was very mindful that we all sprung from two men, man and woman, and were wrought and shapen of loam of earth, and to it must come again.

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(*Her miracles*) were there known, and yet are. And St. Eadburh then took the rule of the minster after St. Mildrið, and she raised the church in which her body now resteth. St. Seaxburh then, St. Æpeldrið and St. Wihtburh were daughters of Anna, king of the East Angles. St. Æpeldrið was given to two husbands, to Tondbriht, alderman of the men of the South Fens; and Ecgferth, king of the Norðhymbrians, for his queen. She however preserved her virginity till her lifes end, and she chose her bodys resting place in the town of Ely, and there her miracles are often known. Further St. Eormenhild, Eorcenbrihts daughter and Seaxburhs, was given to Wulfhere, son of Penda, king of the Mercians, for his queen; and in their days the people of the Mercians received baptism. There they begot St. Werburh, the holy virgin, and she lies in the minster which is called Hanbury. St. Eormenhild rests with her mother, and with her mothers sister St. Æpeldrið, at Ely, and there their miracles are often known. St. Seaxburh and St. Eormenhild received the holy vestment of nuns in the minster which is called Middelton or Milton in Kent: and the island of Sheppey is a dependency of Milton, and it is three miles broad and seven miles long. It pleased then the saintly queen Seaxburh that within the limits of it she should build herself a minster for pleasure and for splendour, and found it, so that men said that for thirty years never ceased the sound of jarring wain nor screaming wheel. When the minster was built, there came to her an angel of God, in a vision

Foundation of
the priory in
Sheppey.

of the night, and announced to her, that before many years a heathen people should overcome this nation of ours. She had then held the kingdom for thirty years to deliver it to her son Hloðhere. And she bought of him his share of the district, Sheppey, to be free for the uses of the minster as long as Christianity should be maintained in England: and she obtained from Rome a blessing for those who for the service of God undertook the charge (*of the priory*).
