

## Bury St Edmund's, Suffolk

Ἅγιον Εὐαγγελιστὴν Ἐδμουνδῶν (formerly Βεδρικσворθ)

Abbey ruins, to S and W of Cathedral of St James

Carved stone

Grid ref .....TL 857 639

### Introduction

If the visitor to the Cathedral of St James at St Edmund's Bury will take the time to step outside and go to the South side, he will see an old Norman gate-house tower, which houses the cathedral belfry. Behind this is a wide sweep of grass, in the middle of which is a modern statue by Dame Elizabeth Frink of St Edmund, King of East Anglia, Martyred by the Danes on xij Kal Dec ADMCCCLXVIII by the Englisc reckoning, which is actually 3 December AD869 by the modern calendar, although most present day folk ignore the Gregorian shift, and celebrate the feast of the Saint – if they remember it at all – on the 20 November.

I will not go into details of the martyrdom here – they can easily be read in other sources (Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Primer* being one of them). The possession of the relics of the Saint at what was then called Bedricsworþ caused the abbey to become a place of pilgrimage. The East Anglians especially loved their saint and his power against those who tried to slight him became legendary. The story of how he became the Patron Saint of all the English (and therefore also of þa Engliscan Gesipas), until he was replaced by the returning Norman Crusaders in the C15 should also be well known, especially to gesipas, and a modification of his badge – a crown and crossed arrows – was long ago adopted as the badge of our Fellowship. A fact that is less well known is that the relics of our

national Patron Saint, after a long exile in France, are now in England again, and currently rest in the private chapel of the Dukes of Norfolk in Arundel Castle, Sussex. The tale of how this came about is told in the book *St Edmund, King and Martyr* by Father Bryan Houghton.

The abbey was massively enlarged by the Norman conquerors, always pre-occupied with outward appearance rather than inward grace, and so it became one of the largest abbeys in mediæval England, endowed with the greatest secular power: another Norman pre-occupation. The now diminutive ruins of the once mighty Norman abbey, despoiled on the orders of Henry VIII, still survive and the remains of the West Front have been made into dwelling houses: however, it is still possible to discern the outline of the three massive archways that once decorated it. These archways are now stripped of their ashlar coverings, and stand, naked and at the mercy of the elements, their inner cores of rubble exposed to public gaze.

### Position of the stone

At the bottom right hand side of the third archway from the left is a green door: one of the entrances to the houses that shelter beneath the distressed abbey front. To the right of this doorway, about level with its lintel is a carved stone about five inches high and about ten inches wide, which seems to remain from the original, pre-schism Englisc abbey, destroyed by the Normans to make way for their Roman Catholic foundation. This humble stone is carved with interlaced, acanthus-type foliage. It appears to be integral with a stone of similar size, but not carved, immediately to its right, both stones having formed the right-hand capital or impost for a door-jamb. There are various reasons for believing that this is a re-used Englisc carving, and not a part of the Norman abbey, which I will now detail.



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### Reasons for dating

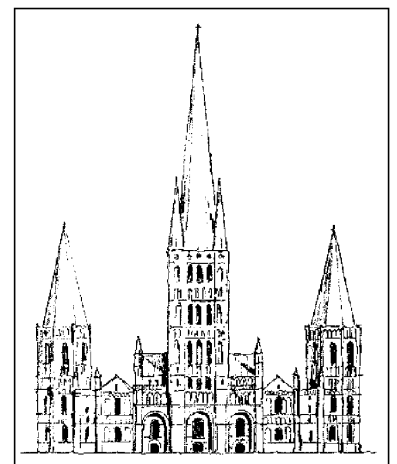
The stone is carved in the Englisc style, and should be compared with drawn examples in MS *Junius 11*, the Cædmon Genesis and the frieze at BOSHAM, Sussex. It is late, and shows the influence of the Danish Ringerike style. We know that King Cnut added a rotunda to the earlier abbey church of St Mary in 1020, in atonement for the impiety of his father Sweyn, who was killed "by St Edmund's spear". The stone has, not surprisingly, been ascribed to the Norman period. However the style is quite unlike any of the capitals that yet survive on the Norman gate-tower in front of the abbey church – in fact in size, and position it would be quite out of keeping with the later front, as reconstructed by A. B. Whittingham. This reconstruction shows that the right-hand capital of the right-most of the three West Doorways would have been considerably to the left of the present position of the stone. The capital of the main arch, for which, in any case, the stone would have been far too small, is about eighteen feet higher up. The stone is clearly a re-used one, set in its present position to stabilise the flint-rubble core. It would subsequently have been hidden by the ashlar facing that originally covered the whole West Front.

### A tentative reconstruction

The original, Englisc abbey church is now lost to us forever, but we can hazard a guess at what it might have looked like by considering other examples. We know that the Englisc were in the habit of forming apsidal shrines in pseudo-crypts under the eastern altars of their churches. Examples of this can be seen at Wing, in Buckinghamshire; Brixworth in Northamptonshire and Repton in Derbyshire. From these remains it would appear that the shrine of the Saint would have been

Above:  
The carved stone  
(Photograph courtesy of  
Daysign)

Below:  
Reconstruction drawing of the  
West Front of the Norman  
Abbey by  
A. B. Whittingham



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in the centre of the crypt, with a passageway all round it to allow the faithful to approach and venerate the relics without causing disturbance to the offices of the monks that might be taking place above. A similar, but ill-fated scheme was also partly executed at St Augustine's abbey, Canterbury, by Abbot Wulfric, the foundations for whose rotunda are still to be seen. Unfortunately this project, based on the church at Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle) involved demolishing the West End of St Mary's church, and Our Lady is said to have taken the Abbot's life for this impiety, after which his rotunda was never completed.

Canute's church, one may assume, would have been along similar lines. It is known to have stood in the north-east part of the Norman Abbey, in the position later occupied by the Lady Chapel. A rectangular nave would have led into a raised, circular area, with a crypt beneath housing the shrine of the Saint. Whether this area was extended upwards into a tower, we have no means of knowing, but it is possible. The remains of English baluster shafts were found embedded in the vaulting of the crypt of the Norman abbey. The English church may even have been turriform, like Earls Barton church in Northamptonshire, or St

Peter's at Barton-upon-Humber: that is to say with a central tower, supported by subsidiary annexes to East and West, containing the Baptistery and the Presbytery. Our stone is probably too small to have formed a capital or impost for the Chancel or Tower Arches, but it might well have been a part of the West Doorway of the church. It could even have formed part of a doorway in the crypt, and thus have been very close to the precious relics of the Saint

*Eadmund (Malcolm) Dunstall, ærealdor*

### Bibliography

For further information on the martyrdom of St Edmund and subsequent events surrounding his incorrupt relics, see the following:

Father Bryan Houghton: *Saint Edmund – King and Martyr*: Terence Dalton Limited, Lavenham, Suffolk 1970.

Jo Matten: *The Cult of St Edmund*: Drecroft Limited, Thurston, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk: 1984.

Father Andrew Phillips: 'The Light from the East St Edmund, England's Lost Patron Saint': *The Lighted Way*. The English Orthodox Trust 1999.

*An artist's impression of  
Charlemagne's Chapel at Aachen:  
Picture from All Our Yesterdays*

