



Whitchurch Canonorum, Dorset

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Ἑρμιονικῆς

Church of St Candida and Holy Cross

Grid ref SY 397955

Relics of St Wite

Notes

Of the countless shrines that were the glory of England's cathedrals and churches before the Reformation, only two remain intact. One, that of Edward the Confessor, in Westminster Abbey, is world famous. The other, dedicated to St Wite, here at Whitchurch Canonorum, Dorset, is comparatively unknown.

Her shrine is a surprising thing to come upon in the transept of a country church. Indeed, the first shrine of St Thomas Becket in the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral must have looked very much like this. Dating from the early C13, it is a large simple structure of local golden stone. The upper portion, a Purbeck marble tomb chest, contains the relics. Beneath are three vesica-shaped openings, almost big enough for the most enterprising pilgrim to clamber right inside.

During the winter of 1899-1900, certain movements of the walls and pavement of the North transept caused an ancient crack in the C13 tomb chest to widen dangerously. The following April, the broken fragment was removed and the interior was found to contain a lead reliquary, lying on its edge and tilted against the north side of the sarcophagus.

The lead casket measured 2'5" long, 18" high, and bore the inscription: "+ HIC. REQESCT. RELIQE. SCE. WITE" - Here rest the relics of St Wite. The reliquary showed signs of having been previously opened (probably during the 16th Century), but its contents appeared undisturbed. They were the bones of a small woman, about forty years old. It was noted that the thigh-bone which lay uppermost was 13 $\frac{3}{8}$ " long.

How this shrine escaped desecration of the Reformation remains a mystery. Equally mysterious is the identity of its saint, a matter that has long baffled historians. Their sense of frustration is well summed up by the Victorian antiquary who wrote: "Her identity seems from the first to have been surrounded by a curious haze." ...

... Since Candida is the Latin form of white, it has been suggested that our saint might be the princess of Brittany, who was known to the Celts as Gwen

and to the Britons as Blanche. These names, of course, also mean white.

Gwen, who bore the curious surname "Teirborn" (three breasted) because she reared three families, flourished in the mid C6. By her second husband, a Cornish chieftain called Francan, she was the mother of four sons, among them the Breton abbot St Winwaloe. Celtic traditions also make her the aunt of the famous St Sampson, evangelist of Cornwall and Brittany. ...

In the C10 a great disaster befell Brittany. The Norsemen conquered the country in 914 and occupied it until 939. One result was an influx of Breton refugees into the West of England, and they brought with them the relics of their saints. The suggestion is that the bones in the Dorset shrine are those of Gwen or Blanche Teirborn, transported from Brittany in this way.

Attractive as this identification may be, it raises two serious objections. First, it is very unlikely that the Saxon word Wite originally meant white. Candida, as we have seen, was a late alternative and does not appear in any records connected with the saint until after 1500; Wite or Wita was in fact a not uncommon Anglo-Saxon name. Secondly, in the old Roman martyrologies, St Wite is honoured liturgically as a virgin martyr, whereas Gwen Teirborn was the mother of sons and died a natural death. ...

When the great Boniface of Crediton set out, in 718, to take the Gospel to the German peoples, he was accompanied by a fellow West Country monk named Witta.

Boniface, together with fifty-two of his followers, was eventually massacred at Dokkum in 755. Some of the martyrs' bodies were brought home for burial, and the assumption is that our St Wite is none other than the monk Witta. This idea, however, does not stand up to close scrutiny. To begin with, Brother Witta was not among those who fell at Dokkum. His career is well documented: he died in 760 as Bishop of Buraberg and is buried at Hersfeld in Germany. Besides the remains found at Whitchurch in 1900 were those of a woman.

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In an attempt to overcome these difficulties, a theory has been advanced that Wite was one of the nuns or women missionaries who worked alongside Boniface and shared his martyrdom. It is an interesting hypothesis, and one which currently enjoys widespread belief. But as the only reason to associate Wite with Boniface is the similarity of her name to Bishop Witta, there are no real grounds for this deduction. ...

The Martyr maiden of Chardown Hill

A strong local tradition has always maintained that the saint was a Saxon holy woman, martyred by Danish pirates during a C9 raid on neighbouring Charmouth.

Coker, in his Survey of Dorsetshire (1732), gives the outline of the story:

"Whitchurch ... took its Name from one St White a Virgin Martyr, whose Well the inhabitants will shewe you not farre off in the side of an Hill, where she lived in Prayer and Contemplation, unto whose Honour a Church being built was from her named Whitechurch."

...It is a matter of history that in 831 a terrible horde of marauding Danes, said to number 15,000, landed at Charmouth and made "cruel ravage and slaughter" in the surrounding countryside. They were finally driven back by King Egbert and his Saxons from the earthwork known as Coney's Castle, but not before many Christians had been put to death. St. Wite could easily have been one of these.

Some ancient carvings of a Viking ship and an axe, held by some authorities to be of Saxon date, have been reset high up on the church tower, and lend credence to that tradition.

Furthermore, it was only fifty years later that Alfred the Great (who took a deep personal interest in those who had died for the Faith at the hands of the Danes), erected the "Hwitacircian" - St Wita's Church - on the spot where the present church now stands. Alfred's building perhaps replaced a temporary chapel which already housed the relics of the saint.

Having looked at the evidence, it seems far more probable that St Wite was a lowly Anglo-Saxon hermit, who never moved any distance from her native village, rather than a foreign princess or Church dignitary. ...

Records show that hermits used frequently to act as coastguards and lighthouse keepers. Possibly some

such service was provided by the cliff dwelling hermits of Chardown. Golden Gap - at 617' the highest point on the South Coast - must have had a beacon; if so St Wite, living at its foot, would have had to toil up every night to tend the fire or hang out the lantern which was to the mariner "a bright beacon of God."

Another of the hermit's duties was to be of assistance to wayfarers, and it is heartening to think of this intrepid little lady tuming out in all weathers to pilot benighted travellers along the treacherous cliff paths she knew so well.

Nor is it pushing speculation too far to imagine her, like St Elizabeth of Thuringia, going fishing to provide food for herself and the poor. Saxon holy women were amazingly independent and often held positions of considerable responsibility in the community.

Judging from the nature of her shrine and well, St Wite was, after her martyrdom, principally remembered as a helper of the sick. So Whitchurch appears to have been a place for people seeking physical cures rather than a pilgrimage centre of pure devotion. It remained from first to last a shrine of "local" popularity, that is the saint's cultus was more or less confined to South-West England. ... There are endless footpaths, lanes and old tracks in the Marshwood Vale and over the surrounding hills, but every one will be found to lead eventually to the church. ...

...The waters of St Wite's Well enjoyed a reputation as late as the 1930s as being "a sovereign cure for sore eyes". They were said to be most efficacious when the sun's first rays lit upon them. ...The wild periwinkles that carpet nearby Stonebarrow Hill every spring are still known locally as "St Candida's Eyes."

With the coming of the Reformation all formal pilgrimage ceased. Under the Injunctions of Edward VI "Shrines, candlesticks, trindles, rolls of wax, pictures, and all other monuments of feigned miracles ... vain and abominable and most damnable before God", were ordered to be swept away.

Why, in the general holocaust, was St Wite's shrine overlooked? The exact truth will probably never be known, but the Jesuit, John Gerard (1564-1637), gives us something of a clue in his autobiography. Having mentioned that he possesses a relic of the West Country virgin, St Vita (a local pronunciation still in common use) he goes on to say:

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"...many churches were dedicated to her under the name of St Witchurch. ...The parson of the place where the whole body was preserved and venerated in the old days, found he was always restive at night and could get no sleep. This went on for a long time. Then one day the thought struck him that his trouble came from his not paying proper respect to the bones he had in his keeping ...This he did, and slept well ever afterwards"

... the reliquary showed signs of being tampered with, according to experts in the C16. It was most likely removed from the shrine at this date. Contrary to popular belief, not all relics were scattered to the winds at the Reformation. Many (like those of St Eanswythe at FOLKESTONE, rediscovered reliquary and all in 1855), were simply hidden or decently interred. In those days of religious upheaval one never knew when the theological climate was going to change. After a suitable interval the Whitchurch parson probably returned the relics unobtrusively to their shrine.

Later, it was supposed by the learned, that the shrine was an altar tomb containing "a leaden coffin inclosing some of the bones of the de Manderville family, who were great benefactors to this church." But ordinary folk never believed this. It remained a sacred place, which was for them, as for their ancestors, holy ground. They still took the old track to the site of the hermitage and its miracle-working spring, to bathe their sore eyes and offer tiny gifts or "sacrifices", such as bent pins: "Holy well, holy well, take my gift and cast a spell." Reverence for the well, guarded by the spirit of a numinous woman with the power to heal, whose story had passed into folklore, was potent yet. Although clearly marked on present day Ordinance Survey maps, all trace of the well head has, alas disappeared; about fifty years ago, a farmer, fearful of his cattle taking a tumble, allowed it to become choked under a tangle of bramble and brushwood. Those who now visit the spring have to content themselves with the sullen waters of the trough which it (serves).

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Left:

Two views of the shrine of St Wite. Harold Woolley, who contributed the bottom two photographs, says that the top part of the shrine, containing the bones of a woman is of later date to the lower part with the three openings, which he considers to be a re-used Romano-British Altar.

Right:

Carved stone panels on the W side of W tower, showing an axe, and an axe with a ship which Harold Woolley alleges are of Anglo-Saxon workmanship.

