

St Fremund

The Legend

Fremund was the son of the great King Offa of Mercia, the one who built the famous "Offa's Dyke" which marks the border between England and Wales, and his queen Botilda. It is said that Fremund's birth was foretold by a child, who died when he was three days old. Fremund was baptized by Bishop Heswi, and apparently performed many miracles, and converted his parents. King Offa later resigned his kingdom to his son, who, after governing a year and a half, forsook the throne to serve God in a desert place. Fremund, accompanied by Burchard, the man who afterwards wrote the story of his life, and another attendant, embarked on a vessel, sailing from Caerleon-on-Usk, and went to a small island called Ylefage, which has been identified with Lundy Island in the Bristol Channel. On his arrival, he found that the island was infested by demons. No doubt Fremund dealt with them because he lived there for seven years, living an ascetic life on fruits and roots.

During this time, the Viking king Ivar the Boneless and his brother, Hubba, led The Great Heathen Army to ravage England, an action which included putting the great Christian King Edmund the Martyr to death. King Offa sent twenty nobles to seek his son throughout England, and when they found him, they implored him to help. Fremund was granted a vision in which it was revealed that each of the twenty nobles would appear as a thousand soldiers to his enemies. Fremund went with them and they, with Fremund and his attendants, fought and defeated 40,000 of the enemy in a great battle at Radford Semele in Warwickshire. But, whilst he prostrated himself in thanksgiving to God for the victory, a man called Oswi, formerly one of King Offa's commanders, but who had defected to the enemy, cut off Fremund's head. The blood spurted out over Oswi, who immediately begged for absolution and forgiveness, which the head pronounced. Fremund then rose and carried his head some distance, a spring burst forth, Fremund washed his wound, fell prostrate and expired.

After his death Fremund's body was taken to Offchurch in Warwickshire (Offchurch is thought to be where King Offa had his palace) for burial and his tomb became a place of pilgrimage for those seeking healing. In about AD 931 his remains were taken to Prescote near Copredy in Oxfordshire. Later, around 1207-1210, some of his relics were removed from Prescote to a new shrine in Dunstable Priory in Bedfordshire, but his shrine at Prescote continued to be venerated until early in the 16th century. Sadly, his shrines at both Prescote and Dunstable were destroyed in the 1530s during the English Reformation.

Inconsistencies

The story has a number of historical inconsistencies. History records Offa's wife as Cynethryth not Botilda and the Botilda name is not mentioned in any charter or by any chronicler. Bishop Heswi, or Oswy as the name is written in John Lydagte's Metrical Legend, cannot be identified. Offa died on 29 July 796 and was succeeded by his son Ecgrith, "Who had been anointed king in his lifetime" according to medieval historians William of Malmesbury and Aethelweard. Ecgrith died the same year as Offa and so none of the legends fits the history on these points. King Edmund was martyred in November 870, seventy-four years after the death of King Offa. It would seem that the connection with the Danish Invasion is more probable than that with Offa, and so Fremund should be perhaps dated to the mid 9th century.

Why should we honour St Fremund as a Bedfordshire Saint?

In the third and fourth century, a word entered the Brythonic language, which was the native language at that time of Britain, from the Latin. The word was originally from Greek and entered Latin because of the growth of Christianity. From there it was adopted by the Christians of late-Roman Britain into their local language. The word was "martyr" (in Greek it is "μάρτυρας", but that is neither here nor there). The word means "a witness" and came to refer to those who had paid the ultimate price for their faith. In Brythonic the word was written "*merthyr*". However its meaning changed slightly. Instead of meaning "a witness", it came to mean a place where a saint's relics had been placed. You will all have recognised the word which makes up the first part of the name of the Welsh town "*Merthyr Tydfil*". The name comes from the fact that not only was Tydfil, a Princess of the Welsh Royal Family, martyred there, but also that a church was built there to protect her relics.

It is because Fremund's relics were brought to Dunstable and they found a home in Bedfordshire that we are able to call him a "Bedfordshire Saint". Our county was blessed by his holy relics, may he continue to pray for us before the Throne of God.

Sadly at the moment, no icon of St Fremund exists.