Saints and Martyrs

Diocese of Shrewsbury

St Milburga

St Milburga, virgin and elder sister of St Mildred, founded the nunnery of Wenlock in Shropshire (now known as Much Wenlock), assisted by endowments from her uncle, Wulfhere, the King of Mercia, and by her father, Merewald.

Installed as abbess by St Theodore, the saint's monastery is said to have flourished like a paradise under her rule, partly because of the virtues she cultivated and the spiritual gifts with which she was blessed. The saint, who was educated in France, was noted for her humility, and was endowed with the gift of healing and restored sight to the blind, according to popular stories. Through the strength of her exhortations she was also reputed to bring sinners to repentance. She organised the evangelisation and pastoral care of south Shropshire.

Fantastic stories surround the saint. One tells of how she overslept and woke to find the sun shining on her. Her veil slipped but instead of falling to the ground was suspended on a sunbeam until she collected it. Another story relates how she was surrounded by "fire from heaven" as she knelt in prayer beside the body of a dead child and when the flames abated she returned the child back alive to its mother.

St Milburga was credited with having power over birds and after her death was invoked for the protection of crops against their ravages.

In her final years, St Milburga was afflicted by a painful and lingering disease which she bore with serenity. Her last words were: "Blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers."

Her tomb was long venerated until her abbey was destroyed by invading Danes. After the Norman conquest Cluniac monks built a monastery on the site – the ruins at Much Wenlock are those of the later house – and during the excavations St Milburga's bones were discovered.

Butler's Lives of the Saints notes that "while many native saints of more historical importance are little noticed in our English calendars, Milburga's name appears in quite a number of them, beginning with the Bosworth Psalter", written in about 950. Her extensive cult owed much to the testimony of St Boniface and of a Medieval papal legate who witnessed miraculous cures at her tomb.

St Milburga was a grand-daughter of the pagan King Penda of Mercia, who slew St Oswald at Oswestry, Shropshire. A third sister of the family was also recognised as a saint but all that is known of St Mildgytha was that she was a nun and that "miraculous powers were often exhibited" at her tomb in Northumbria.

Source: Butler's Lives of the Saints

Feast Day: 19th May

St Oswald

St Oswald, the 7th century Christian King of Northumbria, was killed by the pagan King Penda of Mercia in a battle fought at Maserfield, probably Oswestry in Shropshire, after which his body was mutilated and displayed (Oswald's tree).

He was son of the King of Northumbria who was exiled and took refuge at Iona where he became a Christian. When his uncle, King St Edwin of Northumbria, was killed in battle against Penda and Cadwallon in 633, St Oswald recovered his kingdom, seeking first and foremost to turn his subjects into Christians.

But first he had to defeat the pagan Cadwallon who was ravaging his provinces. In 634 St Oswald assembled a comparatively small force and on the eve of the decisive battle erected a wooden cross crying out to his army, which was predominantly pagan: "Let us now kneel down, and together pray to the almighty and only true God that he will mercifully defend us from our enemy, for He knows that we fight in defence of our lives and country."

The soldiers did as he commanded and that night St Oswald had a vision that St Columba of Iona had stretched his cloak across his sleeping troops and promised them victory. The next day, three miles south of Hexham, near Newcastle, the saint's army routed their foes with Cadwallon himself killed in battle.

St Oswald then proceeded to successfully plant the seed of the Christian faith throughout his vast kingdom, enlisting the help of St Aidan, an Irish monk of Iona, to whom he gave Lindisfarne as his episcopal see.

The saint later married Cyneburga, the daughter of Cynegils, the first Christian King of Wessex, whom St Oswald had sponsored at his baptism. They had a son, Ethelwald, who became King of Deira, but who was of little credit to his father.

After some years, war broke out with Penda, who had allied himself with the Welsh. St Oswald marched south into Shropshire to find himself overwhelmed by a superior force. On 5th August 642 he and his troops were surrounded and St Oswald was slain, aged 38, after uttering a prayer on behalf of his soldiers: "O God, be merciful to their souls."

The saint's head was eventually buried with the intact body of St Cuthbert at Durham.

Source: Butler's Lives of the Saints

Feast Day: 3rd August

St Peter of Alcantara

St Peter of Alcantara was a 16th century Spanish Franciscan of the Stricter Observance and a confessor and spiritual director of St Teresa of Avila. He was chosen as patron of Shrewsbury Cathedral by Bertram, the 17th Earl of Shrewsbury, who paid for the building of the cathedral but died aged 23 two months before it was opened in 1856. A Catholic, the Earl had a great devotion to the saint.

Peter Garavita was born at Alcantara, a small town in the province of Estremadura in 1499 and decided to join the Franciscans at the age of 16 shortly after he was sent to university in Salamanca by his stepfather.
He was a man of remarkable austerity and poverty who travelled throughout Spain preaching the Gospel to the poor. He wrote a Treatise on Prayer and Meditation which was considered a masterpiece by St Teresa, St Francis de Sales and Louis of Granada.

St Peter (whose statue in Shrewsbury Cathedral is pictured) was ordained to the priesthood in 1524 and in 1538 was made minister provincial of the Franciscan province of St Gabriel of Estremadura but resigned when his plans to enforce severe rules among the friars were opposed.
He then left for Portugal where he built his first hermitage on Arabida, a barren mountain on the mouth of the River Tagus opposite Lisbon, where he attracted followers – the Alcantarines – who were distinguished by their ascetic practices, never wearing shoes, eating meat or drinking wine. In 1554 St Peter returned to Spain to establish a friary at Pedrosa using a stricter form of the Franciscan Rule, insisting, for instance, that every cell should be no more than 7ft long.

Two years before his death he arrived in Avila on a visitation where he was introduced to St Teresa. He supported her case that her visions and prayer were from God and that she was not afflicted by delusions caused by an evil spirit.

It is from St Teresa's autobiography that the life of St Peter and his spiritual gifts are more thoroughly understood. The saint said she saw for herself his great raptures and transports of divine love when he was in prayer. She also marvelled at his austerity, telling of how he would deliberately leave the window and door of his cell open during snaps of cold weather and how he would deny himself sleep as a form of bodily mortification and penance, a practice which has led him to become regarded as the patron saint of night watchmen.

St Peter was credited as doing more than anyone else in helping St Teresa in her historical reforms of the Carmelite order. Seized by a mortal illness, he died in 1562 while kneeling in prayer in the convent of Arenas.

Source: Butler's Lives of the Saints

Feast Day: 19th October

St Plegmund

Some saints enjoy timeless popularity (St Augustine, St Teresa of Lisieux), others seem to fade from sight with the passing of time (St Louis, St Dunstan), and others emerge from the distant past to bask in contemporary acclaim (St George, St Christopher). Why did St Plegmund, our local Anglo-Saxon hermit who died in AD 914, sink below the horizon for so many centuries – only to emerge with timid applause in the modern era?

Who was Plegmund? Well, after his eremitical years of prayer and isolation on the Isle of Chester, he was persuaded by King Alfred the Great to become his spiritual adviser, and later to accept the Archbishopric of Canterbury (AD 890-914). He was an immediate success in those turbulent days of the Danish invasions. He travelled to Rome twice to be confirmed in office by the Pope, and set about the reorganisation of many diocesan sees.

St Plegmund's Well, down Plemstall Lane in Mickle Trafford, about two miles to the east of Chester, has kept his memory from total neglect: Plegmund is said to have used its water for the baptism of the local children. About a century ago an Anglican clergyman blessed the well. The pre-Reformation church of St Peter stands in isolation a few yards along the lane, on a hillock known as the Isle of Chester. Here Plegmund the hermit would have lived in safety, surrounded by the marshes and tidal waters of the River Gowy.

Well-dressing has come back into vogue in recent years, and an annual ceremony attracts much support. The Christian churches take part in this colourful folk-liturgy. However, Catholic interest in this ancient shrine has been sporadic. A Catholic pilgrimage to the well took place in 1938: this was probably an initiative of Canon Frank Murphy, who was a curate at St Werburgh's Chester in the 1930s. He returned as parish priest from 1959 to 1982, and organised an annual pilgrimage from St Werburgh's (with its stained glass windows of St Plegmund). Frs Gerry Courell and Peter Sharrocks, curates in the 1970s, recall taking part in this event. The church hall at Tattenhall south of Chester was opened by Canon Murphy in 1971, is dedicated to St Plegmund, and also has stained glass windows depicting his life.

Sadly very few Catholics in Chester seem to remember St Plegmund or have any devotion towards him. Yet he seems an ideal patron for Christian devotion today. His years of prayerful seclusion, and his high reputation as Archbishop of Canterbury, speak of a saint who will encourage our lives of prayer, and look kindly upon the growing friendship between Canterbury and Rome. His intercession may even be able to support us as we breathe the choking fumes of 21st century secularism.

Monsignor Christopher Lightbound

St Werburgh

St Werburgh was noted for her beauty and qualities of character that brought her a number of offers of marriage. But she refused them all, saying Jesus was her spouse, and is honoured in the Church as virgin as well as a saint.
She was the daughter of Wulfhere, King of Mercia, and St Ermenilda, which also made her a grand-daughter of St Sexburga and great-niece of St Etheldreda.

One legend tells of her struggle against the attempts of Werbod, a nobleman of her father's court, to gain her hand in marriage. The king liked Werbod and would have allowed him to wed his daughter if she had consented freely. St Werburgh's mother, as well as her two brothers, Wulfhad and Ruffin, were not quite so keen on the match and the two princes sought out St Chad, the Bishop of Lichfield, in his woodland hermitage to ask his advice. Werbod, knowing their opposition to his designs, showed the pagan king the two princes returning from their visit to St Chad and incited him through slanders to put them to death. Werbod died himself soon afterwards and the king, stung by remorse over the murders of his sons, repented and submitted himself to the guidance of his queen and St Chad.

St Werburgh was no longer afraid to tell her father of her vocation to be a nun and he not only granted her request but also conducted her in state to Ely, Cambridgeshire, where she was met at the gate of the abbey by St Etheldreda and her community.

When the king died in 675 he was succeeded by his brother, Ethelred, who persuaded his niece to return to the Midlands to supervise the female religious houses of his kingdom. She founded several monasteries in Mercia. St Werburgh died in Kesteven, Lincolnshire, between 700 and 707 and buried at Hanbury, Staffordshire, but by the 10th century her relics had been moved to Chester to keep them safe from Viking incursions and they were venerated there throughout the Middle Ages, with her shrine in the cathedral a place of pilgrimage until the Reformation.

St Werburgh's feast is observed in the Diocese of Shrewsbury and the Archdiocese of Birmingham.

Source: Butler's Lives of the Saints

Feast Day: 3rd February

Blessed Edmund Campion

Gerard Edward renamed himself Edward Campion in honour of St Edmund Campion, the esteemed Jesuit missionary who was martyred at Tyburn, London, in December 1581. Blessed Edward would suffer a similar fate in Canterbury just seven years later.

Born at Ludlow, Shropshire, he studied at Jesus College, Oxford, but left without obtaining a degree, finding work as a servant to Gregory Fiennes, 8th Baron Dacre of the South.

Fiennes was married to Anne Sackville, whose family had strong Catholic sympathies, and it was while he was employed in their service that Blessed Edward was reconciled to the Catholic faith, leaving England for Rheims to study as a priest on 22nd February 1586 and changing his name. Because of his higher education he was ordained in Rheims after just a year and returned to England at Easter 1587.

He was captured in Sittingbourne, Kent, just a few weeks later, however, and was imprisoned at the Newgate and the Marshalsea prisons in London following questioning by order of the Privy Council on 22nd April 1587. He was examined a second time on 14th August 1588 and he confessed he was a priest. He also boldly stated that the religion enforced in England under the Elizabethan statutes was heretical. When he was accused of treason he replied that he wished he was no more a traitor than St Edmund Campion. He turned down the opportunity to escape from captivity with the words: “I would gladly, if I did not hope to suffer martyrdom.”

Blessed Edward was executed on 1st October 1588 at the age of 36 years.

Source: Nine Martyrs of the Shrewsbury Diocese by Kevin Byrne

Feast Day: 1st October

Blessed Ralph Crockett

Blessed Ralph Crockett was born in Barton, near Farndon, Cheshire. He was educated at Christ's College, Cambridge, and Gloucester Hall, Oxford, before he began teaching in East Anglia. After five years in Ipswich he felt it dangerous to continue there because of the intensified persecution of Catholics following St Edmund Campion's recent mission to England. Instead, he retreated to his native Cheshire where he stayed for two years until in 1582 – the year after St Edmund's martyrdom – he entered Douay College at Rheims to study for the priesthood. He was ordained in Lent 1584 and intended to pursue a further two years of study but the regime and diet were too severe for his health and he asked to return to England. He embarked on the English Mission in 1585 with three other priests, including Edward James of Derbyshire.

Lord Burghley, Queen Elizabeth's chief minister, had spies at the college, however, and it is likely that he knew of their voyage. When the boat arrived at Littlehampton, West Sussex, the captain was too afraid to let them disembark even after two days. Then on the third day, Mr Justice Shelley came aboard the vessel and arrested all four.

The priests were sent to the Marshalsea prison in London for questioning. Blessed Ralph said his poor health had brought him back to England but admitted that he would serve as a priest as soon as the opportunity presented itself. He also argued that the men had not broken any English laws because they had not come ashore of their own volition but were taken off the boat against their will.

For the following three years they were kept in squalid conditions except for the moments when they were interrogated in the hope that they would either conform to the Protestant religion or inform against their fellow Catholics.

Within two years there were 14 other priests in jail with them.
After the failure of the Spanish Armada a total of 31 priests were tried and sentenced to die on 1st October 1588. Under questioning from Thomas Bowyer the clerics admitted that they intended to reconcile people to the Catholic faith and they protested against the cruelty of laws which condemned them to horrible deaths for their religion and priesthood. When the jury declared the group guilty of treason all remained silent but for Blessed Ralph, who said: "I shall not fear what man may do to me."

Source: Nine Martyrs of the Shrewsbury Diocese by Kevin Byrne

Feast Day: 1st October

Blessed Richard Martin

Born in Shropshire, Blessed Richard attended Broadgates Hall, Oxford, and was reconciled to the Catholic faith. A layman, he was captured in the company of Robert Morton, a priest who would be martyred at Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, on 26th August 1588, and was accused of being a Catholic.

Blessed Richard could have saved his life if he had agreed to attend Protestant services but he refused when the offer was made to him.

Instead he was charged with felony as a "receiver and maintainer of priests" because he had bought supper for Morton. He was hanged at Tyburn, London, on 30th August 1588 along with St Margaret Ward and her companions. There is a panel depicting Blessed Richard in St Joseph's Church, Sale.

Source: Nine Martyrs of the Shrewsbury Diocese by Kevin Byrne

Feast Day: 30th August

Blessed Robert Wilcox

Born in Chester in 1558 Blessed Robert went to the English College at Rheims, where he was ordained in 1585 and was then sent on the English Mission a year later.

With the Elizabethan persecution of the Catholic Church in full frenzy, Blessed Robert was captured almost as soon as he landed at Lydd in Kent and he was jailed in the Marshalsea prison in London. He was condemned for his priesthood, to which he admitted. He was hanged, drawn and quartered at Canterbury – along with the priests Edward Campion and Christopher Buxton, and Robert Widmerpool, a layman – on 1st October 1588 at the age of just 30 years.

Blessed Robert was the first of the group of "Canterbury Martyrs" to die, cheerfully climbing the ladder when called by the executioner. He smiled at the other three condemned men from the scaffold and told them that he was going to heaven ahead of them and would bring the good news of their imminent arrival. Witnesses said that he suffered his barbarous fate with bravery.

Source: Nine Martyrs of the Shrewsbury Diocese by Kevin Byrne

Feast Day: 1st October

Blessed John Beche

One of the most exquisite Catholic artefacts to survive the depredations of the Reformation is the "Colchester Cross". One side, against an enamelled blue background, shows the emblems of the five wounds of Christ. In the centre is the Sacred Heart, surrounded by a crown of thorns.
Below the Heart are the letters "IHS", representing the name of Jesus, and above is inscribed "INRI", the Latin acronym for Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

Turn the cross over and against a red background are the instruments of the Passion. the cross opens up to reveal a figure of the crucified Christ standing aloft a skull. The inside of case bears the inscription in Latin: "He who will come after Me, let him take up his cross and follow Me."

This pectoral cross belonged to Blessed John Beche (alias Thomas Marshall), the last Abbot of the Benedictine Abbey of St John the Baptist, Colchester, Essex, who was hanged, drawn and quartered on 1st December 1539 during the dissolution of monasteries by King Henry VIII.
It is today the property of Lord Clifford of Chudleigh but is on permanent loan to Buckfast Abbey, Devon, until such time that there is again a ruling abbot of Colchester.

Beche is perhaps one of the lost martyrs of the Diocese of Shrewsbury. He is venerated in the dioceses of Brentwood and Westminster and by the English Benedictines.

Yet he joined the Abbey of St Werburgh, Chester, (now the Anglican cathedral) soon after obtaining a doctorate of divinity from Oxford University in 1515 and he ruled as the 26th Abbot of Chester until 1530 when he took up his new office in Essex.

According to Dom Bede Camm, his biographer, he was a "friend and admirer" of both St John Fisher and St Thomas More, although he and 15 other monks in 1534 collectively took the oath attached to the Act of Supremacy, presumably because it contained a caveat demanding obedience only insofar as the law of God allows, which may have bought them time.

Beche was, however, always a "strong opponent" of the King's reforms and became indiscreet about his "grief and bitterness" over the executions of Fisher and More, whom he began to venerate as martyrs for the unity of the Church.

In conversations with other "friends", who would later give evidence against him, he was also critical of some members of the King's Council, describing them as "tyrants and bloodsuckers" who "hath brought his Grace to such a covetous mind that if all the water in the Thames did flow gold and silver it would not be able to quench his Grace's thirst".

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Feast Day: 1st December

Blessed John Beche

It is difficult to fault his interpretation of events because in 1538 Sir John Seyncler was sent by Thomas Cromwell to Colchester to demand that Beche surrendered the keys of his abbey to the Crown. Beche replied that the King would have never have the house "but against my will and against my heart for I know by my learning that he cannot take it by right or law; wherefore in my conscience I cannot be content". Shortly afterwards, he was arrested for treason and sent to the Tower of London.

The events between his arrest and execution are fascinating because of what they reveal, even now, about the authentic nature of conscience.
Beche had no wish to die a martyr and evidence of his wavering under interrogation in the tower became the subject of controversy when it emerged only after his beatification in 1895 by Pope Leo XIII. His signed renunciation of his opposition to the royal supremacy was recorded with the piteous appeal for his life, "most meekly beseeching the King's most gracious Majesty and his most honourable Council to be good to me for the love of God".

There is no reason why people in the 16th century would not share our own horror of death and aversion to suffering and it would surely be rash for anyone to judge a man in the "agony of fear", facing the unspeakable torments of public evisceration, a penalty devised to terrify the populace into conformity by inflicting unimaginable pain on the condemned.

But Beche eventually triumphed over his frailty to win the crown of martyrdom. The records of his trial have disappeared but a letter from Sir Christopher Jenny, reporting the proceedings to Cromwell, describes Beche as an "evil man" who stood finally in his "own conceit that the suppression of the abbeys should not withstand the laws of God", a sign that in the end he publicly rejected Henry's claim to supremacy over the English Church.
He undoubtedly numbers among those people described by Pope Benedict XVI as "faint-hearted" martyrs, who "only after faltering and much questioning succeed in mustering up obedience to conscience, mustering up obedience to truth, which must stand higher than any human tribunal or any type of personal taste".

Bishop Mark Davies of Shrewsbury, speaking in Chester on the feast of St Margaret Ward, observed that the heroic examples of the martyrs are beginning to speak ever more loudly in our own times, paradoxically when moral relativism is obscuring objective moral truth, resulting in the consequent loss of a true understanding of the meaning of conscience.

This silencing of the voice of conscience has been happening for a long time, of course, and it was Blessed John Henry Newman – whom Pope Benedict credits with developing the theology of conscience more deeply than any figure since St Augustine of Hippo – who noted that even in the Victorian age it has become "the very right and freedom of conscience to dispose with conscience".

Simon Caldwell

Blessed John Sandys

According to some historical sources, even the Catholic Church does not know the names of all those who died as martyrs in England during the Protestant Reformation. Of others, only the most basic details are known. Into this latter category surely fits Blessed John Sandys, a Cheshire priest and a martyr of the Diocese of Shrewsbury and the Diocese of Clifton.

Bishop Richard Challoner's Memoirs of Missionary Priests, one of the best records of the acts of the English and Welsh martyrs of the English mission dedicates only two paragraphs to him. They read as follows:
"John Sandys was born in the Diocese of Chester, was educated at Doway College during its residence at Rhemes (Rheims), where he was made priest, and sent upon the English mission, anno 1584.

"After having for some time diligently applied himself to his missionary functions, he was apprehended, tried, and condemned for being a priest, and was drawn, hanged, bowelled and quartered at Gloucester, August the 11th (some say the 2d), 1586."

The Catholic Encyclopaedia of 1913 offers a little more detail. It tells us that Blessed John arrived in the French city on 4 June 1583 and was ordained priest in the Holy Cross Chapel of Rheims Cathedral by the Cardinal Archbishop, Louis de Guise, and was sent on the mission 2 October 1584. It also recounts how during his execution the priest was cut down from the scaffold while he was fully conscious and that he endured a "terrible struggle with the executioner, who had blackened his face to avoid recognition and used a rusty and ragged knife". His last words, however, were a prayer for his persecutors.

Blessed John Sandys was among the 85 martyrs of England and Wales beatified by Blessed Pope John Paul II on 22 November 1987.

Feast Day: 11th August