

## Etheldreda

Almost 1,400 years ago in the palace at Exning, King Anna's queen gave birth to a baby princess. They called the baby Etheldreda.

When Etheldreda was a young girl she loved dressing in fine clothes and wearing pretty necklaces. Etheldreda and her family were Christians, and as she got older Etheldreda began to realise that she didn't want to be a princess after all; what she *really* wanted to do was spend her time praying to God and being a good Christian. She put her beautiful clothes and necklaces away and began to live as if she was very poor. The thing she enjoyed most of all was spending time praising God.

Suddenly things changed for Etheldreda. Her father the king died and her uncle Aethelwald became the new king. The members of the court decided that it was time for Etheldreda to get married and they looked around for a suitable husband. They soon found the ideal person – Tondbert, the King of the Southern Gyrvi people. Etheldreda was horrified! She didn't want to be a queen at all. She wanted to carry on living as a poor Christian for the rest of her life. But in the end Etheldreda really didn't have any choice about what she was going to do; her family made her marry.

Tondbert gave Etheldreda a wonderful wedding present – a whole island with all the farms and buildings on it! The island was called the Isle of Ely. He was also very kind to Etheldreda, because when she told him how she really wanted to spend her time worshipping God, not being a queen, he agreed that she could do whatever she wanted.

Only two years later Tondbert died and for some time Etheldreda carried on living happily on her own special island. She must have thought that she was safe now and could concentrate on being a good Christian, but uncle Aethelwald had other ideas! When Etheldreda was about thirty years old she was suddenly told that her family had found her a new husband, Prince Egfrid of Northumbria. It was an awful shock to Etheldreda, because the Kingdom of Northumbria was hundreds of miles away at the other end of England, and Prince Egfrid was only a teenager – he was half her age! But again Etheldreda had no choice about what she was to do, and she set off on her long journey northwards.

When Etheldreda married Egfrid she explained to him how she didn't really want to be a queen at all, and how the most important thing in her life was serving God. Egfrid seemed to understand what Etheldreda wanted and he even allowed her to leave the royal palace and go to live with the nuns at Coldingham. However, Egfrid was not happy with Etheldreda's behaviour at all. When he became king he decided he would order her to come back to court and be a proper queen at last. He set off for Coldingham with a small troop of soldiers. He had decided he was going to force Etheldreda to come home, whether she wanted to or not!

Etheldreda heard that the king was on his way to capture her, and she decided she would run away back to her own island of Ely where she would be safe. Siwenna and Siwara, two of the nuns from Coldingham, agreed to go with her, and the three set off on foot on the long walk south. How can three women on foot escape from a troop of soldiers on horseback? As they were walking along the seashore the women heard the thud of horses hooves in the distance and they ran out to a small island where they tried to hide. As the women hid the tide began to come in, and when Egfrid arrived there was a deep channel of swirling water between him and the island.

Egfrid was not worried by the delay. His men camped opposite the island and waited for the tide to go out. And they waited..... and they waited..... and they waited. Why wasn't the tide going out again? On the island Etheldreda and her friends were praying desperately to God that they would be saved, and it seemed to be that God was answering their prayers in an amazing way!

After a week of waiting Egfrid gave up in disgust. "Go, if you want to!" He yelled at Etheldreda. "I shall find myself a proper queen!" The soldiers rode away, and at last the tide went out.

Etheldreda and her friends finally got to the Isle of Ely and there at last Etheldreda was able to live as she wanted to do. She built a church and a monastery, and Christians came to join her on the island and to be monks and nuns. For six years Etheldreda did her best to be a good Christian at Ely. She wore simple woollen clothes instead of rich gowns, she had only one meal a day instead of being forced to go to great feasts, and every night she got up at 2.00 in the morning to pray to God in the church until sunrise. She was happy that at last she was doing what she had really wanted to do all her life.

Then one day Etheldreda felt a huge boil growing on her neck. She joked with her friends that it served her right as this was where she used to wear her beautiful necklaces when she was younger. She died soon afterwards of the plague.

**Etheldreda has not been forgotten at Ely. Ever since her death Christians have gone to see the place where she was buried, and to hear her story.**