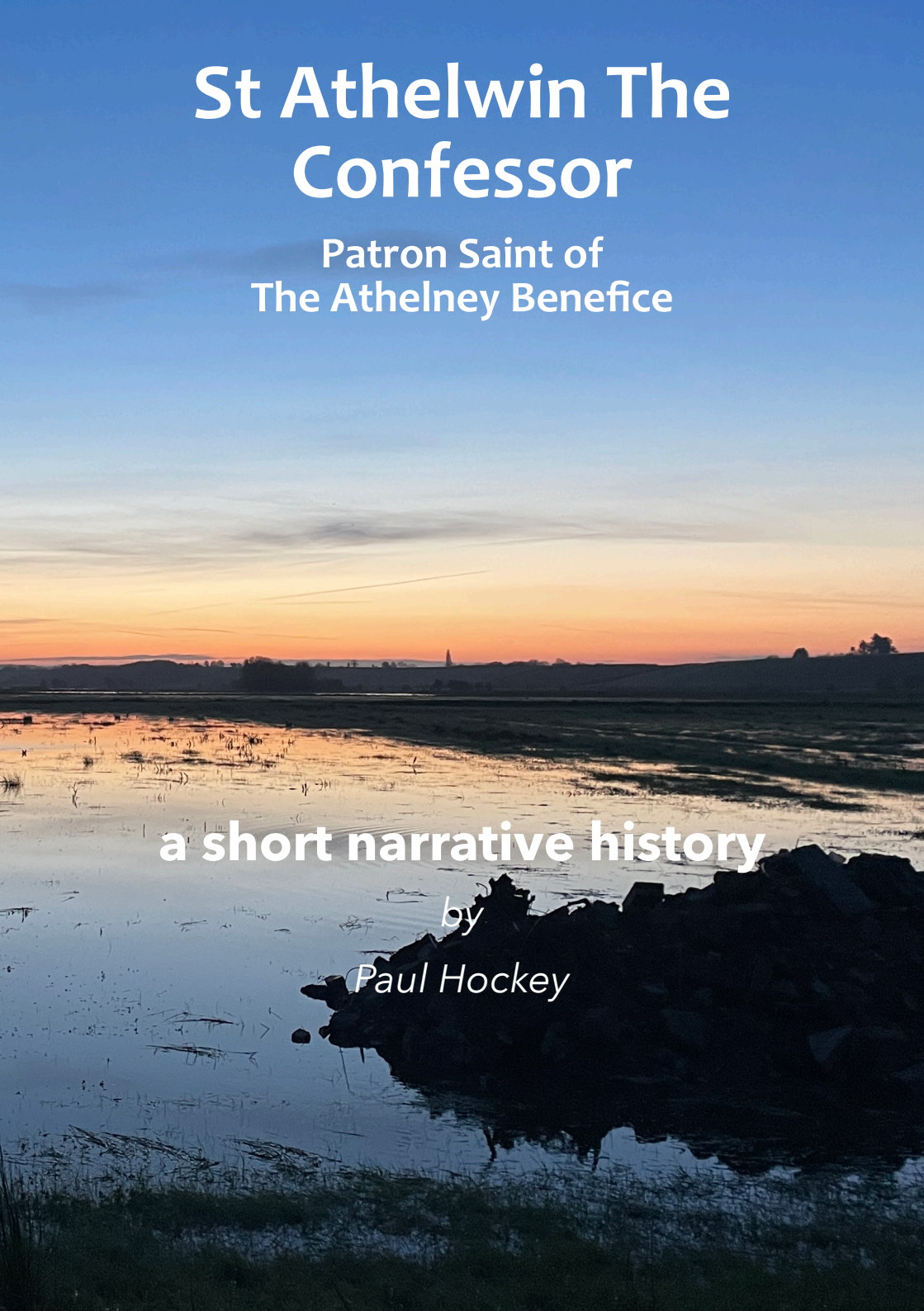
St Athelwin The Confessor

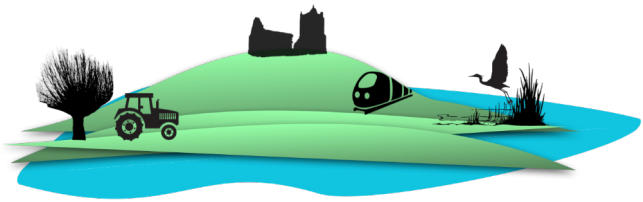
Patron Saint of The Athelney Benefice



a short narrative history

by

Paul Hockey

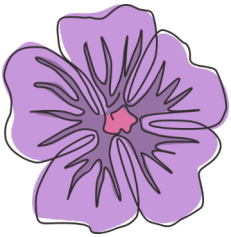


Introduction 4

Authenticity 4

St. Athelwin the Confessor 5

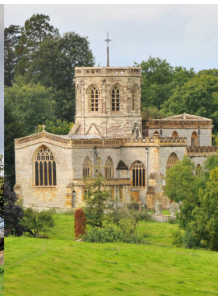
Further information 13



This is a publication of the Athelney Benefice History Programme. Each publication addresses an aspect of the deep history of the region and is drawn from the unifying intentions of the four Anglican Parishes of St Michael, Burrowbridge, St Bartholomew, Lyng, St Peter and St Paul, North Curry and St Gregory, Stoke St Gregory. Other publications include more general descriptions of the parishes themselves along with other specific subjects such as stained glass windows, the history of the bells and other explorations of church architecture.

Further information can be found on athelneybenefice.com



Introduction

This narrative concerns Prince Athelwin, his choice to become a hermit and his subsequent journey to the Somerset Levels.

The timeline is set primarily in AD645, two hundred and thirty three years before King Alfred found refuge on the isle of Athelney in 878. To avoid unnecessary repetition, please note that all dates referred to are AD.

Some background information on the world in which Athelwin found himself. The Celtic populated, Roman province of Britannia had become Christian during the empire period. When the Romans left in 410, Christians in Britannia were effectively cut off from the pope in Rome. The religion drifted, rudderless, developing into Celtic, or Insular Christianity, which tended to be loosely organised and locally focused. Ascetic isolation and mystical spirituality were common themes in the Celtic Church.

Saxon incursions into Britannia began around 450. This brought a return of paganism and pushed the Celtic people and Christianity towards Wales and the South West. However, a mission by St. Augustine had succeeded in converting the pagan Saxons of East Anglia, by the late 6th Century.

Now, in the 7th century, Pope Honorius wanted the West Saxons brought into the Christian fold and then, no doubt, to eventually reign-in the deviations of Insular Christianity in the Celtic regions. The Roman Catholic orthodox view was one of structure, order and discipline, as characterised by the Rule of St. Benedict. Bishop Birinus would be instrumental in moving this objective forward, as will be related later in this story.

Authenticity

This story is not a serious history lesson. Due to the scarcity of information, I have linked known historical facts and speculated on others to 'round out' the story, some examples:

- The route of Athelwin's journey is pure speculation, using geography and likely travel routes available at the time.
- It is recorded that Athelwin had a chronic disease, but the symptoms were not specified. I have assumed that it was Crohn's Disease, as this is one possible affliction of the Royal Wessex line. Specifically, King Alfred and his grandson Eadred. Although the bloodline connection with Athelwin is not certain.

Some of the text is purposely quite descriptive, to hopefully give a vivid mental picture and an atmospheric, meditational quality.

Likewise, the drawings I produced of Athelney in the 7th Century are only my imagination, with poetic license on how it may have been.

The result is a semi fictional story about this little known saint. With that in mind, I offer this tale of St. Athelwin.

St. Athelwin the Confessor

Athelwin was a Prince of Wessex, born in Dorchester-on-Thames, possibly in the year 621. He was the son of King Cynegils (Kynejils) and younger brother to Prince Cenwealh (Kenweal). It should be noted that Wessex, in the 600's was still in the process of expanding into the mighty Kingdom it would later become.

From the age of about fifteen, Athelwin began to suffer from a recurring health problem. It started after a bout of Winter Fever. He developed stomach cramps and other symptoms, usually after eating such things as fatty red meat or dairy products. He often had periods of extreme fatigue when all he could do was to lie still. However, as a Prince of Wessex, he was regularly able to obtain such foods as fish and chicken which he found helped him to manage his ailment.

In 636, at about the same time as Athelwin began to suffer from his chronic disease, King Cynegils converted from paganism to the Christian faith. He was baptised by Bishop Birinus, who had arrived in Wessex a couple of years earlier. The Bishop had been given a mission, by Pope Honorius, to convert the West Saxons. With the King's blessing Birinus became Bishop of Dorchester-on-Thames, which, at this time, was an important old roman town in Wessex.

It is likely that Cynegils initially only converted so he could establish military co-operation with King Oswald of Northumbria, to then attack Mercia. Oswald was already a Christian and therefore he wouldn't fight alongside a pagan. Cynegils also married his daughter to Oswald to seal the alliance. Regardless of his motive, the King seems to have been comfortable with the new faith, encouraging the Bishop to establish his church and giving no obstruction to missionary work.

Athelwin had been listening to the Bishop preach and intently studying Christian beliefs. He was then baptised and embraced the Christian faith completely. He became convinced that his recently manifested pains were a trial sent by God, to test him and to help him achieve spiritual purity. He sometimes compared his trials to those of Job. He wondered if, like Job, Satan had been given leave by God to strike him

with his affliction. Then he thought to himself, was such a comparison the sin of pride?! He devoted himself entirely to spirituality. Consequently, as he grew into manhood he became known as 'one touched by grace', a holy man. It was thought a natural progression that he would become a monk, or enter the priesthood. Bishop Birinus and the other priests often discussed this with him.

However, Athelwin began to feel that he wanted to shun the world of temptation entirely. He felt that even life in a monastery was not the course to follow. It was known that some men and women became 'solitaries', either hermits, or, a few chose the more extreme 'walled up' isolation of an anchorite. Athelwin felt he was being 'called' by God, to be away from the hustle and bustle of the mundane world, but, he did not feel that the more rigidly enclosed life of an anchorite was for him. He liked to watch the dawn come up over the hills and forests. He liked to pray looking out over God's creation. At these times he felt a communion with nature that spoke directly to his soul. He also liked to help people. The life of an anchorite would largely deny him these things. Therefore, the life of a hermit, seemed to be the answer.

Athelwin was already being approached by people for spiritual advice and also for healing, for which, perhaps ironically, he had a gift. He decided these consultations must continue, even when living as a hermit. Bishop Birinus, of course, supported Athelwin's decision to follow his calling. So, a life of prayer, away from the conflict and pain of the secular world, was to be his path. He began to meditate and pray for guidance on where to make his hermitage. Somewhere in the local hills, or forests, perhaps?

During a period of debilitating lethargy, Athelwin had a vivid dream, or vision. He saw a small island in a vast waterlogged landscape and he knew, this place was to be his hermitage. Near the island there rose, out of the swamp, a solitary, steep sided, flat-topped hill or 'mump', which looked most unusual. He had once heard stories of a great marshland somewhere to the south. So he began to make enquiries of travellers and traders coming from that direction. Only one place seemed to fit his vision. However, it was in the Celtic Kingdom of Dumnonia. It seems he was to leave Wessex, for a foreign land, but why? He was soon to find out.

King Cynegils died in 643, he was the first Christian king of Wessex. His eldest son Cenwealh succeeded to the throne, then apparently rejected Christianity and seemed to revert to paganism. At least he 'failed to embrace the mysteries of the faith' according to St. Bede, writing in 731. Cenwealh then 'put away' his wife, who was sister to the powerful King Penda of Mercia, to marry a young local woman, Seaxburgh (Sayaxburg). Cynically, one might think, a return to paganism was the only

way he could ‘divorce’ his wife, to marry Seaxburgh?

Athelwin, strong in the new faith of Christianity, was appalled by the King falling back into pagan ways. This was, he felt, another sign to leave Wessex. If Wessex was again tainted by paganism, leaving it for a foreign land was no longer quite so difficult. He thought it interesting that Bishop Birinus had not been cast out by the King’s return to paganism. It suggested that Christianity might yet be revived in Wessex. The task of that restoration would be left with the Bishop, while Athelwin went to follow his vision.

So, Athelwin would cross the border into Dumnonia, currently ruled by King Petroc. The Kingdom encompassed all the lands south west of Wessex to the sea, at the farthest end of Britannia. At least Dumnonia was Christian, albeit the Celtic form. By now he had learnt more about the island of his vision and its location. This small island, in the wetlands, seemed a perfect place for solitude. It was surrounded by dense forests of willow and alder, extensive reed-beds and of course, water. Thus, it was only accessible by boat. The Saxons of Wessex and the Celtic Britons, were often at war and the island was deep within the Celtic lands. As an increasingly well known Christian holy man, it was unlikely that he would be in any danger, even though he was a Prince of Wessex.

Living the life of a hermit meant that he would probably never leave his island. Athelwin would need people to support him, to provide food and so on. He put his plans before Bishop Birinus, for his approval, which he readily gave. Birinus liked the idea of an ‘orthodox’ hermit bringing some stability of doctrine, to what he considered a wayward



Christian population. He mulled over who best to accompany Athelwin. All the monks believed attending such a holy man was a sacred duty and any of them would be glad to join this venture. Bishop Birinus carefully chose four monks to travel with Athelwin. The first consideration was language. In Dumnonia, Brythonic was spoken. All the party, including Athelwin, had some grasp of the language, learnt by conversing with merchants visiting Wessex from the south west. Two of the monks though, were fluent in Brythonic, having once lived in the Celtic lands. The other two monks were large fellows, good for the manual work ahead.

King Cenwealh, did not interfere with his brother's decision to become a hermit. Indeed the King did not seem interested in anything spiritual, or anything else at all; his only focus at this time was his new wife!

Athelwin had his own funds as a Prince, so he used his wealth to obtain tools for building shelters, provisions for the journey, cooking pots and so on. He thought about the mission he was about to undertake. It was a long journey of many miles, well over a hundred, he supposed, though he could not visualise so great a distance. Therefore, it meant a number of days travelling. He prayed that he would not become ill on the way. He was reasonably fit, when not afflicted. Also, since his vision, he had begun to walk the land more, to increase his endurance for the journey. God had shown Athelwin the place to go, so he was going.

The monks chosen to join him looked upon it as a sacred pilgrimage. This being so, they would walk as much of the journey as possible.

So it was that a would-be-hermit and four monks left Dorchester-on-Thames pulling a heavily laden hand cart, on an early spring morning in the year of our Lord 645. They passed through the town, with its Roman square buildings, some in a ruinous state, but they still stood, as 'ghosts' of a lost imperial past.

The party decided initially to make a direct line across country, to join the ancient Ridgeway track. The hill top tracks were the main routes for travellers, before the Romans came. The Ridgeway was still well used, sweeping its way across the wide, wind rippled, 'grassland seas'. The undulating chalk downs, had many enigmatic tumuli, or barrows, studding the landscape. The mounds were the resting place of ancient chieftains and their folk. The tumuli could act as 'way-marks' for travellers and sheep drovers navigating the route in winter snow.

Even at a considerable distance from his home town, some of the people they met had heard of Athelwin, the Prince who had given up everything for the Christian God.

The continuing importance of the Roman legacy would soon become clear, when the party left the Ridgeway and joined a stretch of old Roman Road, near the pagan site of Silbury Hill. The Roman roads were the only decent direct routes in a land deep into a dark age of petty kingdoms and warfare. There was no building of roads, only the forging of spears.

The route led them, eventually, to the spectacular Roman city of Aquae Sulis (Bath). Walking through the city, Athelwin admired the large stone pillared Roman buildings and temple-like structures that still stood after all these years. They were grander than anything he had seen in his home town. The Roman pools, or baths, were a wonder to behold. Within an impressive building complex, water came up from the depths of the Earth, steaming hot, heated by unknown fires from a mysterious underworld. It was said ailments could be cured by entering, or drinking, the waters. However, Athelwin learnt that Sulis was the pagan goddess who, in the past, was directly associated with the hot springs. Consequently, he would not try healing waters that came from an unholy source. His affliction would be relieved by God, or not, as He pleased. Athelwin did not want to tarry any longer in that place of old pagan gods, or be deflected from his mission.

Meanwhile, King Penda had forcibly removed Cenwealh from the throne, presumably because he had slighted Penda's sister by divorcing her. It could not be due to Cenwealh reverting to paganism because Penda was a pagan. Whatever the reason, Cenwealh fled to East Anglia and the protection of, interestingly, the Christian, King Onna. This news may have become known to Athelwin, but, his life was now set on a different course and the secular world bothered him no longer.

Leaving Aquae Sulis, they began a crawling pace down the old Fosse Way. It remained a fairly good, stone paved, road in many places. Soon after leaving the city the road crossed into the Kingdom of Dumnonia. Travelling through this Celtic land was not a problem, as fortunately, it was a time of peace between the two kingdoms. This arterial route was always busy and so the monks were often given food by travellers. Athelwin repaid the kindness of the people with blessings.

After some days of slow travel Lindinis (Ilchester) was just ahead. As they walked into the settlement, the party was met by two boatmen, who were brothers. They had been told of Athelwin's approach by other travellers. The brothers said they would consider it an honour to take them by river to their destination. The end of their journey was in sight. The whole party was buoyed up by this prospect.

So, the last part of their venture would be via two flat bottomed boats, big enough to carry the party and the contents of their handcart.

The Celtic named river Gifl, (pronounced guyful ie the Ivel or Yeo), that flowed through Lindinis was just navigable along its meandering way to Langport, where it joined the River Parrett (also a Celtic name).

Evening was upon them, so the party was given shelter for the night, as guests of the boatmen, to be ready for the final leg of the journey on the morrow. Before resting, Athelwin attended to the locals who had already come to seek his help. He may have been an unremarkable, gaunt figure to look at, but he exuded a certain confidence. He had an aura about him that indeed felt otherworldly, something different, something intangible.

The next morning was very cold but clear and just as the sun had begun to lighten the sky, they set off, rowing, or sometimes punting, along the river Gifl. Two other men who worked for the boat owners had joined the crew. The sun rose higher. A late pinching frost had touched the land and left ice crystals glinting in the sunlight, coating the reed tops and tree branches that bent towards the water. As the land began to warm, mist drifted in skeins across the river. The sun occasionally pierced through the mist with shafts of hazy gold.

The boats passed the settlement of Langport having now entered the River Parrett. They travelled along the main course of the river, the land becoming ever wilder as they progressed. The untamed swampland encircled them. In the distance, to right and left, lay forest covered ridges, that gave a stark contrast to the flat marshes. Large bodies of open water alternated with willow and alder forests that thickly covered great swathes of the wetland. Deer could be seen splashing through the water margin, then springing away into the dark woodland interior. In other areas impenetrable reed beds stretched away in all directions.The silence was profound. Even the dipping of the oars sounded loud, an intrusion upon the brooding spirit of this place. An occasional cry, of some hidden marsh bird, echoed across the watery expanse, increasing the air of loneliness.

Then, they all saw it, the steep sided, flat-topped hill rising out of the marsh. Sunlight illuminated the bush covered slopes and summit. It was completely incongruous with the flat surroundings. A shiver ran down their spines at the reality, now before them, of Athelwin's vision.

The boatmen knew well the confusing waterways. Scattered all around them were many small islands, some just hummocks, or twisted knots, where the trees had grown together in thickets. They crossed into the River Tan (Tone), using a shortcut provided by the profusion of natural channels that networked across the wetlands, connecting the many lakes that dotted the landscape.

Finally, the island was in sight, consisting of a long low hill, almost

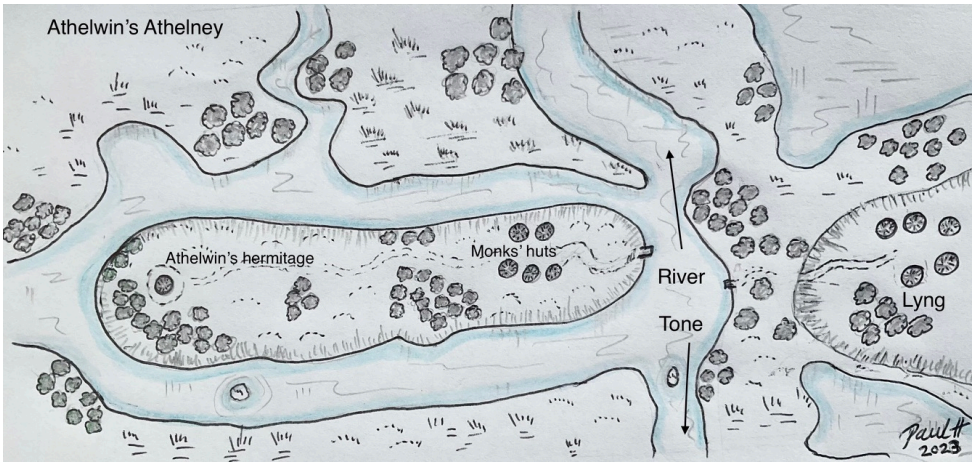
hidden in the dense vegetation. The boats passed along the island's shoreline, most of it thick with willows, or tall reeds. They were approaching another settlement, which in Saxon was known as Lyng, meaning 'a hill'. A landing upon the island was easiest at the point nearest Lyng. Although that which was called a 'landing' was merely a break in the cover where a grassy slippery bank could be climbed towards the interior. The men piloting the boats helped the monks unload the provisions, pots, pans, axes and other tools.

News had reached the area around the island that a holy man, of Royal blood, was to be 'Hermit-in-residence' upon this scrap of land. Several locals offered help in constructing dwellings. The locals were of course Celts and so, unlike the Saxon 'long houses', they built 'round houses'. These dwellings had conical, rush thatched roofs and the walls were wattle and daub. In a fairly short time, several of the round houses were built for the monks, at the Lyng end of the island. One house was dedicated as a place of worship. Athelwin's hermitage was duly completed, at the island's farthest point from the landing place. A boat was donated by the people of Lyng, to allow the monks to travel to and from the island. This small monastic community is considered to be the founding of, what would later become, a famous abbey.

Athelwin would spend most of his time within his hermitage enclosure, in prayer and contemplation. Life on the island would be punctuated by the services held in the round house church. As news of the community spread, locals would sometimes come to join in the services, bringing gifts of food, to help sustain the community that now revolved around Athelwin. The hermit's reputation began to grow in the area. People needing advice, or healing, either in body or mind, came to ask for his help. Which he gave freely, after each service he attended in the church.

Later, a short jetty was built at the 'landing' to make access easier for the increasing visitor traffic. An area was cleared for strip fields, to grow food. The community was now well established. Quite often priests and senior monks would visit. They came, initially, to guide the resident monks and Athelwin, but, later it was he who would be giving them the spiritual advice. People would travel a long way to visit the hermit, even from Wessex. Upon the island there was no distinction between Christians of Wessex and Christians of Dumnonia. All were united in the faith. Also, as Bishop Birinus had hoped, Athelwin had a positive influence on the religious practices and doctrine of the Celtic Christians.

As time went by more monks came to swell the brethren. Eventually, a 'guest house' had to be built, along with improved facilities, for the ever expanding number of people who came seeking the hermit. All this development occurred at the Lyng end of the island of course. Ac-



cess to Athelwin's sanctuary remained as a narrow path that wound through the undergrowth and was kept private, out of respect for the hermit's solitude.

In 648 King Cenwealh regained the throne of Wessex. A couple of years earlier, in 646, the King had, at last, converted to Christianity, while in exile. He was baptised, it was said, by St. Felix, Bishop of East Anglia. Hearing that his brother was successfully established as a holy hermit in the marshes, he would occasionally send the gift of silver. It was not safe for the King to enter Dumnonia, but, messages were sometimes exchanged.

Athelwin was increasingly, but unofficially, referred to as a 'saint'. He was known as St. Athelwin the Confessor. 'Confessor', because he was constantly confessing his sins to God and perhaps because people confessed their sins, or problems, to him. The practice of people formally confessing sins to a priest, or monk, was not common at this time. However, Athelwin would listen to a person's concerns and give them spiritual advice and a blessing. Life on the island followed its organised pattern for many years, with Athelwin as its focus.

Upon his death he was buried within his hermitage enclosure. People with health needs would continue to visit the old hermitage and Athelwin's grave. Here they would pray and call upon Athelwin to intercede on their behalf, to ask God to heal their infirmities. The recording of multiple miraculous cures led to official recognition, by the Catholic church, of Saint Athelwin the Confessor.

Because Athelwin lived and was then buried on the island, it became known as the 'Isle of the Prince', or in the Saxon tongue - Athelney.

Written and researched by Paul Hockey, Athelney, 2023-2024

Further information

Non fiction references in the story are from general historical facts e.g. names and dates, plus public domain sources e.g. the Saxon Chronicles. There should be no copyright on any factual information used in this story. If someone believes they have a copyright claim on any particular part of the text, any proven oversight will be given due credit, as appropriate.

Anchorites and Hermits: Note that the distinction between the two can be blurred sometimes. Both emulated the original 'Desert Fathers'.

1. **Anchorites**, Generally living a strictly solitary life. First recorded anchorite in England C11th. However, there have been anchorites throughout history in caves, or cells sometimes attached to religious buildings. Bede recorded St. Augustine consulting an anchorite in AD 602.

2. **Hermits**, mainly lived a solitary life, with many hours of prayer. However, they would usually give advice to people and might sometimes take part in any community, to work or pray.

3. **Some noted solitaries**:

Towards the end of the seventh century Guthlac of Crowland, related to the royal family of Mercia, withdrew from the monastery at Repton to an island in the Lincolnshire Fens.

Wulfric of Haselbury (died 1154) was enclosed as an anchorite in a cell built against the church in his village of Haselbury Plucknett in Somerset.

Others include - Julian of Norwich, Richard Rolle (who wrote a 'handbook' for becoming a hermit 'The Form Of Perfect Living').

4. **Point of interest**: King Centwine (676-686), recorded as a brother to Cenwealh (and so also Athelwin), believed to have abdicated and became a monk.

Athelney Abbey: King Alfred expanded the original monastic community into an abbey around 888, in thanks for the refuge he found there in 878. Dedicated to St. Peter, St. Paul and St. Athelwin.

Athelwin's Age: speculation only - Athelwin's father, King Cynegils born 575, King between 611- 643. Perhaps Athelwin may have been born about 620-21? Thus he would be 23 - 24 when travelling to Athelney.

Athelwin's feast day: two dates mentioned - Sept 18 (source: Downside Abbey), Nov 26 (source: Catholic Saints).

Athelwin's possible illness: William of Malmesbury mentions a

'chronic disease'. I speculate that it was Crohn's Disease as possibly suffered by King Alfred and his grandson King Eadred.

Bishop Birinus: sent by Pope Honorius to bring Roman style Catholicism to Britannia. Later became a saint. Died in Dorchester-on-Thames, 649 or 650.

Celtic or Insular Christianity: the form of Christian religion left in Britannia after the Romans left. It was still Catholic, but, developed its own practices, especially with regards the natural world. The European church was more organised and disciplined.

Celtic Christianity was displaced by the, initially, pagan Saxon invaders and pushed back into the remaining Celtic lands. Once the Saxons had been converted to the 'European' style Catholic church, the Celtic Christian tradition was gradually absorbed, this was speeded up by the ever expanding Saxon Kingdoms taking over most of the Celtic lands.

Crohn's Disease: causes unsure, could be a genetic connection. Can be triggered by another ailment therefore my inclusion of 'Winter Fever' in the story. Often presents between 15 - 30years old. Exacerbated by wrong diet, can be managed by correct diet.

Dumnonia: name for the Celtic land encompassing Cornwall, Devon and part of Somerset. Also sometimes called West Wales. King Petroc (633-654)

King Oswald of Northumbria: stood as sponsor for the baptism on King Cynegils and married Cynegils' daughter. Oswald died in battle in 642 fighting King Penda of Mercia.

River Ivel or Yeo: The name Ivel derives from the Celtic Gifl meaning 'forked river'. The word Yeo derives from later Middle English ea meaning 'river'.

Saint Felix of Burgundy: Bishop of East Anglia. Died 648.

Saxon or Anglo-Saxon: the term Anglo-Saxon seems to have emerged in the late C8th. So it is beyond the time line of this narrative.

Sulis, (or Romano British) **Sulis-Minerva**: Goddess of healing, wells and waterways, especially Bath.

© The author retains the copyright to this work.