

THE ICON OF SAINTS AETHELHEARD AND HEREFRITH



People watching the St James' Services, out of necessity currently streaming from the Rectory during the Covid-19 pandemic, cannot fail to have noticed the gold 'painting' of two saintly figures standing next to the temporary altar table. What exactly is its significance and why is it there?

It is of course an icon and the figures are the two local Saints Aethelheard and Herefrith. This icon was presented to St James' Church in 2015 by the Orthodox Church of St Aethelheard which is based in one of the two chapels in Louth cemetery. It was painted by Sheila Read - in orthodoxy this would be termed 'written by Thecla Read' – and until recently has stood on its easel to the side of the altar in St James' chancel.

The two figures illustrate to us the very long tradition of Christianity in Louth. The discovery of the 'Louth Cross' in the Rectory garden in 2015 takes Louth's Christian heritage back to the mid-10th century when the cross was erected to proclaim the triumphant return of the Bishops of Lindsey after the area was reclaimed from the Danish Vikings but St Herefrith takes us back further to the 9th century and St Aethelheard further back still to the latter years of the 8th century.

SAINT AETHELHEARD

Although nothing is known of Aethelheard's early life he first appears in the historical record as '*Abbas Hludensis Monasterii*' i.e. the Abbot of Louth Monastery. Without this record the presence of a Saxon monastery or minster in Louth would have been unknown to us. The minster is likely to have been founded in the late-7th or early-8th century along with several other sites in Lincolnshire that were founded at this time under royal patronage.

In 792 the Anglo Saxon Chronicle tells us Abbot Aethelheard of Louth Monastery was elevated to the highest church position in England as Archbishop of Canterbury under the direct influence of the great Mercian King Offa. This appointment certainly strengthens the belief that Louth was already an important religious centre by that time and probably of education too as a letter of support from Bishop Eadwulf of Lindsey reminds Aethelheard that he had once been his teacher at his monastery.



Aethelheard was consecrated on 21st July 793 and during Offa's lifetime he is known to have attested royal charters and to have had coins minted in his own name. The coin illustrated has the title OFFA REX on one side and AEDILHEARD ARCEP on the other.

(Credit - Wikimedia Commons and the Portable Antiquities Scheme).

Aethelheard became Archbishop at a difficult time and when Offa died in 796 the men of Kent rose up against their Mercian overlords and Aethelheard had to flee into exile for two years. In 801 Aethelheard along with the Bishop of Winchester travelled to Rome to present letters on behalf of the king to Pope Leo III. He was a reforming Archbishop who convened important councils and by his diplomacy was eventually able to restore his see at Canterbury.

Aethelheard died on 12 May 805 and was buried at Christ Church, Canterbury. It is said that he was "*an effective and energetic archbishop, concerned both to preserve the integrity and endowment of his see and to ensure the health and discipline of the English church.*"

SAINT HEREFRITH



Replica of a Saxon Comb - The Collection, Lincoln

St Herefrith's importance to Louth in the historical records is in little doubt but scholars have long debated who he actually was. One theory now disproved, but made at a time when little evidence was to hand, suggested he was the Bishop of Auxerre. Another suggested that he was an Abbot of Lindisfarne and a contemporary of St Cuthbert and Bede and yet another that he was one of the last (unrecorded) Bishops of Lindsey, perhaps martyred by the Vikings in c.873, and buried at Louth.

In time a shrine must have been built for him at Louth as we learn from an 11th century account that around 973 a raid on Louth had taken place by the monks of Thorney near Peterborough who were looking for relics with which to endow their new monastery -

“Not long afterwards (Aethelwold) heard of the merits of the blessed Herefrid bishop of Lincoln resting in Louth chief town of the same church. When all those dwelling there had been put to sleep by a cunning ruse, a trusty servant took him out of the ground, wrapped him in fine linen cloth, and with all his fellows rejoicing brought him to the monastery of Thorney and re-interred him”.

There is clear evidence that a church at Louth was dedicated to St Herefrith and this must have developed from the earlier shrine that had once been raided by the monks of Thorney. Herefrith's feast day February 27th was observed well into the 15th century when all manorial business was suspended. In 1257 a land agreement was made *‘in the church of St Herefridus of Louth’* and in 1299 Richard Farford wished to be buried *‘in the church of the blessed Herefrid of Louth’*. The gild of St Mary of Louth had established a chapel within the church of St Herefrith of Louth and was paying for a chaplain to perform services there in 1318.

At the same time that the church of St Herefrith was in existence there is evidence too (from as early as 1235) of a church dedicated to St James. There must have either been two separate churches or one that had a dual dedication with the earlier cult being gradually supplanted by the hugely popular St James in the later medieval period. The latter theory would accord well with a church that had developed from a former Anglo-Saxon monastic site and this type of re-dedication is replicated at other sites around England. The expansion of the town and its enrichment through trade in the 15th century resulted in the great rebuilding of the church that we see today. However, St Herefrith was still not forgotten for in an inventory of St James' church in 1486 we find there is included *‘j come of ivery that was saynt Herefridis’* – surely a saintly relic that had been preserved from his earlier shrine - and in an inventory of the high choir goods of 1514-15 we find an altar cloth stained with the images of St James and St Herefrith and a cloth arras of Saynt Herefrith that was hung at the altar end.

So our icon, though in itself modern, is important in illustrating the longevity of the Christian tradition in Louth and is a symbol of hope for the future. During those 1300 years Louth has from time to time had to overcome famine, flood, war and invasion and yes, plague. Those that helped the townspeople in the great plague of 1631 are still remembered in the historical record and now in the present emergency the townspeople of Louth, whether of faith or not, will be called upon again. The church too will play its part, as will many others, and with this unity and the great community spirit of Louth we will eventually prevail once more.



Written during the COVID-19 Pandemic, March 2020