

# Saint Kenelm

*anon*

*from the fourteenth century South English Legendary, a compilation of saints' lives in verse*

**Translated and retold in Modern English prose  
by**

**Richard Scott-Robinson**

This saint's life has been translated and retold from: Charlotte d'Evelyn and Anna J Mill (eds), 1956, reprinted 1967. The South English Legendary, Volume I. Published for the Early English Text Society by Oxford University Press. Story taken from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 145.

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# The Legend of Saint Kenelm

anon  
*thirteenth century*

**S**aint Kenelm þe yonge kyng · þat holy martir is · kyng he was of Engeland · of þe March of Walis – The young king and holy martyr, Saint Kenelm, was once King of Mercia, in England and in the Welsh Marches. His father, King Kenulf, built the abbey at Winchcombe in Gloucestershire and is still buried there to this day, in the abbey that he built, for Winchcombe was a great city in those days, the finest in that half of England, the best in the whole kingdom of Mercia.

There were five kings in England at this time, for England was long and broad enough; eight hundred miles in length, from south to north, and two hundred miles from east to west. And there are many good sources of water here, as everyone can see, the three foremost amongst these being the river Humber, the Thames and the river Severn. The Humber flows into the North Sea, the Thames into the East Sea and the river Severn flows into the west. Each of these five kings ruled his lands independently, by tradition and in accordance with the law, although the King of Mercia had the largest share of England, which included Worcestershire, Warwickshire, and Gloucestershire, all in the bishopric of Worcester, Chestershire [Cheshire], Derbyshire and Staffordshire, that are now in the care of the Bishop of Chester, also half of Shropshire, Warwickshire and Herefordshire as one diocese, that is to say, half of Shropshire, a little of Warwickshire, Herefordshire and a part of Gloucestershire that are now in the bishopric of Hereford; and yet still more did the King of Mercia have, for he ruled over Northamptonshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Hertfordshire and Nottinghamshire as well. And all this land was called the Welsh Marches, or Mercia, and both Saint Kenelm and his father before him once ruled over it in peace, and Winchcombe was its chief city.

*Saint Kenelm was an early English king of the kingdom of Mercia in the ninth century AD. Like Saint Brendan, his story may contain some intriguing instances of pagan elements that were purposely incorporated into Christian hagiography.*

*The life of Saint Kenelm is found in the South English Legendary, a compilation of saints' lives and other material that was added to throughout the fourteenth century, deriving partly from the Legenda Aurea, a Latin work completed in about 1267. The massive Gilte Legende of 1438 includes this story of Saint Kenelm in three out of the eight copies that survive to this day.*

*The version of the story here is identical to that found in the South English Legendary in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 145, dating to the early fourteenth century.*

Of these five kingdoms of England, the first was Kent, the next, as I have explained, was Mercia, then Wessex, Humberland [Northumberland] and Eastland [East Anglia]. These five independent kingdoms made up England at this time. The King of Wessex had all of Wiltshire, Dorset and Berkshire, which now form the diocese of the Bishop of Salisbury, but in those days Sherborne was the principal seat, and the king also held

Sussex, the Weald and all the diocese of Chichester, Southamptonshire [Hampshire] and Surrey that form the diocese of Winchester, then as now. Somerset at this time looked to Wells but is now in the diocese of Bath, as you all know, and in addition, the king of Wessex ruled over Devonshire and Cornwall, whose bishop was at Exeter. The King of Kent ruled over all of Kent, which included the diocese of Canterbury, whose bishop is the highest in all England, and the diocese of Rochester, to the west. The King of Eastland [East Anglia] ruled over Norfolk whose bishop was at Norwich, over Suffolk and the diocese controlled from the Isle of Ely, and also Grantabridgeshire [Cambridgeshire]. Saint Edmund ruled over this country and he was slain there, as you know. The King of Northumberland was the ruler, I understand, of all the land beyond the River



Humber, as far north as Scotland, of the see of the Archbishop of York, and of Durham; Saint Oswald was king of all this, I know. Thus there were many kings in England, and their lands were divided in this way, as I believe.

The King of Mercia, as I began by saying, was called King Kenulf. He was a good man and a holy one and he had two daughters, Borunuld and Queindrid, and also a young son, Saint Kenelm, who was his heir. And in the twenty-fourth year of his reign, King Kenulf left this world for the joy of heaven.

This was eight hundred and nineteen years after the birth of Christ, if such things are to be reckoned correctly. His young son Kenelm was barely seven years old at the time, but was crowned King of Mercia nonetheless, despite his young age. His sister Borunuld loved him and sought to guide him in the ways of goodness, but his other sister, Queindrid, shared none of her sister's virtue and turned her thoughts to criminality and wickedness. She saw that her younger brother, who was not yet seven years old, was made king over all that her father had ruled and she fell prey to a great jealousy of the boy who by inheritance was now much richer than she. And Queindrid thought that if she could somehow contrive to bring about her brother's death then she would necessarily become queen in his place, and so she occupied her days and some sleepless nights giving thought to how she could kill him.

Queindrid decided to use a deadly poison. But rather than causing the agonising death she had envisaged for her brother, it had no effect on Kenelm at all. He drank it down but seemed none the worse for it. God had no plans for Saint Kenelm to be so easily martyred. If Queindrid was to succeed in her evil plans, she recognised that she would have to find some other means of killing her brother. Since she had drawn a blank with the poison, she thought again.

The young child had a guardian called Askebard, a man well placed for treachery, since nobody is better able to commit treason than someone who is very close to the intended victim. This wicked sister Queindrid began to hatch a dastardly plot, for there is no

depravity to which the mind of a woman cannot sink. She approached Askebard with a plan to murder this young child, offering Askebard rewards in plenty, and her body to do with as he wished. These two villains were soon of one accord and discussed together how they might best accomplish this wicked crime. And while they plotted their coup, the young boy dreamed a strange dream as he lay asleep.

Kenelm dreamed that a tree was standing beside his bed; it spread its branches widely about him and reached to the stars. This tree was fair and noble enough! Its boughs were filled with blossom and fruit and there shone among its branches such a light from lamps and candles that no tree can ever have appeared so beautiful! Kenelm dreamed that he climbed to the very highest bough of this tree and looked over the entire world and all its vanity. And whilst he was gazing from this topmost branch, he thought that one of his closest friends, one whom he trusted the most, was standing on the ground beneath the tree with an axe. The tree fell and Kenelm became a little bird – he dreamed – and began to fly joyfully towards heaven.



When this little child awoke from his sleep he wondered greatly what this strange dream might mean. Such thoughts occupied him to the exclusion of all else when he rose from his bed at Winchcombe, and the more he thought about the matter the more he wondered at it. It began to trouble him so much that in the end he went to see his nurse. She had fed him with her milk when he was a baby and she was the person whom he trusted the most; her name was Olwen and this little boy went to her and told her in confidence all that he had dreamed.

When Olwen had heard from Kenelm all the details, she began to sigh and stood deep in thought, then: ‘Alas!’ she cried. ‘Alas that I should see this day! Alas, my child, my little sweet-heart, that you should have to suffer this! Your sister is plotting your death. And the bird that you became, and which flew up to heaven, was your soul, which will do this when you die.’

And the dream turned out to be true.

Askebard suggested one day soon afterwards that Kenelm should go hunting in the depths of the forest, and that he, as a matter of course, should go with him as his protector. So they went into the forest around the Clent Hills, in Worcestershire, giving every appearance that they were there to enjoy themselves on a hunting expedition. As they searched through the forest, Saint Kenelm became weary and lay down to rest. And as he slept, Askebard took the opportunity to sneak off to a secluded spot in the surrounding woodland and to dig a pit to bury the child in. This child began to wake up, as though aware that Askebard was suddenly nowhere to be seen, and although he had no idea where Askebard was nor what he was doing, may the Lord be a witness to this, he

shouted out to his friend and guardian: 'You are wasting your effort and will gain only frustration, for I shall die in another place, and that is God's will! And this pole here shall offer confirmation of this place where your wicked thoughts decree that I shall be martyred.'

They continued through the forest then, this wicked guardian and the child, until they came to another place. And Askebard grasped the pole and thrust it into the ground, and quickly it began to come into leaf and was soon completely covered in foliage. A great ash tree has since grown in this place and can be found here to this day, declaring the might of Saint Kenelm and Our Lord's grace.

Wicked Askebard seized hold of this child and led him as men do a thief to the gallows. He took him to a secluded place in a deep valley between two high hills [Clent Hill and Walton Hill]. This child knew what was happening, he knew Askebard's wicked intentions although Askebard had said nothing to him as they went along. And as Askebard appeared willing to hesitate and prolong matters Saint Kenelm urged him to get on with it. He began to sing a psalm that is heard every day in church, the *Te Deum Laudamus*, and made ready to get down onto the ground. And when he came to a certain holy verse that was sung then as well as now, in Latin, and in English is: The valiant army of martyrs praise thee... as soon as he had sung this verse, as I find in my book, the wicked Askebard cut off his head beneath a hawthorn tree, for it was God's will that Saint Kenelm should be martyred. A dove, as white as snow, flew out of Saint Kenelm's body and could be seen ascending into the sky towards heaven. Saint Kenelm was scarcely seven years old when he was martyred, and the truth of his dream had been fully borne out.



The wicked man who had killed him began to dig furiously, made a deep pit and threw the body into it, burying it so securely that nobody could find it. Then he went his way, letting the body remain there.

Askebard left the forest and went straight away to seek out Queindrid and when he had found her, he told her everything that he had done, down to the very last detail. She was at once very happy and put her plans to seize the kingdom and all of its manors into immediate effect. She made herself Queen of Mercia, conducting her affairs with a devious hand to which evil came all too naturally. She roamed up and down the kingdom, securing every man's allegiance; but her rule was stern and she held her men in sorrow and wretchedness. She rode to every town in the company of the devil! And as her standing had risen, so it fell. She commanded that nobody should be mad enough to so much as mention her brother's name, for love nor for fear. And if anyone disobeyed this command, she would have their head cut off! This is how the wicked Queen Queindrid ruled; she forbade any mention of her brother's name, and the people were terrified of

her.

And so lay the holy body of a boy whom no one was allowed to speak of, buried in a lonely glade in a forest. And time began to forget, since no one was allowed to remember. But God had no plans to allow Saint Kenelm's murder to go unavenged. Although nobody thought of him, God did not wish his memory to disappear entirely. When no thinking man would acknowledge the boy, God caused a dumb beast to do so.

A widow had a white cow that was free to graze during the day in the woods and clearings of the forest round about where Saint Kenelm was buried. Every day, when this cow was let loose with others from the village to find fodder for herself in the woods, she would leave the herd and go straight into the valley where Saint Kenelm was buried and there, sit beside his holy body until evening, as though honouring him. This cow



sat alone there all day without eating. And when evening came she would make her way home and be so fat and round and so full of milk that it was remarked upon and wondered at, because none of the other cows gave nearly as much milk as she did! And this cow would be as full again in the morning, although she had been milked the previous evening! Whoever owned such a cow would have no reason to lament, even if his larder was empty and his summer-pastures grazed bare! The folk who knew of this wonder enthusiastically followed the cow one day and saw where she sat in the secluded valley and re-

turned to the village again in the evening without having eaten any grass at all. But as to why the cow sat there, nobody had the slightest idea, although they had a feeling that it might have some deep significance, for the cow went there every day. They named this valley Cowbach [Clatterbach], and it is still called that. This holy body lay in Cowbach for many years and nobody had any inkling that it was there, as I have said, for his sister was so fierce and so arrogant, and so threatening, that no one dared even mention the poor child's name.

Although this holy body could not be uncovered in England, Our Lord, who is all-knowing, set events in motion that would lead to its discovery, for as the Pope sang Mass at Rome one day, in Saint Peter's Church, it is told, a dove that was as white as snow flew down from heaven and laid a written message upon the altar. Then it flew back to heaven again. The message was shining white and written in letters of gold; the Pope thanked Jesus Christ, and everyone else in the church did so as well! When the Mass was finished the Pope took this holy message and tried to read it, but found that he could not understand the words, for it was written in English and he did not speak any English. So he had every foreigner in Rome summoned to him, to see if any of them could understand it. And it happened that there were some Englishmen in Rome who knew exactly what the message said when it was read to them. The text was in pure English

and to paraphrase it without rhyme it said: 'In Clent, Cowbach, Kenelm the king's son lies under a thorn tree with his head removed.'

This message from God was splendidly received, held in great honour and accounted a great relic, as it still is, one of the greatest relics in all of Rome; and so it should be when one considers that it came from heaven, from the hand of Our Lord himself! The Pope decreed that Saint Kenelm's Day [17th July] should be observed in Rome as a great holiday. And when the Pope understood the contents of this miraculous communication he sent messengers into England, to the Archbishop of Canterbury, who at this time was Wilfred. The Pope sent letters urging Wilfred to seek out Clent, if anybody had heard of the place, and then a thorn tree in Cowbach, as it was written, and to look for the holy body that lay there undiscovered. And when it was found, he was to treat it with all reverence and arrange that a shrine be built for it.

When this letter arrived in Canterbury, the Archbishop quickly sought the advice of all his bishops and learned clerics and a search was instigated in the Clent Hills, which lay in Worcestershire, and the body was found just as the Pope had said it would be, under a thorn tree in Cowbach. And the miracle of the wandering cow speeded up the search considerably, for all the villagers of the district who had been enlisted to search for the body suspected where it must lie from the very outset. And as they lifted Saint Kenelm's holy body from the ground, a spring issued forth from the rock where his body had lain, a stream of clear water that is flowing to this day. This spring still exists, as witnesses will confirm, and it is called Saint Kenelm's Well and it is visited by folk from far and wide and its water has brought many people from sickness into health.

The people of the city of Winchcombe and its surrounding countryside formed by far the greatest number of folk laying claim to the body, and they were supported by the bishops of England, who decreed that Saint Kenelm should have a shrine beside his father's at Winchcombe, in the abbey that his father King Kenulf had built. And so the men of Gloucestershire took up the body and bore it in procession towards Winchcombe. But the Worcestershire folk, from the countryside surrounding the Clent Hills, consulted amongst themselves and swore that the body belonged to Worcestershire and they would not let it be stolen from them. It should stay in the shire where it was found!

Now beside a river at a place called Pireford these two factions set upon one another, in a struggle for possession of the body, and at last they agreed to a form of peace whereby God's will would be sought while they were both there, if he would declare it to them, since both groups were weary through their exertions and everyone wanted to sleep. So an agreement was made that both sides should lie down and rest, and that whichever side should awaken first, they should take up the body and continue their journey unhindered. So they all lay down and fell fast asleep for weariness, as Our Lord wished, and those of Gloucestershire began to wake up first, at the time that God had ordained, and none of the men of Worcestershire woke at all. So the men of Gloucestershire took up the body and continued their journey in peace, taking the body of Saint Kenelm with them, and when they had gone five miles, the folk of Worcestershire began to wake

up. As soon as the Worcestershire folk became aware that they had been left sleeping, they quickly began to pursue the men of Gloucestershire, but they could not overtake them.

The men of Gloucestershire bore the holy body towards Winchcombe, but before they could reach the city they became so weary that when they came to a wood a little to the east of the city, on the very edge of the Cotswolds, they decided to rest, since they were so close to their destination. And they were so thirsty that they prayed to God – for Saint Kenelm’s love! – to send them some water to drink. A spring of cold water appeared beside them at once! It is still there, up on the downs, half a mile from Winchcombe, dressed with stone and blessed, so that anyone coming this way can drink from it. And the monks of Winchcombe Abbey have since built a chapel beside this spring, dedicated to Saint Kenelm, and many pilgrims visit it.

The wicked Queen Queindrid was at Winchcombe at this time and she had no idea that her brother was so near. She knew nothing about the miraculous message that the Archbishop of Canterbury had learned of from the Pope, or the search for her brother’s body in Worcestershire. She sat in the Church of Saint Peter by the gates of the abbey, in a private room on the east side. And looking out of the window, she saw this great throng of people coming down off the hills towards the south gate of the city and she asked who these people were and what might be their business. She was told that they were taking the body of her brother Saint Kenelm to a church.

Queindrid was struck with fear! She grabbed hold of her Psalter as though she had lost her wits and turned to the last psalm before evensong, psalm one hundred and nine, that treats of one falsely accused and seeks to curse a wicked oppressor! *Deus laudem* it is called; the Queen hurriedly read it out loud in an attempt to curse her brother’s body and the men who were carrying him in accusation of her. And when she came to the nineteenth verse, that reaches the climax of a curse, namely *hoc opus eorum* in Latin, repeating once more a plea that God turn a false accuser’s curse upon his own head, her own head burst open as she read that verse! As she spoke these words, both her eyes popped out of their sockets and fell onto the Psalter! And I think this was a very good thing to have happened! She had never repented what she had done; she was proud of her treachery and received a just reward. This Psalter is still at Winchcombe, and whoever may care to can go and look at the marks that the eye balls made on this book.

The holy body of Saint Kenelm was carried at last with great honour into the abbey and put into a noble shrine, where it lies still. The wicked Queindrid died soon afterwards, in shame enough, and her body was flung into a filthy ditch, the most stinking and putrid that was to hand, and men relieved themselves into it; but such a shameful thing is not to be condoned. Now, God, for the love of Saint Kenelm, send us His sweet grace, that we might attain that Everlasting Joy that Saint Kenelm has achieved.