

Saint Edmund

There has been renewed speculation recently about the place of St Edmund's martyrdom. Clergy and laymen who have used the Ancient Library over the years would have had a number of books to refer to about the Edmund story.

The Churchwarden's booklist of 1599 mentions Polydore Virgil's *Historiae Angliae* [Basle, 1570] and Holinshed's *Chronicles* [London, 1586-7]. Polydore Virgil, writing in Latin, tells how the Danes came to avenge the murder of Lothebric, the fowler, before a detailed description of his death and the story of the wolf. Holinshed, writing in English, has Edmund surrendering to the Danes at Framlingham before 'they bound him to a tree, and shot arrows at him till he died: and afterwards cut off his head from his bodie, and threw the same into a thicke grove of bushes.'

Early in the seventeenth century, Edward White, who was a Burgess of the Common Council of the town, gave two volumes of collections of Latin Chronicles printed in Frankfurt in 1601 and 1603. These have six accounts of St Edmund ranging from Asser (King Alfred's biographer), writing in the late ninth century to William of Malmesbury, writing in the 1120s. Asser merely states that Edmund was defeated by the Danes. William, on the other hand, gives plenty of detail in his two books *Gesta Regum* and *Gesta Pontificum*. He explains why King Cnut thought that Edmund had killed his father, Sweyn, and describes miracles in which Edmund's severed head is re-joined to his body; a blind man is cured; thieves are thwarted; a rash youth is sent mad; Abbot Leofstan's fingers become crippled and the marvellous qualities of Edmund's hair and nail clippings. None of these chroniclers say where Edmund was killed, but they say that the Danes came to Thetford. William of Malmesbury records that 'Cnut erected a minster of royal munificence [at Bury St Edmunds], installed an abbot and monks, and contributed money and great estates: the generosity of his gifts which remain intact to this day, ensured that the place can be regard almost all of the monasteries in England as beneath it.'

There are suggestions of place however in two books given by prominent citizens around 1680. Robert Plummer, a barber who lived at 5 Angel Hill, gave Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* [London, 1570]. This book puts forward either Halesdon or Bury itself and has Edmund saying to Inguar, the Dane: 'Edmundus the christened king, for the love of this temporal lyfe, wil [sic] not subject himself to a Pagane Duke, unless before he become a Christian.' John Clarke, a goldsmith and alderman, gave Speed's *Historie of Great Britaine* [London, 1623] which asserts that Edmund was slain at Heglisdune before his burial at Saint Edmondsbury.

Three other books donated in the eighteenth century throw no further light on the matter.

Some of these books will be on display in the Treasury for the 'St Edmund Conference' organised by the University of East Anglia in the Cathedral on 25-27 March and until May.

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