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AN HISTORIC PAINTING AT ALL SAINTS CHURCH

By Barry Jolly and Ian Stevenson

It is now one hundred years since James Eadie Reid painted the picture which adorns the entrance to All Saints Church, Milford. The painting was displayed at first in the church hall on its opening by the Archdeacon of Winchester, William Fearon, on 17th November 1915, moving to the interior of the church itself at a later date. It depicts the Baptism of Cynegils by Bishop Birinus, and includes a local flavour in that Eadie Reid used the vicar, the Reverend Mark Collet, and parishioners as models for the various characters in the scene.



The Conversion of Cynegils - J Eadie Reid.

The event is significant in that Cynegils was king of the Gewisse, or West Saxons, from 611 to 642¹, and the first to be converted to Christianity. This was a major development in converting the southern part of England as a Christian area. Religious belief may have been subservient to political expediency, however, as Cynegils' motivation in conversion lay in a desire for an alliance with King Oswald of Northumbria against the Kingdom of Mercia. Oswald, himself recently converted, refused to countenance an alliance with a heathen. Given that he had only just (in 634) been involved in the killing of his older and pagan brother, Eanfrith, such an attitude may well have been understandable. Eanfrith was no saint himself, having ascended

the throne only the previous year after being involved in the killing of their uncle Edwin.²

Oswald, though, was a saint, having taken very active steps to promote Christianity from the moment he became king. Although his attention was focused primarily on Northumbria, it is clear that this also involved encouraging Cynegils to convert.

Birinus had only just, in the same year of 634, been appointed as a bishop, in Genoa. His name is Frankish, but his nationality remains uncertain. Following the successful mission of St. Augustin who had landed in Kent, Pope Honorius I charged Birinus to convert pagan Saxons.³ He is believed to have landed in Hampshire - Hamwic (now the St. Mary's area of Southampton) or Portchester being the locations suggested by most historians. Travelling north, he reached Dorchester-on-Thames, the seat of the kingdom of the West Saxons. It would appear that, contrary to his earlier intentions, he stayed in the area because of the continuing strength of paganism there.⁴

Legend has it that on embarking in France, Birinus had left without an all important corporale, or communion cloth. He asked the ship's Anglo-Saxon crew to return and, on their refusal, walked across the sea to retrieve it. According to an early nineteenth century account, the crew, "being struck by the miracle which they had witnessed, lent a docile ear to his instructions; thus our apostle began the conversion of the West Saxons before he had landed upon their territory."⁵

Given Cynegils' desire for an alliance with Oswald, the timing of Birinus' commission was opportune, and Cynegils converted in 635. The alliance was cemented by Oswald marrying Cynegils' daughter, Kyneburga⁶, as well as standing as godfather to Cynegils. Birinus also baptised Cynegils' son Cwichelm in 636 and his grandson Cuthred in 639 for whom he was also godfather.² However, Cenwahl, Cynegils' second son and, more significantly, successor, was not converted, indicating the continuing strength of paganism amongst the West Saxons, and emphasising the challenge facing Birinus.⁷

Birinus was created Bishop of Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, appointed jointly by Cynegils and Oswald. Some time after his death in 649, his remains, once an object of pilgrimage, are believed to have been transferred to Winchester at the time of the Bishop of Dorchester-on-Thames moving his seat there. The cathedral was replaced by a mediaeval abbey which is now the parish church. The present day Roman Catholic Church in Dorchester-on-Thames is the Church of St. Birinus.⁸

Only a few of the various figures in the painting are clearly identifiable. It is probably Bishop Birinus who stands with arms outstretched to receive Cynegils into the Christian church, rather than the bearded man holding the bishop's mitre.⁹ Cynegils

himself steps out of the stream reaching out to King Oswald of Northumbria who stood as his godfather. The one woman in the scene, in red on the far right, may well be Cynegil's daughter, the wife to be of Oswald. The young man in front of her may be Cwicheim. As hunting was very much a royal pastime, the inclusion of what appears to be a hunter with hunting dog¹ emphasises the royal nature of the occasion. The crucifer (bearer of the cross) and the soldier emphasise the power of church and state.

Church records do not provide any indication of why this significant event should have been commemorated by a painting in All Saints Church. The use of local people as models is a common practice amongst artists, with a very notable local example being the acclaimed mural by Phoebe Anna Traquair at All Saints Church in nearby Thorney Hill. Many local people were used as models for that mural, together with more famous figures including William Blake, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Louis Pasteur and Lord William Cecil, Bishop of Exeter.¹⁰

All Saints, Milford-on-Sea, by way of contrast, can boast only the vicar, Mark Collet being identifiable, representing St. Birinus amongst the very much smaller number of figures in the painting. Reverend Mark Cubbon Humphrys Collet was born in c1867, the son of J Collet of Bromley. He was educated at Sherborne School and Trinity Hall, Cambridge. Ordained at Durham in 1891, he was a curate at two churches in the North East - St John's, Sunderland (1890-2), initially as a deacon, and West Hartlepool (1892-1901) - before becoming vicar of St. Hilda's, Sunderland (1901-9). He spent the next ten years at Milford, before moving to be vicar at Frensham in Surrey. He was later appointed Rural Dean of Farnham (1923) and an honorary Canon of Guildford Cathedral in 1936, dying in October of that year.¹¹

TO THE GLORY OF GOD
AND IN MEMORY OF
MARK COLLET
HONORARY CANON OF GUILDFORD
CATHEDRAL
VICAR OF THIS PARISH 1919-1936
THE ALTAR CROSS AND CANDLESTICKS
WERE GIVEN BY THE PARISHIONERS AS
A MARK OF THEIR AFFECTION AND ESTEEM¹

Memorial inscription in the church at Frensham

Intriguingly, Mark Collet was not alone in Frensham, as Eadie Reid is recorded as having died there on 3rd May 1928.¹² This small point of detail opens up questions about the relationship between the two.

¹ It is thought that the dog may have belonged to the Vicar.

As noted above, Mark Collet worked in the North East of England in the early years of the twentieth century. This was at the same time as Eadie Reid, who worked for the stained glass firm Gateshead Stained Glass Company as chief designer from 1900 until 1908.¹³

James Eadie Reid was born in Dundee, although the year is unclear. Most sources put his birth in 1856, but the only record found indicating his age is the Census of 1901.



All Saints, Milford shortly before Eadie Reid's visit

In that year he was living with Reverend William Theodore Jupp, the vicar of St. Columba, Southwick near Sunderland. The census record is unusually clearly written, and his stated age is unquestionably 35, giving a birth year of 1866. His occupation is shown as 'Artist Sculp(tor)'.⁹ By this date, he had already decorated St. Columba's Church with a range of murals.¹⁴ He had earlier worked for the Dundee Advertiser as an illustrator, and also

undertook some work for D'Arcy Thompson, at that time Professor of Biology (later Natural History) at University College, Dundee and an influential pioneer of mathematical biology.¹⁵

Eadie Reid's work whilst in Gateshead is remarkable. Two pages on Flickr provide a wonderful selection of stained glass memorials in churches not only in the North East but elsewhere in the country too.¹⁶ North Eastern churches in Hylton, Southwick, Cleadon, West Boldon, Gateshead, Whitley Bay, and Sunderland vie with Staverton in Northamptonshire, Hanley and Ipstones in Staffordshire, and Leicester. His 1902 painting at Cheltenham Ladies College - *The Dream of Fair Women*¹⁷ - is also of this period, as is the stained glass window at nearby Bishop's Cleeve. The stained glass memorial erected in All Saints, Cleadon (near Sunderland) in 1901¹⁸ is a forerunner of many more war memorials during the Great War of 1914-8.

The questions of how and when Mark Collet and Eadie Reid first met must remain, for the moment at least, a matter of conjecture, but Collet would certainly have known of Eadie Reid's work from his time in the Sunderland area. On the other hand, it is rather more certain that Collet, some time after moving to Milford, invited Eadie Reid to produce a painting that symbolised both the birth of Christianity in the South of England and the ancient union of Northumbria and Wessex of a millennium and more earlier, and that this cemented a friendship which endured for the rest of their lives.

NOTES

- ¹ Barbara Yorke, 'Cynegils (d. 642)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6988, accessed 21 Sept 2015]
- ² Oswald's father Aethelfrith, had converted in 625 and it is probable that Oswald converted at the same time. D. J. Craig, 'Oswald [St Oswald] (603/4–642)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20916, accessed 21 Sept 2015]
- ³ Barbara Yorke, 'Birinun [St Birinus] (d. c.650)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/2453, accessed 21 Sept 2015]
- ⁴ Stenton Frank M *Anglo-Saxon England* p 102 OUP Oxford 2001
- ⁵ James Dugdale *The New British Traveller: Or, Modern Panorama of England and Wales; Exhibiting ... an ... Account, Historical, Topographical, and Statistical, of this ... Portion of the British Empire ... Interspersed with Biographical Particulars of Eminent and Remarkable Persons, Volume 2* pp 538-9 J. Robins and Company, 1819
- ⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oswald_of_Northumbria, citing Tudor, Victoria, "Reginald's *Life of St Oswald*", in C. Stancliffe and E. Cambridge (eds), *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint* (1995, 1996). ISBN 1-871615-51-8 . This article supplements note 2 for St Oswald.
- ⁷ Stenton pp 117-8. It was to be more than a decade later that Cenwahl finally converted.
- ⁸ Web sites of the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches in Dorchester on Thames: <http://www.dorchester-abbey.org.uk/> ; <http://www.stbirinus.co.uk/> https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorchester_Abbey
- ⁹ Tradition dictates that the bishop's crosier is always held in the left hand, this figure would therefore be an aide. However recent this tradition may be, it is one that would have been understood by modern congregations.
- ¹⁰ Web site of All Saints Thorney Hill: <http://bransgore.org/all-saints/>
- ¹¹ John Venn & J A Venn (Eds) *Alumni Cantabrigienses: A Biographical List of All Known Students, Graduates and Holders of Office at the University of Cambridge, from the Earliest Times to 1900* Cambridge University Press, Digital Edition 1911.
- ¹² Ancestry.
- ¹³ Imaging the Bible in Wales Database <http://imagingthebible.llgc.org.uk//person/500> ; Also p 499.
- ¹⁴ http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-1001-1/dissemination/pdf/Modern_Sunderland_Durham_Project/Reports/Johnson-Potts_Mar_2008_%28%29.pdf
- ¹⁵ Laurence Roussillon-Constanty, Philippe Murillo *Science, Fables and Chimeras: Cultural Encounters* p 93 Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2013
- ¹⁶ The two sites – which are readily accessed through a search engine – are: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/44949839@N07/galleries/72157623970712972> & <http://flickrhivemind.net/Tags/jameseadiereid/Interesting> The former includes work only by Eadie Reid whereas about half of the pictures in the latter are his work.
- ¹⁷ Clare A. P. Willsdon *Mural Painting in Britain 1840-1940: Image and Meaning* p 282 Oxford University Press, 2000
- ¹⁸ <http://www.limestonelandscapes.info/SiteCollectionDocuments/Cleadon%20Village%20Atlas%2003ii%20-%20Cleadon%20Archaeology%20and%20history.pdf>