

furseý pílgríms

'CELEBRATING SAINT FURSEY'

WHO WAS FURSEY? WHY ALDEBY?

In the 7th century, about 1380 years ago, a group of Irish monks, with distinctive rather wild-looking hairstyles, arrived in East Anglia. They were welcomed by the new Christian King, and worked alongside a newly arrived Bishop from France to proclaim the Christian Gospel in this part of England. Their leader was a monk-priest, Fursey, the first Irish religious leader to work in England, and one of the great Irish missionaries to Europe. He had tremendous influence in western Christendom, both during his lifetime and in the centuries following.

In 1495 a resident of Aldeby, John Wallys, made his will. In it he asked that “my body to be buried in the Chapel of Saint Fursey within the church of Our Lady of Aldeby”. It is the earliest reference we have for the medieval dedication of the north transept chapel of this church. Although there are a number of dedications in Ireland and France, the chapel of this church remains the only medieval dedication to St Fursey in England.

There may be two reasons for this dedication to East Anglia’s first known missionary. About 1100, Bishop Herbert de Losinga was building his great Norman Cathedral in Norwich, and Aldeby became one of the six priories he established in his diocese. Although small, with only a Prior and three monks, it was important to the Benedictine Mother House in Norwich. The monks here would have used the Norwich calendar, which doubtless remembered Fursey, in their daily worship. Such a local saint could have inspired them to build the large north transept in his honour. A second reason could be Aldeby’s position on the river Waveney. In earlier days travel by water was often preferable to travelling on land. Down river from here is Burgh Castle, the most likely site of Fursey’s monastery, and he and his monks would have used the rivers for their missionary journeys. Perhaps Fursey himself came to this place, and the memory remained! Whatever the reason, Aldeby is a special place as the English home of Fursey’s Chapel.

Who was Fursey? He was born in Ireland in the closing years of the 6th century. He early became a Christian, then a monk, and was ordained as a priest. The turning point in his life came when he received a series of visions. From then on his life was focused on the urgency of proclaiming the Good News of Christ. Norfolk people will be well aware of the power of visions, as eight centuries later Mother Julian of Norwich was inspired by her visions to write her “Revelations of Divine Love”, the first book to be written in English by a woman.

For Fursey, the next decade was spent travelling the length and breadth of Ireland. His powerful preaching and teaching made him very popular. His name was on everyone’s lips - and this concerned Fursey. Were they coming to see a “celebrity” (as we would say today), or were they coming to hear

the Word of God? So, with his closest companions, he sought out a remote island for a month long retreat, to seek God's guidance. The desire to become "a pilgrim for the love of God" became ever stronger, with the result that the group left Ireland - never to return - and arrived in East Anglia.

How Fursey came to East Anglia is a mystery. Perhaps it was the clear leading of the Holy Spirit, coupled with an invitation! In 630 Sigebert was called from exile to be the first Christian King of East Anglia, and wished to share his Faith with his new subjects. A window of opportunity had opened! Sigebert had become a Christian through the influence of earlier Irish missionaries to Burgundy, and had requested a monk from there, Felix, to come to be the first Bishop of the East Angles. There may have been no internet, but news still travelled widely! The fame of a new, dedicated and exciting Irish preacher would have spread widely. Whatever the reason, Fursey and his companions arrived here in East Anglia c.632, and it seems most likely that he set up his monastery within the walls of the Roman Fort at Burgh Castle.

For the next decade he travelled and shared the Good News. All the indications are that Fursey and Felix worked harmoniously in this pioneer work. When the people of Alpheton (between Bury St Edmunds and Sudbury) put a new east window into their parish church, to mark the millennium, they placed Fursey and Felix side by side! When he felt that the foundations of Christianity in our region had been well laid, Fursey appointed his brother Foillan as Abbot, and continued on his pilgrimage.

Arriving in France he was well received by the king Clovis II, his East Anglian-born wife Bathild, and his chief official Erchinoald. They gave him a grant of land to build a monastery at Lagny-sur-Marne, east of Paris, where the church built on the site is still a place of worship. (Today, Disneyworld is just up the road!)

Evidence of Fursey's journeys and work in northern France are everywhere. Churches in Picardy and the Somme area are dedicated to him, Holy Wells remain, his name is on the maps, and relics survive. He fell ill and died, about 650, while on his way back to East Anglia to see his friends. He was buried in the town of Peronne, in Picardy, which has claimed him as their patron saint ever since.

Just outside Peronne his companions had founded an Abbey in his honour, which became a great centre for pilgrims, and the setting for an important scriptorium. It was there, only four years after Fursey's death, that one of the monks wrote a 'Life of Fursey'. While many saints' lives are written long after their death, and often include the weird and the wonderful, this is a contemporary account written by a fellow monk who had known Fursey, prayed and worshipped with him, observed him, listened to him, travelled with him, and had seen the effect he had had on his listeners.

As the 'Life' was not easily accessible to readers, the Fursey Pilgrims invited an East Anglian scholar to transcribe and translate the earliest surviving manuscript. It was published in 2007 under its original opening words: *Transitus beati Fursei*. It gives a compelling picture of a holy humble man of God. It speaks of a strikingly handsome man who prayed much, a compassionate thoughtful person with whom it was easy to talk, a man both patient and discreet, who was clear in both his thoughts and words, someone who could see deeply into a situation, a man who lived love. And above everything, at the

heart of all he was and did, was a burning lifelong desire to spread the Gospel of Christ. Like other Celtic Christians he understood the truth, so clearly expressed in the New Testament, that life is to be lived as a pilgrim for God. It is a truth we urgently need to recover today, faced as we are with the consequences of human longings for power and control.

Less than 80 years later, the Venerable Bede drew on *Transitus* as he wrote his 'History of the English Church and People'. He was obviously captivated by the example of this holy man. He spoke of "how great a man Fursey was", and recommended the 'Life', "for [the reader] will reap great benefit from it". He went on to say how Fursey was "renowned for his words and doings, [and] outstanding in virtue". And also how "inspired by the example of his goodness and the effectiveness of his teaching, many unbelievers were converted to Christ, and those who already believed were drawn to greater love and faith in him".

One of the key ingredients of Fursey's life and faith were his visions, "out-of-body" experiences, in which he met both angels and devils. The influence of these visions on Fursey was great, and he spoke of them often, they take up about 80% of *Transitus*. They are among the first major accounts of the journey of a soul in the other world to be written down in the early medieval period. Many commentators feel that Dante was greatly influenced by Fursey when he wrote his "Divine Comedy" over 650 years later. Through his visions Fursey had a major pivotal role in the Western Church's developing understanding of penance and forgiveness, and the world to come. It was in one of his visions that an angel said to him: "you do not know the depth of the mysteries of God".

In 1997, the 1300th anniversary of Fursey's birth, the Fursey Pilgrims came into being. We are drawn from many Christian traditions, acknowledging Fursey as Father in the Faith for all of us. We seek to encourage renewed interest in the life and times of St Fursey, and a deeper understanding of the spirituality of his era. Among our other events, we have two annual gatherings. Each year, on the first Saturday of October, we make a Pilgrimage to Burgh Castle, and the site of Fursey's monastery. Invited preachers have ranged from the Salvation Army to the Coptic Orthodox, with most traditions in between! Then in January, on the Saturday nearest to St Fursey's Feast Day of the 16th, we meet in Norwich for worship and the now annual Fursey Lecture. We invite scholars who have worked on aspects of Fursey's life and heritage to give the lecture, and we publish the majority of them. In this way we seek to contribute to a deeper understanding of Fursey.

From Fursey's time has come a special prayer attributed to him - the Lorica. It is a type of prayer, often called the Breastplate, which was unique to Celtic Christians. A prayer that recalls we live in God's presence always, and how we may use our God-given senses as antennae into God's world. It opens by recalling the warmth of God's hug, and ends with the prayer that there may be a home for God in our hearts. We have printed the prayer as a bookmark, and we make no charge.

Our latest publication is the medieval Office for Fursey, complete with the music, and Aldeby today is a good place to officially launch it. The manuscript was only recently discovered in a Paris Library. We owe a great debt of gratitude to Dr Ann Buckley, who found it in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, and brought it to our attention. Among her other appointments she is a Research Associate at the

Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Trinity College, Dublin, and has published widely. The liturgies of Irish saints in the Middle Ages are however one of her main areas of research, and having found the Office, she both transcribed and translated it. She came and gave the 2011 Fursey Lecture to introduce the Office to us, and later that year, in the presence of the Bishop of Norwich, the Fursey Vespers was sung in Norwich Cathedral, and heard for the first time for centuries. The complexities of publishing the Office were many. But with Dr Buckley's active co-operation, working with our committed printer Jeremy Warren of Postprint, the book has been completed. It includes the full music for the various Offices for Fursey, the Latin text with parallel English translation, and Dr Buckley's lecture. The manuscript itself dates back to 1256. On 17th September that year, at Peronne, the relics of St Fursey were translated to a new shrine, in the presence of King Louis IX. A special presentation book was put together, including all the music for the feast of Fursey, the Life of Fursey (*Transitus*), and Bede's words about Fursey, and given to the King. He brought it back to the Royal Treasury in Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, where it remained until the Revolution. We are publishing the book under the opening Latin words: *Nobilitate vigens Furseus*.

Later this afternoon, members of the Norwich Cathedral men's choir will sing Vespers from *Nobilitate*, in the original Latin. Copies of this Office - with the Latin text and an English translation - are available so that you can feel part of this special offering of worship. Canon Peter Doll, the Cathedral's Canon Librarian, will explain about Vespers, before they sing, and how much of this ancient Office is found these days in Anglican Evensong.

Today is special! Plainsong Vespers has probably not been sung in this church for centuries. Even more, as the music MS is French, it is unlikely that these Fursey Vespers has ever been sung here. It is a special privilege and joy to be able to sing the praises of this saint, so special to us in East Anglia, at the entrance to the chapel that for so long has borne his name.

St Fursey is a saint to enjoy, a saint for whom we need to give thanks to God, a saint to emulate, a saint to walk beside as a guide on our pilgrim path. The anonymous monk-author wrote: "to them that seek in faith, the merits of Fursey are bright with divine virtue". And Vespers will begin by reminding us that Fursey "shines out with excellence among the stars".

Revd Canon David Abraham - a Fursey Pilgrim
St. Mary's Parish Church, Aldeby, Norfolk
Saturday 14th June 2014