

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Botolph

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: June 17

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IN BRIEF

Saint Botolph

Anglo-Saxon abbot, founder of the monastery of Icanho in East Anglia, patron saint of travelers.

Feast day	June 17
Born	early 7th century
Died	c. 680, Icanho (Iken, Suffolk), England, probably
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (immemorial cult)
Era	7th century
Patron saint of	travelers, Boston (Lincolnshire)

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Botolph

Saint Botolph, in Old English *Botwulf*, was an Anglo-Saxon abbot of the seventh century who founded a monastery at Icanho, in the kingdom of East Anglia, now identified with Iken, in Suffolk. He died around 680 and became one of the most popular saints of medieval England, the patron saint of travelers. The town of Boston, in Lincolnshire, takes its name from his, and through it so does Boston, Massachusetts. Part of his relics was moved to Thorney Abbey, which is why he is sometimes called Botwulf of Thorney. His feast day is June 17.

Who was Saint Botolph?

Botolph is a witness to the first generation of Anglo-Saxon monasticism, when East Anglia, only recently converted, was filling with monasteries. Reliable sources are very thin: a mention in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and a reference in an early life of Abbot Ceolfrith.

The only detailed account of his life, the *Vita sancti Botulphi*, was written in the eleventh century by Folcard, a Flemish monk who became abbot of Thorney. Folcard himself seems to have had little information and relied heavily on the commonplaces of hagiography. It is therefore important to distinguish what is documented from what belongs to tradition.



St Botolph's Church, Boston, England.

Key dates in the life of Saint Botolph

- **Early seventh century**: Born, probably in England; date and place unknown.
- **Youth**: According to Folcard, he receives his monastic training in a monastery in northern Gaul.
- **654**: According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, he begins to build a monastery at Icanho.
- **c. 670**: The young monk Ceolfrith, future abbot of Wearmouth-Jarrow, comes to learn from him.
- **c. 680**: Dies, probably at Icanho.
- **Tenth century**: Saint Æthelwold, bishop of Winchester, has his relics moved; part goes to Thorney, his head to Ely.

The founder of Icanho

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that in 654 "Botwulf began to build the minster at Icanho." This was the time when King Anna of East Anglia, father of Saint Etheldreda, was encouraging religious life in his kingdom.

According to Folcard, Botolph was trained in a monastery in Gaul, perhaps one linked to Anglo-Saxon princesses who had taken the veil there. He then returned to England and obtained from the king a deserted, marshy piece of land, said to be haunted by demons, to found his community.

Icanho is generally identified with Iken, a small village on a headland overlooking the estuary of the River Alde, in Suffolk. Excavations in St Botolph's Church at Iken uncovered a fragment of an Anglo-Saxon stone cross, a witness to the age of the site.

A master of monastic life

An anonymous life of Ceolfrith, written in the early eighth century, reports that this young monk, later abbot of Wearmouth-Jarrow, the monastery where Saint Bede the Venerable lived, traveled to East Anglia to observe the customs of Abbot Botolph, whose reputation for learning and holiness was great. This almost contemporary witness is the most precious one we have: it shows that Botolph was regarded as a master of the monastic life.



St Botolph's Church, Iken, on the probable site of Icanho.

Relics and devotion

The monastery of Icanho probably suffered during the Danish invasions of the ninth century. In the tenth century, during the great English monastic revival, Saint Æthelwold of Winchester had Botolph's relics sought out. According to Folcard, part of them was taken to Thorney Abbey, in the Fens, the head to Ely Abbey, and the rest joined the relic collection of the kings of England. The translation of his relics was celebrated on December 1.

His cult then spread widely. More than sixty ancient churches in England are dedicated to him. His cult also reached Scandinavia, where his name appears in medieval calendars. For a man about whom so little is recorded, this wide devotion is striking: it shows how deeply ordinary people trusted his protection.

Why is Saint Botolph the patron saint of travelers?

Many churches dedicated to Saint Botolph stand near town gates or along roads, because he was invoked as the patron of travelers. In London, several St Botolph's churches stood by the gates of the City: Aldgate, Bishopsgate and Aldersgate. Travelers leaving or entering the city could stop there to pray for a safe journey.

Boston, England, and Boston, Massachusetts

The town of Boston, in Lincolnshire, owes its name to "Botolph's town" or "Botolph's stone." Its great St Botolph's Church, whose tower rises over the Fens, is one of the largest parish churches in England. Through the port of Boston, his name traveled to America with the city of Boston, Massachusetts. Many Bostonians today live in a city named, without knowing it, after a seventh-century English abbot.

Botolph is a quiet builder of the Church in England. He chose an unpromising place and made it a center of prayer and formation, and his influence passed through his disciples to the great monasteries of the north. He can be invoked for travelers and pilgrims, for founders and educators, and for England.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Botolph in art

Saint Botolph is shown as an abbot, holding a crozier, sometimes holding a model of a church. He appears in this way in English stained glass windows, often in the churches that bear his name.

Where to pray to Saint Botolph

- **Iken** (Suffolk, England): St Botolph's Church, on the probable site of his monastery of Icanho.

- **Boston** (Lincolnshire, England): the great St Botolph's Church, nicknamed the Stump.
- **London**: the churches of St Botolph's Aldgate, St Botolph-without-Bishopsgate and St Botolph's Aldersgate.
- **Ely** (Cambridgeshire, England): the cathedral, the former abbey that received his head.

To pray with him, use the prayer to Saint Botolph for travelers or the novena to Saint Botolph, prayed from June 9 to June 17.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Botolph for Travelers

Saint Botolph, Anglo-Saxon abbot of the seventh century, has been invoked for centuries as the patron saint of travelers. Many English churches dedicated to him stood at town gates and along roads, where travelers stopped to pray before setting out. You can pray it before a journey, for yourself or for someone you love. This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Botolph for travelers

Saint Botolph, faithful abbot of Icanho,
you made a lonely marsh a place of prayer
and welcomed those who came to learn from you.
For centuries, travelers have called on you
at the gates of cities and along the roads.

Watch over me on this journey.
Guide my steps, keep me safe from accident and harm,
and bring me home in peace.
Protect all who travel today:
drivers and pilots, sailors and pilgrims,
migrants and refugees far from home.

And on the longer journey of my life,
help me to keep my eyes on Christ, who is the Way,
until I reach the house of the Father.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray this prayer

- Before a trip by road, rail, sea or air.
- Before a pilgrimage.
- When a loved one is traveling or far from home.
- On his feast day, June 17, or during the novena from June 9.
- For migrants and refugees on dangerous roads.

A traditional prayer for a journey

You can also pray, with Saint Botolph, the words of Psalm 121, the pilgrim's psalm:

> *"I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. ... The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore." (Psalm 121:1-2, 8)*

To learn more, read the life of Saint Botolph or pray the novena to Saint Botolph.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Botolph

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Botolph (Botwulf), Anglo-Saxon abbot of Icanho and patron saint of travelers. It is not an official liturgical text. To end on his feast day, begin on June 9: the ninth day then falls on June 17.

Few sure facts about Botolph have come down to us, but they are enough to show a founder, a teacher and a man of prayer, whose name has traveled farther than he ever did. You can pray this novena before a journey or a move, for a loved one far from home, for travelers and migrants, for teachers and founders, or for any intention close to your heart.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then pray an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The suggested act helps you carry the prayer into your day.

You may begin each day with this opening prayer: *Lord God, you made Saint Botolph a builder of your Church and a friend of travelers. Through his intercession, hear the prayer I bring you today and guide me on the road to you. Amen.*

If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

Day 1: Learning far from home

According to his eleventh-century biographer, the young Botolph went to Gaul to be formed in monastic life. He was willing to leave home to learn how to follow Christ. Growth in faith often asks us to step out of what is familiar.

Prayer: Lord, give me a teachable heart. Bless all who study far from home. Amen.

Today: Pray for a student or young person living away from their family.

Day 2: Coming back to serve

Botolph returned to England to share what he had received. What we are given is meant to be passed on. Faith kept to ourselves grows weak; faith shared grows stronger.

Prayer: Father, help me to share generously the gifts and faith I have received. Amen.

Today: Teach someone something you know well.

Day 3: A place no one wanted

Tradition says Botolph was given a lonely marsh, said to be haunted. He made it a place of prayer. God can make something beautiful of the places we fear or avoid.

Prayer: Lord, enter the dark and empty places of my life and fill them with your light. Amen.

Today: Face, with God's help, a task you have been avoiding.

Day 4: Building with patience

In 654, says the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Botolph began to build his monastery at Icanho. Founding something lasting takes years of patient work, and the founder rarely sees the full result.

Prayer: Lord, bless all who start something new for you: parishes, schools, families, communities. Give them patience and perseverance. Amen.

Today: Take one concrete step in a project you care about.

Day 5: A teacher of the young

The young monk Ceolfrith traveled to East Anglia to learn from Botolph. Ceolfrith later led the monastery where Saint Bede lived. A good teacher's influence reaches far.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, bless teachers, catechists and mentors. Make them wise and patient guides. Amen.

Today: Thank a teacher who shaped your life, or pray for them.

Day 6: Prayer at the heart

Botolph's monastery was first of all a place of prayer. His reputation for holiness drew others because he lived close to God. Before he was a builder or a teacher, he was a man who prayed.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to pray. Let prayer be the center of my day, not an afterthought. Amen.

Today: Set aside ten minutes of quiet prayer at a fixed time.

Day 7: At the gates of the city

In London, churches of Saint Botolph stood at Aldgate, Bishopsgate and Aldersgate. Travelers stopped there to pray before setting out. Every journey can begin with God, whether it is a long voyage or the daily drive to work.

Prayer: Saint Botolph, watch over all who travel today. Bring them safely to their destination. Amen.

Today: Before your next trip, even a short one, say a brief prayer.

Day 8: Far from home

Many people today travel not by choice but out of need: migrants, refugees, workers far from their families. The patron of travelers is close to them too, and so is every Christian community that opens its doors to them.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you were a refugee in Egypt. Protect migrants and refugees on dangerous roads, and make us welcoming. Amen.

Today: Support an organization that helps migrants or refugees.

Day 9: A name that traveled

From Boston in Lincolnshire, Botolph's name crossed the ocean to Boston, Massachusetts. A humble abbot of East Anglia is remembered on two continents.

Prayer: Saint Botolph, I place before you the intention of this novena. Present it to the Lord, and help me to walk faithfully to the end of my journey. Amen.

Today: Pray for the city or town where you live.

Closing prayer

Lord God, you made Saint Botolph a builder of prayer in a wild place, a teacher of monks and a protector of travelers. Through his intercession, grant what I have asked during these nine days, if it is your will. Keep me safe on every road, faithful in the work you give me, and always on the way toward you. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

CREDITS

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