

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Werburgh of Chester

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: February 3

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IN BRIEF

Saint Werburgh of Chester

Princess of Mercia, nun at Ely and abbess who founded convents, patron saint of Chester.

Feast day	February 3
Born	mid-7th century, Mercia, England
Died	February 3, c. 700, Threekingham, Lincolnshire, England
Canonized	immemorial cult (no formal canonization)
Era	7th century
Patron saint of	Chester

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Werburgh, Patron of Chester

Novena to Saint Werburgh

Credits and sources

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LIFE

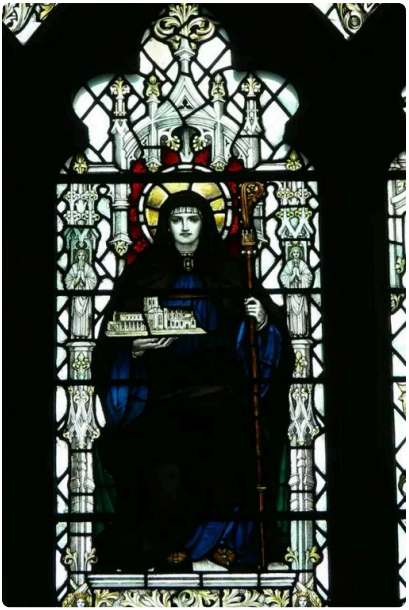
Saint Werburgh of Chester

Saint Werburgh (in Old English, Werburh) was a seventh-century Anglo-Saxon princess, the daughter of King Wulfhere of Mercia and Saint Ermenilda. A nun at Ely under her great-aunt Saint Etheldreda, she was asked by her uncle, King Æthelred, to found and govern several convents in Mercia. She died around 700 and is the patron saint of the city of Chester, whose cathedral still preserves the remains of her medieval shrine. Her feast day is February 3.

Who was Saint Werburgh?

Werburgh belonged to one of those Anglo-Saxon royal families that gave the Church, in just a few generations, a whole constellation of women saints. Through her father, she descended from the kings of Mercia, who had only recently converted. Through her mother, she descended from the kings of Kent, the first Christian kings of England. Her grandmother, Saint Sexburga, and her great-aunt, Saint Etheldreda (also known as Saint Audrey), were abbesses of Ely, and her mother, Saint Ermenilda, also became a nun.

We know her mainly through a Latin *Life* written at the end of the eleventh century, attributed to the monk Goscelin of Saint-Bertin and based on the traditions of Ely and Mercia. Historians distinguish in it a solid historical core, a royal abbess who founded monasteries, and wonderful stories, such as the tale of the wild geese, which made her popular.



Saint Werburgh, stained glass in Chester Cathedral.

Key dates in the life of Saint Werburgh

- **Mid-7th century**: Born in Mercia, daughter of King Wulfhere and Queen Ermenilda.
- **After 675**: After her father's death, she enters the monastery of Ely, led by her mother's family.
- **Late 7th century**: Her uncle, King Æthelred of Mercia, calls her back to found or reform the convents of Weedon, Hanbury and Threekingham.
- **February 3, about 700**: Dies at Threekingham, according to most sources; she is buried at Hanbury, as she had asked.
- **Early 8th century**: According to tradition, her body is found incorrupt when her remains are raised for veneration.
- **Late 9th century**: In the face of the Danish invasions, her relics are taken to Chester.

- **1093**: Founding of the Benedictine abbey of Saint Werburgh in Chester, the future cathedral.

A princess at Ely

King Wulfhere died in 675. Werburgh, who refused marriage, obtained permission to enter the double monastery of Ely, founded by her great-aunt Etheldreda. There she lived the monastic life under the guidance of the women of her family. A tradition of Ely, accepted by some historians with caution, makes her an abbess of that monastery after her grandmother Sexburga and her mother Ermenilda.

Foundress in Mercia

Her uncle Æthelred, who had become king of Mercia, called her back to his kingdom and entrusted her with the direction of its convents of women. She founded or reformed the communities of Weedon in Northamptonshire, Hanbury in Staffordshire and Threekingham in Lincolnshire. Her *Life* describes her as a humble abbess, faithful in prayer, attentive to the poor and to the peasants who worked the monastery lands.

The legend of the geese

Weedon is the setting of Werburgh's most famous legend. Wild geese were ravaging the peasants' fields. The saint ordered them to leave, and they obeyed. But one of the monastery's servants had kept a goose to eat. When the flock came back to claim their companion, Werburgh had the bird found, brought it back to life and let the whole flock go, and the geese never returned to the area. This is why she is often shown with a goose.

Death and first relics

Werburgh died on a February 3, around 700, at the convent of Threekingham. She had asked to be buried at Hanbury, but the people of Threekingham wanted to keep her body; according to the account, the people of Hanbury had to come and take it by night. A few years later, when her cousin King Ceolred had her remains raised for veneration, her body is said to have been found incorrupt. Hanbury then became a place of pilgrimage.

Chester, the city of Saint Werburgh

At the end of the ninth century, to protect the relics from the Vikings, they were taken to Chester, an old fortified Roman town. In the early tenth century, under Æthelflæd, "Lady of the Mercians," a collegiate church was dedicated to her. In 1093, Earl Hugh of Avranches turned it into the Benedictine abbey of Saint Werburgh, and the translation of her relics was later celebrated on June 21.

At the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII, in 1540, the shrine was destroyed, but in 1541 the abbey church became Chester Cathedral. Fragments of the medieval shrine, recovered later, have been reassembled there. Today the cathedral belongs to the Church of England, while the Catholic church of Saint Werburgh in Chester also carries her name.

Why is Saint Werburgh the patron saint of Chester?

Werburgh never lived in Chester. She became its patron because her relics were brought there for safety in the ninth century, and because the great abbey that grew up around them, now the cathedral, carried her name for centuries. The city's history is so bound up with her that her shrine remains one of the treasures of the cathedral.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Werburgh in art

- **The goose**: her most common attribute, recalling the miracle of Weedon.
- **The habit of an abbess**, often with a crozier, as a foundress of convents.

What can we learn from Saint Werburgh?

Werburgh chose consecrated life when she could have held a royal position. She put her gifts as a king's daughter at the service of the Church, founding communities where people prayed, worked and welcomed the poor. The legend of the geese, simple as it seems, speaks of her care for farmers and her kindness to all creation. We can pray to her for Chester, for nuns and those who hold responsibility in the Church, for farmers and for the protection of harvests.

To pray with her, read the prayer to Saint Werburgh or follow the novena to Saint Werburgh, which ends on February 3.

Where to pray to Saint Werburgh

- **Chester** (England): the cathedral, former abbey of Saint Werburgh, where her shrine stands in the Lady Chapel; the Catholic church of Saint Werburgh in the city.
- **Hanbury** (Staffordshire): the church of Saint Werburgh, on the site of her first tomb.
- **Weedon Bec** (Northamptonshire): the place of the legend of the geese.
- **Dublin** (Ireland): Saint Werburgh's Church, a sign of how far her cult spread.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Werburgh, Patron of Chester

Saint Werburgh, patron saint of Chester, was invoked for centuries by the pilgrims who came to pray at her shrine. No ancient prayer in her name is in common use today, so Saintspedia offers an original prayer inspired by her life as an abbess and by the legend of the geese. This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

Prayer to Saint Werburgh

Saint Werburgh, king's daughter who became a servant of Christ, you gave up the honors of the court for the prayer of the cloister. Teach me to seek first the Kingdom of God.

You founded and guided communities of prayer in Mercia. Support nuns, superiors and all who hold responsibility in the Church. Give them wisdom, humility and gentleness.

You protected the peasants' fields and gave life back to the lost goose. Watch over those who work the land, over the harvests and over the creation God entrusts to us.

Watch over the city of Chester, over its cathedral and over all who come there to pray. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Through your prayer, may my life be simple, faithful and generous, for the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Intentions to entrust to Saint Werburgh

- For the city of Chester and its people.
- For nuns and monastic communities.
- For farmers and the protection of harvests.
- For Christian families, called to pass on the faith from generation to generation.
- For the unity of Christians in England, Catholics and Anglicans, who venerate her together.

A short invocation

Saint Werburgh, abbess and patron of Chester, pray for us.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Werburgh is celebrated on February 3, the day of her death. The translation of her relics to Chester was formerly celebrated on June 21. You can also pray to her at sowing time or at harvest, or before a visit to Chester Cathedral. For nine days of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Werburgh, and read the life of Saint Werburgh.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Werburgh

This novena to Saint Werburgh is an original composition by Saintspedia. It follows the Anglo-Saxon princess who became a nun at Ely, then an abbess and foundress of convents in Mercia, and who is now the patron saint of Chester. To end on February 3, her feast day, begin it on January 26. You can also pray it at any time, for example at sowing time, before a pilgrimage to Chester or for a vocation.

Each day takes one moment of her life, as her medieval *Life* and the traditions of Ely and Chester have handed it down, and turns it into a short meditation for today.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. Close with the small act suggested for the day. If you miss a day, simply continue: God looks at the heart.

You can pray it alone or with others, at home, in a parish or during a visit to one of the churches that bear her name.

Day 1: A family of saints

Werburgh grew up among holy women: her mother Ermenilda, her grandmother Sexburga, her great-aunt Etheldreda. Faith was passed on to her through her family. Long before she chose the cloister, she had seen in her mother and grandmothers what a life given to God could look like.

Prayer: Lord, bless my family. Make our home a place where faith is lived and passed on. Amen.

Today: Pray for each member of your family by name.

Day 2: Choosing Christ above all

As a king's daughter, Werburgh could have married into another royal house. She chose instead to give her life to Christ in the monastery.

Prayer: Lord, help me to put you first, before comfort, success and the opinion of others. Amen.

Today: Give up something unnecessary and offer it to God.

Day 3: Learning at Ely

At Ely, Werburgh learned the monastic life from the women of her family. Holiness is learned by living close to those who love God. Day after day, the psalms, the shared work and the common table shaped her heart.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who have taught me to pray. Give me wise guides on my way. Amen.

Today: Thank someone who helped you grow in faith.

Day 4: Called to serve

Her uncle, King Æthelred, called her back to Mercia to lead the convents of his kingdom. Werburgh accepted a responsibility she had not sought.

Prayer: Lord, bless all who hold responsibility in the Church, and help them to serve with humility. Amen.

Today: Pray for your parish priest and for the superiors of religious communities.

Day 5: A foundress

At Weedon, Hanbury and Threekingham, Werburgh founded or reformed communities where women prayed, worked and welcomed the poor. These houses were small lights in a kingdom that had only recently received the Gospel.

Prayer: Lord, raise up vocations to the religious life, and bless the monasteries of our country. Amen.

Today: Pray for a vocation you know of, or for a young person who is discerning.

Day 6: Care for the peasants

Her *Life* shows her attentive to the people who worked the monastery lands. When wild geese ravaged their fields, she sent them away.

Prayer: Lord, bless farmers and all who feed us. Protect the harvests and those who work the land. Amen.

Today: Thank God before your meals, thinking of those who grew your food.

Day 7: Kindness to all creation

According to the legend, Werburgh brought back to life the goose that a servant had taken and let it rejoin its flock. Her gentleness reached even the animals.

Prayer: Creator God, teach me to respect and care for the world you have made. Amen.

Today: Make one concrete gesture to care for creation.

Day 8: A peaceful death

Werburgh died around 700 at Threekingham, after a life given to God. She had asked to rest at Hanbury, among the sisters she had served. Even in death, she wished to remain close to her community.

Prayer: Lord, grant me a peaceful death, surrounded by your love, and comfort the dying tonight. Amen.

Today: Pray for the dying and for those who care for them.

Day 9: Feast of Saint Werburgh

Today the Church remembers Werburgh, patron saint of Chester. Her relics, carried to safety from the Vikings, made a whole city her home. For centuries, pilgrims came to her shrine, and fragments of it still stand in Chester Cathedral today.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I entrust my intention to you. Through the prayer of Saint Werburgh, make my life simple, faithful and generous. Amen.

Today: Pray for the city where you live and for its people.

Closing prayer

Saint Werburgh, princess of Mercia and servant of Christ, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for Chester and for all who come to your shrine, for nuns and monasteries, for farmers and their harvests, and for the unity of Christians in England. Help me to use the gifts I have received in the service of God and of others, as you did. May I, like you, bring peace to those around me and care for the poor, for the land and for all that God has made. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Werburgh and the prayer to Saint Werburgh.

CREDITS

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