

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Wigstan of Mercia

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: June 1

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IN BRIEF

Saint Wigstan of Mercia

Anglo-Saxon prince of Mercia, grandson of King Wiglaf, murdered in 849 and venerated as a martyr.

Feast day	June 1
Born	first half of the 9th century, Mercia (England)
Died	June 1, 849, Wistow (Leicestershire), according to tradition
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (immemorial cult)
Era	9th century

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Wigstan of Mercia

Saint Wigstan, also known as Wystan or Wistan, was an Anglo-Saxon prince of Mercia and grandson of King Wiglaf, murdered in 849 for opposing a marriage he judged contrary to the law of the Church. Buried in the royal crypt at Repton, in Derbyshire, he was venerated as a martyr, and his relics were later moved to Evesham Abbey. His feast day is June 1.

Who was Saint Wigstan?

Wigstan belonged to the royal family of Mercia, the great kingdom of central England. His father, Wigmund, was the son of King Wiglaf; his mother, Ælfflæd, was the daughter of another Mercian king, Ceolwulf I. He may have reigned briefly, or been called to reign, after the death of his grandfather.

The historical sources about him are very slim: a mention in chronicles and a few lines in the annals of Evesham. The story of his life and death, the *Passion of Saint Wigstan*, was written at Evesham in the twelfth century, long after the events. We must therefore distinguish the historical core, a young prince killed in 849 and venerated at Repton, from the details handed down by tradition.



The Anglo-Saxon crypt at Repton, where Saint Wigstan was buried.

Key dates in the life of Saint Wigstan

- **First half of the ninth century**: Born to Wigmund and Ælfflæd, grandson of King Wiglaf of Mercia.
- **c. 840**: At Wiglaf's death, according to tradition, he declines the crown to lead a more religious life, and the throne passes to Beorhtwulf.
- **June 1, 849**: He is murdered by Beorhtfrith, son of King Beorhtwulf, whose marriage to his widowed mother he had refused.
- **After 849**: He is buried at Repton, in the mausoleum of the Mercian kings, and a cult grows up around his tomb.
- **Eleventh century**: Under King Cnut, his relics are moved to Evesham Abbey.
- **Twelfth century**: His *Passion* is written at Evesham.

A prince who refused a marriage

According to the Evesham tradition, Wigstan, still young, left the government of the kingdom to others in order to give himself more fully to God. King Beorhtwulf came to the throne. His son, Beorhtfrith, wanted to marry Ælfflæd, Wigstan's widowed mother. The marriage would have strengthened Beorhtfrith's claim to the crown.

But Wigstan opposed it. According to his *Passion*, Beorhtfrith was bound to the family by a spiritual or blood relationship that made the union contrary to the rules of the Church. Wigstan put the law of God before political advantage, even though the marriage would have settled the question of the succession.

Murder at a meeting of peace

Beorhtfrith then asked for a meeting, on the pretext of making peace. During the encounter, he struck Wigstan on the head and killed him, together with those who were with him. According to tradition, this happened on June 1, 849.

Whether the motive was first religious or political, and it was surely both, Wigstan's death was seen as that of an innocent man killed for defending the law of God, and he was honored as a martyr.

The hair of the martyr

A striking legend grew up around the place of the murder, traditionally identified as Wistow, in Leicestershire, whose name is said to mean "Wigstan's place." People told how a column of light rose there for thirty days, and how every year, on the anniversary of his death, "hair" of the martyr sprang up from the ground where he fell. This story, handed down by the monks of Evesham, shows how alive his memory was in the region.

Repton and Evesham

Wigstan was buried at Repton, in Derbyshire, in the crypt that served as a mausoleum for the kings of Mercia, where his grandfather Wiglaf already lay. This crypt, one of the best-preserved Anglo-Saxon monuments in England, with its spiral columns, can still be visited beneath the parish church that bears his name. Pilgrims came to pray at his tomb.

In the eleventh century, under King Cnut, his relics were moved to the Benedictine abbey of Evesham, in Worcestershire, one of the great monasteries of medieval England. They were venerated there until Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century, which led to their loss. Of Evesham Abbey only a few remains survive today, including a fine bell tower from the early sixteenth century.

Why is Saint Wigstan honored as a martyr?

Wigstan did not die for refusing to deny Christ before a pagan judge. He died for refusing to approve a marriage he believed God's law forbade. The Church of his time recognized in this a true witness: a man who chose faithfulness to God over power and family advantage, and who paid for it with his life. He has no formal patronage, but his story makes him a fitting intercessor for young people facing hard choices, for the respect of marriage and family, and for victims of violence linked to power.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Wigstan in art

No well-established iconography of Saint Wigstan is known. His memory is carried above all by places: the Anglo-Saxon crypt of Repton, the church of Saint Wystan that stands above it, and the church of Saint Wistan at Wistow.

What can we learn from Saint Wigstan?

We know little about Wigstan, but the heart of his memory is clear: a powerful young man who preferred faithfulness to God's law over political arrangements, and who paid for it with his life. He joins the long line of Anglo-Saxon saints of royal blood who died violent deaths and were honored as martyrs, such as Saint Edmund or Saint Kenelm. We can pray to him for young people who must make difficult choices, for respect for marriage and the family, and for those who suffer violence linked to power.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Wigstan and the novena to Saint Wigstan, from May 24 to his feast on June 1.

Where to pray to Saint Wigstan

- **Repton** (Derbyshire, England): Saint Wystan's Church and its Anglo-Saxon crypt, the place of his first burial.
- **Wistow** (Leicestershire, England): the church of Saint Wistan, on the site tradition links to his martyrdom.
- **Evesham** (Worcestershire, England): the remains of the abbey where his relics were venerated.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Wigstan for Courage of Conscience

Saint Wigstan, or Wystan, a young prince of Mercia murdered in 849 for opposing a marriage contrary to the law of the Church, was honored as a martyr at Repton and Evesham. No traditional prayer to him has come down to us in common use. This page offers an original prayer by Saintspedia, inspired by his story.

Prayer to Saint Wigstan

Saint Wigstan, prince of Mercia, you could have chosen power, yet you preferred to give yourself to God. Teach me to put God first, before success, comfort and the opinion of others.

You refused to approve a marriage that went against the law of God, even when it would have served the interests of the powerful. Give me the courage to say no to what is wrong, gently and firmly.

You were struck down at a meeting that promised peace. Pray for all who are betrayed, for victims of violence and of the abuse of power, and for those who do them harm, that they may be converted.

Watch over young people facing difficult choices, over marriages and families, and over the Church in England. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Through your intercession, may I remain faithful to God's law and to my conscience, and come one day to share your joy in the kingdom of heaven. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.



The crypt of Repton, where pilgrims once prayed at Saint Wigstan's tomb.

Intentions to entrust to Saint Wigstan

- Young people who must make hard choices of conscience.
- Respect for marriage and the family.
- Victims of betrayal, violence and the abuse of power.
- Leaders and those who hold power, that they may serve justice.
- The parishes of Repton, Wistow and Evesham.

A short invocation

Saint Wigstan, faithful prince and martyr, help us to choose God's way, whatever it may cost. Pray for us. Amen.

Original invocation by Saintspedia.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Wigstan's feast day is June 1, the traditional date of his death in 849. You can also pray to him before a difficult decision or when you face pressure to act against your conscience. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Wigstan, and read the life of Saint Wigstan.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Wigstan

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Wigstan, or Wystan, the Mercian prince murdered in 849 and honored as a martyr at Repton and Evesham. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, June 1, begin it on May 24. You can also pray it at any time, especially before a difficult decision or for a family in crisis.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for the day helps you live in the spirit of Saint Wigstan, faithful to God above all. You can pray it alone, as a family or with a parish group.

Day 1: Born to a royal house

Wigstan was the grandson of King Wiglaf, born into the ruling family of Mercia. He received much: rank, wealth and the prospect of power. Everything we receive is a gift to be used for God and for others.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for all I have received. Help me to use it according to your will.

Today: Name three gifts in your life and thank God for each of them.

Day 2: Choosing God before power

Tradition says that Wigstan left the government of the kingdom to others in order to give himself more fully to God. He saw that a crown was not the highest good. What we let go of for God makes room for him.

Prayer: Lord, free me from the desire to dominate and to be admired, and teach me to seek you first.

Today: Give up an argument or a position you are clinging to out of pride.

Day 3: A son who cared for his mother

Wigstan's opposition to the marriage concerned his widowed mother, Ælfflæd. He refused to see her used as a means to power. Love for our parents includes protecting their dignity.

Prayer: Lord, bless my parents, living or dead, and help me to honor them as you ask.

Today: Call your mother or father, or pray for them if they have died.

Day 4: Faithful to God's law

Wigstan judged that the proposed marriage was contrary to the rules of the Church, and he said so, even though it would have pleased the powerful. Conscience formed by God's law must sometimes say no.

Prayer: Lord, form my conscience by your Word, and give me the courage to follow it.

Today: Read a passage of Scripture on faithfulness, such as Daniel 3 or Matthew 5:33-37.

Day 5: The holiness of marriage

At the heart of Wigstan's story is respect for marriage, which is not a political tool but a covenant blessed by God. His witness invites us to pray for all marriages and families.

Prayer: Lord, bless married couples, strengthen those in difficulty, and protect families from all that would divide them.

Today: Pray for a married couple you know, or do something kind for your spouse or family.

Day 6: Betrayed at a meeting of peace

Beorhtfrith invited Wigstan to a meeting on the pretext of peace, and there he killed him. Betrayal is one of the deepest wounds, and Christ himself knew it on the night he was handed over.

Prayer: Lord, heal those who have been betrayed, and give them the grace to forgive.

Today: Pray for someone who has hurt you, and ask God for the grace to forgive.

Day 7: Remembered by the people

The legend of the column of light and of the martyr's "hair" growing each year at Wistow shows how deeply people remembered Wigstan. The faithful recognized an innocent man in him, and they did not forget. Memory, too, can be a form of prayer and of justice.

Prayer: Lord, keep alive in your Church the memory of those who died for what is right.

Today: Pray for Christians who suffer today for their faith or their conscience.

Day 8: Resting among the kings

Wigstan was buried in the royal crypt of Repton, where his grandfather lay, and later his relics were honored at Evesham. Pilgrims came for centuries to pray at his tomb.

Prayer: Lord, bless the places where your saints are remembered, and make our parishes houses of prayer.

Today: Visit a church and spend a few moments in silent prayer.

Day 9: Faithful to the end

Wigstan's life was short, but it was faithful. He chose God's law over power and paid for it with his life. Such faithfulness is never wasted in God's eyes. More than eleven centuries later, he is still remembered and invoked.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Wigstan, make me faithful to you in great things and in small. Amen.

Today: Attend Mass if you can, and renew your baptismal promises in your heart.

Closing prayer

Saint Wigstan, prince and martyr of Mercia, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for young people facing hard choices, for marriages and families, for victims of betrayal and violence, and for all who hold power. Obtain for us a firm conscience, a gentle heart and faithfulness to the end. Amen.

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

CREDITS

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