

## **“The Cult of St Swithun”**

**Talk by Dr Tom Watson, October 2025**

The first talk of our 2024/25 programme was a live event by Dr Tom Watson on the “Cult of St Swithun”. Dr Watson has a long interest in saints and is particularly interested in Swithun, who was bishop of Winchester from 852 to 863. Swithun does not appear to have been particularly revered in his own lifetime and is better known for his miracles than his work as bishop of Winchester. Swithun was a secular cleric (not a monk) and was not considered saintly until long after his death.

A century after Swithun’s time, in 963, Bishop Aethelwold, encouraged by King Edgar, moved from Abingdon to become bishop of Winchester and, influenced by monastic reform from Cluny in France, set about making major changes to the minsters at Winchester. Secular clergy were forcibly expelled and replaced by celebrate monks and, on 15<sup>th</sup> July 971, in great ceremony, he moved Swithun’s tomb into an extended Old Minster. Aethelwold created a reliquary for Swithun’s remains and the subsequent pilgrims led to a new source of income and a large number of reported miracles. Most of the stories of miracles come from four sources, written by monks long after Swithun’s time:

Lantfred, a Frankish monk, who wrote of Swithun’s miracles in about 974.

Wulfstan, an Old Minster monk, who expanded Lantfred’s work in the 990s

Aelfric, another Old Minister monk, who wrote a Life of St Swithun in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century and included more miracles

An unknown monk from Sherborne, who wrote “Vita St Swithuni” in about 1100, including a collection of the saint’s miracles. This was written well over 200 years after Swithun’s time.

Only one miracle is attributed to Swithun during his lifetime and this was when he restored broken eggs to a complete state, although this wasn’t reported until about 1100.

In 968, Swithun appeared in a vision to a blacksmith and in the following year a man with back pain who fell asleep by the tomb woke up fully cured. There was another case of a man who suffered paralysis after seeing three naked Ethiopian women (!!!) in the City’s water meadows and was told in a dream to visit Swithun’s tomb where he was cured. With these three miracles the process of sainthood could happen. Pilgrims flocked to Winchester and 200 sick people were cured in ten days. Many crutches were abandoned in the Old Minster by cured cripples.

Swithun became very popular and some 68 churches were dedicated to him in England; none are north of Wakefield and there are none in the other countries of the United Kingdom. He had three commemorations in the church calendar – 2<sup>nd</sup> July (deposition), 15<sup>th</sup> July (translation) and 30<sup>th</sup> October (ordination). By the 12<sup>th</sup> century many churches had relics of Swithun.

The legend that most people associate with St Swithun was that he wished to be buried outside so that his body could be walked on by ordinary people and, when his remains were moved inside on 15<sup>th</sup> July 971, to demonstrate his displeasure, it rained for 40 days afterwards.

After the completion of the Norman cathedral in the 1090s, Swithun’s reliquary was moved from the Old Minster and placed by the high altar. In 1150, Henry of Blois had it moved to an apse behind the

altar and after this time the “holy hole” was created to allow pilgrims to get closer to the saint’s remains. In 1476 a new shrine was built to relaunch the cult and attract even more pilgrims and their money. The cult came to an end in 1538 when the shrine was destroyed on the orders of Henry VIII’s commissioner.

This was a very interesting talk, which greatly expanded on the basic knowledge that many of us have of St Swithun. The shrine and reliquary are long gone but Swithun remains one of our best-known saints and is famous far beyond Winchester.



Alan Sandford

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