



## Skirting round Saint Faith?

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For a good many years now, this writer has been gathering information about other churches dedicated to Saint Faith. His findings are collected on the church website, where lists of these churches, together with some of the varied stories associated with them are published. Fortunately, there are relatively few Saint Faith's churches in the UK and worldwide, so the task is not an impossible one. So far, we have identified 52 dedications. About a half of these are accompanied on our site with links to their websites, stories about them, or both. Quite a few, though, are just names on the list, and the one in the news below was, until now, one whose name and location we knew but nothing more.

Recently there have been few discoveries or updates, but the new year has seen the surfacing of a remarkable story centred on the medieval church of St Faith in Bacton, in rural Herefordshire. The revelation centres on what may very well have been Good Queen Bess's actual skirt – used there for some time as an altar hanging - and the existence of another St Faith, this time an English one. Don't tell me you don't want to know more...

The Daily Telegraph of Sunday, January 8<sup>th</sup> started your collator on the trail with a substantial piece by chief reporter Gordon Rayner, entertainingly headlined 'Old altar cloth? It's actually Elizabeth 1's long lost skirt.' This pedant would have hyphenated the final two adjectives, without which it could well have implied the existence of a short lost skirt, but never mind.

The report spoke of 'a piece of fabric described as the Holy Grail of fashion history', a beautifully embroidered textile, cut up and used for hundreds of years as an altar cloth in Bacton. It has been identified by royal garments experts as extremely likely to be the only surviving piece of clothing worn by Queen Elizabeth I. The report explains that very little costuming from before the reign of Charles I survives today, partly because Oliver Cromwell sold off the contents of the royal stores. The Bacton piece is made of cloth of silver, which could only be worn by royalty.

So how could the royal skirt have found its way to a remote country parish? The answer lies in the fact that Blanche Parry, the queen's favourite lady-in-waiting and known friend, adviser and

confidante, was a St Faith's parishioner, to whom Good Queen Bess is known to have given clothes, and whose ornate tomb, in which she is seen in effigy kneeling before the queen, is to be seen in the church. One source suggests that Blanche is paying homage to the queen as Gloriana; another (less likely, perhaps, but more attractive) that the lady is reverencing St Faith.

St Faith's has recently loaned this unique item to Historic Royal Palaces, who will restore and conserve it and display it at Hampton Court Palace, where doubtless the name of our patron saint will be writ large.

Interesting though the story is so far, there is more to come. As ever, your scribe, following up on the tale, had recourse to Google, Wikipedia, and sites associated with the story. Anyone interested will find the trail worth following, especially if they are led as I was to the connections between St Faith and her dedication in Bacton.

The official guide to the church, free to download, says that 'the earliest known dedication of the church was to Saint Foi (or Moi/Tyfoi) a disciple of Bishop Dubricius or Dyfrig, the greatest of Herefordshire's early saints.' I was intrigued by the reference to 'our' Saint Foy (the French name for Faith) and wondered what she was doing in the lovely Golden Valley in the border country between England and Wales.

A later paragraph in the guide answers the question. 'During the medieval period Saint Foi was equated with Saint Faith, the virgin martyr whose cult centre was in Conques, France. Saint Faith's feast day was 6<sup>th</sup> October and this was remembered as Bacton's feast day as late as 1796.' Incidentally, there is another St Faith dedication in nearby Dorstone.

So who was this presumed English St Faith and when did she live, if she existed at all?

Saint Dubricius/Dyfrig is well enough documented, and was active as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Otherwise the trail goes cold at present. The few online references to her all seem to lead back to the Bacton Guide and provide no back-up to the story of the converging saints. The enigmatic alternative names of 'Moi/Tyfoi' yield nothing relevant online. Indeed, when asked about 'Saint Tyfoi', the ever-helpful Mr Google repeatedly asks me 'Did you mean Saint Typhoid?'

The idea of a rural English Saint Faith continues to intrigue, and it would be good to find out more. At the very least, a modest candle to the shy saint of Bacton, not to mention the site of the Royal Skirt, might fittingly be lit on October 6<sup>th</sup>.

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Our list of churches dedicated to or connected with Saint Faith is online [here](#)

The official guide to Bacton Church may be accessed online [here](#)

Footnote: one online source refers to the existence of a relatively recent window representing St Faith in Bacton Church . One for the archives if anyone is going down that way?

