

Edmund House



House Feast Day 20th November
Red Martyrs

St Edmund, King and Martyr

Edmund was born in 841 of devout Christian parents. His name means 'blessed protection'. As a child he learnt the importance of prayer and knew the psalms by heart.

From 855 Edmund's movements have been traced by historians. In that year we know for example of his presence in Hunstanton Norfolk at a place now called St Edmund's Point, where still today may be found St Edmund's well and the ruins of St Edmund's chapel. From here his movements have been traced to Attleborough in Norfolk from where he went to Wessex. On 5 November 855 Edmund took part at a great Council of the English nobility in the Wessex capital, Winchester. Here the gathered nobles allied themselves to fight the growing menace of the pagan Danes, the Vikings.

Towards the end of 856 the young prince Edmund was chosen as King of East Anglia at the royal palace at Caistor St Edmund outside Norwich. On Christmas Day 856, aged only fifteen, he was anointed and crowned King of East Anglia at Bures, a strategic crossing-place on the Suffolk-Essex border. The image we have of Edmund is that of a devout and noble King, so dedicated to the defence and well-being of his people that he did not even marry. He was 'wise and honourable...humble and devout...bountiful to the poor and to widows like a father..., raised up by God to be the defender of his Church'. However, a great storm broke over his peace-loving kingdom in 865 with a full-scale Danish invasion of East Anglia.

Edmund organised resistance as he could to the invasion and was active at Orford, near Framlingham and elsewhere even outside East Anglia in order to defend England from the Danes. Thus in 868 he fought alongside the future King Alfred the Great to deliver Nottingham. In East Anglia he was also active in building or rebuilding a defensive dyke to the east of Cambridge, known still today as 'St Edmund's Ditch' in the area of 'St Edmund's Fen'. In 869, however, the Danes returned to East Anglia with a huge army. They sacked many monasteries, including Ely and Soham. In the late autumn Edmund the King gave battle at Thetford in Norfolk and although inflicting heavy losses, he was forced to retire to Hoxne in north Suffolk.

Here he refused Danish offers of peace at a price and remained faithful to Christianity, saying: 'It is needful that I alone should die for my people, that the whole nation should not perish'. Edmund was seized by the Danes, refusing to defend himself, though he had defended others. The Danes insulted him and beat him. Refusing to renounce his faith, Edmund said: 'Living or dead, nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ'. Then Edmund was tied to an oak-tree, whipped and had arrows fired at him. Calling on the name of the Saviour to the end, Edmund was finally beheaded. It was Monday 20 November 869. The Danes then left the area, flinging Edmund's head into thick brambles nearby. Later people who came searching for the head of the Martyr, were alerted to its presence by the howling of a wolfhound.

Edmund was buried at a chapel at Hoxne and miracles soon followed. The most extraordinary of these was that within a generation the Danes who had martyred him had accepted Christianity and were themselves venerating their victim, Edmund, as a saint. At the beginning of the tenth century Edmund's body was moved to the monastic town of Bedricsworth which then became known as Bury St Edmunds. In the centuries to come, this became a great shrine and one of the finest and largest monasteries in all England. All the more so since for some five centuries Edmund the noble champion was to become not only the patron-saint of East Anglia but also the patron-saint of all England. Edmund was indeed a national hero, the light from the East, a 'blessed protection' for East Anglia and all England.