

The Relics of St. Edmund.

The Little Box from Toulouse

In 1966 a small wooden box arrived in Bury St. Edmunds from France. To some it contained priceless objects of great sanctity whereas others viewed it merely as an embarrassment. Understanding of the significance of this event requires us to go back over a thousand years to East Anglia in the ninth century.

Edmund had assumed the kingship of East Anglia at the age of about fourteen in 855, following the death of his father. He developed the reputation of being a devout Christian and effective king. The Rev. Alban Butler (1710-1773) wrote in his "Lives of the Saints" that "he was by his piety the model of a good prince, the enemy of flatterers and informers, and a monarch to whom the peace and happiness of his people were his whole concern". However, in 865 "a great heathen force" of Danes arrived in England, led by Ivar the Boneless, not to carry out coastal raiding as before, but as a permanent army of occupation. The "Daily Chronicle" of 26th July, 1901 tells us that religious houses were targeted and, according to the chronicler, the nuns of Coldingham beyond Berwick, went so far in their preparations as to cut off their own noses and upper lips "that appearing to the barbarians frightful spectacles of horror, they might preserve their virtue". The precaution was at any rate effectual; for the chagrined invaders "put them all to the sword" – in pity, perhaps, as well as in anger. After defeating the Northumbrians and Mercians, and taking York, they moved down to East Anglia in 869. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records "The force went over Mercia to East Anglia and took winter quarters at Thetford. In that year, St. Edmund the king fought against them and the Danes took the victory, killed the king and overcame all the land."



**St. Mary and St. Lambert, Stonham
Aspal, Suffolk.**

More detailed information is contained in a biography of Edmund written by Abbo of Fleury in about 985. The information supposedly was provided initially by Edmund's sword bearer. Edmund refused to submit to Ivar unless he adopted Christianity. This he declined to do. On 20th November 869, Edmund was seized, tied to a tree, beaten and then put to death by a volley of arrows. His body was then decapitated with the head being thrown away into brambles. When Edmund's followers later came to retrieve his body they discovered his head being guarded by a wolf. When head and body were reunited they were miraculously joined, leaving only a faint red mark. Initially his remains were buried in a small wooden chapel near Hoxne and about 903 were "translated", i.e. moved, to a shrine at Beodricsworth which later became known as Edmundstowe and then Bury St. Edmunds. In 929 Athelstan created a community to care for his shrine and it was probably during his reign (924-939) that Edmund was canonised. Cnut ordered a new stone church to be built over his shrine in about 1020 and the church was again rebuilt in 1095. Such was the following of Edmund, King and Martyr that he was recognised as the patron saint of England, a position held until he was ousted by St. George in the fourteenth century. Bury and its magnificent abbey prospered. Edmund's shrine within the abbey was dismantled in 1539 after the monastery had been dissolved following

Henry VIII's break with Rome. It was, however, an empty tomb.

During the early thirteenth century baronial and ecclesiastical opposition grew against King John to such an extent that large scale resistance developed. A group of earls and barons, plus the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, met at Bury on November 20th, 1214 (St. Edmund's feast day) and swore on the high altar to make war on the king unless he confirmed the freedoms contained in a charter issued by Henry I. As a result, Magna Carta was sealed in June 1215. The failure of John to follow the terms of the great charter led to the so-called Barons' War. The barons sought to overcome stalemate by offering the throne of England to Louis, the Dauphin of France, later Louis VIII. John died in 1216, the throne passing to the nine year old Henry III. Royalist forces were successful against the baronial rebels at the battle of Lincoln and Louis decided to withdraw from England. Louis, allegedly, according to the "Daily Chronicle", "avenged himself by taking back with him to France the most precious national treasure, the body of the saint who had become the traditional protector of the people's rights. Internal disturbances in France took the Dauphin and his army to Toulouse. With him went the body of the English saint, that through Edmund's intercession success might attend the quelling of the rebels. Arriving at the gates of Toulouse, the body was placed in the cloisters of the basilica of St. Sernin, even then of ancient and renowned fame, bearing over its portals the boast "There is no spot more holy on the whole earth." Accordingly, the Augustinians in charge laid St. Edmund to rest in the crypt beneath the great basilica. In 1489, "the body of St. Edmund, once King of England" appears in the inventory as interred in a plain marble tomb".



The Basilica of St. Sernin

According to Boniface Mackinlay's "St. Edmund, King and Martyr" (1893), pages 256-257, in 1867 the Archbishop of Toulouse, Cardinal Desprez, opened the shrine of St. Edmund and removed some of the relics. He presented a bone an inch long to St. Edmund's monastery, Douai in northern France, with which he had been connected since childhood. He gave a second portion of bone to Father Ring of Walthamstow who bequeathed it to the same monastery. The Cardinal presented a third portion to an English bishop, the Right Reverend Edmund Knight, D.D., bishop of Shrewsbury, who wore it in his pectoral cross. The final portion was given by the Archbishop to St. Edmund's Church, Bury St. Edmund's where it was kept in a silver and gold reliquary, on a stand set with emeralds and "chased with designs emblematic of martyrdom". It was

encircled by a Latin inscription, which translates as “From the bones of St. Edmund the Martyr, king of East England.” It was exposed annually on the saint’s altar, with flowers and lighted tapers, for the veneration of the faithful.

The “Bury Free Press” of 24th November 1877 reported a ceremony at St. Edmund’s Roman Catholic Church, Bury St. Edmunds, marking the unveiling of a statue to commemorate the saint:-

“Last Tuesday being St. Edmund’s Day, it being exactly a thousand and seven years since the good King of East Anglia suffered martyrdom at the hands of the Danes, a solemn ceremony was celebrated. Some time ago Mrs Milner-Gibson presented a handsome statue of the Royal Saint to the Church....There was a large congregation to witness the ceremony. The altar had been more than ordinarily beautified for the occasion with flowers, ferns and other plants, while it was also fully illuminated and very handsome drapery ornamented the front, in the centre of which appeared the borough arms, the device, however, being somewhat different to that which we are accustomed to see, it consisting of two wolves supporting a red shield, with the crown of St Edmund above it...The statue was then unveiled, and the Bishop with his priests took up their position before it, while the religious formularies adopted for the occasion were proceeded with; and arrows fixed in the body of the statue by an attendant priest.....St Edmund is represented in Royal robes, and suffering martyrdom at the hands of the Danes. The statue is about four feet high and now forms a handsome and conspicuous ornament to the Church...”

The 1901 “Daily Chronicle” article was providing the background to momentous events underway nationally affecting the relics of the saint. Cardinal Vaughan had become Archbishop of Westminster in 1892. His most fervent desire was to ensure that the Catholic community in England and Wales should have an appropriate mother church. After years of planning, the foundation stone of Westminster Cathedral had been laid in 1895. What would be more fitting to enhance the prestige and the sanctity of the new cathedral than the relics of England’s former patron saint, languishing in France?

The “Daily Chronicle” explains the position under the heading:-

ST. EDMUND, KING AND MARTYR

His Body Recovered for England

“It is now some years since Cardinal Vaughan first turned covetous thoughts upon Toulouse. This French town held the relics of an English king, relics that had played their part in English history; and here was a great Cathedral in progress to replace the long-alienated Abbey of Westminster, rich in historic and pious memories and remains. The Cardinal made overtures to the custodians of the body at Toulouse. They in reply were polite, but firm. They were but custodians, they said, and could not part with treasures they held in trust. Nothing daunted, the Cardinal laid his case before Pope Leo XIII. England had been robbed, a national shrine rifled; a restitution should be made. The Pope listened, and made the case his own. A wish from the Pope in such a matter must needs rank as a command: and, as a result of his intervention, the body of Edmund, “king, martyr and virgin” was borne to Rome.... To cede to Leo XIII, and to place at his disposal the precious bones, was an act of grace more easy of performance than the cession of it straight to England. On Monday last, therefore, the relics left Rome (where they had reposed in Pope Leo’s private chapel) in custody of Monsignor Merry de Val. Very sacred was its setting forth. No body snatcher could have been more wary or more dark; and with reason; for the fear was that the French Government, in a fit of national piety, might waylay the relics and prevent their delivery to England. Any such danger is now over and done. Yesterday Monsignor Merry de Val and his mysterious bundle arrived safely at Newhaven and proceeded at once to Arundel, whither went in the afternoon Cardinal Vaughan, Archbishop Stoner (now on a visit from Rome), the Bishop of Ennaus, Bishop Brindle, the Bishop of Southwark, and a large body of Roman Catholic clergy. The Duke of Norfolk, with his family and house party, received the relics in the Fitzalen Chapel, which still remains in his Grace’s custody. The body is to remain exposed during the night, tapers burning and the Sisters of the Faithful keeping watch. Mass will be said this morning. Then a procession will be formed to

carry the remains to the castle Chapel. Here, under an altar, they will remain for the present. A year hence... the English King will have his own shrine at last in the heart of that free Empire which his virtues and his fame helped to build and to uphold.”

The “Daily Mail” took up the story:-

A Striking Ceremonial

St. Edmund’s Relics Carried in Procession.

“Early yesterday morning the relics of St. Edmund, King and martyr, were carried from the Fitzalan Chapel to the domestic Chapel of the Duke of Norfolk at Arundel Castle.

On the altar of the Fitzalan Chapel on Thursday night lay a curious casket of dark wood, nearly two feet long, a foot wide, and something more than a foot deep, bound and sealed with the Pope’s seal, and containing remains hundreds of years older than the oldest of the five tombs around it.

Round the altar burned gold lamps, placed at the service of this ceremonial by the Duke of Norfolk. There was no sacred vigil, but nuns, of their own desire, said prayers in the chapel till nearly midnight, when male guards were left in charge.

From 8.30 in the morning mass was said by dignitaries and priests of the Roman Catholic Church. At 8.30, after a brief service, the removal to the castle was conducted by Cardinal Vaughan. The choir and the children of the Roman Catholic schools were formed in procession, and led the way through the beautiful park. Then the acolytes and the servers, with lighted candles, were a mild prelude to the blaze of colour which struck against the green trees when the gold mitred Cardinal walked forth, leading a band of archbishops, bishops and priests, all in red vestments, in significance of the death of the martyred Saxon King.

St. Edmund’s body followed, borne on a bier by priests and accompanied on each side by six torch bearers; in the rear followed the Duke of Norfolk and others.

A hymn to St. Edmund from a manuscript of the eleventh century in Latin was sung.

The relics were laid upon a side altar, and after a short service the Archbishop of Westminster gave an address. He stated that the Pope, out of goodwill to England, had sent the sacred relics here, and wished that till the new cathedral of Westminster was ready to receive them they should remain in the custody of the Duke of Norfolk.”

Cardinal Vaughan informed a “Daily Mail” representative subsequently that the Pope at his request had obtained the relics from the Church of St. Sernin at Toulouse where they had rested for centuries after being stolen from Bury St. Edmund’s by the French.



Cardinal Herbert Vaughan



St. Edmund's Church, Bury St. Edmunds

The return of the relics was also marked in Bury St. Edmunds, as indicated by this extract from the "Bury Post", July 27th, 1901:-

"At St. Edmund's Catholic Church, Bury St. Edmunds on Sunday, the occasion of the translation of the relics of the patron saint to his own land was not permitted to pass without due observation. The Papal flag floated over the church and the large candles on St. Edmund's shrine were lighted – a custom usually observed only on the feast day of the Martyr King. The relic of St. Edmund was also exposed for veneration of the people after mass; having been first incensed; and then the prayer of St. Edmund was said and his hymn sung. Mass was celebrated by the Rev. Father Jones, in the morning, and the Rev. Father Perrin, who was the preacher, in the course of an eloquent discourse, made allusion to the return of the remains to England. In the evening at Vespers, the preacher was the Rev. Father Jones who took for his text, "Thy mercies, O God, are from generation to generation", and in the course of a very earnest and eloquent sermon, said it was an event of extraordinary and unalloyed joy, that the sacred relics of their glorious patron St. Edmund, were once more restored, by the special intervention of His Holiness, and by the generosity of the

Cardinal Archbishop of Toulouse, to the land for whose faith he

had shed his blood. Much as he would have desired to have seen those relics once more in Bury St. Edmunds, in his own town and church, they must rejoice in the fact of their becoming one of the glories of a new Cathedral at Westminster."

Boniface Mackinley, O.S.B., reflected the joyous mood in an article in "The Tablet", July 27th, 1901. Headed "Topics of the Day", an article called "The Return of St. Edmund, King and Martyr, to England", ended by saying:-

"Three dates will ever remain memorable in connection with St. Edmund, King, Martyr and Virgin. The date of his passion and martyrdom, A.D. 870; the date of his exile to a foreign land, A.D. 1217 – an exile full of providential traits, and full of honours paid to him by the noble Church of France; and the date 1901, when the Archbishop of Toulouse, with a truly Catholic and disinterested sentiment of faith and charity, had the Body of our King conveyed to the Vatican, in order that Leo XIII might lovingly restore him to England, to become once more revered and honoured in his native land."

This euphoria was not to last. Letters appeared in "The Times" and "The Standard" condemning the ceremonies and the Catholic veneration of relics. The major attack on the origin of the translated remains was made by Sir Ernest Clarke, M.A., F.S.A. (a native of Bury St. Edmunds) in a letter to "The Times", 3rd September 1901. Sir Ernest argued that the relics of St. Edmund had not been taken to Toulouse. Using local records he demonstrated the bones remained in the Abbey until 1465 when a great fire swept the Abbey and the body "whether or not corruptible till 1465 was more or less cremated on that occasion." It was shown that in August, 1256, forty years after the alleged stealing of the body by the French, Pope Alexander IV confirmed statutes made for the governance of the Monastery of St. Edmund at Bury, which provided:- "First, that the monks are to eat and drink in the refectory, and sleep in one dormitory, two persons watching the body of St. Edmund and two the Church Treasure and clock night and day."

Dr. James, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge in a statement to the "Bury and Norwich Post" on September 10th, 1901 joined in the attack, concluding that there was no proof of the Toulouse tradition and that the evidence was against it. Sir Ernest later enlarged on the letter he had written to "The Times" and

published this as a booklet called "The Bones of St. Edmund". Cardinal Vaughan considered establishing a commission to investigate the relics.

In September 1901 the annual Roman Catholic Conference was held in Newcastle at which Cardinal Vaughan was to preside. He saw that this event would give him some opportunity to comment on the controversy concerning the relics. The following is an extract from "The Life of Cardinal Vaughan" by J.G. Snead-Cox, 1910:-

"But when he retired for the night Herbert Vaughan sat down with Sir Ernest Clarke's letter before him. He was alone with the truth. When he rose from reading it, it was with a new resolve. Was it right to shuffle on to a Commission a responsibility that was his own? Was not the appointment of a Commission a suggestion that he himself was still in doubt? The reasoning in Sir Ernest Clarke's letter seemed irresistible, and the Cardinal accepted it. It was a moment of difficulty. If it had been a question only of "saving his own face" there would have been no hesitation; but he had to think of his friends in Toulouse who had given their treasure to him, and he had to think of the authorities in Rome. He thought of it all, long and anxiously, but when the dawn came it found him with his mind made up. He would not pretend that he was waiting for the verdict of a Commission when he knew already. He was satisfied that the bones were not the bones of the English Martyr, and so, in all simplicity, he would say so.

Standing on the platform at Newcastle that evening, to the astonishment of friend and foe he threw over the whole case for the genuineness of the relics with both hands, and publicly thanked the iconoclast who had destroyed his illusions in the following words:-

"You have heard of St. Edmund, the Martyr and King of East Anglia, and of the controversy that has arisen as to his relics. I am going to make a very open confession to you. Having built a Cathedral, the thought and desire occurred to me of enriching it with the relics of St. Edmund the King, which the tradition of Toulouse said were held as a precious treasure in the Church of St. Sernin. To me, who am, I regret to say, entirely without experience in studies of historical research, the matter seemed to be certain. I therefore petitioned the Holy Father to obtain this treasure for the Cathedral of Westminster. And his Holiness desiring to gratify the Catholics of England, and believing that Englishmen in general would be pleased to see the remains of a Saxon King brought back to England, obtained for us from the Archbishop of Toulouse what we all believed to be the bones of St. Edmund the King. Shortly after their arrival in England two learned authorities, Dr. James, of Cambridge, and Dr. Bigg, of Oxford, wrote letters to "The Times" calling in question their authenticity. They did not seem to be absolutely conclusive, but upon the suggestion of the Bishop of Clifton and of Abbot Gasquet and others, I determined to submit the whole question to experts in England and France, so that we might by means of their researches clear up difficulties and turn a pious belief into a positive certainty one way or the other. But last Thursday Sir Ernest Clarke published the report of what appears to be an exhaustive and careful examination into the question of the authenticity of the relics, so that the Committee of experts I have referred to will have their task, I should think, very much lightened, if they do not find that it has been already accomplished. I confess that Sir Ernest Clarke's evidence seems to me, who am, however, very far from being an expert, overwhelming and conclusive; and I therefore, subject to further examination and verification by experts, hasten to express to him my hearty and sincere thanks for the services he appears to have rendered."

There are letters among Cardinal Vaughan's papers which show that there were some abroad whom his language on this occasion gravely displeased. In Toulouse especially there were many who thought that he had acted with unnecessary haste, and perhaps even with less than due regard for his own dignity."

Shortly afterwards the following report appeared in the "Bury and Norwich Post":-

Important Pronouncement by Cardinal Vaughan

Sir Ernest Clark Correct

The Toulouse Relics Not Genuine.

“Preliminary to the Roman Catholic Conference being held in Newcastle this week, under the auspices of the Catholic Truth Society, a public meeting was held on the Monday night at the Olympia, Newcastle. The Hall held about five thousand people.

Cardinal Vaughan presided, and, at the outset, referring to the controversy as to St. Edmund’s relics, he said that the report of Sir Ernest Clark clearly proved that the bones which had been brought from Toulouse, and hitherto treated as the bones of St. Edmund were not genuine. Some of their friends might now inquire whether the discovery that the relics are not genuine would be a very awkward matter for the Church. To this he answered “Not at all!” The question of the authenticity of relics was like other matters of common history – it was a question of fact to be ascertained by the canon that guided human reason in historical research, and in weighing the elements that produced moral certainty. The Church pretended to no Divine guidance for accuracy and certainty in such things as relics....It was a matter of human evidence. According to Canon Law, relics could not be exposed for the veneration of the faithful unless they had at some time been authenticated or recognised by the Bishop of the diocese. But authentication of this kind did not absolutely guarantee that they were genuine. It was a matter of evidence, which was always open to experts.”

Archbishop Germain of Toulouse did set up a commission to investigate the relics, made up of six members, the parish priest of Sernin, one canon lawyer, one theologian and three professional historians, but no anatomist. Their report was completed by December 1902 but not published since it was to await a report from a commission set up by Cardinal Vaughan. This never appeared and so the relics remained at Arundel under the care of the Duke of Norfolk and the French commission’s report went astray.

The thousand year saga of the relics of King Edmund appeared to have come to an end but this assumption was to prove unfounded.

Father Bryan Houghton became parish priest of St. Edmund’s Roman Catholic Church, Bury St. Edmunds, in 1955. He had been born in Dublin in 1911 where his father, a professional soldier, had been stationed. His mother, as a young girl, had been sent to Berlin as a Hoffraulein in the household of Princess Victoria. He spent his early years in Europe, speaking little English until the age of thirteen. He was sent to England where he gained an open scholarship to Christ Church, Oxford, gaining a First in Modern History. He returned to Paris, working as an international banker. Increasingly attracted by Catholicism, he was received into the Catholic Church and, after attending the English College in Rome, was ordained priest in 1941. He was wealthy, totally committed to Catholicism and an inspiring parish priest. He was not easily rebuffed. He held the position of Chairman of Governors at the newly opened St. Benedict’s School in Bury. He sought to increase the catchment area of the school but the local education authority was reluctant to help with transport and catering. In January 1957 he obtained a bus which he drove himself. The LEA then refused to feed the extra pupils and so he marched the potentially hungry youngsters to Palmer’s restaurant in Bury where he arranged for them to be fed, at his own expense. He ensured that the local press were on hand to record this event and the “Bury Free Press” ran a story with a picture entitled “Catholic Priest drives bus and feeds 30 after LEA said *No!*” Humiliated by this public display, the education authority caved in.

Father Houghton was to become an authority on the life of St. Edmund and was to produce in 1970 a book entitled “St. Edmund, King and Martyr.”

In the preface he explains how his interest in the subject developed, starting in 1959 when “some wretched Frenchman started badgering me about St. Edmund. He took it for granted that, as a Parish Priest of St.

Edmunds, I was a mine of information on my patron. At first, of course, I paid not the slightest attention. A tart acknowledgement was enough for M. Edmond Bordier to redouble his activities and I soon became immersed in Edmundania.”

By 1966 he had gained a considerable amount of knowledge about St. Edmund and had accumulated a comprehensive library on the subject. Pressures of parochial activities meant that scholarly work had to be confined to his holidays. He explains:-

“St. Edmund’s library was annually installed in the back of my car. Unfortunately, in 1966, a friend had lent me an enormous left handed drive Jaguar. I had been down to Lucca and was returning to Toulouse when the car was stolen. Curiously enough, the thieves were not in the least interested in St. Edmund; they merely wanted a large and fast limousine to help in a bank robbery. My Edmundania was thrown out of the back and scattered wide over the Alps.”

Despite this setback he did manage to complete his book, dedicated to Monsieur Bordier, which contained a rejection of the arguments put forward by Sir Ernest Clark and criticised the actions of Cardinal Vaughan:-

“it really is rather comic: the unscrupulous bullying of the Archbishop Germain and the craven submission to Sir Ernest Clark, the tapers and procession of July 26th and the abysmal surrender of September 9th. It makes one despair of the sanity of bishops.”

A crucially important event had occurred in 1964, namely the long-lost report of the Commission established by Archbishop Germain in 1902 had been unearthed in the Toulouse archives. A researcher into the Bury Cult, Francis Young, pointed out that this was published in Edmond Bordier’s “Des Reliques de St. Edmond” (1971). The President of the Commission was M. Louis Gondal, Vicaire Général, Supérieur du Grand Séminaire de Toulouse, and the Secretary was M. Jean Lestrade, prêtre, later an eminent member of the Archaeological Society of the south of France. The main Report, of thirty five pages, has three sections namely:-

- The Toulouse Tradition in relation to the relics of St. Edmund.
- A comparison of the Toulouse tradition with information gained from incontestable historical sources.
- Examination of the objections raised in Britain to the authenticity of the relics.

The Commission refers to “direct proof” of the validity of the relics by citing many examples of events in the history of Toulouse during which these relics were mentioned. “Indirect proof” was found in that there were substantial records to show that the shrine in Bury was empty after the early thirteenth century.

The conclusion of the Commission was that the Toulouse cult of St Edmond “roi d’Angleterre, confesseur et martyr, garde son prestige et sa légitimité.” (“retains its prestige and legitimacy.”) Indeed after 1902, there continued to be an annual mass to celebrate Saint Edmund in the crypt of Saint-Sernin, in the chapel of the Saint, before the reliquary exposed on the altar.

Drawing on this Report, Father Houghton refers to some key events affecting the relics of St. Edmund. He states that:-

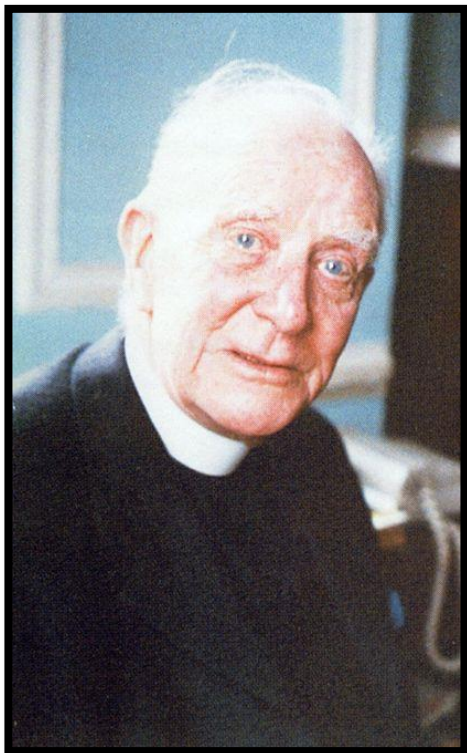
“in 1644, Archbishop Charles de Montchal opened the stone sarcophagus bearing the inscription “here lies the venerable body of St. Edmund, Martyr, King of England”. The skull was complete. The lower jaw was detached and contained seven teeth in place. There were three loose teeth from the upper jaw. The skeleton was complete apart from one radial... Montchal placed the skull in one solid silver reliquary. The skeleton was placed in another of monumental size, also of solid silver.... they received the grateful veneration of the people until the Revolution..”

During the Revolutionary period, commissioners arrived at St. Sernin in February 1794 and stripped the place of all precious metals, including the reliquaries, the relics having been removed and then replaced in their proper positions. A year later, it was rumoured that the Basilica itself was to be demolished. A small group of clerics and laymen were responsible for moving the relics to a place of safety, “placed in proper boxes, numbered and sealed” where they remained for a few months until they could be safely returned to St.

Sernin. Supposedly, the group found that the relics which they had not been able to remove had remained undisturbed. The building was returned to ecclesiastical control in 1802 and a detailed inventory of 1807 identified a coffer as containing the skull and another box the skeleton of St. Edmund. The two parts were given a new bronze reliquary in 1845 by Archbishop d'Astros.

It is hard to imagine today that in the chaos reigning in France in the mid 1790s, and in the face of huge personal risks to those involved, the removal from and return of the relics to their resting place in St. Sernin could have been a tidy operation.

Within his church in Bury Father Houghton revived sung celebrations of the mass on St. Edmund's feast day, accompanied by a full choir and orchestra, which was followed by a champagne reception. In December



Father Houghton, aged 80.

1964 he started negotiations to bring the bones back to Bury from Arundel. He had felt able to do this since the French commissioners had concluded that under Canon Law, the relics of St. Edmund, some of which had been sent to England, could be objects of public veneration. The Bishop of Northampton gave his permission and the Archbishop of Westminster waived his rights. The Bishop of Southwark, whose diocese included Arundel, did not object to their removal. By February 1965, it appeared that the relics would be on their way to Bury St. Edmunds but then the arguments of 1901 were reignited. The Duke of Norfolk was instructed to keep the bones where they were.

On 17th January 1988, long after Father Houghton had left Bury and while living in Viviers in southern France, he engaged in previously unpublished correspondence with the author. Father Houghton stated:-

“Actually I never WROTE my St. Edmund. It was commissioned by the editors precisely in 1969 when I was moving out of the parish. Hence I had to dictate it. The advantage is its facile “spoken style”; the disadvantage is that I was relying on my memory (at that time still elephantine) rather than on documents. Had I written it, there would have been considerably more material and several errors would not have escaped my notice. However, even as it stands, it is not an idiotic book.”

He goes on to comment on the various relics of St. Edmund:-

“The skull at Arundel Castle – the word used by Archbishop Germain in his authentication of 1901 is slightly ambiguous. He uses the word “chef”. Literally, this means “head”, i.e. the cranium plus the lower jaw. But the term is also used for the “cranium” without the lower jaw. I suspect that in such an official document he was being punctilious: he sent the whole skull (less the three loose teeth). The skeleton remains at Toulouse.”

In the letter he deals with the matter of “the three loose teeth”. Being frustrated in his efforts to obtain the relics of St. Edmund reposing in Arundel, Father Houghton had made contact with the authorities in Toulouse in an attempt to gain other parts of the body. He states:-

“The three teeth at Bury. I had made all the arrangements with Cardinal Garonne and had hoped to be one of the “notaries” to verify the “translation” of the relics. We had even settled the date at which I was to be present at Toulouse. Unfortunately he had been appointed in the meantime to be the Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education in Rome. His overworked auxiliary transferred the relics at his convenience without waiting for me. He assured me that he had enclosed a properly certified “authentication” in the sealed box containing the three teeth.

All that is required CANONICALLY is for the Bishop of East Anglia to open the little box from Toulouse in the presence of two priests, whom he appoints as “notaries” to describe the event and “recertify” the document which they find enclosed. It is not terribly difficult nor terribly chronophagous (time consuming.)

When I was P.P. of Bury St. Edmunds, the relics were duly incensed on St. Edmund’s Day on the Sunday within the Octave. At Benediction, the faithful duly kissed the box containing the relics. I had intended to erect a transparent safe beside the monument to St. Edmund. But time ran too fast for me.”

Why exactly did Father Houghton feel compelled to quit his parish and England after almost thirty years of service as a priest? We find some clues in his obituary written in “The Independent” by John Sheerin following the death of the priest in Montelimar, France on 19th November, 1992. He wrote:-

“Bryan Houghton was a priest set apart. He was a convert Catholic, fiercely loyal to the Papacy though not above the belief that liturgical changes that have swept through the Roman Catholic Church in the past 25 years were ill advised. He was not alone in the view that the reforms to the liturgy had their origin in a theological modernism which was entirely inappropriate to the Faith of Ages, eternal and true.”

R. Michael McGrade, in a tribute contained in “Una Voce America”, goes more deeply into this episode. He refers to the introduction of vernacular language into the Mass in 1963/64:-

“Yet they had not fiddled with the Canon (the core of the Mass) and Fr. Houghton still felt able to offer the Mass of 1964 with a “certain devotion”, even as his peers were switching into experimental mode around him. He wrote, however, to his Bishop, in shrewd anticipation of the liturgical anarchy to come, submitting his resignation “from the day on which they touch the Canon”. The Bishop, of course, assured him that the bishops were there precisely in order to prevent it from being touched. “Poor dear Bishop!” wrote Fr. Houghton, “he did not have the slightest idea about what was going to happen”. Five years later this “suspended” resignation was activated and he resigned as parish priest of Bury St. Edmunds with effect from midnight on 29th November 1969. The following day, the New Mass came into force – they had “touched” the Canon and restricted the Old Mass to retired or aged priests, alone and in private.”

He retired to France and settled in Viviers. He said mass daily until a week before his death at the high altar of the Cathedral of St. Vincent in Viviers, attracting about a hundred faithful followers.

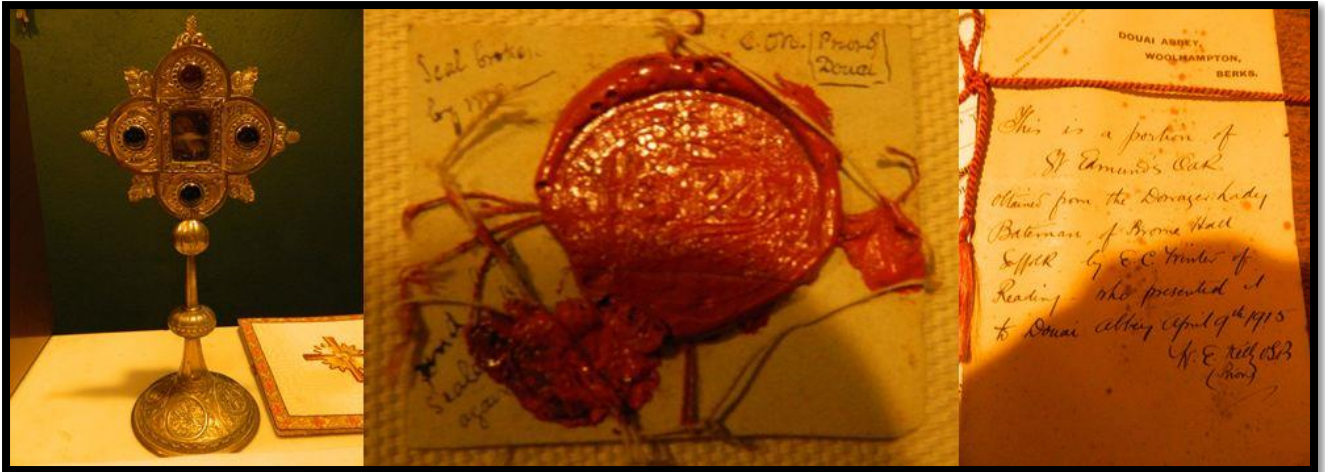
His obituary states that:-

“He gained a reputation in France as a writer, wit and “savant”, and contributed regularly to French theological reviews. He acquired a well-deserved reputation in France never fully accorded to him in England. He was perhaps too intelligent and above all too independent for the English hierarchy to accommodate.”

In his autobiography “Prêtre rejeté” (Rejected Priest) he makes this assessment:-

“I have always made a mess of things in my life. I had the intellectual capacity to make a brilliant agnostic, but converted to religion. I had studied to become an international banker, then used my inheritance to build schools and churches. I was listed for Episcopal election but criticised Teilhard de Chardin as heterodox. Here I am, a priest rejected, unusable even as a curate or convent chaplain, utterly good for nothing.”

And what of “the little box from Toulouse” which Father Houghton had made so much effort to obtain? Research undertaken in the process of preparing this paper led to Abbot Geoffrey Scott of Douai Abbey, Woolhampton, Berkshire, a community of the English Benedictine Congregation, confirming that the three teeth obtained by Father Houghton are now held by the Abbey. These may have been taken from Bury to the Abbey by Father Houghton in the late 1980s. The Abbot explained that Boniface Mackinlay was a monk of Douai which led to his interest in, and book on, St. Edmund. The Abbey possesses the reliquary of 1867 which came to England in 1903 when the monks left France. Its seal appears to have been broken at the end of the nineteenth century. There is also a relic of St. Edmund’s oak, the tree to which the king was tied before being slain by arrows. There are two other relics, one of which may be the one given to Father Ring in 1867 and later bequeathed to the Abbey.



The author is ignorant of the location of the relic contained in a monstrance obtained by St. Edmund's church Bury St. Edmunds and which was exposed for the veneration of the people in 1901.

What is still held at Toulouse? If one accepts the arguments put forward by Sir Ernest Clarke, the body of St. Edmund never left England, a view with which Father Houghton and the Toulouse Commission strongly disagreed. We do know that something was brought from France in 1901 to Arundel and Father Houghton believed that the skeleton of Edmund remained in Toulouse. In writing this article in autumn 2012 it was considered necessary to contact the authorities in St. Sernin to gain their view as to what relics they possessed. The surprising response was that the body of St. Edmund is held in St. Sernin and the box has not been opened for centuries. Clearly the parish priest of St. Sernin is unaware of the events of 1901 and later translations of the relics.

During the thousand year history of St. Edmund's relics, those seeking the truth have generally had to rely on historical skills. In modern times, researchers have had other techniques at their disposal. In 1991-2, The Institute of Archaeology, London, carried out a scientific study of the remains in the casket in the vault of the Fitzalan chapel. They found that the bones derive from at least twelve, and probably considerably more, individuals of both sexes, and include a skull from a male of at least forty five years. No scientific dating was undertaken nor was there any analysis of the supposed relics of St. Edmund at Toulouse.

Since the beginning of Christianity, believers have seen relics as a way of coming closer to the saints and therefore to God. Saint Jerome wrote:-

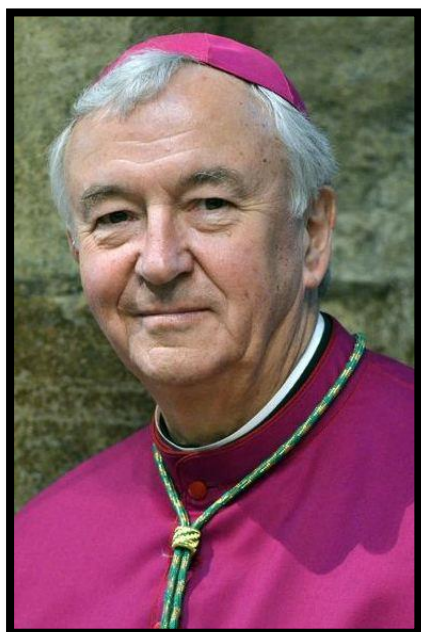
"We do not worship, we do not adore but we do venerate the relics of the martyrs in order the better to adore Him whose martyrs they are".



Popes, cardinals, archbishops, kings, princes and dukes have all been involved in the fate of St. Edmund's body. Objectively it cannot be stated with certainty whether any remains of St. Edmund are still in existence and if they do exist, their location is open to doubt. Even the skull at Arundel would seem to be that of a man far older than Edmund was believed to be at the time of his martyrdom. Until the mid twentieth century, such problems would have been of great concern to the Roman Catholic Church.

Catholics like Cardinal Vaughan and Father Houghton made huge efforts to gain access to objects of great spirituality for the benefit of the faithful. But, in the modern liberal Church are the relics of a long dead Anglo-Saxon king of any concern? Father Houghton wrote "Relics are unfashionable." The elaborate altar, existing in 1901, beneath the statue of the martyr king in St. Edmund's Roman Catholic Church, Bury St. Edmunds, has long disappeared. At the time of writing, the statue stands on a plinth at the front of the church.

However, the Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, the author's contemporary in Rome, was reported in the Catholic Herald of June 23rd, 2011, as saying in connection with an exhibition of relics and reliquaries at the British Museum:-



"It's perfectly clear that relics are a very important part of the expression of religious faith as well as of cultural importance in the way that people cling to a souvenir from a person they've loved or a place that they have been to. And what that conveys is the connecting of this moment with the treasured moment of the past. And if that connection is made through an object which, maybe, forensically won't stand up to the test, that is of secondary importance to the spiritual and emotive power that the object can contain, and does contain.

I think that's where the setting of the relic is as eloquent as the relic itself. If you look at a lot of these reliquaries you do not actually see the relic. The relic is, as it were, the end of an inner journey. So what they're looking for is the viewer to really enter their own soul to understand how they enter into the value of the treasure of the relic that is before them.

So it's a spiritual dialogue that takes place between this object and the person themselves. That is why they're called "Treasures of Heaven", because it is through the spiritual that our hearts are raised to heaven."

There are still some members of the community of Bury St. Edmunds who still feel deeply about the little box from Toulouse and the relics it contained.

Michael P. Peyton
with
David W. Atherton
December 2012

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