



Account of Purley on Thames

Birinus and the West Saxons

Birinus is much less famous than Augustine although the area of England he set out to evangelise was many times bigger than that of Augustine. They both, however, established a pattern of diocesan organisation which was almost unique to England and which was at the root of the antipathy between Pope and King which lasted over a thousand years. In the rest of Christendom a bishop exercised his authority from a particular place rather than over a particular area as developed in England. It was much much later that the boundaries between dioceses became established whereas in England the diocese was coincident with the realm of the king and bishops were seen by those kings as their courtiers. Gradually as kings' realms and the workload of a bishop expanded the dioceses became subdivided, a process which continues to this day. William the Conqueror tried to adopt the continental system but merely ordered existing bishops to set up shop in the main towns of their sees.

Of Birinus's origins we know next to nothing. He has been claimed as a Frank, a German and an Italian and what we do know comes mainly from Bede's History of the English Church. He states that Birinus was first consecrated bishop by Asterius the Archbishop of Milan, in Genoa and, a while later, was sent by Pope Honorius I to evangelise the Mercians whose territory extended over most of the midlands north of the Thames. He landed at Portchester in Hampshire in 634. The wife of King Cynegils of Wessex was already a Christian and Birinus was welcomed at Cynegil's court at Winchester when he arrived and sent on to meet the king on his estate which was probably near Cholsey in Berkshire. Birinus was given permission to evangelise in Wessex and although this had not been Birinus' mission he reckoned, from what he had seen, that Wessex was in dire need of his spiritual services.

At the time Cynegils was in league with King Oswald of Northumbria against Penda, who had become king of Mercia in 632. Cynegils had already had a run in with Penda and had established a somewhat uneasy truce with him using the Thames as their mutual boundary and ceding overlords-hip of the Severn Valley and Cotswolds to Penda. Oswald was visiting Cynegils and had been negotiating with him at Easthampstead in Berkshire over the hand in marriage of Cynegils' daughter Cynaburga. One of the sticking point in the negotiations was that Wessex was essentially pagan and Oswald as a Christian did not feel able to make an alliance with pagans so Birinus was sent for and, with Oswald acting as his godfather Cynegils was baptised at Fountain Garth near the present Bracknell. The alliance was sealed and the two kings agreed that the seat for the bishopric should be at Dorchester on Thames on the boundary between Wessex and Mercia. It is not clear whether Penda was consulted on this but most of Birinus's subsequent activity seems to have been south of the river in Berkshire and Hampshire and as Oswald claimed overlordship over Mercia anyway they probably did not bother.

The two kings set off to examine the site which had been the old Roman town of Dorcic and consequently had sufficient materials on hand for Birinus to build himself a cathedral. On the way many others of the royal court decided they too had better become Christians, so in 635 at Brightwell in Berkshire, just down-river of Dorchester, Birinus held a mass baptism although Cynegil's son Cwichelm refused. He relented a year later and accepted baptism.

Cynegils died in 643 and his eldest son Cenwalh succeeded him and invited Birinus to establish a minster at Winchester. A minster was the base for priests who went on circuits ministering to the Christian communities around. There was no concept of parishes or parish priests at this time and

neither had the concept of monasteries and closed religious communities been established in England.

Birinus is also credited with establishing minsters at Reading and Abingdon and probably did so in several other towns. The priests from the minsters would visit villages and towns around, initially holding services in the open air, usually choosing a site that had already a tradition of a holy site such as an oak grove or standing stones or the mound of a hill. These gathering places would usually be marked by a cross, initially of wood but later of stone and often the villagers would erect a small building on the site. In later years lords of manors employed priests as their clerks as they were among the few who were literate, hence the phrase 'clerks in holy orders' which most parish priests even today use as the official description of their profession. Then, later on, the possession of a church on one's estate became one of the qualifications for a lord to move up the social ladder to a thane and so most manors built their own churches and used their clerks as local priests, although the minsters continued with their work until well into the 12th century by which time they were becoming the parish churches of the larger towns and a few becoming cathedrals. Certainly by the mid 10th century virtually every village in southern England had its own parish church.

Cenwalh offended Birinus and the Christians in Wessex by putting aside his wife and marrying another, But this was surpassed by Penda's reaction as the first wife was Penda's sister and the marriage was tied in with the uneasy truce between Wessex and Mercia. Penda invaded Wessex and Cenwalh fled for his life to East Anglia where he sought refuge at the court of King Anna who was a devout Christian. Anna encouraged Cenwalh to develop his faith and to support the conversion of Wessex when he returned in 647. A year later the minster at Winchester was completed and dedicated by Birinus.

Initially Birinus himself spent a large amount of his time tramping around the Berkshire and Hampshire areas, baptising converts and establishing Christian communities, served by the priests from the minsters he established. He was not an administrator but was generally regarded as a holy and humble man and greatly revered. When he died on the 3rd December 649 he was buried in the cathedral he had built at Dorchester and his shrine became a place of pilgrimage

Agilbert succeeded Birinus as the second bishop in 650 and, building on Birinus' work, made great progress in establishing Christianity in Wessex, but in 663 he fell out with Cenwahl who had divided the diocese which stretched from the South Coast to the Humber giving the Wessex half to his protégé Wini with his seat in Winchester and leaving Agilbert with the Mercian half. Agilbert promptly resigned and went north to Northumbria, eventually ending up as Bishop of Paris. His problem was that his English was so poor that he was unable to hold a proper conversation with Cenwahl whereas Wini was native born and could hold the kind of dialogues that Cenwahl appreciated. Three years later Cenwahl fell out with Wini too and he moved to become Bishop of London leaving Cenwahl with no bishops until he had Leutherius consecrated and appointed in 670.

Cenwahl died in 672 and for many years thereafter Wessex was invaded and fought over and by 680 Birinus' remains had been 'rescued' from Dorchester and moved to Winchester where a new shrine and place of pilgrimage was established although pilgrimages to the old shrine at Dorchester continued.

After his death Birinus was canonised, a process which required a number of miracles attributed to him. The first was when his ship was leaving Genoa with Birinus having left his corporal behind. This was an altar cloth which held the relics of older saints and without which Birinus would be unable to perform his Episcopal duties. Birinus leapt over the side in a storm leaving the ship frozen in time and walked back to shore over the water to retrieve his precious gift given him by Pope Honorius. On arrival in Wessex an old woman who was both blind and deaf was told in a vision to seek out Birinus and when she found him he made the sign of the Cross over her and her sight and

hearing was restored. There were many other tales of the miracles at his shrine.

He appears in the Calendar of Saints in the Catholic Church on 3rd December, the day of his death. The Russian Orthodox Church has the same date but some other churches use December 4th. The Anglican Church however have chosen 4th September, the day in 980 when St Ethelwold consecrated a new shrine at Winchester covered with gold and silver.

From 1977 An ecumenical walk has been held to commemorate the last part of Birinus' journey from Winchester to Dorchester.. It starts at Churn Knob near Blewbury, where Birinus is reputed to have preached his first sermon, with a picnic and a blessing and then the pilgrims make the way over the 13 or so miles to Dorchester with pit stops at the several villages en route. At Dorchester there is a huge service at the Abbey with all denominations taking part with a Salvation Army band providing the music and some notable preachers. After the service everyone repairs to a barbecue in the grounds of the nearby Catholic Church where those that have completed the walk and had their 'passport' stamped at all the villages can receive a certificate. The stamp points are:- Churn Knob, Blewbury, South Moreton, Brightwell, Little Wittenham, St Birinus Catholic Church and Dorchester Abbey

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