Saint Guthlac

His Life

and

The Guthlac Roll
Foreword

This booklet outlines the story of St Guthlac's life based on a translation of the earliest manuscript and then tells his story through The Guthlac Roll.

*The Life of Saint Guthlac* was written by a monk named Felix at the behest of King Ælfwald of the East Angles, to whom it was dedicated. It was written within 35 years of Guthlac's death; (after 731 - as it was not mentioned in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and before 749 - when Ælfwald died). Felix based it on the recollections of Wilfred (a hermit who visited Guthlac often) and Cissa (who was Guthlac's successor at Crowland). Consequently, this manuscript can be considered to be the most reliable history of his life.

It was not for another one to two hundred years that other works on St Guthlac's life started to appear, written in Anglo-Saxon and Latin. These included poems as well as prose. They also included embellishments by the various authors and through traditions that had grown up at the Abbey of Crowland as years passed. Some of these, shown on the Guthlac Roll, are indicated in the notes in italics below the roundels.

The Guthlac Roll is believed to have been drawn by monk(s) at Crowland Abbey in late 12th Century or early 13th Century. It is based on Felix, other histories and/or the Crowland tradition. The Roll comprises 18 roundels on vellum measuring 2,910mm long by 165mm wide. Only half of the first roundel remains and there were probably at least 2 more. The purpose for which the Roll was drawn is not known. Archived as Harley Roll Y6 in the British Library, it is one of its most highly regarded illuminated manuscripts.

England in the 7th Century

By the end of the 6th Century the invading Angles, Saxons and Jutes had set up their own kingdoms across England. These included Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex and Wessex. During the 7th Century these kingdoms were constantly warring between themselves and with the Britons in Wales and the southwest.

At the same time, the followers of St Columba were establishing Christianity in the Celtic tradition among the kingdoms from the north – Northumbria (634), East Anglia (653) and Mercia (655) – and St Augustine was re-establishing it in the Roman tradition from the south. The two traditions were in conflict until, at the Synod of Whitby (664), it was decided that the Roman tradition should have supremacy. However, in the middle and north of the country, the church which resulted was a blend of the two traditions.
Guthlac’s Life

Guthlac was born in Mercia in 673 when Æthelred was King. His parents, Penwalh and Tette, were related to the Mercian royal family. At his birth there was a heavenly portent – a gold-red hand, reaching from the clouds, pointed at the cross on the door of the house. After eight days he received the name of Guthlac, from the name of the Guthlacingas tribe; also meaning (in its Latin form) “Belli munus” or “reward of war” (by fighting against vices he would gain the reward of eternal life).

His childhood was exemplary; for the brightness of spiritual life shone in him so brilliantly that it was clear what type of man he would become.

In his mid-teens, learning of the valiant deeds of the heroes of old and desiring to command, he gathered a band of followers and took up arms. After a time he had defeated many foes and devastated their lands, had gathered companions of many races and from many areas, and had amassed immense booty. However, he then began to reflect on the purpose of his life, returning one third of the treasure to its former owners.

After about nine years of warring, while resting from his exertions he had a revelation: in contemplating the wretched deaths and shameful ends of warrior leaders, he foresaw where his life could lead and resolved to change it and become a servant of Christ.

His comrades were utterly amazed and dismayed at his decision. Despite their protestations and disregarding his noble expectations of military leadership, he spurned his family, fatherland and comrades of youth, and renounced worldly things for faith and trust in Christ.

At age 24, he left everything he possessed and entered the monastery at Repton, where he became a monk, in the Roman tradition, under the Abbess Ælfthryth.

Striving to expiate his past sins, he never again took intoxicating drink (except for wine at communion). He was initially disliked by the brethren there for his intense piety, until he had proved himself by his sincerity.

After two years of training in the monastic life (scriptures, prayers, canticles, psalms, hymns, and church routine) and virtues (obedience, humility, patience, abstinence, sincerity and temperance), he decided that his way would be the solitary life. In trying to find a deserted place he learnt about a “most dismal fen of immense size in the middle of England which stretched north from near Cambridge to the sea”. It consisted of marshes, bogs, black
waters with wooded islands traversed by tortuous streams and overcome by fogs.

He made his way there by the most direct route. He met a man called Tatwine who knew of a remote island where many had tried to live but had come away because of the terrors it held. This was the place he sought. Tatwine took him there in a fishing boat through trackless bogs within the dismal marsh. He arrived on St Bartholomew’s day (24 August, probably 699) and resolved to spend the rest of his life there.

Guthlac built his hermitage on what was probably a round or chambered long barrow. From that time he wore garments made from animal skins and abstained from food other than small amounts of barley bread and fen water taken after sunset.

He now endured various temptations to make him turn from his chosen path, including the despair of unworthiness (feeling unable to cope and crushed by the weight of past sins) and fasting to excess.

Evil spirits (ferocious creatures with all kinds of deformities, who shrieked terribly) threw him into the marsh, dragged him through the brambles and beat him with whips, eventually taking him to the gates of hell. Guthlac responded that he was willing to bear any torture but would not give up his way of serving God. As he was about to be thrown in St Bartholomew came to his aid, making the spirits take him back to his hermitage.

Having overcome the evil spirits, he received the ability to discern people’s thoughts and to foresee their actions, as well as the gift of healing: there is space here to relate only a few of his miraculous works.

He restored the health of a man who had been possessed by an evil spirit for four years, and healed another who was extremely violent by binding him with his girdle. Rumours of his miracles passed throughout Britain and people came from far afield, including a wounded man who was healed by being wrapped in his prayer cloak.

Bishop Headda visited him, and was so impressed with his teachings and wisdom that he ordained him priest and consecrated his chapel. The Bishop’s secretary had come intending to prove that Guthlac was a false hermit whose powers were not from God. To the secretary’s amazement Guthlac told him what his intentions had been.
Abbess Ecgburh sent him a leaden coffin and linen cloth as presents, and asked who would inherit the place after his death. Guthlac responded that the person (Cissa) was still a pagan who had not yet been baptised.

Æthelbald, a Mercian prince discouraged and exhausted by his exile, came to Guthlac for solace and advice. After praying, Guthlac was able to advise him that he should be patient and that the kingdom of Mercia would come to him, not through bloodshed but by God’s hand. From that time Æthelbald placed his hope in the Lord.

Guthlac had a sudden illness which gave him premonition of his death, so that he began to prepare for the joys of the everlasting kingdom. He became ill on the Wednesday before Easter and on the following Wednesday, (probably 11 April 714), he died. Although his speech had been affected, having taken the sacrament on Easter Sunday he was able to preach with great wisdom. He instructed his companion Beccel that, on his death, he should find his sister Pega and ask her to carry out his wishes for his interment. Beccel reported that, when Guthlac died, the hermitage was filled with the splendour of a heavenly light which stretched up to heaven, such that the midday sun seemed pale, the air was filled with angelic sounds and the sweet scents of spices.

Pega returned to the island with Beccel and found the sweet scents still present. After three days of prayer and praise, as instructed by Guthlac, his body was wrapped in the linen cloth and placed in the coffin that Abbess Ecgburh had sent him, and buried.

Twelve months after his burial it was decided to put his body in a new sepulchre which had been prepared above ground as a shrine. When the coffin was opened those gathered were amazed to find that his body was whole and that his joints were flexible, as if he was asleep rather than dead, and the shroud was clean and bright. The shrine was later ornamented by King Æthelbald.

Æthelbald, still in exile far away, heard of his death and came to the sepulchre to pray for guidance. In the night, he awoke to find that his cell was lit with a mighty light and he saw a vision of Guthlac who told him that, through his intercession, God had answered his prayers and within twelve months he would be given the sceptre of his kingdom. This became so in 716, when his cousins died.
At some time The Roll was been torn apart. The missing roundels would, no doubt, have covered Guthlac’s birth, with the hand pointing from the clouds and his youth and/or his early soldiering.

In the remaining part of the roundel, Guthlac can be seen resting with his fellow soldiers. He and one companion are still dressed in chain mail, possibly too exhausted from the battle to remove it. The person on the bed may be the king and/or may be seriously wounded. This represents the time of Guthlac’s revelation, when he makes the decision to change his way of life.
Having decided to give up the life of soldiering and removed his military clothing, Guthlac leaves his army telling them to find another leader, and sets off across the hill country towards his new life. Guthlac’s fellow soldiers, still dumfounded by his decision, are unable to make him change his mind.

The hill country shown is a marked contrast from the land in which he will later choose to dwell. The chain mail depicted in the two roundels is likely to be representative of 10th to 12th century rather than 7th Century. An expert at the British Museum stated (1887) that helmets with “nasals” were not found on manuscripts after 1200 AD, indicating that the Roll was drawn prior to that date.
Guthlac goes to the monastery of Repton for his training. 

_Guthlac receives the tonsure at Repton._ Guthlac is kneeling before the bishop who is giving him the tonsure of St Peter. The bishop and abbess Ebba are holding crosiers in their left hands while a monk holds the service book and two nuns are in attendance.

_This monastery was a joint order of religious men and women, governed by an abbess. The abbess is named as Ebba, however Felix states (and other records indicate) that she is Ælfthryth. The Bishop performing the tonsure is unnamed but, as Repton is less than 20 miles from Lichfield, is likely to have been Headda, the bishop there, who headed the diocese which encompassed the kingdom of Mercia._
After two years at the monastery, Guthlac decides to follow the Celtic tradition in leading a life of solitude. Hearing about the desolate fens he goes there by the quickest route, most likely along the old Roman roads. On reaching the fens, probably at a village where the road crossed the River Welland or Nene, he finds a man, Tatwine, who tells him of a desolate island.

*Guthlac is conveyed to Crowland* in a fishing boat steered by Tatwine. Another man, possibly Guthlac's companion/servant Beccel, uses a pole to ensure that the boat does not run aground. Guthlac holding a book seems lost in contemplation. They arrive at Crowland on St Bartholomew's Day, probably 699.
Having initially built himself his hermit’s cell, Guthlac builds a chapel for himself with two helpers. The chapel is of stone with a tiled roof. The man on the left is shaping a stone, while Guthlac is using a rope to lift the building materials to the second man on roof.

In the 7th Century such a chapel would have been of wood and thatch. Additionally, in such a remote location as Crowland, stone could only have been obtained at substantial cost.
In his desolate and remote location, Guthlac is assailed by the devil, suffers many temptations and is driven almost to despair. He calls to the Lord in his distress and is sent help when, in the early morning, an angel and St Bartholomew speak with Guthlac. The angel blesses Guthlac, who is sitting in front of the altar with a book in his right hand, while Beccel, his companion/servant, looks on in awe from behind a column.

*This book, which appears in several of the roundels, by Crowland tradition is Guthlac’s psalter.*
Despite the attendance of St Bartholomew and the angel, the demons return during the nights. In the roundel the demons carry Guthlac into the air, striking him with scourges while keeping a strong hold on him. Beccel, in a room below, is unaware of what is happening to Guthlac.

The artist did not need to use his imagination to draw the demons as Felix gave detailed descriptions – ferocious in appearance, terrible in shape with great heads, long necks, filthy beards, ghastly complexions, hairy ears, wild foreheads, savage eyes, stinking mouths, horses’ teeth, throats vomiting flames, twisted jaws, thick lips, singed hair, scabby thighs, knotty knees, crooked legs,…… they grew terrible to hear with their mighty shriekings ……discordant bellowings.
One night, when Guthlac responds that he will not change his way of life no matter what befalls him, the torture continues further from home – the demons carry Guthlac to the gate of hell. Within the bounds of hell other demons are chastising and torturing the inmates; these include kings, bishops and monks. Just as he is about to be thrown in to join them, Guthlac’s mentor arrives to stop them - St Bartholomew gives Guthlac a scourge. St Bartholomew, holding the psalter, then orders the demons to take him home without further molesting or harming him.

The gift of a scourge to Guthlac (not included in Felix’s Life) is considered to be a Crowland tradition. It is the symbol of St Guthlac, and with the knife (the symbol of St Bartholomew), is quartered in the Crowland Abbey shield.
When the demons next return Guthlac is able to drive them off with the scourge. Here *demons in different bestial forms surround Guthlac’s home whilst Guthlac has caught and is beating one of them. Guthlac’s psalter is on the altar.*

Felix wrote a different ending to the torments by the demons - the next morning, during Guthlac’s dawn praises, two spirits whom he had noted to be his main persecutors, appeared standing to his left and weeping. In response to his question they said that they were mourning that he had broken their strength, that they no longer had power over him and dared not touch or even approach him.
Guthlac using his belt casts out a demon from the nobleman. Egga, believed to be one of the exiled Æthelbald’s comrades, had developed a seemingly incurable madness which made him extremely violent. He is brought to Guthlac to be healed. Two of Egga’s companions look on.

This is one of Guthlac’s several miracles of healing. By this time his name was becoming well known across the whole of Britain for his ability as a counsellor, healer and prophet. He was also known for his love of the birds and fish of the fen, which would come at his call.
Guthlac is visited by Bishop Headda. The bishop, holding a crosier, is so impressed with his teachings and wisdom, that he ordains him priest and consecrates his chapel. Guthlac receives the priesthood from Headda Bishop of Winchester. Guthlac holds the chalice, representing his elevation to the priesthood. Five other priests or monks are in attendance; one dressed in ornamented vestments is holding the service book whilst another is holding the psalter.

The artist was probably mistaken – Bishop Haedda of Winchester died in 705 which is probably too early for Guthlac’s reputation to have built and spread. It is more likely to have been Bishop Headda of Lichfield (also of Leicester from 709) who would have known of Guthlac at Repton.
Æthelbald, a Mercian prince in exile, is exhausted and discouraged as he seeks safety in various parts of England and comes to Crowland to consult him. Guthlac consoles the exiled King Ethelbald. Guthlac sitting before the altar and holding his psalter, is earnestly talking to King Ethelbald, comforting him and advising him that one day he will become king. One of Æthelbald's attendants looks on, heeding the advice.

Æthelbald is not yet King; he is forced into exile from Mercia by two successive kings, the sons of Æthelred who are his cousins, as he is a rival for their throne.
After 15 years on the island, Guthlac has a sudden illness which lasted 8 days. He receives Holy Communion on Easter day (the 4th day) and, despite a speech impediment is able to preach with great fervour. On the 7th day Beccel finds Guthlac lying near the altar of his chapel and is given his last instructions. Guthlac as he becomes weaker speaks with his follower Beccel.

Beccel also asks Guthlac to tell him whom he had heard him talking to in the early mornings and evenings over the years. Guthlac replies that, now he is at the end of his life, he is prepared to say that every day at these times the Lord sent him an angel who was able to relieve his burdens and reveal many things to him.
Guthlac dies the next day. His soul is shown rising from his mouth with the aid of an angel. Another angel waits to clothe Guthlac's newborn soul and bear it away to heaven.

The pillar of light like a tower of fire reaching from earth to the clouds fills the chapel with the splendour of heavenly light and makes even the sun at noonday seem pale. Additionally, angelic sounds and sweet smelling nectar fills the air.
Beccel brings Guthlac's instructions to Pega across the waters of the fen by boat. Finding Pega, he tells her and she falls to the ground in her grief as if she is dead. After a short while she rises and gives thanks to God for his life.

Then, Pega Guthlac’s sister gets into the boat for the journey back to Crowland. Her attendant monk, supported on a walking stick, is bearing a book (possibly the psalter?).

Pega’s hermitage was probably on an island close to the edge of the fen at what is now Peakirk (Pega’s church).
They arrive the next day, and find the whole place filled with an Ambrosian odour. They spend 3 days in prayer and praise, commending her brother’s spirit to heaven.

_{Here Guthlac is buried.}_ On the third day, in accordance with his instructions, _Guthlac’s body_ is wrapped in the linen shroud and placed in the lead coffin by Pega and Beccel. Also in the chapel, officiating at the funeral, are the priest, holding the service book and incensing the body, and a monk. The pillar of light to the clouds is still present.

_The linen shroud and lead coffin had, years before, been a gift to Guthlac by Abbess Ecgburh,_
Twelve months later, when it is decided to move Guthlac’s body to a new sepulchre, they find it whole and as if he was sleeping rather than dead.

Soon after this, Æthelbald, still in exile, travels to Crowland to pay his respects and request Guthlac’s intercession. One night Guthlac appears to King Æthelbald keeping watch at his tomb. He is kneeling in sorrow while his companions are sleeping. Guthlac, holding his psalter and extending his right hand in blessing, tells King Æthelbald that he should not be sad, as his many afflictions will soon end and he will become king of Mercia within a year.

He did so in 716, when his two cousins died.
The final roundel shows contributors to the foundation of Crowland Abbey, standing before the altar holding scrolls describing their gifts. To the front is King Æthelbald “I King Ethelbald give you land for an abbey with all that goes with it free from all worldly taxes” Behind him are twelve other benefactors. The gifts include from Earl Algar – land at Spalding, Pinchbeck, Waplode and Holbeach; from others land at Baston and Langtoft, and the Priory of Frieston.

Behind the altar is a man with hands tied and an unclean spirit coming from his mouth, indicating that miracles were still taking place at Guthlac’s shrine.

*Mention of Frieston Priory is important, as it was established in 1141. This sets the earliest date for the Roll to have been drawn.*
Notes on the Sources

The outline of Guthlac’s Life is summarised from *Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac – text, translation and notes* by Bertram Colgrave (1956). Colgrave suggests that Felix' style caused difficulty for translators because it was “ornate and bombastic”, based initially on the “almost unintelligible” style of Aldhelm, but later on Bede, whose style was more simplistic; he also “had a flair for inventing words”. However, more recent scholarship has indicated that his style was very much in keeping with the literary tastes of the period.

The reproductions of the roundels, shown here about 2/3 of full size, are from *The Antiquaries Museum* (1791) by Jacob Schnebbelie, draftsman to the Society of Antiquaries of London. He copied them from the original Roll and summarised their content and Guthlac’s life as part of his book. A copy of the book was “bequeathed to the rectors of Market Deeping for all time” in 1887 by the then rector, Revd. David Robertson. He also coloured in the drawings from the original - olive green shading which highlights small areas - these show here as the darker areas.

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St Guthlac’s Church, Market Deeping
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