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## Notes

### **The Birthplace of Saint Wulfthryth: An Unexamined Reference in Cambridge University Library Additional 2604**

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*Cambridge University Library Additional 2604 is a fifteenth-century miscellany that is largely comprised of East Anglian and Kentish saints' lives. It also includes a vita of Saint Edith—the patron saint of the convent at Wilton in Wessex. This vita names the birthplace of Edith's mother, St. Wulfthryth, as 'Lesing' in Kent. I suggest that this unique reference may come from a desire to firmly connect Edith's mother as well as Edith herself to a Kentish heritage.*

Cambridge University Library Additional 2604 (CUL 2604) is an important miscellany of saints that has only recently received scholarly attention. The content, dialect, script, artistic features, and ownership history of this manuscript indicate that it was probably produced in East Anglia in the late fifteenth century.<sup>1</sup> It contains the vernacular lives of twenty-two saints, all but three of whom are women. Of these women, six belong to the pre-Norman family who founded and led the monastery at Ely: Æthelthryth, Sexburh, Eormenhild, Eorcengota, Whitburh, and Wærburgh. The manuscript also includes several saints who were Kentish or had ties to Kent: notably, St. Eanswith who founded one of Kent's earliest religious centers at Folkstone, and St. Eadburh who was an abbess of Thanet and venerated at Lyming.<sup>2</sup> Though their legacy was centered in East Anglia, the Ely group had clear ties to Kent. Sexburh was married to King Eorcenbeht, and she founded Milton and Minister in Sheppey for herself and her daughter, Eormenhild, before they left and became abbesses at Ely.<sup>3</sup> This manuscript is clearly concerned with the families of royal women

1 O'Mara and Blanton, "Cambridge University Library, Additional MS 2604," 237-47. Blanton and O'Mara's article outlines some of the major arguments that they will discuss in their upcoming edition of CUL 2604. Their work will provide important insights into the manuscript's provenance and historical context.

2 Yorke, *Nunneries*, 23.

3 Yorke, *Nunneries*, 26.

who set the stage for Christianity in Eastern England.<sup>4</sup> Hild and Modwenna are the only British saints included who were not widely associated with this region. Saint Edith is also included. Though she was the patron saint of Wilton, she was born in Kent to King Edgar and Saint Wulfthryth. Her life in CUL 2604, includes unique details about her family that create further links to Kent—details that may or may not have been fabricated by CUL 2604’s author. Though much of this manuscript is translated from John of Tynemouth’s *Sanctilogium Angliae*, the author adds the birthplace of Edith’s mother on folio 69v:

Blessid Edith the virgyn was the doughtir  
of kynge Edgar and of Wolfride  
that was a dukes doughtir born in  
Kent in a small village callid Lesing which Wolfride  
kynge Edgar had purposed for to wedde.  
But she wold not for as sone as seynt Edith was  
borne she made hir selfe a nonne of Wilton abbey  
and at laste was abbes ther made by seynt  
Ethelwolde bisshop of Wynchestre.<sup>5</sup>

Tynemouth’s *vita* reads as follows:

*Beata virgo Editha filia fuit Edgari regis, et Wlfrudis, regii ducis filie, quam rex insolubilibus votis regno sociare disposuerat; sed partu explicito caste viuere, quam illecebris deseruire maluit, propter deum, habitumque monialium de manu sancti Ethelwoldi episcopi apud Wiltoniam suscepit.*<sup>6</sup>

The blessed virgin Edith was the daughter of King Edgar and Wulfthryth, the daughter of a noble leader, whom the king arranged to join in an insoluble royal vow. But after giving birth [she] clearly preferred to live chastely near God more than to diligently serve enticement, and she received the monastic habit at Wilton from the hand of Saint Æthelwold, the bishop.

4 O’Mara and Blanton, ‘Cambridge University Library, Additional MS 2604’ 237-47.

Blanton and O’Mara have argued that CUL 2604 does not emphasize family connections that would tie the Ely saints to their Kentish sisters—for example, the author fails to mention that Eadburh is Sexburh’s sister in law. They suggest that by omitting the genealogies that were present in CUL 2604’s source texts, the manuscript seems to separate the Kentish saints from the Ely group.

5 This was transcribed from the Harvester Microfilm series.

6 Horstman, *Nova Legenda Anglie*, 311.

Clearly, the reference to Wulfthryth's birthplace at Lesing did not come from John of Tynmouth's account. Indeed, it seems to be unique to CUL 2604. Though it is a small detail, it is significant given the sparse references to Wulfthryth in the historical record.

Other accounts that reference Wulfthryth include The Wilton Chronicle, Gosceline of St. Bertin's 'Life of St. Wulfhild,' and William of Malmesbury's histories. Though she was probably responsible for establishing and running the convent at Wilton, most records focus on her virgin daughter, Edith, and include Wulfthryth as something of a footnote or back story. Where she is discussed, the details of her life vary widely. For example, The Wilton Chronicle claims that she was the daughter of 'Syre Godwin,' but this was probably a confusion with Earl Godwine of Wessex whose daughter was also named Edith and was associated with Wilton.<sup>7</sup> Goscelin's 'Life of St. Wulfhild' claims that Wulfhild and Wulfthryth were cousins. In this account Edgar attempted to first marry Wulfhild, and when that proved unsuccessful, he entered a relationship with Wulfthryth. There also seems to be some question as to how formal Wulfthryth and Edgar's relationship was—accounts range from rape in William of Malmesbury to 'insoluble vows' in Goscelin of St. Bertin's Life of Saint Edith.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the case, according to Goscelin, Edgar took Wulfthryth to Kemsing, Kent<sup>9</sup> where she gave birth to Edith. Shortly afterwards she repudiated her 'husband' and took the veil.<sup>10</sup> Though her daughter was probably born in the East, Wulfthryth's background seems to be rooted in Wessex. She and her cousin were educated in Wilton, Edgar met them there, and she returned after their separation—which makes the reference to a Kentish birthplace remarkable.

7 Dockray-Miller, *Saints Edith and Æthelthryth*, i, 100.

8 Yorke, Barbara 'The Legitimacy of St. Edith' 97-113.

9 Edith's veneration continues to be associated with Kemsing into modernity. A miraculous well associated with her is still set aside in the center of town. See Hasted, "Parishes: Kemsing," 32-50.

10 Hollis, *Writing the Wilton Women*, 26.

Given CUL 2604's interest in the royal families of Kent and East Anglia, it is possible that Wulfthryth's birthplace was manufactured in order to establish deeper connections between the saints in Wessex and Kent. Edgar's influence on the Benedictine reforms and the history of pilgrimage to Wilton would make the western connection appealing to a Kentish/East Anglian audience. Of course, if Wulfthryth was truly born in Kent, it would also make sense that she would give birth to her daughter in Kemsing (as most sources claim).

I found no modern location in Kent by that name, but I will speculate on two possible candidates. The first is a property called 'Lessyng' that is referenced in a 1502 manorial survey of the Manor of Brook[e] near Ditton. The document states that a property called 'Apuldur Feld' is 'next [t]o a land callyd Lessyng land on the east syde'.<sup>11</sup>

Another option could be Lidsing, which is located near Chatham.<sup>12</sup> This area was more established than the area near Ditton; it contains a village and a medieval chapel of ease.<sup>13</sup> Wallenberg's *Place Names of Kent* describes a number of alternate spellings for this location:

'Lidisinga' c. 1100 Text Roff; 'de Lidesings' 1201 FF; 'Lidesing, de Lidesinge' 1226 Ass; 'de Lidesinges' 1251 FF; 'de Lydesyngge' 1270 Ass; 'de Lydisinges,' 'de Lydesingge' 1278 Ass; 'Lydefyngg,' 'Lydesyngge' 1278 QW; 'Lidesinge' 1296 Ipm; 'Lydesinge' 1311 Ch; 'de Lydesingge' 1313 Ass; 'Lydesyngge' 1318 FF, etc.

Earlier spellings tend to favor 'i' and, with a few exceptions, they eventually develop into 'y.' Some of these exceptions include 'Ledesyng 1382 Pat; 1383 Reg Roff' and 'Leggyn 1530 ArchC 23, 143-4'.<sup>14</sup> The Old English 'y' largely unrounded into 'i' in early

<sup>11</sup> See the Kent Records Office MS U49 M16.

<sup>12</sup> This location and some elements of Kentish dialect features were kindly suggested to me in a personal correspondence by Sheila Sweetinburgh with the help of Paul Cullen. Any mistakes are, of course, mine.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, "Lidsing - Limehouse," 85-87.

<sup>14</sup> Wallenberg, *Place Names of Kent*, 131-2.

Middle English; however, it became ‘e’ in Kent.<sup>15</sup> It is not impossible that dialectal confusion between ‘i,’ ‘y,’ and ‘e’ could be to blame for CUL 2604’s ‘Lesing.’

In any case, both modern Lidsing and the Ditton area are about twenty miles from Minister at Sheppey which Blanton and O’Mara name as a candidate for CUL 2604’s provenance. Inventories taken during the Reformation indicate that the abbey had a vernacular miscellany of saints’ lives. It was also founded by St. Sexburgh of Ely and dedicated to her; the manuscript’s focus on East Anglian and Kentish saints would make this abbey a logical contender for CUL 2604’s provenance.<sup>16</sup> If the compiler of CUL 2604 was indeed connected to Minister at Sheppey, it makes sense that he or she would try to associate Wulfthryth with the nearby landscape.

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<sup>15</sup> Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar*, 64.

<sup>16</sup> O’Mara and Blanton, ‘Cambridge University Library, Additional MS 2604’ 237-47.

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