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Feb. 3, St. Werburga

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Today is the feast of St. Werburga, fourth Abbess of Ely, the double monastery founded in 673 by her great aunt, St. Etheldreda.

(Etheldreda was also known as Audrey. "At St Audrey's Fair necklaces of silk and lace were sold, often of very inferior quality, hence the derivation of the word tawdry from St Audrey." The souvenir badges worn by pilgrims to Werburga's shrine depicted geese in a wattle enclosure, referring to the saint's miraculous clearing of geese from Weedon and restoring one that already had been eaten to "life and full plumage".)

St. Sexburga, sister of St. Etheldreda, became the second Abbess of Ely. The third Abbess, daughter of Sexburga, was St. Ermenilda, Werburga's mother. She appointed Werburga to succeed her as Abbess of Minster-in-Thanet. Upon Ermenilda's death, Werburga became Abbess of Ely. She also ruled the monasteries at Weedon, Hanbury, and Trentham.

In 699, St. Werburga "died at her own monastery of Trentham but the monks of Hanbury carried off her body to enrich their own church. In the ninth century, during the ravages of the Danes, the venerable body was removed for greater safety to the Church of SS. Peter and Paul in Chester."

The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: A Study of West Saxon and East Anglian Cults, by Susan J. Ridyard, Cambridge University Press, 1989, is based on the original sources for the lives of Werburga and her relatives, the "'dynasty' of royal ladies, descendants of the East Anglian king Anna (c.635-54), who came to be venerated at the abbey of Ely". Search term, "Werburga".

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