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Feb. 24, St. Ethelbert, King of Kent

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NCR Today

Today is the feast of St. Ethelbert, King of Kent, a descendant of Hengist, who led the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes into England.

Ethelbert was born in 560. He was a worshipper of Odin, but in 588, when he married Bertha, a daughter of King Charibert of Paris, as part of the nuptial agreement, he agreed to permit her to continue practicing her Christian faith. Bertha brought a chaplain to England with her, and King Ethelbert gave him an old church at Canterbury.

In 597 Pope St. Gregory the Great sent St. Augustine to England to convert the pagans. Ethelbert allowed Augustine and his forty Benedictine monks to stay, and he gave them a house at Canterbury.

Ethelbert asked Augustine to instruct him and to baptize him, but he did not compel his people to embrace Christianity. Still, many thousands were baptized.

King Ethelbert gave Archbishop Augustine land for his episcopal see in Canterbury, and he built the church dedicated to St. Paul in London which would become St. Paul's Cathedral.

St. Ethelbert died on Feb. 24, 616. He was buried with Queen Bertha in the Abbey of Sts. Peter and Paul at Canterbury. A candle burned before their tomb until the Reformation.

Here are some images of the exceedingly handsome King of Kent, including one on a stamp showing his baptism by St. Augustine. There is also a stained glass window of his beautiful wife, Queen Bertha.

The Saxon and Norman Kings, by Christopher N. L. Brooke, provides historical context for Ethelbert and

Bertha, and for Gregory and Augustine.

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[2] <https://www.ncronline.org/node/160616>