

St Frideswide and Jesus College

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Mornings in medieval Oxford

If you use the official University of Oxford diary, you may have noticed an entry on 19 October for St Frideswide's Day. Frideswide, or Friðuswīþ if you prefer the early English form, is said to have died on 19 October 727. Although women were not formally admitted to the University of Oxford until 1920, Frideswide was declared the patron saint of both the city of Oxford and the university in the early fifteenth century. Anyone arriving in Oxford by rail will walk through Frideswide Square. Within the city, there is a new school, two churches, a block of flats, a farm, and a bus stop all named for Frideswide. But who was this person, and what is the significance of having her as a local saint? More particularly, what is her significance to Jesus College as the successor to the White Hall, operated in the Middle Ages by St Frideswide's Priory?

If you were a student in Oxford before the twentieth century, you were expected to be ready to go before sunrise every single day to sing a service of morning prayer called matins. It forms a true workout for the mind. You would have been expected to memorize the entire book of psalms and many other sung texts for the occasion. This exercise front-loaded the day with a range of texts used for instructional purposes. It focused on a combination of biblical texts, patristic commentaries, and saints' lives. The medieval version of matins lasts for about two hours, but it became much less complex after the Reformation. Nonetheless, the 1622 statutes of Jesus College still specify that it is to begin between five and six in the morning.

At first glance, these might seem practices from another age; but the St Frideswide's Day 2021 issue of *The Guardian* includes [a review of morning routines](#) that sounds surprisingly like the routine required of a medieval student. Get up before the sun; get physical (note that pews are a recent introduction to churches); include time for meditation and creativity; and pay attention to celebrity role models. They cite Orlando Bloom as an authority that this should ideally include chant. The *Guardian* columnist, Emma Beddington, finds the celebrity advice she reads inspiring but impossible to achieve on her own. If we read 'saints' lives' for 'celebrity advice', surprisingly little has changed.

Imagine, then, that you are a student at Oxford five centuries ago on St Frideswide's day. Many manuscripts assign the following extract to be read on this day at matins, from Robert of Cricklade's *Life of St Frideswide*, probably written in the 1170s. The most reliable manuscript for this text is conveniently from the Jesus College collection ([Bodleian MS. Laud Misc. 114](#)). This text would originally have been chanted in Latin, split into nine sections, with musical interludes. Here is my translation.

Robert of Cricklade, *The Life of St Frideswide* 2–7

[2] Around the year 727 from the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the king of all ages, the word of God had blossomed and brought forth the greatest fruit in the savage nation of the English. They had seized the island of Britain, devastated it, and put it under the control of its lordship with a bloodthirsty hand. There was a certain vassal king named Didan, an orthodox man and outstanding in all the decency of his ways. He honoured a city with his frequent residence called Oxford in the Saxon tongue, which we can call *Boum Vadum* in Latin.

By divine will, he took a wife suitable to his character named Safrida, from whom he received an heir to his disposition rather than to his spoils – that is to say, an only daughter. He directed that she be called Frideswide when she was cleansed at the fount of holy baptism.

[3] After five years' attentive upbringing, they handed her over to learn the study of letters under the tuition of a very devout matron named Algiva.

As if she were the happiest foretelling of a happy future age, she shone forth in the very beginning of her study, so much that it was clear to everyone that the Holy Spirit had chosen her mind as a dwelling place. For who was not astounded at a young girl, five years old, who had learnt the hundred and fifty psalms of David in some five months and committed them to memory? And her companions did not become jealous from this; but having been touched by the zeal that filled her with charity, she was beloved by everyone.

She was of humility and likewise gentleness, and thereafter was of such powerful grace, that she appeared not to be a royal maiden, but a person of servile state, obliging all and displaying a feeling of compassion for all. She was clearly *not a forgetful hearer* of the divine word, *but a doer of works*. [James 1.25] For she dutifully stored what she heard from the Scriptures in the bookcase of her heart, devoting herself persistently to return money loaned from the Lord to him *with interest*. [Matt. 25.27]

Accordingly, she constantly slaughtered the sacrificial victim of her heart in a burnt offering acceptable to the Lord, [Cf. Rom. 12.1, Phil. 4.18] in devout rivers of tears with sighs and groans day and night, praying continually that she might deserve to *dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of her life* [Ps. 27.4 (Vulg. 26.4)] and to contemplate his face.

[4] As an adult, she had not entrusted herself to a husband when her mother passed from the earth.

Lacking any other source of comfort, the virgin was released from her father's protection. As much as she could, she urged him with sound warnings to seek remedies for his soul, as he was about to go in a short time from this place to where the companion of his bed had gone before. But struck with grief, as is usual, at the recent loss of his wife, and urged by the constant prayers of his most beloved daughter, he built a church within the city walls. It was dedicated in honour of the holy and everlasting Trinity; of the ever-virgin Mary, the mother of God; and of all the saints. He entrusted it to his daughter at her request.

She entered the church and handed herself over intentionally to divine works, entrusting her chastity to the Lord with persistent prayers. She opened her innermost thoughts in her entreaties, giving gifts to the poor with her own hand when they asked. She also neglected the splendour of the world to desire the celestial country ardently. She seemed nearly to have shed the burden of her flesh, and to have put on the armour of immortality. [Cf. Rom. 13.14; Eph. 6.11] For she did not feed the body with food but enlarged her spirit. She did not dress in soft clothing, [Cf. Matt. 11.8; Luke 7.25] but kept vigil with the sharpest hair shirts. She did not sleep on softness, but pinched herself if she slept. What can I say of her bed, since it was nothing but the hardest ground? She laid down on it when sleep conquered her, settling her debt to nature; bowing down to the ground, she constantly sought it on her knees when she poured out prayers to the Lord. You would be amazed that the royal daughter raised on kingly feasts fought the wantonness of hunger with a rough meal of cheap vegetables and a small portion of barley bread; and that she overcame the urgent burning licentiousness of thirst with a mouthful of water. What more? She so embarked on *the narrow and hard way that leads to life* [Matt. 7.14] that there was nothing further.

O unhappy people of this time, *whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things*, [Phil. 3.19] who put piety forward with their habit, but gainsay it with their conduct and life! They turn their eyes onto themselves with the cheap garment of appearance, but they disrupt their bowels in overindulgence of fine food. If they ever fast, they 'search earth and sea' [Lucan, *Pharsalia* 5.262] whence they might compensate for the loss of fasting. But this is not the *fast that I have chosen*, [Is. 58.5-6] says the Lord.

England was amazed, everyone wondered, perceiving that the weak sex surpassed manly strength at a tender age. The happy young girl's father was moved to dance with joy. He had thought that his heir would provide a leader of earthly affairs, but now she looked to heavenly desire.

[5] And what is more, to demonstrate that she had fully put off every hope of a perishable future age, she asked her father that she might deserve to receive the habit of nuns. With a wise plan, she was taking precautions, without doubt, that she should not by chance be forced to enter a marriage after her father's death, and to corrupt her intention to remain a virgin in every respect. Besides, the most blessed virgin was sick of adorning her body in purple: she had known that she was redeemed by the blood of Christ while she was condemned by faithless, foul death. Betrothing herself with the ring of faith, she despised gold and precious stones as merchandise of little worth.

King Didan, rejoicing greatly at his daughter's plan, ordered the bishop to be summoned near and asked for the habit of nuns to be given to his most beloved daughter. In emulation of the most blessed virgin, roughly twelve girls of noble birth *forsook all and followed the Lord*, [Luke 5.11] *walking in all his commandments and precepts* [Luke 1.6] following the example of Frideswide, beloved of God. Although they could not equal her in virtues, they still glowed to be made her partners by sharing in the kingdom of heaven. And so, by the king's generosity, they built lodgings for themselves, most fit for holiness, alongside a church. There, melodious happiness echoed day and night in the mind of the virgins with a harmonious voice, singing psalms and hymns.

[6] Meanwhile, the king himself sunk to his bed, struck by a heavy fever; and brought to the last, strengthened by the viaticum of the body of Christ, he slept with his fathers, finishing his days in good old age.

Blessed Frideswide was thus deprived of the comfort of both her parents. She desired the *Father who is in heaven* [Matt. 6.9] ardently; she hurried to him with whatever steps she could. For she extended her fasts, she persevered in continual prayer, and furthermore she sought the one her soul loved a hundred times a day and a hundred times every night on bended knees.

[7] But who can prevail in one's attempts to be good in the world without someone who is particularly harmful becoming jealous? For he who was able to drive away the first person from the joys of paradise attempts to cast down everyone. And because he could not overthrow Frideswide's mind with the goad of temptation, he displayed a physical spectacle for her bodily eyes to fight with her hand-to-hand.

And he was puffed up into the hope of his ancient madness, in which he was declaring that he would be like the Highest, and disguised himself as Christ. And, accompanied by a band of demons disguised as angels of light, he approached the virgin with these words: 'Come, my beloved, come; because it is time for you to gain *the crown of glory that cannot fade*, [1 Peter 5.4] which you have deserved. Come and prostrate yourself at the soles of my feet; worship him whom you have long desired. For I wish to appear to you for this: that you may see me for whom you have sighed with such passionate desire, and that you may succeed in entering the reward of eternal life without the trouble of the body.'

The virgin, informed by the Holy Spirit – by whose inspiration to the human race she discovered this enemy – began to speak to him thus: 'Why, most miserable creature, do you presume to promise to others what you do not have, nor can have because of your pride? What is immortal life to you? While living you died, and while remaining you sink always into eternal death. But I, a wretched and most miserable sinner, would have shared in your damnation if the mercy of my redeemer Christ – whom you most wickedly pretend to be – had not come before. For he is *my hope, even from my youth.*' [Ps. 71.5 (Vulg. 70.5)]

At the virgin's lowly words, that proud one disappeared, not enduring the Spirit, and he filled the air with horrible howling and a deadly stench. Blessed Frideswide continued in prayer and remained in vigils with a calm mind, and remained undaunted.

Saints' lives in history and literature

This is the end of the nine readings that late medieval manuscripts assign for St Frideswide's day, though the story continues. Algar, the lecherous king of Leicester, attempts to abduct Frideswide. She flees into the wilderness, living at Binsey for many years. Following the usual pattern of hermits who attempt to find solitude, the people eventually discover her hiding place after she performs many miracles, and she decides to return to Oxford. She dies after kissing a leper to heal him.

The selection that you heard was composed almost half a millennium after the date that it gives for Frideswide's death. There is only one earlier text on Frideswide, composed about fifty years earlier. As a result, modern scholarship has never studied her with much seriousness. It is said that on St Frideswide's Day 1935, Claude Jenkins, the Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History, gave a sermon at Christ Church, which is the successor to St Frideswide's Priory and still has a shrine dedicated to her. 'Saint Frideswide', he said, 'never existed.' It was felt that the texts on Frideswide said nothing useful about history, and therefore were of minimal value.

This is a dated approach. We do not ignore *Beowulf* because it tells us little that can be verified about Scandinavia in the sixth century. Yet the approach endures when we discuss saints' lives because of a group of Jesuit historians called the Bollandists, who published saints' lives beginning in the early seventeenth century, aiming to separate true saints from the false in response to Protestant criticism. The influence of the early modern era still makes it difficult for us to sit back and enjoy saints' lives as simply a good story.

More recent scholars have rehabilitated Frideswide's historicity to some extent. Whatever one thinks about her existence in early Oxford, this text tells us a great deal about the twelfth century. The author, Robert of Cricklade, was brought to Oxford in 1138 or 1139 as a scholar. His *Life of Frideswide* reflects his ideals for learning as one core element of a holy life. Medieval teaching aimed not only to develop book-learning, but to build resilience and strong character. Hence why singing in a foreign language at the crack of dawn was one of the building blocks of the day.

In Robert's text, Frideswide is a rebel who goes against the grain of society, but she also typifies all the virtues that medieval writers aimed to promote. She is presented with the opportunity to acquire glory and riches, but chooses the path of humility. She can read and memorize texts faster than any boy, but does not flaunt this, while also honestly using her skills to teach and lead others by running a monastery. She adopts a vegan diet and every practice of self-discipline imaginable, and instead uses the resources to support the poor. The modern equivalent to this might be a story of a brilliant superhero who adopts a zero-carbon diet, sponsors migrant orphans, volunteers for a homeless shelter, cleans up plastic waste alongside rivers, and organizes peaceful protests against criminal government actions, all while keeping up a day job of operating a business to build energy-efficient housing.

The origin of Jesus College in St Frideswide's Priory

You might ask what prompted Robert to write this text. Robert was an active administrator, but his priory faced difficulties after its founder, Roger of Salisbury, died in 1139 without making proper financial provision for it. This might remind you of the relationship of Hugh Price to Jesus College, leaving the college starved for resources for its early history. Robert travelled to Paris and Rome in the 1140s to negotiate the priory's rights. He also initiated a programme of building works: archaeologists date a cloister at Christ Church to the 1140s, while the chancel of the priory church was probably begun in the 1160s but mostly constructed in the 1170s. These findings align intriguingly with events in Robert's life. He travelled to Rome on priory business via Sicily and Paris from at least 1156 to 1158. He combined this with a

book-hunting expedition, and brought back a Greek medical book to Eleanor of Aquitaine.

In Sicily, Robert contracted a disease that caused swelling in his left leg, which recurred periodically until he made a pilgrimage to the grave of Thomas Becket, who was assassinated at Canterbury Cathedral in 1170, after which a pilgrimage cult almost immediately sprung up around the site. His enthusiastic letter to Benedict of Peterborough shows that the healing left a deep impression, which probably occurred in late 1171 or early 1172, 'twelve years or more' after his trip to Sicily. This appears to have inspired the creation of a new shrine of St Frideswide that the priory promoted as a healing site to encourage pilgrimage to Oxford, which opened in 1180.

Robert's successor, Philip, wrote *The Miracles of St Frideswide*, a record of miracles at Oxford in the early 1180s. This is a brilliant text for understanding the plight of everyday people in Oxford, giving us a window into the lives of both rich and desperately poor people who travel to Oxford in search of healing. The intellectuals and clerks of St Frideswide's Priory made the decision to allow all sorts of people in for everything from short stays to sleeping in the church for weeks on end, vomiting on the floor, and shouting in the middle of prayers. Philip never portrays this as an inconvenience, but writes to convince yet more people to make the journey to Oxford.

The shrine to Frideswide was sufficiently successful to put the priory on a more secure financial footing. Significantly to us, it created an institution known as the White Hall in the late thirteenth century, which hosted students on the corner of what is now Turl Street and Market Street. Jesus College took over this institution's personnel and buildings on its foundation, and continued to pay rent to Christ Church for the site until 1866. Hence, Jesus College is the indirect result of a failed book-hunting expedition to Sicily, the assassination of Thomas Becket, and the decision to promote Frideswide as a saint representing the interests of both town and gown.

Writers after Robert of Cricklade kept up the imagery of an abbess who was both learned and humble. The seal of St Frideswide's Priory used from the 1190s onwards shows the saint holding a set of wax tablets in one hand, widely used for composition and study; and a lily in the other, a symbol of virginity, which was shorthand for extreme holiness of life. She was viewed as someone of extraordinary abilities who chose a different path than the one that society expected her to take. She prioritized her principles above all else and put the lives of others before her own. Selecting Frideswide as a patron saint might be roughly the equivalent of selecting Greta Thunberg as the figurehead of a new university in a few hundred years. As we seek to maintain the highest intellectual standards and solve seemingly insurmountable problems while also enabling people from all walks of life to find solace at Oxford, Frideswide is a figure from whom we can continue to draw inspiration.