



Christ Church

UNLOCKING CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL: FAMILY RESOURCES

A VIRTUAL VISIT ONLINE The Shrine of Saint Frideswide



Introduction:

A shrine is a special place to which people come, as pilgrims, to pray and to remember the person to whom the shrine is dedicated. In Canterbury Cathedral, there is a shrine to Saint Thomas Becket. In Dorchester Abbey, the shrine is dedicated to St Birinus who first brought Christianity to Oxfordshire. This shrine is dedicated to the patron saint of Oxford, Saint Frideswide, the Anglo-Saxon princess who founded the first church here in Oxford.

Very often, pilgrims light a candle, as a symbol of their prayer and to remember that Jesus said he was 'the light of the world'. A Christian saint is a person of faith, who has lived their life 'in the light', teaching and preaching the Gospel, caring for the poor and sick, and trying to follow Jesus' own example and teachings.

Background:

This shrine was designed and built by the Augustinian Canons and brothers who had taken over the running of St Frideswide's Priory. They also built the spire at Christ Church, which we can see towering above today's Cathedral, and enlarged the old Saxon church, using the latest Norman styles and building techniques.

The shrine was dedicated to the saint in 1289, as a fitting resting place for the coffin and body of Frideswide, who had died in the year 727. Her grave had long been a place of pilgrimage to which pilgrims would come to ask the saint to pray for them and help them. Many pilgrims prayed for healing because the stories about St Frideswide included tales of miraculous healings.

The shrine, which is made of intricately carved limestone, features several healing plants which were used in medieval times to cure illnesses.



This carving shows fig leaves which were used in medieval medicine to cure skin conditions.

The shrine also has four carved faces. On one side of the shrine, the three faces are complete. They show Princess Frideswide with her two companions, hiding in the trees at Binsey.

On the other side of the shrine, there would have been another image of St Frideswide, in the centre, but it has been destroyed, probably during the Reformation in the 1540s by Henry VII's soldiers or by Oliver Cromwell's soldiers in the 1640s during the Civil War.



The Princess' face on the shrine's south side.



Her damaged face on the north side.



The shrine is a giant jigsaw puzzle made of 13th century stone and 20th century fibre glass!

These young visitors are detecting the difference between original stone parts of the shrine and modern fibre-glass replacements for missing pieces!

When visitors see the shrine, it looks as if it has all been carved from stone but, when Cromwell's soldiers broke up the shrine, they threw its fragments into a well. Over two hundred years later, some Victorian workmen discovered the stone fragments but many were still missing. Nearly one hundred years after they had been gathered together, the pieces were fitted together using modern technology and materials. Missing pieces were created out of fibre glass and it is VERY hard to spot the difference.

In many Cathedrals, the saint's bones or relics are in, or on, the shrine but Frideswide's bones have been buried in a secret location since the time of Queen Elizabeth 1st, and nobody knows where they are!

Things to do at home- a few ideas

- Find out some other common uses for **fibre glass**.
- The medieval monks and nuns made their medicines using plants. Some of their medicines must have tasted disgusting. Do some research into **old-fashioned medieval remedies**.
- 80% of today's medicines still use plants to help cure illness. Can you discover more about plants that are used in **modern medicine**?
- Use papier-mache, clay or plasticine to re-create the **missing face** of Saint Frideswide. This kind of sculpture is called a relief.
- Design a **21st century shrine** for Saint Frideswide.
- Write a **story** about how YOU discovered where the relics of Saint Frideswide are hidden...!