

St. Swithun

St. Swithun had been Prior of the monastery attached to the cathedral, before he was made Bishop of Winchester in AD 852. He was, say the chroniclers, a diligent builder of churches in places where there were none before and a repairer of those that had been destroyed or ruined. He also built a bridge on the east side of the city and, during the work he made a practice of sitting there to watch the workmen, that his presence might stimulate their industry. One of his most edifying miracles is said to have been performed at this bridge where he restored an old woman's basket of eggs, which the workmen had maliciously broken. It is more certain that Swithun was one of the most learned men of his time and the tutor, successively, of King Aethelwulf of Wessex and of his son, the illustrious Alfred. He died on 2nd July AD 862 and was buried, according to his own desire, in the churchyard of the Old Minster (Cathedral) at Winchester, where "passers by might tread on his grave and where the rain from the eaves might fall on it." His reputation as a weather saint is said to have arisen from the translation of his body from this lowly grave to its golden shrine within the Cathedral, having been delayed by incessant rain. Hence the weather on the festival of his translation (15th July) indicated, according to the old rhyme, what it would be for the next forty days:

*"St. Swithun's day, if thou dost rain,
For forty days it will remain;
St. Swithun's day, if thou be fair,
For forty days 'twill rain na mair."*

June and July, however, have their weather saints in the calendars of France and of Belgium, as well as in those of other parts of Europe:

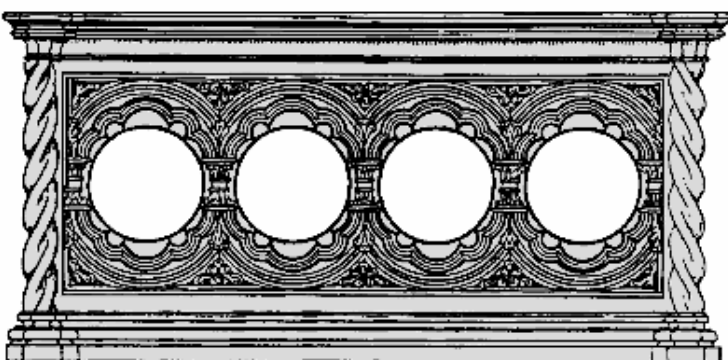
*"Quand il pleut a la Saint Gervais (19th July)
Il pleut quarante jours apres."*

Is the old French proverb, while Wedermaend, the 'month of storms' was the old Flemish name for July.



The nave, Winchester

St. Swithun's Shrine at Winchester Cathedral



Before its destruction in 1538, the Shrine of St. Swithun in Winchester Cathedral was perhaps the second most popular place of pilgrimage in Medieval England. However, despite its popularity in times gone by, no illustrations or detailed descriptions of the shrine have survived. The form, style and even site of this holy relic remain controversial even today.

St. Swithun's feretory was probably placed behind the High Altar. In the mid-12th century, Bishop Henry (of Blois) elevated St. Swithun onto a large platform built into the eastern apse of the Norman Cathedral especially for his veneration. Much remodelled, this area is still known as the *Feretory* or *Feretory Platform*. Beneath it is the '*Holy Hole*': a small (originally larger) passage which enabled pilgrims to crawl from outside the cathedral to right beneath St. Swithun's Shrine! Bishop Henry also surrounded Swithun with the bones of various Saxon Kings and Bishops in lead

coffers, which he had removed from their *'lowly place'* of burial. But for how long did the new shrine remain in this position? Here the controversy begins.

Today, a modern shrine stands in the usual spot reserved for a saint's relics behind the High Altar: sandwiched between the chantry chapels of Bishops Waynflete and (Cardinal) Beaufort. This was certainly the site of St. Swithun's Shrine at the time of its demolition in 1538, though it is not known when exactly the move from the feretory platform occurred.



Construction of the retrochoir, within which this area is housed, was begun by Bishop Godfrey Lucy around 1202 and completed about thirty-three years later. At the same time it has often been supposed that it was built specifically as a large open area to accommodate both a new shrine and the vast numbers of pilgrims which were by that time flocking to St. Swithun's side. The pilgrims are known to have entered through a door in the north transept and one theory has them being barred from the choir and nave which were reserved for the monks only.

Several pieces of beautifully sculptured purbeck marble stonework in the cathedral's possession (and now on display in the Triforium Gallery) were identified in 1924 as part of this retrochoir shrine. Le Couteur and Carter proposed a reconstruction of this as being of the common arcaded-niche type dating from around 1250-60 (*see illustration*). They further suggested that the shrine may have been rebuilt after being damaged by a weathervane which is recorded to have fallen on it from

one of the cathedral turrets in 1241. However, recent re-analysis of these findings by John Crook, Winchester Cathedral's Archaeological Consultant, suggests a very different story.

In the early 14th century, the old eastern apse was finally removed and replaced by the present decorated screen below the feretory platform and facing into the retrochoir. The coffered remains of the Saxon Kings were placed along its top edge and (possibly wooden) representations of them placed in the paired niches below, along with identifying inscriptions. But what of the great St. Swithun?

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Let's do a rain check on Saturday 15th July and see if its true or not!!!

Editor.