

The Legend of Wulfad and Rufin

There are various versions of the legend and the following is a summary of them.

Wulphere, like Penda his father, was a pagan. He wanted to marry Ermenild, a Christian princess from the royal house of Kent, and so to secure his bride he declared himself a Christian. However when he brought Ermenild back to Wulpherecestre (now Bury Bank, 2 miles north of Stone) he soon reverted to paganism. They had three children: two boys named Wulfad and Rufin and a daughter, Werburgh. The boys were brought up pagan by their father and Werburgh was raised as a Christian.

As the boys grew up they became very fond of hunting. One day Wulfad was pursuing a white hart. As he was about to shoot, his hand was stayed by a hermit standing by a cave where he was living. The hermit was none other than St Chad. He welcomed Wulfad into his cave and encouraged him to bring his brother Rufin the next day. Wulfad and Rufin secretly visited St Chad many times and in due course were converted to Christianity and baptized.

Meanwhile, King Wulphere had a general called Werebode in his court who desired to marry Werburgh. Wulphere gave his consent, but Werburgh would have none of it as Werebode was a pagan and besides, she was determined to be married to Christ only.

The disgruntled Werebode was seeking revenge for this insult and as he was suspecting the boys, he decided to follow them one day and he spied them in conversation with St Chad. He quickly returned to King Wulphere and reported that the boys had become Christians and added his own elaboration that they were plotting to overthrow him. Wulphere was so incensed by their betrayal that he ordered the boys to be killed. As they returned to the palace, the boys got wind of their fate and fled the way they had come. Wulfad was killed first at what is now Stone and then Rufin was slain at what is now Burston.

Ermenild and Werburgh took up the bodies of the two boys and as was the custom, they were buried under a pile of stones. This, it is said, is how the township of Stone received its name. Very soon after this, Wulphere was filled with remorse for his dreadful deed and sought and received absolution from St Chad. On this occasion he genuinely renounced his pagan beliefs and became the first Christian King of Mercia. Ermenild and her husband founded a monastery at Stone in honour of their two sons and this became a centre of pilgrimage. Hugh Candidus a monk writing in the 12th century described how *“a multitude of the infirm and those suffering from diverse weaknesses and of others seeking God ... was accustomed to visit the place and to carry stones thither to the building.”*