

Edward the Martyr - A Murder Mystery

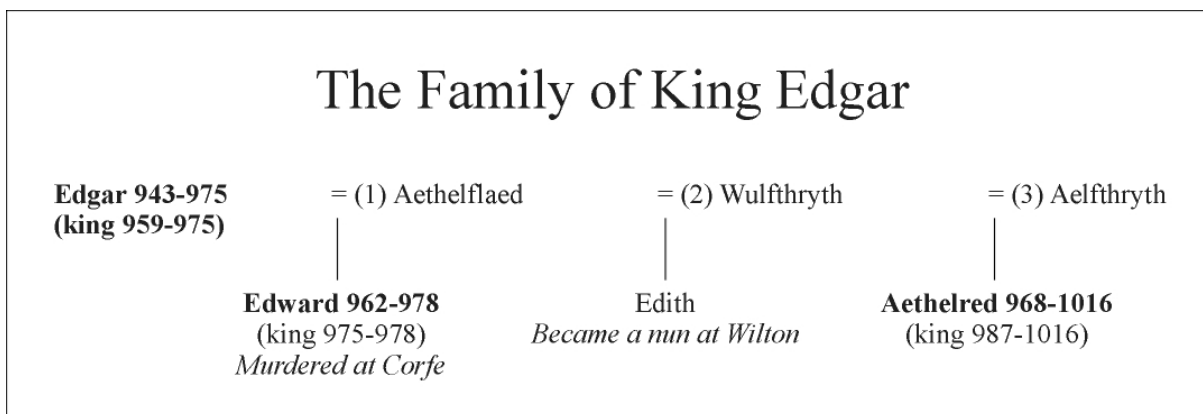
On 18th March 978 a murder took place which was to change the history of Shaftesbury Abbey. The victim was Edward, the Saxon King of England. He was just sixteen when he was murdered. This activity sheet looks at the evidence and asks:

- ◆ Why was Edward murdered?
- ◆ What happened to his body?
- ◆ Why was he important to Shaftesbury?

The Background

Evidence 1. Edward's family

1a. Edward became king when his father Edgar died in 975. Look at Edgar's family tree - you can see that he married three times, and had one child from each of his wives.



1b. Edward's father was a very successful king. 'Edgar's reign is often seen as the high point of Anglo-Saxon England. It was a time of peace ... because of his 'strict control backed up by military force'. (*MacDonald, p.9*)

Evidence 2. Who would be the next king?

2a. 'Edward was Edgar's older son but - unlike Aethelred - he had not been born during his father's reign as king. Consequently both had legitimate claims to the throne.' (*Chandler, p.30*). Although Edgar became king in 959, he was not crowned until 973.

2b. 'Anglo-Saxon succession did not necessarily go from father to eldest son. The most worthy man of royal blood was chosen.' (*MacDonald, p.19*). 'Worthy' could mean different things to different people!

Evidence 3. What was Edward like as a person?

3a. A Saxon monk, Byrhtferth, compared Edward and his younger brother Aethelred: 'Certain of the chief men of this land wished to elect as king the younger, because he appeared to all gentler in speech and deeds. The elder, in fact, inspired in all not only fear but even terror, for he scourged them not only with words but truly with dire blows, and especially his own men dwelling with him.' The monk was writing during the reign of Aethelred, in his *'Life of Oswald'*

3b. *Theodoric Paulus* said, 'St. Edward was a young man of great devotion and excellent conduct; he was wholly Catholic, good and of holy life; moreover, above all things he loved God and the Church; he was generous to the poor, a haven to the good, a champion of the Faith of Christ, a vessel full of every virtuous grace.' Edward was made a saint in 1001.

Evidence 4 - What was Edward like as a king?

4a. '975. This year Edward, Edgar's son, succeeded to the kingdom; and then soon, in the same year, during harvest, appeared "cometa" the star; and then came in the following year a very great famine, and very manifold commotions among the English people.' (*Anglo Saxon Chronicle*)

4b. 'In his days,
On account of his youth,
The opponents of God
Broke through God's laws;
Aelfhere alderman,
And others many;
And marr'd monastic rules;
Minsters they razed,
And monks drove away,
And put God's laws to flight.'
(*Anglo Saxon Chronicle*)

4c. As he was so young, 'Edward's position as king was not secure, his enemies conspired against him' (*MacDonald, p.23*)

4d. There are no portraits of Edward except on coins made during his reign, such as this silver penny.



The Murder

Evidence 5. How did King Edward die?

5a. 'This year was King Edward slain, at eventide, at Corfe-gate, on the fifteenth day before the calends of April [18th March]. And he was buried at Wareham without any royal honour. No worse deed than this was ever done by the English nation since they first sought the land of Britain.' (*Anglo Saxon Chronicle for the year 978*).

5b. 'One day, the young King was hunting near the Royal Palace of Corfe, in Dorset, where Queen Aelfthrith and Prince Aethelred were staying. Being weary and thirsty, King Edward turned away from his hunting party and rode off to drop in on them and take a rest. When he rode up to the palace gate, Aelfthrith herself came out to greet him with a kiss. The two were on friendly terms as far as the King knew and, without dismounting, he asked his step-mother for a drink. Queen Aelfthrith sent for a cup of wine and the exhausted Edward drank eagerly. But as he drank, Aelfthrith gave a sign to one of her servants, who stepped forward, drew his dagger and stabbed the King in the back! The King cried out in pain, but managed to set his spurs to his horse in an attempt to escape to the safety of his comrades. He slipped from his horse though and, with his leg caught in the stirrup, he was dragged along until the combination of the knife-wound and inflicted head injuries killed him.' (*S. Baring-Gould*)

5c. 'Edward went to Corfe to visit Aethelred because of the affection he felt for him and while he was staying there a group of zealous thegns [lords] who were staying with Aelfthrith, stabbed him. The body was hidden in a house and buried the next day.' (*MacDonald, quoting Byrhtferth's 'Life of Oswald', p.23*)

Evidence 6 - What happened to the body?

6a. Archbishop Wulfstan was alive when Edward was murdered and wrote this in 1014: 'Edward was betrayed and then killed, and afterwards burnt.' *Wulfstan*

6b. 'His body was buried in a swampy place and was found in February 979.' (*MacDonald, p.26*)

6c. '979. In this year, Alderman Aelfhere fetched the holy king's body from Wareham and bore it with great honour to Shaftesbury' (*Anglo Saxon Chronicle*) where it was buried again on February 18th in the Abbey churchyard. Aelfhere was a powerful lord who had opposed Edward when he was king - see Evidence 4b. The *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* goes on to say, 'Those who would not bow to his living body, now bend humbly on their knees to his dead bones'.

Edward and Shaftesbury

Evidence 7 - How did Edward become a saint?

7a. 'William of Malmesbury tells of a miracle preventing Aelfthryth from visiting the body of Saint Edward. She mounted a horse to begin the journey, but it would not move. She switched horses, but to no avail. Thus the miracle was that the Saint prevented her from visiting him. The *Passio* [i.e. 'The Suffering and Miracles of St. Edward King and Martyr'], moreover, claims that he cured the blind.' (*MacDonald, p.29*)

7b. 'The 12th century historian, William of Malmesbury, recorded seeing Edward's lung, still miraculously breathing. A glass bowl excavated here and said to have once held the heart of King Cnut, may, instead, have contained this relic of Edward.' (*Shaftesbury Abbey Museum*). William of Malmesbury does not mention Edward's bones.

7c. 'Edward's lung was on display at the abbey and was still breathing. There is evidence of Saxon relics preserved in glass jars. Such a glass jar was excavated in 1902 near the altar, and 'contained a small, shrivelled object like a pebble'. Although the 'pebble' was lost the jar was analysed by specialists in the 1950s and confirmed as a 'late Saxon reliquary'. (*Chandler, p.36*). A reliquary is a special casket where holy relics are kept.

7d. It was 'to Aethelred's advantage to promote his family to the highest rank of all, sainthood' (*Chandler, p.35*).

7e. Edward was made into a saint in 1001 and 'the body was moved to a more exalted place inside the Abbey church.' (*MacDonald, p.26*)

7f. Coins made during Aethelred's reign have been found at Shaftesbury. Compare this one with Edward's (4d).



7g. 'The shrine of St. Edward continued to be visited and venerated by pilgrims throughout the middle ages' (*Chandler, p.37*) and the Abbey became rich and successful partly because of this. The town of Shaftesbury was even called 'Edwardstow'.

Evidence 8 - What happened to Edward's bones?

8a. 'Here lies, or rather lay, St. Edward...' (*William of Malmesbury, writing in about 1120*). During the middle ages, relics of Edward were sent to many other churches and monasteries so that they could also have shrines to him. William of Malmesbury may have been joking, because the Abbey would never have allowed all the bones to be given away.

8b. On Thursday 22 January 1931 John Wilson Claridge (whose father owned the Abbey ruins at the time) and his gardener, Bert Richards, 'came across a lead casket concealed beneath a large stone. Inside were human bones. The winter afternoon light was failing, so they stopped work. Friday was wet, but on Saturday Claridge (a professional actor) assembled the rector, the town clerk, his parents and three newspaper reporters to witness the excavation of his dramatic discovery. The base of the casket was too corroded to be lifted out, so he removed its contents - part of a skull and bones amounting to about half the skeleton of a young man. Claridge was in no doubt that he had found the relics of St. Edward.' (*Chandler, p.37*) Bert Richards built a shrine near where the bones had been discovered, Claridge sold the Abbey ruins in 1951 and took the bones with him. They were later enshrined in Brookwood Cemetery near Woking, where they are today. The lead casket is in the Abbey museum.

8c. Dr. Don Brothwell of the British Museum examined the bones in 1973 and thought that 'the individual was of mature age and so could not have been the teenage Edward' (*Chandler, p.38*).

Sources

MacDonald, J., 'Monarchs, Murder, Mystery and Mayhem', 2000

Chandler, J., 'A Higher Reality', 2003

Byrhtferth of Ramsey, *Vita S. Oswaldi* ('Life of Oswald'), written between 997 and 1002.

S. Baring-Gould, 'The Lives of the Saints', 1877

Anglo Saxon Chronicle, a history of England, started in 890 and kept going until 1154.

Goscelin, 'The Suffering and Miracles of St. Edward King and Martyr', 1070s

Theodoric Paulus, 'an early writer', quoted in *Orthodoxy America*, May-June, 1981.

Archbishop Wulfstan, 'Sermon of the Wolf to the English', 1014.

What really happened?

Use the evidence to discuss these questions:

1. Who were the most likely murderers?

- ◆ Queen Aelfthrith (Edward's stepmother)
- ◆ Aethelred, his younger brother and the future king
- ◆ Lord Aelfhere, who had opposed Edward and attacked churches and monasteries
- ◆ A group of Queen Aelfthrith's servants

2. What could have been the excuse for murdering Edward?

- ◆ Because he was bringing bad luck on the country
- ◆ Because he was violent
- ◆ Because he was not ruling the country well
- ◆ Because as a young person he was under the influence of the wrong advisors

3. What happened to the body straight after the murder?

- ◆ It was burnt
- ◆ It was hidden
- ◆ It was buried in a swamp
- ◆ It was given a royal state funeral

4. Why was Edward made a saint?

- ◆ Because so many miracles happened after his death
- ◆ Because he was a holy martyr who died for his religion
- ◆ So that his family (Aethelred and his mother) would seem to have God on their side
- ◆ So that Shaftesbury Abbey would receive pilgrims visiting his shrine

5. Whose bones were discovered in the lead casket in 1931?

- ◆ Edward's
- ◆ An older man's

6. Write your own version of the whole story, justifying your argument by referring to the evidence