

Deserted villages have long held a romantic fascination, especially when their memories are evoked by crumbling ruins. Old, roofless churches evoke images of once-bustling village communities, lost to the ravages of Black Death, heartless landowners intent on evicting them from new parkland, or simple economic failure at the expense of nearby towns and cities.

St Etheldreda's church in Chesfield is exactly this sort of place. Tucked away off a narrow winding road - Back Lane - that connects Graveley with Weston, it is a building easily overlooked by car drivers and walkers. To find it, one has to go searching. Its flint walls sit incongruously next to the late seventeenth-century brick of Chesfield Manor Farm, with a statue of the patron saint by Mary Spencer Watson standing by its south door since 1982. The gable of the west end of the nave stands almost to its original height, as does the west wall of a chapel to the south of the chancel, but little else remains.



The church consisted of three rooms: the nave to the west, chancel to the east, the two forming a rectangle 15.2 m by 5.6 m, and a side-chapel measuring 6.4 m by 4.0 m south of the chancel. There is a doorway in the south wall of the nave with fourteenth-century mouldings, with another but narrower door in the west wall of the chapel with identical mouldings. A traceried window of the same date also survives in the west wall. These details show that the whole building consists of a single phase of construction, around 1360.

To confuse matters, there is documentary reference to a chapel at Chesfield manor in 1216 and another that the advowson (the right to choose its rector) was in the same hands as that of nearby Graveley in 1232. It is also mentioned as Ecclesia de Chivesfeld ('Chesfield Church') in Pope Nicholas's tax survey of 1291-2. This evidence shows that there was a church here more than a century before the present one was built. Throughout the Middle Ages, Chesfield and Graveley were rivals: John Smyth, the priest at Graveley, murdered Robert Schorthale, the priest at Chesfield, in 1384. According to the historian Nathaniel Salmon, the two parishes were combined in 1445 as Graveley-cum-Chesfield. In the Lay Subsidy lists of 1307, the two are already assessed together (as Gravelee & Cshivesfeld), separating the names of householders between places. By the Subsidy list of 1334, it is described as hamelettus de Chevesfeld ('hamlet of Chesfield'), suggesting that its status as a separate parish had been lost. In 1750, Bishop John Thomas of Lincoln gave permission for the church to be dismantled. In an ironic twist of fate, he allowed the stone rubble to be used to repair Graveley church.

Inside the ruined chancel, a trapezoidal stone coffin was once visible. Percival Westell of Letchworth Museum excavated it in 1921, and the vicar of Graveley donated it to the museum the next year. It was moved to the Letchworth Urban District Council depot in

1935, but its present whereabouts are unknown.

Chesfield does not appear in Domesday Book, compiled in 1086, and the earliest reference to the place is in 1200, as Chivelesfeld. It was probably included with Graveley (Grauelai in the original), which was given five separate entries, each with a different lord (Bishop Odo of Bayeux, Robert Gernon, William of Eu, Gosbert of Beauvais and Peter of Valonges).

Gosbert's and Peter's holdings were the two described as manors, so one probably refers to Graveley proper and the other to Chesfield. By the thirteenth century, Chesfield was part of the de Valonges barony, so Peter's Domesday manor was likely Chesfield. William of Ow's smaller holding possibly also included part of Chesfield. Peter de Valonges later acquired the Bishop's lands. He also held land in Escelueia, usually thought to be Chells (now part of Stevenage) but was probably somewhere in the north of the historic parish of Graveley, as this part of it was said to be in Wilga (Willian): Robert Gernon also had land there.

So what of the deserted village? Nothing in the landscape suggests that there was ever a nucleated community at Chesfield, although the creation of Chesfield Park in Georgian times has changed the road layout. The figures in Domesday Book suggest a population of perhaps 70 or so people at Chesfield in 1086, which is large for Hertfordshire, and about 40 people in Graveley itself.

Who was St Etheldreda? The name is a Latinised version of Old English *Æðelþryð* (*Æthelthryth*), who was born a princess, daughter of King Anna of East Anglia, about AD 636. She took a vow of perpetual virginity as a young woman but despite this, she was married about 652 to Tondbert, ruler of the South Gyrwe in the Fenland. After he died, she retired to Ely, where Tonbert had given her property as part of her dowry. In 660, she was married again - probably against her will - to Ecgrith of Northumbria, a teenage boy. He became king in 670, at which point she found herself queen. She took advice from Wilfrid, Bishop of York, who advised her to retire and become a nun, although Ecgrith objected. In 672, she joined the monastery at Coldingham but evidently did not feel safe there (it was a Northumbrian royal foundation, so Ecgrith perhaps had proprietorial control over it). She fled back to Ely, which was her own property, and founded a monastery there in 673, becoming its first abbess. *Æðelþryð* died on 23 June 679 and her sister Seaxburh succeeded her. Sixteen years later, Seaxburh decided to remove her sister's remains from an unmarked grave to put the body into a specially built shrine. *Æðelþryð*'s body had not decayed, which was traditionally a sign of sainthood.

*Æðelþryð* was duly moved into a white marble sarcophagus, taken from a Roman tomb at Cambridge, which was miraculously found to be a perfect fit. Her original wooden coffin and her burial clothes were found to have miraculous healing powers. Accordingly, Ely became a place for pilgrims to visit in the hope of being cured throughout the Middle Ages (with a hiatus between 870, when the invading Danish Great Army destroyed the monastery, and 970, when King Eadgar rebuilt it). Gradually, her name transformed into Middle English *Seynt Audrey*, giving us the modern name Audrey. *Seynt Audrey's fair* in Ely was renowned for its lace, which pious ladies would wear to conceal their cleavage. By the seventeenth-century, 'tawdry lace' (from 'Saint Audrey lace') had become a by-word for cheap and vulgar

finery. From there, it went on to develop its commoner modern meaning of cheap, gaudy, unseemly and sordid. Poor Æðelþryð did not deserve that!

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