

Saint Audrey (Etheldreda of Ely)

born 636 Exning (or Erming), Suffolk, England
died 23 June 679, Ely, England

One of the five daughters of King Anna, Audrey loved to wear gold necklaces studded with jewels. At sixteen she was forced to marry an elderly prince who gave her the Isle of Ely as a wedding gift and agreed to remain celibate.

Widowed after three years, Audrey retired to Ely until she was ordered to marry Egfrid, a prince of Northumbria. At fourteen, he was ten years younger than Audrey, but he adored her and honoured her wish to live in celibacy. After twelve years of happiness, everything changed when Egfrid unexpectedly became king of Northumbria. Returning victorious from battling northern rebels, he demanded Audrey consummate their marriage. Painful scenes followed and Audrey fled back to Ely, pursued by Egfrid, who was convinced that he could not live without her. After wandering for days on foot, Audrey finally reached Ely. The island was surrounded by impassable swamps, which finally convinced Egfrid that his wife was protected by a power greater than his own. Egfrid left Audrey in peace and later remarried. Audrey built a large double monastery at Ely. She died of a tumour on her neck, which she regarded as a punishment for her youthful passion for necklaces. Her sister Sexburga, widow of the king of Kent, succeeded Audrey as abbess. Audrey was regarded as a protector of chastity and guardian against illnesses of the throat and neck. Her abbey became a cathedral, which still stands, but her incorrupt body was burned during the Reformation. Only her hand was saved and is venerated today at St. Etheldreda's Roman Catholic Church at Ely.

The Genius of Audrey:

Audrey's insistence on celibacy might strike some as unreasonable or quaint, but she was a woman who stood by her principles and clearly possessed great charm. In the end, Audrey always got what she wanted.

Reflection:

"Not everyone says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

Matthew 7.21 (from the Gospel reading for her Memorial Mass)

Gallick, Sarah [The Big Book of Women Saints](#) p. 188