

# THE LIFE OF SAINT RUMWOLD

## AS REMEMBERED BY THE PEOPLE OF RUMWOLDSTOW

### Characters

QUEEN CYNEBURH, daughter of King Penda of Mercia, mother of St Rumwold

EALHFRITH, regent of Northumbria, father of St Rumwold<sup>1</sup>

ODDA, manservant to Cyneburh

WATT, manservant to Ealhfrith

ST RUMWOLD, a baby

WIDERIN, a priest of Sutton

EADWALD, another priest of Sutton

A DUCK

*Here begins the life of the blessed babe, Rumwold, our patron saint, who was born, lived and died in this parish.*

*Rumwold was of noble birth. His mother was Cyneburh, daughter of Penda, King of Mercia. This princess married Ealhfrith, king of Deira in Bernicia, far to the north. Some months after the wedding, the happy couple rode south to visit Penda, accompanied by their manservants Odda and Watt, and sundry other attendants.*

CYNEBURH: (clearly very pregnant) Oh, my back. I am starting to wish we hadn't decided to visit Daddy just now! How did we ever think it was a good idea to travel to Mercia in November, sweet heavens the mud! I wish the baby was safely born.

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<sup>1</sup>Alhfrith or Ealhfrith (c. 630 – c. 664) was King of Deira under his father Oswiu, King of Bernicia, from 655 until sometime after 664. Appointed by Oswiu as a subordinate ruler, Alhfrith apparently clashed with his father over religious policy, which came to a head at the Synod of Whitby in 664. Oswiu and Penda were great rivals.

EALHFRITH: I know, sweetie, but I couldn't stand *my* father's ranting any longer! I thought he'd never shut up about the sheep!

CYNEBURH: King Oswiu is a bit obsessed isn't he? But Dad's just as bad when it comes to cattle. They nearly had a punch-up at the wedding, I thought I'd die laughing.

EALHFRITH: Oh my lord yes, when they were arguing about the best phase of the moon to castrate lambs and calves, and which ones are more trouble if you don't knock off those nadgers...still, we distracted them all right!

CYNEBURH: I thought King Oswiu would burst a blood vessel when you announced you were converting to Christianity...

EALHFRITH: ...and King Penda nearly fainted when his delicate daughter said she couldn't possibly do naughty things with a pagan!

CYNEBURH: Dearie me no, that would be too shocking! (smiles at her husband)

EALHFRITH: I say, what's Odda up to? Hey, Odda! What's up?

ODDA: (from just ahead) Up sir? Watt's not up, he's down there. Watt, what have you found mate?

WATT: (from further ahead). That's odd, that is!

EALHFRITH: What's odd?

CYNEBURH: (points at Odda) Pookums, that's Odda, surely you know his name by now?

EALHFRITH: eh?

WATT: There's a little meadow here, all filled with flowers, like it was May-time. Come and see.

CYNEBURH: Oh! Um...would it be a good place to camp? I think...I think the baby's coming now!

*King Ealhfrith's servants rapidly set up the camp and a fine tent for Cyneburh, who was soothed by the sweet scent of the unseasonable lilies and roses. During her labour, two priests from the nearby village of Sutton approached the tent and addressed King Ealhfrith.*

WIDERIN: greetings, good sir! You seem of noble mien, how may I address you and what brings you to humble Sutton?

EALHFRITH: I am King Ealhfrith, and husband to Cyneburh, princess of Mercia and now queen of Deira.

WIDERIN: Oh, how splendid! Welcome to our meadow, I see you've made yourselves comfortable but wouldn't you prefer to journey a little further and stay in the great hall at Sutton? And if I may ask, where is our dear Cyneburh?

EALHFRITH: Ah well, she's in the tent...having a baby. Bit sudden, what?

EADWALD: Couldn't the baby have waited a bit longer?

CYNEBURH: (from inside the tent) Pookums, who's that outside? You can come in now, the messy bit's all done!

*The men open the tent and we see Cyneburh sitting up with the infant Rumwold on her lap.*

EALHFRITH: Darling! Doesn't he look healthy - and so alert - almost like he's about to speak!

WIDERIN: Haha, I don't think we'll hear much from a newborn babe beyond "wah wah wah". But he is a perky looking little chap isn't he?

RUMWOLD: (in a very definite tone) Christianus sum! Christianus sum! Christianus sum!

WIDERIN: (astonished) My gracious me, what's that?

EADWALD: That's odd.

EALHFRITH: don't start that again.

RUMWOLD: I worship God the three in one, and the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, so there!

CYNEBURH: Who's mummy's precious boy?

EALHFRITH: I don't know much about babies but this isn't normal is it?

EADWALD: I daresay it's a miracle.

*Everybody marvelled at the infant and sang the 'Te Deum Laudamus', after which the babe asked to be made a catechumen by the priest Widerin, to be born aloft by Eadwald, and to be named Rumwold.*

CYNEBURH: Rumwold? Why on earth Rumwold? I thought we'd call you Pybba, after my grandpa. Or Æthelfrith after your Daddy's grandfather.

RUMWOLD: No! Kings Penda and Oswiu will only argue about it.

EALHFRITH: You're not wrong there.

RUMWOLD: It's got to be Rumwold! And I need to be baptised immediately!

CYNEBURH: Darling, we should hold a proper baptism ceremony and invite all the local thegns and the bishop. Daddy will want to make a big feast of it.

RUMWOLD: None of that malarkey. As Christ was baptised in the waters of the Jordan by John, I will be baptised in this humble field by these uncouth local priests.

EADWALD: Oy!

RUMWOLD: See that valley over there? Send somebody down to fetch the hollow stone by the brook, and fill it with clean water.

*Odda and Watt were sent to the marshy valley, where they searched for the stone Rumwold had described. They had not yet found it when a duck called out to them.*

DUCK: Hic, hic, hic!

WATT: Eh? That duck's a bit odd. What's it pointing its beak at?

ODDA: That must be the stone! Blimey, it's heavy. You give me a hand with this.

WATT: (straining to lift the other end of the stone) Sorry mate I can't shift it. What's odd is that it don't look that big.

ODDA: Put your back in it!

WATT: I'm not going to give myself a hernia. It must be fixed down somehow. That Rumwold don't know what it is to do hard work.

ODDA: fair play, mate, let's give it up. They can always use a cup instead.

*Odd and Watt return to the meadow and explain that the stone can't be moved.*

RUMWOLD: Nonsense! I can't be baptised in a cup! You clearly aren't holy enough. Widerin, Eadwald, trust in the high Creator of all and fetch that stone.

WIDERIN: Oh, how splendid, another miracle! In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity let us obey!

EADWALD: Humph.

*The two priests immediately set out and easily lifted the great stone. Accompanied by the duck, they brought it to the camp and put it in front of St Rumwold.*

RUMWOLD: Thank you!

DUCK: Quack.

*The priests blessed the water of holy baptism in the stone and Widerin baptised the blessed infant Rumwold, and Eadwald received him; the duck stayed by his side. Rumwold demanded a mass to be celebrated, after which he delivered a sermon about the true religion and every grace of goodness.*

RUMWOLD: ...and of course the seventh central tenet of the Catholic Church is...

CYNEBURH: (yawning) isn't he clever...who'd have thought a newborn babe could preach like that?

EALHFRITH: (starting awake) eh? Oh, yes...very impressive...such a long sermon...

WIDERIN: (snoring lightly)

RUMWOLD: But behold! It is not permitted for me to live in this mortal body beyond the hour of my birth; I shall die upon the third day.

CYNEBURH: Rumwold!

RUMWOLD: And after my death, I desire to remain in this place where I was born. Now, it's time for my nap. Where's Ducky?

DUCK: (comfortingly) Quack.

*On the third day, Rumwold gave up his spirit and was taken up in the hands of angels. His parents grieved yet rejoiced that they had witnessed such a miracle and proof of God's grace. He was buried in the meadow, as he had bidden, and ever after, that meadow has never ceased to be fragrant and lovely, the grasses always green and the flowers humming with bees. The loyal duck sat by the saint's grave. But during that night, Odda and Watt crept down to the grave.*

ODDA: There's that everlasting duck. Why's everybody made such a fuss about it? It's only a duck.

WATT: Odda, I'm hungry.

ODDA: So am I mate. Nobody's been looking out for us with all this miracle stuff going on. We deserve a treat, I nearly ruptured myself trying to move that rock.

WATT: Here ducky ducky...

ODDA: (creeps up behind the duck and grabs it) Gotcha!

DUCK: Qau...gh

*Let us draw a veil over the distressing scene which ensued, but it was not good for the duck. Next morning, the priests Widerin and Eadwald came to St Rumwold's grave to offer prayers.*

WIDERIN: oh blessed place! Where our own holy babe St Rumwold was born and lived his short but holy life! Ah, the wisdom of his sermon shall be my guide all the days of my life.

EADWALD: (pointing at the ground) Here's what's this?

WIDERIN: That's odd, feathers and bones. And where's Ducky? Oh...

EADWALD: I bet it was Odda. Or Watt.

WIDERIN: Woe! That St Rumwold's duck should have perished, and so ignobly!

EADWALD: (thoughtfully) I mean, there's good eating on a duck.

WIDERIN: St Rumwold, I pray you to pity the sorrow of your humble priests, and restore this good duck who served you so faithfully.

ST RUMWOLD: (voice emerging from the ground) Go away! I'm sleeping!

WIDERIN: Forgive us for disturbing you, but a great wrong has been done to your duck.

EADWALD: (nodding) Right.

ST RUMWOLD: Ducky! My Ducky! Indeed, he must be restored to life.

*The duck flew up, restored to life and full plumage, and called out in front of Odda and Watt, who were nearby.*

DUCK: Quack! Odda! Quack! Watt!

ODDA: (falling to his knees) I'm sorry! It was Watt's idea!

WATT: (falling to his knees) You fibber!

DUCK: (menacingly) Quack!

ODDA: All right, I confess! It was a terrible sin, and I repent!

WATT: I repent too. You were very tasty though. I don't suppose...?

ODDA: (nudging him to be quiet) Don't push your luck mate.

DUCK: (sternly) Forgiveness is a Christian virtue. But watch it.

*Thereafter, in Sutton and in other less important places such as Buckingham and Brackley, which do not give such faithful service to their king, St Rumwold bestows favour upon those who ask, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and letting the lame walk. Here in Sutton we venerate him at our minster dedicated to this our own saint.*

*And if any doubt this history, be assured that it is God's own truth, and in token of that we have preserved here at Rumwoldstow the very skull of the duck who befriended Saint Rumwold, was slain, and brought back to life. May you all, like this duck, count St Rumwold your friend, with the consent of our Lord Jesus Christ.*