

**Suggested Readings:** *2 Corinthians 10:17 - 11:2; Psalm 45: 11 – 16; Matthew 25:1 – 13.*

Like many Anglo-Saxon saints, Frideswide might well have become no more than a vague local memory – but for one thing: in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century the Archbishop of Canterbury formally declared her to be the Patron Saint of the University of Oxford.

Her story (the earliest surviving record is 11<sup>th</sup> century) is that she was the daughter of Dida of Eynsham, ruler in the late seventh century of part of what is now west Oxfordshire. She became abbess of a double monastery (i.e. for women and men) on the site now occupied by Christ Church Oxford. The town of Oxford grew up around this monastery. Her shrine is recorded in the early eleventh century, when the monastery was destroyed in 1009 during the burning of the town by a Danish army. It was refounded as a priory for Augustinian canons in 1120; translation of the saint's relics to a new shrine is recorded in 1140 and again in 1249.

In 1525 Cardinal Wolsey obtained papal permission to suppress the priory to build Cardinal College: the shrine was left intact in the eastern arm of the church, which became the College Chapel. Five years later Wolsey died, and in 1532 the college was refounded by Henry VIII as Christ Church. It would later become Oxford's cathedral as well as the College Chapel.

In 1538 the shrine, like most of those in England, was dismantled and robbed by the royal commissioners. It was restored under Queen Mary, but finally destroyed in 1561, when the saint's relics were deliberately mixed with the bones of the ex-nun wife of the Reformed theologian Peter Martyr to put an end to devotion to the saint. They were buried in the eastern part of the church. During the last hundred years many pieces of the stone base of the shrine has been discovered and have now been put together. This restored construction now stands in the cathedral's Lady Chapel and has again become a centre for prayer and pilgrimage.

Among the sculptured details of the shrine are female heads looking out from foliage. These may refer to the legend of Saint Frideswide, according to which a local prince sought to marry her, but, as she had decided to give her life to God, she ran away from him and hid with two companions in a wood in Binsey, before escaping to Oxford. The three figures in the upper part of the Oxford Diocesan shield of arms are probably Saint Frideswide and her companions.