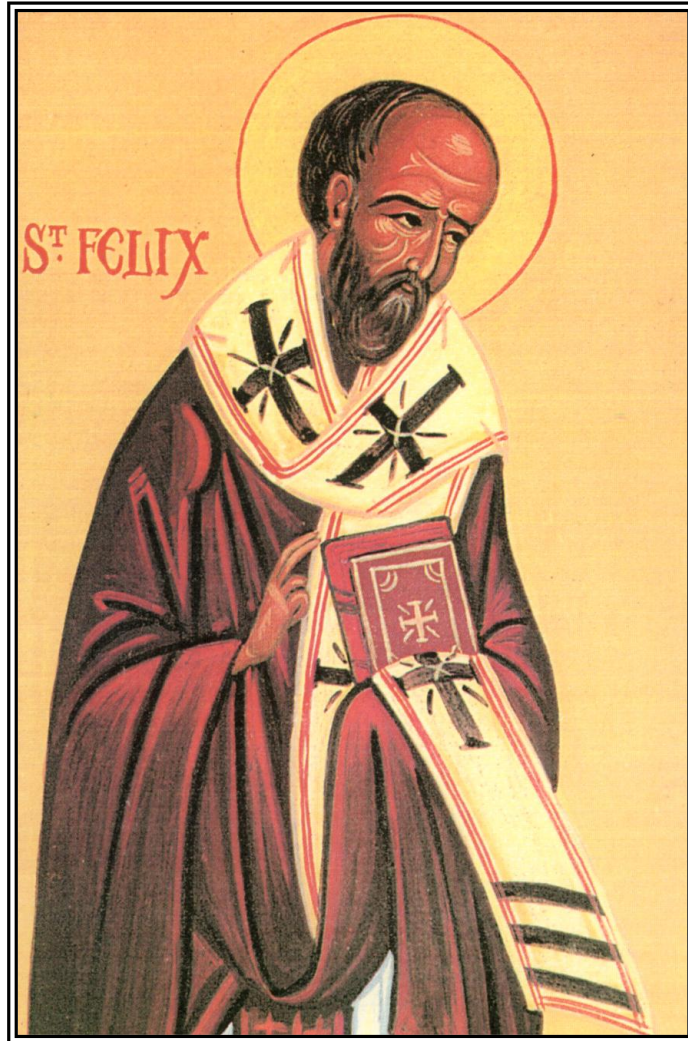


THE STORY OF ST. FELIX,
APOSTLE OF EAST ANGLIA



Father Andrew Phillips

Dedicated to Felix Body of Felixstowe

First Published 2000

Published by
The English Orthodox Trust
Seekings House
Garfield Road
Felixstowe
Suffolk IP11 7PU
England

Designed and Typeset by Daysign

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A Cataloguing-in-Publication record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-9531774-2-4

Do we who are entering the third millennium know anything of the Apostle of East Anglia of the first millennium?

Who was St Felix? Where did he come from? Why did he come to East Anglia? What were his links with Sutton Hoo and Felixstowe? What were his links with Ireland? How did he know St Audrey and who was she? What is the mysterious Red Book of Eye? And is St Felix still here?

Find the answers to these and many other questions below.



Oh, it's here the sea is calling,
 And it's here I'd like to stay,
 When the sun is warm and tempting,
 As it gleams across the bay.
 Where imagination takes you
 Into days of old romance,
 And you dream you see St. Felix
 When he first came here from France.

From a nineteenth century ballad on Felixstowe

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Foreword

The author welcomes readers to the second edition of this little work on St Felix, Apostle of East Anglia, whose mission began in Suffolk and then spread to Norfolk and Cambridgeshire. The first edition (ISBN 0-9531774-2-4) was published by the English Orthodox Trust in Felixstowe in 2000, but is now out of print. This then is the first electronic edition and has been revised and updated in the light of the most recent research. This at last concludes, after earlier controversy and much doubt among academics, that the town of Felixstowe is indeed the site of the initial mission of St Felix and is named after him. This is also the site of his first cathedral, at the Roman fort of 'Walton Castle', then called by its British name, Dommoc, possibly meaning 'deep water'. As for Dunwich, once mistakenly identified as Dommoc, its name may simply come from 'Dune-wich', meaning the trading port in the dunes, which is akin to the name Dunkirk, meaning 'the church in the dunes'. St Felix of Felixstowe it is.

*Fr Andrew Phillips,
Seekings House,
Felixstowe,
19 July 2020.*

Chapter One: ST FELIX AND FELIXSTOWE

Felixstowe is situated in Suffolk, on the coastal tip of a flattish peninsula, facing south-east. To the south it is bordered by the River Orwell, to the north by the River Deben. The large town of Ipswich is located some ten miles inland at the head of the peninsula, with the picturesque town of Woodbridge a few miles to the north. Formerly a very small fishing village, Felixstowe was correctly spelled without an e as Felixstow until the early 1870s, when the 'e' was added on a whim. In Victorian and Edwardian times Felixstowe became and remains a popular seaside resort, enjoying record hours of sunshine and very low rainfall. In addition, in modern times it has also become Britain's premier container port. But what is the origin of its name?

Academic opinion, such as that of Rigold, Hoggett, Newton and Briggs and Kilpatrick, is today unanimous that Felixstowe means 'St Felix's holy place'. Indeed, according to Ekwall, the word 'stow', later also spelled 'stowe', usually means 'holy place, church, monastery, place dedicated to a saint'. In the thirteenth century the Suffolk historian Bartholomew Cotton recorded that Dommoc, the site of the see of Bishop Felix, was then known as Felixstowe (more exactly, 'Filchstowe', which is replicated exactly both



by the ancient pronunciation of the name (Filix) and the modern local pronunciation of the town – Filxstowe). After all, how extraordinary that the name ‘**Felixstowe**’ could be unconnected with the local St **Felix**!

We cannot ignore local tradition which maintains that the ‘Apostle of East Anglia’, Bishop Felix, landed here from the little ship provided for him, bringing the Light of Christ, in the year 630 or 631. This is also supported by the well-known, historic activities of St Felix in what is now Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire. The Roman fort situated at the northern part of today’s Felixstowe was and is situated at the mouth of the River Deben, a safe anchorage along which was the palace of the bishop’s royal sponsors, the East Anglian Kings, at Rendlesham (‘the home of Rendil’ [‘the soldier with the little shield’]). This is near Woodbridge and only a few miles from Felixstowe.

This tradition was confirmed in 1097, when a priory dedicated to St Felix was built within the old Roman fort located just off the present coast of northern Felixstowe. This fort was called ‘Dommoc’ by the local Britons, ‘Burgh’ or ‘Fort’ by the early English and much later came to be known as ‘Walton Castle’ when it was partly rebuilt and re-used by the Normans in 1100. It is now some one hundred yards off the coast, a victim of the erosion by the sea of Felixstowe’s clay cliffs. What is significant is that the priory built here was dedicated to St Felix. Why dedicate it to this saint if there were no local tradition of his presence here? Moreover, the very name ‘Felixstowe’ is a typical Old English, pre-Norman name. This shows that the Apostle of East Anglia, St Felix, was certainly present in what is now Felixstowe and his feet, as we say, ‘trod these shores’. Every time we say the name Felixstowe we utter the name of St Felix.

Much more recently, the tradition of St Felix’s presence was continued by the names given in the nineteenth century to local places – such as Felix Road, Felix House and the former Felix Hotel (now Harvest House). It has also been upheld by the local Roman Catholic church, dedicated to St Felix, and by the local Orthodox Church community dedicated to St Felix from its beginning in 1997. The town coat of arms or emblem of Felixstowe includes two crosses and a mitre against a background of waves, thus reminding us of St Felix. Similar emblems are to be found elsewhere in east Suffolk, from that of the now closed local Deben High School, showing St Felix’s ship,



Emblem of local Deben High School showing St. Felix’s ship.

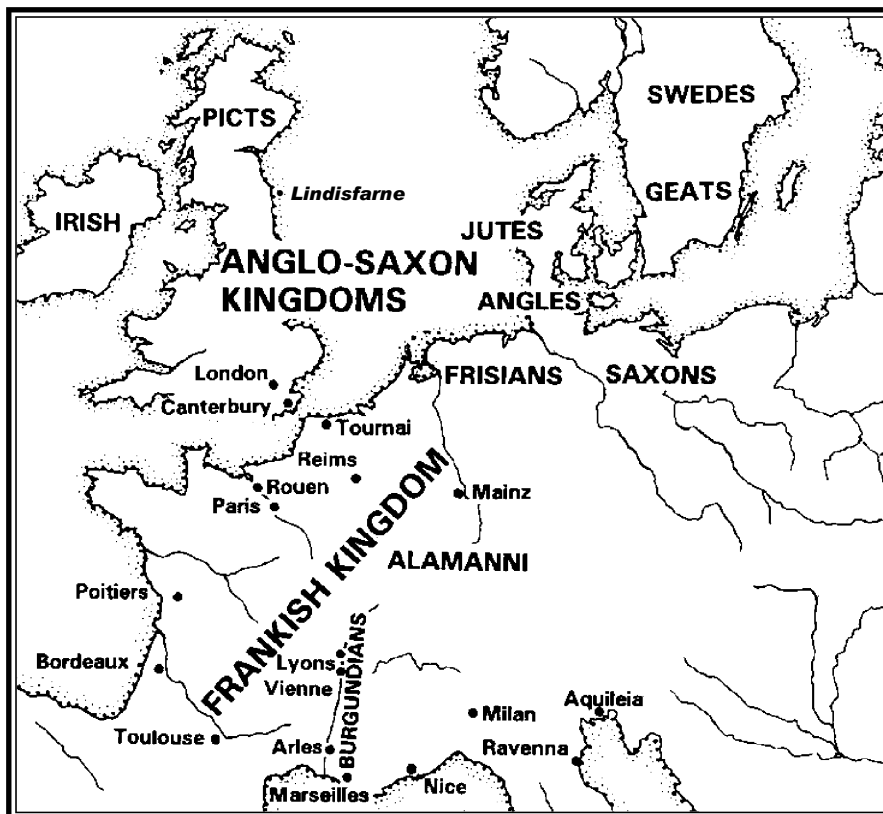
But do we know anything about the saint whose name we utter whenever we say ‘Felixstowe’? Do we, who have entered the third millennium, know anything of our founder in the first millennium?

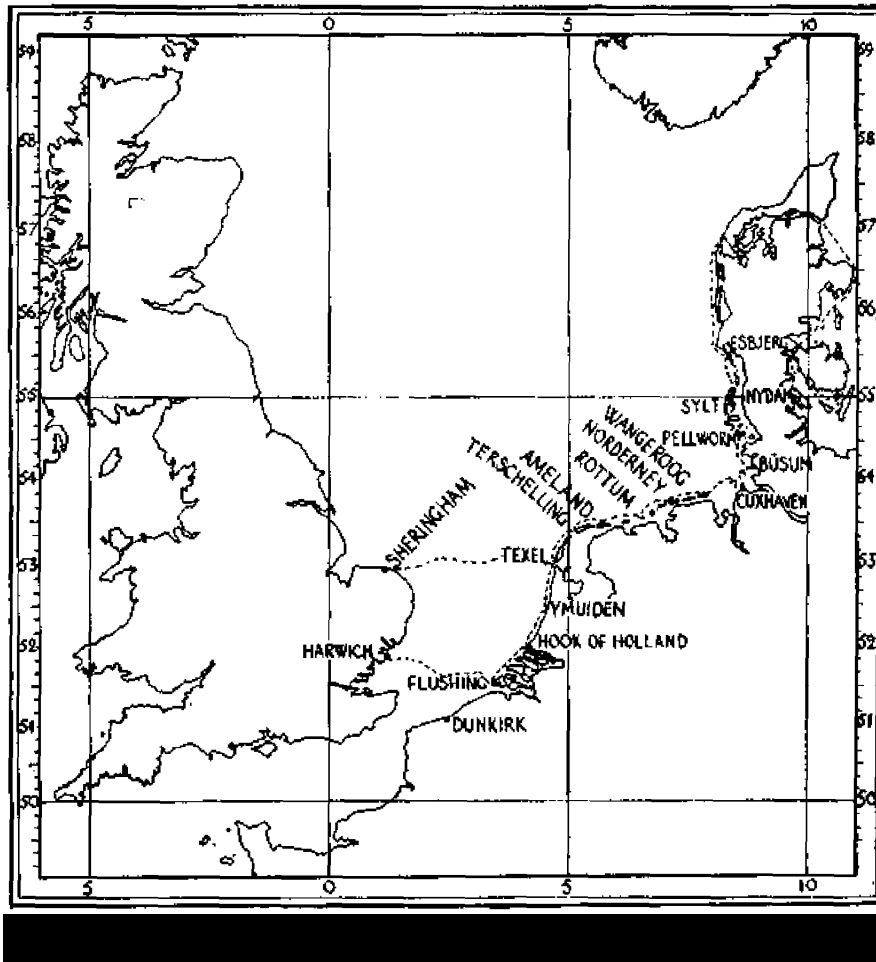
Chapter Two: ST FELIX AND THE KINGDOM OF EAST ANGLIA

Historically, East Anglia, or the semi-peninsula of eastern England apart from Essex, is made up of Suffolk, Norfolk and eastern Cambridgeshire. It came into being in the late fifth and early sixth centuries AD, after the fall of the Roman Empire and of its province ‘Britannia’.

At that time the forebears of the English, mainly the closely-related Jutes, Angles and Saxons, were forced out of their homelands in Jutland in Denmark, ‘Angeln’ in the neck of Denmark and ‘Saxony’ in northern Germany by invaders from further east and by rising sea levels. These peoples settled among the Britons in different parts of ‘Britannia’, which gave rise to the old East Anglian jest that: ‘When the Angles came to England, the acute Angles went north, the obtuse Angles went west and the right Angles stayed here.’ In fact, the Angles were so numerous that they gave their name to the whole of the new land – Angleland or England.

At that time the country was divided into seven different kingdoms, in the south the Jutish kingdom of Kent and the smallish Saxon kingdoms and the Angle kingdoms everywhere else. Thus, Wessex was in the south-west, Sussex in the south, Kent and Essex in the south-east, but East Anglia in the east, Mercia (Angles) in the Midlands





and Northumbria (Angles) in the north. The Angles of East Anglia later separated into two groups, the north folk and the south folk, the origin of the later two counties of Norfolk and Suffolk. However, in those days these counties spread further west into the unmapped fens of what later became the eastern half of Cambridgeshire.

The early English would have sailed down the coast of Germany to what is now the Netherlands and then, when the weather was right, in a matter of a day or two covered the mere 120 miles or so across the North Sea in their small craft. Each boat would have held anything between twenty and eighty people in extended family groups. When they landed they would have joined their compatriots, mercenaries from the collapsed Roman Army, who had been living on the south-eastern shores for many decades. Perhaps they had invited the newcomers. Perhaps Rendil of sub-Roman Rendlesham was one of them. Originally the mercenaries had manned in their thousands the nine Roman shore-forts built along the southern and eastern coasts of Britannia against pirates. They had no doubt intermarried with the local British population and thus virtually colonised the eastern and southern English coasts, though not then in any organised fashion.

As we have already said, one of these large shore-forts, restored on the orders of the Emperor Constantine the Great in 330, was located just off the coast of present-day Felixstowe at the then estuary of the all-important River Deben. Long ago washed into its course and it is also some 250 yards wide. Moreover, the River Deben, unlike the other rivers, gave a very safe and sheltered anchorage for their craft and those who followed them.

Sailing up the river on the tide, they would have come to the well-wooded high place on the north bank by the Roman ford, not far from Rendlesham, near Woodbridge. It was the ideal site for this ambitious family to build not only a home, but also a wooden palace. Indeed, their descendants, Wehha among them, would claim to be the kings of the whole of this region.

Situated in the east of the island, their kingdom would be called 'East Anglia' after their homeland in Angeln in what is now southern Denmark. And an inlet off the River Deben would later be called 'Kingsfleet', for it would become the anchorage of their fleet and in mediæval times that of Kings of England, such as Edward III.

Of Wehha's forebears and of Wehha himself we know nothing, except that they had Swedish connections. But Wehha had a son called Wuffa and he became the founder of the Royal House of East Anglia, known as the Wuffings. Wuffa ruled over East Anglia from about 550 until 578 and a village by the River Deben, Ufford – Wuffa's ford – bears his name to this day. Wuffa had a son called Tytila, who in turn ruled until about 599. Tytila also had a son and it is he, Wehha's great-grandson, who interests us.

Chapter Three: ST FELIX AND SUTTON HOO

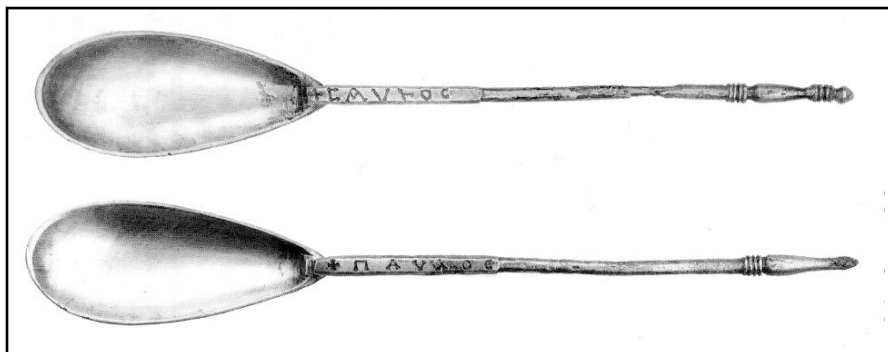
It was 1938 and Mrs Edith Pretty, a spiritualist, was troubled. Living on the high north bank, the headland or ‘hoo’ over the River Deben near Woodbridge, only a few miles from Felixstowe, she was continually disturbed by dreams. They told her that there had at some time long ago been a battle by the site of her home. Some mighty warrior, she felt, had been buried in the strange and ancient mounds that she could see from the front rooms of her house. Later, there were rumours that she had also seen his ghost and a man on a white horse by those strange mounds. Since her father had been a keen amateur archaeologist, she decided to call on Ipswich Museum to conduct some test digging. The results of the preliminary investigations of 1938 were clear: there was something of historical importance in the mounds. The world was about to discover one of the most remarkable archaeological sites in England – Sutton Hoo.

In May and June 1939, following further digging, the remains of a seventh-century ship, some ninety feet long, were uncovered, and inside it – treasure. Since that time and more investigation, most experts are today unanimous that Sutton Hoo is the burial site of the pagan Kings of East Anglia – the strange mounds were tumuli, burial-mounds – the equivalent of the pyramids of the Egyptian Pharaohs. Moreover, most experts agreed, the ship discovered was the burial-site of Redwald, King of East Anglia from 599 to 625, the great-grandson of Wehha, whom we have mentioned above.

Now Redwald is a historical personage known of by Bishop Felix and known to us from the ‘History of the English Church and People’, compiled and written in the early eighth century by the Father of English History, St Bede the Venerable. Redwald, we are informed, had been baptised in Kent in the early seventh century, his godfather almost certainly the saintly King of Kent, Ethelbert, who was ‘Bretwalda’, the Overking of England. However, on returning to East Anglia, Redwald had renounced his new faith under the influence of his wife. Indeed, in an attempt to please everyone he had set up two altars in his pagan temple, one to Christ and the other to his pagan gods. It was this Redwald who after the death of Ethelbert of Kent became the main King in England with influence far outside East Anglia, including into North Essex.

When Redwald died in 625, he was buried in great style by his palace at Rendlesham on the high headland facing south and overlooking the Deben – Sutton Hoo, meaning ‘the enclosure on the headland facing south’. Side by side with his ancestors who were buried in the other grave-mounds, Redwald was interred in a ship with many precious grave-goods. Among these were an elaborate helmet, a rich sword, a shield, an axe, a royal standard, a harp, gold coins, an Egyptian bowl, a drinking horn, a silver dish from the city of the Roman Emperor in Constantinople, a brooch and buckle, a silver cup and bowls, a lamp and two christening spoons, engraved in Greek words, Saul and Paul. These were almost certainly the gift from St Ethelbert of Kent to Redwald at his baptism in Canterbury.

Redwald was succeeded by his son, Earpwald. In 628 he was persuaded to accept baptism by a friend of his father, the saintly Edwin, King of Northumbria. However, Earpwald was killed by a pagan and two or three years later was succeeded by a step-brother, Sigebert (Sigeberht), in 630–1. The latter was a devout Christian, called ‘the Learned’. Forced to flee East Anglia by his pagan stepfather Redwald, he had gone into exile in Gaul, where he had been baptised. It is now that the reader will begin to understand the connection between all this and our hero, St Felix.



The pair of silver spoons inscribed in the Greek alphabet with the names of Saul and Paul.

Chapter Four: ST FELIX AND THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Redwald's stepson, Sigebert, had lived in exile in Gaul, in an area to the east of the centre of present-day France near the Swiss frontier and Geneva. This is the region that we call Burgundy.

The name Burgundy is in fact not French, but Germanic. The Burgundians had settled in eastern France after being pushed out of their homeland in Bornholm, now part of Denmark, just as the Angles had been pushed out of their homeland in Denmark and emigrated to Britain. The Burgundians originated then in an area not so far from where the English originated and spoke an almost identical language.

It is quite probable that the East Anglian Prince Sigebert had taken refuge at the royal court of Burgundy itself. Although the Burgundians had soon intermarried with the local people and been assimilated by them, many still spoke the Burgundian language, so similar to the Old English of Sigebert. However it may be, in Burgundy Sigebert met a churchman called Felix, probably of noble origin and bishop of a town that is now called Chalons, in Burgundy. It seems that he gave Sigebert instruction in the Christian Faith and baptism. Sigebert gave up much time to study the Faith under Bishop Felix and may even then have desired to become a monk. As we have already said, Sigebert was recalled to East Anglia in c. 630 after the death of his half-brother Earpwald and three years of instability. And he was determined that his father in the Faith, Bishop Felix, should come with him and convert his whole East Anglian Kingdom to Christ.

Chapter Five: ST FELIX AND CANTERBURY

The Christian Faith had been brought to Britain as early as the first century and a few British people had become Christians even then. However, the early English who had arrived from the Continent, mainly in the fifth century, only began to accept Christianity in the year 597. This was through the mission from Rome led by the Italian St Augustine, ‘The Apostle of the English’.

Augustine, who was to become the first Archbishop of Canterbury, was followed as Archbishop in rather quick succession by four other missionaries from Italy: St Laurence, St Mellitus, the first recorded Bishop in London, St Justus, the first Bishop of Rochester, and St Honorius, who was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury in Lincoln in 627. It is Archbishop Honorius who concerns us here.

Having arrived in England with Augustine as a young man in 601, Honorius was to be Archbishop of the Church in England for some twenty-six years – for almost as long as the four previous Archbishops between them. He was devoted to building up a truly national Church in England and it is indeed from his time that we can speak of the beginnings of national consciousness and, however modest initially, national unity. Indeed, when he reposed in the year 653, he would be succeeded by Frithona, the first Englishman to become Archbishop of Canterbury and whose name was translated into Latin as Deusdedit – God provides. Honorius also encouraged missionaries from abroad, for example Irish missionaries like St Aidan in the north of England, or the Lombard St Birinus and the Frank St Agilbert in Wessex. Thus, when in about 630 the new young East Anglian ruler, the devout and learned Sigebert, brought with him from Gaul his teacher, the zealous Bishop Felix, Archbishop Honorius did not hesitate to send him to East Anglia as a missionary. He would become the first Bishop of East Anglia but is also known from his origins as St Felix of Burgundy.

Bishop Felix sailed north from the coast of Kent and Canterbury. Skirting the Essex coast a few miles to the north of Kent, he would soon have made landfall. According to local tradition, this landfall was made near the old Roman fort or ‘Burgh’, better known by its Celtic name, Dommoc, by a small settlement then called Walton and later Felixstowe.

Chapter Six: ST FELIX AND DOMMOC

Arriving at his destination, the fort called ‘Dommoc’ by the local Britons, Bishop Felix knew that it was the ideal site to start a monastery. Here there was plenty of good building stone and it had all the prestige of being a Roman site.

The fort, built in about 330 – 300 years before Bishop Felix landed in 630 or 631 – was certainly later used as a source of stone for the Priory of St Felix, begun there in 1097 in what the Normans then called Walton Castle. However, in about 1300, parts of the priory collapsed over the cliff into the sea, the monks moving further inland. Nevertheless, the last remaining stones of the fort did not tumble over the eroded high cliffs until as recently as 1766.

So Bishop Felix landed at the Roman fort, situated at the mouth of the River Deben. A mile or so away there was a settlement of people of British descent, which was called by the English, ‘Walton’, ‘the town of the Welsh’. (In Old English ‘Welsh’ means foreigners, which is why the Welsh do not call themselves Welsh, but ‘Cymry’, the comrades or allies of the Romans).

However, much nearer the fort, Felix found a village of English fishermen. They called the fort – ‘Burgh’. It was among them – although it is true that this must remain supposition – that Bishop Felix could have built a wooden chapel. This he could have dedicated to Sts Peter and Paul, a favourite seventh-century dedication – and a fine one for fishermen. He, after all, had not come to East Anglia to live alone as a monk, but as a missionary, his task was to preach the Word of God where people lived. In the Middle Ages the wooden chapel he had built would be rebuilt in stone. And today there stands, with the same ancient dedication, the parish church of Old Felixstowe:

On sea-lapped cliff of holy Felix town
Stands homely shrine where Saints of God come down
To those that keep the Faith of old, the Crown
Earned here on Earth for Heavenly Renown...

Bishop Felix full well knew that the place where he had been told to land was only a few miles from the palace of King Sigebert at Rendlesham off the River Deben by the burial-ground of Sigebert’s pagan forebears at Sutton Hoo. We can imagine that the King was waiting there to greet him. Dommoc was also only some ten miles from Ipswich, later to become famous for its manufacture of ‘Ipswichware’ pottery.

The vast majority of writers now concur that Felixstowe was where Bishop Felix and King Sigebert, Church and State, acting together in harmony, had decided to establish the first East Anglian See. Firstly, because it was close to the political capital of the East

Anglian Kingdom. Secondly, because it was a prestigious Roman site with stone available for building. And thirdly, because at that time missionary work had to be conducted by sea and river, the only quick and easy means of communication.

Chapter Seven: ST FELIX AND SUFFOLK

St Felix was truly the Apostle of Suffolk, for his missionary work took him throughout the area covered by the modern county. Indeed, local lore records that it was Bishop Felix who taught the people to build their churches with the flint that lies so abundantly on Suffolk fields, as though placed there for that purpose by the Maker.

Firstly, in south-east Suffolk there was the cathedral of Bishop Felix in Dommoc, now called Felixstowe in the saint's memory. Unfortunately, we know nothing of this modest cathedral, for it has long since disappeared beneath the waves. We can imagine that it was only a small chapel in today's terms.

We do know that Bishop Felix opened a school 'for the education of boys in the study of letters' here in Dommoc. This school was opened at the suggestion of the learned King Sigebert who wanted to establish in his own Kingdom what he had seen in Gaul. Bishop Felix, we are told, 'provided teachers and masters according to the practice of Canterbury'. We can imagine that this cathedral-school, like that at Canterbury (which still exists in a modern form), was a training ground for future priests and monks. It must also have been a place where the élite of East Anglia could provide their children with the skills needed to read and write, as well as religious instruction. This would have included knowledge of the Scriptures, the Church Fathers and Latin. Dommoc would remain the seat of Suffolk bishops until 870, perhaps already by then renamed Felixstowe, when it was ravaged by the Danes. Later its school would be regarded as the forerunner of that East Anglian institution, Cambridge University, though this is only true in a spiritual sense. Today, not far away near Southwold, there exists a private school known as St Felix School. The educational traditions of St Felix continue.

Secondly, there is the missionary activity on the Felixstowe peninsula, which is dominated by the memory of the saint. We have already recounted our belief that the parish church of Sts Peter and Paul in Old Felixstowe may have been built on the site of the original chapel built by St Felix.

However, in the village of Walton, about a mile from the sea, the parish church which was recorded in the Domesday Survey was dedicated to Sts Mary and Felix (although now to St Mary the Virgin alone). It is our thought that such a dedication may well indicate the previous existence here of another wooden chapel, built this time in honour of the Virgin. This is another typical seventh-century dedication. Over one fifth of all ancient churches in England were dedicated to Her and England was at one time known as 'the Island of Mary'. Could such a chapel have been built by Felix for the local Britons of Walton? They would probably have wanted to worship separately from the English, who spoke a different language and were still perceived as invaders. Why else

would this church, later rebuilt in stone and flint, have then received an additional holy patron – precisely St Felix?

Another dedication to St Felix also existed in the peninsula – that of the now disappeared church in the lost village of Hallowtree to the east of Ipswich. And near the peninsula there was of course the royal palace of the East Anglian Kings. The palace itself is now believed to be under the present Naunton Hall. Until recent times, a field here was still called ‘Great Woodenhall Field’. As regards the church that St Felix founded, it is believed to be located beneath the present-day parish church of Rendlesham, which is dedicated to St Gregory the Great, who had begun the mission to the English. Again, this rare dedication is typical of the seventh century.

Thirdly, in north Suffolk local tradition affirms that St Felix was active at Beccles and further west at Flixton in the Saints country near Bungay. Some indeed believe that the very name ‘Flixton’ simply means ‘Felixtown’. In any case we know that this area belonged to the early English bishops of East Anglia, and later bishops, based at North Elmham in Norfolk, built a church near Flixton at South Elmham. Since 1921 the village sign, showing St Felix in bishop’s vestments and holding a church, has commemorated the tradition of his mission here. Nearby Mendham is also said to be a foundation of St Felix, as is mentioned by Fr Elias Jones.

Fourthly, it has been suggested that the church of the town of Sudbury, easily accessible in the age of Bishop Felix along the River Stour, was also founded by him. Dedicated to St Gregory, it certainly was a very early centre of Christianity and if not founded by Bishop Felix, then surely by his disciples.

One final Suffolk foundation, probably in 633, was at Bedricsworth – long ago renamed Bury St Edmunds. Again this was supported directly by King Sigebert, for this time the foundation consisted of a monastery and its first monk was none other than Sigebert. Tired of ruling, he abandoned kingship to devote himself entirely to the Kingdom of God, entrusting his earthly kingdom to a relative called Egric. Within four years, however, the pagan King Penda of Mercia (the Midlands) attacked East Anglia and in 635 killed both Sigebert (who is honoured as a martyr) and Egric. We can only imagine the chaos and difficulties caused to the mission of Bishop Felix by this attack. Nevertheless, the succession passed to a cousin of Sigebert, Anna, who, as we shall see, was to play a great role in the future of the East Anglian Church and Kingdom.

Chapter Eight: ST FELIX AND EAST ANGLIA

Although because of Felixstowe, the name of St Felix is especially connected with 'Holy Suffolk', we should not forget that he is known as the Apostle of East Anglia as a whole. Let us look at his work in the other contemporary East Anglian counties, Norfolk and the eastern half of Cambridgeshire.

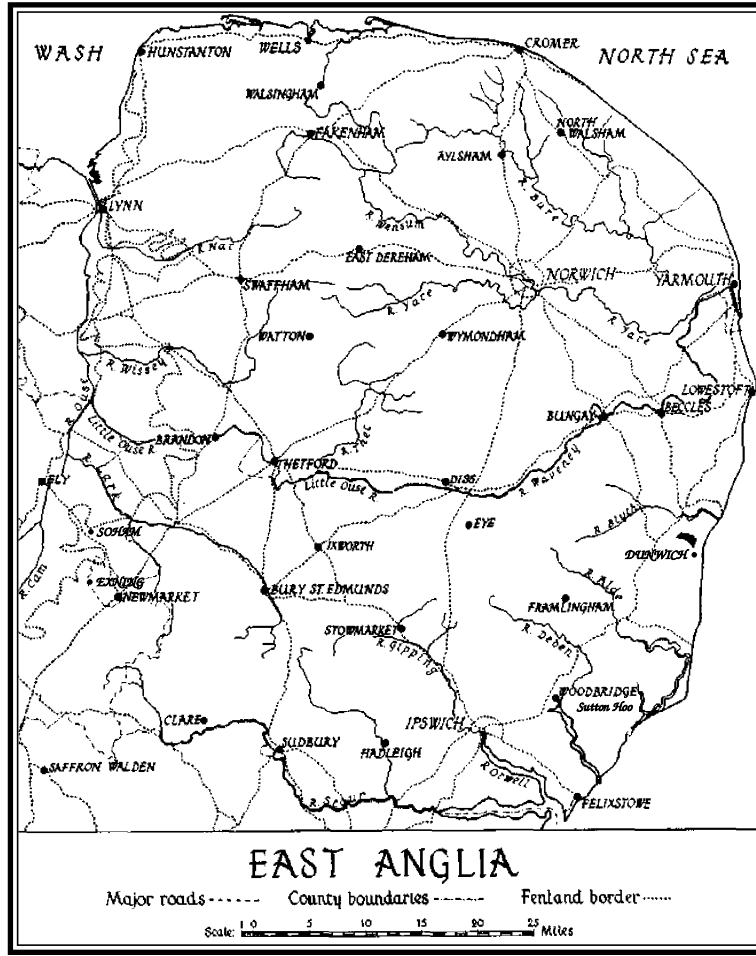
The oldest church in Norfolk is at Babingley in north-west Norfolk, not far from Sandringham, between Hunstanton and King's Lynn. Now in a ruinous state, it is the only church in Norfolk dedicated to St Felix and it is said to have been founded by him. Situated as it is by the Babingley River near the Wash, it is certain that Bishop Felix could have travelled around the East Anglian coast to have reached Babingley and set up a mission here. And a mission there must have been here. Not far from Babingley the surrounding low hills are known as 'Christian Hills'. Could they have been the site from where Norfolk people first heard the Word of God from Felix?

Some four miles downstream from Babingley lies the village of Flitcham. Just like Flixton in Suffolk it too claims to have been named after Felix and its village sign commemorates his arrival by ship. Local tradition affirms that the saint came sailing down the Babingley, then much broader and navigable, and that the saint was close to the animal world, especially to beavers and badgers. Four miles to the north of Flitcham lies the village of Shernborne, boasting the second oldest church in Norfolk, also said to have been founded by Bishop Felix. It is dedicated to Sts Peter and Paul, like the church which may have been founded by Felix in Felixstowe.

A second centre of missionary activity of Felix may have been south-east of Swaffham, further inland from Babingley, by the River Wissey. Although the traditions here are very uncertain, nevertheless it is clear that Christianity was brought here as early as the time of Bishop Felix, perhaps by himself.

Finally, it seems that Felix was also active near Yarmouth in south-east Norfolk, in the village of Loddon and, four miles further north, at Reedham, where we know there were Roman barracks by the Roman lighthouse by the broad estuary. Local traditions again speak of foundations by Bishop Felix. Reedham, situated on the River Yare, is believed to have been one of the palaces of the East Anglian kings. Future excavations here, as at Rendlesham in Suffolk, may one day uncover remains of both a palace and a church.

As regards activity in Cambridgeshire, the name of St Felix is closely linked with Soham. Lands here definitely belonged to the kings of East Anglia and traditions consistently speak of Felix founding here a monastery with a seminary-school. Moreover, Soham is only six miles south-east of Ely and the latter is also linked with Bishop Felix, as we shall discover in the next chapter..



Chapter Nine: ST FELIX AND ST AUDREY

As we have already said, St Sigebert and his relative Egric who succeeded him as King of East Anglia, were both killed in 635. Their murderer was the long-lived pagan tyrant of Mercia, King Penda. In 632 he had also slain the sainted King of Northumbria Edwin, who had had links with the Kingdom of East Anglia over many years.

The next King of East Anglia was Sigebert's cousin, the pious King Anna. The same Penda would be furious with King Anna too, when the latter brought about the baptism of Cenwalh, King of Wessex, Penda's brother-in-law. Cenwalh, driven out of Wessex by Penda, was exiled to East Anglia for three years and, instructed in the Faith, in 645 or shortly after, was baptised by Bishop Felix. This was an act for which the pagan Penda never forgave East Anglia. All the more so, when in 648 Cenwalh was restored to the Kingdom of Wessex and made the Kingdom Christian. King Anna reigned over East Anglia from 635 to 654, when he too would be killed by the same Penda of Mercia. The latter's reign would soon after end, however, since he too would be killed in that same year.

Anna was the father of no fewer than six saints. These were a son, Jurmin, who was killed together with his father by Penda defending the Faith, probably at Blythburgh. Next came a daughter Ethelburgh and a step-daughter Sethrid, who both became nuns in Gaul at a place called Faremoutiers. A famous convent to the east of Paris, it lay on the route that Bishop Felix must have taken when he first came to England from Burgundy. Indeed, some say that Abbess Fara who founded the monastery ('moutiers') could have been related to Felix, maybe she was even his sister. Then there was another daughter Saxburgh, who married into the royal family of Kent and when widowed became an Abbess in Kent and later at Ely. Two other daughters distinguished themselves as nuns in East Anglia: Withburgh who lived as an anchoress at Holkham in Norfolk and who in 654 founded a convent at East Dereham in Norfolk, and finally Etheldred or Etheldreda, better known as Audrey, Abbess of Ely.

Although the main palace of King Anna and his family was at Rendlesham in east Suffolk, Anna's name is also connected with the strategically important Exning. This is located just to the south of Soham in Cambridgeshire, not far from the present town of Newmarket. This was a vital area of East Anglia. Protected in the south by the River Stour and thick forest, and in the west by the River Ouse or Cam and impenetrable fenlands, East Anglia had one narrow defensive weak spot, the downland valley to the south-west behind which lies Exning. On the Suffolk-Cambridgeshire border, Exning lies just behind the system of four defensive dykes which were probably built by the early East Anglian Kings to defend their Kingdom from attack. The last and most important of these gigantic seven-mile long dykes, to this day called 'the Devil's Dyke' (perhaps a reference to Penda), is within a mile of this royal frontier estate of Exning.

It was here that Audrey was born in c. 630 and it is here, we believe, that in the stream nearby she was baptised together with the rest of her family by Bishop Felix. We can quite reasonably suppose that all this happened not long after Felix's arrival in East Anglia. No doubt this too was all under the sponsorship of Anna's cousin, King Sigebert, who may already have seen a worthy successor in his cousin, the defender of the dykes, and the opportunity for himself to abdicate and become a monk.

As far as we know, Bishop Felix instructed the whole family in the Faith, following them as the years passed by. The relationship between Audrey and the bishop became that of spiritual father and spiritual daughter. We can assume that the monastery at Soham, the church at Rendlesham and the cathedral and school of Dommoc, now Felixstowe, played a great role in Audrey's formation. Here she would have studied the Scriptures, the Church Fathers and Latin, as well as needlecraft and perhaps manuscript copying.

At the East Anglian court the young Audrey must have met many of the future spiritual leaders of England, including those from the then thriving Kingdom of Northumbria. Let us recall that her great-uncle, Redwald of Sutton Hoo, had shielded St Edwin of Northumbria. Now Audrey met Edwin's kinswoman, the future St Hilda of Whitby, whose sister, the saintly Hereswith, had married Audrey's uncle. Perhaps also Audrey met Hilda's spiritual guide, St Aidan of Lindisfarne, of whom we shall speak later.

After Bishop Felix reposed in 647 or 648, Audrey was to have an eventful life which culminated in her return to East Anglia in 673 when she founded the monastery at Ely, endowing it with extensive family lands in East Suffolk around Woodbridge, long known as 'The Liberty of St Etheldreda'. At Ely, in today's Cambridgeshire, Audrey set about restoring an older church, destroyed by the old tyrant Penda. Some say that it had been founded by Augustine of Canterbury, others by Felix himself. In any case, it is clear that spiritually at least Bishop Felix was responsible for the foundation of the monastery at Ely through his daughter in Christ, Audrey, 'the Mother of East Anglia'.

Chapter Ten: ST FELIX AND IRELAND

We have said that Bishop Felix came from Burgundy in eastern France (Gaul) and that he had become a monk, priest and bishop there before arriving in England. But who had taught him the monastic life? Surprisingly, perhaps, there is here an Irish connection, one of three in such an eventful life as that of St Felix.

St Columban (c. 543–615) was born to a noble family in Leinster in Ireland and received an excellent education before becoming a monk. For many years he lived at a famous monastery founded by St Comgall at Bangor near Belfast, but in about 590 he went to eastern Gaul and founded two monasteries, the latter of which was at Luxeuil on the edge of Burgundy. Although Columban reposed at his second foundation at Bobbio, now in northern Italy, it was the foundation at Luxeuil which interests us, because it must surely have been there that Felix learned the monastic life. Felix, born at the end of the sixth century when Columban founded the monastery, would have become acquainted there with Irish monasticism and discipline. This, as we shall see, would explain his connections in England.

St Felix' first Irish link in England is with St Fursey (also called Fursa), the Irish missionary who came and settled in East Anglia in 633–35. Like Columban, Fursey too was of noble blood, coming from Munster, and had lived for a long time in the west of Ireland. Surely there he must have come into contact with the disciples and disciplines of Columban. And perhaps this would explain why Fursey came to England with his brothers and disciples. For if King Sigebert, like Bishop Felix, had been a product of the Irish monastery at Luxeuil in Gaul, what would have been more natural than to invite Irish missionaries, also disciples of Columban, to East Anglia?

If Bishop Felix were a missionary organiser, a man of action who mixed with kings and nobles, then Fursey and his monks were the monastics and visionaries. In any case, King Sigebert or Bishop Felix himself seems to have invited them to England – although they may have heard from Irish sources on the Continent that Bishop Felix was now in East Anglia and come of their own desire.

King Sigebert gave them land in east Norfolk, possibly though not certainly, at the Roman shore-fort at Burgh Castle on the River Yare, a few miles from Yarmouth. Here Fursey and his disciples established a monastery and set about converting the local inhabitants, giving Bishop Felix much needed help. King Anna may later have patronised their monastery too and added buildings. Fursey stayed there for some years until he decided, like Columban before him, to cross over into France where he reposed in about 650. What remained of his monastery is not clear, but it does seem that some of his disciples stayed on. They were responsible for much further missionary work

throughout Norfolk and the village of Dickleburgh, near Diss, may have been named after one of his followers, Dicul.

Bishop Felix's second Irish connection in England is with St Aidan. We have already seen the links between Northumbria and East Anglia and how King Anna's brother had married the Northumbrian princess Hereswith, sister of the future St Hilda. Now Hilda, a known visitor to the East Anglian court, was the spiritual daughter of Bishop Aidan. He was an Irish monk from the monastery founded by the Irish St Columba on Iona. Aidan came from Iona to England in 635 to evangelise the north-east of England at the invitation of the King of Northumbria, St Oswald. In Northumbria Aidan founded the monastery at Lindisfarne, England's Holy Island, which was to become a nursery of saints and monastic culture. Moreover, it is clear that Felix and Aidan met, for the former, according to St Bede, held Aidan 'in high respect'. Where did they meet?

Although we cannot prove this, it would seem most probable that they met in North Yorkshire. Here, well outside the East Anglian territory evangelised by St Felix there are two churches dedicated to him. One, dedicated to St Peter and St Felix, is at Ravensworth near Richmond. The other, twenty miles or so south-east, is at Felixkirk, a village called 'Fridebi' by the Vikings, which has come to take on the name of its church. There is no reason why these churches should be dedicated to St Felix unless he visited these places, and why would he have visited them?

Only on account of links with St Aidan. It may well be that Felix went north, on pilgrimage to Lindisfarne, and these are places where he stopped and preached. And there his memory has been kept to this day through the dedications to him of the two local churches.

Chapter Eleven: ST FELIX AND THE HOLY RELICS

After some seventeen years filled with the most active apostleship throughout East Anglia, Bishop Felix reposed on 8 March 647 (or 648). He was immediately considered to be a saint. Of his episcopate Bede the Venerable, recalling that the name 'Felix' means 'happy' or 'felicitous', wrote: 'Like a good farmer, he reaped a rich harvest of believers. He delivered the entire province from its age-old wickedness and infelicity, brought it to the Christian Faith and works of righteousness and – in full accord with the significance of his own name – guided it towards eternal felicity'.

Following the Bible, the Church considers that the Holy Spirit, received by those of holy life, continues to be present in the earthly remains or 'relics' of holy people. Therefore those relics and any vestige of a saint's presence are worthy of veneration and are to be enshrined (See Acts of the Apostles, 5, 15). Thus, when Bishop Felix was succeeded by an Englishman, Thomas, born near Ely in the Cambridgeshire fenlands of East Anglia (and who must surely have been one of Bishop Felix' disciples at his monastery in Soham), this is what happened. Bishop Thomas had St Felix' relics enshrined in what is now Felixstowe. But the monks of Soham, zealous for their founder's memory, later transferred these relics there.

Here the relics continued to be venerated until 869, when the invading Danes ravaged all the East Anglian monasteries, including Soham, and martyred Edmund, the last King of East Anglia. Thus the relics of St Felix were lost, believed destroyed. However, at the beginning of the eleventh century when monasteries everywhere were being revived, the relics were recovered and taken to the monastery at Ramsey in Huntingdonshire. Here the relics were venerated until the Reformation, when they disappeared. We can only assume that they are buried somewhere beneath the remains of Ramsey Abbey. An archæological investigation may yet redeem some of the destruction of that time.

Another 'relic' of St Felix survived for longer. This was the saint's reddish-coloured leather-bound Gospel-Book. With its silver fittings it was taken from Felixstowe inland to the Priory of Eye in High Suffolk in about 1300. Known as 'The Red Book of Eye' and written in a large Lombardic script, it survived the Reformation and was used by the Corporation of Eye for the taking of oaths until the early nineteenth century when it too mysteriously vanished. One rumour even said that in an act of vandalism, remarkable even for the nineteenth century, it was cut up and used for game labels at Brome Hall near Eye. There is no proof of this and there remains the fascinating possibility that the very Gospel-Book, read by the seventh-century Apostle of East Anglia, may at this very moment be lying somewhere in a Suffolk attic.

Finally, a manuscript of parts of St Luke's and St John's Gospels still kept in East Anglia, at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge, has also been linked with St Felix. Although most believe it to be St Augustine's Gospels, other scholars assert that it is of Irish origin and belonged to St Felix. If so, it might be the final link connecting Felix to the Irish-founded monastery Luxeuil in France. Although only a possibility, it would be the confirmation that not only is St Felix spiritually present with us in East Anglia (and there are those who have felt his presence coming ashore over the waves off Felixstowe) but also that he is still physically present with us.

Chapter Twelve: ST FELIX AND THE FUTURE

Today ‘Holy Suffolk’, the land which by the end of the Old English age in 1066 was adorned with 417 churches for a population of 70,000, one for every 170 people, is dominated by the memories of two saints: St Felix the Apostle of East Anglia and St Edmund the King and Martyr of Hoxne. Hoxne, on the Suffolk-Norfolk border, became the united see of East Anglia when the two East Anglian sees moved from Felixstowe and North Elmham in what is now Norfolk (founded as the second East Anglia see in c. 673) after the Danish raids. So even here, between the two great saints, there is continuity. Sea and land unite in their veneration of them. Surely, they after all are what lie at the root of the old name, ‘Silly Suffolk’ – ‘Silly’ of course in the Old English sense of ‘Blessed’ and ‘Holy’. And perhaps that has a meaning for our future. As the local poet John Muriel wrote in lines taken from his poem ‘Suffolk 1958’:

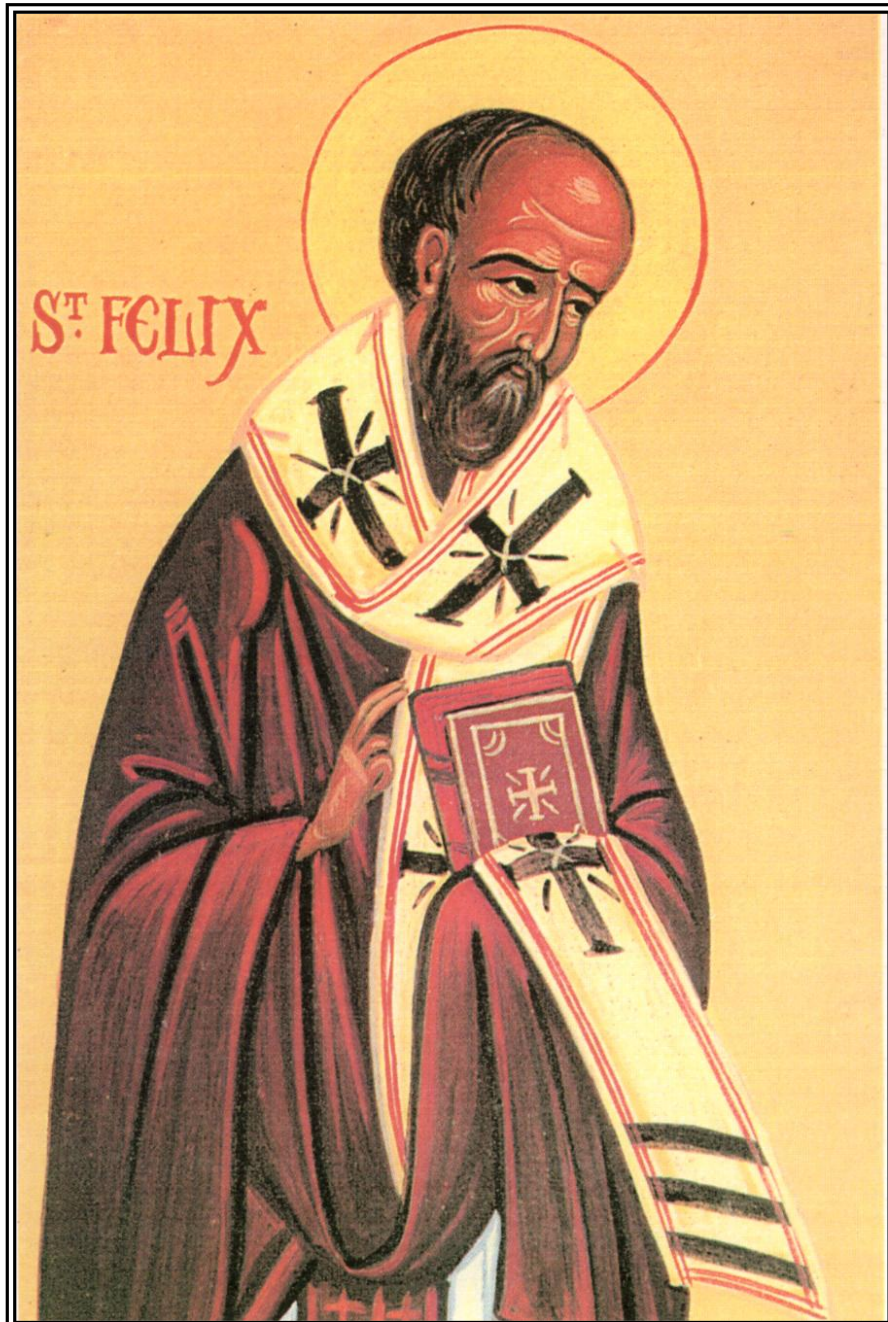
So, I have come home,
After my business,
To the place I was born;
To the lilting speech,
The endless skies,
The eternal morn.

I have come back
To the heavy ploughland,
To the seas which wash up
To the countryman’s doorstep;
To the land of the Saints
And the Martyrs.

Yes, I have come home.
To the heavy ploughland,
The endless sea.
So I pray to our Saints,
St Felix, St Edmund
That they, in their mercy
Will look after me.

Today the fort of Dommoc at Felixstowe lies beneath the waves. At the southern end of Felixstowe lies the largest container-port in these islands. Perhaps it has occurred to some that the name of the town means not only ‘the holy place of Felix’ but also, quite simply ‘happy place’. And perhaps that too has a meaning for our future.

And what of our future? Now in the third decade of the third millennium, after more than a century of the most appalling wars and rumours of wars and crimes of all sorts, we hope and pray for a long sought after peace and stability. But we cannot help thinking that future peace and stability will only be found by reference to the Faith of the first, brought here by our Apostle, St Felix, all those long years ago. For it is our belief that only when we recover that Faith of old, the Faith of St Felix, will we recover happy places, the Felixstowes of the heart.



St. Felix holding the Red Book of Eye

A Prayer for Felixstowe.

O Lord Jesus Christ, the True and Living God, who has said, ‘Behold, I make all things new’, and again, ‘Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them’, bless us who have gathered together for the renewal and welfare of this town. O Thou Who didst enlighten and hallow these coastlands through thy Saint Felix whose feet trod these shores, bless, guide and save this Thy town and all its people. Comfort and console those who are in need and work Thy justice for the oneness of mind and faith in Thee. Bring us to the Light of Thy Truth, making Thy face to shine upon Thy people anew. Hearken to our prayer, O Lord, that we may live and work according to Thy word that, as Thou hast said by the Prophet Isaiah, ‘Therefore in the east, give glory to the Lord: in the coastlands of the sea give glory to the Name of the Lord’. For we praise Thy most honourable and holy name, together with Thine eternal Father and Thy most holy, good and life-creating Spirit, both now and ever, and unto the ages of ages, Amen.

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Of websites, the relevant wikipedia sites can be useful, but they contain very many mistakes. However, we can recommend www.wuffings.co.uk by the historian Dr Sam Newton.