

A history of St. George

Or to be more accurate, a non-history of St. George as there are very few accurate records of this famous Saint. Much of his history was written several hundred years after his death, so their accuracy perhaps needs to be questioned.

Chief among the late sources is the Golden Legend, which remains the most familiar version in English owing to William Caxton's 15th century translation. However, a version of St. George and the Dragon written by Richard Johnson in 1596 makes slightly easier reading, and is available as a children's story on our website (download free of charge at www.stgeorgholiday.com/download)

Most historians (at least, those who believe he existed) agree St. George was born between 275-281AD and died on 23 April, 303AD. George was from Anatolia, a Greek-speaking town now part of modern day Turkey, and because of his tall stature and fair hair was probably of Darian origin.

George's family were Christians, his father was from Cappadocia and served as an officer of the Roman army. His mother was from Lydda (now Lod, Israel). She returned to her native city as a widow along with her young son, where she provided him with an education.

George enlisted into the Cavalry of the Roman Army at the age of 17, and very quickly established a reputation for courage, chivalry and charity (the 3 C's).

By his late twenties he achieved the rank of Tribunus Militum in charge of a regiment of 1,000 men. George was now stationed in Nicomedia as a member of the guard for Emperor Diocletian.

It should be noted this was a time of high inflation and civil unrest across the Roman Empire and the increasing influence of Christianity was causing the authorities some concern. Diocletian set himself the task of rejuvenating the morale of the citizens of Rome by reviving the traditions of Paganism.

Diocletian's second-in-command was Galerius, an avid supporter of the Pagan religion. In 303AD, as a result of a rumour the Christians were plotting the death of Galerius, an order was issued for all Christian Churches to be destroyed. Anyone admitting to being a Christian, would lose their rights as a citizen, if not their life.

George tried to limit Diocletian's cruelty against the Christians. He went to the city of Nicomedia and tore down the notice of the Emperor's order. As news spread of his rebellion George realised that it would not be long before he was arrested. When he appeared before Diocletian, George bravely denounced him for his unnecessary cruelty and made a courageous speech. But the Emperor sentenced George to prison with instructions he should be tortured until he denies his faith in Christ.

After various tortures, including laceration on a wheel of swords, George was executed by decapitation at Nicomedia's city wall, on 23 April, 303AD. His body was returned to Lydda for burial, where Christians soon came to honour him as a martyr.

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(It should be noted that because St. George stayed true to his faith, despite terrible torture, he is highly regarded among Muslims in the Middle East and is the only Christian Saint to be mentioned in the Koran, Holy Book of Islam. He also has the distinction of having a Mosque named after him, Al Khadr, in Palestine).

In 494AD, George was canonised as a saint by Pope Gelasius I, who referred to how little was known about him by saying he was among those "whose names are justly revered among men, but whose acts are known only to God". By 1222 the popularity of St. George encouraged the Bishops of the Oxford Synod in England to declare 23rd April a public holiday, and by 1415 it was as popular as Christmas.

The story of St. George and the Dragon was a legend brought back by the Crusaders. In the Western version, a dragon made its nest at a spring that provided water for the city of 'Silene' in Libya (or the city of Lydda, depending on which version you read).

Consequently, the citizens had to dislodge the Dragon from its nest in order to collect water. So each day they offered the Dragon a human sacrifice. The victim was chosen by drawing lots and one day the Princess chose the short straw. The King begged for her life but without success. She was offered to the Dragon, but St. George rode to the rescue, slayed the Dragon and saved the Princess.

A classic tale of good triumphing over evil.

It is claimed that St. George was adopted as the Patron Saint of England after the English won the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. Shakespeare captured the moment in this famous speech from the play Henry V (Act III, Scene I):

"I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
Straining upon the start. The game's afoot:
Follow your spirit, and upon this charge
Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'"

The rise of the British Empire and the need to unify England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland resulted in St. George becoming less popular. The Union Jack replaced the Cross of St. George as our national flag.

But Scottish, Welsh and Irish Devolution during the 1970s has seen a rise in nationalism in these countries. Now there are greater demands from the Scottish Parliament for a complete separation from England, and many people in Scotland prefer to call themselves Scottish rather than British. Commentators argue this is the end of the 'British' nation.

As a result, people in England are asking themselves "If I'm not British, what am I?". Perhaps St. George has the answer.

St. George Unofficial Bank Holiday

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St. George Unofficial Bank Holiday is an independent group who want a national bank holiday for England. We have no links to any political or religious organisation. We would like all the English, regardless of colour, religion or sexuality, to be able to celebrate their common heritage and future together.

