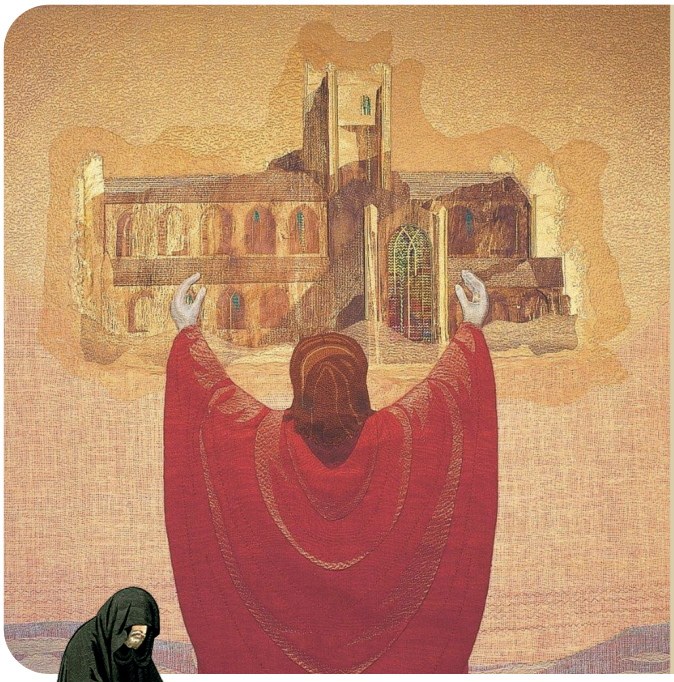
BathAbbey

Saint Alphege



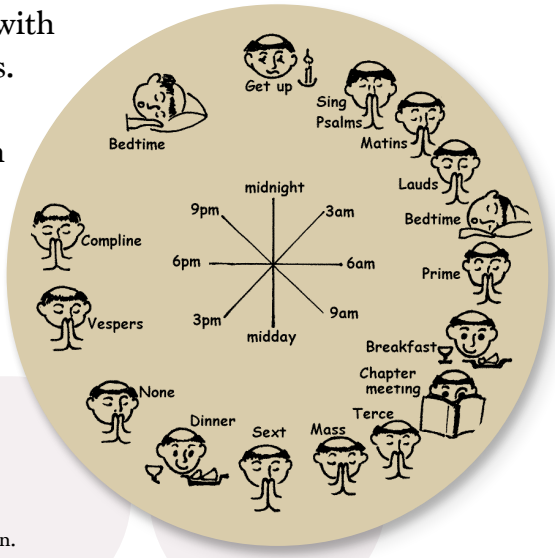
St Alphege was born in 953 and started training to be a monk at the age of 9 or 10. He became a hermit (choosing to live alone) in the countryside near Bath. He was then made Abbot or Head of the monastery in Bath when he was only aged about 27. There had been monks and, before that, nuns there for about 300 years.

St Alphege insisted the monks started to live a stricter life. They had to follow rules written by St Benedict in 516.

This picture of St Alphege is on an embroidered screen in the Abbey.

St Benedict said monks should not leave the monastery and should "Do God's work" which meant pray and worship a lot, even through the night. Also, "Keep busy", which meant working hard to grow food, study and copy the Bible, and look after the sick and poor.

Many monks were able to read and write which was unusual at the time. They decorated their work with beautiful illuminated letters. They wore simple clothes called habits and were often silent, so they used sign language to communicate.



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In 1005 St Alphege became the Archbishop of Canterbury. In 1012 he was martyred (killed because of his religious faith) after the Danes took him prisoner. He refused to allow a huge ransom to be paid for his release because he thought poor people would have to pay it. He was killed by a drunken mob throwing stones and animal bones. He was made a saint in 1078.

This picture shows people asking him for advice.

Activity ideas

1. Medieval monks did not speak at meals so they had to use sign language to help them ask for their food. See if you can match the hand movement to the food (answers below).
2. On the next page, choose an illuminated letter to decorate. You can see some beautiful examples at: www.vam.ac.uk/articles/illuminated-manuscripts
3. How would you have got on as a medieval monk? Do you think you would have enjoyed their simple life? What was good or bad about it in your opinion?

A: Shake your hand with your three fingers together.

B: Stroke with three fingers on the inside of your hand.

C: Move your fist as if you were stirring.

D: Scrape with your finger up your left thumb.

E: Put your two thumbs together, and your two index fingers one against the other in front.

F: Place your finger on your tongue.

Answers: 1B Butter, 2E Bread, 3C Soup, 4F Honey, 5A Salt, 6D Eggs

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