

The Life of St Etheldreda

During 2022 schools and home educated children from across the Diocese of Ely were invited to design panels depicting key events in the life of St Etheldreda.

Twelve of these designs have been selected to form a set of hanging applique banners in St Catherine's Chapel.

These banners have been hand stitched by the very talented Ely Cathedral Broderers using the children's designs.

Each panel shows a key moment in the life of our founder and patron saint, St Etheldreda.

This project has been supported by generous sponsorship from the Cook family in loving memory of Rita and John McDermott and the Tann family.

Panel 1:

Etheldreda was a Saxon Princess. She grew up with her sisters, mother and father, King Anna near Exning in Cambridgeshire. She loved to wear jewellery, such as necklaces and brooches. However, she loved God and more than anything she wanted to become a Nun.

Designed by children at Bourn Primary School.

Panel 2:

King Anna refused to let Etheldreda become a Nun, he needed her to marry and help him gain allies. She was 16 when she married Prince Tondberht. As a wedding gift, he gave her The Isle of Ely.

Designed by children at Elton Primary School.

Panel 3:

Sadly, after 3 years, Prince Tondberht died. Etheldreda begged her uncle, who was now king of East Anglia, to let her become a Nun. He refused as he had found another husband for her. She was sent to the powerful kingdom of Northumbria to marry the young Prince Egfrith.

Designed by Izzy Burgess.

Panel 4:

Etheldreda married Prince Egfrith but asked him every day if he would let her go and join an Abbey and become a Nun. Eventually, he let her go and join his Aunt Aebbe, who was the Abbess at Coldingham Abbey.

Designed by children at Spring Meadow Infant School.

Panel 5:

After Egfrith's father died and he became King, he decided he needed Etheldreda back! Abbess AEBbe knew what would happen so, in the middle of the night, she gave Etheldreda back the deeds to the Isle of Ely and helped her escape the abbey before Egfrith arrived.

Designed by children at Robert Arkenstall Primary School.

Panel 6:

Egfrith quickly caught up with Etheldreda and the other Nuns. They hid on an island and were protected when the tide came in. Egfrith waited for the tide to go out, he waited and waited. For 3 days the tide stayed in. Believing that this was a sign from God, Egfrith left and decided to find a new wife.

Designed by children at Isleham Primary School.

Panel 7:

It was a long journey from Northumbria to Ely, and Etheldreda and her friends were on foot. They were very hot and tired. Etheldreda stuck her staff in the ground and it grew into a mighty tree, giving them shelter and a place to rest from the hot sun until they were ready to continue their journey.

Designed by children at Little Thetford Primary School.

Panel 8:

After months of travelling the length of the country on foot, Etheldreda finally arrived on the Isle of Ely. It really was an island then, set in the middle of the misty and damp fen.

Designed by children at Wilburton Primary School.

Panel 9:

Etheldreda decided that she would build her own monastery. Her monastery would be for men and women, a place where they could spend their lives devoted to God. So, she set about building the very first religious community on the Isle of Ely.

Designed by children at Downham Feoffees Primary School.

Panel 10:

Once the monastery was finished in 673AD, Etheldreda's very good friend, Bishop Wilfrid visited. He was so impressed by the work she had done and how she had dedicated her life to serving God and becoming a Nun that he made her the first Abbess of the monastery.

Designed by children at The Shade Primary School.

Panel 11:

Sadly, after just 6 years, Etheldreda died from a tumour on her neck. She was buried in a simple grave in the grounds of the monastery. So many pilgrims visited her grave that, 16 years later, it was decided that she should be moved to a new, white marble tomb inside the monastery church.

Designed by children at The Lantern Primary School.

Panel 12:

When her body was dug up to be moved to the new tomb everyone was amazed! Her body was perfect, the tumour was gone and she smelled of roses. This is a sign that someone is a saint and from that day on Etheldreda has been known as St Etheldreda.

Designed by children at Ely St John's Primary School.