

Venerable Martyr Urith of Chittlehampton

Commemorated July 8/21

by Dmitry Lapa. Source: orthochristian.com



An Orthodox icon of St. Urith of Chittlehampton

St. Urith (Uritha, Hieritha), a holy virgin and martyr of Devon, lived most probably in the sixth century, though some suggest the seventh or the early eighth century. It is traditionally believed that young Urith took up monasticism and led a holy life in chastity in Devon on the site of the present-day Chittlehampton (meaning “farm of dwellers in the hollow”)—a picturesque and tranquil village, set in the north Devon countryside, amid hills and valleys. She was most likely slain by pagan Saxons who at that time were invading much of Britain. According to a late legend, the holy maiden was born in the area of East Stowford in Devon, was a devout Christian who spent all her time in prayer and even built a small church. But, at the instigation of her wicked stepmother who was a pagan the pious girl was killed by local inhabitants—namely she was beheaded with a scythe.

Despite the conflicting versions of the form of her martyrdom, there is a firm tradition that immediately after the saint’s death a holy spring gushed forth on the same site in the drought-ridden soil and flowers (scarlet pimpernels) began to blossom. The saintly virgin was buried in Chittlehampton and a church was erected above her grave. Every year a great many pilgrims visited the wonderworking relics and the holy well of St. Urith in Chittlehampton. Miraculous healings were

performed, and people brought generous donations with them. This contributed to the appearance of the very tall, massive bell tower of the Chittlehampton church and the church itself was considerably enlarged, which is quite unusual for a small village.

Urith became one of the most celebrated saints of all Devon, believers from far and wide hastened to visit her shrine on her feast-day, and “Urith” became a popular feminine name in Devon. Love for Urith was such that her relics were annually taken from Chittlehampton and visited many neighboring parishes for veneration by all. The veneration of our saint continued through the “Age of Saints” and the Middle Ages, but was officially suppressed by the sixteenth-century Reformation, However her veneration among the pious has never ceased.



Chittlehampton church and tower, Devon (photo provided by the vicar of Chittlehampton)

Before the Reformation the shrine with St. Urith’s relics stood in a small chapel in the north of the chancel of the present-day church of St. Hieritha in Chittlehampton where her image was originally located. There is a tradition which has been maintained in the parish church that Urith’s relics were not destroyed during the Reformation, but instead were hidden under a very tall stone slab approximately on the site of the original chapel. It is quite possible because due to the remoteness of the site the representatives of Henry VIII could have overlooked the relics in this church, although her statue was then removed. Her body still may lie under the church floor, a long way below the slab that covers it. The grave slab—symbolic tomb—of St. Urith is in an alcove to the north side of the altar inside the church. It

is actually behind a pillar with the saint's name painted on it. The gravestone is believed to belong to another person of local importance, not to St. Urith; as the author N. Mayhew Smith suggests, perhaps it was used as a "decoy" by locals in order to mislead the "reformers" and save the relics.



St. Urith's tomb inside the Chittlehampton church, Devon (photo provided by the vicar of Chittlehampton)

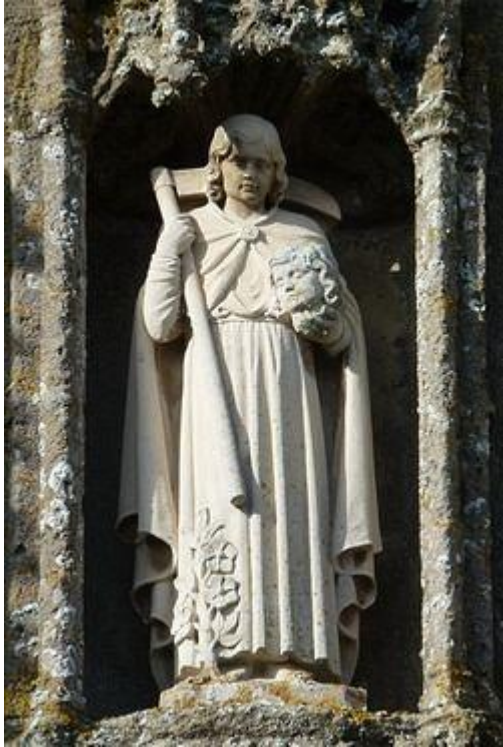


Altar and tomb in the alcove of Chittlehampton church, Devon (photo provided by the vicar of Chittlehampton)

If the story of the martyr's physical presence in this church is true, then she is in a very select company of just a few early English saints whose relics lie practically undisturbed in their respective resting-places. Besides, the church notably has a pulpit dating to about 1500 and containing an ancient stone carved figure of this saint, who holds a palm branch as a sign of the martyrs and a rock as the foundation of the Holy Church.



*The pulpit carving of St. Urith
inside Chittlehampton church, Devon (photo provided by the vicar of Chittlehampton)*



The tower statue of St. Urith, the Chittlehampton church, Devon (photo provided by the vicar of Chittlehampton)

A modern statue of Urith holding the instrument of her martyrdom was installed high in a niche on the exterior of the Chittlehampton church tower, on its south side. The church is huge and built in the late Perpendicular style. The first eighth-century church was wooden, in the twelfth century it was completely rebuilt in stone and the current church was built between 1470 and 1520. Its bell tower is the tallest in Devon and is famous for its excellent peal of bells.

St. Hieritha's (Urith's) holy well on the eastern edge of Chittlehampton still exists. This spring is already 1,500 years old and it was formerly covered by a chapel. It is known locally as "St. Teara's well", the name given to a row of cottages near it. From ancient times it was famous for curing eye diseases. The waters of this well are now annually blessed again, as it was before the Reformation. As wrote Revd. J. H. B. Andrews, the late vicar of Chittlehampton in the second half of the twentieth century, in his article dedicated to the well: "The well has a volume of more than two cubic meters and if it is emptied it fills up overnight, and the water is still pure and sweet and of course cold."



The Slab and the holy well in Chittlehampton, Devon (photo provided by the vicar of Chittlehampton)

Every year, on the Sunday nearest to July 8 (her feast according to the old calendar), the morning church service begins by the people processing from the church to the well (about five minutes walk), where the glass cover is lifted, and water drawn from it. The vicar prays for God's blessing on the water, and the people are given a sign of the cross on their foreheads, using the blessed water. A hymn is sung by the people, based on an ancient poem from Glastonbury from around 1429. The text of the hymn is as follows (given with the kind permission of the local vicar):

Daily the morning's rays
tell out to God his praise,
and freshly shine on Urith's holy fame
'twas here her maiden dower
grew fragrant like a flower,
and here her faith burned steady as a flame.
This was the favored scene
of that resolve serene,
her infant vow to live for God alone;
to tread the Savior's way,
so by His cross to lay
an offering pure upon his altar-throne.
Christ was her hope and shield!

No dread could make her yield;
she moved untainted by the world's alloy.
When scythe of pagan wild
mowed down the fearless child,
her life sped heav'nward with its hidden joy.
No vengeful thoughts draw near
that soul, to God so dear,
who only to his call of love aspires;
her one desired reward
to greet the eternal Lord,
and chant His glory with winged choirs.
There where the maiden fell
gushed forth a healing well.
A stream of pardon for her kinsfolk's hate;
and there the parched earth
bore flowers to hide it's dearth.
Fair tributes to her faith inviolate.
Sing, Chittlehampton, sing;
Let all Devon's meadows ring
with holy gladness for our saint's renown!
And thou, blest maiden, pray
that we in this your day
may bear our cross and win our heavenly crown.

When the procession to the well is made, there is a prayer sometimes used, referred to as the "collect" for the day:

Almighty and everlasting God,
who didst adorn Saint Urith
with the angelic joys of virginity and martyrdom,
grant to us Thy servants that,
by her merits and intercessions,
we may be worthy to attain to
the eternal joys of heaven,
through Christ our Lord.

(As St. Hieritha's Church belongs to the Church of England, they address their prayers to God the Father, in the Name of Jesus Christ, sometimes referring to the saints as examples they might wish to follow).



The well covering at Chittlehampton, Devon (photo provided by the vicar of Chittlehampton)

Some girls in Devon are called and baptized with the name “Urith” even nowadays. There is a sixteenth-century stained glass window depicting St. Urith in the parish church of the Virgin Mary in the village of Nettlecombe in Somerset. According to the mentioned Reverend Andrews’ information, “She also appears on the font of North Molton nearby and on the rood screens of Ashton and Bere Ferrers. On the Hennock rood screen she is accompanied by St. Sidwell (Sativola) to whom a similar legend applies. The church at Lanteglos, Cornwall is thought by one authority to be dedicated to her rather than to St. Julitta.”

We hope and pray that regular Orthodox pilgrimages to this important and nearly-unspoiled shrine in the midst of Devon’s rolling countryside will resume one day in the near future.