

One Woman

Celebrating the contribution women, connected to Chippenham both past and present, have made to the town, its community and the wider area.

February 6th marks the 100th anniversary of the Representation of the People Act being given royal assent. The act extended the vote to all men over the age of 21 and for the first time gave a vote to a class of women over the age of 30.

To commemorate this significant anniversary and a number of others throughout the year, which are set to bring women's history to the fore, Chippenham Civic Society are working with local historian and genealogist Lucy Whitfield, to publish a series of articles which celebrate women of Chippenham.

Each month a 'One Woman' article will be published on the website featuring women who have made a contribution to the local area; those who have been prominent in politics, business, industry, education, activism and health care both in the past and the present.

Our first article written by Lucy tells of

One Woman – Who United Two Kingdoms

Queen Æðelswið, or the easier-to-read Æthelswith, is perhaps best known as being the sister of King Alfred the Great of Wessex, and is likely to have spent at least some of her life in Chippenham due to the royal family's connection to the area.

She was the second child of six known to have been born, in around 838AD, to Osburh and King Æðelwulf (Æthelwulf) of Wessex, and their only known daughter.

As the daughter of a noble family, she would have been spared the harder life of other Anglo-Saxon women, and would likely have had servants or slaves in the household to direct to tasks. Lower born Saxon women would have been cheese makers, bakers (but not cooks), spinners, sewers and weavers, and it is probable that she would have been taught a degree of some of these tasks to be able to supervise those who served her. As a higher born woman, one of her roles would have been to serve drinks to her family, and to anyone visiting.

Her older brother Æthelstan died in 852. At the age of 15 or so, in 853, Æðelswið was married to King Burgred of Mercia. This was almost certainly an alliance rather than a love-match, possibly to unite the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia against Danish raids. The same year, her father subjugated the lands that are now Wales on her husband's behalf.

After Easter in this year (853) Æðelwulf, king of the West Saxon, gave his daughter to Burgred, King of the Mercians, as queen at the Royal estate called Chippenham and the marriage was conducted in Royal Style.

*Life of King Alfred
Bishop Asser, 893AD*

Three years into her marriage, in 856 at the age of 18, Æðelswið gained a younger step-mother, Judith, who was in the region of 12-14 years old. While this may seem shocking to modern eyes, in an era where life-expectancy was shorter, marriages often took place in people's early teens. Her actual mother Osburh had either died,

or had been put aside for the sake of alliance with Judith's father Charles the Bald, the King of the Western Franks.

When Æðelswið married, she gained a *Morgengifu*, a gift of money or land given to her by her husband. In Anglo-Saxon society, where women had more of an equal legal footing with men than they did after the Normans arrived, she had personal control over that land to give away, sell or bequeath it as she so wished. There are known charters when she does this – one in her own name when she gives land to a minister or *þegn*, and two with her husband when she styled herself either Queen of the Mercians or Queen of the English. The *þegn*, a man called Cuðwulf, is described in the charter as a most loyal subject, which may have been the reason she granted him some land.



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Another relic of her life, a ring inscribed with her name – EADELSVIÐ REGNA – is thought by some to have been too big for a woman's hand at the time, and therefore unlikely to have been her personal property. Instead, in common with other noblewomen at the time, she may have given it to another loyal subject as a reward for that loyalty.

Æðelswið and her husband had no children from their marriage. Her father died in 858, when she was around 20, and her stepmother married one of her brothers, Æthelbald, probably to preserve the alliance with the Franks. Her remaining brothers, except Alfred, all died in relatively quick succession – Æthelbald in 860, Æthelberht in 865, and Æthelred in 871. Alfred had married a Mercian nobleman's daughter, Ealhswith, in 868, whose mother was a member of the Mercian royal family, which strengthened the alliance started by Æðelswið and Burgred.

Although this alliance bolstered both kingdoms, they both still suffered from Danish raids. Eventually, this got too much for Burgred, and his reign came to an end in 874, when Vikings overpowered the Mercians and he and Æðelswið left the British Isles heading for Rome. Burgred died in Rome not long after arrival, leaving Æðelswið a widow.

She never came back to Britain. She lived on in Italy, almost certainly enjoying the better climate, until she died herself in Pavia, in 888. She was 50, which was a good old age for a woman during that era.

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Look out for the next '**One Woman**' article which will be published in March.

If you have any comments about the project or would like to suggest you own 'One Woman' please contact Elaine Davis project co-ordinator elaine2archive@hotmail.com