

English
Catholic



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Association

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NEWSLETTER

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NEWS & NOTES

Note from the Chairman

Happy New Year from the ECHA committee! I am writing this from my office at Downside Abbey where the Mendip mists hang over the site and it very much feels like the Bleak Midwinter!

We hope that you enjoy this *Newsletter* and the editor always welcomes contributions either in the form of news or articles. There is a gentle reminder to renew your subscription as well at the back of the *Newsletter*. I'm grateful to Tim Guile for his article, which I hope you will enjoy.

The ECHA AGM was held at Downside Abbey where Mass was said for deceased members of the Association by Dom Leo Maidlow Davis. A hybrid AGM was taken and the committee was voted back *en masse* with the addition of a new committee member, Tim Guile. We welcome Tim to the committee and look forward to sharing his enthusiasm of English Catholic history.

You will see that we are once again planning to hold 'live' events in our 'Future Programme'; thank you for bearing with us during the pandemic.

News from Downside

The monastic community of St Gregory the Great will be leaving Downside Abbey this Spring. They will live as the *conventus* of St Gregory the Great at Southgate House, which is on the Buckfast Abbey estate. There they will discern their future as they leave their legacy of Downside School and Heritage behind them in Somerset.

Simon Johnson (chair)

spjohnson@downside.co.uk

Downside Abbey, Stratton on the Fosse, Bath, BA3 4RH.

Keeping in touch

The membership continues to be strong and we are always happy to welcome new members. If you would like to update your details or are able to provide an e-mail address for communication then please get in touch. All data is held strictly in line with current data protection law and used accordingly.

A Holy and Devout Virgin Queen. St. Aethelthryth (Etheldreda) of Ely.

By T J Guile

The Catholic church and indeed also the Orthodox and the Anglican church often looks back to the exemplary life of holy and devout people. Indeed, in our own times we could be said to need to have saintly role models who show us how to fully live the Christian life. St Æthelthryth (Æþelðryþe in Anglo-Saxon), also known as St Etheldreda or more popularly, St Audrey, could be such an example to modern Christians just as much as she was in times gone by. She was an important saint in the Anglo-Saxon church and her popularity continued throughout the medieval period. The Venerable Bede wrote about her, and she was seen by many contemporary Christians as a very saintly woman. St Æthelthryth's popularity has in some respects, continued to the present day. She is often depicted with a crown of flowers or a book and is the patron saint of throat ailments.

In the medieval period and up to around 1540, St Etheldreda was still held in great esteem throughout England. Pilgrimages were made to her shrine in Ely Cathedral and badges were worn by those who had completed the pilgrimages. She was a patron of chastity and was invoked for help against infections of the throat and neck. To this day, the Blessing of Throats is an important annual event at St Etheldreda's in London. Lace and silk necklaces are associated with her cult and were sold on her feast day in Ely at St Audrey's Fair. The word 'tawdry' derives from this, referring to the inferior quality of these tokens. If you go to Ely Cathedral today, there is an inscription on the floor marking the location of her shrine, 'Here stood the shrine of Etheldreda, saint and queen, who founded this house AD 673' (*Ely Cathedral*).

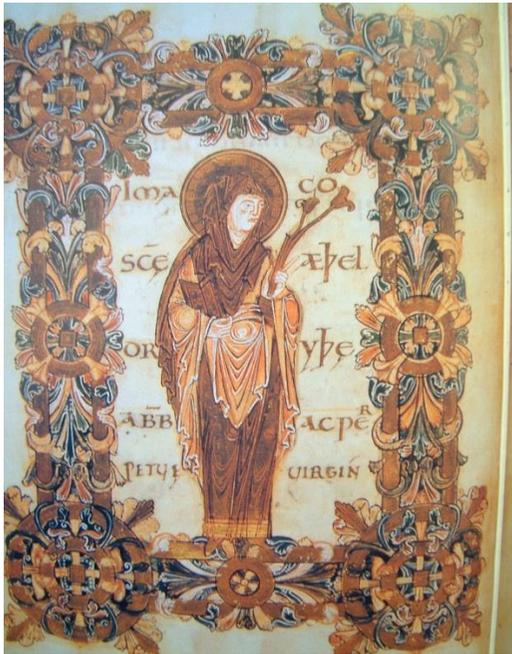


Fig 1

St Etheldreda from the Benedictional of illuminated Æthelwold manuscript

Courtesy of the British Library

A church dedicated to her, Holborn, is the oldest Roman Catholic church still surviving in England, and she continues to be venerated in her hometown of Ely at St Etheldreda's Catholic church, where her shrine and relics are contained. She is also venerated as a saint in the Orthodox Church. St Etheldreda's Church was the town chapel of the Bishops of Ely from about 1250 to 1570. Today, it is the oldest Catholic church in England and one of only two remaining buildings in London from the reign of Edward I. Æthelthryth could be seen by many Catholics today as a role model and an inspiration to the faithful. An interesting relic is to be found in the Catholic church of St Etheldreda in the Cambridgeshire town of Ely. It is said to be the hand of an Anglo-Saxon queen and abbess, St Æthelthryth or St Etheldreda. Considering that she is said to have died in 679, this is a remarkable object both for Catholics and for historians of the period. The 23rd of June is the feast day of Æthelthryth, an Anglo-Saxon queen of Northumbria and founder of a double

monastery at Ely, who took a vow of celibacy despite being married twice.

Relics are religious objects generally connected to a saint, or some other venerated person, and they aren't necessarily just bones. Catholic belief in the power of relics, the remains of a holy person, or objects with which they had contact, is as old as the faith itself and developed alongside it. Relics were more than mementos. The New Testament refers to the healing power of objects that were touched by Christ or his apostles and this belief continued during the medieval period. The body of the saint provided a spiritual link between life and death, between man and God. Fuelled by the Christian belief in the afterlife and resurrection, in the power of the soul, and in the role of saints as advocates for those who had departed this life. Indeed, the veneration of relics in the Middle Ages could be said to almost rival the sacraments in the daily life of the medieval church. During the Middle Ages, it was expected that every altar should contain a relic of a saint. This tradition continues in the Catholic church today.

There are several sources of evidence for the life of Æthelthryth. There are several accounts of Æthelthryth's life in Latin, Old English, Old French, and Middle English. Probably the most famous and most often quoted is an account of her life by the Venerable Bede in his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Angolorum*.

Princess Æthelthryth was said to be the daughter of King Anna, who was a king of East Anglia. Æthelthryth was probably born around 636 AD in Exning, near Newmarket in Suffolk. One of the four saintly daughters of Anna of East Anglia, who all eventually retired from secular life and founded religious houses. Æthelthryth was regarded as a very spiritual young woman and she reportedly wanted to become a nun from a young age. Æthelthryth, whilst still in her teens, made an early first marriage, probably what we would now call an arranged marriage, around 652 to Tondberct, chief or prince of the South Gyrwe who was purportedly considerably older than her. She managed to persuade her husband to respect her vow of perpetual virginity that she had made prior to their marriage. After his early death in 655, she went to live at a manor on the Isle of Ely, which she had received from her husband as a gift. Æthelthryth subsequently remarried, again probably for political reasons in 660, this

time to Ecgrith of Northumbria, then said to be still a teenager and younger than Æthelthryth. Shortly after his accession to the throne in 670, Æthelthryth apparently announced her intention to become a nun. This step possibly led to Ecgrith's long quarrel with Wilfrid, Bishop of York who was her confidant and spiritual advisor. One account relates that Ecgrith initially agreed that Æthelthryth should continue to remain a virgin, but in about 672 he wished to consummate their marriage and even attempted to bribe Wilfrid to use his influence on the queen to convince her. This tactic failed and the king tried to take his queen by force. Æthelthryth fled and made her way to Coldingham, north of Berwick Upon Tweed, then still part of Northumbria but now in Scotland. She was also said to have given money and land to Wilfrid to establish a monastery at Hexham around this time. At Coldingham, under the careful guidance of Saint Æbbe, Etheldreda finally became a nun. Etheldreda stayed at Coldingham for about a year before eventually making her way back to Ely with two faithful nuns where, as well as founding a religious community, she also built a magnificent church on the ruins of one founded by the efforts of St Augustine himself but laid waste by war. Etheldreda was said to be quite revolutionary for her own time. She is reported to have set free all the bondsmen on her lands and for seven years led a life of exemplary austerity. "It is told of her that from the time of her entering the monastery, she would never wear any linen but only woollen garments, and would seldom wash in a hot bath, unless just before the greater festivals, as Easter, Whitsuntide, and the Epiphany, and then she did it last of all, when the other handmaids of Christ who were there had been washed, served by her and her attendants. She was renowned for her humility and service to others around her as well as her asceticism and piety. She was said to seldom eat more than once a day, except on the major festivals, or for some exceptional reason. Her habit, except when serious illness prevented her, from the time of matins till daybreak, was to continue to pray in the church. Some also say, that by the spirit of prophecy she not only foretold the pestilence of which she was to die, but also, in the presence of all, revealed the number of those that should be then snatched away from this world out of her monastery." (A. M. Sellar, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England*, George Bell & Sons, 1907).

It is recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, that Æthelthryth founded a double monastery at Ely in 673, which was later destroyed in the Danish

invasion of 870. After its restoration in 970 by Ethelwold, it is said to have become the richest abbey in England after Glastonbury. Etheldreda died about 680 reportedly from a tumour on the neck, reputedly as a divine punishment for her vanity in wearing necklaces in her younger days. In reality it may have been as a result of a plague which also killed several of her nuns, many of whom were related to her. Seventeen years after her death, her body was reported to be incorrupt, in other words, it did not appear to have decayed. Wilfred and her physician, Cynefrid, were among the witnesses. The tumour on her neck, cut by her doctor, was found to be healed. The linen cloths in which her body was wrapped were as fresh as the day she had been buried. Her body was placed in a stone sarcophagus of Roman origin, found at Grantchester near Cambridge, and reburied. The story of the Northumbrian queen preserving her chastity as a sign of her devotion to God, fleeing from her second husband Ecgrith when he tried to assault her and travelling back to her homeland to found the monastery at Ely obviously struck a deep chord in the medieval psyche. After her death, devotion to her seemed to have spread rapidly, as people claimed to have received help and favours through what they were convinced was her powerful intercession in Heaven. And when, through popular demand, it was decided to remove her to a more fitting tomb, it was found that even after 15 years in wet earth her body was said to still be in a perfect state of preservation. According to Bede, (*Historia Ecclesiastica*), her body remained uncorrupted after death, a sure sign she had not been defiled. When the Normans began building the present Cathedral at Ely and moved her body in 1106, it was again reported to be still incorrupt. That was nearly 450 years after her death.

Bede, in his History of the English Church, told how after her death, Æthelthryth's bones were disinterred by her sister, Seaxburh, also known as St Sexburga of Ely, and that her uncorrupted body was later buried in a white, marble coffin. Seaxburh moved to the double monastery at Ely and succeeded her when Æthelthryth died in 679. Seaxburh who was also famous for founding the abbeys at Milton Regis and Minster-in-Sheppey where her daughter Ermenilda was also a nun, moved the remains of her sister in 695, from a common grave to the new church at Ely by which time Æthelthryth had been dead for sixteen years. The Liber Eliensis, a twelfth century chronicle of history, written in Latin in Ely and composed of three books, reports that when her grave was

opened, Æthelthryth's body was discovered to be uncorrupted and her coffin and clothes proved to possess miraculous powers. A sarcophagus said to be made of white marble was taken from the Roman ruins at Grantchester, which was found to be the right fit for Æthelthryth. Seaxburh supervised the preparation of her sister's body, which was washed and wrapped in new robes before being reburied. She apparently planned and oversaw the translation of her sister's remains without the supervision of her bishop, using her knowledge of procedures gained from her family's links with Faremoutiers Abbey in order to plan the ceremony.



Fig. 2

A mediaeval painting of the translation of Æthelthryth at Ely, attended by her sister Seaxburh

Courtesy of <https://archive.org/details/shrinesofbritish00wall> from *Shrines of British Saints*, by James Charles Wall (1905)

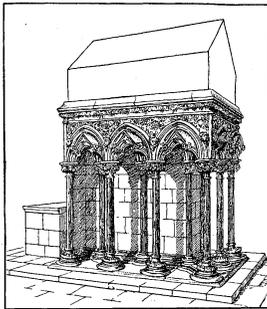
Virginia Blanton (*Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St Æthelthryth in Medieval England 695-1615*, 2010) argues that the safe and inviolable monastic space is a symbol of her inviolable virgin body.

In other words her body could be compared to the sacred and sacrosanct nature of the monastic space and enclosure. (https://www.academia.edu/817925/Elys_St_AEthelthryth_The_Shri nes_Enclosure_of_the_Female_Body_as_Symbol_for_the_Inviolability_of_Mon astic_Space, *Women's Space, Place and Gender in the Medieval Church*, V, Blanton, 2010) Elsewhere she argues that the saint was a popular symbol of purity and that her incorrupt body reflected her devotion and dedication to the inner spiritual life that she led. "Here is one shrine, within which the marble sarcophagus containing the virgin body of St. Æthelthryth is enclosed, turned in the direction of her own altar, just as the exalted lady, entirely whole, entirely uncorrupted, rests in the tomb which, we believe, had been prepared for her at God's command by the hands of angels." (*Tota Integra, Tota Incorrupta: The Shrine of St Æthelthryth As Symbol of Monastic Autonomy*, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, pp227-267, Duke University Press 2002)

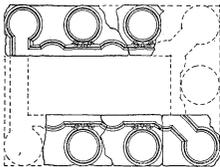
For a long time during the Middle Ages there was an annual St Etheldreda's fair in Ely. Sometimes it was referred to as St Audrey's Fair. It often specialised in selling lace to go around the neck. Some of this lacework was reputedly of such poor quality that it was referred to as 'tawdry' after St Audrey. During the medieval period the Abbeys or Cathedral churches of Durham, Glastonbury, Salisbury, Thetford, Waltham and York all claimed to have relics, or small parts of the body of St Etheldreda. How accurate these claims were, is difficult to prove. Besides the principal relic of the body of St Etheldreda, the cult of St Etheldreda seems to have also involved the distribution of lace necklaces and other objects which were claimed to have been associated with St Etheldreda. Records of the visitation of Dr Layton and Dr Leigh in 1536 refer to cloths for women with sore throats and sore breasts, a comb of St Etheldreda for women with headaches and a ring of St Etheldreda for women seeking relief when 'lying-in' in childbirth.

During the medieval period, Ely cathedral was known as the Cathedral Church of St Etheldreda and St Peter, but the dedication was changed at the Reformation to the Cathedral Church of the Holy and Undivided Trinity. The ancient shrine of the saint, which had been a focus of

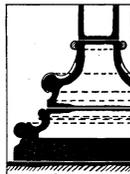
pilgrimage until then, was demolished around 1541. Parts of the shrine are said to have been found in different parts of Ely in more recent times. Painted panels with scenes from the Saint's life were said to have been used as a cupboard door in an Ely house in the 1780s. There was said to be a small eighth-century carved frieze found in a barn wall at St John's Farm near Ely, which is thought by some to have come from the shrine. The shrine was apparently made of stone rather than marble as was commonly thought at the time. Official records show that some 361 ounces of gold and 5,040 ounces of gold and white plate were taken from the shrine into the royal treasury. Thus ended the medieval cult of St Etheldreda of Ely.



SUGGESTED RECONSTRUCTION, SHOWING COVER IN OUTLINE



SCALE OF FEET
0 1 2 3 4 5
PLAN AS AT PRESENT



SECTION THROUGH BASE OF COLUMN
(RECONSTRUCTED)

Fig. 3

Conjectured shrine of St Etheldreda at Ely Cathedral

Courtesy of <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/cambs/vol4/pp50-77>

Today there is a chapel in Ely Cathedral dedicated to her. There is a statue of the saint to be found there and visitors or pilgrims are encouraged to say a prayer and light a candle.

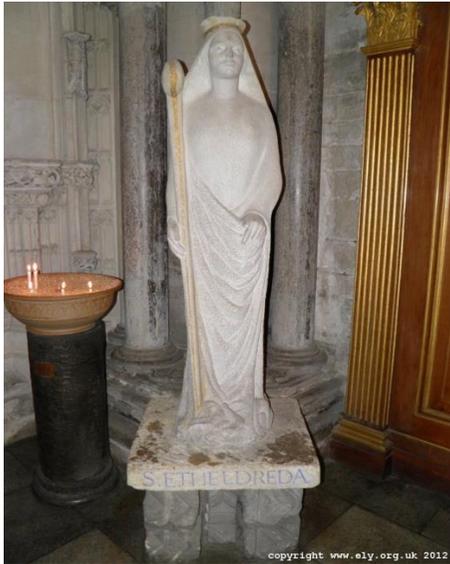


Fig. 4
Statue of St Etheldreda in Ely Cathedral
Courtesy of Ely Cathedral

It does not appear to be recorded what happened to the body of the saint but in 1541 it was recorded that her body still appeared to be incorrupt. A relic of Saint Etheldreda, consisting of her left hand, was reputedly found preserved in a separate reliquary, hidden in a priest's hiding hole in a house in Sussex in about 1811. It was apparently presented to the Duke of Norfolk and passed down to the community of Dominican Sisters at Stone in Staffordshire. The hand was found on an engraved silver plate on which was written 'Manus Sanctae Etheldredae DCLXXIII.' (The hand of St Etheldreda 673 AD). The plate itself was of a tenth-century style, suggesting that the hand had been separated from the rest of St Etheldreda's body at around the time of the tenth century. It was reported in 1876 that when the hand was found it was "perfectly entire and quite white (but) exposure to the air has now changed it to a dark brown and the skin has cracked and disappeared in several places" (Alexander Wood, *St. Etheldreda and her Churches in Ely and London: A Preliminary Notice of the Catholic Memorials and Missions in the Vicinity of the Latter and a Supplementary Account of Ely House*, (A lecture read at St. Etheldreda's Ely Place, 2 March 1876), Papers in the Cambridgeshire Collection C52 p.16)



Fig. 5

The relic of St Etheldreda in the church of St Etheldreda in Ely
Courtesy of Andrew Conway. <https://andrewconway.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/AJC06882.jpg>

A small part of the hand of the saint was given by the nuns at Stone to St Etheldreda's Church in Ely Place, Holborn, London in 1950 and in 1953 they donated the rest of the relic to St Etheldreda's church in Ely where it remains today. St Etheldreda's Church in Ely Place in Holborn is dedicated to the saint. It was originally part of the palace of the bishops of Ely. After the Reformation, the palace was used by the Spanish ambassadors, enabling Catholic worship to continue in the church. In 1620, the Spanish Ambassador, the Count of Gondomar, a face so loved by the artist El Greco, moved into Ely Place. The Bishop's Palace was his residence and mass was again allowed to be said in St Etheldreda's, because an ambassadorial residence and grounds are considered part of the country they represent. To hear mass was still punishable by death for English Catholics but despite the dangers they flocked to St Etheldreda's. It was written at the time that more persons were drawn to mass at Gondomar's little private chapel in Holborn than anywhere else. Since 1878 it has once again become a Catholic church and later, the home of the relic of the saint. St Etheldreda's church is the oldest Catholic church in Britain and dates to the reign of Edward I. It will always be a place of prayer and remembrance of this pure and holy queen

of Northumbria. There is also a St. Etheldreda's Church in White Notley, Essex, which is a Church of England parish church, of Saxon construction, built on the site of a Roman temple, with a large quantity of Roman brick in its fabric. The church has a small Mediaeval English stained-glass window, depicting St. Etheldreda, which is set in a stone frame made from a very early Insular Christian Roman Chi Rho grave marker. Her relic in the Catholic church in Ely is a tangible reminder of the medieval cult of the saint and an example of a holy and devout Christian life dedicated to God.



Fig. 6

St Etheldreda's statue in the church of St Etheldreda in Holborn, London

Courtesy of the church of St Etheldreda

(<http://www.stetheldreda.com/index.php/history-of-st-etheldredas/>)

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BOOK REVIEW

Rowland Broomhead 1751 – 1820 Apostle of the North.

By Peter Francis Lipton.

[Gracewing 2015, pp. 380, ISBN 978 085244 850 2]

Those of us who feel despondent about the Catholic Church today, may find themselves uplifted and hopeful with this biography.

Rowland Broomhead was the son of a recusant family living in what was then known as the Northern Vicariate. He spent ten years studying at the Venerable before beginning his ministry as a Catholic Priest in Sheffield in 1775. After only three years, he was already well-loved by the Catholics there. He was then posted to the Manchester area, in 1778, where he remained for the rest of his priestly life.

His early years in Manchester coincided with the Catholic Relief Acts of 1778 and 1791. This enabled Fr Broomhead to begin the provision of rudimentary Catholic education for the multitudes of those living in extreme poverty.

In 1787, Fr Broomhead became involved more widely in the Catholic Mission and he was given the charge of Rook Street Chapel, St Chads.

Fr. Broomhead laboured for all in need and worked with his fellow Christians of other denominations, although doubtless the word ECUMENISM would not have been part of his vocabulary. He was a member of the non-denominational Sunday School Movement.

His benevolence towards everyone and his work for the poor was recognised by the people of Manchester. He worked with the non-denominational Sunday School Movement. Responsible for the building of local Catholic Chapels, he always insisted that the buildings should have a large schoolroom for the children. He was involved in the establishment of Ushaw College.

Numbers of Catholic Baptisms greatly increased during these years:

1777 Baptisms 1819 Baptisms 2549

Fr Broomhead died in 1820 and the people of Manchester turned out in force to bid farewell to their much-loved Priest.

Peter Francis Lipton gives us a meticulous account of Father Broomhead's work in schools and hospitals and in the founding of local churches for

the people of Manchester. He offers us a work of very detailed scholarship. The book is an invaluable source for all those interested in the growth of our churches in this period

Thea van Dam

October 2021

DOWNSIDE ABBEY HERITAGE EVENTS

The Heritage Department at Downside Abbey holds many events, sharing its incredible collections and you can keep up to date with these on our website: www.downsideabbey.co.uk.

You can view our previous online talks on our YouTube page <https://www.youtube.com/user/DownsideAbbey> which focus on a wide range of subjects relevant to Downside, English Catholicism and heritage as well as other subjects.

Coming up we have talks on Dom Gregory Murray, Cardinal Aidan Gasquet and Abbot Edmund Ford, and we are also planning an exhibition focusing on Downside's connections to Siegfried Sassoon which will take place later this year.

You can also see our monthly heritage newsletter on the Downside website, and sign up to it by emailing sparsons@downside.co.uk

FUTURE PROGRAMME 2022

So far there are two events planned for 2022, please note them in your diaries:

Wednesday 26th January 7.30pm

Zoom talk by Eilish Gregory who will speak on her recent book, *Catholics During the English Revolution 1642-1660: Politics, Sequestration and Loyalty*.

The Zoom link is:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86867852167?pwd=RXB6Zy9xS2NqdIVIL2R0a2svVFVBUT09>

Meeting ID: 868 6785 2167

Passcode: rsR74T

Wednesday 4th May

Visit to Wardley Hall, Worsley , Manchester, M28 2ND

Wardley Hall is the residence of the Bishop of Salford, with connections to the martyr, Ambrose Barlow (executed 1641).

Organiser: Anthony Kloszek

More details will follow in due course.

If there are any problems with Zoom please e-mail
spjohnson@downside.co.uk

SUBSCRIPTION REMINDER

Subscription for 2021 is due from 1 January.

Please note the current rates - **£11.00** (individual), **£14.00** (joint)
(discounted rate £4.00 for full-time students under 25).

Cheques payable to **English Catholic History Association** should be sent to the membership secretary/treasurer :

Vincent Burke, 16 Brandhall Court, Wolverhampton Road, Oldbury, West Midlands, B68 8DE

N.B. A few subscribers who pay by standing order are still paying at the old (2015) rate. Please check to see that the correct subscription is being paid and inform your bank of the increased amount.

Do not complete a new standing order mandate.

By completing all the sections below you can ensure that the Association's membership records are accurate and up to date. *

Name:

Address:

.....

..... Post code:

Tel. No. :

E mail:

Amount enclosed:

*If you pay your subscription by standing order and any of your details have changed in the last year it would also be helpful if you could complete and return this form; alternatively you might e mail the membership secretary with details of any amendments that need to be made.

vburke44@blueyonder.co.uk