

## LADY GODIVA (Godgifu, in the spelling of her time.)

29<sup>th</sup> Great Grandmother

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An Anglo-Saxon gentlewoman, patron of the arts, equestrienne, and tax protester, etc. All the historians say that she "flourished, circa 1040 - 1080 A.D."

Leofric, earl of Mercia, and husband of Lady Godiva, was a man of broad but obscure interests; a religious man thoroughly Christian, and an entrepreneur, raconteur, and general all around good sport. At the same time, he did have an avaricious streak in him, and it is for this reason that his name has survived through the ages, but more prominently for his interesting response to the nagging of his bleeding-heart wife, who pestered him incessantly over details of the daily lives of the peasants under his control, and similar fussy matters.

It's not that she was always being petulant about everything he did, but certain of his actions caused her to be irritable, but that part of the story comes later. Actually both Leofric and Godiva were quite religious, and upon their move to Coventry, Warwickshire, from Shrewsbury, Shropshire (where Leofric had earned his fortune and title from amazing successes in the mutton trade), they were immediately impressed by the lack of proper facilities for training and housing men of the cloth in or around the raucous little district of Coventry (pop. 6215). How, they thought, were the spiritual needs of these simple souls to be cared for? At the same time, being somewhat "nouveau riche" and anxious to make their mark in what passed for genteel society there (not having had the proper credentials to enter such circles back in Shropshire -- which may have been a big piece of the motivation for the move), they decided to apply some of their ready cash to a worthy public cause.

Near the physical center of Coventry, where the bombed-out ruin of mighty Coventry Cathedral stands today, Leofric and Godiva (in 1043) founded and funded an abbey (some accounts say monastery), named in honor of St. Eunice of Saxmundham (an early martyr, slain by flaying at the hands of the Romans). The abbey faced the rising sun, as was decreed it should by Leofric in a moment of romantic inspiration. A simple affair, made of wattle and daub with a roof of thatched reeds in the manner of the day, it was nevertheless imposing by standards in the village otherwise; it was the biggest structure in the entire region.

Before long this edifice was something of a social focus for the town, functioning not only as a center for the education and housing of those who had received the calling, but also as a gathering point where more vulgar popular events and festivities could be celebrated. Leofric and Godiva came to be awarded the attention and respect they longed for from the start, and they had served the purposes of the church as well. They did not seem to mind that much of the activity circulating around the abbey was decidedly Druid in origin; at least the peasants were occupied and happy. Coventry grew around the abbey.

As a gentleman, and now established philanthropist of some local repute, Leofric assumed a growing role in the governance of public affairs, and was given responsibility for certain financial matters (the town had grown enough to actually have financial matters), which he quickly understood as presenting especially interesting opportunities. One public work generated the idea of another, if only some money were at hand to facilitate such growth...

Meanwhile, Godiva's proficiency as a horsewoman had become polished to a considerable degree, as she had acquired a taste for the hunt and the social pleasantries which accrue to the activity "apres." Plus, the people she met during these excursions which provided such complacency, were of a disposition and delicacy of interest to which she had aspired for some time. She could do worse than to engage in certain preoccupations of the intellect, and considerations of the aesthetic, and so she immersed herself in the arts and, therefore, society.

Perhaps, she earnestly thought, aid to those industrious in this field of elevated concern (artists) would inspire the rude masses by means of example. Commissioning a proper portrait of herself would be a good place to start; it would be an inspiration for simpler souls, so the work was begun.

It only slowly entered Godiva's consciousness that the lack of success she was having in interesting the base masses in artistic concerns, beautiful pictures of herself spread around or not, was rooted in the fact that nearly all of them spent 100% of their waking hours in partially effective efforts to feed and clothe themselves, and to provide some form of shelter from the elements. Most were having a hard time of it, in light of the fact that Leofric, in his new-found megalomaniacal grand-public-works mode, had been taxing everything he could think of, even including a levy on manure.

Lady Godiva would not have such noble aspirations -- such as art for everyone -- placed on a back burner for the sake of boring considerations like a municipal water supply. Men had such ignoble visions, always functional and mechanical, mostly never above waist level. This would not do, the taxes must be reduced if this early medieval subsistence-agriculture village was going to pull itself up into the 11th century and its more cultured concerns. She went to have a pointed talk with Leofric.

Beside himself with raucous laughter, Leofric injured his left wrist slightly as he fell off his stool in the hall of the village burghers, and this sobered him up rather quickly. Reduce taxes in order to foster the peasants' appreciation of silly pictures? Was she mad? No waterworks? There would be no tax reduction; as a matter of fact, Leofric added a new tax on pictures, which only had to be paid by his wife since she was the only person who had any, except for the church which was exempt.

Their argument became a classic war of wills, taking the equally classic form of nagging versus stone-walling. However, at very long last, since his wife would not give up and was driving him to distraction and worse, Leofric capitulated, but, regarding it all as

something of a sport , attached an interesting condition to his offer to allow some reduction in taxation.

The ancient Greeks, he pointed out, and those coarser Romans as well, viewed the nude human body as one of the highest expressions of the perfection of Nature. Nudity was not seen as erotic in any sense, but as purity , and a celebration of the wonderful form of a sensuous being displayed in all its marvelous glory for the betterment and appreciation of those enlightened enough to consider this aesthetic. To present a well formed nude body as an object of great beauty, even art, would be to offer a lesson of inestimable value to the simple peasants of Coventry, whose experiences and perceptions had never been enlightened to appreciate such perfection.

If Lady Godiva truly believed in the crusade she was promoting, then she should lead it herself, and offer to the citizens of Coventry an example of the glorious beauty to be understood by careful consideration of a perfect nude human body. There could be no shame in this, it would be the most gross error to consider it as such. Was she ashamed of the wonders of God's work? Besides, with all that horse-back riding , and similar, she had lost some weight and looked pretty good.

Therefore, Leofric proclaimed that if Lady Godiva would ride her horse through the crowded market-place of Coventry, in the full light of mid-day , clothed in only that which God had given her, as an example of the perfection of God's work and as an expression of the highest possible aesthetic -- she had been spreading pictures of herself around anywhere -- then he would reduce taxes on the populace, lifting from them the burden Godiva perceived, and erasing from himself any further doubt he might harbor of the sincerity of Godiva's convictions.

To Leofric's absolute surprise, she agreed, once she had ensured that she actually had his "permission" to do so.

Taken aback by his wife's courage and certainty in her purposes Leofric , somewhat overwhelmed, then stated that he fully accepted the truth of Lady Godiva's belief in the merits of her cause, and so in response, on completion of her ride he would not just reduce taxes, but would remove all of them -- save those tolls on horses which were already in place before he assumed his office, and which were necessary for basic needs of the city.

A day was chosen for the event, and while no particular effort had been expended to publicize the ride, talk of it had spread in whispers throughout the whole of Coventry. Not wishing to reveal that this concealed discussion had taken place, and since people were curious about all aspects of the affair and did not want to interrupt it, the marketplace's business proceeded as it might have done on any other less interesting Thursday in late August.

As noon approached, so did Lady Godiva. She was not alone, but was accompanied by two female aides also on horseback, but normally clothed; one rode on each side and slightly to the rear. Three horses walking on the cobbles in formation at a measured gait

did not have the sound of the usual traffic and bustle, and so -- since all were secretly and eagerly anticipating the event -- her appearance was announced clearly to everyone. She sat straight and properly in the saddle with a look of composure on her face; relaxed, confident, unashamed. Her hair was done in two large braids which were curled snugly at the back of her head, one on each side ; she wore no jewelry or other adornment. People looked at her and saw that she was not merely naked, or nude; rather she was in a higher state of presentation -- being a correct and elevated quality of her composure , and resulting also from the people's appraisal, appreciation, and consideration beyond simple voyeurism.

To all present this was an experience like no other in their lives. The only images of people unclothed they had ever seen were in the church : Adam and Eve, and the crucified Christ. This was a lady, simple and normal with a body like that of every other woman present, a human , a creature of God's earth. Though he half meant it as a joke, Leofric 's words rang true: here was a celebration of being in its perfection. Perhaps, as well, some believed with Zoroaster that sex is the bounty of God.

So, all survived the event with peacefulness and dignity, and the taxes were removed. In the *CHRONICA*, written by Roger of Wendover (who died in 1236), the account of the year 1057 tells the story of Godiva's ride in full detail , and is the earliest surviving written description.

Even more complete versions are provided by the famous historian Ranulf Higden (died in 1364) in his *POLYCHRONICON*, and by Henry Knighton (died c . 1396) who followed him, which explain not only the details of the ride and its reasons, but also the specifics of the removed taxes, in particular that all save those on horses were eliminated. Much later, King Edward I, being an inquisitive man (he devised an earnest, but rather awkward system for the classification of songbirds in Wales ), wished to discover the truth of the Godiva story and, therefore, commissioned an inquiry of ancient records which showed that in 1057 and there abouts, there were indeed no taxes levied in Coventry except those on horses, which was a rather anomalous situation not seen elsewhere at the time, thereby establishing the merit and probable accuracy of the legend. The tale of "Peeping Tom", who was struck blind (or dead) when he alone gazed upon Lady Godiva was not added until the 17th century. This is also true of the detail of the story, often added, that Godiva was covered totally, except for her legs, by an enormous and improbable quantity of hair.

Doubtless both of these embellishments were supplied later by prudish Christian churchmen who entirely missed the point and considered that viewing the unclothed human body under any circumstance was a heinous act which would damn one to eternal hell fire; they certainly thought the female body to be dirty and inferior to appreciation, and only worthy of being hidden from view. On the face of it such a view would seem to be a perversion, and affront to the beauty of God's work. The Greek s felt that the idealized human form was the only one worthy to represent the god s on earth. On the other hand, the Christian faith is unique in that it alone has, throughout its history, suppressed any celebration of the beauty of the human body.

So, what was Lady Godiva? A visionary; a social climber; a patron of the arts; a dilettante of the worst order?

In any estimation, she had the guts to follow her convictions, and may have brought a degree of enlightenment to a small corner of 11th century England. And, probably, no one went to Hell because of it.

À`Jerome C. KrauseLADY GODIVA (Godgifu, in the spelling of her time.)