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## Introduction

Saint George's Day is **23 April**.

Saint George



Saint George, by Gustave Moreau ©

Saint George is the patron saint of England. He's popularly identified with England and English ideals of honour, bravery and gallantry - but actually he wasn't English at all. Very little, if anything, is known about the real Saint George. Pope Gelasius said that George is one of the saints "whose names are rightly revered among us, but whose actions are known only to God."

## Facts in brief

Everything about Saint George is dubious, so the information below should be taken as mythical rather than real.

- Born in Cappadocia, an area which is now in Turkey
- Lived in 3rd century AD
- His parents were Christian
- Later lived in Palestine
- Became a Roman soldier
- Protested against Rome's persecution of Christians
- Imprisoned and tortured, but stayed true to his faith
- Beheaded at Lydda in Palestine
- 23rd April was named as Saint George's day in 1222

## Patron saint



Saint George's flag

He is patron saint not only of England but also of Aragon, Catalonia, Georgia, Lithuania, Palestine, Portugal, Germany and Greece; and of Moscow, Istanbul, Genoa and Venice (second to Saint Mark). He's also patron saint of soldiers, archers, cavalry and chivalry, farmers and field workers, riders and saddlers, and he helps those suffering from leprosy, plague and syphilis. In recent years he has been adopted as patron saint of Scouts. Some people have campaigned for Saint Alban to be the patron saint of England instead of George.

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## His life

Who was Saint George?



An icon of Saint George ©

The story of Saint George is so wrapped in myth and legend that it's difficult to extract the historical facts of a real life. Some believe he never existed or that he's a Christianised version of an older pagan myth.

In the early centuries of Christianity, followers would write up fabulous accounts of the lives of their heroes. This enhanced George's reputation but left the details of his life very blurred.

#### Early life

What we believe to be the truth is that George was born in Cappadocia, an area which is now in Turkey, in the 3rd century; that his parents were Christians; and that when his father died, George's mother returned to her native Palestine, taking George with her. George became a soldier in the Roman army and rose to the rank of Tribune.

#### Persecution of Christians



George by Cosmè Tura in a 1474 altarpiece [©](#)

The Emperor of the day, Diocletian (245-313 AD), began a campaign against Christians at the very beginning of the 4th century. In about 303 AD George is said to have objected to this persecution and resigned his military post in protest.

#### Torture and martyrdom

George tore up the Emperor's order against Christians. This infuriated Diocletian, and George was imprisoned and tortured - but he refused to deny his faith. Eventually he was dragged through the streets of Diospolis (now Lydda) in Palestine and beheaded. It's said that Diocletian's wife was so impressed by George's resilience that she became a Christian and that she too was executed for her faith.

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#### Myths: George and the dragon

##### Myths about Saint George

The image of George most familiar to us today, the saint dressed in a white tunic bedecked with a red cross, astride his stallion, and skewering a dragon as he rescues a fair maiden, depends more on a late medieval and Renaissance ideal of this *miles Christi* (knight of Christ) than on his legend in its earlier forms, in which the dragon and the maiden play no part and George's role is one of verbal jousting and violent suffering rather than knightly derring-do.

*The Martyrdom of St. George in the South English Legendary*, ed. E. Gordon Whatley



Paulo Uccello's impression of the dragon, 1857 [©](#)

The story of Saint George only achieved mass circulation when it was printed in 1483 by Caxton in a book called *The Golden Legend*. This was a translation of a book by Jacques de Voragine, a French bishop, which incorporated fantastic details of Saints' lives.

#### George and the Dragon

This version of the dragon tale is from *The Golden Legend*.

S. George was a knight and born in Cappadocia. On a time he came in to the province of Libya, to a city which is said Silene. And by this city was a stagne or a pond like a sea,

wherein was a dragon which envenomed all the country.

*The Golden Legend*

More fearful, fell and crueller was she  
Than the deadly monster of Lerna was doubtless  
Upon her wings and on her back on high  
Were green rough scales like iron of hardness  
If Hercules for all his hardiness  
With bill or club had run this dragon to  
He should forsooth have found enough to do.

*adapted from Alexander Barclay, The lyfe of saynt George, 1515, a translation of Baptista Spagnuoli, Georgius, 1507, printed in The Life of St. George, ed William Nelson, Oxford University Press, 1960*

The people of the town had begun to feed the dragon two sheep every day to prevent it attacking them; when the sheep failed, they began to give it one sheep and one man. The king decreed that the human sacrifice should be chosen by lot. This continued until the king's daughter was selected. The king tried to bargain his way out of it, but the townspeople were adamant that she should be delivered to the dragon just as many of their children had been.

Then did the king do array his daughter like as she should be wedded, and embraced her, kissed her and gave her his benediction, and after, led her to the place where the dragon was.

*The Golden Legend*

George, who was passing, asked the lady what was happening. She told him about the dragon and begged him to leave before it appeared and killed him too.



George fighting the dragon,

by Vittore Carpaccio, 1502-1507 ©

Then said S. George: Fair daughter, doubt ye no thing hereof for I shall help thee in the name of Jesu Christ. She said: For God's sake, good knight, go your way, and abide not with me, for ye may not deliver me.

Thus as they spake together the dragon appeared and came running to them, and S. George was upon his horse, and drew out his sword and garnished him with the sign of the cross, and rode hardily against the dragon which came towards him, and smote him with his spear and hurt him sore and threw him to the ground. And after said to the maid: Deliver to me your girdle, and bind it about the neck of the dragon and be not afeard. When she had done so the dragon followed her as it had been a meek beast and debonair.

*The Golden Legend*



Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting of George marrying the princess

Sabra, 1857 ©

The princess led the defeated dragon into the city, causing much panic and alarm until George told the people not to be afraid: "Ne doubt ye no thing, without more, believe ye in

God, Jesu Christ, and do ye to be baptized and I shall slay the dragon."

The king was baptised, followed by all his people, whereupon George killed the dragon and had it dragged out of the city (requiring four ox carts to do so) and its body thrown into the fields.

The king set up a church of Our Lady and Saint George. On the site there sprang up "a fountain of living water, which healeth sick people that drink thereof".

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Myths: George's martyrdom

Myths about his martyrdom



George in a painting by Jan van Eyck, 1436 ©

In the stories George is said to have been tortured in a number of gruesome and hideous ways. He was forced to swallow poison; crushed between two spiked wheels; boiled in a cauldron of molten lead. None of these attempts killed him and his wounds were healed in the night by Christ himself.

George was told his life would be spared if he would offer sacrifice to the Roman gods. The people assembled to see him do so but instead George prayed to the Christian God.

Immediately, fire came down from heaven, an earthquake shook the ground, and priests, idols, and the temple buildings were destroyed. However, by this time it was God's will that St. George should die for his faith, and he was beheaded without further trouble.

Stories of this nature abounded about pagan and Christian figures in the early Middle Ages. People would have expected their heroes to have undergone such experiences and in an age when many things seemed mystical, few were sceptical about such stories.



George in a 1467 altarpiece by Andrea Mantegna ©

His rise and fall

It's believed that Saint George was adopted in England because the story in the *Golden Legend* was similar to an Anglo-Saxon legend. Saint George was quickly incorporated into miracle plays adapted from pagan sources and is a prime figure in Spenser's famous epic poem *The Fairie Queen*.

George's popularity faded after the Reformation when religious beliefs changed. He also lost ground as gunpowder became the primary weapon of war and protection, making the lance and sword less significant. In 1778 Saint George's Day was demoted to a simple day of devotion for Catholics in England.

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George and England

Saint George and England



Medieval tapestry showing Saint George ©

The earliest known British reference to Saint George occurs in an account by St. Adamnan, the 7th century Abbot of Iona. He's believed to have heard the story from Arcuif, a French bishop who had travelled to Jerusalem and other holy places in Palestine. The saint is also mentioned in the writings of the Venerable Bede.

George's reputation grew with the returning crusaders. A miracle appearance, when it was claimed that he appeared to lead crusaders into battle, is recorded in stone over the south door of a church at Fordington in Dorset. This still exists and is the earliest known church in England to be dedicated to Saint George. The Council of Oxford in 1222 named 23rd April Saint George's Day.

Order of the Garter

When Edward III (1327-77) founded the Order of the Garter (c. 1348), the premier order of knighthood in England, he put it under Saint George's patronage. The magnificent St George's Chapel at Windsor Castle was built by Edward IV and Henry VII as the chapel of the order. The badge of the Order shows Saint George on horseback slaying the dragon. From the 14th century Saint George was regarded as a special protector of the English. English soldiers were called to wear "a signe of Saint George" on chest and back. He became, in the popular imagination, English.

The flag of Saint George

The flag of Saint George - a red cross on a white background - is incorporated into the Union Jack and recalled in the ensign of the Royal Navy.

Henry V

In 1415 Archbishop Chichele promoted the feast of Saint George to principal status after Henry V's speech at the Battle of Agincourt invoking Saint George as England's patron saint. Many believed they saw him fighting on the English side.

The George Cross

In 1940 King George VI inaugurated the George Cross for 'acts of the greatest heroism or of the most conspicuous courage in circumstances of extreme danger'. The award is usually awarded to civilians. Saint George slaying the dragon is depicted on the silver cross.