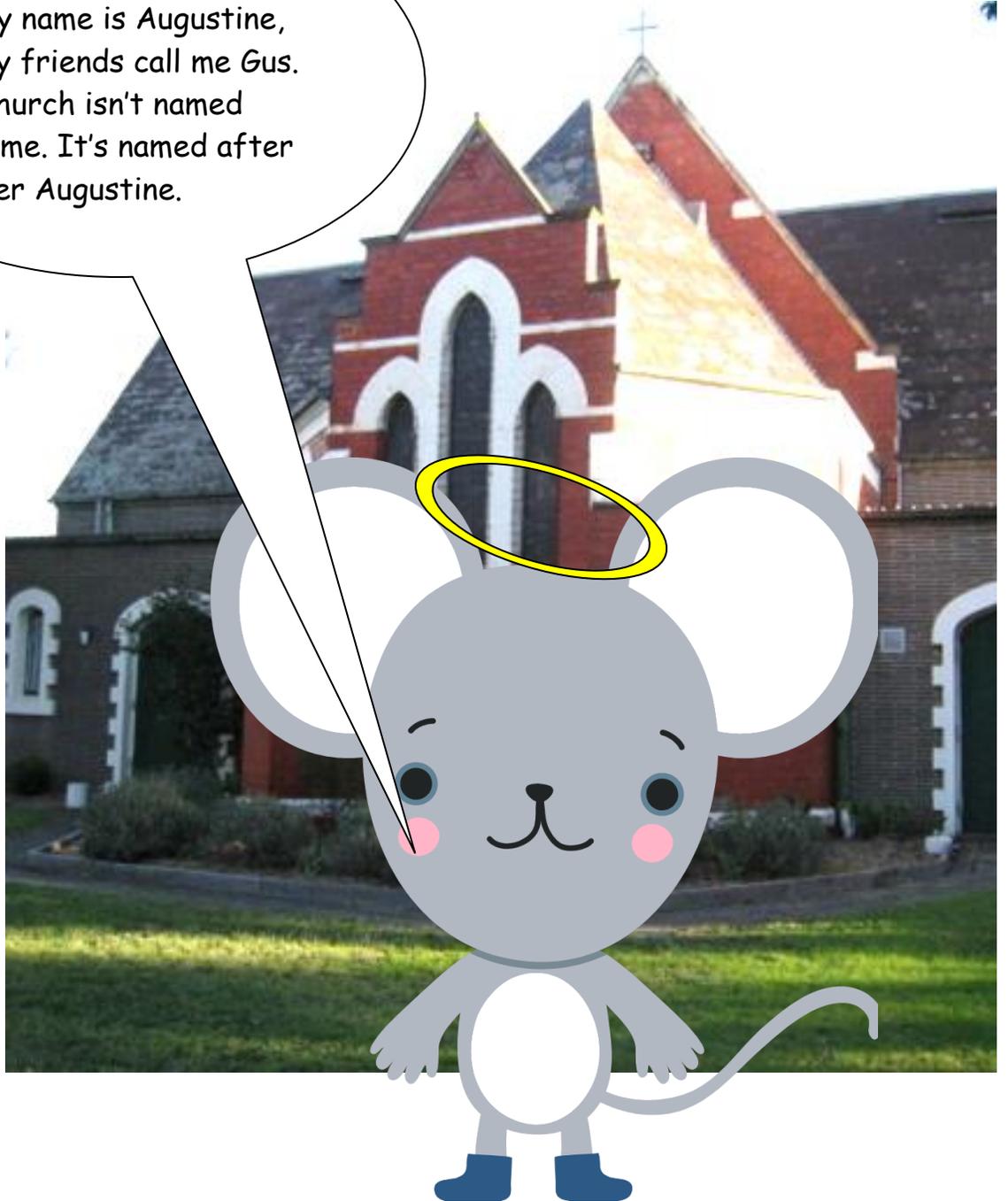


MYSTERY TWO:

Who was Saint Augustine?

Hi! I'm the church mouse and my name is Augustine, but my friends call me Gus. The church isn't named after me. It's named after another Augustine.



Within a couple of hundred years after the birth of Jesus Christianity had come to the British Isles. We remember some of those early British Christians like Patrick who spread the Christian faith in Ireland and Alban who was martyred in the city just north of London that is now named after him. However pagan Germanic tribes invaded Britain and virtually wiped out Christianity in what is today called England. In fact England is named after one of the tribes, the Angles. The country was divided up into several kingdoms including Northumbria, Wessex, East Anglia, Sussex and Kent.

The English worshipped gods like Tiu (god of war) Woden (god of death), Thor (god of thunder) and Frige (goddess of beauty) which we preserve in the names of the days of the week. (Can you guess which days they are named after them?)

Gregory, the Bishop of Rome, had first seen English people as slaves in the markets of Rome and made a famous pun that with their fair hair and blue eyes they should be called "Angels" not "Angles", and that they should have a place in heaven. So in 597 A.D. he sent the Roman abbot Augustine with forty of his monks to King Ethelbert of Kent. In his capital of Canterbury he reigned with his wife Queen Bertha who was a Christian and the daughter of the King of Paris. Perhaps that's why Gregory chose to send Augustine to Kent in particular. Eventually Ethelbert and his nobles decided to be baptised and gradually all of the English kingdoms accepted the Christian religion.

Augustine wrote several times to Pope Gregory for advice about how to replace paganism with Christianity. Gregory's advice in favour of evolution rather than revolution stamped the English character forever. He advised that rather than uprooting paganism and replacing it with a foreign religion that Christianity be grafted on to the English roots by taking over pagan places of worship and pagan feasts. If only half-done it is called "syncretism". If properly done it is called "contextualisation". Most would agree that this was a very successful case of contextualisation of the Christian gospel

The English were ready to receive the gospel because there was a widespread feeling even among their pagan priests that their old faith in their ancestral gods had failed them and that the new faith taught them how to live and die well. The new Christian faith also gave access to the cultural riches of the Roman, Greek and Hebrew worlds. Soon the English became famous for their learning and sent missionaries to their Germanic cousins in Europe like the Friesians and the Saxons.

To get a perspective on the era, Augustine lived the same time as Muhammad. So as Islam started to spread across North Africa and Asia from Arabia, so Christianity was spreading westward from England to northern Europe.

By the way, St Augustine of Canterbury is not to be confused with St Augustine of Hippo. He was a bishop in North Africa at the beginning of the collapse of the Roman Empire. He had a brilliant mind and wrote two classics: "Confessions" and "City of God".