

GLHS outdoor meeting on Holy Island, 22nd September 2021

On a beautiful late summer's day, 14 members joined John Woodhurst, local historian and Natural England volunteer warden to learn about the early monastic sites on Holy Island.

John outlined the 7th century history of the Northumbrian kings and their differing support for Christianity, and how Lindisfarne experienced both the Irish and Roman traditions of the Christian church.



The main written sources for the history of this period are Bede's accounts and that of an anonymous monk, all hagiographies written to demonstrate the divine qualities of those who would subsequently be canonised. Excavations, most recently the Peregrini Project (2016-18) in which our speaker had taken part, have provided archaeological evidence.

On the Heugh, the narrow ridge between the priory and the sea, we saw the outline of a small sandstone church with nave and chancel, excavated in 2017–8. It had not been possible to date the structure, but it's thought it could be a second church on that site, built over Aidan's first, wooden church on Lindisfarne.



The Irish tradition was to build in wood, the construction akin to a modern flat-pack, relatively easily moved as when Viking raids caused the monks to move

to Norham in 845. That a stone church was later built on the site may indicate its significance as Aidan's burial place.

Further west along the Heugh beside the lantern tower were the remains of a 13th century stone chapel where two depressions hewn out of the rock were found to contain six skeletons.

Recent excavations had also revealed a substantial structure that has been interpreted as possibly the watchtower mentioned by Bede. The Heugh certainly provides an excellent signalling point, as Bamburgh and the Farne



Islands can be clearly seen.

Below the Heugh to the north is St Mary's church, with Anglo-Saxon foundations, now thought to have functioned as a reception area for pilgrims (who would have walked across from the mainland at low tide or arrived on boats hauled up the gently sloping beach near what is now known as St Cuthbert's Island) on their way to the shrine of St Cuthbert.

The imposing ruins of the priory are Norman in style and scale, much later than the buildings familiar to Aidan and Cuthbert, though again some Anglo-Saxon remains have been found in that area and excavations continue. This priory



building was started in 1130, when monks came from Durham to build a church marking Cuthbert's original grave, to be the focus of pilgrimage.

Helped by a glorious sunny day, albeit very blustery, the outing was very much appreciated by everyone present, and we all gained further insight into aspects of the life of Cuthbert the man.

Background to early Christian Northumbria

The first Christian mission to northern Britain was sponsored and supported by King Edwin (616–632), who invited Roman missionary priest Paulinus to come north. Edwin was himself baptised in a new wooden church at York; mass baptisms followed in the River Swale and in the River Glen at Edwin's royal palace at Ad Gefrin/Yeavering In 627.

However, the renowned 'great peace' ensured by the warrior-king Edwin ended with his death in battle in 632: Northumbria collapsed into its two constituent kingdoms, reverted to paganism, and was laid waste by Cadwallon of Gwynedd.

The Irish/Celtic mission in the North began in 635, at the invitation of King Oswald. In 632 Oswald, nephew of Edwin, returned to claim Northumbria. In 635 he sent to Iona, which he knew well from his 16 years in exile, for monks to convert the Northumbrian people. **Aidan** established an Irish monastery on Lindisfarne; he became its first bishop but continued his evangelism humbly on foot. Monasteries were also established at Melrose, Coldingham, Hartlepool.

Lindisfarne's second saint, **Cuthbert**, came from a noble family in north Northumbria. After military service, in 651 he became a novice at Melrose abbey, later prior (second in command) at the new abbey at Ripon.

From the Irish to the Roman church

When it was decided at the Synod of Whitby (664) that the churches of Northumbria should follow the Roman tradition, many Irish monks at Lindisfarne returned to Iona. The abbot of Melrose became also abbot of Lindisfarne with Cuthbert as his prior and trouble-shooter. Later Cuthbert spent around 10 years as a hermit, first on St Cuthbert's Island then on the Inner Farne, before two years as a travelling bishop. Cuthbert was a charismatic leader, politically astute, the friend and respected advisor of kings, princesses and abbots.

Cuthbert died in 687 and was buried in Lindisfarne where, owing to his reputation as a healer, many came to pray for healing. When his coffin was opened (to retrieve his bones as relics) and his body found to be 'incorrupt', it was regarded as further proof of his great saintliness and Lindisfarne became a shrine and centre of pilgrimage. During the Viking raids, monks carried Cuthbert's coffin to a number of safer, inland churches and monasteries, until they reached its final resting place at Durham.