

October 2021: 'The Cult & Culture of Monasticism' – Margaret Kirby.

Our speaker, Margaret Kirby, presented a very well-illustrated and knowledgeable account covering 1000 years of monastic culture, from an era when religious houses were an influential feature of everyday life in Britain. We heard that monastic life started in Egypt in C313 with the first ever recorded monastery, that of St Catherine, in the Egyptian Sinai desert. At that time Christian monks sought to emulate Christ by seeking solitude, austerity and prayer. Thence, monastic life spread throughout north-western Europe, particularly to France. Indeed St Patrick was schooled in monastic culture on the French Mediterranean island of Lerins before returning to concentrate on extending rural monastic life at home in Ireland. The Irish Church flourished owing to the island generally escaping much of the European warfare hence Ireland became a centre of Christian culture and education. Resident communities spread, the Irish Church became established overseas in France, Switzerland and Italy.

Initially, however, some Irish monks had followed a very austere, isolated, contemplative life-style of deprivation and solitude as hermits, with remote archaeological remains, from this period, being found on the remote rocky outcrop of Skellig Michael, off the south western coast of Ireland, an example.

However, monasteries in a wider area evolved over time and the St Benedict Rule brought regulation to Benedictine monks' living, but over centuries the rules became more relaxed with less physical labour allowing further development of the arts, plain song and the design of more elaborate churches.

Fine artistic skills developed as monastic residents illuminated manuscripts (e.g. Lindisfarne Gospels & the later Book of Kells) influenced by Byzantine & Mediterranean and Irish artwork, sometimes with scribbles, reflections or poetry in the margins – we heard sample quotations. Fine examples of stone-carved crosses with varying ornamentation, again with Mediterranean influence, are to be found throughout Ireland. Over time, craftsmanship extended to include metal work with decorative filigree on Chalices, coloured glass-work in windows and the use of Vellum.

A steady stream of travelling monks extended influence to Scotland and Northumbria with St Columba founding the great monastery on Iona. Further Irish influence is seen at religious sites at Lindisfarne, Jarrow, Wearmouth and Durham. We heard of miracles associated with the body of St Cuthbert having been found 'incorrupt' – totally preserved – within his coffin, and of consequent pilgrimages to Durham where the cathedral was founded in his honour. Vast income was made from the purchase of 'relics', (souvenirs in modern parlance): anything (including bones) associated with the contents of the coffin.

St Bathan's name was given to the Borders abbey and settlement. Locally, Eccles also relates to an ecclesiastical site and there remains a church of Irish origin at Escomb. Leading women also featured as with St Hilde at Whitby Abbey.

However, the Irish, or Celtic, church was challenged – owing to a debate over the timing of Easter – at the Synod of Whitby (664AD) when acceptance of the Pope as head of the Church established Roman ecclesiastical authority. Over centuries reforms brought new orders of monks.

Abbeys in this wider area flourished, including those at Coldingham, Melrose and Jedburgh, with Kelso being the greatest and hosting the baptism and crowning of Kings of Scotland. Such establishments developed sheep farming selling wool, gaining further profits, and thus becoming enormously wealthy.

Towards the end of the first millennium, people thought the Day of Judgement was near; gifts of great wealth were bestowed upon monastic orders. Monks, being held in high regard, were paid to pray for people's souls and forgiveness of sins (in chantries); they were employed to fast as a penance for others' wrong-doing (as today an insurance is understood). Monastic buildings became decoratively richer and more elaborate. However, this was not to last – decline began with some monasteries meeting their demise even before Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries.

This report is incapable of giving the detail presented to us, we should therefore appreciate what remains of these great establishments, especially in the Borders, from the previous millennium of Cult and Culture of Monasticism ably recounted by our speaker and her theatrical assistants (Jenny & Frank) who read quotations, testimonies and poems of the era.