

**February 2024**

**St Cuthbert's Chapel on Inner Farne**

**Speaker: Nick Lewis**

Many of us will have briefly stepped ashore on Inner Farne as part of a boat trip from Seahouses, & wondered about the old stone buildings in the north-east corner of the island. Our eloquent speaker, who knows the island well as Collections & House Officer with the National Trust, explained the origin & varied uses of the buildings.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Aidan established an abbey on Holy Island. Cuthbert (635-687), a later prior of the abbey, sought a more remote hermitage & built on Inner Farne a circular cell of stone & turf, big enough to lie down & see the sky. He spent 10 years there. The royal stronghold at Bamburgh, the monastery on Holy Island & Inner Farne are within sight of each other, a triangle of key Northumbrian sites.

The association of Inner Farne with St Cuthbert meant that by the 13<sup>th</sup> century there were up to six monks in the House of Farne, under supervision of the bishop of Durham. The community lived in the rectangular enclosure we can see now – then made up of the chapel, the hospitium (guest house), walls & entrance gate. The water supply was enclosed in the base of the tower built in the 1490s by Thomas Castell, Prior of Durham Cathedral.

The monastery was abandoned at the Dissolution (1536) and the islands passed into the ownership of the Dean and Chapter of Durham. From then until 1637, the building housed a small garrison, shown on Spede's map of 1611, a defence against French or Spanish invaders.

In 1776 John Blackett, tenant of the Farne Islands, erected two fire baskets on the top of Prior Castell's Tower - the first 'lighthouse' on the islands. The lighthouse keeper is thought to have lived in the chapel. In 1809 Trinity House built on the west side of the island the lighthouse which is still in use.

In 1838 Archdeacon Charles Thorp of Durham Cathedral (& first Warden of Durham University) took on the tenancy himself & began a renovation of the tower & a major restoration of the chapel as a place of worship. He installed the extravagantly carved pews & panelling which had been made redundant as a result of the Dean's refurbishment of the cathedral choir. New windows were added, & a memorial to Grace Darling was placed in the chapel.

Far ahead of his time, Archdeacon Thorp also conserved the natural environment of the islands by employing a warden to protect the seals & the eggs of nesting seabirds.

In 1861 he bought the Farne Islands, & his family gifted them to the National Trust in 1925.

The Trust has renovated the chapel – it is not consecrated, though it is overseen by the priest at Bamburgh. The Trust's rangers live in the tower for 9 months of the year.

I'm sure I won't be the only person intent on (re)visiting Inner Farne, to enjoy it all the more after this inspiring talk.