

St. Cuthbert and his Associations with Cumbria



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Saint Cuthbert and Cumbria



Cuthbert was born in about AD634 and became a monk in his teens at Melrose then in the English kingdom of Northumbria. It is alleged that having observed angels descending and ascending and taking a 'holy soul' to God and next day discovering that St. Aidan had died (31st August, 651), he offered himself at the monastery at Melrose.

Eata was the abbot and Boisil the prior. Noting his qualities of leadership early on, Eata asked Cuthbert to go with him to Ripon where a new monastery was being established; this was an uneasy move and they and their group were expelled for refusing to adopt the Roman monastic reforms, and they returned gladly to Melrose.

In 661 Melrose was struck by the plague. It afflicted Cuthbert and killed Boisil. Although he survived unlike many of his community, Cuthbert was left permanently weakened and often suffered 'inner pains' thereafter. Cuthbert then became prior and travelled widely, visiting the remotest and most spiritually difficult parts of the countryside. His growing reputation as a healer and his evangelistic zeal earned him the title: 'Fire of the North'.

After Cuthbert spent a number of years at Melrose, Abbot Eata transferred him to the island of Lindisfarne; he was at last following in the footsteps of Aidan. He had watched with sadness the divisions caused by the Synod of Whitby and the departure of Bishop Colman for Iona rather than accept the Roman rite and style. As prior of the new community he walked across the sands and was warmly greeted by the whole community of the brethren who had heard of his vision of Aidan.

The island was becoming a very busy place with its important school and its many pilgrims and visitors. It was also a community in transition and there were often tensions between the old celtic order and the new roman practices; Cuthbert was a wonderful diplomat and peace-maker, but it was demanding and tiring.

Despite all of the demands 'in community' he still made frequent visits to the people around the area, taking his ministry of healing deliverance further afield and his visits were much anticipated as his reputation grew.

Throughout this time Cuthbert kept up his night vigil, often going to extreme remedies to keep alert (like standing for hours up to his chest in the sea!) Often he sang psalms and worked with his hands to stay awake and to watch and pray.

Cuthbert felt the pull of isolation and retreat more and more and even found that the little island of Hobthrusk was too close to the monastery for periods without disturbances. He longed for a place to be alone with God, his 'desert in the sea' and was finally allowed by Eata his Abbot to leave the community.

Cuthbert 'retired' to the nearby island of Inner Farne in 676 to live the life of a hermit but in 684 was 'persuaded' by bishop Trumwinni (see links with Urswick) and a high profile delegation allegedly including King Ecgfrith of Northumbria, to return to the mainland and was consecrated bishop of Hexham, a 'See' he swapped with Eata in 685 and became bishop of Lindisfarne. He resumed the long journeys, preaching and ministering to the people of a wide area which was, of course, characteristic of his life as a Celtic monk.



Cuthbert returned to Inner Farne after two years and died there on 20th March,687. He was buried at Lindisfarne.

Cuthbert's links with Cumbria are intriguing. Certainly he was no stranger to Carlisle, probably because it fell within the diocese of Lindisfarne. A grant of land some 15 miles in circumference around Carlisle was made to him by Ecgfrith in 685. Shortly after Ecgfrith was killed in battle in May of that year Cuthbert was back in Carlisle to ordain some priests. He was also visited there by his old friend and hermit Heribert who had his hermitage on an island on Derwent Water (Keswick). It is said that a second grant of land was made to Cuthbert in 685, outside of Carlisle, in fact the 'district of Cartmel' complete with its British inhabitants, and that of course would include the Furness Peninsulas. It says much about the attitude of the Anglian rulers towards the local Celtic inhabitants in that they were given as part of the donation!

There is no evidence to date that Cuthbert actually visited Low Furness or Cartmel in his lifetime but the story doesn't end there.

We know that a monastery existed in or near Carlisle from about AD250 and that possibly St. Ninian went out from there into what is now southern Scotland. Other 'saints' have taken the gospel across parts of southern Scotland and north Cumbria; for example, St. Kentigern (Mungo) and several dedications can be found to him in the area around Carlisle in particular.

We also know that Cuthbert encouraged his monks to take the gospel out into the areas around the monastery and it is likely that they did this also from Carlisle. Logically they would follow major river routes not least for ease of travel, and it would be interesting to discover whether any of the churches dedicated to St. Cuthbert along the Eden Valley south of Carlisle have any evidence relating to this period or within living memory of the monks who would have listened to Cuthbert.



Of course it is possible that some of those churches will have been built later on sites where the relics of Cuthbert were rested in the late 800s when the monks fled with Cuthbert's body ahead of the invading Danes— and this was a known (and safe) route from Lindisfarne to the west coast.

A route via friendly abbeys would seem a logical and supportive passage towards Carlisle and then south into north Lancashire and then back 'over sands' via Cartmel to Aldingham (where there is an Anglo-Saxon cross fragment), possibly to Kirkby in Furness (no evidence to date) and then across the Duddon to Millom and up the west coast to where Workington now is.



St.Cuthbert's Aldingham cannot trace its roots beyond the 12th century building but there is an earlier Anglo-Saxon cross fragment in the east wall of the chancel which suggests that monks might have rested Cuthbert's bones there during their 7-year wanderings to escape the Vikings.

The monks had intended to escape to Ireland but again legend has it that when the holy relic was placed on board a ship at 'the mouth of the river which is called Dyrwenta' (modern Workington) by bishop Eardulf of Lindisfarne and abbot Eadred former abbot of Carlisle, a violent storm blew up, three huge waves fell on the ship, the water they contained turning immediately to blood, suggesting Cuthbert's strong disapproval of their actions!

Cuthbert's body was finally put to rest in Durham Cathedral (built for that purpose) in about AD999 and it continues to be a place of pilgrimage and of healing today.



St. Cuthbert's Church, Kirkby in Furness

We know that the ‘cult of St. Cuthbert’ grew up in the Middle Ages and that there was a Cuthbert alter at Furness Abbey, so it is likely that a number of the churches dedicated to Cuthbert in Cumbria date from the 13th century instead. The ‘Cumbria Christianity’ website states that ‘prayers to the saint obtained a favourable judgment in a law suit for the monks of Furness Abbey, healed a young man from Skirwith and protected the valuables deposited in St. Cuthbert’s church at Plumbland during a Scottish invasion.

Reference is made to the cult’s vigour in the late– Middle Ages as in seen in the 18-picture series of scenes from Cuthbert’s life based on a manuscript borrowed from Durham, which were executed at the back of the choir stalls in Carlisle Cathedral in about 1475 (see the display in St. Cuthbert’s, Aldingham).

For more information on the life of St. Cuthbert see:

‘Fire of the North: The life of St. Cuthbert’ by David Adam, published in 2003 by SPCK.

Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, Volume 84 (1984)- an article by Dr. V Tudor.

The Hidden Light-Low Furness Project is currently exploring the Christian heritage in Low Furness and significant new archaeological discoveries are being made, particularly around the church of St. Mary and St. Michael, Urswick in the past few years. The St. Cuthbert Display at Aldingham is a very important element in this Trail and in the story. He continues to exert influence today with the ‘rediscovery’ of the healing ministry in mainstream churches and with current interest in ‘all things Celtic’.

Could it be that we shall see the re-emergence of another ‘fire of the North’?



For more information about the Hidden Light– Low Furness Projects please see our extensive website at:

www.explorelowfurness.co.uk

In relation to Low Furness and its importance as a cradle of Celtic Christianity there is evidence of Roman habitation at Urswick, including a military fort and settlement, together with evidence of early Christianity. The shape of the Celtic monastery at Great Urswick is based on that of the Irish template similar in layout to Iona and Lindisfarne and can be clearly seen in the landscape. The question is: When was it established and by whom? Again, there are writings which suggest that St. Ninian consecrated and sent bishops into northern Britain and that the seaward location of Furness suggests a simpler route between these places and of course with Ireland. This is a possibility.

We know that St. Patrick came from northern Britain, probably on the Solway, adopted the Roman model and when sent to Ireland by the pope attempted to establish a Roman diocesan structure there.

Could it be that Irish monasticism was re-exported to Furness at a similar time to St. Columba's mission to Iona because we know that travelling was a significant part of Celtic Christianity and 'peregrinate' travelled great distances.

Or was it the other way round?

Other research and 'journey patterns' promote the possibility of St. Kentigern or some of his monks making a significant contribution at Great Urswick as they travelled back to Strathclyde when Kentigern was 'recalled' from Llanelwy in North Wales in about AD574. He was accompanied by his cousins who became St. Nidan and St. Finan. Local place names within a day's walk of Great Urswick could bear their names (Nib-thwaite, and Fins-thwaite)

We await further revelations!

Writers suggest that at the time of the Synod of Whitby in AD664 the Irish were well aware of a large monastery in the north of Britain and current artefacts and the landscape around Great Urswick would seem to bear this out. Is it in fact 'Rosnat'?

We know that after the 'defeat' of the Celtic Church at Whitby bishop Colman and his monks went back to Ireland via Iona. Could it be that first he came back to Great Urswick/Rosnat and then back over the water as the Roman practices advanced?

Perhaps life continued relatively undisturbed for some time afterwards, although we know that Archbishop Theodore did a wide-ranging visitation in 669-80 to try to unite the Church and to confirm the Roman model as standard.

It has been suggested that he came to Great Urswick where an important Anglo-Saxon cross fragment depicts his visitation. A recent re-interpretation of the runes on the fragment show that Trumwinni erected the cross in memory of his 'Lord Torotheo' (Theodore= Greek). We know that it was Trumwinni who in 685 persuaded Cuthbert to be consecrated bishop and that by then he was well respected and wise; clearly Trumwinni knew about the monastery at Great Urswick; could it be that *he* came from there and was called out by Theodore to become bishop himself over half of Northumbria and was actually the prior or abbot there?

Intriguing possibilities!