

Saxon Saints and Skirmishes

Michael F. Hopkinson. May 2023.

The Role of Constantine

It is surprising how many times Yorkshire is mentioned in accounts of early Christianity in England. If we begin with the Emperor Constantine, his accession in 306 AD provided a significant change in relations between Church and State, as control of the whole Roman Empire as a single entity was already proving too difficult. Yet he had been the first Emperor to appreciate the advantages of alliance with the growing Christian Church rather than opposition to it. His statue outside York Minster, in the first province to legislate religious toleration, records the scene before the decisive Battle of the Milvian bridge, in which he had a dream of the Cross with the message "By this sign conquer". He set about organising the structure of the Church into a more efficient institution; establishing the system of general Councils at Nicaea in 325, and making Sundays a public holiday (321 AD). Whilst there were obviously political advantages there were similar benefits for the Papacy too, and Constantine was undoubtedly much influenced by his mother, St Helen, although his own baptism only took place just before he died.

Bede

For much of what happened between the fall of the Western Empire in 476 AD and the resurgence of Papal authority in 597 AD we rely on Bede's "history" (731 AD), and its reinterpretation in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles collected from a variety of monastic writings from the 11th and 12th centuries. Bede's account is divided into five roughly chronological books, which become increasingly detailed as he gets nearer to his own lifetime.

The Conversion of Edwin



Paulinus baptising Edwin at York
(print Samuel Wales c. 1786)

Bede's second book commences in 600 AD . The death of Ethelbert in 607 AD, who had ruled in Kent for more than fifty years, and as a Christian for twenty, was a setback but by 624 AD the bishops in Kent were restored, and Paulinus, the first missionary to Deira, now Yorkshire, was sent to escort the new bride to King Edwin at York. Bede devotes ten chapters to Edwin's rule and conversion, which took place at Goodmanham at the Assembly of the king and his tribal elders, with his pagan High Priest, Coifi. The most famous story is of the speech one of the elders gave: "My Lord, suppose a sparrow flies

through your hall, in at one end, out through the other. For a moment it is warm and in the light, but before and after in cold and darkness. We are the same, we know not whence we come or where we go. If this man can tell us more, let us hear him". Coifi made a similar statement; "I have served the Gods all my life and it has profited me nothing: I say we should turn to the God that this man offers". The assembly agreed, and Coifi took the King's horse, rode to the shrine, thrust his spear in, then burnt it down. He is the only pagan priest to have a stained glass window in a Yorkshire church! Again, politics were important, though the king's wife also was a strong influence.



The High Priest Colfi Profanes the Temple of the Idols
from *A Chronicle of England, B.C. 55-A.D. 1485*, James E. Doyle, 1864

Edwin's rule was short-lived: the Pagan ruler of Mercia and the Welsh leader, Cadwalla defeated him in 634 AD, and Paulinus took Ethelburga back to Kent: he became bishop of Rochester, she abbess of Barking. But a new Saxon monarchy, that of Oswald, Osric and Oswy, were triumphant at Hexham in 635 AD and invited Aidan, a Celtic monk, from Iona to Lindisfarne in 636 AD to preach to the Scots and the northern half of Northumbria. The two traditions, who had disagreed under Augustine's mission, were to come together at Whitby in 664 AD to thrash out their differences, but in the meantime their survival was still quite tenuous. In 634 AD only James, the deacon under Paulinus, was left to cope as best he could in Deira. He remained at Catterick, avoiding persecution and returned a little later to Lindsey, a safe small kingdom, teaching Gregorian chant and music; the last of the previous generation of missionaries. His first-hand accounts probably reached Bede by word of mouth, and may have given us the description of Paulinus as a "tall, dark and ascetic looking man". James has only one church dedicated to him: a modern one in Acomb. Ethelburga has one in Great Givendale, and some fine windows in Beverley Minster. Other later ones erected to Paulinus exist in London and the south east.

Whitby and its Aftermath.

Book three widens the focus from East Yorkshire and the Wolds north and westwards. The main item is to introduce the Synod of Whitby and its protagonists. Aidan was a supporter of the Celtic tradition, with a history of semi-peripatetic monks and local organisation, often allied to local town chiefs. The Roman organisation is diocesan, of monasteries that are settled communities, following established written rules and often self supporting and living on their own property. Hild, who has already run two abbeys, one of them at Tadcaster, and is now in charge at Whitby also aligns more to the Celts, as does Colman who has Scottish links. Wilfrid is on the Roman wing, as Bede seems to be, though he is not overtly biased. In fact, Bede is much more appreciative of the Greek Delegate, Theodore, soon to be appointed as Archbishop of Canterbury, and a more emollient personality. Significantly, Oswyn will chair at least some of the discussion, which Bede records as a dialogue. James is still living and attends, but does not seem to have been a major contributor.



The Hild window at Christ Church, Oxford
(Courtesy English Heritage)

When he first arrived in England, Aidan spoke little English, so the King travelled with him, interpreting his preaching. Wilfrid was unhappy at Lindisfarne and moved to Ripon where he tried to establish a diocese based on Benedict's principles. This was not a success and despite being reinstated, the abbey was eventually given to John of Beverley, who in the early 700s, was the master of St Peter's School, and also a noted scholar, who had ordained Bede. Later Wilfrid returned to be Bishop of Lindisfarne, preceding St Cuthbert.

The fourth book deals with the outcome of the Whitby Synod, at which Wilfrid and Bishop Colman (a staunch Celt) are interviewed. Colman eventually leaves England and takes his community back to Scotland. This attempt to join English and Scots communities doesn't really work: the English monks wish to retain their lifestyle of manual work and settled residence, in the Benedictine fashion, the Scots wish to "wander" in the summer, rather like the mendicant friars of later centuries, but demand a share of the harvest in winter, despite not having worked the land. Colman has to separate the two groups.

A more successful approach is adopted by Theodore in ameliorating some of the Roman rituals and feasts to incorporate Celtic traditions: the Holy Week services, the season of Lent, and recognising the ordination of Celtic bishops. Also he is the first Archbishop to call councils of his fellow bishops, in Hartfield and Hertford. There are by now seventeen dioceses in England, four of them in Yorkshire: Hexham, York, Lindisfarne and Galloway (which is the oldest, being founded by St Ninian and actually in Galloway) as well as the Archdiocese at Canterbury and several subsidiary bishoprics such as Rochester. To the bishops who can attend he presents ten "canons" as simple statements of policy, most of which are clarifications of church discipline and rules demarcating the rights and restrictions of monastic communities and their separation from dioceses. He justifies this "top-down" approach on the grounds that he is required to demonstrate to the Pope the loyalty and Orthodoxy of the English Church as he is unable to attend the newly called Ecumenical Council against heresy, at Constantinople, where the final text of the Nicene Creed is defined. The Greek is a born diplomat.

The Church matures

In the last book the life and work of John of Beverley is discussed, along with a return to the final years of Wilfrid, exiled in Gaul, a close friend of Bede, and an account of his death and burial at Ripon. There is also more detail of Hild's later years, giving this final summary a definitely Yorkshire tone. Bede has achieved a great sweeping account, making vibrant and lively what could have been a mere catalogue of dates. He had a gift for writing that brought to life an account of events that for the most part he had never witnessed.

Bede closed his History in 731 AD, dying four years later. He came to York once, in 733, AD and may have met a small boy who was to become almost as famous as himself: Alcuin, a pupil at St Peter's who became Master there and subsequently Chief Adviser to the great Frankish King, Charlemagne. In 800 AD Pope Leo III would crown Charlemagne, the first Holy Roman Emperor, to seal the link between Church and State, both reliant on each other for legitimacy and protection against the threats from the Norsemen and Germanic tribes and the new religion of Islam. While Constantine had recognised the value of the Christian connection five hundred years previously, the Pope now rewards Charlemagne for his support.

The above narrative covers around 500 years of Christianity's being established across Europe and beyond, and throughout it our county keeps occurring: as an important seat of the church at York; as a place associated with some key figures of

early British Christianity; as the location of a significant council of the church at Whitby. And does anyone need to be reminded of the remarkable heritage of churches and abbeys that the county remains home to?



Bede at work? (from an 8th-century history that recorded the events of Hild's life British Library Board, Yates Thompson MS 26 fol 2)