

Saint Michael the Archangel, Kirkby Malham

The North Aisle Windows

## The Northern Saints



*“In this year, Pope Gregory sent Augustine to Britain with very many monks who preached God’s word to the English nation”.*

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records this for the year 595. But it was not all plain sailing (even Augustine turned back at first) and the religious history of the next century saw a struggle between the pagan and Christian traditions. The efforts of the early saints who were essential in the development of Christianity in the north were celebrated not only in their time but for centuries after and the windows in the north aisle reflects this tradition.

Encouraged by the local Vicar of the time, Rev.W.Baron, the windows were commissioned by local families and produced by A.K.Nicholson in the 1920s at his Westminster studios in London\*. Bradford Cathedral also has some of Nicholson’s memorial stained glass tucked away depicting the Northern Saint St Hilda.

Nicolson was a follower of the Arts and Crafts movement which looked back to medieval times for inspiration. The stained glass has a jewel like quality which is richer in effect than the glass of the St Columba window found in the chantry at the far end of the ‘Northern Saints’ row.

*\*The guidebook to the church incorrectly suggests the North Aisle windows were made by Alexander Strachan in Edinburgh*

Follow each window in turn from the tower moving towards the chancel...

## **Saint Bede**

Saint Bede (or "The Venerable Bede") was born near Jarrow and, at the age of 7, he entered the Benedictine monastery of Wearmouth and Jarrow. He spent the rest of his life in the monastery, becoming one of the greatest scholars of his age. His most famous work is his *History of the English Church and People* which he completed in AD731, one of the most important sources of our knowledge of early Anglo-Saxon history. He died in 735 at the age of 62.

The main window shows Bede reading/translating the Gospel of St John (the title is in latin on the outside cover). This connects with the story depicted in the lower small window. This shows a scene described by Cuthbert, a young monk who was with him at his deathbed. Cuthbert tells us that Bede spent his last hours translating this Gospel of St John from Latin into "Englisc" so that his own people would be able to read the scriptures for themselves (although few at the time would be able to read at all).

## **Saint Cuthbert**

There appear to be two versions of Cuthbert's origins – nobleman or humble shepherd boy who saw angels carrying a soul to heaven, thus triggering his desire to become a monk. Whatever his background, however, he was a man of deep spirituality. He became Prior of Lindisfarne but, after 12 years in that post, retreated to a cell on one of the Farne Islands to live a life of solitude and prayer. King Egfrith of Northumbria persuaded him to become Bishop of Hexham where he remained for two years before returning to Lindisfarne to die in 687.

The main window shows him dressed as a bishop and carrying an otter - a reference to a story that, while Cuthbert was praying by the seashore, otters came to warm his bare feet. The lower small window shows King Egfrith persuading Cuthbert to become a bishop.

## **Saint Hilda**

Hilda was from an aristocratic family related to King Edwin of Northumbria and, along with most of the royal family, converted to Christianity in 627 (when Hilda was 13 years old). Her entry into a religious life came much later, at the age of 33, when she became abbess of the convent of Hartlepool and later abbess of Whitby which was a religious house for both men and women. In 664, she presided over the Synod of Whitby which was essentially a forum to see which Christian tradition (the Celtic or the Roman) would be accepted by the Church of Northumbria. Probably the most famous debate centred on how to establish the date for Easter. Hilda was an advocate for the Celtic tradition but the Roman view prevailed and she accepted the decision which is still in force today (Easter Sunday is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox).

The main window shows Hilda holding a work of learning (Whitby Abbey was renowned for its scholarship). The small lower window shows Hilda (wearing a crown as befits her aristocratic origins) presiding over the synod. The three monks behind Hilda all seem to have the Celtic tonsure (with the front of their head shaved) while those behind the bishop opposite (probably Wilfred) have the Roman tonsure (the "hole" in the middle). Notice also the presence of two nuns in the background.

## **Caedmon**

Bede tells the story of how Caedmon, a cowherd attached to Whitby Abbey, was inspired by a dream to compose the first religious poetry written in English and, as such, is the start of a great vernacular tradition. Only a fragment remains of his poetry which (in translation from Anglo-Saxon) is as follows:

Now let me praise the keeper of Heaven's kingdom,  
The might of the Creator, and his thought,  
The work of the Father of glory, how each of wonders  
The Eternal Lord established in the beginning.  
He first created for the sons of men  
Heaven as a roof, the holy Creator,  
Then Middle-earth the keeper of mankind,  
The Eternal Lord, afterwards made,  
The earth for men, the Almighty Lord.

The main window shows Caedmon with a harp (the standard instrument for a poet or "bard") and the small lower window shows Caedmon in a stable (which would be his normal sleeping space) having his inspirational vision.

## Saint Chad

Chad was born in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century and studied under Aidan at Lindisfarne. He travelled to Ireland and was very much associated with the Celtic church tradition of itinerant preaching. He was recalled to Northumbria and became abbot of several monasteries (including Lastingham in North Yorkshire), Bishop of the Northumbrians and, later, Bishop of the Mercians.

He was enthroned as "Bishop of York" in 664, a controversial event at the time as he appears to have displaced Wilfred as bishop of Northumbria. Wilfred had travelled to France to be consecrated and was absent for two years while Chad replaced him. When Wilfred returned, Chad withdrew to Lastingham but the whole episode showed that the early church was not without its politics or, especially in the case of Wilfred, strong (even dogmatic) characters. It is perhaps a little ironic that Chad and Wilfred are shown in the same set of windows!

The main window shows Chad in the robes of a Bishop; the small lower window suggests a scene in the life of the wandering Chad blessing a huntsman. Is there a reminder of Malham Cove in the background?

## Saint Wilfred

Wilfred was from a noble Northumbrian family and was educated at Lindisfarne, after leaving home following a difference of opinion with his stepmother. He became bishop of York in 664 but, in his lengthy absence abroad, was replaced by Chad. As mentioned earlier, this was eventually resolved but Wilfred was never backward in supporting the Roman tradition against the Celtic view. Bede tells us that, at the Synod of Whitby, Wilfred said that the whole world followed the Roman tradition of dating Easter except "*the only people who stupidly contend against the whole world are those Scots and their partners in obstinacy the Picts and the Britons who inhabit only a portion of these the two uttermost islands of the ocean.*"

A diplomat he was not and his career involved a number of disputes with both clergy and nobility. But, in contrast, we are told that Wilfred preached "*gently and with sweet and marvellous eloquence*" and he was a great builder. The Saxon crypts at Ripon Cathedral and Hexham Abbey were built by him.

Like his co-bishop Chad, Wilfred is shown in the main window in the robes of a bishop. He is carrying a ship which may be a symbol of his extensive travelling or to a specific episode when his ship was blown ashore on the Sussex coast. On being attacked by the locals (who were pagan), Wilfrid's party killed the head priest before refloating their ship and making their escape. The lower small window shows him on the road in his quest to convert the population to Christianity.

## **Saint Oswald**

King Oswald had a tough introduction to adult life. His uncle, King Edwin of Northumbria, was killed in battle in 633 by the combined forces of Penda, the pagan ruler of Mercia and Cadwallon, the Christian king of Gwynedd. Oswald went into exile for a year before returning to crush Cadwallon's army at the battle of Heavenfield near Hadrian's Wall. Oswald claimed to have won thanks to divine aid and to the large wooden cross he raised with his soldiers just before the battle.

Oswald's success came at a time when the early church was under serious threat, not least from the impact of the plague as other rulers reverted to paganism in an attempt to placate the old gods and thus remove the plague. Oswald became the protector of Christian clergy, encouraged itinerant preachers to his expanded kingdom (his influence reached as far south as Wessex) and really was the founder of the Northumbrian "golden age." His life was cut short at the age of 38 when he was defeated in battle by his old adversary, Penda.

Oswald was acknowledged as a saintly man almost immediately after his death and there were many stories of miracles associated with his remains.

The main window shows Oswald crowned as a king with a sceptre in his right hand. On his left arm is a raven with a ring in its beak – the origin of this is shrouded in mystery but Oswald was thought to have a pet raven. Perhaps the bird and the ring are symbols of his overcoming the pagan religion: Odin (or Woden) had two ravens and a magic ring. The lower small window shows the cross set up before the battle of Heavenfield.

## **Saint Aidan**

Aidan was an Irish monk based at Iona when King Oswald contacted Iona for a missionary to help convert the Northumbrians. Aidan was consecrated bishop and Oswald gave him Lindisfarne as his missionary base. Within twenty years, Aidan and his followers had re-established Christianity in Northumbria. He followed the simple, austere life associated with Celtic missionaries and yet was accepted by kings and nobles and his fellow senior churchmen in the south. Bede described him as a man of outstanding gentleness, holiness and moderation (despite Aidan being an upholder of the Celtic, rather than the Roman, church traditions).

The main window reflects Aidan's austerity showing him in the plain habit of a monk. He holds a torch in his right hand (bringing light to the pagan north) and in his left he carries a bible. The lower small window shows him preaching to a group, accompanied by King Oswald who acted as his interpreter (Aidan spoke only Gaelic, at least for some time after arriving in Northumbria). Is that a lake behind him? Malham Tarn?

## Local Sponsors of the Northern Saints Windows

### St Bede/St Cuthbert Window

Sponsored by the Ayrtons of Gordale, a local family who farmed near Gordale Scar from the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is also an inscription in the church to the memory to Thomas Ayrton and his wife Hannah and some of their 8 children. One of the children who became a successful solicitor in Liverpool paid for the St Bede/St Cuthbert window in the 1920s.

### St Hilda/Caedmon Window

Sponsored by the children of Edmund Owen, in memory of him. Owen was a renowned surgeon in London, who for some time worked at Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital and also advised the Red Cross and St John's Ambulance during the First World War. He maintained a residence at Dale House in Malham and loved the dales - and the fly fishing.

### St Chad/St Wilfrid Window

Sponsored by the Morkill family of Newfield Hall as a memorial to a son, Ronald Falshaw Morkill, a lieutenant in the West Yorkshire Regiment and Flying Officer in the Royal Flying Corps in 1915 who died of injuries received in a flying accident in northern France aged 23 in World War 1. There is also a badge of the West Yorkshire Regiment and the Royal Flying Corps in St Chad's window. R.F.Morkill is buried in the church yard.

### St Oswald/ St Aidan Window

Sponsored by the King family who had lived in Malhamdale at Skellands between Airton and Kirby Malham for generations. Robert King was the vicar of Kirkby Malham in the latter years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and his great, great, great, great grandson Captain James King sailed with Captain Cook on his third and final voyage. St Michael's Church has in its archive Robert King's bible.

