

*Dear Reader*

*Thank you for your interest in these talks about St Cuthbert and his Community. A quick disclaimer before you read on.*

*What follows are my lecture notes. They were designed to be read aloud and were intended to entertain and inform. They are not formal essays and are not referenced. Because of the 45-minute time limit, they offer a glimpse of the period rather than a full exposition.*

*You can find out more in my novel trilogy or in any of the excellent factual accounts of the period available.*

### **BEA Talk One: Cuthbert and Bede.**

Our talk today is about Cuthbert himself and his famous biographer, the Venerable Bede. The next two talks will focus on his after-life, on the remarkable story of the continuance of his cult and his community, known as the Haliwerfolc. Hali-wer-folc: the holy man's people.

Fourteen hundred years after Cuthbert's death, we still know the story of his life, we have his coffin, his relics, personal possessions like his comb and his cross. We have the great masterpiece of the Lindisfarne Gospels created in his honour. It is easy to take this for granted, but during the early medieval period the survival both of the relics and the community was by no means a foregone conclusion. We will be following the perilous adventures of the Haliwerfolc through two violent invasions, first by the Vikings, then the Normans. There were times when they were hanging on by their finger-nails. As I felt when I was writing the novels based on their history, we owe it to them to remember their story and their heroics.

Today is the start of the story, about St Cuthbert himself and the times he lived in.

As this is the first talk of the series I'm going to start with some background, about seventh century Northumbria; the people who lived there and how they organised themselves. I'll then go on to talk about the sources we have for the period and for the story of Cuthbert, and we'll consider how reliable or otherwise they are. And then, finally, we'll get to the story.

And before I begin, a disclaimer. I researched this period in order to write a novel, but I'm not an academic. There is scholarly debate about many aspects of the early medieval period, and we'll encounter this particularly in the next lecture. However, my aim has been to move the story out of the academic realm where it is often confined, and to make it accessible to a general readership who would otherwise know nothing about it. So I would stress that this is a layman's guide to the period.

So! First of all, let's time-travel back through fourteen hundred years, back to the seventh century. We are still in this place, in Northumberland, but not as we know it. The English/Scottish border just up the road has dissolved away. England and Scotland do not yet exist as nation states in this country of the past. Banish from your mind the idea of London and the gravitational pull of the south of England. In this country of the past, what we know today as the north is the centre, the great kingdom of Northumbria at the heart of the heptarchy. Northumbria stretches from the Firth of Forth to the north, over into Dumfries and Galloway, to Carlisle and part of the Lake District. To the south it extends as far as the

Humber, hence Northumbria. The kingdom is sub-divided into two provinces, Bernicia to the north of the Tyne, and Deira to the south. It is part of an Anglo-Saxon heptarchy that comprises Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex, and Wessex, and there is a constantly shifting pattern of alliance and warfare between the seven. Northumbria's biggest rival is neighbouring Mercia. To the north are the kingdoms of the Picts, and in the north-west the Irish Scots. Scotland as we know it today does not exist. Wales was a Brittonic kingdom.

So back to Northumbria. Now let Newcastle and Edinburgh dissolve back into the landscape and most of York as well. This not an urban society. It is rural. These are farming people, most of them live in hamlets or small villages. There is no standing army along Roman lines; rather, the society is the army. The sons of noblemen and land-holders are expected to train as warriors, and to be available whenever the king needs a fighting force. In return a good warrior is given land and gold. The land is not necessarily his for ever; he needs to continue to give service. The king holds several estates and moves around between them to accept rents in kind from his tenants. Bamburgh is the most important of these estates, with its impregnable fortress and the nearby ceremonial centre of Ad Gefrin. It is a hierarchical society bound together by ties of loyalty and fealty. Whether you are a churl or a thane, your lord is the most important person in your life. It has been, till very recently, a pagan society and an illiterate society.

There have been two attempts at introducing Christianity. The first time, under King Edwin, saw missionaries being brought up from Kent, notably Paulinus, and mass baptisms took place in the River Glen. But when Edwin was killed in battle, the country reverted to paganism. The second attempt, under King Oswald, brought missionaries from Iona, most famously Aidan. This time the conversion stuck and now, at the time of our visit, Northumbria is established as a Christian kingdom. But the tension between the two traditions, the Roman and the Irish, left potential for conflict in the new religion, and this played out in Cuthbert's lifetime.

So now, we are almost ready to start our story.

But the final question we have to address is, how do we know? We are talking about the Dark Ages. Who or what shone a light into the darkness at this particular point of the Dark Ages? The simple answer is, the Venerable Bede. Bede was the great historian of the age and wrote the ground-breaking Ecclesiastical History of the English-Speaking People. He was also a huge fan of St Cuthbert and wrote the Life of St Cuthbert which is our main source.

Bede was 14 when Cuthbert died, so they never actually met. Bede spent his life at the monastery of St Paul at Jarrow, sister monastery to St Peter's at Monkwearmouth. The land for these monasteries had been given by King Edfrith, and they had been fantastically well equipped by their abbot, a monk called Benedict Biscop, who made several trips to Rome to bring back books and treasures to adorn the monastery. He even brought back a choir master to teach the monks to sing the liturgy correctly. So Bede, living in what might seem to us a near primitive society had access to a continental library and became one of the leading Christian scholars in Europe. He invented the AD / BC dating system and wrote seminal treatises on time, more biblical commentaries than you could count, and the two works I've already mentioned, the Ecclesiastical History and the Life of St Cuthbert. For us, it is really important that Bede was so famous. When the Vikings came along they destroyed the

monastic culture of Northumbria. A non-literate culture had no use for the written word and the monastic libraries were burned to ash. But because Bede was famous, his work had been widely copied and circulated, and hence it was preserved in libraries in other parts of the country and on the continent. As we'll see the Life was to have a vital role in ensuring the continuance of the cult.

I should mention here that there was an earlier Life, known as the Anonymous Life, written by one of the monks on Lindisfarne, which forms the basis for Bede's later work. Bede re-wrote it, re-structured it and added new material. He also left some detail out, so the Anonymous Life is a useful supplementary source.

What Bede sets out to do in the Life is to demonstrate Cuthbert's sainthood. He is interested above all in the miraculous. The Life is full of miracles, some of them endearingly prosaic. The monks forget to bring a piece of timber for Cuthbert to construct his outdoor toilet on Inner Farne. Next day God arranges for a piece of exactly the right size to wash up on the beach. Bede gives us precious insights into Cuthbert's character and the detail of his everyday life. But he is not interested in his earthly circumstances. He skates over the controversies that led to the significant events in Cuthbert's life. Bede gives us the transcendent view of the saint. For a view of the immanence, of the political and social context, we have to look elsewhere.

When I was writing my novel about Cuthbert that view came largely from an exceptionally well-researched history of the period by early medieval historian Nick Higham. Reading it, I was often reminded of an archeological dig. Higham reconstructs fragments from different sources to reconstruct a scenario of the period. While Bede is interested in the hagiographical, Nick Higham reconstructs the history and the politics. I learned from him what Bede doesn't tell us, the parts of the story he feels expedient to suppress, or that he doesn't regard as relevant. I'll discuss these as we go along.

So finally, let's turn to the story. It begins in AD 634. It is a very important year for Northumbria. Aidan arrives from Iona to start the evangelisation of Northumbria and found the monastery on Lindisfarne. The same year two infants are born who are going to have a seminal effect on Christianity in Northumberland. One is called Cuthbert, the other Wilfrid. Both, in turn, will be bishops of Lindisfarne. In their lives and practice they will express two radically different visions of the new religion. In the Life of Cuthbert, Bede doesn't mention Wilfrid at all. But he was a huge influence on Cuthbert's destiny.

Let's start with our hero, Cuthbert. We know from the Anonymous Life that he grew up in the Leader valley, near Melrose. There is a tradition that his home was at Channelkirk, but this was not recorded till much later, in Norman times. We also know from Bede that he was brought up by a foster mother. Here's Bede's description of Cuthbert as a child:

*He amused himself with noisy games and loved to be in the company of children and join in their play. And because he was by nature agile and quick-witted he very often used to prevail over his rivals in play, so that sometimes, when the rest were tired, he, still being untired, would look around triumphantly to see whether any of them were willing to contend with him again. Whether they were jumping or running or wrestling or exercising their limbs in any other way, he used to boast that he had beaten all who were his equals in age and even some who were older.*

It is one of the vivid glimpses Bede gives us of Cuthbert's character. The qualities we see here of strength and endurance and determination to excel are key to his story.

The next thing we hear about Cuthbert is that he is on campaign as a warrior. The Anonymous Life refers to this, but Bede chooses to suppress the information. Perhaps he thought a background as a warrior wasn't suitable for a saint. Certainly the campaign Cuthbert is likely to have been involved with was one that Bede strongly disapproved of.

The king of Northumbria at that time was Oswy and the great enemy of the kingdom was Penda of Mercia. The previous king, Oswald, had been killed in battle by Penda. Sometime around 649 when Cuthbert would have been 15, Penda came back for more. He invaded Northumbria and besieged the fortress of Bamburgh. The fortress held, but there was widespread looting and destruction in the countryside. Once peace had been patched up with Penda, King Oswy had another agenda. He believed that his vassal, the sub-king of Deira, had betrayed him and given assistance to Penda. In the confusing way of Anglo-Saxon names, the sub-king was called Oswin. So Oswy raised his army and went after Oswin. By now, Cuthbert was seventeen. It was almost certainly the campaign he served in. The Anonymous life describes an incident at Chester-le-Street around this time, which would fit with a campaign south of the Tyne.

Oswine of Deira knew that Oswy was too strong for him. He wouldn't engage in battle and went into hiding. However, he was betrayed by one of his thanes and Oswy arranged his assassination. Although it was fine to kill someone in battle, assassination was regarded as pretty low, especially as he was a kinsman of the queen. Moreover, he had been a great favourite of Bishop Aidan's, who regarded him as a truly good ruler. When Aidan heard the news of his death the shock was so great that he collapsed. He died a few weeks later.

By the time of Aidan's death Cuthbert was back home in the Leader valley, doing a bit of shepherding and sleeping out. As he lay on the hills he saw a vision. The heavens opened and angels descended to earth. Cuthbert saw Aidan's soul being carried up into heaven. The following day Cuthbert entered the monastery at Melrose. It wasn't far away, at the foot of the Leader Valley. He was seventeen years old, and he arrived at the monastery gates on horseback, with a spear in his hand. Just as a young warrior would.

So given that we know the exact date of his entry into Melrose, and that the only campaign in the previous two years was the Deiran campaign, it is reasonable to deduce he was involved. And maybe what happened precipitated his decision to become a monk. Read more in Cuthbert of Farne!

It was a pretty radical thing to do. Christianity was incredibly new in Northumbria. The monastery at Melrose had only been going for a few years. It was the second monastery Aidan had founded. There weren't any others. Cuthbert turned his back on the warrior life and all the traditions of his society and gave himself to God. Quite a step for a teenager.

The monastery at Melrose was situated on a peninsula in the Tweed. If you have ever looked down from Scott's View you are looking directly at the site. Although you can visit Old Melrose, you need special permission to visit the site of the monastery, which is on private land. You can still see the ditch and wall the monks built across the neck of the peninsula to complete their enclosure. There is a feeling of no-distance between the present day and the

place Cuthbert knew fourteen hundred years ago. We associate Cuthbert with Lindisfarne, but in fact he spent around thirteen years at Melrose.

The Abbot was a young Northumbrian trained up by Aidan on Lindisfarne. His name was Eata, and he was to be Cuthbert's lifelong companion. Till Cuthbert went into solitary retreat on Inner Farne, they were an unbreakable partnership, Abbot and Prior, both at Melrose and Lindisfarne. It tells us something about Cuthbert's capacity for loyalty and friendship. The Prior in charge of the novices at Melrose was Boisil, an Irish monk from Iona renowned for his saintliness. He was to be a major influence in Cuthbert's spiritual development and a beloved mentor. The monastery itself was nothing like our mental picture of a monastery, with dormitories and cloisters and refectories. It was built on the Irish model - a collection of smaller and larger huts built of wood and turf, and of course a church, surrounded by a ditch and wall to separate it from the world. Irish monasticism was strongly influenced by the tradition of the Desert Fathers and withdrawal from the world. It was simple and ascetic.

Cuthbert spent the first eight years of his vocation here. He was then sent, with Abbot Eata and others, to found a new monastery at Ripon. But after only eighteen months he and his brothers were thrown out. Bede is quite nonchalant about this. He says: *All the ways of this world are as fickle and unstable as a sudden storm at sea.* He gives no hint of what went wrong. But this is the point at which Wilfrid enters the story. For it was Wilfrid who threw them out.

Wilfrid was a protégé of the Queen of Northumbria, and he had travelled to Rome for his training as a priest. He was a passionate advocate for the Roman church. He was also highly charismatic and persuasive. When he returned to Northumbria, he became the favourite of Alfrid, the king's eldest son who was now the ruler of the southern province of Deira. Wilfrid persuaded Alfrid to give Ripon to him, so that he could found a Benedictine monastery on the continental model. He threw out Cuthbert and Eata and their brothers, who went back to Melrose.

Why doesn't Bede explain this? Well, at this time Cuthbert was still fully signed up to the Irish doctrines. Bede thoroughly disapproved of those doctrines and doesn't wish to draw our attention to the fact that his hero was, at that time, on the wrong side of the argument.

So now, let's fast forward three years, and the whole Irish / Roman issue has come to a head. There are doctrinal difficulties about the dating of Easter and the correct method of tonsure. But underlying them are political issues. It is not just about doctrines. It is about governance, in other words who controls the Northumbrian church, who appoints bishops and so on. It is also about politics. The southern kingdoms of the Heptarchy, like East Anglia and Kent, are with Rome. King Oswy wants to be allied with them. He also wants to build bridges with his son and Wilfrid.

So in 664 we have the famous Synod of Whitby, held at the abbey governed by Abbess Hild, who had been taught by Aidan and was a strong supporter of the Irish church. But the decision went against her and the other Irish church people. Wilfrid gave a star performance in support of the Roman church and the king gave his decision in favour of Rome.

It was very controversial. The Irish bishop of Lindisfarne, Colman, resigned his post and returned to Ireland, taking many of his monks with him. The remaining monks were in

uproar. It was at this point that Abbot Eata and Cuthbert, who was now his prior, were drafted in from Melrose to sort out Lindisfarne.

So what brought Cuthbert to Lindisfarne, unromantically, was conflict in the church. It is clear that he and Eata had decided to submit to the ruling of the Synod of Whitby and to adopt Roman doctrines and practices. The Lindisfarne monks disagreed, and Bede gives a vivid picture of Cuthbert's techniques in handling conflict.

*Some of the monks preferred their old way of life to the rule. He overcame these by patience and forbearance, bringing them round little by little through daily example to a better frame of mind. At chapter meetings he was often worn down by bitter insults, but would put an end to the arguments simply by rising and walking out, calm and unruffled. Next day he would give the same people exactly the same admonitions, as though there had been no unpleasantness the previous day. In this way he gradually won their obedience. Though overwhelmed with sorrow at these monks' recalcitrance he managed to keep a cheerful face. It was clear to everyone that it was the Holy Spirit within giving him strength to smile at attacks from without.*

Once again, Bede doesn't explain why the monks were being asked to change their way of life. He may have assumed that for his contemporaries, the fall-out from the Synod was common knowledge. Bede himself was strongly committed to the Roman tradition and would have had little sympathy with the Lindisfarne monks

Eventually things settled down on Lindisfarne, and Cuthbert spent the next twelve years there, serving as prior under Abbot Eata. The other monasteries in the Irish tradition, at Melrose, Whitby and Coldingham seem to have adapted in a similar way, taking on some Roman practises while remaining loyal to the spirit of the Irish tradition, with its emphasis on evangelism and asceticism. The king went on appointing Irish-trained priests to senior positions. The church had found a middle way. Or had it?

Not if Wilfrid could help it.

Wilfrid was driven and ambitious. He had no sympathy with the middle way that was evolving. He wanted the Northumbrian church to be fully Romanised with all hint of heresy driven out. And he wanted the Northumbrian church to emulate the wealth and power of Rome, with himself at its head. After a turbulent few years immediately post-Whitby, when his soulmate, Prince Alfrid, fell out with the king, he was eventually ordained bishop of Lindisfarne. He set about a major building programme, restoring the church at York and building new churches and monasteries. He lived like a prince in his bishop's palace, with a small army of retainers. He encouraged the nobility to send their sons to him for education as part of his household and was able to persuade many of them to give him land for new monasteries and churches. Unlike land given to warriors, the land given to the church was given in perpetuity, so Wilfrid managed to accumulate an extremely large land-holding.

We'll take a snapshot of Wilfrid in the year 675, when he gave a great feast to celebrate the consecration of Ripon church, on the site of the original monastery Cuthbert had helped to build. No-one had ever seen a church like it, built of stone, with its painted walls and magnificently robed clergy. The feast was enormous. At the height of it Wilfrid gave a speech, listing all the lands that had been given to the church. He also listed the lands where the Irish and British who held heretical beliefs had been driven out *'at the point of the sword.'*

It is just a single phrase in the record of the event, but it provides shocking evidence that he was carrying out a violent persecution of dissenters in the church.

In the same year, 675, Cuthbert left Lindisfarne in a small boat and went to Inner Farne. He set about building a stone cell with his own hands where he would live, as he thought, for the rest of his mortal life. He set about planting barley and vegetables so that he could feed himself. His solitary retreat was completely within the Irish / Celtic tradition of green martyrdom as the highest expression of religious aspiration. It could not have been a more direct contrast with Wilfrid's vision of the church, except in one way. It was public. Cuthbert did not choose to retreat to the cave in the Cheviots he had often previously used for retreats. He chose an island immediately opposite the king's palace at Bamburgh. Every time the king looked out of his window, he was reminded of Cuthbert and what he stood for.

Fast forward three years. A comet has appeared in the sky, in broad daylight. It is obvious there will be strife in the earthly world. Bede reports what happened, this time in the Ecclesiastical History :

*in the month of August 678 there appeared a star known as a comet which remained visible for three months, rising in the morning and emitting what seemed to be a tall column of bright flame. In the same year a dispute arose between King Edfrith and the most reverend bishop Wilfrid, who was driven from his diocese.*

Wilfrid had over-reached himself. He was becoming as powerful as the king himself. According to his supporters, the queen was jealous and turned the king against Wilfrid. This description of her words is from a Life of Wilfrid:

*She eloquently described to the king all the temporal glories of Bishop Wilfrid and the riches, the multitude of monasteries, the greatness of his buildings, and his innumerable army of followers decked-out in royal vestments and arms*

There are amazing echoes here of later conflicts in the church. One thinks of Henry 8<sup>th</sup> and Cardinal Wolsey. But it wasn't just about his wealth. It was about his politics. Wilfrid's policy of persecution was directed at the British churches in the West, which refused to acknowledge the authority of the Pope, and also at the Northumbrian/Irish churches that still held to their earlier doctrines. It was causing political problems with Ireland, and restlessness in the Celtic fringes.

The archbishop of Canterbury wasn't happy either. Wilfrid wanted the pope to create a second archbishopric in the north, at York. He wanted to hold total power over the northern church as archbishop. Canterbury didn't like that at all. So King Edfrith and Archbishop Theodore charged Wilfrid with causing dissension and division in the church, as well as other matters. He was stripped of all his estates and deposed from his bishopric. They threw him into prison, but he escaped and was soon on his way to Rome to lay his case before the Pope.

Archbishop Theodore wasn't having any further rivalry in the north. He split the diocese into three separate sees, Bernicia, Deira and Lindsey. All the men appointed were from the Middle Party, priests who had been trained at Whitby or Lindisfarne. It was an emphatic rejection of high Romanism as personified by Wilfrid.

Where did Bede stand on all this? The monasteries at Jarrow and Monkwearmouth were founded in the Roman tradition, under the guidance of Benedict Biscop. Biscop seems to

have kept his distance from Wilfrid, and to have been relatively independent of him. Bede does write about Wilfrid in the Ecclesiastical History in carefully non-committal terms. But his real passion and enthusiasm is for the version of Christianity that Cuthbert embodied – of total dedication and renunciation, of evangelising, of following in Christ's footsteps and practising miracles of compassion through His grace. Bede also loves the characteristically Celtic nature that Cuthbert embodied, and tells many stories of Cuthbert's affinity with birds and animals. Provocatively one could say, Bede is a rational Romanist but a spiritual Celt.

And what about Cuthbert? The backwash from the Wilfrid affair was soon to hit the tiny beach on Inner Farne. By this time Cuthbert had been on Inner Farne for eight years and he had become a celebrity. Men would row out to the Island to lay their troubles before him. Stories of his spiritual powers abounded. The sea and wind obeyed him and angels ministered to him. He was also self-evidently free of ambition and greed. Everyone could agree on Cuthbert. Edfrith decided that Cuthbert was the man to settle things down, particularly with the British and Irish churches. He would make Cuthbert his bishop.

In spite of his tears and protests he was dragged forth from the Island and ordained. A document tells us that the king gave him *'the land which is called Cartmel and all the Britons with it'* He also gave him Carlisle. He wanted Cuthbert to take care of the West.

From a life of total solitude on Inner Farne, Cuthbert found himself undertaking one of the most influential jobs in the country. Many of the miracle stories in Bede's Life of Cuthbert date from this period. Perhaps that was because he was more in the public eye. Or perhaps the intensity and ascetism of his solitary retreat had brought him closer to God, had deepened his spirituality. He didn't spare himself as bishop, travelling constantly in his diocese. In particular, during an outbreak of the plague, he went to every village and hamlet to comfort the sick and dying. No-one could imagine Wilfrid doing that. He had only been in office a year when King Edfrith, against Cuthbert's advice, launched a campaign against the Picts. Cuthbert was left in charge of the queen and went with her to Carlisle. While they were there, the Northumbrians suffered a disastrous defeat at the battle of Nechtansmere. King Edfrith and the flower of the Northumbrian warrior youth were killed. Edfrith had no children and the country was left without an heir.

At this critical moment in Northumbria's history Cuthbert found himself as a key power-broker. The only candidate for the throne was an illegitimate son of King Oswy's, called Aldfrid. Aldfrid was a scholar and lived in an Irish monastery. Cuthbert sent a delegation from Lindisfarne to beg Aldfrid to become the king of Northumbria. He was able to communicate with Aldfrid from within the same tradition, untainted by Wilfrid's animosity towards the Irish church.

After Aldfrid became king, Cuthbert stayed on as bishop for another year. Then, Bede tells us, he felt his death approaching. After Christmas 687 he made the monks take him back to Inner Farne. He died three months later, on the 20<sup>th</sup> March.

Although he had only been bishop for three years, he had played a vital role in protecting the kingdom. This aspect of Cuthbert as protector of his people was to become an integral part of his cult.

There are two postscripts to the story. The first concerns Wilfrid. The new king, Aldfrid, bowed to pressure from the pope and restored Wilfrid to his bishopric. When Cuthbert died,

Wilfrid took charge of the monastery at Lindisfarne. Here is Bede's description of what happened:

*'After Cuthbert was buried, a violent storm of temptation shook that church, and several monks chose to leave rather than face such dangers. The year after Edbert was made bishop, and because he was a man noted for great goodness and deep learning in the scriptures, and above all given to charity, he stopped the storm that had arisen.'*

Once again, Bede refrains from telling us exactly what Wilfrid did to cause such an upset at Lindisfarne, although perhaps the comparison with Edbert's qualities might give us a clue. Wilfrid didn't back off. He continued to press the new king to restore his former possessions and to make him bishop of all Northumbria. Within three years he had been banished again, and was back in Rome with his bitter petitions to the pope.

The second postscript was to come eleven years later. It was to have a sensational effect on Cuthbert's posterity. Here's Bede's account of it.

*The sublimity of the saint's life was well attested by his numerous miracles. Almighty God in his Providence now chose to give further proofs of Cuthbert's glory in heaven by putting into the minds of his brothers to dig up his bones. They expected to find the bones quite bare, as is usual with the dead, the rest of the body having dwindled away to dust. They were going to put them in a light casket in some fitting place above ground in order to give them their due veneration.*

*On opening the coffin they found the body completely intact, looking as if still alive, and the joints of the limbs still flexible. It seemed not dead but sleeping. The vestments, all of them, were not merely unfaded but crisp and fresh like new, and wonderfully bright. The monks were filled with great fear and trembling; they could not speak, did not dare to look at the miracle, and hardly knew where to turn.*

This discovery marked the real start of the Cult of St Cuthbert, which has survived through many vicissitudes right up to the present day. Prior to the disinterment, the monks knew that Cuthbert had been an exceptionally holy person. If that hadn't been the case they wouldn't have wanted to dig up his bones to venerate as relics. But the discovery of his incorrupt body was sensational proof of his sainthood. It was the next best thing to being resurrected. It was a miracle and a sign. He was given new vestments and placed in a new coffin beside the altar at the church at Lindisfarne. Pilgrims started to visit for healing and new miracles were quick to occur. It was the start of the next chapter in the story, the chapter of the Haliwerfolc, or people of the saint.

*Dear Reader*

*Thank you for your interest in these talks about St Cuthbert and his Community. A quick disclaimer before you read on.*

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*You can find out more in my novel trilogy or in any of the excellent factual accounts of the period available.*

## **BEA Talk two: The Fury of the Northmen**

Welcome back to the series, and a quick catch up if you weren't able to join us last week. We left Lindisfarne after a sensational discovery. Eleven years after Cuthbert's death, his coffin was opened. Instead of a skeleton, the monks found Cuthbert's body completely intact, the joints of his body still flexible and his grave clothes still fresh.

It was a transformative moment. It was understood as a miracle, a direct sign of God's favour. Bede tells us that the monks who discovered the incorrupt body were, *'filled with great fear and trembling; they could not speak, did not dare to look at the miracle'* Cuthbert was already revered as a saint, but it was at this moment that the cult really started. Our 21st century inclination is immediately to look for a scientific explanation. The medieval mind did not work like that. No-one doubted it was a miraculous and deeply holy event and it generated profound awe and reverence.

Before we go on, I'd like to take a moment to talk about sainthood, about how sainthood was understood in the early church. I'd like to read something from this book, *'The Year 1000'*, a delightful account of Anglo-Saxon daily life at the first millennium. Here's the authors, Robert Lacy and Danny Danziger, on sainthood:

*'Heaven was visualised as being something like the royal court. God sat there in judgement like the king and paid most attention to those who could catch His ear. On earth it was the great warriors and lords who enjoyed that privilege. In heaven it was the saints.'*

For the pilgrims who came to visit Cuthbert's shrine on Lindisfarne, he was their local representative in the court of heaven, to whom God had shown special favour and who could take prayers on their behalf directly to God. He had demonstrated in his life that he loved and cared for his people. In his new life-in-death he was to continue doing so. That sense of Cuthbert as the north's own special saint has continued right through the centuries. His shrine at Durham is constantly visited today.

As well as being their representative, his life was an example for the faithful to follow. At the start of the Anonymous Life, it says: *'It is in itself a ready path to virtue to know what he was.'* His life was his teaching. So the first thing the cult needed was a life of the new saint.

By 700, two years after the disinterment, the first Life, by an anonymous monk on Lindisfarne, had been written. In 721 Bede re-wrote the Anonymous Life, now called the Life of St Cuthbert. In fact, being Bede, he wrote it twice, once in verse and once in prose, just

because he could. But it was the Prose Life that took off and became widely circulated. The second great treasure of the shrine was the incomparable Lindisfarne Gospels, created sometime between 710 and 725 by one man, Bishop Edfrid in Cuthbert's honour. Over a period of twenty years Lindisfarne became established as the most important religious centre in Northumbria, even in Britain.

Less than a hundred years later the sanctity of the shrine was to be brutally assaulted. In June 793 a fleet of longships hauled up on the beach and an assault force of Viking raiders came ashore. The destruction that followed was devastating, both physically and symbolically.

The scholar Alcuin wrote to Ethelred, King of Northumbria, from the court of King Charlemagne:

*Lo, it is nearly 350 years that we and our fathers have inhabited this most lovely land, and never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could be made. Behold, the church of St. Cuthbert spattered with the blood of the priests of God, despoiled of all its ornaments; a place more venerable than all in Britain is given as a prey to pagan peoples.*

It was totally horrifying. We can note in passing that Alcuin describes Lindisfarne as 'a place more venerable than all in Britain'. It gives us a feel for how important the cult was at this point, a hundred years on from Cuthbert's death. It also suggests why the Vikings might have picked on Lindisfarne for their first ever major raid. It wasn't just about loot. The narrative we are used to is all about ruthless warriors bent on rape and pillage. But there is background to the Lindisfarne raid which is not often mentioned. For this we need to widen our gaze beyond Northumbria, to the countries of Europe. This was the time of Charlemagne the Great. He was to be crowned as Emperor by the pope, and his ambition was to create a new Christian empire. He had declared war on the pagan peoples of Saxony and beyond. When I say pagan here, I'm referring to the old Germanic religion of Wodin and Thor which still held sway in Scandinavia and northern Germany. It was an incredibly brutal campaign. In 782, following a victory over the Saxons, Charlemagne had 4500 unarmed captives forcibly baptised and then executed. It is known as the massacre of Verden. In the year just before the Lindisfarne raid Charlemagne had thousands of Saxons forcibly removed and resettled and imposed brutal punishments on any pagan practices. The Danes were closely allied with the Saxons and they could see Charlemagne coming their way. Not surprisingly, they developed a profound hatred of Christianity, of priests, monks and churches. The choice of Lindisfarne wasn't just for plunder. It was the 9/11 of its day, an expression of intense religious and cultural conflict and revenge.

Somehow, the incorrupt body of the saint, as well as the Lindisfarne Gospels, survived the onslaught. It marks the starting point of the next chapter in the story of the survival of St Cuthbert and his cult, through several centuries of violence and instability. This is the narrative running through this talk and the next. Not till September 4<sup>th</sup> 1104 when the still incorrupt body of St Cuthbert was finally translated into Durham Cathedral was the cult secure. Even then, Henry VIII and the Victorians made their own assaults upon it, but that really is another story.

So back to Lindisfarne, and the watershed moment of the first raid in 793. The monastery wasn't abandoned at this point. Whether it was fortified in any way we don't know, but the

monks didn't leave the Island till eighty years later. There is some evidence that during that period there was a partial move to Norham, an estate belonging to the Community beside the river Tweed. But the monks didn't leave Lindisfarne for good till 875. So why then?

In those eighty years between the first attack in 793 and the departure in 875 the nature of the Viking threat had changed. For decades it continued to be a matter of opportunistic summer raiding. But then the agenda changed. In competition with the Norse, the Danes were constructing trade routes across the known world, reaching into Europe and Russia. The Danes were no longer just interested in plunder. They were interested in conquest. Meet the Ragnarsons, sons of the king of Denmark: Ivar the Boneless, Halfdan and Ubbe. They could command an army more formidable than any in England. In 866 the Great Army of the Danes arrived in Northumbria. On the 21<sup>st</sup> March at the battle of York they defeated the Northumbrians and did unspeakable things to the Northumbrian King Aelle. They took over York, or Jorvik, and made it the capital of their new kingdom, the kingdom of York. They appointed a Northumbrian earl as a puppet king while they continued their campaign of conquest. The following year they defeated Mercia, the year after that East Anglia. By 871, when Alfrid became king, Wessex was the only kingdom of the Heptarchy not under Danish rule.

During all this time the Haliwerfolc were hanging on at Lindisfarne. York was a long way south. But the conflict was about to come nearer to home. In 872 the Earl of Bamburgh, Ricsige, led a revolt against the Danes. The puppet king of York was killed and Ricsige seized power. Nothing happened for a couple of years. The Ragnarsons were busy elsewhere. Then in 874 Halfdan Ragnarson took a fleet of longships north from York and sailed into the Tyne. He made winter quarters near the mouth of the Tyne, and when Spring came, set about subduing the rebellious province. He started with the convent at Tynemouth, burning it to the ground. It was at this point the monks abandoned Lindisfarne. Tynemouth was too close for comfort. For the next seven years, the Community was on the road.

So far, so good. We know when they left. But at this point the historical record falters. There are very few records from this time, just because there was widespread destruction of the monastic, literate culture. Everyone agrees that there was a seven-year hiatus between the Haliwerfolc leaving Lindisfarne and their re-settling much further south. But there is disagreement about what was happening and where they went. There is some recent scholarship to suggest they may have spent much of the time at Norham. Others believe that every church named after St Cuthbert marks a spot on the route they took, which makes for a very complex itinerary. Others again believe that they were just taking a tour of their estates.

The only full account we have comes from a writer named Simeon of Durham. Simeon was a monk of Durham in the twelfth century. He wrote a History of the Church of Durham, which chronicles the whole story of St Cuthbert and the Haliwerfolc from the arrival of Aidan in Northumberland up to his present day. At this point Simeon is writing a full two hundred years after the event, with few contemporary records to draw on. We have to assume it is a version of events based on oral tradition, passed down by the monks for generations. It has become part of the myth of the cult where the broad arc of the narrative is more important than dates and details. The best we can do is to try and correlate Simeon's version with whatever objective dates and facts we have. His telling of the story is exasperatingly unspecific. He mentions only three places by name. It is repetitive and the chronology is all

over the place. But it is the closest thing we have to a contemporary account and it tells us how the monks themselves saw their own story. It tells us what they chose to remember.

So let me introduce you to the lead actors in the story. The bishop of Lindisfarne at the time was a man called Aedwulf. When the Danish longships arrived in the Tyne, Bishop Aedwulf summoned his friend Abbot Eadred of Carlisle. These two, Aedwulf and Eadred, stuck to the saint through thick and thin. The two men took the decision to abandon Lindisfarne. Here is Simeon on what happened next:

*“A fearful storm swept over that place and indeed the whole province of the Northumbrians, for it was cruelly ravaged far and wide by the army of the Danes under King Halfden. Everywhere did he burn down the monasteries and the churches; he slew the servants and the handmaidens of God, after having exposed them to many indignities, and in one word, fire and sword were carried from the eastern sea to the western. Whence it was that the bishop and they who with him accompanied the holy body, nowhere found any place of repose, but going forwards and backwards, hither and thither, they fled from before the face of those cruel barbarians.”*

The historical record bears Simeon out. We know that as well as Lindisfarne, Tynemouth, Hexham, Ripon, Jarrow and Carlisle were destroyed, and certainly many other smaller churches and monasteries. The great monastic culture of Northumbria was being destroyed before their eyes. So where did the Haliwerfolc go? The local legend is that they spent the first night at Kyloe, sheltering in the caves there. The cave is still known as St Cuthbert's Cave. It is about the right distance for the first day's journey from Lindisfarne. But where next? All that Simeon can tell us is that:

*They wandered through the whole of the districts in Northumbria, having no settled dwelling place, like sheep before wolves*

No clues there. However, after a lot of non-specific wandering, the first place that Simeon mentions by name is Derwentmouth, in the Lake District. So we know that at some point the Community had gone west. One reasonable guess is that they might initially have gone to Carlisle. After all, Abbot Eadred was from Carlisle. Carlisle had been given to St Cuthbert by the king when he became bishop. It still belonged to the Community, and the monastery was contained within the old Roman fort, so to some extent it was defensible. It seems a logical place for them to have gone.

During the early stages of their flight, the whole Community seem to have been on the road. Simeon tells us that *'all the Christian inhabitants, with their wives and children, accompanied the sacred body of St Cuthbert'*. Gradually the following diminished, till it was reduced to a hard core of monks. These men became part of the foundation myth of the Community. When the monks left Lindisfarne, seven men were chosen to be the bearers of the saint, who were responsible for the safe-keeping of the shrine. No-one else was permitted to touch it. As things got more and more desperate, only the seven bearers, the Bishop and the Abbot were left, reduced to poverty and despair. The seven bearers are the heroes of Simeon's story. Right up to the time he was writing, their descendants were held in high honour in Northumbria. Here is Simeon again:

*It is the boast of many persons in the province of the Northumbrians, as well clerks as laymen, that they are descended from one of the families of these men, for they pride themselves upon the faithful service which their ancestors rendered to St Cuthbert.*

Clearly the fateful journey is part of the Community's story of itself that still resonated many generations later. The story has grown hazy over the decades. But the essential point that Simeon reiterates again and again, that this was a time of extreme crisis where the survival of the Saint and the Haliwerfolc themselves was on the line.

So back to the journey. If our guess is right and they went to Carlisle, they would not have found safe haven there for long. We know that Carlisle was sacked at some point during the Halfdan's reprisals in Bernicia. They must have moved further south into Cumbria, eventually ending up at Derwentmouth.

Here, in 878, things reached their lowest point. It wasn't just that the Danes were laying waste Northumbria. Things were looking pretty bad elsewhere. In January 878, three years after the Community left Lindisfarne, King Alfred of Wessex was defeated at Chippenham and had to take refuge in the marshes of Athelney. Wessex was the last Christian kingdom to hold out against the Danes, and now it looked as if it had fallen too. There was nowhere in England free of pagan rule, nowhere where the Community might take refuge. To add to their troubles, Simeon records that there was a famine, possibly brought about by the destruction wrought by the Danes. Bishop Aedwulf and Abbot Eadred took a momentous decision. They would take the Saint's body to Ireland and make a new home for the cult there.

Why Ireland? Although Dublin was a major Viking trading centre, parts of Ireland were still free and Christian. The Haliwerfolc did have contacts in Ireland. Back in 664, after the Synod of Whitby, Bishop Colman and some of the Lindisfarne monks had returned to Ireland and founded a new monastery there. Perhaps the monks were hoping to make a new home there. We don't know. But there is general agreement that the monks did attempt to move to Ireland. Simeon frames it like this:

*Bishop Aedwulf and Abbot Eadred, after having wandered over nearly the whole of the province with the treasure of the holy body, were at last worn out with the fatigue of their daily labour, and began to discuss transporting the holy body to Ireland, especially as there now appeared scarce the shadow of a hope that they would be able to continue in this country. So then they all of them, bishop, abbot and people, assembled at the mouth of the river which is called Derwent. A ship was there prepared for their transit, in which the venerable body of the saint was placed; the bishop and the abbot and the few to whom their resolution had been made known, embarked, while all the others were kept in ignorance of their intention.*

So there was a very real possibility that the cult might have become Irish. Lindisfarne would have been forgotten and Durham Cathedral never built. However, it appears that the Saint had no intention of leaving Northumbria. Soon after they set out a fierce storm broke out that threatened to sink them altogether and drove them off course. The ship keeled over and the Lindisfarne gospels were washed overboard. The monks fell to their knees, insofar as the storm permitted, begged the saint for forgiveness for their folly and turned back. It seems that they ended up at Whithorn, in Dumfries and Galloway. Whithorn is the location of the shrine of an earlier saint, Ninian. It may have been no accident they ended up there. There are other

local traces of Cuthbert's presence, as in the name Kircudbright. According to Simeon, it was on the beach near Whithorn that the monks discovered the Gospels washed up on the shore, clean and undamaged. We may scoff at this for a miracle story, but it is apparently true that there are some signs of water damage on the Gospels. At this point, when the faithful followers were close to despair, St Cuthbert started to intervene directly.

Back down in Wessex, you'll remember that we've left King Alfred hiding in the marshes and burning cakes. However, Alfred had moved on. He had managed to raise an army against the Danes. The night before the crucial battle of Ethandun, St Cuthbert appeared in a dream to Alfred. He foretold his victory and said to him

*I especially exhort you to observe mercy and justice, since by God's gift, through my intercession, the rule of the whole of Britain shall be placed at your disposal. If you are faithful to God and to me, I shall become to you an impenetrable shield, by means of which you will be enabled to crush all the power of your enemies*

The following day Alfred joined battle with the Danes at Ethandun and utterly defeated them. Their leader had to swear fealty to him and become a Christian. It was a crucial turning point in the Danish conquest of England. The story of St Cuthbert's assistance isn't wishful thinking on the part of the Northumbrians. Alfred attested to it and gave his full support to the ultimate re-settlement of the cult, as well as rich gifts. The House of Wessex continued to revere the saint generations later, and Alfred's grandson, the powerful Athelstan, made a special visit to the shrine with gifts of legendary value. The prophecy of St Cuthbert had come true for Athelstan. He was king of all England.

At last, the tide was turning. The Danes suffered two further losses at this time. Ubbe Ragnarson was killed at the battle of Cynuit in Wessex. His brother Halfdan, who had been responsible for the devastation of Northumbria, was killed in a battle with the Norse for the possession of the great trading port of Dublin. The Danish army suffered heavy losses both in Wessex and Ireland. And Ubbe had been king of York, so there was now a power vacuum in the Kingdom of York.

With the immediate threat from Halfdan removed one might have expected the Community to risk a return to Lindisfarne. With the improvement in the political situation it would have made sense. But they didn't go to Lindisfarne. The next place they turn up is Crayke. Crayke is close to York and had once been a possession of St Cuthbert's. For whatever reason, and it is possible that Lindisfarne had been sacked by the Danes, they moved south, still with the shrine in tow.

The choice of Crayke seems to mark the entry of the Haliwerfolc and their leaders into the unravelling politics of the Danish invasion. Here is Simeon again:

*During this time the army and such of the inhabitants of York as survived, being without a king, were insecure*

You'll remember that the death of Ubbe Ragnarsson, King of York, left a power vacuum in the new Danish kingdom. Ubbe Ragnarson had died without an heir. At this point, according to Simeon, St Cuthbert made another intervention, even more extraordinary than the last.

*The blessed Cuthbert himself appeared in a vision to Abbot Eadred, that man of holy life and addressed him in the following words:*

*Go to the army of the Danes and announce to them that you are come as my messenger. Ask to be informed where you can find a lad named Guthred, the son of Hardacnut, whom they sold to a widow. Having found him, and having paid the widow the price of his liberty, let him be brought forward before the whole aforesaid army; and my will and pleasure is that he be elected and appointed king at Oswiesdune and let the bracelet be placed upon his right arm.*

Wow. How left field was that. It has the ring of a fairy story, the finding of a lost heir and his restoration. It may be a legend from another source that has seamlessly become part of the Cuthbert story. Whatever the truth, there was a result.

*The young man was produced, and both barbarians and natives reverently accepted the directions of St Cuthbert by unanimously appointing him, who had so recently been a slave, to be their sovereign.*

Whatever lies behind the story, it is absolutely true that Guthred was made king, and that he subsequently showed great favour to the Community of St Cuthbert. Once Guthred was securely installed as king of York, St Cuthbert appeared once more in a final vision to Abbot Eadred. This time he had instructions for the new king. He was to hand over all the land between Tyne and Wear to the Community. The church was to have the power to offer asylum to fugitives and fines were set for any breaches. It was to be possessed in perpetuity with sac and socne and infangtheof. Importantly, Simeon tells us, this was agreed to not only by the whole army of the English, but that of the Danes also approved and agreed to it. It seems to have been at the heart of a peace settlement between the English and the Danes.

What is going on? Why the sudden shift from fugitives to negotiators? To understand the politics behind Guthred's extraordinary gift to the Haliwerfolc, we have to look at the topography of the Anglo-Danish conflict.

For the Danes, Northumbria was always about York. To them, it was the Kingdom of York, or Yorvik, at the heart of their trading empire. The land round about was flat and fertile, the rivers easy to navigate. They had no interest in the northern province of Bernicia. Halfdan had done his best to subdue it, but the rebellious earls of Bamburgh continued to pose a threat to the stability of the Kingdom of York. The Danish forces were weakened. They didn't want to be fire-fighting further rebellions. Giving the land between Tyne and Wear to the Haliwerfolc created a buffer state. It drew a line between the Kingdom of York and the troublesome province of Bernicia. The granting of powers of asylum made it a kind of no man's land in terms of conflict. In the absence of other leadership, the Haliwerfolc had become peace-brokers between the warring sides.

The Haliwerfolc had made a choice that was to dictate the whole of their subsequent history. They turned their back on Lindisfarne. On Bamburgh. They moved first to Crayke, then to Chester-le-Street, close to the centre of Danish power. The Danes needed them, because of the power and prestige of the cult within Anglo-Saxon society they were able to guarantee any settlement between the English and the Danes. And the Haliwerfolc needed the Danes. They had learned their lesson. When the Danes destroyed the monasteries of Northumbria, Ricsige, the Earl of Bamburgh, had been unable to protect them. He was helpless against the superior army of the Danes. The Haliwerfolc wanted to be saved from fire by fire. They wanted the protection of the Danes. Their new monastery, at Chester-le-Street, was within an

old Roman fort. They had had enough of the open harbour of Lindisfarne, where a dozen longships could beach in a morning. They wanted the security of walls around them.

Simeon doesn't bother with such explanations. It is about the miraculous intervention of the saint, and his will and pleasure requires no further explanation. We may choose to rationalise it, but perhaps we should also keep faith with Simeon's narrative and see this settlement as inspired in some way by the spirit of the saint. The saint wanted peace. In his own time, he had always been opposed to conflict. And he wanted to protect his people. This is the narrative of the Haliwerfolc right up to the present day.

In 882 the relics of St Cuthbert were installed in the new church at Chester-le-Street, built on the site of the Roman commandant's house. The present-day church has been restored and altered, but the narrow outline of the original church is still clear. It was to be the home of the cult for the next ninety years, the only remaining monastic institution in the north. The monks preserved the liturgy of Lindisfarne in their worship. The winds of reform that swept through monasteries in the south of England in the following century didn't reach as far as Chester-le-Street. Standards seem to have slipped somewhat. Sometime around 960 a priest called Aldred translated the Lindisfarne Gospels into the Northumbrian dialect of Anglo-Saxon. It is more accurate to call it a gloss, rather than a translation. It was inserted directly into the text, with the translation of each Latin word written in above it. It is discreetly done in small letters so as not to detract from the noble script of the original. It is the first translation of any kind of the Gospels into the vernacular in England. Were educational standards slipping? Were the monks struggling to learn Latin? They were certainly struggling with celibacy. Somewhere along the line the monks became married men, with families. The Bishop was supposed to be a monk, but there was no requirement on the other clerics to take monastic orders. It also became a hereditary order. The possessions of St Cuthbert were attributed to the senior members of the Community and passed down to their sons. The Haliwerfolc of the tenth century looked very different to its predecessors.

The politics of the north remained turbulent, as the Danes continued to battle for supremacy. We'll finish for today with the famous story of the saint's final move to Durham. In 995 there was another Danish attack in the north and the Bishop of the day, Aldhun, decided to move the shrine south to Ripon. After a few months, when the danger had passed, the Community returned north to their home. But when they reached a spot near Durham the saint refused to advance any further. Despite everyone's efforts, the cart containing the shrine wouldn't move. In Simeon's words, it was *'as firmly fixed as if it were a mountain'*. So the entire community spent the next three days in prayer and fasting after which a revelation was made to one of their number, a man named Eadmer. The saint wanted to go to Durham. As soon as the cart was turned in the right direction, the saint consented to move and the community set off for Durham. It was a smart choice by the saint. The town sits on a peninsula high above the river which surrounds it on three sides. It is a highly defensible site and it was at the time unoccupied. Simeon:

*It was discovered that the place, though naturally strong, was not easily habitable, for the whole space was covered with a very dense wood.*

Everyone pitched in to help:

*The entire population of the district, which extends from the river Coquet to the Tees, readily and willingly rendered assistance as well to this work as to the erection of the church at a later period.*

St Cuthbert had chosen his new home. From henceforth, Durham was to be the heart and centre of the cult. A small town grew up around the monastic site, and a fine new church was built to house the saint's body, known as the White Church. Durham was busy with pilgrims and the Community prospered. Even King Canute recognised and respected the shrine, walking barefoot for five miles in penance before he presented himself to the saint. He gave several estates for the support of the Community, to add to their wealth and influence. The future, it seemed, was assured.

But only 60 years after the move to Durham, the Community were faced with crisis once again, with the coming of the Normans. Once again they would take flight, and once again the very nature of the Community would be under extreme pressure. Would they survive? Find out next week!

*Dear Reader*

*Thank you for your interest in these talks about St Cuthbert and his Community. A quick disclaimer before you read on.*

*What follows are my lecture notes. They were designed to be read aloud and were intended to entertain and inform. They are not formal essays and are not referenced. Because of the 45-minute time limit, they offer a glimpse of the period rather than a full exposition.*

*You can find out more in my novel trilogy or in any of the excellent factual accounts of the period available.*

### **BEA talk three: The Norman Conquest**

Today's talk covers the period immediately after the Norman Conquest in 1066, up to September 1104, when St Cuthbert's relics were moved into the new Durham Cathedral. By this time, 1066, the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy of the seventh and eighth centuries had given way to a unified single kingdom; England. Northumbria was still a powerful province, but it was ruled by the king of England. The Earls of Northumbria still lived at Bamburgh and enjoyed considerable power, especially as Northumbria was a vital bulwark against the nascent power of the new nation state of Scotland. St Cuthbert's shrine was securely settled in Durham. A prosperous small town had grown up on the peninsula. The Community were influential land-holders and its bishop was the leader of the Northumbrian church. No-one could have foreseen the storm that was about to break, both on Northumbria and on the Community.

Let me start by reading you part of the deathbed confession of William the Conqueror;

*I have persecuted the natives of England beyond all reason. Whether gentle or simple I have cruelly oppressed them. Many I unjustly disinherited and killed innumerable multitudes by famine or the sword. I was the barbarous murderer of many thousands both young and old of that fine race of people.*

The confession was recorded by a historian called Orderic Vitalis. Whether William actually said those words, or whether Orderic thought he should have, we don't know. Either way, he wasn't lying. William's reign saw atrocities that are comparable to the worst of contemporary warfare. Anglo-Saxon England, to borrow the memorable phrase of Dominic Cummings, was a smoking ruin. It was a period of intense suffering and violence for the whole country but nowhere more than in the north. Why did the Conquest have such a cataclysmic effect?

As we know from last week, England had seen invasions before. But there was a difference between the Danish and Norman invasions. We can sum up the difference in a word: castles.

When the Danes conquered England, they had to live alongside the people they had conquered. As we saw with the treaty they made with the Haliwerfolc, they had to reach an accommodation with the locals so that they could live together. The borders between the Danelaw and the rest of England were permeable.

But the Normans had no intention of negotiating with the locals. They had only one strategy: domination. They achieved it through fortification. In the words of historian Marc Morris, *the castle was the primary instrument by which the Normans stamped their authority on England*. From having almost no castles in the period before 1066, the country was quickly crowded with them. According to one conservative modern estimate, based on the number of surviving earthworks, at least 500, and possibly closer to 1,000, had been constructed by the end of the 11th century – barely two generations since the Normans’ initial landing. Durham Castle was one of them.

Here is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 1067, “*the Normans built castles far and wide throughout the land, oppressing the unhappy people, and things went ever from bad to worse*”.

How did they manage such an astonishing building programme? These castles were initially quite simple structures. They were built on the motte and bailey design – at its simplest, a huge mound of earth with a wooden fort on top, and a bailey wall within which they built barracks and workshops. Such a castle could be defended by a relatively small number of fighting men. As an example, we can look at the strategically important city of Lincoln, home of one of the heroes of tonight’s story. A detachment of Norman warriors moved into the town and wiped out any resistance. They took the most important local people hostage. On threat of killing the hostages, they forced the rest of the townsfolk to dig the motte on the site of the town’s Roman fort. This involved destroying 166 houses that got in the way. Once the castle was finished, a small garrison could be left to govern the town and defend the important routes that passed through it.

This pattern was repeated the length and breadth of England. The land was taken from its Anglo-Saxon owners and given to relatively few Norman lords and barons, who were then responsible for controlling their land by military force. Within a couple of generations, the Normans had become the new ruling class. French became the language of power. The Normans also took over the senior hierarchy of the church.

So this is the context for what was to happen at Durham. The Community were to face existential threats to both their physical and spiritual survival. When it emerged from the fire it had been transformed beyond recognition. Nevertheless, extraordinary events ensured that the inner life of the new community still possessed a continuity with its Anglo-Saxon past and with the tradition of its saint. How that happened is today’s story. Our informant is once again Simeon. He was a monk of Durham, and during this period he was an eye-witness, so we can give his account much greater credibility

In the first two years of the Conquest, William extended his authority as far as York. It seems that the Community submitted to William at an early stage, as the bishop, Ethelwin, was used by William as an ambassador to Scotland. However, the rest of Northumbria had no intention of submitting to William. The heavy taxes, known as geld, that he tried to impose on them were a flashpoint. In 1069, three years after the Conquest, William appointed one of his nobles, Robert de Comines, as the new earl of Northumbria. He gave him 700 crack troops and sent him off to subdue the north. Unwisely he set out in January and arrived at Durham in a snowstorm. Simeon tells us that the Northumbrians were unable to flee because of the snow. They came to the resolution, Simeon tells us, of either murdering the earl or themselves dying together. Bishop Ethelwin knew what was happening and tried to send

warning to Robert de Comines, but with his 700 men at his back, de Comines ignored him. He and his troops entered Durham, roughed up the inhabitants and took over the town. No doubt, with the snow deep on the ground and a bitter frost outdoors, they enjoyed all the food and drink they could lay their hands on. At dead of night the Northumbrian warriors entered the town. De Comines had not bothered to set a watch. The Northumbrians worked their way from house to house, killing the sleeping soldiers. By the time they got to the bishop's house, where de Comines and his retinue were staying, the alarm had been raised and they were ready to defend themselves. So the rebels burned down the house with the Normans in it. Only one man of the seven hundred escaped to carry the tale back to William.

The Community woke to find their town turned into a battlefield. Simeon says, *'So great was the multitude of the slain that every street was covered with blood and filled with dead bodies'*

In a single catastrophic night, the Community found themselves at the heart of the conflict.

It was the trigger for a full-scale rebellion in the north. The Northumbrians formed an alliance with Swein of Denmark and Edgar the Atheling, both of whom had a claim to the English throne. Through the spring and summer of 1069 the battle was fought over York, which fell first to one side, then the other. The Northumbrians adopted classic guerrilla tactics, attacking the town when a small garrison was left behind, but fading away into the countryside if William's army was too large for them to handle. By December, after months of frustration, William decided on a campaign of total destruction, so that there would be nowhere for the rebels to hide. It was the napalm bombing of its day. He gave orders for all the land between York and Durham to be laid waste – the farms and villages destroyed, the inhabitants put to the sword, the farm implements destroyed, the land salted. It was known as the Harrying of the North. It was a genocidal massacre that took a generation to recover from. There are no records of Yorkshire in the Domesday book. It is simply recorded as 'waste'.

When the news of the advancing Norman massacre reached Durham, the Community took the decision to flee. They had found themselves on the wrong side of everybody. The Northumbrians saw them as traitors because they had originally submitted to the Normans. The Normans thought they were complicit in the Massacre at Durham. So once again the Community took flight. Where did they go? Back to Lindisfarne.

Simeon tells us all about the journey. It took them four days. When they got there – you have to remember it was December and bitterly cold – they had forgotten to consult the tide timetables. They felt just the way we all do when we get the tides wrong. Here's Simeon:

*As they happened to arrive there about evening, at the hour at which it was full tide, the bishop and the elders and the women and children mourned and lamented with each other at the danger they should incur from the winter's cold. 'What shall we do?' said they. 'We are prevented from crossing over to the island, nor is there any place of residence for us in which we can escape this nipping cold.'*

It is a very human vignette. Luckily the saint took pity on their plight. The waters parted, the Community passed through, and the waters closed again behind them. St Cuthbert had returned to Lindisfarne.

They returned to Durham three months later. They found the church desecrated and treasures stolen. The surrounding countryside was devastated. The survivors were starving. And at this point the bishop, Ethelwin, lost his nerve and abandoned the Community. He was to be the last Anglo-Saxon bishop. William appointed a Norman in his place, called Walcher. As well as the bishopric, William decided Durham needed a castle. Whether they liked it or not, the Community was getting protection. The building of Durham castle, in its original Norman iteration, got underway.

At this point, with the sound of shovels and axes ringing in our ears, we're going to leave Durham for a couple of years. We need to meet two men who are going to play a central role in saving the shrine of St Cuthbert. Their stories are recorded by our friend Simeon, who knew both men personally. Otherwise you could be forgiven for thinking he'd made them up, they are so extraordinary. But no. It's all true. So first of all we're going to take a quick trip south, to Winchcombe in Gloucestershire, to meet the Prior, a Saxon monk named Aldwin. Around the year 1072, something happened to Prior Aldwin. He had found an author he had never read before. What he read inspired a radical vision in him. The author was Bede, the books the Ecclesiastical History and the Life of Cuthbert. The vision? Prior Aldwin was completely inspired by Bede's description of the saints of the early church. He believed that the church of his day had fallen into apathy and decadence and that he was called to restore the purity of that early church to the north. To the very places where those early saints lived. Everyone at Winchcombe thought he was completely off his head. They let him visit the neighbouring monastery at Evesham to try and find some recruits for his great project. There Aldwin met Reinfrid and the plot thickened. Reinfrid was a Norman knight who took part in the Harrying of the North. When he and his men reached Whitby, and he stood amid the ruins of the Anglo-Saxon monastery there, his heart was suddenly struck with repentance for the terrible acts he had committed. He took a vow to reform his life, to become a monk and to found an abbey at Whitby in penitence.

Reinfrid had become a monk at Evesham. Right away, he was on board with Aldwin. They both had a mission to the north. The only other recruit was a young deacon called Elfwy. The three men set off for Northumbria. They took with them a donkey to carry vessels for the Mass and some books. And they walked all the way, Norman and Saxon together, through the wastelands of the Harrying, till they got to Durham. The new Norman bishop, Walcher, was delighted to see some proper monks, unlike the married priests of the Community, and gave them Jarrow for their new foundation. Jarrow, you'll remember, was the site of Bede's monastery. It had long since fallen into ruin. The three monks set about stripping off the brambles and nettles and built huts for themselves in the ruins. The monastic revival of the north had begun.

So that's Aldwin. We'll leave him and his brothers in Jarrow, and head next overseas to Norway, to the court of King Olaf in Nidaros, present day Trondheim. What, you might wonder, could this possibly have to do with Durham? It's about King Olaf's favourite, his right hand man. This man is Anglo-Norse and he speaks both languages fluently. His name is Thorgot and he comes from the Danelaw. Back in 1068, when the Normans took over Lincoln, Thorgot was one of the local land-owners who was taken hostage while they built their new castle. Thorgot had an English father and a Norse mother. So when he managed to escape he headed to Norway. He seems to have been an exceptionally capable and attractive man. Olaf was trying to establish Christianity in Norway and Thorgot was able to help him.

Thorgot had been a clerk of Lincoln church and he had a great voice. He could help with everything from teaching psalmody to building a new cathedral. He was a young man, not much older than Olaf, and they seem to have had a great time together. Olaf heaped wealth and favours on him. But after four years Thorgot started to miss England. He wanted to go home. In spite of Olaf's protests, he set sail. His ship was loaded with treasure to start his new life.

It was not to be. The ship ran into a storm on the way back. Somewhere off Tynemouth, it was wrecked. Thorgot escaped with his life but all his wealth and treasure was gone. He was destitute. He believed the hand of God was over him and took the decision to become a monk. He was taken to Durham and sent from there to Jarrow to join Aldwin's tiny community of monks. It was Autumn. Thorgot's novitiate took place in the toughest circumstances one can imagine. From king's favourite to ascetic in the space of weeks. It must have been quite a journey.

These two men, Aldwin and Thorgot, were to form a profound bond. Aldwin was the mystic and visionary. Thorgot was the doer, the action man. Their partnership was to be at the heart of the new Community of St Cuthbert.

But we're jumping the gun. We'll return now to Durham. While we've been away, there have been more upheavals. The bishop, Walcher, has been given the earldom as well as the bishopric, and his rash actions triggered a second rebellion in the north. At a meeting in Gateshead, Walcher and all his retinue were ambushed and murdered. William's brother, Odo, came north with an army to take revenge and once again terrible destruction ensued, around and to the north of Durham. Once the dust had settled, a new bishop was appointed. His name was William de St Calais. He was one of King William's top administrators, who was later to be responsible for the organisation of the Domesday Book. But for now, his task was Durham.

In one sense, William de St Calais was a positive presence for the Community. He had no doubts whatever about St Cuthbert. The Normans tended to be dismissive of Saxon saints and frequently replaced them with their own. William the Conqueror had been highly sceptical about Cuthbert's incorrupt body. On his only visit to Durham, he demanded that the coffin be opened and threatened to kill the elders of the Community if their claims proved to be untrue. However, he wanted dinner before the opening. During the meal, St Cuthbert struck him with a burning fever so intolerable that he sprang from the table, called for his horse and galloped out of the town. It was a close shave.

However William de St Calais, the new bishop, was a scholar and a priest. He was familiar with Bede's work and the 'Life of Cuthbert'. His concern was not that Cuthbert was a fake, but that the shrine was not living up to its potential. He saw two problems. The first was that the estates of the Community had been devastated in the fury wreaked upon the north. This meant that the income from rents and tithes had been decimated. He petitioned the king for additional estates in the south. The second problem was the Community itself. William de St Calais was shocked to find that the senior clerics were all married men, from the Dean onwards. As we saw on the flight to Lindisfarne, they had wives and families. They were also powerful politically, linked by marriage to many of Northumbria's leading families, and controlling a large network of estates. William de St Calais decided to get rid of them. As luck would have it, King William wanted him to lead a diplomatic mission to Rome. While

he was there he laid his concerns before the pope. It was a meeting of minds. Pope Gregory's main mission in life was the enforcement of clerical celibacy. In the late eleventh and twelfth century this became a major issue in the church. He was happy to provide William de St Calais with a papal bull, declaring an anathema on anyone who opposed the bishop's plans to enforce celibacy on the Community. St Calais headed back to Durham to set his trap. First he referred to Bede. He quoted from *The Life of Cuthbert* to prove that the shrine had originally been cared for by monks, and that was how it should be. He declared that he was going to establish a monastery in Durham. There wasn't enough money to support a monastery and the Community so the Community would have to be disbanded. They could join the monastery if they repudiated their wives and families and became celibate. And if anyone felt like opposing his plan, well, the pope had declared his anathema on them.

St Calais had caught them in his trap. The Community's lay supporters were weakened and dispersed following the Harrying. They were too demoralised to fight for the Community – and in any case, hadn't the Community gone over to the Normans right at the start. As for the Community, they were supposed to be faithful servants of the Pope. As far as we know from Simeon, they didn't resist. In 1083 all the senior families of the Community left. Except one. The Dean's son, Hunred, had joined Aldwin's Community at Jarrow and he persuaded his father to become a monk.

When I found out, my first thought was, what happened to his wife? What about her? Where did she go? She became one of the main characters in my novel. Throughout that period when the Pope's campaign for clerical celibacy was at its height, the wives of priests suffered terrible abuse. They were treated as whores and prostitutes who had lured men into a life of sin. Special torments in hell were devised for them. And at Durham, the cult took a sudden lurch into misogyny. As they evicted women from the Community, word was spread about that St Cuthbert hated women. Several new miracles were recorded, featuring women who had tried to approach the shrine and were struck down with horrible illnesses or death. Suddenly it was a men-only cult.

Traces of this have survived up to the present day, so it is important to understand that Cuthbert's supposed misogyny is a Norman invention to help justify the expulsion of the Community. If you read Bede, it is immediately obvious that Cuthbert has as many female friends and followers as male. There is no hint of the supposed hatred.

So, back to St Calais. He had got rid of the Community and had taken over the purse-strings. Now he needed his monks and he knew where to find them. Just down the road.

By this time Aldwin's revival at Jarrow had, astonishingly, taken off. Men came to join him from all over Northumbria and from further afield. At this time of national trauma, his spiritual certainty struck a chord. In Thorgot, he had found the able administrator who was capable of running the practical side of things. And the revival was spreading. Reinfrid had gone to Whitby to fulfil his vow of founding a monastery there, and his Norman friends the Percys gave him the land. Aldwin and Thorgot set off together to found a new monastery at Melrose, on the site of Cuthbert's first home, but they were chased away by King Malcolm of Scotland. Back home, as well as Jarrow they now owned the other former monastery at Monkwearmouth.

So William de St Calais didn't have far to look. He summoned Aldwin and Thorgot and told them they would be moving to Durham now, with twenty-five of their brothers. They would be the new guardians of the Saint.

We don't know what Aldwin thought about it. He was said to have had a great longing for the life of solitude that Cuthbert practised, so it can't have been entirely welcome. But he obeyed his bishop. New monastic buildings were soon underway, and after that, St Calais had even bigger ambitions. He was going to put Durham and its shrine on the map. The Anglo-Saxon church that housed the Saint's shrine was too plain, too ordinary, just too old-fashioned to house the great monastic centre that St Calais envisaged. The Normans had brought not just castles to England, but a new continental architecture. Within ten years of the Conquest, Archbishop of Canterbury, Lanfranc had rebuilt Canterbury Cathedral in the Norman, Romanesque style. St Calais would outdo him at Durham.

However, it would be ten years before the foundation stone for the new Cathedral was laid. In the meantime, Aldwin died and Thorgot was appointed Prior of Durham in 1087. After the death in the same year of William the Conqueror, St Calais backed the wrong son to be king, Duke Robert of Normandy. When William Rufus won the struggle to become king of England, he banished St Calais. St Calais fled to France. Before he left, he made Thorgot his deputy. Once again, Thorgot had risen to the top. He must have been an exceptional and charismatic man. For three years he was in sole charge, not only of the monastery but of the diocese. When St Calais was finally pardoned and returned to Durham, St Calais was full of ideas for the new cathedral. He had spent his time in banishment looking at the building work going on at places like Jumieges. Durham would be inspired by the book of Revelation. It would be the new Jerusalem on earth, God's dwelling place amongst his people. Once again, he turned to Thorgot. During his years in Norway, Thorgot had worked with King Olaf on the building of the cathedral at Nidaros / Trondheim. Thorgot knew his way around a building site.

In 1092 the old Saxon church was demolished and in 1093 the foundation stone of the new cathedral was laid. Although St Calais was passionately interested in his new cathedral, he was often called away on state business, leaving Thorgot in charge. In 1096 he died. The bishopric was left empty for years by William Rufus, who wanted the revenue for its own purposes. So throughout this time, both before and after St Calais' death, Thorgot was effectively Prior and Bishop of Durham and builder of its great cathedral.

There isn't time here to go into detail about the various stages of the building of the cathedral, and I'm not an architect. I'll just quote Bill Bryson: 'I unhesitatingly give my vote to Durham is the best cathedral on earth'. That just about sums it up really. If you have never been, jump in your car as soon as the pandemic is over.

But the point I really want to make here is about its genesis. Although the impetus and architectural inspiration for the cathedral came from a Norman bishop, William de St Calais, it was effectively built by the new Community of St Cuthbert with Prior Thorgot at its head. The men who sat in the new monastic stalls were Aldwin's monks, inspired by his vision of St Cuthbert and the early saints. Inspired by the words of Bede. Bede provided the extraordinary continuity between Cuthbert's life and the Community that took up his tradition in Durham. It seems that the Saint was still with his own people. The circumstances that brought both Aldwin and Thorgot to Durham were extraordinary. Even miraculous.

When I found their stories, I thought, you could write a book about this...their stories, together with the Dean's wife, Edith, are at the heart of my novel, 'A New Heaven and a New Earth'.

I'm going to finish today by saying a bit about how the cult developed during the Norman period. There is sometimes confusion about what stories, even what buildings, are originally Anglo-Saxon and what date from the later period. As we've already seen, a new tradition of misogyny was introduced at this time and there is more.

So! With the building of the new cathedral, the shrine of St Cuthbert became one of the foremost cults in England, attracting thousands of pilgrims and well-wishers. There was a renaissance of the cult. Aldwin had started a trend of re-establishing monasteries on sites connected with Cuthbert, and this was to take off with an explosion of building activity. The priory on Lindisfarne, which many of you will be familiar with, dates from this period and was completed by 1150. It is thought to have been built on the site of the original monastic church on the Island. Built in rose-coloured sandstone with massive Romanesque columns and a stunning crossing arch, it is a smaller version of the cathedral at Durham. It made explicit the link between the cult's origins in Lindisfarne and its new home at Durham. It acted as a daughter house for Durham, with monks spending a few months there at a time. Over on Inner Farne, a small church and retreat cell were constructed for the use of the monks.

In what was now Scotland, King David was busy too. David had spent years in exile at the Norman court, and had depended on Norman support to win his crown. He brought a new Norman influence to Scotland, including reverence for the cult of St Cuthbert. First of all, a small chapel was built at Old Melrose. Then, in the 1130s David founded a new Cistercian monastery at Melrose – not on the site of the original monastery, which was deemed too inconvenient – but on the present site where we see it today, though most of the present-day abbey dates from a later period.

There was also a new flowering of literature about the cult. There were additions both to the story of Cuthbert's life and to the miracles attributed to him. It helps to be aware of this later tradition, which is often assumed to be authentic. As we'll see, some caution is needed. Bede's Life continued to be the main source for the cult, and there are some beautifully illustrated editions that date from this period. But Bede was annoyingly silent on one topic; Cuthbert's family background and where he came from. The Anonymous Life does specifically mention the Leader Valley, near Melrose, and this now became the focus of attention. At the head of the valley is an ancient holy site, called Holy Water Cleugh, where baptisms took place. Maybe this was the site of Cuthbert's childhood home? A new life appeared, called 'The Book of the Nativity of St Cuthbert, taken and translated from the Irish.' It was adopted as authentic by Reginald of Durham, a 12<sup>th</sup> century historian.

According to this Life, Cuthbert was born in Ireland, of royal extraction. There are many twists and turns, but here is the story in brief. His mother, a princess named Sabina, was taken captive by the King of Connathe and violated by him. He then sent her to his own mother and the two women entered a convent. There Sabina gave birth to the boy Cuthbert and gave him the Irish name of Mullucc. He is said to have been born in Kells.

Sabina then travelled with the infant Cuthbert to Britain on a miraculous stone, which sailed like a boat and they landed in Galway. After many wanderings his mother decided to go on a pilgrimage to Rome. She left Cuthbert with a religious man, who lived by the Holy Water Cleugh and later a church was erected in Cuthbert's honour, which was called Childeschirche. Here the book of the nativity of St Cuthbert comes to an end. Childeschirche is the old name of the parish now called Channelkirk, in the upper part of the valley of the Leader. The Irish Life thus lands him where Bede takes him up.

The new life was enthusiastically adopted, and Childeschirche, or Channelkirk as it is now called, was rebuilt as a site of pilgrimage.

In recent years there's been an annual pilgrimage from Channelkirk to Melrose, and the people of Channelkirk won't have any doubt shed on the authenticity of the site. But I think we can take 'The Book of the Nativity' with a generous pinch of salt.

Meanwhile, back in Durham, Reginald of Durham was busy promoting the cult with the compilation of a new anthology of miracles. He lists 141 miracles taking place over a 300 year period, from 875 – 1175. Among them are a new category of miracles, ones that show St Cuthbert's hatred of women and the punishment that falls on women who dare to venture into the shrine. If you have visited the cathedral you may have seen the line of dark stone running from one side to the other. It marks the furthest limit that women were allowed to enter. Eventually, in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, the beautiful Galilee chapel was constructed at the west end of the cathedral, where women could worship. But they couldn't approach the shrine. For the first four hundred years of its life, till the English Reformation, Durham Cathedral was a men-only space.

There are lots more stories to tell, but let's say goodbye to the saint and his people at a very special moment. The year is 1104. It is the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September, and tomorrow the coffin of St Cuthbert is going to be translated into its new home behind the high altar in Durham Cathedral. Prior Thorgot and the senior monks decided that this was the moment to open the coffin and settle once and for all the issue of whether the saint's body was still incorrupt. They opened the coffin in secrecy, in the middle of the night, by candle-light. They found two coffins, one inside the other. Within a chest covered with hide was a wooden coffin, with scraps of linen attached. There were two lids with iron rings, the lower resting on transverse bars with a copy of the Gospel of St John placed upon it. The lower lid was lifted and a linen covering removed. The witnesses *'smelled an odour of greatest fragrancancy and behold, they found the venerable body of the holy Father laying on its right side in a perfect state, and from the flexibility of the joints representing a person asleep rather than dead.'*

The following day the body was displayed to all the monks and a visiting Abbot, in order that he could vouch for its preservation to sceptics. It was then returned to the coffin. Then it was time for the ritual translation. A procession passed from the old site to the new, through an *'immense crowd waiting for it which from very joy burst into tears and fell flat on the ground, rendering it almost impossible for the procession to advance. All the while the voices of the singers were drowned by the strong cries of the praying, the exulting and the weeping for joy.'*

St Cuthbert had come home.

