

Brunswick Centre, Westborough, Scarborough (Personal Callers Only)
Harbourside, Sandside, Scarborough YO11 1PP
Langborne Road, Whitby YO21 1YN
John Street, Filey YO14 9DW



Scarborough, Whitby, Filey, Tourist Information Bureau,
Town Hall, St Nicholas Street, Scarborough YO11 2HG
Tel: Accommodation Hotline: 01723 383636
General Enquiries: 01723 383637
E-mail tourismbureau@scarborough.gov.uk

Scarborough Borough Council

No 5 1/3

St Hilda of Whitby

It is characteristic of our northern saints that there clings about them all an atmosphere of robust reality; and where legend has gathered round their memory their personality stands out clear like the grey rocks of their homeland. Practically nothing of fantastic story has been woven into the picture of St Hilda; the records of her life are scantier than one would wish, but they are all clear facts; and where, as in two cases, there are opposing interpretations of a given incident, these lie wholly in the field of normal divergences cropping up in historical evidences.

Her life falls entirely within the seventh century, one of the most momentous and interesting in our country's history. The separate waves of Anglo-Saxon invasion had spent themselves; the original small settlements had coalesced into the larger kingdoms: a pattern of national life was shaping itself and the Christian Church was locked in a desperate struggle with paganism. A tract of the north stretching from the Humber to the Forth, and bounded on the west geographically by the Pennines, and racially by the British Kingdom of Strathclyde, was to develop into the great Kingdom of Northumbria, and achieve its golden age; and in this vigorous evolution – political, religious and cultural – St Hilda played a leading part, presenting us for all time with a portrait of English womanhood at its best.

When a clear picture of Northumbria is first discernible we see it as two Kingdoms where the original isolated groups of settlers had drawn together under the leadership of two outstanding personalities – Ida in the Anglican kingdom of Bernicia, north of the Tees, and Ella in the southern Anglican kingdom of Deira. Here we get an interesting link which enables us to know the exact way in which Christianity reached our Anglo Saxon forefathers. Everyone knows the story of Pope Gregory's befriending the fair-haired children in the slave market at Rome. There is a traditional version of the actual words of the transaction. *'Of what nation are they?'*, asks Gregory. *'They are angles'*. *'Not so, but Angels'*. *'Of what country?'* *'Deira'*. *'A significant name; they shall be saved (de ira) from the wrath of God'*. *'Who is their king?'* *'Ella'*. *'Good. Alleluias shall be sung in Ella's land'*. And with all this St Hilda was virtually connected.

The next picture is of rivalry and war between the two kingdoms Ethelfrid, grandson of Ida, was the aggressor and successfully invaded Deira whose royal family fled into exile. Of this family two of the recorded names are important; Edwin, second son of the reigning monarch, and his nephew Hereric. Edwin found a refuge to the south-east in the Kingdom of the East Angles (Norfolk and Suffolk), while Hereric, with his wife Brigeswide and his little daughter Hereswith settled in the small Kingdom of Elmete in the west of Yorkshire. This is the setting for the birth of our Saint. Just before this took place the family was involved in tragedy. For reasons unknown, Cerdic, the petty ruler of Elmete, brought about the death of Hereric by poison, though continuing to extend his protection to Hereric's family. Here a beautiful story connected with the birth of Hilda (or to give the name more correctly, Hild) is given by Bede. On the night before that on which her child was born Brigeswide had a vivid dream. She thought she was wandering in a dark wood, vainly seeking her husband in great sorrow. Unwittingly, she placed her hand in the bosom of her dress and drew out a great jewel. As it lay in the palm of her hand, it began to glow with a soft light, which steadily increased in brilliance till it not only lit up the place around her, but also shone out all over England. Next day Hild was born – a child of prophecy. Turning next to the fortunes of Edwin we find him pursued by the enmity of the usurper Ethelfrid, at the point of being betrayed by his royal host, but eventually managing to raise an army and turn the tables upon his adversary, whom he defeated and slew at a battle near Retford in 617. He then over-ran Bernicia

and drove the three sons of Ethelfrid into exile among the Picts. He did not, in the hour of victory, forget his kin and Brigeswide and her two little daughters were brought home to Diera.

Born in exile, Hild in 617 returned to her native country at the age of three, and the years slipped by till the momentous year 625. Edwin's first wife had died and he sought a second one in the far south, in the Kingdom of

last updated Oct - 04

Kent, and the King of Kent consented to a match between his sister Ethelburga and King Edwin. The great importance of this marriage alliance lay in the fact that Ethelburga was a Christian and the free exercise of her faith and the attendance of her Chaplain and other priests was a clause in the marriage treaty. Her Chaplain, Paulinus, was consecrated Bishop of Northumbria before he left the South – an indication of the hopes entertained of the conversion of that country. The incidents of that conversion have come down to us in the pages of Bede in stories both thrilling and beautiful, but only the relevant details can be recorded here.

On Easter Eve, 627, Hild, together with King Edwin and other members of the royal household, was baptised at York; over the site of the baptism, Edwin later erected a church, the nucleus of the present stately Minster, in whose Crypt can still be seen the stone Font which tradition cherishes as that in which this baptism was performed. So all seemed well, with ever brightening prospects for the firm establishment of the new Faith and the political stability of Northumbria.

Then came the catastrophe, which changed for Hild the whole course of her life. Penda, King of Mercia, Northumbria's powerful and pagan neighbour made a sudden attack on Northumbria which swept away all resistance, Edwin himself falling, the hero of a lost battle. In the distress and confusion, which followed the news of the catastrophe, Paulinus seems to have taken the lead. James the Deacon, was deputed to stay behind in York, while Paulinus himself conducted Queen Ethelburga, Hild and their companions by perilous ways to the Queen's native home in Kent. There we lose sight of Hild for 13 years. We know that Queen Ethelburga embraced the religious life and founded a convent at Liming, and it is safe to conjecture that Hild remained in close contact with her kinswoman, since we also know that during these years the firm purpose was slowly formed of devoting herself, in like manner, wholly to God's service. She does not seem, however, to have contemplated joining the Queen-Abbess, but rather to have intended to leave England altogether and enter a famous religious house of women in France at Chelles (or Cales). But first she would go to East Anglia, where her sister, Hereswith, widow of King Anna, and mother of the reigning King, was residing; from there she had determined to go direct to France. Easier said than done, however, for a whole year passed before there was any chance of carrying out the design. And the design never was carried out – it was Hereswith, who, in the end went to Cales!

During the time that Hild was away in the South there had been great changes in Northumbria. At first, the Mercian armies ravaged the country far and wide; then they seem to have withdrawn, confining their hostile activities to periodic raiding. Eanfrid, the youngest son of Ethelfrid, of Bernicia, appears to have returned already from his exile in Pictland, where he with his two brothers, Oswald and Oswy, had embraced the Christian faith. He now took over the Northern Kingdom, but only to give way under stress of difficulties; relapse into paganism and meet his death by a treacherous Mercian plot. All this happened in quick succession after Edwin's death, and so black a time did his brief reign seem to the Northumbrians that they erased the memory of it and incorporated the unhappy year into the glorious reign of his brother Oswald. In their despair messengers sought for Oswald in Pictland and begged him to come home and rescue them. Oswald and his brother had no resources beyond their personal following and their faith, but that was sufficient for high adventure and the battle of Heavenfield, the site of which is still marked by a wooden cross near the Roman Wall, won for Oswald a Kingdom which it was his first care to reconquer for Christ. An appeal to Iona for missionary help brought to his side Aidan, who had been his friend at Iona and was now to be his counsellor and partner in the Christian government of his realm. Once more Christianity – but a Christianity of the Celtic, not the Roman pattern – was established in Northumbria, and the political power of Northumbria was at its height.

Then once more, the day of glory faded into the darkness of tragedy; again the Mercians invaded and again a Christian King, Oswald was defeated and slain. But this time the disaster was not final; Oswy took up the task and struggled for years to defend his realm against the invader. Aidan, though he could not enjoy the same spiritual companionship with Oswy as with his saintly brother, remained till his own death the King's faithful friend and adviser. How there came to be contact between Bishop Aidan and Hild, we do not know, but there must have been one to account for the fact of his sending messages to her while she waited at the East Anglian Court, begging her to return to Northumbria and organise the religious life for women there in her own country. Without question, she obeyed the call and so the work for which all her life had been a preparation was begun.

Her new life was, at first, on a very small scale; she was put in charge of a small group of women who were also aspiring to the religious life, at a small house on the River Wear. It was speedily realised by Bishop Aidan that she was ready for wider responsibilities and the opportunity soon presented itself. There was a much larger and fully established religious house of women at Hartlepool whose Foundress, Hiu (or Bega as she is more commonly named), was desirous of founding a new house at Tadcaster and Hild was called to take her place as Superior, and she was at Hartlepool when she received her final call. To go back for a moment to Northumbrian history. Bishop Aidan, wise ruler of the Northumbrian Church, friend and counsellor of Northumbrian kings, died in 651, and was succeeded by Bishop Finan. King Oswy struggled on, striving to protect his kingdom from Mercian attacks, but doing no more than hold his own. At length in 655, weary of the indecisive conflict, he sent envoys to Penda, the octogenarian King of Mercia, offering rich gifts and begging for peace. His gifts and petition were both rejected with scorn and so Oswy, in his extremity turned to God alone.

'The pagan rejects our gifts' he said, *'let us offer them to one who will accept'*. The gifts now offered were different. Oswy decided to risk all on a final battle and with the concurrence of Bishop Finan vowed to God, if he survived as victor, twelve hides of land to found houses (or churches) for God's Service, and also to dedicate to him the virginity of his daughter Aelfleda, just a year old. The victory was won; the ancient enemy of Northumbria, Penda, lay dead on the field and the Mercian danger was at an end forever.

One of the parcels of land was at Streonshalh, an Anglican settlement at the mouth of the River Esk, in which place there was already a Christian Church where King Edwin's body had been interred. To the Abbess Hild of Hartlepool, Oswy offered this land with the request that she would found (or re-order), we are not sure which, a house of religion; in addition, he committed to her charge the little Aelfleda, to be brought up in religion, the babe who was to grow up under her care and to succeed her as the second, and last Abbess of Whitby.

So in 657, Hild, with a number of her sisters from Hartlepool, came to settle in her new home, where she remained till her death in 680. It was a many sided life. First, she was the spiritual ruler and mother of a large community, and that community included, besides sisters, novices, aspirants and women – Catechumans under instruction, a number of young men who were studying and preparing themselves for the special service of God under guidance. Five of these, including Wilfrid of York, after going on to complete their training at Lindisfarne, became bishops. Then there was a more secular side of her life. As a landowner, she had many in her employ, men to care for sheep and cattle, tillage and wood cutting, for whom she was intimately responsible; and she was Lady of the village which straggled along the riverside at the foot of the Monastery. Nor was it only the common folk who enjoyed her protection and care. In her mother's dream the light had brightened till it shone over all England, the fame of the goodness and wisdom of the Abbess Hild drew many kings and nobles from far distances to seek from her that help and counsel, which, says Bede *'they ever gratefully acknowledged that they had received'*. She was a great hearted missionary, also, to her own people and the story of Caedmon one of her herdsmen, whose poetic gift, so dramatically discovered, she fostered with zeal and care as a means of bringing the knowledge of the Gospel Truth to the common folk, is well known.

This story of Caedmon, which now holds a distinguished place in English literature, was in its own day only a local event. Very different was the other well-known episode in the life of Hild, the Synod of Whitby. The issues involved were vital and far-reaching, but what brought about the Synod was the practical entanglement of those same ecclesiastical issues with the everyday life of ordinary folk. To put it briefly the case was as follows. As we have seen Northumbria had been converted to Christianity twice over, once from Kent and once from Scotland, that is, once from Rome and once from Iona. It was all one faith, but the very fact that Iona lay far remote from the centre of Christendom and had developed an organisation closely knit with the customs and outlook of the Celtic race, fostered divergences in practice which, though mainly of little importance in themselves, were tenaciously clung to by their respective adherents, and became a cause of controversy which tended to out run charity. The most important was a difference in the computation of the time of the Easter Festival, the result of which was acutely felt in the royal household where, for example, the Queen trained in the Roman rite, might be keeping Palm Sunday while King Oswy was celebrating Easter. A tribute paid by Bede to the saintly personality of Bishop Aidan comes in appropriately here: *'This difference about the observance of Easter, whilst Aidan lived, was patiently tolerated by all men, as being sensible, that though he could not keep Easter contrary to the customs of those who had sent him, yet he industriously laboured to practice all works of faith, piety and love according to the custom of all holy men, for which reason he was deservedly beloved by all, even by those who differed in opinion concerning Easter and was held in veneration by all'*.

But it was the awkwardness of such divergences that caused Oswy to arrange a Conference between the opposing parties in 664, and everyone agreed that no place was more suitable for such a conference than Whitby. The decision made at that Synod was in favour of the Roman usage and so passed the danger of the Northern Church growing up in isolation from the main currents of Christendom. Hild probably preferred the Celtic customs in which she had been brought up, but she loyally accepted the decision of the Synod, setting, as was her wont, a great example of obedience and humility.

And so her life passed on till near the close it pleased God, says Bede, *'To send her the trial of great sickness from which she suffered for the last six years of her life, yet never omitting to give thanks to her Maker, or to instruct publicly and privately those committed to her charge'*. Her great care was that her monastic family should be one in the Lord, and her last recorded words were, *'Have evangelical peace among you'*. So she passed to her rest near midnight on 17th November 680.

Bede relates how two of her sisters, one in the monastery and one at Hackness, a Branch house some 13 miles away, were permitted to see her holy soul ascending joyfully into heaven attended by angels. When brethren from the monastery arrived at Hackness on the morning of the 18th bearing the news of the death of their Foundress they were greeted, to their surprise, with the information that it was known already. So we bear away from the description of her life, the picture of a gracious lady the virtuous woman of the Psalmist, but more warm and human in its lines, well summed up for us in the words of a modern writer, *'strangely austere, strangely gentle, strangely tender, strangely inflexible'*.