

2 2.1 Fourteen centuries of pilgrimage

The Forth to Farne Way follows a large part of the old established pilgrim route linking St Andrews with the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. From the early 12th century this route was travelled in both directions by pilgrims. The original start was from St Andrews to Earlsferry in Fife, then it crossed the Firth of Forth to North Berwick. That is where the Forth to Farne Way picks up the old route and follows it to Lindisfarne.

All along this Way there are links to early Christian saints and to historic nunneries, priories, churches, pilgrim hostels and holy wells. This route was walked by a constant flow of medieval pilgrims, including monks and saints. The pilgrimage tradition was supported by religious communities and pilgrim hostels, some of which had royal funding.

An important visit for the medieval pilgrim was Whitekirk, the site of a 15th century church, holy well and of pilgrim hostels established by King James I. Sadly the holy well and hostels no longer exist, but the church is still in active use. A notable visitor in 1435 was Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini. He arrived having promised the Virgin Mary to walk barefoot to her nearest shrine if she delivered him safely from a stormy sea passage. Upon arrival at Dunbar he must have been dismayed to discover that this involved a barefoot walk of over ten miles through the snow. Afterwards he suffered badly from painful feet, which he attributed to this episode. Many years later he became Pope Pius II, reigning from 1458-64.

This first part of the Way runs through East Lothian, where St Baldred, the 'Apostle of the Lothians', was active in the 8th century. Baldred came from the monastic community of Lindisfarne to spread the Christian message. He was also known as 'Baldred of the Bass' because he built a chapel and hermitage on the Bass Rock, where he made frequent retreats. He founded a monastery at Tynninghame and a church at East Linton – Preston Kirk, see page 33. The Way passes St Baldred's Well nearby: in the 13th century this provided water to the nearby monastery, and it continued to provide water to the village into the 20th century.

The Bass Rock, where St Baldred made his retreats



A recommended visit near Cockburnspath is Dunglass Collegiate Church, a remarkably intact medieval example of its kind, with superbly carved stonework: see page 43 and 44. The original nave and choir were enhanced in the 16th century with transepts and a tower. After a period of decay and partial restoration, it was taken over by Historic Environment Scotland: see page 70. Nearby, the Way visits the pre-Reformation Cockburnspath Parish Church, featured on page 45.



Entrance to Andrew Usher's Northfield House

The spread of Christianity in Northumbria (which then extended to North Berwick) was largely the work of two children of its pagan King Aethelfrith – Ebba and Oswald. After Aethelfrith was killed in AD 616, his family took refuge in Iona where they were converted by followers of St Columba. Both were key figures in spreading the Celtic version of Christianity throughout the area, and until the Synod of Whitby (AD 664) Northumbria adhered to this, rather than the Roman interpretation. Both Ebba and Oswald were later made saints, and Oswald also became King of Northumbria.

Ebba's name is sometimes spelled Abb or Aebba, and she lived in the 7th century. In AD 695 Ebba set up separate communities of monks and nuns, and later a church, on Kirk Hill: see page 52. Shortly after Ebba's death, St Abb's Kirk was destroyed by fire, and a church was built at Coldingham, just a couple of miles inland.

Coldingham Priory was founded by Edgar King of Scots in 1098 AD and at first was home to 30 Benedictine monks from Durham. It was well endowed by Edgar and attracted many gifts and privileges from later Scottish kings and other donors, becoming one of Scotland's wealthiest and most important religious sites. In its heyday, it was the hub of an empire built on land ownership, with income from timber sales and the export of wool.

Head of St Ebba



After the original church was destroyed by King John of England in 1216, a larger and more splendid church replaced it on the same site. Various attacks did further damage, culminating in Oliver Cromwell's siege of 1650 which destroyed all but the north and east walls of the choir. These were later incorporated into the church that you see today, which explains the contrast between their ornamental arches and the very plain south and west walls. The building is well used as the local parish church, and welcomes modern pilgrims.



Looking east, Coldingham Priory church

The Way ends at Lindisfarne Priory, established in AD 635 by Aidan who was its first bishop and later was canonised. He had been invited by Oswald, now King of Northumbria, to come from Iona to spread the Christian message. About this time another monastic community was established at Old Melrose, where St Boisil and St Cuthbert first became Priors before moving to Lindisfarne. The original monastic community had to flee the Viking invasion of AD 793, but monks returned to the island later and re-established the priory which still stands as a partial ruin. For visit information, see page 70.

Lindisfarne Priory has strong links with St Cuthbert, who was its third Prior and bishop: see page 69. However his body was moved for safety and was finally buried at Durham Cathedral. When it was opened in 1827, they found a beautiful cross of gold studded with garnets around his neck.



Lindisfarne has remained a focus of pilgrimage over the centuries, and became the fitting destination of both St Cuthbert's and St Oswald's Ways. They are now joined by the Forth to Farne Way, which celebrates the resurgence of pilgrimage walking in the 21st century.

St Cuthbert's Cross

St Aidan facing Lindisfarne Priory

