

2.1 The striding saints

During the Dark Ages, starting from various offshore islands, Christianity spread inwards across Britain in small boats and on foot. The Celtic saints were the long-distance walkers of their times. People lived in tribal villages from which it was dangerous to stray into the next glen, but the saints strode from one side of the country to the other – obeying their Master’s command to ‘take the Gospel to the ends of the Earth’. From St Patrick’s settlement at Iona, St Aidan walked diagonally coast to coast to establish his own foundation at Lindisfarne. Aidan was presented with a horse by the Christian King Oswald of Northumbria. As soon as possible, Aidan passed it on to a poor man who, in his opinion, needed it more.

This made sense in practical terms. In unsettled tribal lands, a saint on foot – with no possessions and possibly not even carrying food – would scarcely be worth the trouble of murdering. Also, Aidan just loved long journeys on foot. His successor St Chad was similarly embarrassed by a gift horse, and managed to get rid of it.

Cuthbert, the third Prior of Lindisfarne, was born in AD634 and probably grew up as a shepherd in the Cheviot fringes, or possibly on the Eildons themselves. At the age of 16 he had a vision of St Aidan being carried into Heaven by angels. He embraced the religious life, and became a novice monk at Old Melrose. Within ten years he was its prior. Old Melrose was a few miles east of the present Melrose, in a bend of the Tweed, but almost nothing remains of it today.



Easter tides and the Synod

The Synod of Whitby was held in AD664: see page 18. It was convened to settle the correct date

for Easter, agreed as the first Sunday after the first full moon after 20th March. A neat consequence of the Synod is that Easter pilgrims who arrive at Beal Sands on the morning of Good Friday will always find the tide is out, ready for their crossing of the Pilgrims’ Path.

Statue of St Cuthbert, Lindisfarne Priory



Old Melrose was a substation of Lindisfarne, founded by St Aidan in AD635 and staffed with monks from Iona. A few years later, Cuthbert's abbot, Eata, was appointed Bishop of Lindisfarne, and he took his capable young prior Cuthbert along with him. So St Cuthbert's Way celebrates Cuthbert's life journey from Melrose to Lindisfarne. But for Cuthbert and his colleagues, 62 miles would have been little more than a weekend break. There must have been much monkish walking back and forth between the two foundations, along the old Roman road through the Cheviots and across Glendale.

Cuthbert also walked much further afield. His missionary journeys probably took him to Iona, and he is recorded in Glen Lyon in central Perthshire. Under Hadrian's Wall near Housesteads is Cuddy's Crag, where he probably preached – Cuddy being his Northumbrian nickname. Every year he walked across England to visit his friend St Herbert, who lived on an island in Derwent Water. His colleagues from Lindisfarne are recorded journeying far north into Scotland as well as south to East Anglia and even Tilbury.

At the Synod of Whitby, the crucial church conference of AD664, England adopted the Roman rather than the Celtic version of Christianity and agreed how to set the date for Easter: see the panel on page 17. Cuthbert was there as a conciliator, and in the following years he helped the Celtic style to be absorbed into the Roman one within the Lindisfarne monastery.

In AD676, aged 42, Cuthbert retired early to become a hermit on the Farne Islands. He built himself a small cell, where he prayed and slept. He hacked a well out of rock, and scraped together enough soil to grow barley. What stands today as Cuthbert's Chapel dates from about 1300 and was restored in the mid-19th century, using woodwork brought from Durham Cathedral. The stained glass windows show Cuthbert as bishop (left) and hermit (right).



In AD 684, at the age of 50, Cuthbert was summoned back to Lindisfarne to become its bishop. Within three years, his health had broken and he was carried back to his beloved Inner Farne to die. Under his brief, Lindisfarne became the library of the church. Scrolls were inscribed on vellum (specially prepared calfskin). Holy Island had its own vellum factory with two workshops, a slaughterhouse and a midden with the bones of scores of calves. Hundreds of books were hand-written and crafted here.

Immediately after his death in AD687, the famous Lindisfarne Gospels were inscribed in Cuthbert's memory. Their 258 pages consumed 130 calfskins, and involved two man-years of work just for the illustrations. The book's decorations included blue lapis lazuli imported from the foothills of the Himalaya.

In AD698, Cuthbert was dug up and found to be miraculously preserved. In later years, Cuthbert's corpse continued his long-distance travels. Following the first Viking raid on Lindisfarne in AD793, Cuthbert and the Lindisfarne Gospels were carried westwards for safety. On its way to Workington his body rested at Cuthbert's Cave: see page 60.

Meanwhile, the Lindisfarne Gospels en route to Ireland were lost in a shipwreck on the Irish Sea. Cuthbert appeared in a vision and told the monks where to find it again, washed up on the shore. Seawater stains on the gospel, now held at the British Library, corroborate this story.

Later, Cuthbert's corpse reached Ripon, but because of marauding Danes, in AD995 it was moved again to Durham. Here a church was built above his new grave. In 1104 his remains were transferred to a shrine in the newly completed Durham Cathedral. This became a popular place of pilgrimage throughout the Middle Ages.

During the Reformation, Cuthbert's shrine was dismantled but the monks managed to hide his remains. In 1827 Cuthbert's coffin, still containing his bones, was dug up and opened. Around his neck was his beautiful pectoral (chest-worn) cross, made of gold and studded with garnets. His original (AD698) coffin and this cross are on display at Durham Cathedral. A stylised version of the four-armed Cuthbert Cross is used today as the logo of St Cuthbert's Way.



The Cuthbert Cross, Durham Cathedral