

## In search of St Aidan and St Cuthbert



**Martin on Holy Island, with Lindisfarne Castle in the distance**

For many years I'd wanted to visit the sites where Christianity was re-introduced into England after the departure of the Roman legions. St Aidan and St Cuthbert were two of the key figures in the renaissance of the Christian faith.



**The statue of St Aidan near to Lindisfarne Priory.**

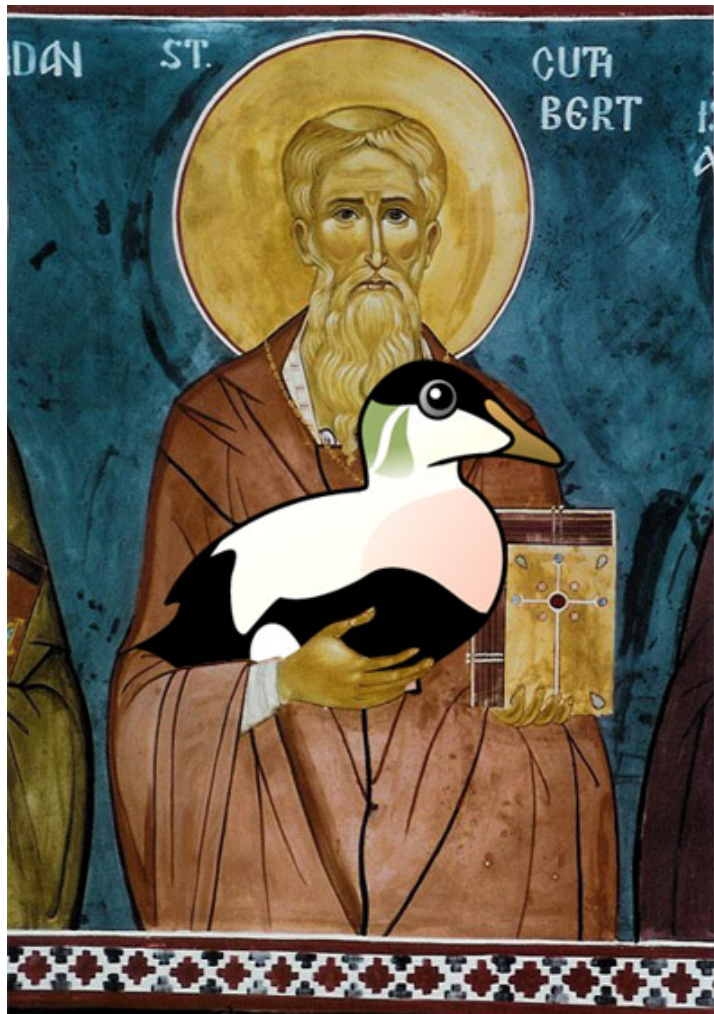
**St Aidan** was born in Ireland and became a monk on the island of Iona. When King Oswald of Northumbria invited missionaries to preach the Gospel in his kingdom, Aidan was sent.

He established a monastery on the island of Lindisfarne which became the centre of missionary activity in the north of England. It also became a valuable centre of learning and an important training ground for those who would continue the work of evangelisation.

Aidan was consecrated a bishop and made Lindisfarne his headquarters. He worked with King Oswald and often travelled with him on missionary journeys, the king acting as interpreter, for at first Aidan was not able to speak the Northumbrian dialect.

Bede described Aidan as "a man of remarkable gentleness, goodness and moderation, zealous for God". Oswald's death in battle was a great blow to Aidan but his successor, King Oswin, was equally dear to him.

After Oswin's murder Aidan only survived a fortnight, dying it is said of a broken heart at Bamburgh on 31st August 651.



An image of St Cuthbert carrying an Eider or 'Cuddy/Cuthbert' duck, a species he is reputed to have helped to conserve.

**St Cuthbert** was born about 634 and legend tells us that as a boy he used to tend sheep on the mountain-sides near the monastery of Melrose. In the year 651, while watching his sheep, he saw a vision of the soul of St. Aidan being carried to heaven by angels, and inspired by this he became a monk.

Eventually he became prior at Lindisfarne (Holy Island ) where he spent much time in evangelizing the local people. He wanted more solitude and time for contemplation so went for a short while first to either St Cuthbert's Isle (off Holy Island) or, as some biographers suggest, St Cuthbert's Cave in Northumberland. Eventually in 676 he moved to the Inner Farne, where he lived in solitude and peace for a while.

While St Cuthbert was on St Cuthbert's Isle he would pray for long times at night on the shores of the sea in all weathers and seasons. Legend has it that the sea otters would come and sit at his feet warming them in the freezing North Eastern weather.

Legend also has it that he, like St Francis, conversed with the local ducks who would flock around him. He also made rosaries from the fossil crinoids washed up on the sea shore. To this day these crinoids (still washed up locally) are known as St Cuthbert's Beads. He is recognised as one of the world's earliest wildlife conservationists and the Eider Duck is known locally as the Cuddy Duck or Cuthbert Duck in his memory. Eventually he left Holy Island and the Inner Farne when he was called back to active service as Bishop of Hexham in 684. For two years he travelled the length and

breadth of the North of England. He had the reputation of being a saint and a worker of miracles even in his lifetime. He returned to Inner Farne and died there on 20 March, 687.



The Gospel of St Matthew from the Lindisfarne Gospels

St. Cuthbert was buried in his monastery at Lindisfarne, and his tomb immediately became celebrated for remarkable miracles. After his death, the [Lindisfarne Gospels](#) an elaborately illustrated book, were created in his honour.

Magda and I booked a week at a [holiday cottage in Waren Mill](#), a couple of miles from Bamburgh, the ancient seat of the kings of Northumbria. The trip north east is a long one and takes the greater part of the day. It's around 260 miles from Sedgley and not terribly straightforward - we found it very handy to have a satnav to negotiate the jumble of motorways around Newcastle.



**The holiday cottage near Bamburgh**



The cottage we rented was superb; it was a barn conversion with all mod cons including a 'walk in' shower, giant screen TV and was part of a complex of similar accommodation. It was an ideal base for exploring the attractions to the north and south.

We were fortunate that Liz and Chris Williams had provided us with a list of places to visit in the area, so we already had a good idea of the main sites. The most 'hyped' attraction in the area is Alnwick and that's where we made for on our first full day out.



**Harry Potter's flying sequences in the first two films were shot at Alnwick Castle**

There are regular adverts on regional TV about it; its main claim to fame is that [Alnwick Castle](#) was used for filming the 'Quidditch' broomstick flying sequences in the first two Harry Potter films made in 2001 and 2002. However we feared the attraction would be very crowded and very child-orientated and opted instead for the equally impressive [Alnwick Garden](#) instead.



**The amazing child friendly water park at Alnwick Gardens**

The Garden has had a great deal of money spent on it - it was restored over a six year period. Prince Charles opened it eleven years ago - returning in July 2012 to open the "Jamie's Ministry of Food" project in the grounds, aimed at helping people learn about food and cooking.

As well as being a wonderful garden, the developers have designed a giant cascade fountain and a range of child-orientated surprise/novelty water fountains. On the day we visited it was very hot and so ideal for young families, whose children revelled in splashing around in the spray.



**Barter Books, at the old railway station in Alnwick**

We also visited a really wonderful bookshop called [Barter Books](#), based in the old railway station at Alnwick. It was reminiscent to the specialist bookshops at Hay-on-Wye, and filled with a range of rare, old and obscure books, with sofas on the floors to while away the time perusing the books at leisure before making one's choice of which to buy.



**The walk out to romantic Lindisfarne Castle**

We devoted a whole day to exploring the '[Holy Island](#)' of [Lindisfarne](#) which is reached by a long marine causeway that's covered by sea for part of the day, so you have to consult the tide tables carefully before you set off to ensure you can get across - and just as important, that you can get back once you're there. There's quite a bit of walking involved: you park in the main visitor car park and walk into the village. Then, around a mile's walk away from the village is [Lindisfarne Castle](#).



The ruins of Lindisfarne Priory, the monastery founded by St Aidan.



**The wooden sculpture of the monks of Lindisfarne carrying the coffin of St Cuthbert, in the church of St Mary the Virgin, Holy Island.**



Returning to the village there are the ruins of [Lindisfarne Priory](#).

St Aidan founded the monastery in AD 635, but St Cuthbert, prior of Lindisfarne, is the most celebrated of the priory's holy men. Buried in the priory, his remains were transferred to a pilgrim shrine there after 11 years, and found still undecayed - a sure sign of sanctity.

Nearby is the church of St Mary the Virgin. The most memorable aspect of the church is the amazing sculpture, carved with a chainsaw from elmwood, depicting the monks of Lindisfarne bearing the body of St Cuthbert away from the island after it was attacked by the Vikings.

Purely coincidentally, Songs of Praise on the day after we returned from Northumberland was broadcast from the church of [St Mary the Virgin, Holy Island](#) and they interviewed Dr Fenwick Lawson the sculptor of 'The Journey' - the striking portrayal of the monks of Lindisfarne with St Cuthbert's coffin.



**The road bridge at Berwick on Tweed**



**A street scene in central Berwick, depicted by LS Lowry in one of his paintings**

We decided to go north to explore [Berwick-on-Tweed](#), the most northerly town in England, close to the Scottish border. It's a charming place, full of arty places and bookshops. The core of the town is Elizabethan, the era when it was extensively fortified. It was a favourite of the artist LS Lowry who spent his holidays there.



**Bamburgh Castle**

[Bamburgh Castle](#) is probably the most imposing fortress of all in Northumberland. It has a long and illustrious history and was owned in the 19th century by Lord Amstrong who made his fortune from the armaments trade. [Lord Armstrong](#) rescued the castle from ruin and added many innovations, some of which he developed himself like the central heating system. He used the castle to entertain and impress his industrialist friends.



**The memorial to Grace Darling who rescued passengers from a boat wrecked on the Farne Islands**

Also in Bamburgh is [St Aidan's church](#). In the grounds there are two memorials to [Grace Darling](#), a lighthouse keeper's daughter who achieved fame in 1838 for rowing out from Longstone Lighthouse to rescue passengers on the Forfarshire, a boat wrecked on a rock near the lighthouse. Her story was taken up by the media of the day and she received a large financial reward and the plaudits of the nation.



**Lord Armstrong's country retreat at Cragside**

In the 1870s Lord Armstrong built a magnificent country house in the middle of a huge estate called [Cragside](#). It is literally built on the side of a cliff and is surrounded by ornamental gardens, an arboretum and woodlands. In the basement of the house he built what must have been one of the world's first saunas, drawing on his knowledge of hydraulics and water supply. There is a magnificent visitor centre with restaurant, several lakes and after visiting the house you can drive round the estate, which takes around half an hour.



**Howick Hall is surrounded by wonderful gardens**



**The altar at the church on the Howick Hall Estate**

On our last day we went to [Howick Hall](#) which is a beautiful house and gardens once owned by [Earl Grey](#), Prime Minister of Britain 1830-34. There are wonderful walks through the woods and a most surprising church in the grounds. Located in one of the reception rooms is the 'Earl Grey Tea Rooms' where we had lunch. The house itself is not open to the public, but you can go round the church.





**A sunny afternoon on Alnmouth Beach**



**St Cuthbert's Cross, Alnmouth**

To finish off our holiday we went to Alnmouth where there is a magnificent beach by the links golf course. As it was a glorious day so we soaked up the sun there, before seeking out the place where [St Cuthbert](#) is said to have agreed to become Bishop of Lindisfarne when petitioned by the king.

[St Cuthbert's Cross](#) is on top of a hill that rises from the shoreline which is only accessible by paddling across at low tide.

This area of England is quite remote and many people are unaware of its beauty. The magnificent weather certainly helped make it more enjoyable, but this was a memorable experience and much recommended.

**Martin and Magda Jones, August 2013**

## Links:

Saint Aidan - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aidan\\_of\\_Lindisfarne](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aidan_of_Lindisfarne)

Lindisfarne - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lindisfarne>

Lindisfarne Castle - <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/lindisfarne-castle/>

Lindisfarne Priory - <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/daysout/properties/lindisfarne-priory/>

St Mary the Virgin, Lindisfarne - <http://www.lindisfarne.org.uk/stmary/tour.htm>

Berwick on Tweed - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berwick-upon-Tweed>

Bamburgh Castle - <http://www.bamburghcastle.com/>

St Aidan's Church, Bamburgh - <http://www.staidan-bamburgh.co.uk/>

Grace Darling - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grace\\_Darling](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grace_Darling)

Cragside - <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/cragside/>

Howick Hall Gardens - <http://www.howickhallgardens.org/>

Earl Grey - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Grey,\\_2nd\\_Earl\\_Grey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Grey,_2nd_Earl_Grey)

St Cuthbert's Cross Alnmouth - <http://www.visitnorthumberland.com/historic-sites/st-cuthbert-s-cross>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuthbert>