

PROGRAMME 5

DARK AGES IN NORTHUMBRIA

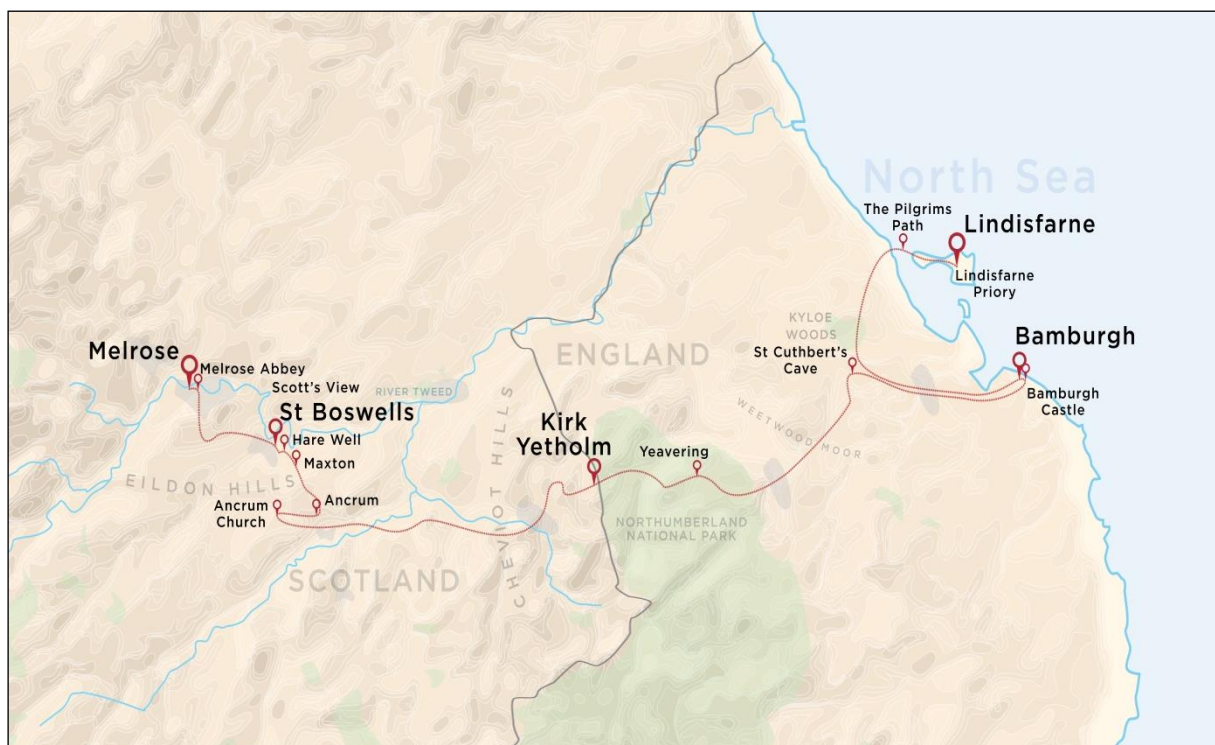


Introduction

On this 4 day walk we head through the spectacular landscape bridging Scotland and England. We step into Northumberland and the mysterious heart of the Dark Ages, to a time when the huge Kingdom of Northumbria was being torn apart, by internal strife and wars with rival kingdoms.

In the middle of this turmoil, a small group of radical Irish monks persuaded the largest kingdom of pagans in the country to put down their swords and become Christians. The charismatic figure at the centre of this mission, who later became a saint, wasn't Irish but a Briton named Cuthbert.

 This 75 mile walk, mainly following 'St Cuthbert's Way' links Melrose Abbey and the holy island of Lindisfarne. The two sites that bookend Cuthbert's religious life. We begin in the Scottish Borders; heading through dramatic scenery to Northumberland National Park, completing Cuthbert's story and our walk on England's Northeast coast.



Day 1

Begins at Melrose Abbey and follows St Cuthbert's Way, through the Eildon Hills and along the River Tweed to St Boswells, uncovering the early religious life of St Cuthbert and the Celtic monks who came to this area. It's also possible to take a detour to Bemersyde Hill for a spectacular view over Cuthbert's early stomping ground.

- ⇒ Melrose to St Boswells, via The Eildon Hills and The River Tweed
Distance: 8.5 miles
Distance with the detour to Bemersyde Hill: 11.5 miles

Day 2

We're off to Ancrum and Kirk Yetholm to find out more about how the early Christian evangelists drummed up support from the native pagans of this land.

- ⇒ St Boswells to Kirk Yetholm, via Maxton and Ancrum
Distance: 24 miles

Day 3

Takes us to one of the most important Anglo-Saxon sites on St Cuthbert's Way, before heading to Bamburgh, the royal seat of the kings of Northumbria, and the house of 7th century power.

- ⇒ Kirk Yetholm to Bamburgh, via Yeavering and St Cuthbert's Cave
Distance: 27 miles

Day 4

The final day's hike takes us to the Holy Island, avoiding treacherous seas on the Pilgrims Path to Cuthbert's spiritual headquarters and the island of his final years, Lindisfarne.

- ⇒ Bamburgh to Lindisfarne
Distance: 16 miles



St. Cuthbert's Way is clearly signed and way marked with the St Cuthbert's Cross symbol, but you will still need to take a map. Please use OS Explorer Maps 338, OL16, 340 (1:25k) or OS Landranger 73, 74, 75 (1:50k). All distances approx.

Walking Through History

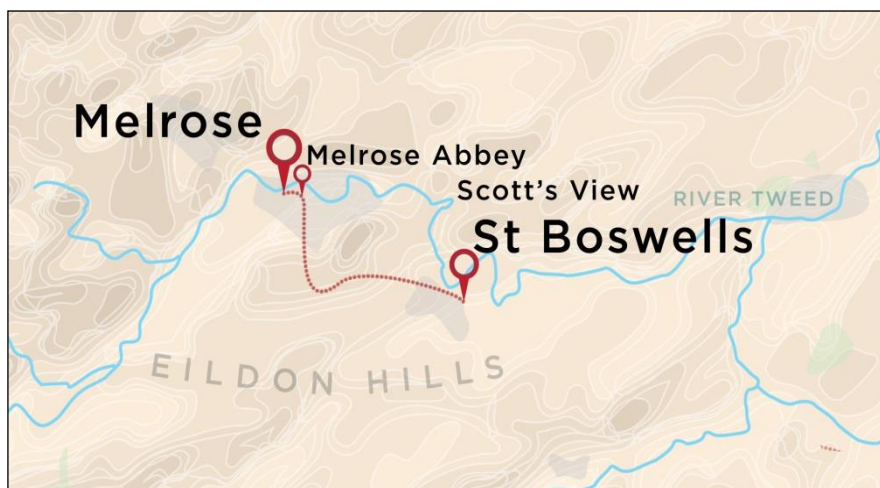


Day 1 – Places of Interest

Melrose to St Boswells via:
the Eildon Hills and the River Tweed

Distance: 8.5 miles

Distance with detour to Bemersyde Hill: 11.5 miles

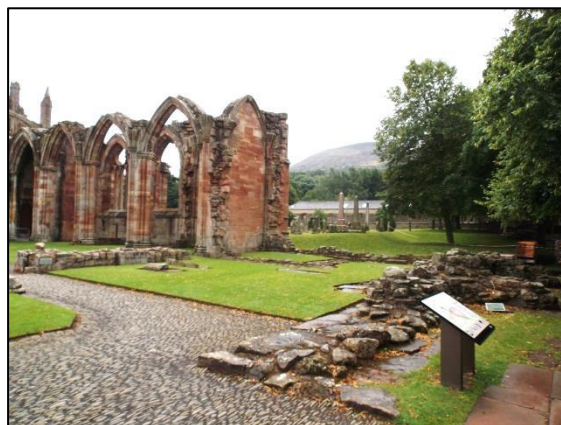


The walk takes us to the Scottish Borders and the village of Melrose, where we begin this historic hike at the Medieval Melrose Abbey. Sadly today, nothing remains of the Melrose Abbey that Cuthbert knew, and there is also no public access to its site, which lies east of the current Melrose Abbey. But if you'd like to stroll around these ruins, an admission fee is payable. For further details check out:

<http://tickets.historic-scotland.gov.uk/webstore/shop/ViewItems.aspx?CG=TKTS&C=WSBORDERS#melrose>

Melrose Abbey

Melrose Abbey now in Scotland, was at the time of Cuthbert's birth in 635 AD part of the old kingdom of Northumbria. This area has one of the most turbulent histories in the country. Back then it was a region of violence and bloodshed. The Abbey that stands today was completed in the 12th century, but it's back in the 7th century that we find Cuthbert's Melrose Abbey. Cuthbert came here, and became a monk in around 650 AD.



Previously, he's thought to have been a shepherd, a soldier and an aristocrat. He joined Celtic monks, with their roots in Ireland, who were here to convert the locals to Christianity. Cuthbert wanted to help in the fight against paganism. His weapons were solitary prayer, curing the sick and feeding the hungry. But that was all he needed to capture the soul of Northumbria. The present Abbey is two miles upstream of the Melrose Abbey that St. Cuthbert first joined in his youth. Cuthbert went on to become the prior of Melrose Abbey, where he gained notoriety, spending time amongst the people, carrying out missionary journeys, preaching and performing miracles.



From the gates of Melrose Abbey, we join the start of St Cuthbert's Way, heading south to begin our pilgrimage through 7th century Northumbria. If you're feeling energetic, a detour towards the end of this day's walk offers spectacular views of Old Melrose, the location of Cuthbert's abbey.

Old Melrose

The geography of the area gives a clue as to why the monks originally chose this place. The word 'mailros' means a bare peninsula. And if you look at an OS Map you can see that the river Tweed virtually surrounds Old Melrose.

It was this seclusion and the river's protection, that made it the perfect spot for an outpost of Christianity, set apart from a pagan land and the brutal feuding of rival kingdoms. After the dangers of a day's preaching in the wilds, this was a safe haven the monks could retreat to.



From Melrose, an invigorating climb takes us over the iconic Eildon Hills whose triple peaks are one of the best loved landmarks in the Scottish Borders. It's a hard climb but when you reach the summit, make sure to pause, catch your breath and take in the spectacular views in all directions. On a clear day, you can see not only Melrose, the Moorfoot and Lammermuir Hills, but also the mighty Cheviot range - the barrier between Scotland and England. Following St Cuthbert's Way we roughly trace the route the monks would have taken from their outpost at Melrose Abbey to their headquarters on the island of Lindisfarne.

Religion in 7th Century Britain

The task of converting was tough. Most Northumbrians were pagan. There had been Christians in the north-east in Roman times, but the Romans had left over 200 years earlier. What followed was a meltdown. The native Britons were overrun by successive waves of Pagan invaders - Angles, Saxons and Jutes - who took over most of the country, and drove the Christian faith out to the western margins. Northumbria quickly adopted the pagan religion of its new Anglian rulers, which meant the people now worshipped a number of gods. It was a pantheistic faith. They believed the landscape was possessed by spirits, and their sacred places were often hilltops, springs or groves of trees. This was the spiritual world Cuthbert and his fellow monks encountered.

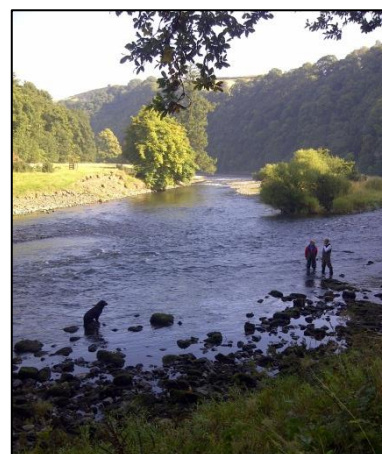


After dropping back down to the village of Bowden, nestling in the lee of the Eildons, the route takes us through gentle farmland and woodland to Newtown St Boswells before heading along the tranquil banks of the River Tweed.

St Cuthbert and the Sea Eagle

At over 100 miles, the River Tweed is one of the longest rivers in Britain. It's an expensive waterway. People spend hundreds of pounds a day for the right to fish it, sometimes for trout, but mainly for salmon. Back in the 7th century, the monks would have fished these waters, but Cuthbert is associated with a very particular story - a miracle involving a salmon.

It's said that during one of his missionary journeys, Cuthbert's young companion asked where they might find their mid-day meal. Famished, Cuthbert assured him to trust in God to provide the food they needed. Just then, as they walked along the river, an eagle swooped down and



snatched a salmon from the waters. The young monk was astonished when the eagle dropped the salmon at Cuthbert's feet. Cuthbert told him to take a share for them and to leave a fair share for the eagle.

 Ospreys are present on the Tweed today, so keep your eyes peeled for this majestic bird as you walk along its banks. Glimpses of Dryburgh Abbey may also be spotted as we head down river before reaching St Boswells where Day 1's walk comes to an end.

That is unless you take the detour...

Detour

In this case we leave St Cuthbert's Way after Tweed Horizons, crossing to the north side of the Tweed at Dryburgh Footbridge. We then climb steadily to the statue of William Wallace and onto the grounds of Bemersyde House, the ancestral home of the Haig family. A minor road is then followed up Bemersyde Hill to the spot of Sir Walter Scott's favourite view across the Tweed to the Eildon Hills.

Scott's View

Sir Walter Scott, a Scottish historical novelist, playwright, and poet was popular throughout the world in the 19th century.

Scott's View is said to be his favourite viewpoint and he often stopped here on his way home to Abbotsford House in Melrose. Legend has it that Sir Walter Scott paused at this point so often that his horse would halt here without command. When Scott died, his faithful horse, part of the funeral cortège, stopped here en route to the funeral, allowing his master a last look at the Borders landscape.

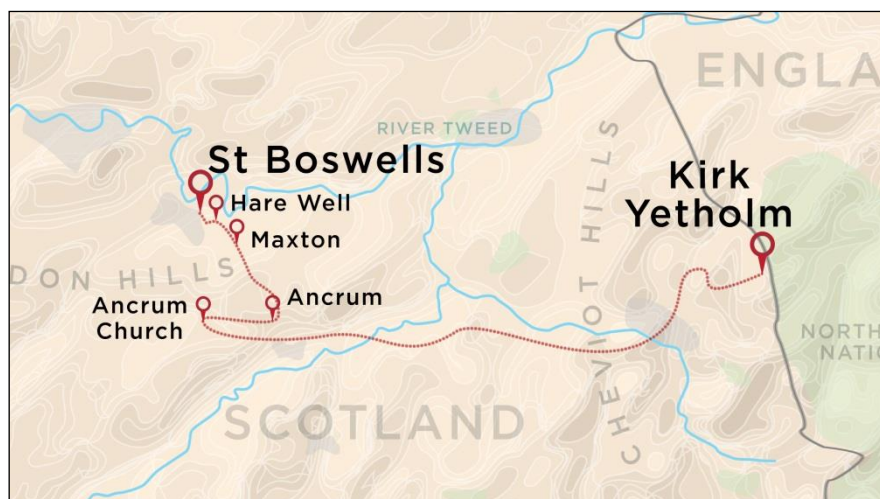


 From Scott's View you also get an incredible view of Old Melrose to the west, note its protected location, flanked on virtually all sides by the river. Once you've marveled at the breathtaking views retrace your steps to rejoin St Cuthbert's Way and head east into St Boswells.

Day 2 – Places of Interest

St Boswells to Kirk Yetholm, via Maxton and Ancrum

Distance: 24 miles



Day 2 of our walk begins at St Boswells and at over 20 miles, it's quite a hike, so be sure to make an early start.

King Oswald and a Christian Takeover of Northumbria

7th century Northumbria was ruled by King Oswald who took the throne when his brother died in 634. Oswald brought Christianity to Northumbria. He'd lived in exile on the island of Iona, and grew up amongst the monks there, becoming a Christian. Oswald's reign sparked an evangelical wave of Christianity; effectively an Irish Christian takeover.

Oswald set about creating monasteries from which these Irish monks could perform their missions to convert Northumbria. Oswald was from an Anglian, therefore from a pagan family, but Christianity offered him a faith focused on one god and one authority, the ideal religion for a ruler who wanted to govern a unified kingdom.

St Boswells

With the help of the Celtic monks Oswald created a monastery at Lindisfarne, the Holy Island. From this new religious centre, a group of young monks were sent out to set up another monastery in Old Mailros (now Melrose) and from this base, they journeyed along the Tweed on missions into the surrounding communities. One of these monks, St Boisil, became well known for his powers of healing and it is he who gave his name to the village and parish Saint Boswells. Boisil was the prior at Melrose when Cuthbert joined the monastery, and perhaps it was stories of Boisil that drew the young Cuthbert to Melrose in the first place.



From St Boswells, we chart the course of the Tweed heading east towards Maxton. This riverside section is one of the most popular walks on the whole of St Cuthbert's Way, so enjoy it! Just before we reach Maxton, Cuthbert's Way passes Maxton Church, which used to be the Church of St Cuthbert, and here we can take a small detour into the woods to investigate the wells that are clearly marked on the OS Map, near St Boswells Burn.

Holy Well (Hare Well)



Since we're on the route the monks took, you'd expect them to have left some archaeology behind and old maps of the area reveal a 'hare well'. 'Hare' comes from 'hearg', old English for holy, so 'Holy Well'.

It's a magical spot, thought to have been a place monks like Boisil brought the sick and ailing for treatment. Water from a natural spring trickles down a channel in a man-made dam, and hidden beneath the undergrowth, some serious engineering forms a large stone

wall and basin, thought to have been used for baptism and healing rituals.



Passing through the village of Maxton, we head south along Dere Street, following in the footsteps of the Romans who built the original road, towards Ancrum where we uncover more about Northumbria's old pagan beliefs.

Christianity - The Hard Sell

Cuthbert and his brother monks wanted to create a lasting Christian community. A belief in the virtue of poverty was always going to be a hard sell to poor people, who were facing starvation and a life usually over by thirty.

But one of the biggest issues was changing the old views and traditions of paganism, with its array of gods and its reverence for hills, rivers and forests. In this environment, with the wonder of nature all around, it's hard to see how the monks were going to make this new faith stick. And remember by and large, this pagan society was illiterate. They didn't rely on reading, instead they listened to stories. So tales like Cuthbert's fish supper were not just charming, they were ways of captivating the pagan audience.



After Harrietsfield we drift west briefly diverting from St Cuthbert's Way to visit Old Ancrum Church.



Old Ancrum Church and a Hog-back Grave

The origins of Old Ancrum Church can be traced back to a monastic settlement dating to the 12th century, and although it was rebuilt in the 18th century, today it lies abandoned and secluded, over half a mile from the current village. But there are clues that the site may date to far earlier than the church ruins, to pre-Christian times.

In the graveyard, located 20 metres south of the ruin is a hog-back stone, a grave from the 9th century. So if this place was being used for spiritual and burial purposes in the 9th century, it's likely that it was also being used in the 6th-7th centuries, when Cuthbert was around. If you changed your religion, becoming Christian rather than pagan, the place of spiritual practice didn't have to change.



It wasn't just pagan spaces; pagan ideas were also colonized by the Christians. The monks didn't dislodge old beliefs; they changed them by negotiation and stealth, introducing the new religion packaged in a way that was acceptable to pagans. As they went around preaching, Cuthbert and the monks tweaked the message making it less foreign and threatening. They made Christianity user-friendly.

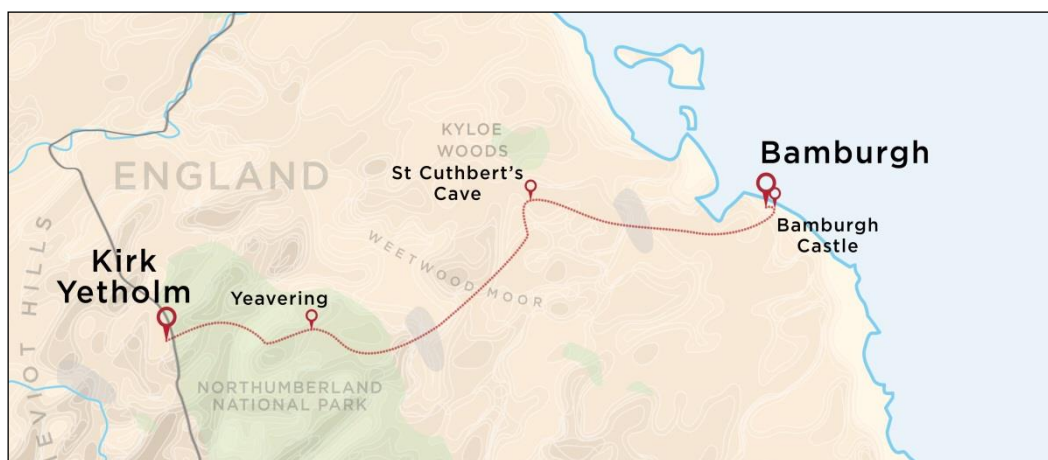


We rejoin St Cuthbert's Way heading through the village of Morebattle. The last miles of today's walk skirt the northern edge of the Cheviot Hills, where once the medieval Melrose monks kept huge flocks of sheep that brought them a large income. We head east through the hills to reach Kirk Yetholm and the end of Day 2's walk.

Day 3 – Places of Interest

Kirk Yetholm to Bamburgh, via Yeavinger and St Cuthbert's Cave.

Distance: 27 miles



On today's walk we leave Kirk Yetholm and the Scottish county of Roxburghshire, and cross the border into England to visit a famous Anglo Saxon royal palace, but first we must scale the Cheviots.

NORTHUMBERLAND NATIONAL PARK

A hike into the Cheviot Hills, a climb the monks would have done every time they travelled south to their Holy Island of Lindisfarne.

Today all we contend with are aching muscles and short breath, but in Cuthbert's time, there were wolves in these hills. It's one of the highest points on St Cuthbert's Way, with views extending over twenty miles back into Scotland, as far as the Eildon Hills.



Today's walk is the longest, but make sure you find time to marvel at the dramatic landscape the border country presents. Following St Cuthbert's Way, we head to Northumberland, the most sparsely populated county in England. Crossing the border into England there's no passport control and the signage is limited, but in Cuthbert's day there wasn't even a border. In those days all the land from Edinburgh to York was part of the mighty kingdom of Northumbria. We now enter Northumberland National Park, one of Britain's best kept secrets. St. Cuthbert's Way drops down via Elsdonburn to Hethpool, at the head of College Valley before taking us through woodland and a track at the Cheviot foothills to Yeavinger.

Yeavinger and Roman Christianity

Yeavinger is one of the most important Anglo-Saxon sites on St Cuthbert's Way. In the early 7th century, it was regularly visited by the Anglian King, Edwin, who became King of Northumbria in 616. At that time, a generation before Cuthbert was born, it was thriving. During this period it was important to be visible throughout the realm, so Edwin would regularly journey from Bamburgh Castle across his kingdom.

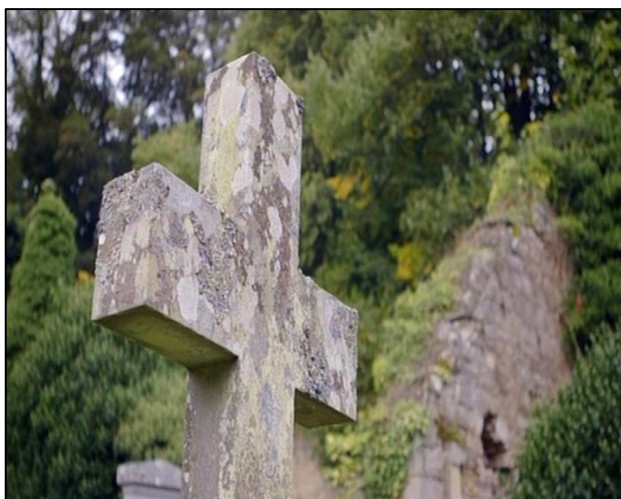
One of the main places he would stay was Yeavering. Huge timber buildings were built here, great halls where the king would feast, entertain, and receive dignitaries from other lands. Edwin and Yeavering also play a crucial part in the story of Christian Northumbria.



Before Cuthbert and the Irish monks started their missionary work, there had been a previous attempt to convert the Northumbrians. A different kind of Christianity came to the kingdom in 625, when a monk called Paulinus travelled north from Kent and converted King Edwin to Christianity. Paulinus was Italian and belonged to the Roman church. But the Roman Christianity he had brought to the area, died with the King. In 633 Edwin was killed in battle and his kingdom overrun. What Paulinus had built here was lost, the area reverted to paganism.

Irish vs Roman Christianity

St Cuthbert went on to become the prior of Melrose Abbey, and as his career progressed he was increasingly drawn into the growing conflict between his church, with its Irish traditions, and the Church of Rome. His take on the Christian faith opposed many of the Roman ideas. Instead of a vast, hierarchical organization, Cuthbert's church was small and closer to both the people and nature. He believed in a life of simplicity, non-hierarchy and community, as opposed to a Roman tradition of power and hierarchy, with its Pope, priests and bishops. Celtic spirituality was much more egalitarian.



In one generation Cuthbert and his contemporaries had evangelized a whole people and their impact was spreading right across Europe. They didn't bow to the power and control of the Roman church. Their authority came from Lindisfarne, or Melrose, and the Roman church wanted to keep them in check. At the same time Roman Christianity was spreading, and there were new Roman monasteries in the south of Northumbria. The rift between the two factions steadily increased and healing this division began to play an increasingly significant part in Cuthbert's life.



The route now heads along a path through the heather over Gains Law, down to the small market town of Wooler. From here it's up over Weetwood Moor. We drop down to cross the River Till via the 16th Century Weetwood Bridge and quiet lanes lead to Horton, and another section of Roman road: the Devil's Causeway, which once linked Corbridge and Tweedmouth. Farmland and woodland tracks lead up to St. Cuthbert's Cave, the first landmark we've come across that actually bears Cuthbert's name.

St Cuthbert's Cave

To understand the significance of this cave, we must jump forward in time to a period long after Cuthbert's death. For the last twenty years of his life, Cuthbert was connected with the holy island of Lindisfarne. It was here his renown as a preacher and healer went interstellar. By the time he died, St Cuthbert's fame was so great people had begun making pilgrimages to the area, he was an international superstar, and the cult of Cuthbert was born.



All this was disturbed in 793. Over a hundred years after Cuthbert's death, tragedy struck the island. Lindisfarne was the first place on British soil to be raided by Viking warriors who sacked the monastery and killed many of the monks. The brutality of it shocked Europe. The raids went on. There was fear and uncertainty for the best part of a hundred years. Eventually, the monks had had enough; they left Lindisfarne and took the body of Cuthbert with them. They travelled all over Northumbria, hiding in the woods, and St Cuthbert's Cave is one of the places it's believed they stayed. It's an extraordinary image, the monks lying in the cave at night with Cuthbert's dead body in a coffin alongside them.



St Cuthbert's Way now heads northeast, but for once we don't follow it. Here we divert from the route, taking a right-hand path named St Oswald's Way and heading south to the coast of Bamburgh where our third day's walking comes to a close.

Day 4 - Places of Interest

Bamburgh to Lindisfarne.
Distance: 16 miles



On the final day of the walk we find out how Cuthbert faced the biggest split in English Christianity since the end of the Roman Empire. We're nearing the end of our St Cuthbert pilgrimage and the climax of St Cuthbert's fame and the conflict between the two churches. Today's walk begins at Bamburgh Castle the royal seat of the Kings of Northumbria from the 6th century. If you'd like to go inside an admission fee is payable. It's open to visitors daily from early February until the start of November. For further details check out - <http://www.bamburghcastle.com/index.php>



Bamburgh Castle

150 feet above sea level and perched on a shelf of volcanic rock, Bamburgh Castle dominates the coastline and the town. It overlooks the Farne Islands and The Holy Island. It was from here that King Oswald brought the Irish monks to Lindisfarne. Today the castle spans over 9 acres and is one of the largest inhabited castles in the country.

From Bamburgh, we retrace yesterday's steps to rejoin St Cuthbert's Way, and this time head north through Kyloe Wood to Fenwick. It's clear to see why this part of the Northumberland coast has been designated an area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. From Fenwick we head to the coast again and it's on to the holy island of Lindisfarne, where we find out how Cuthbert dealt with the clash between the Roman and Irish churches. Holy Island is only accessible on foot at low tide, so timing your arrival at the coast is crucial if you want to walk across. Having reached the causeway at low tide you can choose your final approach, either take the Causeway Road or follow the posts of the historic Pilgrims Path across the sands. For low tide and safe crossing times check - <http://www.northumberland.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=3309> and <http://www.lindisfarne.org.uk/general/travel.htm>

Lindisfarne



Lindisfarne, also known as Holy Island, has a recorded history dating from the 6th century when it became an important centre for early Christianity. The monastery of Lindisfarne was founded by Irish monks sent from the island of Iona on west coast of Scotland, at the request of King Oswald.

The Irish monks settled on Lindisfarne and a priory was founded here in 634. There is now no trace of the 7th century monastery, but today you can marvel at the ruins of the medieval priory, built in its place. Lindisfarne became the base for Christian evangelizing in the North of England and beyond.

When the first monks went out from Lindisfarne to preach and baptise in the wilds of Northumbria, they spoke only Irish, so they were accompanied by officers of the king - sometimes Oswald himself - who translated for them.

But Cuthbert was different; he spoke to the Northumbrians in Anglo-Saxon, their native tongue. He connected with the people and became famous throughout the land for his healing, teaching and miracles. Lindisfarne became home to St Cuthbert, Northumberland's patron saint. He became the Abbot of Lindisfarne, and later in his life the Bishop of the monastery. The oldest piece of English historical writing in existence tells of Cuthbert's life at Lindisfarne and is thought to have been written here between 685 and 704.



A Clash of Two Churches



Cuthbert also had the tricky task of holding the Christian community together in really challenging times. Missionaries from Ireland and Rome were doing things differently. They couldn't even agree on a date for Easter. The royal family was split.

with the Celtic tradition and go their own way; or join Europe and become part of something more global.

The King was brought up on Irish traditions, while his queen from Kent on Roman traditions. She couldn't come to the Easter festivities, because for her it was still Lent. But more importantly things needed to be resolved on an international level: either stick

A synod was held at nearby Whitby, and the decision was finally made to go the international route, with Roman Christianity. In effect the Irish Christians lost. Many returned to Ireland, but Cuthbert stayed in his job now to reconcile the Christian church.



Our walk and St Cuthbert's Way end at Lindisfarne, but Cuthbert's story doesn't quite end here. Whilst you're in the area it's also worth a trip to the island of Inner Farne. It's possible to buy a ticket for a boat from Seahouses, located just a few miles south of Bamburgh. There is also a landing fee payable to the island rangers on arrival. For further details check out - <http://www.farne-islands.com/>

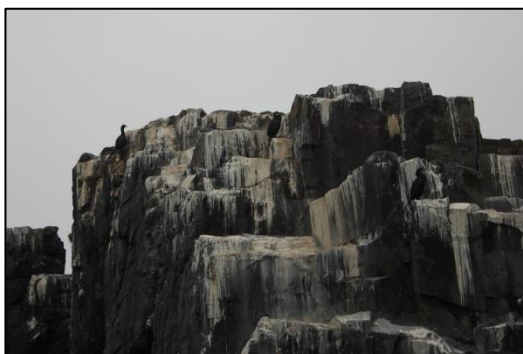
Inner Farne

Cuthbert realised that union with the Roman church was the way forward, but there was still a lot of the Irish radical left in him. He craved solitude and hardship, the life of a hermit.

He eventually retreated to Inner Farne, a remote and barren island off the Northumbrian coast, to spend his days fasting and praying. The island was thought to be haunted by devils, and Cuthbert was the first man brave enough to live there and fight them.



The largest of the Farne Islands, Inner Farne is a haven for wildlife. It harbours a vast grey seal colony and in the summer months is home to tens of thousands of nesting seabirds. Including - Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills, Arctic Terns, Shags, Cormorants and Eider ducks. Locally Eider ducks are known as Cuddy ducks or St Cuthbert ducks, as the saint was known for his care of these birds. In 676 he passed decrees protecting the Eider ducks and other seabirds nesting on the islands. These acts are thought to be the earliest bird protection laws anywhere in the world!



For 12 years St Cuthbert retired to Inner Farne, until he became Bishop of Lindisfarne in 684. He returned to Inner Farne when his health deteriorated and he died on the Island on 20th March 687. The church built here in 1370 is dedicated to St Cuthbert while a peel tower, originally a fortification built in the 1500s, now home to the islands wardens, is thought to be the original site of Cuthbert's shelter.



Today the Farne Islands are under the guardianship of the National Trust. For more information on the Farne Islands see - <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/farne-islands>