

## Early Medieval History – Northumbria, Yorkshire, Craven, Giggleswick & Middleham K.Kinder 8/24

Over the years I have heard it said that so little is known about the early history of our area that it is not worth exploring without involving a lot of guesswork. That may be partly true, but not entirely. There was a well-recorded time during the late 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD when Northumbrian civilisation was innovative and a way ahead of other parts of the country, but there was also a time after William the Conqueror came to the English throne in 1066, when the area now known as Yorkshire, suffered the worst tragedy of any English region in any time period.

There were remarkable people from the two main Christian traditions, Anglo-Saxon -"Roman" and Irish-Celtic from Iona, whose gifts enriched the kingdom of Northumbria from the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century until the Vikings destroyed Lindisfarne in 793 and the Danes invaded and destroyed York in 866. Northumbria produced Bede, the monk of Jarrow, England's first historian, Oswald, the saintly king, responsible for bringing the Celtic missionary, St Aidan from Iona, Cuthbert, saint, missionary and hermit of Lindisfarne, the much-travelled missionary Paulinus, Hilda, head of a joint male-female, Celtic-style monastery and encourager of Caedmon, poet and singer, Alcuin of York, tutor of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne, Wilfrid, founder of the original monastic church at Ripon, one of the centres famous for stone carving, and then of course, there was Eadfrith and the monks who created the Lindisfarne Gospels. The achievements of Benedict Biscop, the abbot-founder of the Jarrow-Wearmouth monasteries, the creator of a great library, and teacher of Bede, are less well-known. Of noble stock, a scholar monk, and a Christian of the Anglo-Saxon "Roman" tradition, he made several journeys to Rome and monasteries in Gaul to bring back books, manuscripts, the skill of stained glass making for windows and the knowledge of building in stone, a knowledge lost since Roman times. He also brought back monks who could teach the Northumbrians how to sing the Divine Office. We learn all this and more from Bede's *A History of the English Church and People*, c731.

As well as churches built in stone, carved crosses began to appear in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, usually on the south side of a church. People talk about the 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century "Celtic" knot-patterned crosses of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Cornwall, but very few know that similar crosses were first created in Northumbria. There was also a school of carving in Otley. In 2019, when I was preparing to write the Guidebook for the St Alkelda's Way, my eye was caught by the plait pattern from St Alkelda's tomb in Middleham Church. Later, I discovered from W.G Collingwood's *Northumbrian Crosses of the pre-Norman Age*, 1989, Llanerch facsimile, that similar carved plait patterns were popular in the last half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century during which Alkelda was martyred. This is yet another reason for saying, she was "probably" a historical person. A source of inspiration on the Guide book cover is a photograph of the stained glass panel which was found in a dirty, dusty state in Giggleswick Parish room in 2015. It was cleaned, restored and fitted into a church window. Dated to between 1920-30, an object of considerable beauty, the panel depicts St Alkelda's death by strangulation. Its provenance remains a mystery.

To return to the kingdom of Northumbria -its heyday began in 625 when the two regions of Deira and Bernicia united under King Edwin. He married Ethelburgha of Kent, a Christian of the Anglo-Saxon "Roman" tradition. Edwin became a Christian in 627 and allowed Paulinus and his missionaries to travel all over Northumbria bringing the Gospel to the people. It is recorded that Paulinus visited Burnsall in Wharfedale and Whalley in Ribblesdale. In 637, St Aidan, an Irish Celtic monk from Iona, invited to be a missionary by King Oswald, established a monastery on Lindisfarne. He had the Celtic habit of leaving his monastery at times to go where God had called him. This according to tradition, is what St Alkelda did when she left her home church in Middleham, Wensleydale where she is buried, to travel to Giggleswick through the Yorkshire Dales probably along what is called the St Alkelda's Way, a pilgrimage route, now walked by an

increasing number of people. Web-site: [stalkeldasway.info](http://stalkeldasway.info). Although this is normally a self-guided pilgrimage route, from September 18th-22nd, 2024, the Revd Julie Clarkson, vicar of the Castleberg benefice, will lead a group of 20 pilgrims from Giggleswick to Middleham churches along the St Alkelda's Way. Not all will walk the full 33 miles, but they can re-join at various points to share in activities at churches and at other significant places along the Way.

In all Alkelda's association with Giggleswick, until the end of the nineteenth century when the end "a" was added to her name, Giggleswick church was known privately as St Alkald's, an Anglo-Saxon name. While her holy well, now under the headmaster's house, Giggleswick School, was called St Awkeld's Well. In wills, she appeared as St Alkild. Being of Anglo-Saxon-Northumbrian heritage, Alkelda was not permitted to be publicly associated with Giggleswick Church during the Middle Ages, but she went into folk memory to emerge officially during the eighteenth century. The ruins of an Anglo-Saxon-Northumbrian church in the Giggleswick Church crypt were investigated and described by Thomas Brayshaw during the 1890-2 church restoration. He brought to the surface some carved stones before the crypt was re-sealed. There also appears to be a decapitated Northumbrian cross shaft outside by the small south door. There is no record of either in any church document. In St Mary and St Alkelda's Church Middleham, the only other church dedicated to St Alkelda, her tomb was found again during a restoration in 1878, under the floor of the nave exactly where tradition said she was buried, The local doctor identified the femur as female.

One trait became more obvious as time went on in Northumbria and then in Yorkshire and that was the influence of an amalgamation not only of different peoples – northern and southern English, Irish monks from Iona and then from the ninth century onwards, Danish and English, but also of different Christian traditions in the regions north of the Humber. That proved at first an inspiration for the rich and varied Northumbrian civilisation, but later, it caused division and strife, even when the problem of the conflicting Celtic and Anglo-Saxon "Roman" Christian traditions appear to have been resolved at the Synod of Whitby in 664 when the Church as a whole accepted the "Roman" date for Easter. After 1066, there was the Norman church influence to contend with. I had not realised until recently how this situation also created problems, even at parish church level, when I was trying to put a rough date on the destruction of the Northumbrian – Anglo-Saxon church in the crypt under our present St Alkelda's Church in Giggleswick.

In 866 the Danes attacked and destroyed York and then advanced across the Vale of York killing and burning as they went. St Alkelda we believe, was one of their victims. Eventually they settled and intermarried with the native population, many becoming Christian. York was rebuilt as Jorvik. By 1066, the resulting Anglo-Scandinavian population ruled by Danish rulers was to prove an enormous problem for William the Conqueror. In Craven, the problem was even greater. The Scandinavian influence had greatly increased when in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, waves of former Vikings, now known as Norse, came from Ireland and settled on the Lancashire and Cumbrian coasts, infiltrating Lunesdale and North Craven. William responded with more than his customary brutality. There was another reason; the area carved out of the southern, central and western parts of Northumbria, now known as Yorkshire with its three ridings, had since 886 been under the Danelaw, the inhabitants living by Danish values and customs. Craven had more of this problem than any other Yorkshire region.

From 1996-99, when I was studying Celtic Spirituality for the Archbishops' Diploma for Anglican Readers (lay ministers), I would come across again and again the growing animosity in Northumbria between Celtic, Anglo Saxon, Danish and latterly, Norman "Roman" Christians, the latter used to a highly organised church structure, the former, freely wandering across dioceses, leaving their monasteries, like St Alkelda, and St Cuthbert, to evangelise away from home or go into solitary retreat for a spell. This animosity was certainly part of William the Conqueror's

attitude. Once he became king of England, as we learn from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, he dismissed Saxon bishops as well as the Anglo-Saxon-Danish aristocracy and replaced them with Normans. When he could not get rid of Saxon patronal saints, as he obviously managed with Giggleswick Church, he coupled them with Biblical ones, so we have St Mary and St Cuthbert (Bolton Abbey), St Mary and St Alkelda (Middleham), St Peter and St Wilfrid (Ripon Cathedral) What he did at Durham, really shows the extent he was prepared to go. He destroyed the Anglo Saxon Cathedral dedicated to St Cuthbert and built the magnificent Norman cathedral we see now, dedicated to Christ the King, St Mary the Virgin and St Cuthbert.

When William the Conqueror became king of England in 1066, he faced rebellion in various parts of the country, the worst being a series of Anglo-Danish uprisings in Yorkshire. After spending Christmas in York in 1068, William launched a series of horrific reprisals on people, their land and livestock, which we call the Harrowing of the North. Much guesswork has been applied in discussions about what really happened. Some people believe that “waste” describing the destruction in settlements, was created by years of natural neglect, or happened during raids by the Scots or criminal gangs of Danes, or was due to omissions and mistakes created by the officers conducting the Domesday Book survey in 1089. It was not until I came across the impressive study on the Domesday Book by the research team at Hull University that I became convinced that “vasta, -waste” meant “deliberate devastation” by William the Conqueror’s soldiers in most cases. This devastation was still apparent and recorded 16 years later in the 1086 Domesday Book. There were obviously other isolated causes but which did not have the long term evidence of William’s Final Solution, a combination of “ethnic cleansing” and “scorched earth” policies.

Because the Hull University researches are, quite deliberately, only online, they are available to anyone with a smartphone, tablet or pc.

The purpose of the Hull University Domesday study is given at: [domesday.net/home](http://domesday.net/home)

You will find the Domesday readings for all places at: [opendomesday.org/place](http://opendomesday.org/place) As an experiment, look up Whalley, then in Cheshire, just outside the Craven Yorkshire border. Blackburn, Kirkham and Salford will give similarly positive readings. Many modern settlements simply did not exist then.

Now look up readings for Craven: [opendomesday.org/hundred/craven/](http://opendomesday.org/hundred/craven/) All 125 entries are “waste”:

“According to Domesday, Craven was a desert in 1086, entirely denuded of population and resources, not a single human being or animal is recorded. **Most historians have interpreted this situation as the effect of the Conqueror’s “Harrying of the North” in 1069-70**, though some believe that the apparent desolation of the area is due more to defects in the Domesday record than to the ravaging of the Norman armies.”

[domesdaybook.net/domesday-book/data-terminology/administrative-units/craven](http://domesdaybook.net/domesday-book/data-terminology/administrative-units/craven)

It is obvious that Craven suffered more than any other region of Yorkshire. Devastation was total. Elsewhere, as in habitations including and around Alkelda’s home in Middleham, it was bad, but more selective.

William the Conqueror died in 1087, the year after the Domesday Book was completed. We have no idea when Craven as a whole became re-populated with people and their stock animals, or when the land was re-cultivated, and a church built. Perhaps as a guide, we can look at the church’s benefice board to see when the first village parish priest was appointed. Even then we cannot be sure. It may well have been earlier than recorded. The annihilation of cultures and peoples is still carried on in

parts of the modern world today, There is a lot to encourage and inspire us in the story of people like St Alkelda. While there is much we wish to regret, we are grateful for the power of folk memory to remind us of how much we owe to the character and gifts of others of days gone by.  
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