



# St Hilda

## From 7<sup>th</sup> Century Abbess to Saint today

Hilda lived for 66 years, 23 at Whitby and nearly ten years nearby at Hartlepool. She died 17 November 680 AD and her life continues to evoke a sense of pride in this English woman who stood up to pressure from St Wilfrid of Ripon to conform to the Roman practice of dating Easter.

### Who was Hilda?

She emerges from the pages of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* as a woman of strong character and principles. Although she was portrayed by Bede and Wilfrid's biographer as opposing the, correct in their view, Roman dating of Easter and standing with the Irish clergy against the Romans, it should be remembered that she had been baptized by Paulinus, the monk from Rome sent by Pope Gregory in 601. Paulinus had also instructed her in Christian practices until she was probably 19 years old, i.e. until 633, when he returned to Kent after King Edwin's death.

Hilda, a great-niece of Edwin, re-emerges in Bede's narrative at the age of 33, when Aidan persuades her to leave the South of England and return home to found a small monastery on the North side of the River Wear. The following year, she became abbess of the double monastery at Hartlepool and in 657, founded the double monastery at *Streanæshealh* (Whitby). It was usual in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, for women from royal families to head double houses, i.e. foundations for both nuns and monks. At Whitby, Hilda established the same Rule as at Hartlepool, teaching the virtues of justice, devotion, chastity, and to live in peace and charity. There was meant to be no private property and everything was held in common. And in Bede's words 'so great was her prudence that not only ordinary people but also kings and princes sometimes sought and received her counsel when in difficulties' (*HE* iv.23).

After her death, we need to look to her immediate successor, Ælfflæd, who must have started the first commemorations and then formal memorialization of Hilda's life. Ælfflæd's tenure at Whitby, until 714, coincided with Northumbria's golden age, the time of the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Codex Amiatinus, the various *Lives* or sacred biographies of Cuthbert, Wilfrid, and Pope Gregory, and Bede's earliest works on scripture. No *Life* of Hilda has survived but there are indications that it once did (*Old English Martyrology*).

### When did she become a saint?

We must skip forward to the Conquest and the year immediately following 1066 to hear of Whitby again. This is the story of a former soldier in William the Conqueror's army, the Evesham monk Reinfrid, who wanted to revive Anglo-Saxon monasticism which they knew and valued from the pages of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. The Abbot of Evesham supported Reinfrid's quest and three monks set off around 1074 to travel north. Credit is due also to William of Percy, who gave Reinfrid some land on the site of Hilda's monastery. Reinfrid was a hermit at heart and his devotion attracted many followers so that by the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century there was a large group of men wanting to become monks. After Reinfrid's death, the Percy family maintained their interests and William of Percy's brother, Serlo became prior, followed by a nephew, who became Abbot in the first decade of the twelfth century.

The monks at Whitby dedicated the Abbey church to St Peter and St Hilda; St Peter in memory of the dedication of the 7<sup>th</sup>-century monastic church and St Hilda in memory of its first abbess. Hilda was never formally canonized but by the 11<sup>th</sup> century, she was considered one of the Anglo-Saxon saints. The Whitby monks celebrated her life but whether they originated two miracles of her is not known but by the 14<sup>th</sup> century, two became popular – they are: that St Hilda found an infestation of snakes on the headland and forced them over the cliff where they turned to stone, thus becoming ammonites, and of her banishing geese from the abbey because they ate all the corn. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the arms of the abbey showed three ammonites with snakes' heads.



