



Whitby Abbey

History and Archaeology

The site on the East Cliff looking down on the town and harbour has had a fascinating past for more than 2000 years. Archaeologists discovered Iron Age houses at the cliff edge in the early 2000s but until the foundation of a monastery in the mid-600s, there appears to have been very little activity, except for possibly agricultural use. The absence of finds for the Roman and early Anglo-Saxon centuries points to this conclusion.

St Hilda's monastery must have transformed the East Cliff turning it into a populous and thriving institution of nuns, monks, teachers, students, and other people to grow food, weave cloth, go fishing, and craft people to make some of the objects on display here. The first buildings will have been made of wood, wattle and daub in the traditional style. Hilda established the same Rule as at Hartlepool, taught 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.

The Synod of Whitby in 664 marks the most famous event in the early history and had significance beyond the monastery. The King, Queen, and nobles, several bishops and priests gathered here to decide the date of Easter. Hilda had the role of presenting the case for an older way to calculate the date while Wilfrid of Ripon argued for the use of the calculation recently adopted by the popes in Rome. King Oswiu made the final decision based on practicalities. The popes were the inheritors of St Peter, who held the key to heaven. The pope was the head of the church and his rule should be followed.

The monastic church had been dedicated to St Peter and there was another altar dedicated to St Gregory in memory of that pope who had sent Archbishop Augustine to England in 597 to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. Pope Vitalian had sent Oswiu and Eanflæd relics of St Gregory and it is likely that these were installed in the altar.

Archaeology has helped us to interpret the history but it can surprise us, too. The history has concentrated on St Hilda's tenure at Whitby and mentions her immediate successor briefly, Oswiu's and Eanflæd's daughter, Ælfflæd, but gives no information on successive abbesses afterwards. Much later sources claim that the monastery was destroyed by Vikings in the later 9th century (around 867). The objects from the site north of the current ruined monastic church found in the 1920s have given us a picture of activities during 200 years of occupation through commemorative crosses and grave covers, fashion of clothing accessories, writing, and trading.

Excavation in the 1920s has caused its own problems. It started out as a clearance project to tidy up the fallen masonry in and around the ruins. When interesting finds were discovered, the aim changed to find as many Anglo-Saxon objects as possible. The later medieval period was of less interest to the excavators. The diggers were paid a finder's fee dependent on the value of the object in addition to their wages. However, very little information was kept where items were found. This is reflected in this exhibition – sometimes we cannot tell from which century a particular item comes and this is especially true of the many pins found. Almost all come from casual losses rather than from graves. Also, the site was previously disturbed by the later medieval monks when they landscaped the area around the church.

Immigration of the Vikings started in the late 800s. Their presence in the area can be seen in the local place-names ending in *by* but they seem to have avoided the monastery since very few Viking objects were found on site. It is thought that they settled nearer to the river. However, the burial focus seems to have shifted to Lythe four miles Northwest, where the church holds significant Viking funerary stones.

After the Norman Conquest (1066), William of Percy gave the monk Reinfrid land to start a hermitage. This grew very quickly to a sizable community of people wanting to join a monastery. By the time William of Percy left England to go on crusade to the Holy Land in 1096, Reinfrid had died and Serlo of Percy, William's brother, had become prior. William gave land in and around Whitby and Hackness to the monastery, as well as the port and many churches. Early in the new century, William's nephew became the first abbot of Whitby.

For the next 400 years, Whitby Abbey was an important and successful monastery until Henry VIII dissolved it in 1539. Historical documents show us the gifts to and accounts of the monastery regarding land and churches managed by the monks. Many

describe disputes between Whitby and other monasteries or disagreements between descendants of the original donor and the monks. Our collection of finds from this period is sparse.

The Cholmley family became the owner of the abbey estates in the 1550 and their descendants are still the landowners today. The abbey church and the abbot's house remained the only building standing but the Cholmley's built a new house and hard garden in the mid 1600s. As the church started to crumble, it became a romantic ruin for visitors.

