

## BENEDICT BISCOP, HIS LIFE AND TIMES

I must first acknowledge the help I have received in preparing this talk from 2 people. First from a good friend of mine W Bro Ian Nicholson sadly now departed who was Organist and Church Warden of St. Peter's, Church in Sunderland and from the Venerable Bede himself<sup>1</sup>, but more of him later.

Biscop Baducing or as he was later known Benedict Biscop, after whom my mother lodge was named, was born in the year 628, a Northumbrian Nobleman who grew up in the court of King Oswiu where he was a Thegn to the King for a short while<sup>2</sup>. At the age of 25 he decided to give up the life of luxury at court, and become a Benedictine monk. Incidentally the Benedictines some 300 years later were the order of Christianity followed and supported by King Athelstan during his lifetime, but before settling down to monastic life, Biscop went on a pilgrimage to Rome. It is thought that he was one of the first Englishmen we know of, to have gone voluntarily to Rome and not as a slave or an army conscript.

In fact he made the journey to Rome five or six times throughout his life. It is hard to imagine the hardships and difficulties of international travel in those times; in this he showed his pioneering spirit.

This Pilgrimage had a profound influence on him throughout his life. His interest in Rome was probably aroused by King Oswiu's wife, who came from Kent, where Roman Christianity had been established since the sixth century. Biscop's companion on this first trip was St. Wilfred, who later became Archbishop of York, and the founder of the churches at Ripon and Hexham in 673 and 674.

After his second Pilgrimage to Rome, Biscop entered a monastery on the island of Lerins in the Mediterranean and took the tonsure and the name Benedict. After two years he decided to remain there for the rest of his life. Which is difficult to believe of a man with "itchy feet" such as he. In fact while Abbot of Wearmouth he was continually taking off, and had to appoint his cousin Eosterwine as joint Abbot to keep things going whilst he was away.

At any rate he celebrated his decision to remain in the monastery, by going on another Pilgrimage to Rome. He arrived there in time to see Wigheard being consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury by Pope Vitalian. According to Bede, this was a very welcome appointment of which Bede later wrote the following.

**"This man's consecration the King most anxiously desired, that himself and his subjects, having a**

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<sup>1</sup> Venerable Bede - Lives of the first five abbots of Wearmouth & Jarrow : Benedict, Ceolfrid, Eosterwine, Sigfrid, and Huetbert

<sup>2</sup> St. Benedict Biscop (AD 628-689). An edition of Gibson, E.C.S., *Northumbrian Saints*, S.P.C.K., 1884. Britannia.com. Retrieved on 26 May 2008.

**prelate of their own nation and language, might be initiated with greater ease and perfection in the doctrines and mysteries of faith. For by the hands and instructions of a relative and countryman, those blessings would ever be delivered without the perplexity ever attendant on the intervention of interpreters”<sup>34</sup>**

Unfortunately, Wigheard and his entire entourage died from the plague. Therefore a new Archbishop had to be found. The Pope decided not to wait for messengers to go to and return from England, but offered the See to St. Hadrian the African, who declined, but recommended another man, Theodore of Tarsus (later to become a saint). He was already 66 years old, and not even a Sub-deacon. So he had to be made a priest, then a Bishop, and then be appointed Archbishop. He was the first non-European to be appointed to the See, he had never been to England before and spoke no English. Therefore the Pope looked around for an interpreter and his eyes lit on the young monk Benedict Biscop, who of course spoke English as well as fluent Latin and Greek. So Biscop returned to England as interpreter to Theodore, and in turn was appointed as head of the Abbey of St. Peter and St. Paul at Canterbury. (Two names we shall hear again).

Theodore lived for a further 22 years, and laid the administrative structure of the church in England by dividing it up into dioceses and parishes, a structure which continues to the present day.

After two years St. Hadrian arrived in Canterbury to become head of the monastery, and Biscop was off on his travels again. Biscop was a very rich man, and used his riches to spread Christianity. On his frequent trips he would stay at monasteries en route and would inspect their books. If there were any which interested him, he would arrange for copies to be made ready for him to pick up on his return trip. In this way he gained a tremendous experience of monastic life, and amassed a huge collection of books. He also bought relics of the saints, because people thought that the holiness of the saints ‘rubbed off’ by handling the things they had used, and in particular their mortal remains.

Incidentally Thorney Abbey in Cambridgeshire where Benedict Biscop is reportedly buried & Glastonbury Abbey in Summerset who also claim to have his relics.

Biscop was also a pioneer in the use of the visual aid, by purchasing paintings of the Bible stories. Very few people could read, so the pictures gave them direct access to the stories of the Gospels. On his return

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<sup>3</sup> Venerable Bede - Lives of the first five abbots of Wearmouth & Jarrow : Benedict, Ceolfrid, Eosterwine, Sigfrid, and Huetbert

<sup>4</sup> Centenary History Lodge Benedict Biscop 2795 Ian Nicholson 2003

trip from one of the pilgrimages to Rome, Biscop headed for Winchester to visit his friend the King of the West Saxons, only to find that the King had died. So he came home, home to the northeast where he was made welcome by King Ecgrith. Ecgrith who probably could not read himself was so impressed by the pictures Biscop had brought with him that he gave 70 hides of land at the mouth of the river Wear to build a monastery there. *(incidentally a hide was the amount of land that could support one family for a year, so the grant would have been in the order or 6 to 10 square miles.)*

When Biscop founded the Monastery of St. Peter at Wearmouth in 674, he wanted everything to be done properly in the Roman manner and that meant having the Church built of stone. He wanted something permanent and lasting to signify the Eternity and Glory of God.

The buildings in the Northeast around about then, would have been mud and thatch for the ordinary people, and wood for the rich and nobility. So no one here would have any knowledge of building in stone. Biscop the pioneer went off to France (Gaul as it then was), and persuaded Abbot Torthelm to lend him masons to come to England to build St. Peter's in stone. The west wall of the Church and the lower part of the tower are their handiwork, still to be seen today after more than 1300 years.

Within a year of the foundation being laid, the Church was up and roofed and the first Mass had been celebrated. He wanted the Church to look beautiful so he had stained glass made for the windows, right there on site. Yet another first for Biscop, and a rarity and novelty in 7<sup>th</sup> Century England (Wilfrid Biscop's friend, had had glass put into his Cathedral at York in 670, but it was imported ready-made from Germany). The pictures of the Bible he had hung round the walls as a teaching aid. The Church itself was built to the same proportions as the Temple at Jerusalem, a 3 to 1 ratio. Biscop also wanted the worship to be beautifully sung in the Roman manner, so on another of his trips to Rome he borrowed John the Arch-chanter, the head of the Vatican choir, and he came to Monkwearmouth to teach the monks there, and in the surrounding monasteries Gregorian Chant. <sup>5</sup>

In the year 681, a little boy of 7 was brought to the monastery by his parents, perhaps to be educated, this little boy was Bede, who became known as the Venerable Bede, and who is rightly called the Father of English History. The dark-ages, so called because so little was known about that period ended by one great light shining out of the darkness. This light was Bede; whose written accounts formed the beginnings of English recorded History. It would be difficult to decide who was the greater, Biscop or

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<sup>5</sup> Centenary History Lodge Benedict Biscop 2795 Ian Nicholson

Bede. Most people have heard of Bede, but very few of Biscop. Yet without Biscop and the monastery of St. Peter, there would have been no Bede. At the very least Biscop was the precursor of Bede.

There were soon too many monks for the size of the buildings at Wearmouth, so rather than enlarging the monastery at Wearmouth, Biscop founded the twin Monastery of St. Paul of Jarrow, there were now some 600 monks between the 2 houses.<sup>6</sup>

Ceolfrid was appointed the first Abbot of Jarrow. In 688 When both Eosterwine and Biscop were dying, Ceolfrid became Abbot of the combined Monastery; Biscop spoke often of the need for the two monasteries to stick together, and to see themselves as a unity just as a head and body together make one person.

With all the books he had bought, and the monks who came flooding there to be members of the religious community, Wearmouth & Jarrow became a center of learning, it was famous for hundreds of miles and became more famous still because of the scholarship of Bede, who was born on the monastery land in 674, and was noted for his Bible commentaries and translations, and for his history. It was not exaggerating at all to say that in its day Wearmouth/Jarrow was Oxford and Cambridge rolled into one. So, what kind of man was Biscop? He was a rich man, a great man, with a huge love of Rome, a great regard for scholarship, and an enormous regard for monastic life, above all a great love of God. Itchy feet yes but used in the service of God.

Benedict Biscop was a pioneer a “first” man, putting God first. Nothing much is said by Bede about Biscop, on the other hand, Bede writes that Eosterwine slept in the same dormitory as the other monks; he had no special food, and joined in the manual labour along with everyone else. I think these comments are significant as Bede relates about Eosterwine but makes no such similar comments about Biscop. Nevertheless a very great man putting all the senses to the use of God, hearing with music, touch with the stonework, sight with pictures and stained glass, and smell with incense.<sup>7</sup>

For the last three years of his life Benedict Biscop was bed-ridden struck down with a paralysis suffering his affliction with great patience and faith. Still he did not stop, even from his bed he would send out for copies of books of which He had learned and have copies made and brought back to the twin Monasteries to swell the library, it is estimated that he had a library of several hundred books at the time

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<sup>6</sup> Venerable Bede - Lives of the first five abbots of Wearmouth & Jarrow : Benedict, Ceolfrid, Eosterwine, Sigfrid, and Huetbert

<sup>7</sup> Centenary History Lodge Benedict Biscop 2795 Ian Nicholson

of his death in 690ad aged 62years,<sup>8</sup> He achieved many things in his life, but I think his greatest was perhaps The Venerable Bede, that young boy that he took in and educated. Who continued his work and through his manuscripts became that light in the darkness that was the middle ages.

**Now brethren, that's another story.**

**W Bro. David Dorward PGBurgh**

**WM Court of Aldred No 15**

Additional sources.

- Wikisource:Ecclesiastical History of the English People/Book 4 & 5
- Bede's World guidebook, 2004

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<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia – Benedict Biscop