

THE LIFE OF ST. WILFRID

Wilfrid, the son of a Northumbrian Thegn, was born in 634. His mother died when he was quite young and he did not get on with his stepmother. Wilfrid went to the Court of Oswy, King of Northumbria, where he was befriended by the King's wife, Queen Eanfleda, who sent him to the Monastery at Lindisfarne to study the sacred sciences. Wilfrid who, as one historian said, "*despaired of the insularity of the place*", decided to travel in France and Italy.

Wilfrid stayed for a while in Canterbury, where he studied the Roman discipline under St. Honorius and learned the Roman version of the psalter, which differed from the Celtic version which he had previously used. In 654, St Benet Biscop passed through Kent on his way to Rome and Wilfrid joined him for the sea crossing. Wilfrid firstly reached Lyons in France, where St. Annemund was Bishop. Annemund offered Wilfrid a position of high importance and the hand of his niece in marriage, both of which Wilfrid declined. Wilfrid eventually reached Rome where he continued his studies under Archdeacon Boniface, who was also Secretary to Pope St. Martin.

Wilfrid then returned to Lyons for a further three years, during which time he took the tonsure, which he received in the Roman manner and thus showed his abandonment and dissent of the Celtic customs. Annemund wished to make Wilfrid his heir but unfortunately was murdered before this could take place. It was only because Wilfrid was a foreigner that he escaped with his life.

When Wilfrid returned to England, King Alefrid of Deira, having heard that Wilfrid had been instructed in the Roman discipline, requested Wilfrid to instruct him accordingly.

Alefrid had recently established a Monastery at Ripon, peopled with monks from Melrose on the Scottish Borders, where he wished the Celtic usage to be abandoned and replaced with the Roman usage. The Abbot, Eata, along with Cuthbert and other monks, refused to accede to the King's wishes and accordingly returned to Melrose. Wilfrid was then appointed Abbot of Ripon by King Alefrid. Wilfrid introduced the Rule of St. Benedict and, shortly afterwards, was ordained priest by Agibert, the Frankish Bishop of the West Saxons.

By this time, the whole of England, apart from a small portion South and West of a line drawn roughly from Hastings to Bristol, had been converted to Christianity. The Roman usage, brought to England by St. Augustine, had spread North and West whilst the Celtic usage, brought to Iona by St. Columba, had spread South and East. It might now have been thought that, in the words of the Easter Hymn, "*the strife is o'er, the battle won*", but, alas, this was not to be. There was strong discord as to which usage, Roman or Celtic, was the correct one. There were many differences; each had a different calendar, as a result of which Christmas and Easter, along with other major feasts, were kept at different times; each had a different shaped tonsure and several other differences.

In 663 or 664 – we are not sure of the exact date – a Synod, known in history as the Synod of Whitby, was held to decide which usage was correct. Wilfrid, as Abbot of Ripon, was present, along with all the other Bishops and Abbots. One of the historians said.... "*Wilfrid, by the eloquence of his oration, carried the day*" and so the Roman usage was adopted. Needless to say, some of the Northern Bishops took umbrage, among them

Colman, Bishop of Lindisfarne, who retired to Iona.. Tuda was consecrated Bishop of Northumbria but died very shortly afterwards. Alefrid wanted Wilfrid to be Bishop of York.

Wilfrid was not liked by the Northern Bishops, perhaps because they did not like the way things had gone at Whitby, and Wilfrid rather unkindly regarded them as schismatics.

When it came to Wilfrid's consecration, one historian stated that....."*there were not enough goodly Bishops in the North to carry it out*" So Wilfrid went South and over to France, where he was consecrated Bishop by his old friend Angibert, who had returned to his own country. The question might well be asked as to why the Southern Bishops did not consecrate Wilfrid and the answer may well be found in the Book of Common Prayer of 1662, much of which is based on more ancient usage. In the Preface to the Form and Manner of Making, Ordaining and Consecrating of Bishops, Priests and Deacons it states...."*and everyman who is to be ordained, or consecrated Bishop, shall be fully thirty years of age*" At this time Wilfrid was only just thirty years of age and it is quite possible that he was looked upon by the Southern Bishops as a 'High Flyer' or 'Whizz Kid' and they did not wish to be associated with him either.

For reasons unknown, Wilfrid dallied in France after his consecration, before returning to England. In the meantime, King Oswy, who had succeeded Alefrid, had sent Chad, Abbot of Lastingham, South to be consecrated by Wine, Bishop of the West Saxons, and, on his return, he appointed him Bishop of York. When Wilfrid returned he did not dispute Chad's appointment but retired to his Abbey at Ripon.

Wilfrid often visited Mercia and, on one occasion, brought back with him a monk called Eddius Stephanus who became not only his friend but also his biographer.

In 669 Theodore, the newly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, on his visitation, decreed that Chad's appointment was irregular and Wilfrid was installed as Bishop of York.

Wilfrid travelled extensively throughout his Diocese and, with the assistance of Eddius, introduced Latin into all the churches in his Diocese. Wilfrid was greatly loved by all the people except one, King Egfrid, whose wife, Ethelreda, a niece of St. Hilda, the Abbess of Whitby, had refused, after ten years of marriage, to consummate the marriage. With the assistance of Wilfrid, Ethelreda became a nun at Collingham and was later to found her own Abbey at Ely.

Theodore now decided that Wilfrid's Diocese was too large and, with the support of Egfrid who accused Wilfrid of maladministration, divided the Diocese into three parts and consecrated three new Bishops in Wilfrid's Cathedral in York.

As a result of these events, Wilfrid travelled to Rome to appeal to the Pope. A special Synod was summoned which decreed that Wilfrid was to be restored to his See with the right to appoint his own assistant Bishops. When Wilfrid returned to England Egfrid accused him of obtaining his Papal Decrees through bribery and imprisoned him for the next nine months.

When Wilfrid was released from prison he went to Sussex, where he began the conversion of the pagan South Saxons. Ethelwald, the King of the South Saxons, had already been converted to Christianity in Mercia. King Ethelwald gave Wilfrid some land at Selsey on

which he founded a Monastery, later to become an Episcopal See with Wilfrid as the first Bishop. The See of Selsey was eventually transferred to Chichester in 1075.

Wilfrid spent five years at Selsey and, on the death of Egfrid, was called to London by Theodore, who, regretting his actions in depriving Wilfrid of his See, wrote letters to various people, including Aldfrid, who had succeeded Egfrid as King of Northumbria, and requested his re-instatement. In 689 Wilfrid was restored to his Abbey in Ripon.

Within five years of his return to the North of England, Wilfrid quarrelled with Aldfrid and, as a result, was banished from Northumbria. Wilfrid went into Mercia where Ethelred, the King of Mercia, gave him the vacant See of Lichfield.

Berthwald, who had succeeded Theodore as Archbishop of Canterbury, had no sympathy with Wilfrid and, in response to pleas from Aldfrid and others, called the Synod of the River Nidd, where a decision was made that Wilfrid should resign and retire to his Abbey in Ripon.

Wilfrid again made the journey to Rome to appeal to the Pope and, again, his appeal was upheld.

When Wilfrid returned to England, Aldfrid continued to make life difficult for Wilfrid, until his death in 705. Wilfrid accepted a compromise solution, whereby he retained the See of Hexham but resided in his Abbey at Ripon and John of Beverley remained as Bishop of York.

Wilfrid was a great traveller and spent much of his time visiting the various Monasteries which he had founded. It was during one of these visits, to the Monastery at Fotheringay near Oundle in Northamptonshire, that Wilfrid died in 709. Mary, Queen of Scots was executed at Fotheringay Castle in 1567.

Wilfrid's body was first buried in the Crypt at Ripon but was subsequently transferred to Hexham. His relics were later translated to London and finally to Worcester.

Wilfrid was revered at both Ripon and Hexham and numerous churches have been dedicated to him, including St. Wilfrid's Church, Cantley.