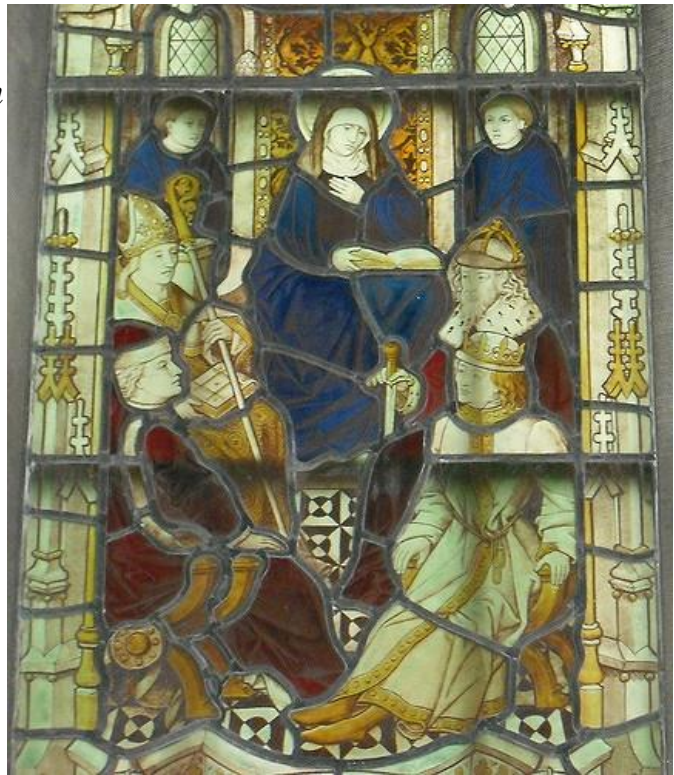


The Synod of Whitby

Abbot John has commanded that a history of our Abbey at Whitby be written, to record the work that has been done in this place to the glory of God.

An extract from the annals of the Abbey of St Peter at Whitby, formerly known as the Priory at Streoneshalh. The year of our Lord 664.

It is well known that in the year of our Lord 664, Oswiu, King of Mercia, Bretwalda of Great Britain took it upon himself to call a synod here at Whitby, to make a decision about whether the people under his protection would continue to follow the ways of the Ionian Church or that of Rome. The deliberations of this synod were recorded by Blessed Bede within the lifetime of some of those who had been present. The Ionian church was an offshoot of the Irish Celtic church, which had begun its missionary work among the pagan Saxons in AD563 with the arrival Columba and twelve of his companions on the Island of Iona. The Roman church had been sending missionaries to convert the heathen people of the Angles and Saxons since the arrival of Augustine in AD597.



The reasons behind the synod were these. Oswiu had been brought up in Ireland in the Celtic Christian tradition. After the death of his father he had had to flee with his mother and brothers to Ireland when he was just four years old, and had not returned until his 21st year. He was fluent in Irish Gaelic, and Celtic in his Christian practice. He became King of Mercia following the death of his brother.

Oswiu would probably never have even had to face the decision between the two branches of Christianity had he not married Aenflaed, daughter of Edwin, King of Northumbria and Aethelburgh of Kent. She had been promised as a Christian from birth, and was baptised by Paulinus, a Roman missionary and first Bishop of York. Throughout her life she followed the teachings of the Roman Church.

One might wonder why there was such a problem in the Royal household with the king and Queen believing different things. Well, there was the obvious, that their households at best took to sniping at each other, and at worse got a little enthusiastic and killed or maimed each other, all in the name of religion. More to the point, it directly affected the way the royal household was run. The periods of Advent and Lent were times of abstinence and fasting, broken with great feasting and jollity.

However as the two churches, Celtic and Roman, could not agree on the date of Easter in particular, the King would want to start feasting when the Queen was still fasting, or at the beginning of Lent the King would begin his Lenten penances and the Queen would still be living the merry life. It was a situation which after many years of married life became unendurable for the King, so he resolved to do something about it. He summoned all the senior church men and women of Great Britain and Ireland to his court sitting here in Whitby and ordered them to present their arguments to him regarding which of the two churches he and his people should follow.

Deusdedit, Archbishop of Canterbury and his entourage would have been impressed when their boat rounded the point and came into the mouth of the river Esk, and up to the harbour below the Abbey. We are told that he would have seen up on the cliffs, high above the port, surrounded by a wooden fence, stood the stone built church at the heart of the Abbey complex, the foundations of which are under our present great Abbey church.

Around the abbey church would have been a number of round huts, some perhaps built of stone, others of wattle and daub, all roofed with thatch. Members of the community, both men and women, for this was then a *conhospitae*, a joint house, would live together in these huts. Some would have married, and their children would be brought up in the community. In those days the community, men and women were led by a woman, the Abbess Hilda. As well as these buildings there would have been accommodation for visitors and a library, a long wooden rectangular building, which would have housed the community's collection of books each hanging in a bag from a peg on the walls. There would have been many valuable books then, as the Abbess was a member of the royal family of Northumbria, and would have encouraged donations to the abbey library. As there are now, there would have been a garden for vegetables and herbs, workshops for metal workers, carpenters and cooks, and stables for horses.

From the safety of the community, missionaries would go out to the surrounding areas to preach and convert the local pagan Saxons. They would have been visible as members of the community as like all members of Celtic religious houses the men would shave their heads forward of a line running from ear to ear, following the inspiration of St John, the beloved disciple to whom Jesus gave his mother, as opposed the tonsure on the back of the head we now wear, to imitate the crown of thorns, following in the tradition of St Peter.

Having guests for the great synod would have meant that members of the community would have had to share their accommodation with some of them, while the most important guests would have been housed in the guest house.

The Synod convened in the Abbey church. The Roman faction led by Deusdedit, archbishop of Canterbury, included Wilfred of Ripon, who was chosen to present the arguments in favour of Rome, as Deusdedit was not a well man. Colman, Bishop of

Northumbria presented the arguments in favour of the Ionian church. The arguments boiled down this, Wilfred stated that firstly, the Roman way of doing the tonsure was the right one as St Peter was the one to whom Christ had given the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Secondly Rome had got the date of Easter right because it was using the more modern and up to date calculations and calendar.

Colman countered saying that the Ionian calculation of Easter was based on the agreement at the Council of Nicea in the year of our Lord 325. Rome had chosen to go it alone on changing the calendar, and in decreeing that Easter could not be celebrated on the same day as the Jewish Passover. This was utterly ridiculous as Christ was himself a Jew, and it was well known that he had died at the time of Passover. To have it at any other time of year was to totally divorce the celebration from the origins of the event itself.

The debate was recorded as being very noisy and acrimonious. Oswiu listened to all the arguments and after consideration decided in favour of Rome as it was to Peter, the founder of the Roman Church that the keys to the kingdom of heaven had been given, so his authority was greater than that of St John.

After the synod, some people left straight away for Ireland, where they would still be able to practice the ways of the Ionian church. Gradually over many years, the Roman way took hold in England. Women were expelled from monasteries and were confined to their own Nunneries or sent back to their families. Marriages of community members were declared as unlawful and children were torn from their parents and sent away. It took about 250 years for the last remnants of the Ionian church to be routed out of the far reaches of Cornwall, but it was finally done, and England at last became a Christian country following the true church.