



Thin Places, Sacred Spaces, Historical Traces

St Helen's Tour of Mystic Britain A Visitors' Guide

Chapter 5 – Lindisfarne; July 2023

From Scotland we decide to start down the east coast of England, where more that is steeped in history and mystery awaits us. Indeed, there is a connection, because the priory at our first stop was established by a monk sent from Iona (remember Iona from last week?) Helen will tell us more about this fascinating link with our past. A little further south and inland, Val will bring another priory, and its origins to life for us at Finchale. Finally we'll make the short trek from there to Durham where John will tell us about the city, the famous cathedral there and the more contemporary St Nicholas' Church (anything younger than two centuries is "contemporary"). So with anticipation, let's press on ...

Just 20 km from the border with Scotland in Northumberland, Holy Island, also known as Lindisfarne, can only be reached via a causeway that is under water at high tide, so planning a visit is important. It is indeed a mystical place with both a castle and priory ruins. In 635 AD, Oswald, King of Northumbria, summoned the Irish monk Aidan (later Saint Aiden) from Iona and asked him to found a monastery here. Forty years later the Prior Cuthbert implemented the decisions of the Synod of Whitby (664) which favoured Roman practices over Celtic ones and became unpopular with the monks. He opted to lead the life of a hermit initially on a tiny rocky island and then on the equally inhospitable but larger



Lindisfarne Priory ruins (photo: Henry Giroux)



island of Farne a couple of miles further out to sea. In 685 he was recalled and made Bishop and once again had to mix with the politicians and courtiers of the day. He died in 687 and was buried in the Lindisfarne Priory. Eleven years later the coffin was opened and his body had not decayed, proving that he had been pure, and thus began the cult of Cuthbert leading to his sainthood. By the 8th century, miracles at his shrine were apparently common.

The Priory continued to thrive until Henry 8th took it over in 1537. Its strategic importance led to its use by the military for several centuries.

In 721, Eadfrith, a monk in the Priory, illustrated the Lindisfarne Gospels. The earliest surviving gospel text in any form of the English language, they have miraculously

survived and can be seen today in the British Library. If you are interested, they can be viewed online by searching the British Library website (bl.uk).

Finchale Priory is a 13th century Benedictine priory built by the monks of Durham Cathedral on the site of a 12th century hermitage founded by St Godric of Finchale. The latter was born in Norfolk around 1065. He worked as a peddler before becoming a sailor and working his way through the ranks; some accounts suggest he was the captain of the ship that carried King Baldwin 1 of Jerusalem to Jaffa in 1102. He may even have been a pirate at one point! All accounts agree that he certainly led an interesting life of travel, finally finding himself at Lindisfarne, possibly to visit St Cuthbert's shrine. Here, he underwent a religious conversion and immediately gave up his seafaring life. He did continue to travel and went on certain overseas pilgrimages as well as working for a time as a humble doorkeeper at St Giles Hospital church in Durham.

In 1115 he persuaded the Bishop of Durham to grant him land in a loop of the River Wear at Finchale, to establish a small hermitage. He lived out the final 60 years of his life as a hermit, establishing a growing reputation for piety and wisdom. He is known for his simple lifestyle, sleeping outside in all weather using only branches for protection from the elements, but he was a very knowledgeable man. Leaders such as Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury; and Pope Alexander III sought his advice. After a long illness, probably brought on by the hardship of his self-imposed lifestyle, Godric died in 1170. He was initially buried at Durham Cathedral before being laid to rest in the chapel of St John the Baptist at Finchale. He was never formally canonised, so the term 'Saint' is a bit of a misnomer.

Construction of the priory was a long process. The earliest surviving stonework, along with a fishpond, mill and chapel, date from 1196. Building was completed in 1277 and in 1296, Bishop Hugh Pudsey and his son Henry endowed Finchale as a full-fledged priory with 8 monks and a prior. Finchale was never wealthy. There were 4 permanent monks in residence and every three weeks, another 4 monks travelled from Durham Cathedral for a rest. Finchale was a sort of holiday retreat for Durham with a more relaxed regime than their normally strict one.

In 1536, Finchale Priory (which had 52 monks at the time) was dissolved by Henry VIII and the complex of priory buildings fell into disuse. During the 18th Century parts of the site were 'landscaped' to create a picturesque ruin. The Priory is now in the care of English Heritage.



Finchale Priory across the River Wear (Photo credit staticflickr.com)

A historic city on the River Wear, to the south of Newcastle, our walk takes us to Durham. The name derives from Celtic and Norse sources, and for years was known as Dunhelm. Local legend reckons the city was established in the late 990s AD by divine intervention. The bier of St Cuthbert was apparently being carried around the North and mysteriously came to a halt near this area. No-one could move it further. Cuthbert was an early convert to Christianity known for his evangelical work and miracles who died around 687. According to the 'legend of the dun cow', a local milk maid directed the procession to the settlement of Dunhelm, where the body was laid up in what eventually became Durham Cathedral, where a carving on the south side depicts the legend.

The Cathedral Church of Christ, Blessed Mary the Virgin and St. Cuthbert of Durham dates from 1093. Along with the adjacent castle (an early rectory!), Durham Cathedral has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, one of the finest example of Norman architecture. Occupying a strategic position above the river, it reminds us of the days when bishop had military as well as religious responsibilities.

An imposing structure, the building, with the digital addition of another tower, starred as Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the “Harry Potter” films!

Mysticism flows also towards St. Nicholas’ Church, dating from 1858 and located at the Durham marketplace. The city’s civic church, in the open evangelical tradition of the Church of England, boasts a beautiful spire, but a relatively modern interior. George Carey, later Archbishop of Canterbury, was vicar here from 1975 to 1982. During that time he led a project which removed the pews and the Victorian furnishings to allow the church to be used more flexibly for worship and community activities. Carey’s book, “The Church in the Marketplace” describes the process and its



Durham Cathedral (Photo: Andrew Heppenstall at www.paradoxplace.com)

impact on the life of the parish. This story also had a major, if lesser-known impact on our St. Helen’s, as an inspiring influence when our church was first built in 1993.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Durham,_England
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Durham_Cathedral,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Nicholas%27_Church,_Durham
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuthbert>



It seems silly to us now that the huge schism within the church in the 7th and 8th Centuries between the Celtic (or Ionian) factions and the Roman order was about how to calculate the date for Easter, and tonsure, how the hair of monks

should be cut. To them, however, these were differences of import, causing much rivalry and angst, raising issues of loyalty and political involvement (the Synod of Whitby was presided over by a king of Northumbria) – or were they actually important to them? Is there any chance the rivalry was really about who had control? When we are divided over issues of form, can we look below the surface to see anxiety about being heard, fears about our own significance? When we are thinking of or concerned about ourselves, we can lose the kind of perspective that looking back centuries can give us. Is this perhaps one of the aspects of our nature Jesus was referring to when he said: “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”?

As we visit sites steeped in history that are often obscure, we tend to imbue that mystery with meaning beyond itself. Standing in these ancient ruins, we can feel the thinning of the veil between the spiritual and physical realms, but not everyone who has stood there has perceived that thinning. A “thin place” is just that: thin, not transparent. If we are to experience something of what is on the other side, we must lose much of ourselves and hold onto that which transcends the temporal. It involves effort and discipline on our part.

Your Mystic Britain travel guides

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