



## *Thin Places, Sacred Spaces, Historical Traces*

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

#### Chapter 6 – Yorkshire & Monastic Life; July 2023

We're not going far this week. Continuing down the east coast from Durham, we enter Yorkshire where perhaps the most mystic feature is the plethora of abbeys, priories, convents, friaries, and monasteries, or at least their ruins. Helen is going to tell us a little of the evolution and destiny of these houses, greatly affected by the "Dissolution of the Monasteries" of 1536 to 1539, an event some place amongst the most revolutionary events in English (and probably church) history. While we're in Whitby, Kay will describe her stay at the Priory of the Sisters of the Holy Paraclete there and the kind of impact religious houses can still have. Then we'll revisit the Synod of Whitby (again because we're in Whitby, but also because of its significance to our faith tradition) of which we heard a little last week. Finally, Helen will talk briefly about the custom, associated with St Helen, of throwing coins in wells. So, with hiking boots tightened and alongside our friends, we walk on ...

Why does Yorkshire have so many religious houses? Perhaps it's because many were founded in remote



*Rievaulx Abbey ruins* (photo: [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rievaulx\\_Abbey](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rievaulx_Abbey))

valleys and we can still see the remains, whereas in more populated areas, the sites have been built over and forgotten. Rievaulx, Fountains, Jervaulx, Mount Grace, Whitby, and Bolton are just a few of the once rich and influential abbeys.

Many of the religious houses founded by locals (eg, St Hilda, St Aidan, St Chad, St Cedd) in the 7th and 8th centuries, were wooden structures, later destroyed by Viking raiders. Most,

however, came later, in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries; after the Norman Conquest, an influx of French and other European monks founded new monasteries, sometimes on ancient sites, and over the next few centuries, erected magnificent stone buildings. These Benedictines, Cistercians, Carthusians and Augustinians became known by the habits they wore: hence Blackfriars, White Fathers, Black Canons etc. These houses became the centres of their communities, owning great areas of land with tenant farmers doing most of the work. In medieval times, wool was the most important commodity and the Yorkshire valleys and hills were and still are great sheep country. By the time of Henry VIII in the 1530's, there were almost 900 religious houses. The monks and nuns controlled much of the economy and many had lost sight of their religious calling. Henry, a reformer in need of money to fight France, together with Cromwell and Archbishop Wolsey, took control and initiated the Dissolution of the Monasteries.



*Painting of Fountains Abbey as it is today (photo: wandereringsoul.deviantart.com)*

We do not have time to visit them all; Rievaulx was the biggest and wandering among the ruined walls one can imagine the busy community that once lived and worshipped in this remote valley. Whitby sits high on the cliffs above a busy harbour and can only be reached by climbing the 166 steps from the streets below. Fountains is the most complete and sits in the grounds of a stately home surrounded by water gardens. The entrance to Mount Grace Priory is across a busy divided highway down a country lane. Once there you are struck by the peace, monks here

lived a solitary life each with their own cell and garden, eating alone and coming together only to worship and then returning to their silent contemplative lives. Selby Abbey survives as the parish church in a busy town.

Monastic life is still possible in small pockets of the Anglican Church, for example, the fathers at Mirfield and the sisters at Whitby. In 1915, a young woman, Margaret Cope was called to found an order of teaching nuns. In our congregation Felicia Kwamena and I were both educated by nuns of The Order of the Holy Paraclete in Ghana and Whitby respectively and Kay Richardson spent part of her sabbatical with them. In October 2015, Henry and I were privileged to be able to attend their Centenary Celebration in York Minster and experience that magnificent building filled with worshippers from around the world whose lives have been touched by the sisters.

[www.ohpwhitby.org.uk](http://www.ohpwhitby.org.uk)

I spent ten days at a retreat in the Priory of the Sisters of the Holy Paraclete, Whitby in August, 2004, enjoying the hospitality of the sisters.

They gave me a large room for my stay. I was able to worship with them, eat with them and had use of their

library. In the midst of a very busy life this retreat gave me an opportunity to rest and spend time in prayer and meditation. I was blessed with a spiritual guide to speak to about my prayers and questions. Years later I can see the fruits of this retreat in the continuing of my own relationship with God, and in my deepened interest in Celtic Christianity. The sisters' library allowed me some reading materials on this topic, which has fed me ever since. During the retreat I walked through the gardens of the sisters, was able to reach the beach where there were fewer people and enjoy sitting in the sunshine, when there was some. In the midst of a very busy life, this retreat was a lovely oasis away.



*Whitby Abbey and part of town (photo: Henry Giroux)*



*The Priory of the Order of the Holy Paraclete, photo credit: <http://www.ohpwhitby.org.uk/>*

The Synod of Whitby, 664AD, marked a significant turning point in the development of the English church when it was decided to follow the Roman way of determining the date of Easter rather than the Celtic method. The discussion was recorded by the Venerable Bede and reads like the minutes of such discussions today. If you are a fan of mystery novels as well as mystical places, try reading the Sister Fidelma Series by Peyer Tremaine. The novels are set in the 7th century and give lots of information about the Celtic church and the upheavals of the times. *Absolution by Murder* is set at the Synod of Whitby. The books are available in the public library.

St. Helen's wells. While we are in Yorkshire, we could visit one of the seven St Helen's wells in the area, but not found in the rest of England. We are all familiar with the custom of throwing coins into a fountain; originally young girls threw pins into Holy Wells and tied pieces of cloth on the trees around the well while making a wish or offering a prayer. Many of these wells were dedicated to St Helen; Yorkshire likes to claim St Helen as one of their own as she was born a Brigantine princess (the Brigantine lands stretched across most of northern England) and married a Roman who later became the Emperor Constantius the first. He died at York in 306 AD and their son Constantine, who was campaigning with his father, was proclaimed emperor in York at that time. We all know the rest of the story.

The monastic way of life was clearly a draw, both in Celtic oriented Christianity and within the Roman church. While the eventual wealth and power of the various houses may have contributed to their attractiveness (and to their demise in the 1530's), living apart, even with rigorous regimes, and much time in prayer and worship was the allure for most. Perhaps so many entered because following a spiritual path while "out there" in society is more difficult than doing so while separated. Perhaps they went because the perceived holiness of those already there might rub off on them. Perhaps they were eager to try anything that might bring them into more consistent contact with their God and their spiritual nature, for surely they, like we, had experienced enough of the Infinite and Unknowable to know that they wanted more and were looking for a place where the veil was thinner. Whatever their reasons, we know from what happened to the houses and from the stories of the saints who truly lived their vocation, that some were diverted from the goal when the trappings of wealth, power and the world intruded, while others continued to live in spiritual attentiveness, in "thin places". Perhaps this tells us that thin places, while sometimes encouraged by surroundings and aura, are mostly of our own making.

Your Mystic Britain travel guides