

Benedict Biscop



Benedict Biscop from The Monthly Chronicle of North-Country Lore and Legend 1888

Rome. However, on arrival the Pope asked him to escort the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus, back to England.

They arrived in Canterbury in 669AD and Biscop was put in charge of the monastery there. He stayed in Canterbury until 671AD, when he travelled to Rome again to collect books and study.

The foundation of St Peter's monastery at Monkwearmouth

He returned home to Northumbria in 673AD and was keen to found a new monastery after seeing how successful monastic life was under the Rule of St Benedict. King Ecgfrith, Oswiu's successor, granted him 70 hides of land at the mouth of the River Wear, and here he built the monastery of St Peter. The area is now called Monkwearmouth.

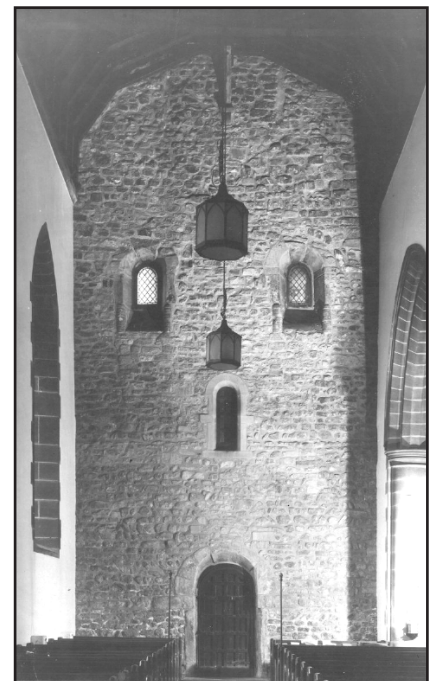
Biscop had learned of the development of Christianity, and had seen the great churches and monasteries in Europe, while on his pilgrimages. At St Peter's, he employed masons and glaziers from France in order to build a stone church, and produce window glass and glass vessels, in the continental Romanesque style. Buildings in Northumbria were normally constructed in timber, so the new church must have seemed very unusual to local people and must have stood out from the wooden houses and barns in the area.

Who was Benedict Biscop?

Benedict Biscop was born in 628AD and was the son of a Northumbrian nobleman. He was named Biscop Baducing, but adopted the name Benedict when he entered religious life. As a young man, he was a thane (lord) to King Oswiu of Northumbria. Then, at the age of 25, he went on a pilgrimage to Rome, where he learned about Roman Christianity. On his return home he set about promoting Roman Christianity, and developed a following in the court of King Alhfrith, son of King Oswiu.

At this time, Northumbria followed an Irish form of Christianity. However, following Biscop's visit to Rome, Roman Christianity became more popular and more influential. So in 664AD King Oswiu, at the Synod of Whitby, decided that the kingdom of Northumbria would follow Roman and not Irish religious practices.

By 666AD Biscop had travelled to Rome again. This time he also journeyed to the monastery of Lérins off the south coast of France, where he took monastic vows. He spent the next two years at Lérins, until returning to Rome for a third time in 668AD. It appears that he may have intended a long stay in



The 8th century west wall of St Peter's



Anglo-Saxon carvings at St Peter's

The growth of St Peter's and the foundation of St Paul's, Jarrow

After the monastery was completed, Biscop travelled to Rome for a fifth time in 678AD, with his associate Ceolfrith, to obtain books, vestments, relics, and paintings for teaching and learning purposes. He also brought back Abbot John Archcantor, the head of liturgy at St Peter's in Rome, to be the choirmaster at St Peter's.

Not long after his return, Bede entered monastic life at St Peter's at the age of seven, and became a pupil of Biscop and Ceolfrith. Following the success of St Peter's, Biscop was granted further land at Jarrow to establish a second monastery in 681AD. The new monastery of St Paul became a twin monastery with St Peter's, and Ceolfrith was appointed as Abbot at Jarrow. Biscop was now in his mid 50s and appointed Eosterwine as abbot at Monkwearmouth, before setting out on his sixth and last journey to Rome. This time he was away for four years and once again he returned with books and religious art.

Biscop's legacy

Biscop spent the rest of his life in the monastery. Before he died he made arrangements for the future of the twin monasteries, and gave instructions for the election of abbots and the preservation of his library. He died at the monastery on 12th January 690 at the age of 62, and was buried close to the altar in St Peter's church.

He is remembered for his dedication to his faith and commitment to establishing Roman Christianity in Britain. Above all, he is remembered for building the monasteries at Monkwearmouth and Jarrow and for making them the great centres for learning and study that produced remarkable scholars, such as the Venerable Bede.

To celebrate the adoption of Benedict Biscop as Patron Saint of Sunderland, a replica copy of the Codex Amiatinus was brought to the City of Sunderland and is currently on loan at St Peter's church where it is displayed. The Local History Library @ ETR also displays a facsimile copy of another great monastic book, the Lindisfarne Gospels.

The manuscript was written around 715-720AD to celebrate the life of St Cuthbert, and was one of the earliest western Gospels. For more details see the web site at www.sunderland.gov.uk/libraries/Lindisfarne-gospels. For more details about the Codex: Amiatinus see the website at www.sunderland.gov.uk/codex



St. Peter's today

Find out more about Benedict Biscop

For more information, visit the Local History Library @ ETR, 64 Fawcett Street, which has many books about the period and written by the Venerable Bede about his colleagues, such as

- "The Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth" translated by Revd Peter Wilcock (1818)
- "The Early Church in Northumbria" by Margaret Gallyon (1977)
- "Northumbria's Golden Age" by Peter Fairless (1994)

The City Library also displays a facsimile copy of another great monastic book, the Lindisfarne Gospels. The manuscript was written around 715-720AD to celebrate the life of St Cuthbert, and was one of the earliest western Gospels. For more details see the web site at www.sunderland.gov.uk/libraries/Lindisfarne-gospels.asp. For more details about the Codex Amiatinus see the website at www.sunderland.gov.uk/codex

To experience where Biscop lived and what life was like in Anglo Saxon England, visit St Peter's church, Monkwearmouth and the living history farm and museum of Bede's World (www.bedesworld.co.uk) and St Paul's monastery and church at Jarrow. The Bede's World web site also has more information about Biscop at www.bedesworld.co.uk/academic-people-benedictbiscop.php.