

King's College Chapel
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Woman of Spirit - Mother Hild of Whitby
The Dean

Hild is one of the remarkable and vivid characters of the Anglo-Saxon era. The Venerable Bede calls her a 'most devoted servant of Christ' in *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Hild was 66 years old when she died having lived 33 years she lived as a lay person and for thirty three years as a nun. Not that she was any ordinary lay person – or for that matter any ordinary nun.

She was born a princess in 614 – and grew up in Bamburgh castle on the north east coast not far at all from the holy island of Lindisfarne where Aidan had established a school of missionaries who were bringing Celtic Christianity to England. She was baptised at the age of 13 in York with her uncle the king. It's impossible to know whether this was by choice or not, but it is clear from the way her life unfolded that her faith was a very deep and significant part of who she was and at some point she must have become, if I can put it this way, a voluntary Christian.

Hild lived in times of great change and upheaval. As well as the spiritual movements that were challenging and changing people's hearts and souls there were constant disputes and battles would have been frequent and brutal. She would have seen plenty of soldiers and battle-scarred people at the castle where she grew up – indeed her name, Hild, indeed means 'battle'. But her own life at the castle would have focussed on domestic duties and we can imagine her developing skills in embroidery and weaving. She did not marry and it was her own decision to become a nun.

Although by this time in her life she was probably living in Kent, and she initially intended to follow her widowed sister into a Frankish monastery, she returned to the north east and joined one of Aidan's training monasteries not on Lindisfarne itself but on the banks of the Wear. She must have quickly impressed Aidan because he soon made her abbess of the convent at Hartlepool. According to Bede, Aidan 'visited her frequently, instructed her assiduously, and loved her heartily for her innate wisdom and devotion to the service of God'. She also impressed King Oswui who put his own daughter into Hild's monastery and later gave Hild land to establish a new double-monastery at Whitby.

We don't know much about what life would have been like here – but double monasteries – those containing both men and women, were not rare in this era. We can imagine the windswept cliff top community reflecting something of the Saxon culture that would have been everyday life at the equally windswept Bamburgh castle when Hild was young, though with a strong theme of Celtic spirituality running through it. This was a world of runes and the hallowing of the ordinary. The famous Whitby comb comes from this era. It is a small piece of bone on which a fragment of a one sentence prayer for help begins in Latin and then stumbles into the vernacular, making it an apt symbol of the cultural diversity that was everyday life in the seventh century Yorkshire. The prayer is not unlike the sort of prayer that visitors leave when in our own St Edward's Chapel 'My God, almighty God, help – name'.

Bede tells us that 'all who knew Hild, the handmaiden of Christ and abbess, used to call her mother because of her outstanding devotion and grace.' Her monastery was a very successful training academy for clergy who would later rise to high office and make a significant difference, including five bishops. Hild's reputation and story became well-known and had its own profound effect on many who heard of her. And there were many who travelled, in those days when travel was arduous and dangerous, to seek her advice and counsel. She made all the members of her monastery follow the Rule of life, insisting particularly on the study of the scriptures, and she ensured that not only was there fairness and justice but also peace and charity. In other words she ran a happy and peaceful family as mother, and gained the trust of many.

It was for this reason perhaps that when the decision was made to gather a synod to discuss the future of the church it was decided that it should be held at Whitby. Hild was responsible for the hospitality – a not inconsiderable task that would have stretched the resources and abilities of her community to the limit.

The synod of Whitby was called to settle a hot ecclesiastical issue. Was the church in England to be Celtic or Roman? The answer, of course, was that the Roman sort won. This must have been hard for Hild to bear as she was after all hosting this event at great personal cost and her whole life was based on adherence to the ways of Aidan and the Irish monks. But Hild, like Cuthbert, understood that once the decision was made it was her job to help people accept it and to move forward with that same spirit of charity and peace. This was perhaps one of her greatest achievements.

And there is another one. Hild was not only a brilliant leader of a community, a forward-looking reconciler and wise and devout person; she was also a talent-spotter. There was a young man in her community who had a gift for poetry and music – Caedmon. He was also a very shy and retiring person, someone of great aesthetic and spiritual sensitivity. But Hild encouraged him and enabled him to develop his unique gift. And so it is that in the annals of English poetry Caedmon is the earliest entry. So if we wanted a patron saint of composers, or spiritual singer-songwriters, we might look to Mother Hild of Whitby.

Hild is one of very few women to make the headlines or achieve celebrity status in the church of the Middle Ages. And yet we see in her a person of rare gifts and profound influence. Taken as a whole she offers a vision of the sort of person whose life reflects the best values of British Christianity. For what we see in Hild is someone whose life is Christ-centred, focused on learning and generous in hospitality; we see someone who is personally and domestically wise, politically astute, conciliatory in defeat, open to inspiration, music and art and encouraging of the young and talented. If we are wise, if we want to live lives worthy of our faith, we could do a lot worse than to allow ourselves to be inspired by her story.