

# SESSION 2 – ANGLO-SAXON NORTHUMBRIA

## THE FIRST ANGLO-SAXONS

The old version of history told us that when the Romans left Britain the Anglo-Saxons overwhelmed the native Celts and drove them out with fire and sword.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, there was certainly a struggle between native Celtic princedoms and the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms that were becoming established in Britain.

## **REFER TO MAP OF ANGLO-SAXON BRITAIN**

In our region there is no evidence of a violent takeover - more likely a palace coup by a band of mercenary Angles supported by a faction of the native Celtic elite.

At that time, the area we now call Northumberland was known as Brynaich, a Celtic word meaning “hilly region”.

For the year 547AD the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records: **“In this year, Ida assumed the kingdom, from whom arose the royal race of the Northumbrians.”**

Ida established his base at Bamburgh and Brynaich was renamed Bernicia.

Ida was succeeded by his sons, who faced a series of attacks by a league of British kingdoms including the Gododdin, Rheged and Strathclyde.

In 593, the Britons made one last attempt to cut off Bernicia from the rest of Anglo-Saxon Britain.

The army of the Britons followed the old Roman road of Dere Street southwards to Catraeth (Catterick), where they were met and defeated by an Anglian army perhaps five times larger, led by Ida’s grandson, Aethelfrid.

## **BERNICA AND DEIRA UNITED**

Aethelfrid became king of Bernicia in 593AD

Bede's "History of the English Church and People" says: **"Aethelfrid was a most mighty king and most ambitious for glory. He ravaged the nation of the Britons more than any other English ruler. No king made tributary to the English, or peopled with English settlers, more territory of the Britons after exterminating or subjugating the natives."**

Aethelfrid's first queen was Ebba after whom he renamed his capital of Din Guaroi as Bebbanburgh, or "Bebba's fortress", which has changed over the years to the modern Bamburgh.

In 603AD, Aethelfrid united his kingdom of Bernicia with Deira, the neighbouring kingdom the south by marrying Acha, the daughter of Aelle, King of Deira. Aethelfrid then had his father-in-law murdered and drove the rest of the Deiran royal family into exile.

The united kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira became Northumbria, "Northan hymbre" – "north of the Humber".

As a result of Aethelfrid's takeover of Deira, Aelle's son Edwin spent much of his childhood in exile at the court of the Celtic Christian king of Gwynedd in North Wales. There, Edwin was brought up as the companion of the king's son, Prince Cadwalla.

Later, Edwin moved to East Anglia under the protection of King Redwald, who was Bretwalda, or Overking of England at that time

In 603, the year he united Bernicia with Deira, Aethelfrid inflicted a heavy defeat over the Britons of the kingdom of Dal Riada, at a place called Degstastan, which was probably located in Liddesdale or Lauderdale.

Aethelfrid's campaigns brought much of southern Scotland and north Wales under Northumbrian control.

On his way back from Wales in 616AD. Aethelfrid was ambushed and killed by the army of King Redwald of East Anglia, near the River Idle in Nottinghamshire

## **EDWIN AND CHRISTIANITY**

After Aethelfrid's death, Aelle's son Edwin returned from exile to take the throne of Northumbria and it was now the turn of Aethelfrid's children to flee from their enemies.

Eanfrid, Aethelfrid's eldest son from his marriage with Ebba, escaped to Pictland, north of the Firth of Forth, while Oswald, Oswy and Ebba, the children of Aethelfrid's second marriage to Aelle of Deira's daughter Acha, found a safe retreat among the Irish Christian monks on the Island of Iona, in the Kingdom of Dal Riada on the West coast of Scotland.

Edwin married Aethelberga, a Christian princess from Kent, who brought her chaplain, Bishop Paulinus, with her to Northumbria.

Paulinus converted Edwin to Christianity and baptised thousands of Northumbrians in the waters of the River Glen beside the royal palace of Ad Gefrin, at Old Yeavinger near Kirknewton.

Archaeological evidence suggests that Yeavinger had been a site of religious significance since prehistoric times and was the site of important archaeological excavations undertaken by Professor Brian Hope-Taylor in the 1950s.

### **REFER TO PLANS OF GEFRIN**

The first plan shows Ad Gefrin as it probably looked in about 600AD, when it became a Northumbrian royal palace in the time of King Aethelfrid.

The most notable feature is the so-called Great Enclosure, at the western end of the site, with massive ditches and wooden palisades that enclosed a prehistoric burial barrow (marked with the circle),

Its significance seems to have been ritual as well as practical. In the Bronze Age there had probably been a standing stone monolith at the centre of the barrow, but this was later replaced with a large wooden post, on which the main buildings of the Anglo-Saxon period site were aligned. At the foot of the post, Hope-Taylor found a grave containing a ritual human burial accompanied by a sheep or goat's skull.

It is unlikely that the enclosure was built to protect the settlement, as the important buildings stand outside it and there was ample room to locate them within the ramparts. Perhaps cattle was corralled there at certain times of the year, when the site was used for ceremonial gatherings.

Ad Gefrin's buildings were constructed of locally-felled wood, mainly oak. Perhaps significantly, one of the nearest hamlets to Ad Gefrin is called Akeld - "oak slope".

The Great Hall in the centre of the site had a fenced courtyard attached and there was another, smaller hall at the western end of the settlement, which may have been some form of temple.

Another building that could have been a kitchen or slaughter-house stood close by. Cattle may have been slaughtered and prepared here as part of a seasonal religious ceremony. There is evidence that ox-skulls were stacked up inside the temple building.

The temple and kitchen buildings stood adjacent to the site of a prehistoric stone circle which had been demolished but was clearly still respected as sacred ground, as the area within the circle was being used as a burial site in early Anglian times.

The most interesting building on the plan is described by Hope-Taylor as an assembly structure. It was apparently built as a semi-circular auditorium, with banked tiers of seating.

The audience would have looked forward to a dias, which seems to have had screens on its flanks and rear, which would have helped to project the voice of the speaker from the dias.

Holes were found that once held large, free-standing wooden posts, rather like totem-poles. Nothing like this structure has been found dating from this period anywhere else in Britain.

Compare the first plan of Aethelfrid's palace with the second plan on the right, which shows the settlement at the height of King Edwin's reign in about 630AD.

The Great Enclosure had been made even grander, with a building that seems to be some form of guard-post at the entrance,

A new Great Hall had been built, in line with the old hall and the barrow within the Great Enclosure, where King Edwin would have feasted with his thegns when they visited the palace. The entrance to the hall was probably flanked by intricately carved wooden panels.

A grave was found in front of the main thresh-hold, containing a human skeleton, a goat's head and two long wooden objects that may have been poles for standards.

Hope-Taylor's excavations revealed that the temple building at the western end of Ad Gefrin had at some time been encased within an outer wooden skin. This seems to provide supporting evidence from contemporary written accounts of the conversion of the English to Christianity.

Letters sent to St. Augustine's mission in Kent give an insight into the way Christianity took over existing pagan sites and customs. At first, Pope Gregory had told his missionaries to destroy the pagan temples, but he quickly changed his mind and sent a second letter ordering that the temples of the old religion should be converted to Christian use. Sacrifices of oxen could continue at times of special festivals when the people "should build around the converted temples huts made of boughs of trees".

The excavators at Yeavinger found post-holes around the old temple building suggesting that a series of temporary shacks had indeed been erected outside the building. Pope Gregory's letter also provides documentary support for the sacrificing of oxen, for which there is ample archaeological evidence at Yeavinger.

The continued use of the burial ground on the site of the demolished stone circle also points to the transition from paganism to Christianity,

## NORTHUMBRIA'S FIRST GOLDEN AGE

King Edwin's sovereignty stretched much further than Northumbria itself and, as Bretwalda, he held nominal over-lordship over all the English kingdoms except Kent, into whose royal house he had married anyway.

### **REFER TO TRIBAL HIDEAGE OF KING EDWIN MAP**

The tribute flowing into Edwin's coffers was recorded in a document called the Tribal Hideage.

The hide was a basic unit of land value that was considered enough to support a freeman, or ceorl.

The tribute payment was made in kind, such as horses, minerals and craftsman-wrought treasures like those found in the famous Sutton Hoo burial.

Bede's "History of the English Church and People" described Edwin's reign as a "Golden Age for Northumbria: **“At that time, as far as King Edwin's power extended, Britain is said to have enjoyed such peace that, as the proverb has it even today, a woman with her new-born child could walk across the whole island from sea to sea and take no harm.”**

Edwin still had enemies, though.

His childhood companion, Cadwalla was now King of Gwynedd in North Wales.

Although Cadwalla was a Christian, he had made an alliance with Edwin's arch-rival, King Penda of Mercia, a ferocious defender of the old pagan religion.

## **DEATH OF KING EDWIN**

Bede's "History" records how Edwin's Golden Age came to an end in 633AD: **"For seventeen years Edwin had ruled most gloriously over the English and British races, and for six of those years, as I have said, he had been a soldier for the kingdom of Christ, when Cadawalla, King of the Britons rebelled against him. Cadwalla received help from Penda, a vigorous son of the royal house of the Mercians, whose reign over that nation extended for twenty two years from that time, with varying fortunes. A fierce battle was fought on the plain called Haethfeld, in which Edwin was killed; the date was the fourth of the ides of October, in the year of Our Lord 633, and Edwin was 48 years old. His entire army was slain or scattered. Also in this war, one of his sons, Osfrith, a warlike young man, fell before him, while the other, Eadfrith, was forced to desert to King Penda, who later murdered him in contravention of an oath, during the reign of Oswald."**

Queen Aethelberga and Bishop Paulinus fled back to Kent and Northumbria reverted to paganism.

Christianity had probably not touched the ordinary folk beyond baptism as Christian services must have been few and far between in Edwin's vast kingdom. When the rulers changed through the fortunes of war, so did the religion of the people in the kingdom.

With Edwin and his sons dead or held hostage, the kingdom of Northumbria split again into its two constituent parts.

Edwin's cousin Osric took the crown of Deira. He attempted to besiege Cadwalla at a town, which was probably York, but Cadwalla broke out, surprising and destroying Osric and his army.

Meanwhile, Aethelfrid's eldest son, Eanfrith, returned from exile in Pictland to claim the throne of Bernicia. After a few months, he decided to sue for peace with Penda. Arriving at Penda's court with a bodyguard of only twelve thanes, he was swiftly put to the sword.

## **DESTRUCTION OF NORTHUMBRIA BY PENDA**

Bede gives a vivid account of the devastation wrought throughout Northumbria by Penda and his ally Cadwalla:

**“At this time a great slaughter took place among the Church and people of the Northumbrians, all the more brutal in that one of the perpetrators was a heathen and the other a barbarian, and even more savage than the heathen. Penda and the whole Mercian race worshipped idols in ignorance of the name of Christ, but Cadwalla, though a Christian by name and profession, had the temperament and character of a barbarian. Showing no mercy even to women and innocent children, he tortured everyone to death with bestial savagery, and for a long time spread havoc throughout their lands, intending to extirpate the entire English race from the land of Britain.”**

Hope-Taylor's excavations at Yeavering revealed a layer of destruction by fire, and violent and deliberate demolition of the buildings on the site, including the Great Enclosure, the Great Hall, Temple and Assembly Structure.

Some of Ad Gefrin's defenders and inhabitants were buried in neat rows at the site. At the centre was the grave of an individual of above average height – about 5' 9" compared with the more usual 5' 3". Perhaps he was Edwin's reeve at Gefrin, or a thane of Anglian stock responsible for organising the local defence.

## KING OSWALD

In 633, after seventeen years in exile, Aethelfrid's sons Oswald and Oswy returned to Bernicia from Iona and marched into Tynedale with a small army to confront Cadwalla's army near the ruins of Hadrian's Wall.

The fight took place by the Rowley Burn, near Chollerford, at a place that came to be called Heavenfield.

According to tradition, on the eve of the battle Oswald had a vision in which St Columba came to him and told him he would gain a great victory over his enemies:

Here is Bede's account of what happened next: **"On approaching this battle Oswald set up the sign of the holy cross and on bended knees besought God to send heavenly succour to his worshippers in the hour of their need; and the place is pointed out to this day and held in great reverence. Indeed it is said that when the cross had been quickly made and a hole made ready for it to stand in, Oswald himself, fired by his faith, seized it and placed it in its hole and held it upright with both hands, until the soldiers heaped up the soil and made it fast in the ground. Thereupon he raised his voice and cried aloud to the whole army: 'Let us all kneel, and together pray the almighty, ever-living and true God to defend us by His mercy from a proud and cruel enemy; for He knows that the war we have engaged in for the deliverance of our people is a just war.' They all did as he had ordered and, advancing this against the enemy as dawn appeared, won the victory as the reward for their faith. At the place where they prayed countless miracles of healing are known to have been wrought, a sure proof and memorial of the king's faith."**

The attack by the Northumbrian army took the superior enemy forces by surprise. Cadwalla was killed and the Britons broke and ran.

Oswald had sworn he would convert his people back to Christianity, and he sought help from Iona. Cormac, the first missionary they sent was not up to the job, and soon went back home complaining that the Northumbrians were "an intractable people of stubborn and uncivilised character".

## AIDAN

His replacement, the Irish monk Aidan, was more successful.

Aidan is usually portrayed as a simple monk, elevated to the status of bishop purely for the purpose of the task in hand. In fact, he had already been bishop of two other island monastic sees in Ireland and Western Scotland, before he came to Northumbria.

Oswald granted to Aidan the island of Lindisfarne for him to found the first monastery in Northumbria.

The raising of new Christian churches that followed Oswald's victory at Heavenfield is reflected in the rebuilt settlement of Ad Gefrin.

## **REFER TO THIRD PLAN OF AD GEFRIN**

Oswald rebuilt the settlement as you see it in the third plan.

All the buildings of Edwin's time had been destroyed by Penda and Cadwallon. The Great Enclosure, Great Hall, the Assembly Structure and the Temple had all been pulled down and burned.

A new set of halls and ancillary buildings was built, situated in echelon from the rebuilt Great Hall.

Oswald's rebuilding did not include the replacing of the old temple and its adjacent kitchen, nor the Great Enclosure. The prehistoric barrow within the enclosure site became part of the church and Christian cemetery that became the new sacred focus at Ad Gefrin.

The assembly structure was rebuilt, but was dismantled again some time later, apparently not by violent means. It seems its original purpose had become redundant.

Unlike Edwin, King Oswald will have spent much of his time in his palaces of Ad Gefrin and Bamburgh, as he was of the Bernician line of Ida and not descended from the York-based Deiran royal house.

Oswald set about re-uniting Northumbria and re-establishing its military and political power. The king accompanied Bishop Aidan as he travelled about the kingdom converting the people to Christianity. According to Bede, they travelled on foot, not on horseback, so they could be close to the ordinary people as they spread the Gospel. As a result, Oswald and Aidan became much loved among the Northumbrians.

### **DEATH OF KING OSWALD**

Oswald met his death as a Christian martyr at the Battle of Maserfield in 642AD, at the hands of his old enemy Penda of Mercia.

The exact location of the battlefield is debated, but was most probably Oswestry - "Oswald's Tree" - on the Welsh border.

Having dispatched Oswald, Penda ravaged Northumbria relentlessly over the next few years, although the monastery on Lindisfarne seems to have survived.

Once again, the excavations at Ad Gefrin revealed evidence of the wholesale destruction the site, with a layer of burned debris and the complete demolition of the buildings.

Northumbria again disintegrated into its constituent kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira.

Oswald's brother Oswy succeeded to the throne of Northumbria, but two years later the crown of Deira was taken by Oswin from the rival royal house.

## **KING OSWY**

Oswy's first task was to re-unite Deira with Bernicia.

First of all, he married Eanfled, Edwin's daughter, who had fled to Kent as a child with her mother Aethelberga after her father's death. This helped bring together the rival royal houses and assisted Oswy's case, but there was still the problem of Oswin "a man of great piety and devotion, who ruled his kingdom for seven years, and was loved by everyone".

Bede records how Oswin was removed from the scene by the good Christian Oswy:

**"But with him (Oswin), Oswy, who ruled the northern part of the land across the Humber, that is the kingdom of Bernicia, was unable to live at peace; and as the causes of their quarrel increased he murdered him in tragic circumstances. The two kings raised an army against each other, but Oswin saw that he decided that it would be better for the present to abandon his intention of fighting and wait for more favourable times. He therefore dismissed the army he had raised at a place called Wolfaraesdun, meaning the hill of Wilfar, about ten miles to the north-west of the vill of Cataracto; and he ordered them to return to their homes. He himself with only one loyal thane named Tondhere went to take refuge in the home of Hunwald, a nobleman whom he also believed to be a good friend. But sad to say, it proved far otherwise; for he and his thane were betrayed by the nobleman, and Oswy had them killed by his reeve Aethelwin, arousing universal disgust."**

It was said that St. Aidan was so hurt by this murderous act against a fellow Christian king that he died a few days later.

Oswy finally defeated and killed King Penda of Mercia at the Battle of Winwaed in 655AD near modern Leeds, re-establishing Northumbria as the Anglo-Saxon super-power and himself as Bretwalda - Overlord of England.

## **SYNOD OF WHITBY**

It was during Oswy's reign that the conflict between the traditions of the Celtic and the Roman Church was finally resolved, at the Synod of Whitby, in 664.

The Roman Church looked on their Celtic brethren as little better than heathens. Paulinus had persecuted the Celtic Christian priests in the British territories conquered by the Northumbrians in King Edwin's time.

They differed over matters such as the calculation of the date of Easter and how they should cut their hair. There were also fundamental differences in the way the monks and priests of the two traditions lived and worked. The Roman Church was run on bureaucratic lines, with a clearly defined hierarchy from the Pope in Rome down to the local parish priest. Churches of the Roman style were built solidly of stone with beautiful decoration and the priests and monks lived apart from the common folk, who provided them with tithes for their upkeep. In the Irish Celtic Church, priests and monks worked in the community, laboured in fields and gardens to produce much of their own food. Their monasteries were largely self-running houses under the rule of their abbot or prior and had buildings made of wood and turf or thatch, in the Irish style.

The confrontation took place in the Abbey of Whitby. It was chaired by King Oswy, who was a follower of the Celtic Church, while his queen Eanfled was a supporter of the Roman tradition.

Speaking for the Celtic tradition was Colman, the Bishop of Lindisfarne.

The senior Roman churchman present was Agilbert, the Bishop of Wessex, but he was a native of Gaul with a poor command of English, so he left most of the talking to an enthusiastic young cleric named Wilfrid, a son of a wealthy Northumbrian nobleman who was a sort of Peter Mandelson spin-doctor type. He had been baptised by Paulinus and brought up in Kent, the first Anglo-Saxon kingdom to be converted to Christianity by St. Augustine who had been sent from Rome by Pope Gregory.

Wilfrid pulled no punches in his argument against the Celtic tradition:

**"The Easter which we observe is the one we saw celebrated by everyone at Rome, where the blessed apostles Peter and Paul lived, taught, suffered and were buried. It is a usage we found to be universal in Italy and in Gaul, lands which we have travelled over for the purpose of study and prayer. In Africa, Asia, Egypt, Greece, and every part of the world where the Church of Christ is scattered, we learned that this practice is followed by different nations speaking different tongues, and all at one and the same time. The only exceptions are this people and their accomplices in stubbornness, I mean the Picts and the Britons, who from these two remotest islands in the Ocean, and from only parts of them, pursue their foolish struggle against the whole world. Your fathers may have been holy men, yet are they, a few men in one corner of a remote island, to have precedence over the universal Church of Christ throughout the world?"**

After much discussion, Oswy decided in favour of the Roman Church, which was probably more a matter of good politics than theological revelation.

Bishop Colman left Lindisfarne with many of the monks who had refused to accept the Roman way, and they set up two new monasteries in Ireland - one for the Irish monks, the other for the English ones!

Morale on Lindisfarne was restored eventually by the new prior, Cuthbert, who was later made Bishop of Lindisfarne and became Northumbria's best-loved saint.

### **KING EGFRITH**

Oswy died in 670AD and was succeeded by his son Egfrith whose wife, Aetheldreda, granted land at Hexham to Wilfrid, where he began the construction of a splendid monastery in the Roman style. Wilfrid's crypt, built mainly of worked stones from the nearby Roman town of Corstopitum, is incorporated in the present abbey church at Hexham.

### **DECLINE OF NORTHUMBRIA**

Egfrith's death in an ill-fated campaign against the Picts in AD 685 brought an end to Northumbria's military supremacy.

Northumbria's power was waning and no future King of Northumbria would be acknowledged as Bretwalda of all England.

A major contributing factor was the financial drain caused by successive kings and queens granting substantial portions of land and wealth to found and support churches or monasteries throughout Northumbria.

With less land left in royal hands to gift to thanes and warriors for loyal service, the kings of Northumbria were less able to raise a substantial armed host and thanes in the royal household might be inclined to support rival claimants to the throne.

Egfrith's illegitimate brother, the scholarly Aldfrid, ruled Northumbria for the next two decades, a period when Northumbria's Golden Age of art and literature came to full flower. The Lindisfarne Gospels were made in about 700AD and dedicated to King Aldfrid.

**BREAK**

## NORTHUMBRIA'S DECLINE

### **FIRST AND SECOND TABLES OF NORTHUMBRIAN KINGS**

Aldfrid died peacefully in his bed in 704, and was succeeded by his 8 year old son Osred. Things soon went rapidly downhill.

Almost immediately there was an attempted coup and Osred was besieged in Bamburgh by one of his chief thanes, Eardwulph.

After being cooped up for two months, Osred's followers broke out and succeeded in capturing Eardwulph, who was promptly executed.

Osred turned out to be a thoroughly unpleasant, dissolute, debauched, godless young man, notorious as a ravisher of nuns. None too soon, he met his end assassinated by rival claimants to the throne.

The prime suspects were Coenred, who was descended by a rather circuitous route from the Bernician royal house, and Osric, who was perhaps a half-brother of Osred. Both had their turn on the throne, to be followed in 729 by Coenred's brother Ceolwulf.

Bede's History of the English Church and People, finished in 731, was addressed to King Ceolwulf and Bede's closing paragraphs reflect the turbulent state of Northumbria at the time:

**"Both the beginning and the subsequent course of Ceolwulf's reign have been filled with so many serious disturbances and misfortunes, that it is as yet impossible to know what to write about them or how it will all end."**

By the time Bede was writing his History, Northumbria was beset by internal disorder and external enemies. Drove of Northumbrians were entering the monasteries, seeking sanctuary from the chaotic worldly life. In Bede's day there were as many as 600 monks and would-be monks at Wearmouth alone.

Ceolwulf himself opted for the quiet monastic life in the end, retiring to Lindisfarne in 737, making way for his cousin Eadberht.

Eadberht faced Picts to the north, Mercians to the south and rebellion within his kingdom. He took on each in turn and, for a while, Northumbria could again claim to be a major military power in England. After 19 years of struggle, Eadberht followed Ceolwulf's example, abdicated and withdrew to a monastery at York.

### THE BUTCHER KING

Oswulf, Eadberht's son and successor, was murdered near Corbridge in 759, the year after he came to the throne.

This time, the chief conspirator was an outsider, vaguely related to the Deiran royal house - Aethelwald Moll.

Aethelwald held the kingdom by force for about seven years before he was deposed and replaced by Oswulf's son Alchred who was in his turn, deposed by Aethelwald Moll's son Aethelthred.

If Aethelwald Moll was a bullying gangster, Aethelthred was an even more unsavoury character who earned the endearing nickname "the Butcher King". One of his first victims was Eardwulf, High Reeve of Bamburgh, who was singled out for harbouring the deposed Alchred. Eardwulf's execution took place at Ripon but when the monks came to tend to the body before burial they found him still alive. The monks gave him shelter and helped him to escape when he was sufficiently recovered.

After a five year rule of terror, Aethelthred was forced into exile.

Next in line was Aelfwald, Eadberht's grandson. His nine year reign was a period of relative peace and justice, which was ended by his murder near Chesters on the Roman Wall.

Aelfwald's nephew, Osred II, son of the deposed Alhred, was betrayed after only a year on the throne, and forced to flee to the Isle of Man.

The villain behind this coup was Aethelthred the Butcher, who returned to the throne and promptly lured Aelfwald's two infant sons to the Lake District and had them drowned in Windermere.

Osred II attempted a come-back. Landing near Maryport in Cumbria, he was deserted by his followers, captured and executed by Aethelthred.

## **VIKINGS**

It was during Aethelthred the Butcher's second reign of terror that an even worse pestilence descended on Northumbria.

In 793, the monastery on Lindisfarne suffered the first recorded Viking raid on the English coast. Many of the monks were killed, and the monastery was ransacked.

Naturally, it was seen by many as a plague sent by God to punish the wayward Northumbrians. The Emperor Charlemagne, from his civilised Roman-style court in France, declared that the Northumbrians were "worse than the pagans themselves".

The following year, the Vikings struck at Jarrow. They were driven off, and a Viking leader was killed, but hit-and-run Viking raids became a frequent fact of life for Northumbrians for the next two hundred years.

Aethelthred met a deserved end when he was murdered in 796.

## **CHANGE TO THIRD TABLE OF NORTHUMBRIAN KINGS**

Aethelthred's successor, Osbald, lasted only 27 days before he was kicked out and a surprise candidate claimed the throne. It was Eardwulf, who had survived Aethelthred's bungled execution attempt. Within a few years, he had been expelled, returned to throne and finally deposed in 810.

England was now facing more than the occasional change Viking raid.

Worst of all, in 867, there descended on East Anglia a huge fleet of perhaps as many as 400 ships carrying what came to be known as the Great Host.

After ravaging the kingdom of the East Angles, the Vikings moved northwards by sea and land, using the old Roman road system to invade Northumbria and capture York.

The many settlements in Yorkshire including Scandinavian elements like 'by' or 'thorpe' are evidence that the Vikings had not just come as raiders, but as settlers.

Two rivals for the throne of Northumbria, Osberht and Aelle, joined forces and attempted to retake York, but the Vikings won the day. Osberht was killed in the battle and Aelle was captured and executed.

The old Bernicia, now renamed Northumberland, became a client kingdom to the Danish kingdom of York that encompassed Deira.

Symeon of Durham recorded in his History of the Church of Durham:

**"Upon the death of these two persons (Osberht and Aella), the thanes appointed Ecgberht as King over such of the Northumbrians as survived, limiting his jurisdiction to those only who resided upon the north of the river Tyne."**

By 874AD, the Great Host was disintegrating into smaller bands under various warlords, as Symeon's History of the Church of Durham recorded:

**"Entering the Tyne with a considerable fleet, Halfdan landed at Tynemouth, where he meant to spend the winter; purposing in the spring to pillage the whole district lying towards the north of that river, which hitherto had enjoyed peace."**

The monasteries of Tynemouth, Wearmouth, Jarrow, and Hexham all suffered:

**"Wherever they came, these buildings were desolated, the treasuries were emptied, the magnificent garments of the priesthood were borne away, the gorgeous coverings of the altars were taken, the vessels and crucifixes of gold and silver, the jewelled gifts and gems of all kinds which had been brought as offerings to the Virgin or patron saint of the establishments were piled up by the sinewy hands of those fierce rovers of the sea and secured as trophies for the far cold North; while the images of the saints, in whose honour they had been presented, were cast down, mutilated or destroyed."**

### **LINDISFARNE ABANDONED**

The monks of Lindisfarne had plenty of warning that they were likely to be next on the list.

Bishop Earwulf decided to evacuate the monastery, taking what relics and treasures could be carried to safety. The body of Cuthbert, together with the head of Oswald (at least one of them!) and various bits of Aidan and other revered incumbents of Lindisfarne were packed carefully into a linen sack, placed in Cuthbert's coffin, which in turn was placed in a wooden chest wrapped in ox hide.

The Congregation of St. Cuthbert left Lindisfarne carrying their precious burden on a journey that would last over 100 years until they found a permanent resting place for Cuthbert's remains, in a horseshoe bend of the River Wear on the peninsula of Dunholme.

Under Danish rule, York had grown into a major trading centre dealing in goods from all over Continental Europe, and even further afield.

The brief Danish Golden Age did not last long and in 910AD, the combined armies of Wessex and Mercia defeated the Northumbrian Danes at Tettenhall in Staffordshire.

However, there was another threat in the form of the Norsemen from Ireland who invaded Northumbria in 914 and, at a battle near Corbridge, defeated an alliance of Northumbrians and Scots under Ealdred, the Earl of Bamburgh.

After a second battle at Corbridge in 918, the Irish Norsemen moved southwards to establish a line of Irish Norse Kings in York.

## **ATHELSTAN, KING OF THE ENGLISH**

The power of the Norse Kingdom of York was short-lived and by 927AD, the authority of Athelstan, King of Wessex, had spread widely northwards and westwards through Britain.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle recorded: **"In this year fiery beacons of light appeared in the northern sky. And (King of York) died, and King Athelstan assumed the kingdom of the Northumbrians. And he brought into submission all the kings who were in the island. First Hywel, king of the West Welsh, and Constantine, King of the Scots, and Owen, king of Gwent, and Ealdred, son of Eadulf, of Bamburgh: and with pledges and with oaths they confirmed peace, in the place which is called Eamot (in Cumbria), on the sixth of the ides of July, and renounced every kind of idolatry, and after that departed in peace."**

In 954, the 'York-folk' expelled the last Norse King of York, Erik 'Bloodaxe', who was pursued and killed on Stainmoor.

From that time, the old kingdom of Northumbria was divided into two earldoms - Deira and Bamburgh - governed on behalf of the over-king of England by a succession of earls and ealdormen selected from the old houses of Bernicia and Deira.

After a period of strong rule from Wessex, Scandinavian attacks on the Northumbrian coast became more frequent again,

In 993, during the reign of Ethelred the Unready, a large Danish fleet landed an army in eastern Scotland that moved southwards to sack Bamburgh. The Vikings also found support in Yorkshire, leaving Bernicia cut off from the rest of England.

Until the mid-10th century, Northumbria still stretched northwards to the Forth. However, by 962, Edinburgh had been retaken by the Scots and, in 1006, Malcolm II of Scotland raided southwards as far as Durham. The Congregation of St. Cuthbert had only recently established itself there, and the newly built church and shrine of St. Cuthbert was only saved by an army gathered by Uhtred, son of Waltheof, the elderly Earl of Bamburgh.

## **LOSS OF LOTHIAN TO THE SCOTS**

King Ethelred was so pleased with Uhtred's success that he made him earl of both Bamburgh and Yorkshire, and also offered his daughter's hand in marriage.

Following Ethelred's death, the Danish adventurer Cnut took the throne. In 1016, Cnut arranged to have Uhtred assassinated, believing he posed a real threat to his control of northern England.

Northumberland rebelled against the Danish overlords, and the disorder following Uhtred's death gave Malcolm II another opportunity to invade Northumbria.

Uhtred's brother, Eadulf Cudel, now earl of Northumberland, engaged the Scots in battle at Carham on the Tweed. The Scots were victorious and Eadulf was forced to cede the Lothians to the King of Scots, creating the borderline along the Tweed that has remained to this day.

The Earldom of Northumberland was now threatened from the west.

Northumbrian control over Cumbria had been lost to a wild mix of Celts, Scots and Norsemen known as the Galwegians and, in 1040, King Duncan of Scotland allied with the Galwegians and invaded Northumbria from across the Pennines.

In 1033 Siward, a Dane, had been made Earl of York by King Cnut. Five years later, he engineered the assassination of Ealdred, earl of Northumberland, one of Uhtred's sons. The renewed chaos in Northumberland encouraged King Duncan to bring a Scottish army southwards again, which was defeated at Durham.

In 1041, another of Uhtred's sons, Eadulf, was killed by Siward, leaving the Dane in total control from the Humber to the Tweed as earl of both Bamburgh and Yorkshire.

Danish rule in England was extinguished the following year, when Cnut's son Harthacnut died. He was succeeded by Edward the Confessor, who had to acknowledge Siward's position in Northumbria.

Siward took the initiative to strike back and recover Cumbria, then advanced into Scotland to support Malcolm Canmore, his favoured claimant for the Scottish throne. With Malcolm as King of Scots and his frontiers secure, Siward died at York in 1055.

Siward was followed as Earl of Northumbria by Tostig who, despite his name, was not a Yorkshire Dane (though his mother was Danish), nor a Northumbrian, but a member of the House of Wessex, in fact he was the brother of Harold Godwinson, the future short-lived King of England. This was an attempt to impose southern rule directly upon Northumbria.

Three years after Siward's death, Malcolm had disposed of his rivals in Scotland and began testing Northumbria's defences.

With no power base in the region that could rely on, Tostig was unable to risk a full-scale campaign against the Scots and was forced to come to an accommodation with Malcolm, which included the passing of control of Cumbria into Scots hands.

Tostig's ineffective defence of Northumbria, together with harsh taxes and other impositions, led to rebellion throughout Northumbria.

He assassinated Cospatrick, Uhtred's last surviving son, and a number of other members of leading Northumbrian families, which incurred even more hatred from the locals and Tostig was driven into exile in Norway.

In his place, the Northumbrians pressed Edward the Confessor to appoint Morcar, a Mercian and known rival of the House of Wessex. Under Morcar, Northumberland was ruled by Osulf, Uhtred's grandson.

## **THE NORMAN CONQUEST**

Tostig returned to Northumbria in 1066 with the Norwegian King Harald Hardrada. The Scandinavians were met at Gate Fulford, within site of the city of York, by a combined army of Northumbrians and Mercians, led by Morcar and his brother Edwin, Earl of Mercia. The Norsemen were victorious, but soon had to fight another battle at Stamford Bridge against an English army hastily brought up from the south by King Harold Godwinson.

The people of Northumberland, the old Bernicia, must have had rather ambivalent feelings towards the outcome of the Battle of Stamford Bridge. They had no love for the Scandinavian invaders and were unwilling to have Tostig's rule re-imposed on them, but neither did they wish to see Northumbria ruled by Harold Godwinson from Wessex.

In the event, of course, the battle was won by the English, but the result was only a prelude to the drama of Hastings, and the Northumbrians soon had to come to terms with a new overlord.

Within weeks, the earls of Northumbria and Mercia were forced to pay homage to William the Conqueror.

At first, the Norman invasion of 1066 brought little change to Northumbria.

William the Conqueror was just another southern king, who was content to leave control of the region to a local man. However, William's choice of Tostig's former lieutenant, Copsig, as Earl of Northumberland hardly went down well.

In 1067, when Copsig tried to enforce King William's strict tax regime, he was captured and beheaded by the Northumbrians.

Uhtred's grandson Osulf, Earl of Bamburgh, might have provided a local hero for the Northumbrian cause, but he was killed by outlaws in the same year.

Morcar and Edwin attempted to raise Northumbria and Mercia against the Normans, but were forced to flee to Scotland and William was able to restore his authority north of the Tyne.

## **HARRYING OF THE NORTH**

In 1069, another rebellion was sparked by the outrageous manner in which some of the Norman lords were enforcing their authority in their newly gained estates.

King William had appointed one of his trusty Normans, Robert de Comyn, as earl of the lands north of the Tees. From his base in Durham, Comyn looted and pillaged the surrounding region and the Northumbrians reacted violently. The lodgings of the Normans in Durham were put to the torch and Comyn was slaughtered, along with some 700 of his men. The traditional story relates that only one Norman escaped to tell the tale to King William.

In 1069 Morcar and Edwin returned to rally the Northumbrians against the Normans, confident that a promised Danish fleet would soon arrive to help them. The first Norman attempt to crush the revolt was beaten back, but William himself soon marched northwards and defeated the rebels near York, which he then ruthlessly sacked, before going back to London.

The Danish fleet eventually landed on the coast of Yorkshire and combined with the surviving insurgents. York was recaptured from the Normans, but the city was almost completely destroyed by fire in the assault. Winter was now coming on, and the Danes sailed home, unable to sustain themselves in the devastated countryside.

During this emergency, Aethelwin, the Bishop of Durham, fled with his monks and the priceless relics of the Northumbrian saints to seek temporary refuge on Lindisfarne.

William the Conqueror came north again and laid waste the whole countryside from York to Durham. For the moment, he was unable to deal with the troublemakers north of the Tyne and, though Earl Cospatric had been involved in the rebellion, William allowed him to continue to govern in Northumberland.

### **BENEDICTINES AT DURHAM**

However, the Northumbrian leaders knew they were on borrowed time.

Bishop Aethelwin decided to make a bolt for it, taking some of Durham Cathedral's treasures with him to pay for his planned escape to the Continent. Unfortunately for him, he was apprehended and thrown into prison in Abingdon.

It is said that, as he was washing his hands, a bracelet dropped out from his sleeve, and King William had him locked up and threw away the key. The last Anglo-Saxon bishop of Durham starved to death in shame.

Aethelwin's bishopric was given to a Norman priest, Walcher of Lorraine.

In 1070, Malcolm of Scotland invaded Teessdale and Durham from Cumbria, the first of many incursions by the king who had the nickname Canmore ("Big head").

By 1072, King William was free to deal with the double threat in the north, the rebel Northumbrians and the Scots King Malcolm, who had taken advantage of the confusion to raid in strength across the Border. William assembled a massive Norman force and moved into Scotland by land and sea.

The Scots withdrew before the overwhelming Norman might and carefully avoided battle.

Finally, the two kings met and signed a treaty at Abernethy and Malcolm was obliged to do homage to William as his feudal overlord, an act which was to lead to centuries of warfare in later years. However, North and South Tynedale were left under Scots control until the reign of Henry II.

On his way back through Northumbria, King William drove out Cospatric and his title of Earl of Northumberland was given to Siward's son, Waltheof.

## **END OF NORTHUMBRIAN INDEPENDENCE**

In 1075, Earl Waltheof made the last attempt to regain Northumbrian independence from Norman rule in an ill-fated rebellion, which quickly failed. Waltheof was captured and executed and the title of Earl of Northumberland was given to Bishop Walcher. This was the foundation of the unique combination of religious and secular powers exercised throughout the Middle Ages by the Prince Bishops of Durham.

However in 1080, Walcher was lured into a trap and murdered at Gateshead by Northumbrian conspirators.

After Walcher's death, a Norman baron, Aubrey de Coucy, was made Earl of Northumberland and William of St. Calais was appointed Bishop of Durham.

St. Calais set about establishing Durham Cathedral as a regular Benedictine Abbey, replacing the Anglo-Saxon Community of St. Cuthbert with a convent of Benedictine monks drawn from the monasteries at Jarrow and Wearmouth.

In 1091, Malcolm of Scotland again invaded Northumbria. The new king, William the Conqueror's son William Rufus, reacted swiftly. He took back Cumbria and built a massive castle at Carlisle to stamp Norman authority on the area.

King Malcolm's final invasion ended in his defeat and death at Alnwick in 1093

Traditionally, the Earls of Northumbria held considerable autonomy north of the Tees, but Robert de Mowbray overstepped the mark when he confiscated the goods of four Norwegian traders forced to take shelter in the Tyne. King William ordered the Earl to return the goods, but he refused and Rufus marched north to besiege and capture de Mowbray at Bamburgh. The King took direct control of the earldom, and the Crown's authority from that time was represented by a sheriff, rather than an earl. It was nearly 300 years before the earldom was re-established.

The independent status of Northumberland was finally suppressed, and the Norman Conquest of the North East was completed.

What followed next is the beginning of another story.