

Saint Benet Biscop

Born in Northumbria, England, c. 628; died at Wearmouth, England, on January 12, c. 690.

Born of the highest Anglo-Saxon nobility, Biscop Baducing held office in the household of King Oswy (Oswiu) of Northumbria. But, after a journey to Rome when he was 25 (653) in the company of Saint Wilfrid, the saint renounced his inheritance and dedicated himself to God. He then spent his time in studying the Scriptures and prayer.

Following a second visit to Rome with Oswy's son Aldfrith in 666, he became a monk in the monastery of Saint-Honorat in Lerins near Cannes, France, taking the name Benedict. He remained there for two years strictly observing the rule.

His third pilgrimage to Rome in 669, coincided with the visit of Archbishop-elect Wighard of Canterbury, who died there prior to his consecration. Saint Theodore was finally selected to replace Wighard as archbishop of Canterbury, and Pope Saint Vitalian ordered Benedict to accompany Theodore and Saint Adrian to England as a missionary, which he did in obedience. Theodore appointed Benedict abbot of SS. Peter and Paul (now St. Augustine's) monastery in Canterbury, where he remained for two years before returning to Northumbria. (He was succeeded as abbot by Saint Adrian, who held this position for 39 years.)

Thereafter, Saint Benedict travelled to and fro between Britain and Rome (beginning in 671), returning always with books and relics, and bringing back with him also craftsmen to build and enrich the churches of Britain. This fourth journey was made with the view of perfecting himself in the rules and practice of a monastic life, so he stayed a while in Rome and visited other monasteries.

In 674, he was granted 70 hides of land by Oswy's son, Egfrid, at the mouth of the river Wear (Wearmouth), where he built a great stone church and monastery dedicated to Saint Peter. He was the first to introduce glass into England, which he brought from France along with stone and other materials. His foreign masons, glaziers, and carpenters taught their skill to the Anglo-Saxons. He spared no trouble or effort in seeking far and wide for all that would richly embellish his Romanesque church.

From his trip to Rome in 679, Benedict brought back Abbot John of Saint Martin's, the precentor (archcantor) from Saint Peter's. This was a result of Benedict persuading Pope Saint Agatho that Abbot John would be able to

instruct the English monks, so that the music and ceremonies at Wearmouth might follow exactly the Roman pattern. Upon his return to England, he held training classes in the use and practice of church music, liturgy, and chants. (John also taught the English monks uncial script and wrote instructions on the Roman liturgy for them.)

But chiefly he brought books, for he was a passionate collector. His ambition was to establish a great library in his Wearmouth monastery. He also imported pictures from Rome and Vienne, coloured images, and music. Among these treasures imported from Rome were a series of pictures of Gospels scenes, of Our Lady and the Apostles, and of incidents described in the Book of Revelation, to be set up in the church.

Benedict also devised his rule based on that of Saint Benedict and those of the 17 monasteries he had visited. He doubtlessly organised the scriptorium in which was written the manuscript of the Bible that his successor as prior at Wearmouth, Saint Ceolfrid, took with him in 716 as a present to Pope Saint Gregory II: the very book was identified in the Biblioteca Laurentiana at Florence in 1887, the famous Codex Amiatinus. All this immeasurably enriched the early English Church.

Because his monastery and church at Wearmouth was so edifying, in 682 Egfrid gave him a further gift of forty hides of land, this time at Jarrow on the Tyne River. Here he established a second monastery six miles from St. Peter's, and dedicated it to Saint Paul (now called Jarrow) in 685, which became famous as a great centre of learning in the West, and the home of Saint Bede. Among its inmates were many Saxon thanes turned monks, who ploughed and winnowed, and worked at the forge, like the rest, and at night slept in the common dormitory, for rank and class had no place among them.

And because Benedict was busier than ever with all his enterprises and still governed both abbeys, he handed over some of his authority. Benedict first took to help him at Wearmouth his nephew, Saint Eosterwin, a noble like himself, and then Saint Sigfrid. In Jarrow, he placed Saint Ceolfrid in charge. While Benedict still ruled the abbeys as their founder, he made these men the abbots under his direction of the two foundations so that the monasteries would not be without leadership during his absences.

Benedict made his last voyage to Rome in 685, returning with even more books and sacred images and some fine silk cloaks of exceptional workmanship, which he exchanged with the king for three hides of land.

It was due to Benedict Biscop that so much material lay to hand for Bede and other scholars, and that a solid foundation was laid for the later glories of the

English Church. After his death the school at Jarrow alone comprised 600 scholars, apart from the flow of constant visitors. It was also in large part due to him that the Church of Northumbria turned from the old Celtic forms to those of Rome. Out of his labours and travels came a rich and abundant harvest.

At the end of his life, Benedict suffered from a painful paralysis in his lower limbs. (It is interesting to note that Sigfrid was afflicted with the same paralysis about the same time.) Throughout his three-year confinement he asked the monks to come into his room to sing Psalms and he joined them when he could. His last exhortations to his monks, before he died at age 62, were to continue his work, to preserve his great library, to follow the monastic Rule of Saint Benedict, and elect an abbot based on his holiness and ability rather than his lineage. He said he would rather the monasteries be turned into wildernesses than to have his brother succeed him as abbot.

Benedict's biography was written by Saint Bede, who had been entrusted to his care at age seven, and whose learning was made possible by the library Benedict collected at Jarrow. Bede the historian says that the civilisation and learning of the 8th century rested in the monastery founded by Benedict.

Proof of a very early public cultus of Benedict Biscop comes from a sermon of Bede on him (Homily 17) for his feast, but the cultus became more widespread only after the translation of his relics under Saint Ethelwold about 980. Saint Benedict's relics are thought to rest at Thorney Abbey, although Glastonbury also claims them ([Attwater](#), [Benedictines](#), [Delaney](#), [Encyclopedia](#), [Farmer](#), [Gill](#), [Walsh](#), [White](#)).

In art Saint Benedict is depicted as an abbot in episcopal vestments standing by the Tyne with two monasteries near him. Sometimes he is shown with the Venerable Bede ([Roeder](#)). Patron of painters and musicians ([Roeder](#)).