

St. Cuthbert

[Bishop](#) of [Lindisfarne](#), patron of [Durham](#), born about 635; died 20 March, 687. His emblem is the head of St. Oswald, king and [martyr](#), which he is represented as bearing in his hands. His [feast](#) is kept in Great Britain and [Ireland](#) on the 20th of March, and he is patron of the [Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle](#), where his commemoration is inserted among the Suffrages of the Saints. His early biographers give no particulars of his birth, and the accounts in the "Libellus de ortu", which represent him as the son of an [Irish](#) king named Muriadhach, though recently supported by [Cardinal Moran](#) and Archbishop Healy, are rejected by later English writers as legendary. Moreover, [St. Bede's](#) phrase, *Brittania . . . genuit* (Vita Metricia, c. i), points to his English birth. He was probably born in the neighbourhood of Mailros (Melrose) of lowly parentage, for as a boy he used to tend sheep on the mountain-sides near that [monastery](#). While still a child living with his foster-mother Kenswith his future lot as [bishop](#) had been foretold by a little play-fellow, whose prophecy had a lasting effect on his character. He was influenced, too, by the [holiness](#) of the community of Mailros, where [St. Eata](#) was [abbot](#) and [St. Basil](#) prior. In the year 651, while watching his sheep, he saw in a [vision](#) the [soul](#) of [St. Aidan](#) carried to [heaven](#) by [angels](#), and inspired by this became a [monk](#) at Mailros. Yet it would seem that the troubled state of the country hindered him from carrying out his resolution at once. Certain it is that at one part of his life he was a soldier, and the years which succeed the death of [St. Aidan](#) and Oswin of Deira seem to have been such as would call for the military service of most of the able-bodied men of Northumbria, which was constantly threatened at this time by the [ambition](#) of its southern neighbor, King Penda of Mercia. Peace was not restored to the land until some four years later, as the consequence of a great battle which was fought between the Northumbrians and the Mercians at Winwidfield. It was probably after this battle that Cuthbert found himself free once more to turn to the life he desired. He arrived at Mailros on horseback and armed with a spear. Here he soon became eminent for [holiness](#) and learning, while from the first his life was distinguished by [supernatural](#) occurrences and [miracles](#). When the [monastery](#) at Ripon was founded he went there as guest-master, but in 661 he, with other [monks](#) who adhered to the customs of [Celtic Christianity](#), returned to Mailros owing to the adoption at Ripon of the Roman Usage in celebrating [Easter](#) and other matters. Shortly after his return he was struck by a pestilence which then attacked the community, but he recovered, and became prior in place of [St. Boisil](#), who died of the disease in 664. In this year the [Synod of Whitby](#) decided in favour of the Roman Usage, and St. Cuthbert, who accepted the decision, was sent by [St. Eata](#) to be prior at [Lindisfarne](#), in order that he might introduce the Roman customs into that house. This was a difficult matter which needed all his gentle tact and patience to carry out successfully, but the fact that one so renowned for [sanctity](#), who had himself been brought up in the Celtic tradition, was loyally conforming to the Roman use, did much to support the cause of [St. Wilfrid](#). In this matter St. Cuthbert's influence on his time was very marked. At [Lindisfarne](#) he spent much time in evangelizing the people. He was noted for his devotion to the Mass, which he could not celebrate without tears, and for the success with which his [zealous](#) charity drew sinners to [God](#).

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At length, in 676, moved by a desire to attain greater perfection by means of the contemplative life, he retired, with the [abbot's](#) leave, to a spot which Archbishop Eyre identifies with St. Cuthbert's Island near [Lindisfarne](#), but which Raine thinks was near Holburn, where "St. Cuthbert's Cave" is still shown. Shortly afterwards he removed to Farne Island, opposite Bamborough in Northumberland, where he gave himself up to a life of great austerity. After some years he was called from this retirement by a synod of [bishops](#) held at Twyford in Northumberland, under St. Theodore, [Archbishop](#) of [Canterbury](#). At this meeting he was elected [Bishop](#) of [Lindisfarne](#), as [St. Eata](#) was now translated to [Hexham](#). For a long time he withstood all pressure and only yielded after a long struggle. He was [consecrated](#) at York by St. Theodore in the presence of six [bishops](#), at [Easter](#), 685. For two years he acted as [bishop](#), preaching and labouring without intermission, with wonderful results. At [Christmas](#), 686, foreseeing the near approach of death, he resigned his [see](#) and returned to his cell on Farne Island, where two months later he was seized with a fatal illness. In his last days, in March, 687, he was tended by [monks](#) of [Lindisfarne](#), and received the last [sacraments](#) from Abbot Herefrid, to whom he spoke his farewell words, exhorting the [monks](#) to be faithful to [Catholic](#) unity and the traditions of the Fathers. He died shortly after midnight, and at exactly the same hour that night his friend St. Herbert, the [hermit](#), also died, as St. Cuthbert had predicted.

St. Cuthbert was buried in his [monastery](#) at [Lindisfarne](#), and his [tomb](#) immediately became celebrated for remarkable [miracles](#). These were so numerous and extraordinary that he was called the "Wonder-worker of [England](#)". In 698 the first transfer of the [relics](#) took place, and the body was found incorrupt. During the [Danish](#) invasion of 875, Bishop Eardulf and the [monks](#) fled for safety, carrying the body of the [saint](#) with them. For seven years they wandered, bearing it first into Cumberland, then into [Galloway](#) and back to Northumberland. In 883 it was placed in a church at Chester-le-Street, near [Durham](#), given to the [monks](#) by the converted [Danish](#) king, who had a great devotion to the [saint](#), like [King Alfred](#), who also [honoured](#) St. Cuthbert as his patron and was a benefactor to this church. Towards the end of the tenth century, the shrine was removed to Ripon, owing to fears of fresh invasion. After a few months it was being carried back to be restored to Chester-le-Street, when, on arriving at [Durham](#) a new [miracle](#), tradition says, indicated that this was to be the resting-place of the [saint's](#) body. Here it remained, first in a [chapel](#) formed of boughs, then in a wooden and finally in a stone church, built on the present site of [Durham cathedral](#), and finished in 998 or 999. While William the Conqueror was ravaging the North in 1069, the body was once more removed, this time to [Lindisfarne](#), but it was soon restored. In 1104, the shrine was transferred to the present [cathedral](#), when the body was again found incorrupt, with it being the head of St. Oswald, which had been placed with St. Cuthbert's body for safety — a fact which accounts for the well-known symbol of the [saint](#).

From this time to the [Reformation](#) the shrine remained the great centre of devotion throughout the North of [England](#). In 1542 it was plundered of all its treasures, but the [monks](#) had already hidden the [saint's](#) body in a secret place. There is a well-known tradition, alluded to in Scott's "Marmion", to the effect that the secret of the hiding-place is known to certain [Benedictines](#) who hand it down from one generation to

another. In 1827 the [Anglican clergy](#) of the [cathedral](#) found a [tomb](#) alleged to be that of the [saint](#), but the discovery was challenged by [Dr. Lingard](#), who showed cause for doubting the identity of the body found with that of St. Cuthbert. Archbishop Eyre, writing in 1849, considered that the coffin found was undoubtedly that of the [saint](#), but that the body had been removed and other remains substituted, while a later writer, Monsignor Consitt, though not expressing a definite view, seems inclined to allow that the remains found in 1827 were truly the bones of St. Cuthbert. Many traces of the former widespread [devotion](#) to St. Cuthbert still survive in the numerous churches, monuments, and crosses raised in his [honour](#), and in such terms as "St. Cuthbert's patrimony", "St. Cuthbert's Cross", "Cuthbert ducks" and "Cuthbert down". The centre of modern devotion to him is found at [St. Cuthbert's College, Ushaw](#), near [Durham](#), where the episcopal ring of gold, enclosing a sapphire, taken from his finger in 1537, is preserved, and where under his patronage most of the [priests](#) for the northern counties of [England](#) are trained. His name is connected with two famous early copies of the Gospel text. The first, known as the [Lindisfarne](#) or Cuthbert Gospels (now in the British Museum, Cotton [manuscripts](#) Nero D 4), was written in the eighth century by Eadfrid, [Bishop](#) of [Lindisfarne](#). It contains the four gospels and between the lines a number of valuable Anglo-Saxon (Northumbrian) glosses; though written by an Anglo-Saxon hand it is considered by the best judges (Westwood) a noble work of old-Irish calligraphy and illumination, [Lindisfarne](#) as is well known being an [Irish](#) foundation. The [manuscript](#), one of the most splendid in [Europe](#), was originally placed by its scribe as an offering on the shrine of Cuthbert, and was soon richly decorated by monastic artists (Ethelwold, Bilfrid) and provided by another (Aldred) with the aforesaid interlinear gloss (Karl Bouterwek, *Die vier Evangelien in altnordhumbrischer Sprache*, 1857). It has also a history scarcely less romantic than the body of Cuthbert. When in the ninth century the [monks](#) fled before the Danes with the latter treasure, they took with them this [manuscript](#), but on one occasion lost it in the [Irish](#) Channel. After three days it was found on the seashore at Whithern, unhurt save for some stains of brine. Henceforth in the inventories of [Durham](#) and [Lindisfarne](#) it was known as "Liber S. Cuthberti qui demersus est in mare" (the book of St. Cuthbert that fell into the sea). Its text was edited by Stevenson and Warning (London, 1854-65) and since then by Kemble and Hardwick, and by Skeat (see LINDISFARNE). The second early Gospel text connected with his name is the seventh-century Gospel of St. John (now in possession of the [Jesuit College](#) at [Stonyhurst](#), [England](#)) found in 1105 in the grave of St. Cuthbert.