

St Hilda Transcript Season 4, Episode 3

Hello, and welcome to the Time Pieces History Podcast. In today's episode of season four, we're looking at St Hilda, and it's inspired by a [blog post](#) I wrote for my Time Pieces History Project.

One of the categories I looked at was books, choosing 20 of my favourites and exploring the history behind the stories. St Hilda's Abbey plays a key part in Robin Jarvis' children's novel, *The Whitby Witches*.

I'd love to know what you think of these episodes, so please come and find me on Twitter: [@GudrunLauret](#), or leave a comment on your audio player of choice. Alternatively, you can pop a message onto the relevant podcast page over at gudrunlauret.com/podcast, where you'll find the shownotes, useful links and an episode transcript – no email address required to access that.

Hild, or Hilda, was in charge of several monasteries in the mid-600s. She was active in introducing Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons, and her advice was sought by kings from across Britain. Local lad Bede (the Venerable) documented much of her life in his 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People', published in 731.

Born in 614, Hilda was related to King Edwin of Northumberland and brought up at his royal court. Her father was exiled to the court of one King Elmet, in West Yorkshire, and was poisoned while there. Edwin's second wife was a Christian, and after their marriage had his entire retinue baptised.

Missionaries came from both Ireland (Celtic Christians) and Italy (Roman Christians) to England at around the same time, and it was Paulinus, part of St Augustine's Roman group, which baptised the family. Hild, however, was more drawn to the teachings of Aidan, who was based at nearby [Lindisfarne](#).

Hild's sister, Hereswith, had gone off to France to join a monastery, and Hild, who had a religious calling at the age of 33, went down to East Anglia with the intention of crossing the Channel to join her sister. Aidan, however, thought her talents would be better used in England, and called her back.

Hilda spent a brief period as the Abbess of Hartlepool Abbey before founding a monastery for both nuns and monks in Whitby in 657 AD. The Visit Whitby [website](#) says that the community was not celibate, and in fact families lived together and worshipped at the wooden church.

Apart from introducing Christianity to the area, which you'd think would have kept Hilda busy, she even found time to kill all the snakes in town by throwing them off the Abbey Cliff.

She was so enraged by these evil creatures that they turned to stone (ammonites). She also hosted the Synod (assembly of clergy) in 664 which was when the decision was made to adopt Roman Christianity and abandon Celtic beliefs. Oswiu of Northumberland played a key part in the Synod.

Hilda was keen to promote equality in her abbeys, and made sure nobody was made to feel inferior to anyone else. As we can guess from being chosen as the host for the Synod, Hilda herself hobnobbed with the most powerful clerics of her time.

Bede is gushing in his praise of Hild, complimenting her rule, her fair-mindedness and her promotion of 'justice, piety and chastity.' She must have been a good leader, because five monks under her care went on to be bishops, and she also spotted the 'divine talent' of another – the celebrated English poet Caedmon.

It appears that women heading abbeys was not uncommon in the Middle Ages, and they sometimes had responsibility for two monasteries at a time, one with monks and one with nuns. The first record of an abbess has been found on an inscription dating to 514, naming the 'Abbatissa Serena' taking charge of a convent in Rome.

Abbesses were elected from the community, and voting was done in secret, with the bishop sometimes letting people give him the names through the convent wall. Once elected, it was usually a job for life. Those in with a chance of the top job had to be particularly well-behaved nuns, of a suitable age and not a woman who'd done a bit of living (i.e. been married) before she got to the convent.

As with the priories at Lindisfarne and Tynemouth, Whitby Abbey was raided by the Vikings and it was abandoned in the 9th century. Reinfrid the monk re-established a monastery at the site in 1078, and a stone church was built in 1100.

Work began on a Gothic church in 1225, although money ran out before it was completed, with the nave only being finished in the 1400s. After Henry VIII's suppression of monasteries it was abandoned, finally falling into ruins in the 1800s, after centuries of wind and rain took their toll.

As well as the Abbey, Hild was honoured with an Oxford College for women named after her, as well as serving as patron saint of a girls' school in Washington DC. The Oxford College was founded in 1893 with the intention of helping more females have a higher education.

Thanks for listening! Please tune in next week, and let me know what you think of today's episode too.