

*Monks in
Bilsdale*

Luck Warrack

Bilsdale Local History Group

Monks in Bilsdale

This is a short summary of a talk by Lucy Warrack given to Bilsdale Local History Group on 8th April 2014 at the Buck Inn, Chop Gate.

There's no written history of Bilsdale until the monastic period, though, of course, there is much archaeology which can be put together. When the monks arrived at Rievaulx there was no road through the dale. Communication would have been over the tops with the small settlements located on the spring line about half way up the side of the dale. Although Bilsdale isn't mentioned in the Domesday book, this doesn't mean it was uninhabited, merely that it wasn't worth recording such a sparse community. The valley bottom was wild, wet and covered by forest. It was this wilderness that attracted the monks in the early 12th century. This is quite late in English monastic history, but Bilsdale was very remote.

In Roman times the persecution of Christians ended when Constantine was declared emperor in York in the early 4th century. At this time York was a major Roman centre housing four legions, about 25,000 men. The monastic tradition can be traced back to the 4th century in Egypt where hermits established themselves in the desert, gave up marriage and possessions and dedicated their lives to God. Communities developed a communal life of prayer.

One of the main influences was St Benedict who wrote a short book on how to be a monk. He was a late Roman and lived when the Roman's world was crumbling around them. His book emphasised the importance

of monks praying 7 times a day, reading, leading a communal life and copying important manuscripts. Monks ensured the survival of Latin as an important literary language. Monasticism flourished in Italy, France and Spain.

After the decline of the Roman empire came the barbarians from the north and east, the Angles and Saxons. They were gradually converted by monks who came from two directions - some came from the south to Canterbury and York. Others were from West Iona in Scotland. The monks travelled to Lindisfarne where St Aiden taught "a bunch of boys" who then founded Lastingham Abbey and St Gregory's Minster at Kirkdale.

This was all wiped out by the Vikings. They destroyed all the monasteries and paganism returned. They were all over Bilsdale, as can be seen from the name Bilsdale itself and others – Fangdale, Laskill, Hawnby. They didn't make a great impression, as they are not mentioned in the Domesday book, but there were probably some subsistence farmers.

The Normans were keen on monasticism, they were good Christians by this time, but only 2nd generation, they were French Viking descendents. However they were keen to revive monastic life. Monks from the south of England who had read about 7th century monasticism from St Bede refounded Lastingham. Whitby .Jarrow, St Mary's and York. They were all Benedictine, St Bede's rules survived. By the end of 11th century there were Benedictine monasteries at York, Whitby and Durham, but huge spaces in between. Elsewhere, groups who were critical of the Benedictines founded new ways of leading the monastic life, more

austere. This was part of a broader revival driven from Rome. One of the most successful was the Cistercians.

The first small group of Cistercians in Burgundy were later joined by St Bernard of Clairvaux. He was a tremendously confident and powerful character, and drove forward the expansion of the Order throughout Europe. In 1131 his secretary, a Yorkshireman who had been the master of the song school at York minster teaching the boys Latin, was sent back to Yorkshire to establish an abbey. Bernard wrote the following letter to King Henry I, though they had never met – “Help these men as messengers of your lord and in their persons fulfil your duties as a vassel of their lord and may he for his honour, the salvation of your soul and the health and peace of your kingdom, bring you safe and happy to a good and peaceful end”.

Henry wrote to his big vassel, Walter Espec at Helmsley. He was a significant Norman landowner with power over all the land for miles around. So he gave them 4 curates at Griff and 5 curates at Stilton in the wilderness of the Rye valley – Rievaulx is French for Rye valley. The small group of monks arrived in March 1132 and by 1147, when Aelvred was the third Abbot there was a community of over 500 monks, 150 were choir monks living in the monastery, copying books and praying. The rest were lay brothers who carried out most of the work, building the Abbey, digging canals and looking after the sheep. This was a brilliant approach.

Following this early success, Walter gave Rievaulx almost all of Bilsdale from Newgate Bank to William Beck Farm in the early 1140s. Two years later he gave the north east corner, including Chop Gate and Urra to the Augustinian monks at Kirkham Abby.

The Augustinian canons vowed obedience, poverty and chastity. Their work was to get out of the monastery and preach, teach, say mass in villages and be functioning priests in the villages. They had a very different approach to managing their lands, as they were not directly involved in farming. They let the farms to tenants and received rents. The tenants had little to do with the monks and although the population was small, settlements developed with specific trades such as milling and tanning in addition to farming. Elsewhere there were fewer residents as the Cistercian lay brother did the work

The economic life of Rievaulx centred around sheep and iron ore. Walter Espec realised that the monks could make a success of sheep. They improved the quality of their stock and produced the best quality wool in Europe. The wool was stored in the wool house at Laskill and merchants would come from Rome Venice, Antwerp and Bruges. The wool would be loaded onto wagons, taken to York then shipped to Italy or the Low Countries. The monks made a lot of money, St Bernard would have been horrified!

The other industry was iron smelting. The ore was mined in Bilsdale, then taken to the works at Rievaulx where simple iron tools were made. It was not until after the dissolution of the monastery that this developed into a major industry. Rievaulx mill was at cutting edge of 16th century iron technology and produced significant amounts of high quality iron.

While the tenants at the northern end of Bilsdale seldom saw the monks from Kirkham, the southern part, from the 12th century, was farmed by lay brothers from Rievaulx based in granges located through the dale.

Perhaps six lay brothers at each grange, looking after the stock and a monk to oversee them.

At the other extreme was a tiny foundation for women at Arden, with 7 or 8 nuns plus a few helpers. This small settlement of Benedictine nuns was founded soon after Rievaulx and remained a small group until the dissolution in the 16th century.

A place with national and European status was Mount Grace priory. These Charterhouse monks led a very isolated existence. They met only for 3am matins and spent the rest of their time in their individual cells. This was a very successful type of life for a very few people. At the dissolution Mount Grace was flourishing with 25 monks and there was a waiting list. They posed the greatest resistance to Henry VIII during the dissolution and 35 of 45 monastic martyrs killed were Carthusians.

By the dissolution, life at Rievaulx had become relatively relaxed. The last abbot was most famous for being a huntsman at Skiplam Grange. Most of the Yorkshire Cistercians took their pension and went home.

The lay brothers had disappeared long ago to become tenants. On the Abby rent rolls from dissolution there are many names that remained in the dale for hundreds of years – Dale, Garbutt, Barker, Wass, Leng and Flintoft. A latecomer was Ainsley at the end of the 16th century.

The whole of Rievaulx Abby estates, an enormous area of land, went back to the heirs of Walter Espec. They made sure they got them back once the king had taken his cut. The Helmsley estate, including most of Bilsdale, passed through “a wonky family tree” for 14 generations until it was inherited by 2nd Duke of Buckingham, a favourite of Charles II. The

Duke fell off his horse when a hunt got out of hand, he was taken to Kirbymoorside, where he died in 1687. The estate was bankrupt. This was the biggest single land holding in England and in 1695 the trustees sold it to “a crooked banker”, Mr Duncombe. He had been in prison and subsequently made his fortune as banker to Charles II. The family built Duncombe Park and flourished during the 19th century. Later it got difficult to handle. Lord Feversham was killed during World War 1 and left an 8 year old son who inherited everything. He is Lucy Warwick’s uncle. The estate was heading for bankruptcy so in 1944 he divided Bilsdale into lots which sold at an auction.

So the monks shaped Bilsdale and its communities but everything changed when the road was constructed through the dale and the estate was sold.

Return to [“A Short History”](#)

[“Bilsdale”](#)