

The early Christians shared our belief in the incarnation and salvation of the Gospel. They shared a desire to pass the faith on to others.

In the early years, the Christians were a minority and at odds with the culture of their time. Later Christianity became part of the fabric of society and church attendance a part of the prevailing culture.

The history of Westmorland contains the story of the changing way that Christianity has been expressed and experienced in our communities.

Here are some questions that might help you start thinking about whether looking back does help us to look forward:

- ◇ What must it have been like to be a person of faith in various phases between the 6th and 13th Centuries? How did that experience change over the years?
- ◇ What is it like to be a person of faith in today's society and today's Church? Are there similarities between now and then?
- ◇ Over these centuries the nature of Church changed with it becoming increasingly central to society. As it did so, the experience of its members changed. Is there anything that we can learn from this time that might help us today?



Looking Back... ...to Look Forward

The Heron Theatre, Beetham
11th February 2023

Local churches are living through times of increasing challenge. Maintaining time honoured church life can seem increasingly difficult in terms of personnel and finance. Mission can feel hugely daunting in an increasingly secular society

The Church as we know it is the product of evolution through changing times and circumstances

This session is the start of an exploration about whether the experience of our forebears has anything to offer to us as we respond to the challenges of today and tomorrow



The early church in the Kent Estuary

The beginnings

In the six and seventh centuries the area had a scattered population with some Roman army veterans farming good land. There were the cross-bay routes and Roman road from Lancaster to Watercreek via Beetham, Heversham, Leasgill, Levens Bridge. There were some sacred sites as focus for pagan worship but virtually no Christian presence.

At the same time, there was thriving Christianity in Ireland with spirit led outreach. As part of this Columba landed on Iona and established a successful monastic community, drawing likeminded people.

In 597, Pope Gregory sent Augustine to establish formal system of diocese and bishops in southern Britain.

Going out and engaging

In 635, Oswald, as king of Northumbria (which included this area), asked Iona for missionaries to convert his kingdom. The first to come was Cormac but his approach failed to engage people. Aiden was then sent to try to get alongside people, listening to them and starting from where they were. This built a successful momentum and set a missionary style.

Monks coming to work with Aiden established monasteries – either for monastic life (such as in Heysham) or as a base to go out in pairs, stopping to talk to people where they could be found.

Over time, this coalesced into ministries at key locations such as Bolton Le Sands for the cross-Bay route; Sandside for the jetty; Beetham for the crossing from Foulshaw and where routes met near Beetham bridge. Often crosses were set up at these points and sometimes a rustic chapel and graveyard. The monks talked in terms people could engage with, gently leading them to understand their experiences and beliefs in Christian terms.

The Celtic approach in the north of Britain, was for the monastery, under spiritual authority of the abbot, to be a base for the mission and outreach which was led by Bishops. Meanwhile, in the south, the Augustinian approach, supported by Pope Gregory, was for a universal pattern of dioceses, governed by bishops and with the Roman (Latin) rite.

Time of flux

There was a growing tension between these two models. In 664, the Synod of Whitby came down in favour of the Augustinian approach and many of the Celtic inclined leaders went back to Iona or Ireland. As a result, the emphasis moved from outreach and evangelism towards more permanent structures and in due course to grander, richer churches to the glory of God - which was alien to Celtic approach.

Heversham monastery became a minster in early 8th century serving a big area of Westmorland and with a village growing beside it. As a Benedictine monastic community, it continued to bury the dead, but the monks withdrew from evangelism and pastoral care.

As a result of the Viking raids in the early tenth century, the monastic community fled east. At the same time Irish Norse refugees started to come ashore and move up towards the fells, in Crosthwaite where they built a small chapel by the standing cross. They adopted a hybrid of Celtic and Roman rites in order to cater for a mixed local community which had an independent spirit.

In the late 10th century, as the pattern of religious activity became more stable, a Benedictine cell was set up at Beetham and the stone cross erected.

Then in mid-eleventh century two sets of invasions (the second being that of the Normans) resulted in large areas being depopulated and countryside laid waste – with many of the smaller chapels being abandoned.

Formality, Grandeur, Organisation and Structure

Subsequently, the Normans established themselves and confidently asserted their power. Whole areas of land, and their inhabitants, were given to "favourites". Both Beetham and Heversham churches and their land were then passed on to the Benedictine Monastery in York

Although the population did not warrant it, Heversham and Beetham churches were then rebuilt and enlarged, making a political statement about the prevailing power and control. As big churches, they were given the role of mother churches for large areas – everyone being required to walk from their own community to them for all rites of passage.

A common model of Dioceses and Bishops was imposed across the country, with people being required to attend to the church, where the professional ministry was sited. A very different model from the early, Celtic beginnings.