

Talk to the History Society on Thursday 11th October 2012

Iona, Lindisfarne and the Glory of the North was the title of Pat Wright's talk on the 11th October. As a lead in to her talk, Pat took us back to the early history of christianity. In the year 313 the Roman Emperor Constantine had granted Christians freedom to worship in England so persecution had ended, and during the 4th century christianity became widespread in England. However after the last Romans had left Britain in 407, Roman civilisation broke down and Anglo-Saxon invaders arrived. It looked for a time as if paganism might get the better of christianity. Yet somehow christianity survived on the western edges of Britain, particularly in Wales and by the early 5th century it had spread to Ireland.

In the 5th and 6th centuries Scotland was converted by Monks travelling from Ireland. In about the year 430 St Ninian arrived at Whithorn in Galloway and founded a church and christian community. He was followed by St Columba in 565 who came from Ireland to Iona with a small company of Monks. Small missionary bases were established on various Islands. Remains of their dwellings can still be found particularly on the Skelligs. The best monasteries attracted the finest minds of the time and gave them scope and peace to produce some wonderful books and works of art.

We were told that Oswald King of Northumbria at one time sort exile on Iona where he learned about christianity, however he remained a pagan until after a battle near Hexham in Northumberland. Before the battle he had asked his men to pray to God and subsequently was convinced that the Christian faith helped bring their victory. He then became determined to reintroduce christianity to the North East and employed St Aidan an Irish monk from Iona to convert Northumbria to christianity. Aidan established a monastery on the Island of Lindisfarne and became the first Bishop of Lindisfarne.

When organised evangelism spread from Iona, to Melrose and Lindisfarne, it is difficult to imagine what the converts expected. The humanity and forgiveness of Christ had great appeal after pagan vengeful gods. For most people, we were told, christianity was mixed with a continuing belief in local gods and spirits, folk tales and customs.

In Scotland Gaels, Scots, Irish settlers all mingled and fought. Fighting was endemic, most kings died in battle; in fact warfare was more or less essential in order to reward your followers with loot and keep them loyal. It was almost impossible to survive as an individual. Throughout the period frontiers were a meaningless concept so at times Northumbrian kings ruled nearly as far north as Dumbarton.

From this period, beautiful art work survives and some can be seen in illustrated gospels – the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Book of Kells are examples. Pat told us that the Venerable Bede who had mainly lived in the Monastery at Jarrow, had said his greatest delight was to “learn, to teach and write” Sadly the Viking invaders inflicted huge destruction to early monasteries and christian settlements.

Pat Wright fluently covered a long period of early history which she illustrated with some beautiful slides, it was all together a most interesting and enlightening evening and well appreciated by a large attendance of the Society