

## Monks in Bilsdale

[Bygone Bilsdale Review](#)

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### Sources

Recording of talk by Lucy Warrack to the local history Group at the Buck Inn, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2014  
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*This note is still “work in progress” there are gaps which need to be checked against the tape  
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3.17 There isn't, in a sense, any history of Bilsdale at all until there is the monastic history there is a lot of archaeology which can be put together, to support a kind of pre history of the dale. The absolute key when thinking about early Bilsdale from before the 12<sup>th</sup> century is you have to forget about the road, it wasn't there. When the monks arrived at Rievaulx, communication between the odd small farmstead on either side of the dale would have been over the tops, over the ridgeway, not across the dale, the bottoms were swamp, forestwild. Dangerous & nasty, not good for communication at all. We know this because we know the state of the bit of the dale where Rievaulx was built and in doomsday no-one was recorded at all. This doesn't mean no – one was there it means there wasn't enough possessions in property for the government to be interested for taxation purposes.

You can imagine a wild jungley difficult dale with small settlements on either side on the springline, that's where you built, where the fresh water came out of the hill. You had a few cows & sheep. You communicated more easily with people over the tops. Could see people other side of dale, but more difficult to communicate with them.

This is still the case to some extent. At Bonfield Gill, the farmer's mother lives at Crosset, the children would go over the top on pony, 3 miles rather than 25 miles by car So that kind of connection has survived, well it did with this family.

Into this very difficult unbroken country with a few scattered and poor families came something quite extraordinary, a new monastery in the 1130s. Need to go back a bit, these were not the only monks to influence Bilsdale. There are different kinds of monks. 12c is late in English monastic history, but Bilsdale was very remote. This part of England got left out. From 2 different parts of monastic history.

To go back a very long way, Christian monasticism began in the Egyptian desert in 4<sup>th</sup> century when Roman persecution had stopped because Constantine became a Christian. The place where Constantine was declared to be emperor of Rome with a great shout of approval from the surrounding soldiers was in the Roman headquarters building in York below the minster if you go

into the crypt you can see the foundation walls of the headquarters building of this big garrison city... there was a big garrison city 4 legions for 400 years, that's 25,000 men with a whole town on the other side of the river to support them with shops markets, theatres, running tracks, wives children in rows and rows of houses. In that place Constantine was declared emperor in York he became Christian because he had a dream which promised he'd win a battle, which he won... 10.00 Persecution stopped, the heroism goes out of christianity....no one is going to ask you to die for being a Christian. This is one of the impulses which led to getting away from the temptations of .. WAY FROM ...First monks were hermits xx was a hermit in the desert in 4<sup>th</sup> century, many others followed this example, , gave up marriage children family, possessions, money, worldly ambition in order to be devoted to god whole communities grew up, living together, developed communal life of prayer. This started in Egypt main person for us in the west was St Benedict, early in the 6<sup>th</sup> century

St Benedict, a roman, early in 6<sup>th</sup> century wrote a short book of instructions about how to run a monastery and how to be a monk key document in the subsequent history of monasticism in the west.

He was a late roman world was crumbling around them. He wrote this rule which isn't at all fierce a reasonable sensible book. It says be in church praying 7 times a day, generate as much as you can from the monastery, gardens & orchards maybe a farm. Work as well as pray read, lead unselfish communal unselfish life. This was important for the survival of latin civilisations in the west. The Barbarians had poured in from north and east to france spain...completely crumbled. The Latin language and great texts might have disappeared for ever if not for the monks keeping latin going as the language of the church & keeping the accurate copying by hand of books, with careful attention to grammar rules.

Monasticism flourished in Italy France Spain and after a while in Britain. We had romans for 400 years then went away. Left us to be invaded by Angles and Saxons who were pagans. After romans came angles Saxons & Vikings who were pagan. Part of the process of their converting them was monks who would go out on the roads among this pagan country. There had been Christians when romans were still here, just a few. Its probable that Constantine's own sister called Anastasia must have had a mother, Helena who was Christian inclined or she wouldn't have called her daughter anastasia's means..the greek word for resurrection

There were Christians in your bishop from York at in 314 so there were Christians about but they had more or less disappeared when there was this big barbarians invasion. Country became gradually converted by Christians from 2 directions, Monks from rome arrived in the south to Canterbury, eventually sent bishop to then to York to baptise a king of "a wooly tribe" a in Deira. Meanwhile, much more important, monks had arrived from Ireland first in Iona, then Lindisfarne monks from west Iona Lindisfarne St Aiden taught bunch of Anglo Saxon boys who became the missionaries of the north east

From that came the great period of monasticism in 7<sup>th</sup> century nearest monastery was Lastingham says Bede Came a lot of monasteries nearest Lastingham, Bede tells us about the foundation of Lastingham in the 7<sup>th</sup> century probably a saxon.... St Gregory's minster rebuilt

All of that was wiped out by the Viking invasion. Vikings all over Bilsdale because of Danish names Bilsdale, chop gate? (pedlars road), fangdale laskill hawnby - all Danish old Scandinavian Norse names. How they got here is unclear, they probably got here over the tops from the north.

So the Vikings didn't make great impression cos not many around so not mentioned in Domesday. After Vikings completely destroyed all the monastic life in north of England paganism came back destroyed Whitby, Lindisfarne, Jarrow Monkwearmouth, all the monasteries were smashed to bits by the Vikings paganism came back.

The Normans were keen on monasticism they were good Christians by this time but only 2<sup>nd</sup> generation away from pagan Vikings. Norman is the same word for Norse men. William bashed about a bit up here and did in anyone who resisted him, but they were keen on reviving monastic life Norman is the same word as Norse men? They arrived from France they were keen on Monks from the south who had read Bede came and refounded Lastingham, Whitby, Jarrow, St Mary's, York, all Benedictine. St Bede's rules survived as a book, of critical importance arrived in Northumberland and became the rule of the monastery where Bede spent his life

Bilsdale in middle of 11c when William got lost in the snow on his way to bully more people further north, the nearest monks were Benedictines in York, Whitby & Durham, Durham where the cathedral being built at end of 11c, was a ...uniquely English institution, half the medieval cathedrals run by monks Benedictine monasteries run by monks. The bishop didn't have to be a monk, but the man in charge of the outfit dean was the prior of the monastery. In Durham there's a great deal of the monastic building remaining.

York Durham Whitby are a long way away, huge empty space in between. There then arrived as a result of a decision by St Bernard a strong character in the whole Christendom with 12 monks arrived at Rievaulx with a Yorkshireman

At end 11c there was a tremendous revival in Europe ie (Latin Europe, as far east as Poland not Russia, the line between Russia & Poland very important, Catholic world ends at Poland then Orthodox world begins in Russia, very different histories.

But in late 11c tremendous movement of reform renewal revival starting from a succession of dynamic and energetic popes in Rome to make everything work better it, make it more Christian called revivalism in America

Several groups of monks, more in France than Italy, founded new ways of leading the monastic life, in the community more austere, more like the rule of St Benedict. The old abbeys had got too rich, owned too much land, too many tenants etc some flourishing, some were rather lazy not achieving a great deal little breakaway groups formed, started new ways of doing monastic life in

Most successful, though not necessarily the, were the Cistercians, included an Englishman, in Burgundy they broke away from their monastery and started a new self-sufficient way of life in Burgundy this was tiny group about 17 people, joined at the end of the century, by tremendously

powerful character, young man, brought his family, doubled the size of the monastery overnight, St Bernard of Clairvaux went off soon to found his own monastery soon after to found his own monastery

25.00 In 1131 his secretary, a Yorkshire man had been a master of the song school at York minster...taught boys.latin etc...St Bernard was sent back to Yorkshire to find a wild piece of land to turn into the garden of the north for a new cistercian abbey

St Bernard wrote a letter to Henry II Bernard was most important churchmen of the 12c. If he felt like telling kings and popes how they ought to do things, he did he did... 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 vassal 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”. In other words jump to it - so he did. Henry I was quite tough himself. Thought were can I find a wild area and needs taking in hand doing the work. Cistercians wanted wild land, didn't want to be in the fat lands with lots of tenants

He wrote to his big vassal in this area, Walter espec 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Norman at Helmsley castle not a wooden castle at that time Walter had power over all the land for miles around So he decided to give them the bottom of the Rye valley and the hills. Ryedale becomes Rievaulx in French. They started just 13 men Community was impressive and grew very quickly March 1132 they arrived, by 1147 Aelred 3<sup>rd</sup> abbot there was a community of over 500 monks, about 150 were choir monks, proper monks, living in the monastery going to the church 7 times a day, knowing latin, copying books and praying. All The rest of the community were lay brothers, brilliant cistercian invention, most couldn't read or write brilliant approach.

Lot of people wanted to join a monastery it was the thing to do, to save your soul. They had a simple monastic life, prayers in morning and evening, mass on Sunday rest of time they worked things translated from latin for them, Prayers in morning and evening, mass on Sunday rest of time worked, built abbey, dug canals, quarried stone from duncombe park, better quality stone

Walter could see the community was flourishing, needed more land so he gave almost all of Biltsdale to Rievaulx monks in early 1140s. About 1141/2 He'd given them some time to see how they were getting on. When he saw it was a success, he gave most of Biltsdale.

2 years later he gave the corner of Biltsdale around Urra to Kirkham - Augustinian Cistercian – idea was to go back to Benedict rules as laid down in 6thC, don't allow any of the softness which had crept in to the bigger abbeys. Other groups of monks did things rather different. When St Bernard died, and largely thanks to him himself there were 350 cistercian abbeys all over Europe from south Spain to north of Poland. A most extraordinary achievement

that was the beginning of Rievaulx but there were other groups of monks doing other things mainly in France. 32.00 Another group came to be called Augustinian Canons black canons the old Benedictine monks called black Cistercians called white monks, sheep's wool undyed - didn't take them off grey & smelly

## White Cannons & Black cannons

Augustinian black cannons, vowed obedience, poverty, chastity stability (stay in 1 house where you took your vows). But their work was to get out of the monastery & preach & teach & say mass for people in villages & be functioning priests in the villages. Then come back every day to their monastery. Much less rigorous way of life than Cistercians

Walter had founded Kirkham before Rievaulx, much smaller. Very different organisation. Kirkham was Augustinians on river Derwent, completely different organisation & life they had tenants, received rents, no lay brothers. The last piece of Bilsdale was put in place when he gave Urra etc to Kirkham it remained up to 17thC It was called priors land ?? Bilsdale, still a tiny population,

one or 2 settlements at Urra, perhaps also Chop Gate, they paid rent to the monastery, so they had small farms & they did other useful things tanner & 2 millers, Raisdale & low mill??

There were at least 2 mills in Raisdale & low mill?? and tanner

they were tenants of a distant monastic community, had little to do with the monks. Who came to collect the rents

The rest of Bilsdale had few people living in it because work done by lay brothers did most of the work. 36.00 2 things the main economic life of Rievaulx iron ore found in Bilsdale, mined in Bilsdale, made simple iron tools. This didn't develop into a major industry till after dissolution of monastery. Rievaulx mill was at cutting edge of 16thC iron technology, briefly. High quality iron produced

Sheep were more important during monastic period. Walter especially realised monks with their Can't do much more with the land than lay brother could make a success of sheep. They looked after expertly, they got the hang of breeding, produced after 30 or 40 years the best quality wool in Europe. Monks of Rievaulx, then byland, fountains, did sheep Rievaulx produced horses.

Rievaulx Wool stored in the wool house at Laskill. was the best wool you could get 39.00 Imaging wool house, piled high with bales of very classy wool and merchants coming all this way every year from Rome Venice Milan, Antwerp Bruges – the big weaving cities, the big fashion centres of Europe, sending their merchants to choose the best wool. Loaded on wagons to York, then ships to Italy or low countries.

Made monks a lot of money St Bernard would have been horrified, he didn't think monks were in the business of making money. So at Rievaulx you have a simple basic Norman building in the nave, it's mostly gone, would have been quite dark, very plain built in 1150s 60s by 1220s you have the choir - as beautiful as any choir of its day. high Gothic, glamorous .built by professional masons, not monks. That's what the wool had done. Cos monks were rich

Bilsdale from mid 12c is a place of lay brothers looking after sheep everywhere you see grange you have monks...latin term for an out station. Little place to live ,sheep being looked after with maybe 6 lay brothers and a monk to keep them in check... it worked a treat. Granges all over Ryedale

Kirkham was far away collecting rents from the top of Bilsdale. Rievaulx was involved in the life of the dale for the next 400 years.

At the other extreme was a tiny foundation for women, a little nunnery at Arden, on the site of the house it had 7 or 8 or 11 or 12 nuns and a few people helping and a couple of old people who bought themselves a place in the nunnery until they died. A small settlement without much money or land or possessions. we can trace its history, founded shortly after... Benedictine nuns, founded soon after Rievaulx it survived until the dissolution but on a small scale

A place with national, European status was Mount Grace. One of the new groups most remarkable of all were at Grand English translation charterhouse very austere. Each monk lived alone isolated, met only for 3am .. was a very successful type of monastic life for a very few people, doesn't suit everyone, doesn't suit women there's no nuns, women have to talk. End of 14c a charterhouse founded at Mount Grace founded

At dissolution Mount Grace was flourishing Rievaulx a shadow of its former self at Mount Grace 25 monks & 25 small rooms, had a waiting list, waiting for someone to die. Heroic story at dissolution. Far more English Carthusians died, 35 of 45 monastic martyrs killed by Henry VIII because they wouldn't agree to ditching the pope were Carthusians very high proportion, because so much more demanding. Mount Grace will have inspired some people to go to Mount Grace

Last abbot at Rievaulx was most famous for being a brilliant huntsman, had pack of hounds at Skiplam Grange, between Norton? & Kirby not what Bernard had in mind!. Even the Yorkshire Cistercians didn't resist Henry much, they took their pension and went home quietly at dissolution monks disappeared.

Lay brothers had disappeared long ago, so there were tenants they became tenants and paid rents to the abbey. On the abby rent rolls from dissolution you have tenant names Garbutt, Barker was Leng Flintoft. Latecomer is Ainsley, not on rent role but by end 16c. May have moved in as everything split up., but tenants is what went on..

The whole of Rievaulx abby estates, enormous, most of the moors as far as Rosedale S of Helmsley lot of low country went back to the heirs of Walter Espec, they made sure they got hold of it at the dissolution, they just grabbed back what they could, once the king had taken his cut, taken the lead from the roof etc,

passed through a rather wonky family tree of female line marriages until it reached the 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of Buckingham friend of James I he fell off his horse when a hunt got out of hand, he was taken to Kirby (moorside) he died in Kirby 1682 no it was discovered that estate was bankrupt.

So the whole estate, the biggest single land holding in England, not Scotland sold to a crooked banker, had been in prison, but was banker of the king to Charles II, so got himself out of prison Mr Duncombe v rich indeed. He bought the whole thing. Duncombe they built Duncomb Park, flourished in 19c built terraces etc til 20c it got difficult to handle.

Lord feversham, killed ww1, left 8 year old son who inherited everything, he was her uncle, he moved out he's her uncle, under his rather wonky watch, he sold bilsdale in 1944, peculiar time to do this, he was a v brave soldier in the war estate was going bust so he sold Bilsdale  
He was a very brave soldier in the war, it all became impossible and he sold bilsdale

So monks shaped bilsdale til 18c built the road and everything changed

53.00

### questions

3 disasters - black death, sheep disease & scots

Edward 2 too cowardly to face the scots, battle of byland, just over the hill, Edward wasn't very brave, '1322 he was in Rievaulx they did some stealing and bashing about scots won, they didn't seriously destroy monastery

2 bouts of sheep ...? which rocked the economy in 13c Sheep disease much worse 2 bouts rocked the economy, then the black death, killed third of england's population, but half the population of the monasteries, cos living close together

Monks buried ne of church, they always were, but its become a steep hillside, they terraced, never excavated above the church

Rievaulx is terraced from church downwards, to cloister excavated in 1920s, it was all silted up  
Dug out by hand

Until 1920's couldn't see nave. So the hill has come down and covered all traces of where monks are buried

The abbot they loved were buried in the chapter house east of salter.

Bit mor about burials including walter espec died 1153 same year as St Bernard.

Why was church built

William speche probably walter's father, they of course were Normans. Harrying is much exaggerated, it wasn't a wipe out, there must have been some people otherwise why build a church. Not terribly likely that people were forcibly moved as suggested by student. Scots came in battle of standard, Battle of Standard they came down greatt north road church was probably for the few people who lived t, but difficult to say

Discussion about the priest,

There were settlements of people on the other side of the hill, down the hill

Kirkham had settlements that survived all the way through paying rents to the abby.

there is a list, history of helmsley rievaulx & district there's a list of Kirkham tenants, various trades, tanners smiths, it was a different world rest of the dale wouldn't have had many residents??

raisdale is part of the Kirkham holding Is IT thought it was rievaulx's?

101.00

Lay brothers disappeared after the black death?? The tenants just went on after the dissolution. It didn't make much difference to them. In elizabeth's time things were flourishing, look at the rooms in helmsley castle, things were quite prosperous. No one would have thrown them out simply because the moasteries dissolved

105.00

3 cistercian monasteries Scotland, Bedfordshire wales mount st Bernard in Leicestershire and C in Wales

Charterhouse in Sussex, Victorian building room for 30-40 monks

In 1900 french threw out all religious orders again 2 charterhouses came together & came together & moved to sussex.

– mount grace is a very hard life her book about mount grace monk starts at Arden Mill then on John Mexborough has read it. Robert Fletcher was a monk at the dissolution, don't know what happened to him. Reginald Poole last catholic archbishop of Canterbury, a neglected historical character.

108

Discussion about the next bsg meeting

1.11 Details of rents at dissolution

Discussion about the act of dissolution, not violent, remove lead, dig pit & melt lead, it turned up in 1922, helped to lead York minster in 1922 Not a vindictive operation fell down because people used stone for other buildings.

In late 19c the ruins started to be valued, until then they had been neglected for centuries.

Some of the big abby churches are still there – Selby, Gloucester Carlisle.

Big Normans given land to keep the locals quiet

Walter espec founded warden abbey

1.19 book sales

1.20 listen to the rest

The souls of the Vikings are trapped in the names of the lake district BBC

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