

Know your church 3

Hidden away at the back of the chancel is the rarely seen window showing St Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne, holding the head of St Oswald on a plate. This is a rather strange image which dates back more than a thousand years.

Oswald was the son of Aethelfirth, the pagan king of Northumbria. After his death Oswald with his young brother, Oswiu, and possibly his mother fled to the king of the Scots. At this time the Scots controlled a small strip of land on the west coast and some of the islands of the Hebrides. They were Christians who, migrating from Ireland, followed the Irish or Celtic traditions of Christianity. St Columba had established the monastery on Iona and he set about converting the Pictish tribes.

Oswald returned from his exile c 634 and defeated his enemies in Northumbria. The lands along the east coast from the Forth to the Humber were under his rule. He may well have captured Edinburgh and established an Angle settlement here. Oswald invited Celtic monks led by St Aidan to come to Northumbria and convert the Angles (English). The missionaries were given the island of Lindisfarne as their base. Thus the king can claim to have played his part in converting the English.

Oswald was killed in battle against the pagan Mercians and his body was dismembered. In a successful raid the Northumbrians were able to recover some of his remains, including the head, and bring them back to Lindisfarne. Eventually the head was buried with the remains of St Cuthbert. Danish raids forced the monks to leave the island and seek sanctuary further south. They finally settled in Durham at a bend on the river Wear. St Cuthbert with the head of St Oswald were buried here.

John Peacock