

SAINT OSWALD, KING OF NORTHUMBRIA

Oswald was the eldest son of Aethelfrith, King of Bernicia and was probably born in the royal palace of Yeavering in the year 605.

After the death of his father, who was killed in battle by Edwin, Oswald and his brothers went into exile. Certainly this was into what we now call Scotland, possibly even onto the island of Iona. During his 16 years exile Oswald certainly came into contact with the Community of Columba and, being influenced by their teaching and life-style, became a Christian.

After the death of Edwin, Oswald returned in 634 from his exile and sought to regain his kingdom through battle with Cadwallon. The night before the Battle of Heavenfield – near to Hexham – Oswald made a wooden cross, erected it and had his army gather around it and pray for victory.

Oswald's victory led to the unification of the kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira into the kingdom of Northumbria. He set up his royal palace and court at Bamburgh and called for monks from Iona to establish – or in fact re-establish more firmly – Christianity throughout his land.

Aidan responded to this call from Iona, and he established a church at Bamburgh and a Community, based on Columba's Community on the island of Lindisfarne. This was to be a place of learning, of culture and of mission.

We know from Bede's "Ecclesiastical History of the English People" that Oswald and Aidan forged a deep friendship and partnership; the King acted as interpreter for the Bishop, who to begin with only spoke his native Irish language.

Bede also tells this story: One Easter Oswald and Aidan were feasting at the Palace, when a silver dish of food was set before them. Just as they were saying their prayers of blessing a servant, who looked after the needs of the poor, came into the Hall to tell the King that a great crowd of hungry folk were sitting outside the palace begging alms. The king immediately ordered his food to be taken out to them and the silver platter to be broken up and shared among them. Aidan, impressed by the generosity of the King, raised Oswald's right hand and prayed, "May this hand never wither with age".

Oswald met a violent death in the year 642 when he and the Mercian King, Penda clashed in battle. Oswald died on 5th August at Oswestry in Shropshire. His head and arms were severed from his body and stuck onto poles. Legend has it that the right arm of Oswald, which Aidan had raised in prayer, found its way, incorrupt back to Bamburgh and was installed into a silver casket in the church here. Oswald's head was returned to Lindisfarne and was eventually buried in the coffin of St Cuthbert.

Oswald, who despite living in violent days, is renowned as a diplomat, a unifier, a generous and humble king, who is remembered as a martyr.

Lord God almighty,
who so kindled the faith of King Oswald with your Spirit
that he set up the sign of the cross in his kingdom
and turned his people to the light of Christ:
grant that we, being fired by the same Spirit,
may always bear our cross before the world
and be found faithful servants of the gospel;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever.