

Our Saints of Britain and Ireland

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The Orthodox Church has a feast day celebrating all the saints of Britain and Ireland. This feast, unlike many much older ones on the Orthodox Church's calendar, was instituted in fairly recent years. It honors early saints from the western part of the world.

Two of these saints, Aidan of Lindisfarne and Hilda of Whitby, were seventh-century contemporaries. Saint Aidan had been a member of the monastic community on the island of Iona, off the coast of Scotland. Founded by Saint Columba, this monastery was a center of Celtic spirituality. When King Oswald of Northumbria (in northeastern England) asked for missionaries from Iona to convert his English subjects to Christianity, the first monk to attempt it decided that the pagan English were too stubborn to be influenced, and gave up.

Aidan refused to believe the job was impossible, and left Iona for Northumbria in 635. He established a monastery on the island of Lindisfarne, and it became not only a center of missionary work but the home of a growing community of monks. Aidan went on foot among the people of the area, teaching about Christ's love from one village to another. At first he traveled with an interpreter, since he knew only his native Irish language; some say King Oswald occasionally accompanied him. But gradually Aidan learned the language of the people, who responded eagerly to his preaching and instruction.

Saint Hilda of Whitby, born in 614, was a child of the royal house of Northumbria. Her early life was scarred by tragedy and loss; when she was still a baby her father was poisoned. She was brought up by Christian relatives in the Northumbrian court, and grew to love Jesus Christ with all her heart.

So when her sister decided to travel to Gaul to become a monastic, Hilda planned to follow her. But Saint Aidan, who knew her dedication to the faith, asked her to stay in England and gave her land on which to build a monastery.

By 657, Saint Hilda had established that thriving monastic community, and had moved on to Whitby. There she organized a double monastery (one for men and one for women) in accordance with the Celtic tradition of Saint Columba. The community became famous as a center of learning and trained five bishops. Secular rulers and monastic abbots sought Saint Hilda's advice, and she counseled these and many other people, while also encouraging the study of Scripture and giving Church artists the resources to create.

Hilda was stricken with serious illness, a virulent fever that darkened the final six years of her life. But as the Venerable Bede writes, "...taught by her own experience she admonished all men to serve the Lord dutifully when health of body is granted to them, and always to return thanks faithfully to Him in adversity, or bodily infirmity."

These saints are only two of the many who lived and worked faithfully in Britain and Ireland during the Church's early years.