

*Hild of Streataneshalch, Later known as Hilda of Whitby, (614-680), and the so-called Synod of Whitby.*



All that we know of Hild comes from the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. He tells us that she was the daughter Heneric, nephew of King Edwin of Northumbria and the sister-in-law of Ethelhere, king of the East Anglians.



Paulinus, later bishop of York, came to Britain in 601 with a group of missionaries to convert the Anglo-Saxons. He was consecrated bishop in Kent in 625, and then accompanied Æthelburg, sister of the king of Kent, to Northumbria, where her sister was to marry King Edwin. While there, Paulinus not only converted many Northumbrians and built a few churches, but managed to convert the king as well. One of the women he received into the church with the king was Hild.

As sometimes happens with new converts, Hild decided that she would enter the monastic life, and set out to join her sister, Hereswith, at the monastery of Chelles, in Gaul. Hild was gone for a year, but returned at the request of Bishop Aidan, who gave her a small parcel of land on which she settled with a few other women. After this Hild was made abbess of the monastery at Hartlepool (Heretu), in county Durham, which she governed strictly for several years. Heiu, the first Northumbrian woman to enter the religious life founded Hartlepool in the 640's as a double monastery. Excavations of the monastery's cemetery in Hartlepool were conducted in 1833.



*Above Left: King Edwin and St. Paulinus.*

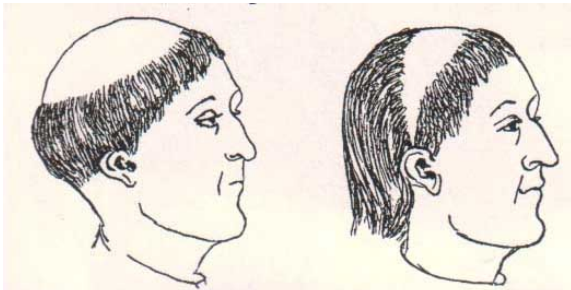
*Above: Bishop Aidan.*

Hild stayed at Hartlepool for some years until she built a monastery at Streataneshalch, establishing it as a double monastery with separate living quarters for monks and nuns who gathered for religious services in the same chapel. Hild ran the two houses according to strict monastic rules. She was especially strict with the monks, insisting that they apply themselves to the reading and study of Scripture. From among their number came five bishops, including Bosa (Hexam), and Aetla (York).

## The Synod



Tonsure in a double monastery. The bishop holding his crosier cuts the monk's hair while the abbess, also holding a crosier, looks on. Below: left: Roman tonsure. right Celtic tonsure.



The fictional image of the Synod (right) shows Hild in secular garb. She would have worn her Benedictine habit. She was Benedictine through and through.

Viking raiders destroyed Hild's monastery at Streanæshalch in 867. It was "re-founded" in 1079, but by then the town was known as Whitby, from the Old Norse for "white settlement."

Hild's memory lives on. Bede tells us that because of the "wisdom and godly service that was in her," many religious persons "were wont continually to visit, steadfastly to love and diligently to instruct her." She was indeed a remarkable woman, wise, spiritual, and a superb administrator, a truly outstanding woman who held her own with princes and prelates—some of the greatest men of her age.

Wilfred, representing the interests of Rome, brought about the final confrontation with Celtic Christianity at a synod called to resolve the method of determining the date of Easter. What better place to hold it than Mother Hild's Abbey?

The gathering of clergy and King Oswy, represented several languages—Gaelic, Old English, Frankish, Early Welsh and Latin. Bishop Cedd was translator for the gathering where not only was the Celtic date of Easter questioned, but also their monastic tonsure, which was different from that of Rome.

Bishop Colman of Lindisfarne fought for the Celtic side, saying all these things were traditions from the beginning. In the end the Celtic party lost, and it must have been painful for Hild to see Bishop Colman and his followers leave the gathering after he was told: "You are foolishly attempting to fight the whole world." Hild and Bishop Cedd submitted to Rome.

It should be noted that at no time were the doctrines or liturgical practices of the Celts questioned by Rome.

