

The Holy Island of Lindisfarne

by Ian Hosker

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St Cuthbert's Isle

St Cuthbert is said to have retreated here to a hermit's life after his attempt to revert religious practices to conform to Rome rather than to those practiced in Ireland was rejected by his fellow monks. Now a favourite safe place for seals.





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Further along the beach, a father and his young son sat cross legged, sifting through the sand and crushed shells for St Cuthbert's beads. The only sounds were those of sea birds and barking seals languishing on St Cuthbert's Isle, or drifting past as the tide ebbs and flows. A day like today, when the sea mist rolls over the island, simply adds to the sense of being somewhere very special indeed.

The cacophony of modern life is thankfully absent, even though the Island of Lindisfarne (*more usually known as Holy Island*) lies just a mile off the Northumberland coast, a few miles to the north of Bamburgh. It is only accessible from the village of Beal via a causeway at low tide. Now a tarmac road, the ancient mudflat trackway across the treacherous sands is marked by tall wooden stakes and the dangers of crossing, even via the modern causeway,

are highlighted by the very prominent signs urging the traveller to be aware of the tidal

windows for safe crossing. Even so, the crossing windows are long enough for walkers to cross, spend a few hours on the island and then return safely.

The large car park at the edge of Lindisfarne village fills quickly within the hour of the



St Cuthbert's Bay

The beach is possibly the only place to collect St Cuthbert's beads, and is the ideal location to observe swimming seals as they drift past.



'safe crossing' window and empties just as quickly at the end of it.

But the island is much more than a tranquil space. It is steeped in secular, religious and natural history that, given its small size, few other places in the UK can match. Arguably, its history as well as its relative isolation, makes Lindisfarne a 'must visit' place on any north-east England travel itinerary.

In 635 the Northumbrian king, Oswald invited an Irish monk, Aidan to leave Iona (the island-monastery off the south-west coast of Scotland) and become the bishop of his kingdom, granting him the island of Lindisfarne to establish a monastery. The island is now more associated with another Saxon monk, Cuthbert, who eventually became Lindisfarne's greatest monk-bishop, and the most important saint in northern England in the Middle Ages. Cuthbert's attempt to reform the religious practices of the community created hostility within the community, and Cuthbert is said to have retreated to the eponymous St Cuthbert's Isle (which lies just 100m or so off the main island in St Cuthbert's Bay) where he lived for a while as a hermit. He eventually



Fishermen's sheds

'Recycled' boats used by local fishermen for their equipment.

moved to Inner Farne - the nearest of the Farne Islands.

While living as a hermit, legend has it that he made rosaries from small strange circular stones with naturally existing holes in their centre that were later named after him – St Cuthbert's beads. In fact, they are the fossil remains of ancient crinoids – ancestors of our current sea lilies, and relatives of starfish. The tidal flow around the island and coastline washes them up on the beach

opposite St Cuthbert's Isle. In fine weather, you will find visitors sifting through the sand and crushed shells in search of them. Most now only measure 2-3 mm or so across and the mission to find them is a good way to pass the time between tides, should you decide to remain on the island.

Some years after his death, Cuthbert was canonised, and the cult of St Cuthbert was born, enhanced by the many reports of the miracles associated with his him. The cult of



Lindisfarne Priory

The ruins of the Norman priory are believed to be located on, or nearby, the original Saxon monastery.



The Causeway

The modern tarmac road replaced the original medieval track across the sand. The island can only be accessed via this road when the tidal window is right. Crossing times are posted at the crossing point.

St Cuthbert led to one of the most significant pieces of medieval religious literature and art, the Lindisfarne Gospels, which are now kept in the British Library in London.

Lindisfarne will also always be associated with cementing the reputation of the Vikings as viscous pagan invaders because it is here that they launched their first recorded major attack on western (and Christian) Europe in the summer of 793. Such was the devastating physical and psychological impact of this raid, and the continuing Viking threat, that the monks eventually moved inland, leaving only a rump religious community.

The current ruins of the Norman Lindisfarne Priory (managed by English Heritage) are thought to have been built on, or near, the site of the Saxon monastery. In 1537 it was one of the first victims of Henry VIII's reformation. The buildings were not dismantled as Henry understood its important strategic location in the defence of his realm, being close to the border with Scotland.

A gentle walk southwards from St Cuthbert's Bay and the priory, provides spectacular coastal views and a magnificent view of Lindisfarne Castle on the imposing highest point of the island, which lies on the western edge of Lindisfarne Harbour. The harbour beach is lined with the iconic upturned boats that serve as fisherman's sheds and add to the unique character of this island. The castle was never engaged in a major conflict and was eventually converted into a private residence by Sir Edwin Lutyens in 1903. Its gardens were created by the renowned

landscape gardener, Gertrude Jekyll in 1911. It is now managed by the National Trust, and at the time of writing was undergoing major restoration.

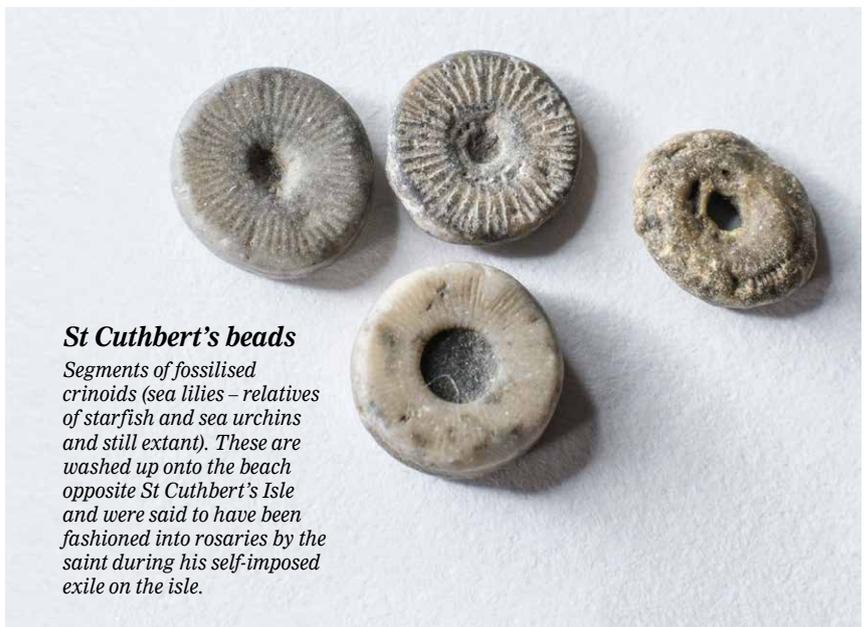
The best way to experience the unique atmosphere of the island is to remain there between tides, when most other visitors leave. Spend time on St Cuthbert's bay listening to the barking of seals and watch them as they drift past with the tide or sit and listen to the sea birds. No traffic noise; no background

sound of industry. Just peace and quiet and time to contemplate.

Note to reader:

It is essential that the tide times are consulted, and the following web site provides a detailed list of 'safe' crossing times as well as useful information to help you make the most of your time on the island:

<https://www.visitnorthumberland.com/coast/holy-island/crossing-times>



St Cuthbert's beads

Segments of fossilised crinoids (sea lilies – relatives of starfish and sea urchins and still extant). These are washed up onto the beach opposite St Cuthbert's Isle and were said to have been fashioned into rosaries by the saint during his self-imposed exile on the isle.

