



One of my favourite history places:

The Holy Island of Lindisfarne

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The Holy Island of Lindisfarne is a special place, not just for its stunning scenery and rich bird life, but also for its unique history and medieval religious heritage. This article visits a few of the many places of historical interest on the island and considers ideas for exploring different aspects of Lindisfarne's history across the primary age range.

My love of Lindisfarne began when I was a student living in Durham in 1989. I don't remember exact details of that first visit, but I do recall the excitement of crossing the causeway to Lindisfarne and the feeling of being at the mercy of both the tide and the weather (it rained...a lot... a lashing rain that with the wind behind it, hits you sideways like thousands of tiny arrows!). I also remember experiencing a genuine feeling of awe at the tangible sense of history of the island. That was the first of several visits and whilst I would like to say that the weather subsequently improved, I can't hand on heart say it always did!

I last visited Lindisfarne in Summer 2022 and was keen to revisit it in this article. Now, sitting down to write it, I hardly know where to start, there is simply so much that can be said about Lindisfarne and a short visit (and by extension, a short article) is not sufficient to explore all the places of historic interest nor the beautiful coastline that surrounds the island. This article touches on aspects of Lindisfarne's history and highlights a few of

the places I went to on my most recent visit, but barely skims the surface of all that Lindisfarne has to offer.

Lindisfarne, an island that is not always an island!

Lindisfarne is an historic island, situated off the Northumbrian mainland in the north-east of England. It is a tidal island only accessible by boat when the tide is high and the causeway submerged. Part of Lindisfarne's charm for me is this separation from the mainland twice a day, adding to its sense of mystery and unique character. Lindisfarne is by no means a hidden gem though. Although it has a population of just over 150, over 650,000 people visit each year.

Lindisfarne or Holy Island?

According to the Lindisfarne community website, the island is rarely referred to by its Anglo-Saxon name 'Lindisfarne' by locals, but rather by its eleventh century name 'Insula Sacra' or 'Holy Island'. This name 'Holy Island' likely originates from the words of the Durham monks following the vicious attack on the monastery by Vikings in 793... 'Lindisfarne, truly a "Holy Island" baptised in the blood of so many good men...'

More widely, 'Lindisfarne' and 'Holy Island' appear to be used interchangeably, with 'Lindisfarne' often used when referring to the island's earlier history. The island is now often referred to as 'The Holy Island of Lindisfarne'.

Lindisfarne, a holy island throughout the ages

Lindisfarne is known as one of the most important holy sites of Anglo-Saxon England, and an important centre of early English Christianity. Originally founded by the Irish monk St Aidan in 635, at the request of Oswald King of Northumbria, Lindisfarne monastery became well known for its association with St Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne who spent some of his life on Lindisfarne and was buried there. Eleven years after his death in 687, Cuthbert's tomb was opened by monks who found that his body had not decayed. This was seen as a sign of Cuthbert's saintliness and signified the beginnings of the cult of St Cuthbert which established Lindisfarne as a place of pilgrimage and learning.

The beautiful illuminated manuscripts, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, were also created on Lindisfarne, around 710–25. They are thought to be the work of a monk named Eadfrith and are now housed in the British Library in London.

The Viking raid on Lindisfarne in 793 is well known. It was one of the first major Viking attacks on Britain, the consequences of which were devastating for the wealthy monastery and its monks. As a result of this, and fearful of future attacks, the monks decided to remove St Cuthbert's body and wandered, carrying his coffin, together with treasures that remained following the Viking raid, for seven years before settling at Chester-le-Street, near Durham. St Cuthbert's relics were moved again in 995 and were finally enshrined in Durham Cathedral where they can be visited to this day.

Following the Norman Conquest, monks returned to Lindisfarne and re-established the monastery as Lindisfarne Priory, a Benedictine house. The ruins of



Image from the Lindisfarne Gospels

Lindisfarne Priory that we see today are those of this priory, built in the twelfth century and thought to be on the site of the original monastery.

Lindisfarne continued to be a place of pilgrimage and an active religious site until Henry VIII closed it during the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536. Nevertheless, the tradition of making religious pilgrimages to Lindisfarne continued. I can't claim my visit was a religious pilgrimage, but I am certainly fascinated by the layers of religious history so evident on the island.

Lindisfarne Priory is now managed by English Heritage and is well worth the entrance fee. The priory's history is clearly presented in the priory museum and is really helpful in bringing a visit to Lindisfarne Priory to life: www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/lindisfarne-priory/

Lindisfarne Priory ruins



AD 635

Lindisfarne monastery is founded by the Irish monk St Aidan.

687–98

The cult of St Cuthbert

After Cuthbert's death he is buried in a stone coffin where his remains do not decay in 11 years. Cuthbert's remains are raised to a ground-level coffin shrine and many more miracles are attributed to him. Cuthbert is declared a saint.



c.710–25

The Lindisfarne Gospels are created by the monk, Eadfrith.

793

Viking raid takes place at Lindisfarne monastery.



793–875

Monks abandon Lindisfarne and carry St Cuthbert's coffin for 7 years before settling in Chester-le-Street.

685

A series of miracles are attributed to Cuthbert throughout his life and in 685 Cuthbert was consecrated Bishop of Lindisfarne.

8th century

Miracles are reported to have taken place at St Cuthbert's shrine. Lindisfarne is now a major place of pilgrimage, power and wealth.



995

St Cuthbert's remains are enshrined at Durham Cathedral.

Overview timeline of aspects of the history of The Holy Island of Lindisfarne (not to scale)



The best views on the island!

One of my favourite places on the island however, is less grand. The former 1940s coastguard lookout tower is situated on the south side of Lindisfarne on an outcrop of rock called 'The Heugh'. Historically, islanders would watch from it to try and make sure that boats had safe passage to Lindisfarne during stormy weather. Now, it has been refurbished and reopened as a 360-degree observatory which provides a fabulous panoramic view of Lindisfarne.

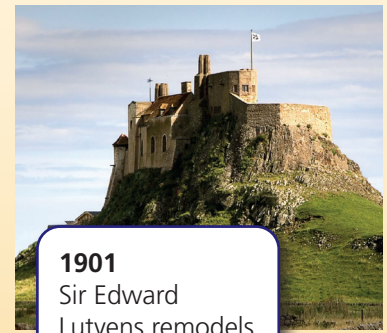
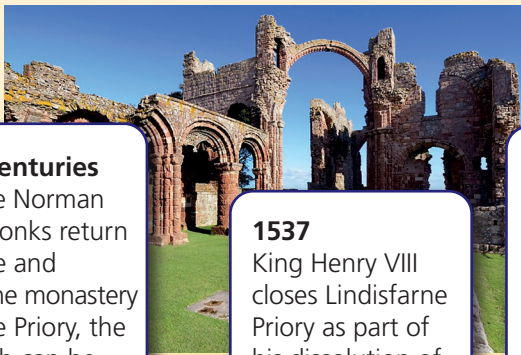
I love it, and I especially love the views it affords. Climb the stairs to the top of the tower and you have not only the promised 360-degree view of Lindisfarne but also, weather permitting, wider views of other notable places of interest like Longstone Lighthouse (from where Grace Darling, the lighthouse

keeper's daughter, spotted the wreck of the Forfarshire and helped rescue its survivors) and Bamburgh Castle (with a rich history of its own and now one of the largest inhabited castles in the country). The view from each window is accompanied by an information panel giving a brief explanation of what is in view.

Whether you are using it as a place to enjoy spectacular views, or somewhere to jigsaw together aspects of the island's history, geography, and natural world, it is well worth visiting.

Remembrance

The island also bears witness to more recent history and devastation. A war memorial (designed in 1922 by Sir Edward Lutyens) stands on The Heugh next to the coastguard lookout tower. It is inscribed on one side with



11th–13th centuries

Following the Norman Conquest, monks return to Lindisfarne and re-establish the monastery as Lindisfarne Priory, the ruins of which can be visited today.

1537

King Henry VIII closes Lindisfarne Priory as part of his dissolution of the monasteries.

1715

Two local Jacobite supporters capture Lindisfarne Castle. The castle is retaken and the two Jacobites imprisoned in Berwick (but later escape).

1901

Sir Edward Lutyens remodels Lindisfarne Castle.

13th–14th centuries

Monks fortify Lindisfarne Priory after Edward I invades Scotland.

1549

Lindisfarne Castle (then known as Beblowe) was built using stones from the demolished Priory. It was an important strategic point in the 16th-century Scottish Wars.

18th and 19th centuries – the industrial age

Lindisfarne is harvested for its ironstone and limestone, with limekilns built near Lindisfarne Castle.

Present day

Lindisfarne is home to just over 150 inhabitants and hosts over 650,000 visitors each year.

References:

www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/lindisfarne-priory/

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/north-east/lindisfarne-castle/history-of-lindisfarne-castle

the names of islanders who died in World War I and then later, on the other, the names of those lost during World War II.

The strength of the elements was also apparent in my most recent visit when I met two conservationists standing over the broken pieces of the Celtic cross from the memorial. The cross had been ripped from its base and smashed to pieces by the wind during recent, fierce storms. I don't know if it was able to be repaired, but I hope it was.

St Mary's Church

St Mary's Church is Lindisfarne's parish church. It is the oldest building on the island with parts of the church originating from the Saxon period, notably its Saxon arch. These are juxtaposed with more modern additions such as the twentieth-century stained glass



windows celebrating St Aidan and St Cuthbert. Memorial plaques to some of the island's men named on the war memorial can be found inside the church. These bear further witness to the immense sacrifice made by the island's families in both wars. We learn that James Patterson died in action,

aged 18 near St Quentin in France, while George Cromarty, aged 19 died in action in the same year, 1918, in Harricourt. It does not bear thinking about, and yet we absolutely must. As you stand in the church amidst the quiet, there is something tangible and present about these losses.

The church is now also home to a beautiful contemporary wooden sculpture by Fenwick Lawson. 'The Journey' shows monks carrying St Cuthbert's coffin from Lindisfarne to Durham when they left the island in 875.

Teaching Lindisfarne's history – where can it be included in the Primary History National Curriculum?

As the Primary History National Curriculum (2014) requires pupils to learn about both 'Britain's settlement by Anglo-Saxons and Scots' and 'the Viking and Anglo-Saxon struggle for the Kingdom of England to the time of Edward the Confessor', this presents the perfect opportunity to explore the history of Lindisfarne as an important centre of early English Christianity and the site of one of the first major Viking raids.

There is also scope to teach aspects of Lindisfarne's more recent history in both Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2.

For Northumberland schools lucky enough to be able to include Lindisfarne as part of their *local study* unit, they need look no further than Karin Doull's wonderful article 'Come all ye fisher lassies' (*Primary History* 85) for ideas to support teaching this. Why not explore aspects of Lindisfarne's fishing industry through the eyes of some of the island's women, in particular during 'the herring'? Lindisfarne has a strong historic tradition of fishing, its own herring industry in the nineteenth century and its very own 'herring girls' (Porteous, 2017). The legacy of this can be seen today in sheds made from upturned fishing keels.

Examples for the Key Stage 2 unit, *a study of an aspect or theme in British history that extends pupils' chronological knowledge beyond 1066* could include Lindisfarne's lime-burning industry as part of a study of nineteenth-century industry. The lime kilns can still be visited at Castle Point and provide an opportunity to look at a less well known aspect of Lindisfarne's history. The National Trust owns Lindisfarne Castle, and its website tells us that the lime kilns are now a designated Scheduled Ancient Monument in recognition of the national significance of the site. They are some of the largest examples of their kind anywhere in the country.

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The Lindisfarne Exhibition Centre is a good starting point from which to explore the island. The exhibition presents the history of the island and provides a good foundation for exploring it: <https://holy-island.com/lindisfarne-centre/>

The Journey



Resources

Websites

- www.lindisfarne.org.uk/general/welcome.htm
- www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/lindisfarne-priory/history/
- www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/lindisfarne-priory/history/viking-raid/?view=Standard
- www.durhamworldheritagesite.com/learn/history/st-cuthbert/life
- www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/north-east/lindisfarne-castle/things-to-do-outdoors-at-lindisfarne-castle

Reading and resources:

- Doull, K. (2020) 'Come all ye fisher lassies', *Primary History*, 85, summer 2020 pp. 14–18.
- Porteous, K. (2017) Holy Island's Fishing Heritage in *Peregrini Lindisfarne: an anthology*. Available at: <https://islandshirearchives.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Fishing-Heritage-Katrina-compressed.pdf>