

Immersed in the tides of centuries of history:

the HA conference visit to Lindisfarne

By Steve Illingworth

On the afternoon of Thursday 14 May 2026, about 20 members of the Historical Association gathered in the foyer of the Newcastle Gateshead Hilton Hotel. The annual HA conference would only begin the next day but we had signed up for the pre-conference coach trip to Lindisfarne, also known as Holy Island, 60 miles further up the Northumberland coast.

As we waited for the coach, the skies above Newcastle darkened, followed by torrential rain and a dramatic flash of lightning. The prospect of being exposed later that afternoon to a fierce storm on the open spaces of Lindisfarne

with few places to shelter caused some degree of anxiety. As it happened, there was nothing to worry about as not a drop of rain fell during our two-hour stay on the island.

Some of us arrived in Newcastle in shirt sleeves and just a light summer jacket. As we gathered in the hotel foyer, we looked at other fellow participants on the coach trip with their bobble hats, waterproof coats and several layers of sweaters and wondered if their attire might be slightly over the top. After all, we thought, just how cold can it get in mid-May? Two hours later, having arrived on Lindisfarne, we had

a response to our question and the answer was ... very cold. As we stood on a mound, looking down on the ruins of Lindisfarne Priory, a bitter wind blew from the North Sea and chilled us to the bone. It was easy to imagine that, if the original monks on the island had sought to deny themselves the earthly comforts and joys of life, then they had probably chosen the right place.

Some of us had been to Lindisfarne before, many decades ago, but the passage of time had played tricks on our memory. For some reason we remembered a small island with hardly any human habitation, cut off from mainland Britain by the tides. In fact the island of Lindisfarne is three miles long and one mile wide. About 150 people live there permanently and back in Victorian times there were several hundred, many working in a thriving lime industry at that time. There are several pubs and shops on the island, with the local strong mead and tasty crab sandwiches being favourite choices for the hundreds of visitors who go there every day. The island is cut off from the mainland for most of the time, but every day there is a window for a few hours when the tides allow vehicles to drive across the causeway from the mainland, built in the 1950s.

By the end of our visit we felt extremely well-informed about the history of Holy Island. This was almost entirely due to the fact that we were fortunate to be accompanied by Richard Gameson of Durham University, who has the impressive title of Professor – History of the Book, which is a reference to his expertise on medieval writings and art. The world-famous Lindisfarne Gospels, a beautifully illustrated Latin version of the early books of the New Testament, are a particular interest of his. As we travelled on the coach from Newcastle





to Lindisfarne, he provided us with a detailed and highly engaging account of the long history of the island, followed up by a guided tour of certain key landmarks when we arrived.

Professor Gameson's insight into St Cuthbert, a highly venerated saint associated with both Lindisfarne and Durham Cathedral, was particularly revealing. Cuthbert's role in the famous Synod of Whitby (664 AD) was explained, where he had been the principal actor in the decision by the northern English Christian church to move away from its Celtic traditions and become more allied to the beliefs and practices favoured at the time by both Canterbury and Rome. According to Professor Gameson, Cuthbert's actions and ideas led to a cooling of relations with other monks at Lindisfarne, prompting Cuthbert to move to the nearby island of Inner Farne, where he died in solitude in 687. An information board on Lindisfarne tells the story of how news of Cuthbert's death was announced to the main island by the pre-arranged signal of lighting fires that could be seen across the water.

Other interesting features of Lindisfarne's history, as told by Professor Gameson, included the story of the Viking raid on the monastery in 793 CE, one of the first attacks of its kind on Britain, and the building of the castle in the sixteenth century. While most contemporary commentators lamented



the destruction of fine Christian men and treasures by vicious heathens, there were others who saw the Viking destruction as God's punishment for the wicked ways of the monks and other Christians in northern England. The castle on Lindisfarne is different from most in Britain in that it was not built by Norman kings but by Henry VIII in the 1540s. Henry was in constant conflict with the kingdom of Scotland at this time, building the castle and installing heavy artillery at a strong strategic location where his armies could control the eastern coast and aim to prevent Scottish incursions.

These intriguing historical developments were brought to life evocatively by our visit to Lindisfarne. As we stood on the headland overlooking the North Sea, we thought of and talked about the Vikings setting off from Scandinavia over the horizon in their longboats and could imagine the terror of the monks

in 793 as they looked in that direction. We could also envisage lookouts in the castle spotting Scottish ships moving southwards in later centuries and from an earlier time could imagine the fires signalling Cuthbert's death from island to island. The whole visit left us with a strong feeling of enjoying a fascinating and very scenic place, where we could feel immersed in centuries of absorbing human history.

