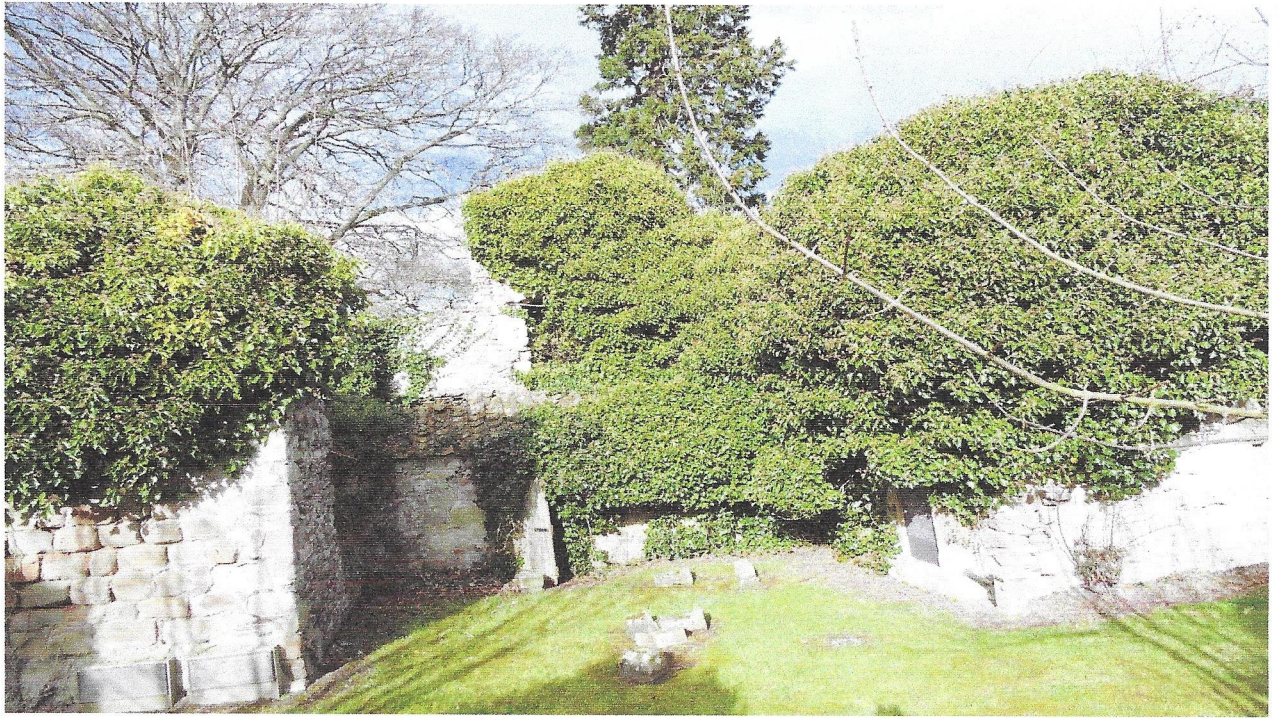


# AYTON CHAPEL

A look at the old chapel at Ayton Church  
dedicated to St Dionysius

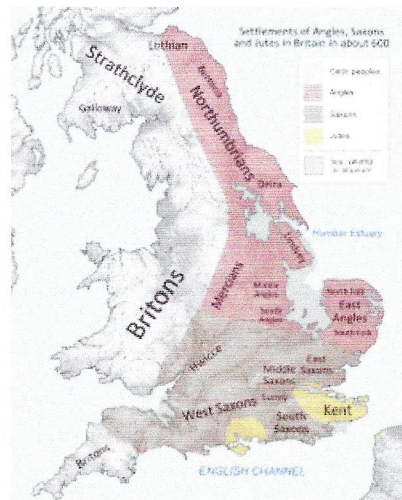


by Michael A. Fenty



## A story of how a headless saint came to Ayton

Kenneth Mac Alpin is credited with being the first King of Scotland, - he would have called his land Alba -uniting Picts and Scots in 843 A.D. This is the somewhat simplistic view we were taught in school. In fact, there were several competing factions for the Crown and Northumbria still existed although not as the powerhouse superstate it had been some centuries earlier.



600A.D.

The Earls of Northumbria, as they had become when England coalesced into a unified state, were always ready to reclaim what had been part of the earlier Kingdom of Northumbria

It was only in about 1018 that Kenneth's descendant, Malcolm II, defeated the Northumbrian army at Carham and established his rule in Lothian and the region between the Forth and the Tweed.

Malcolm's grandson, Duncan I, in the same year succeeded to the throne of Strathclyde, like Kenneth, benefiting from a claim through the female line. When Malcolm died in 1034, Duncan became the first king of all Scotland, although his kingdom did not include the lands held by the Vikings. The Celtic system of succession, called tanistry, however, allowed the throne to pass to any male member of the derbfine, a family group of four generations - a sure recipe for internecine conflict. Thus it was that Duncan's cousin, MacBeth, the Mormaer of Moray, was able to gather sufficient support in 1040 to kill Duncan in battle (not in bed as Shakespeare would have us

believe) and seize the throne.

In spite of a bad press from W.S., MacBeth was a generous and successful king for 17 years, and even made a pilgrimage to Rome. In 1057, he in his turn, was deposed by Duncan's son, Malcolm III Canmore or Ceann Morr (literally “big head” but, more likely, “great chief”). Malcolm, who had been raised in England from the age of nine, took as his second wife Princess Margaret of England, who with her brother, Edgar the Atheling, had fled to Scotland after the Norman Conquest in 1066. (His first wife had been daughter of the Norse earl of Orkney.) Prompted by Margaret, Malcolm introduced Anglo-Saxon customs into his court, where she endeavoured to enforce religious practices in the Roman rite, such as celibacy, on a reluctant Scottish church. Spurred on by his knowledge of England and by the possession of a ready-made claimant to the English throne in his brother-in-law, Malcolm raided Northumbria. This precipitated a Norman invasion of Scotland in 1071, during which Malcolm was obliged to pay homage to William the Conqueror at Abernethy. He did not give up, however, and it was during his fifth border campaign in 1093 that he was killed at Alnwick Castle. Margaret, who died three days later, was canonized in 1251.

Malcolm 's wife Margaret was not quite the saint she has be portrayed. She was a strong willed woman of undoubted piety who had little time for the Celtic church which was less hierarchical than its Roman counterpart and less likely to be in step with the crown.

The original building of the Ayton Church is in the form of a St John's cross which is more like a plus sign than the commonly used Latin cross we are all used to.

St John is more often associated with the Celtic church as St Peter is with the Roman church.

It is like then that the original building was that of a Celtic church.

Here, I might digress to Abbey St Bathans .

Abbey St Bathans is a place of mystery. Firstly, there isn't and never has been, an abbey there.

Then there is St Bathan. Who was he? There is a St Bothan's collegiate church mentioned in 1421 in the nearby parish of Yester but the old name for Yester village near Gifford, was Bothans without its saintly prefix.

St Batheine was the cousin and successor of Columba on Iona and there is a reference to a St Bothan in Shetland in 636 A.D. Both seem remote connections to the little hamlet nestling along the banks of the Whitadder.

There was a priory here with twelve nuns and a Prioress. Founded in the 12th century by Ada, daughter of William the Lion. Never a large foundation, the priory was damaged in the Anglo-Scottish wars of the 16th century and further destruction visited on the site in the Cromwellian period.

There was another religious foundation only a mile or so away at Trefontanis, now Strafontaine. Nothing remains of this site though ruins were recorded up until the seventeenth century. Whether it predated the Cistercian priory, or was contemporary with it is unknown.

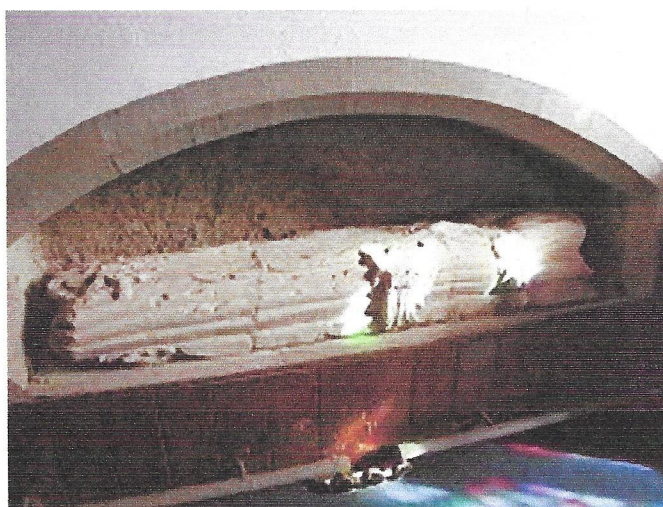
Why all this religious activity in what would have been, even in twelfth century, a fairly sparsely inhabited and poor place? Perhaps it was all about St Bathan or Bothan.

Since the time of Oswiu, king of Northumbria and the Synod of Whitby in 664, the influence of the Celtic church had been waning against the power of the Roman church with its hierarchical structure beloved of monarchs. The Johannine, contemplative way of the Columban church was less acceptable and, though not actively suppressed, was allowed to wither on the vine.

The Culdees, Celi De, the monastic order of the Celtic church had attracted some previously pagan devotees incorporating some of their beliefs about the natural order of the universe. They allowed their followers to marry and tended to function independently, electing their own abbots. The term

“abbot” was applied to the heads of Culdee establishments though they would not be regarded as abbeys in the Roman church.

Queen Margaret wife of Malcolm III, Saint Margaret, for all her perceived piety, was a Norman and steeped in feudalism. The independent nature of the Culdees did not sit well with the rigid structures of that form of governance. She and her sons, Alexander I and David I, were active in bringing the Culdees under canonical rule and by the end of the 13th century, the order had all but disappeared.



**Abbey St Bathans Kirk**

**Effigy of Prioress**

About half a mile from the kirk at Abbey Saint Bathans, in a field called the Chapelfield, are the remains of St Bathan's chapel, set deep in a copse of mature trees.



**Copse of trees enclosing St Bathan's Chapel**

Virtually nothing can be seen except a grave slab or altar stone and a broken ring of stone possibly a font or a piscine. This could have been the site of a Culdee monastery, with its "Abbot" dedicated to the Celtic saint, Batheine, Columba's successor, revered in the Celtic church

It explains why there was a need to establish not one but two orthodox religious establishments in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to counteract the influence of the earlier church and why the term Abbey survives even to this day.

So in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, we have a Kingdom in the making, a Royal House trying to change the nature of kingship from a contested title to which many may have a claim to an anointed title sanctioned by God and the Church - the Roman Church with its hierarchical, feudal structure, and the ever present threat from the Northumbrians on the southern border.

King Malcolm made several attempts to subjugate Northumberland but was unsuccessful. He was

eventually killed alongside his son and heir, Edward at Alnwick in 1093

After a couple of Donalds and another Duncan, none of whom managed to hold on to the throne, King Edgar, who was Norman English through and through, became king in 1097. He ruled, with the help of his patron William of Normandy until 1107. He had little interest in the Celtic side of his ancestry but knew from his time in England the necessity of welding together Church and Crown.

He bestowed many gifts and privileges on Coldingham Priory where "Edgar's Walls" still stand. Ayton Chapel was gifted to the Priory of Coldingham. This presupposes that there was already a church on the site, presumably an independent institution, probably of the old Celtic church.

There is a record of the earliest chaplain *Robertus Parsonae Capellae de Ayton* sometime between 1166 and 1232.

So why Dionysius?

Who was Dionysius?

There are a few candidates.

**Pope Saint Dionysius** (died 268), Greek pope who brought order to the early church after the persecution by Valerian and who corresponded with his Alexandrian namesake

**Saint Dionysius of Alexandria** (died 265), Oriental Orthodox Patriarch, an Egyptian and Copt

**Saint Dionysius the Areopagite** (1st century), judge of the Areopagus, the court of appeal in Athens, who was converted by St Paul

and, more interestingly,

**Saint Dionysius of Paris (died circa 250)**

According to Christian tradition, Saint Denis (also called Dionysius, Dennis, or Denys) is a Christian martyr and saint. In the third century, he was Bishop of Paris. He was martyred shortly after 250 AD, with his companions Rusticus and Eleutherius, in connection with the Decian persecution of Christians. Denis is said to have picked his head up after being decapitated, walked ten kilometres (six miles) preaching a sermon of repentance the entire way, making him one of



many cephalophores in hagiology

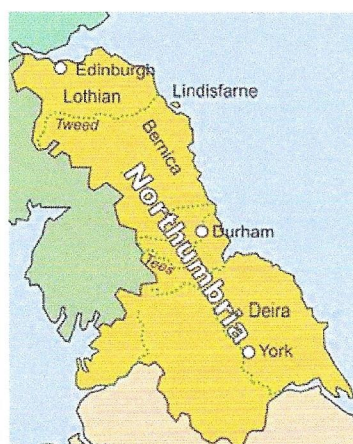
### **A beheaded saint**

There was a beheaded saint much closer to Ayton.

**Oswald** (c 604 – 5 August 642) was King of Northumbria from 634 until his death, and is venerated as a saint of which there was a particular cult in the Middle Ages.

Oswald was the son of Æthelfrith of Bernicia and came to rule after spending a period in exile. By defeating the British ruler Cadwallon ap Cadfan, Oswald brought the two Northumbrian kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira under a single ruler once again, and promoted the spread of Christianity. He was given a strongly positive assessment by the historian Bede who, writing a little less than a century after Oswald's death, regarded him as a saintly king. It is also Bede who is the main source for present-day historical knowledge of Oswald. After eight years of rule, in which he was the most powerful ruler in Britain, Oswald was killed in the Battle of Maserfield, and **beheaded**

In southern Alba, or Scotland as it would become, it may have been Oswald who conquered the Gododdin. Irish annals record the siege of Edinburgh, thought to have been the royal stronghold of the Gododdin, in 638, and this seems to mark the end of their kingdom. That this siege was undertaken by Oswald is suggested by the apparent control of the area by his brother and successor, Oswiu in the 650s.



It was a conflict with the pagan Mercians under Penda that proved to be Oswald's undoing. He was killed by the Mercians at the Battle of Maserfield in 642, at a place generally identified with

Oswestry (although other candidates for the location of the battle have been suggested) and his body was dismembered. Bede mentions the story that Oswald "ended his life in prayer": he prayed for the souls of his soldiers when he saw that he was about to die. Oswald's head and limbs were placed on stakes. Oswald soon came to be regarded as a saint. Bede says that the spot where he died was associated with miracles, and people took dirt from the site, which led to a hole being dug as deep as a man's height. Reginald of Durham recounts another miracle, saying that his right arm was taken by a bird (perhaps a raven) to an ash tree, which gave the tree ageless vigour; when the bird dropped the arm onto the ground, a spring emerged from the ground. Both the tree and the spring were, according to Reginald, subsequently associated with healing miracles. Aspects of the legend have been considered to have pagan overtones or influences - this may represent a fusion of his status as a traditional Anglo-Saxon warrior-king with Christianity.

The name of the site, Oswestry, or "Oswald's Tree", is generally thought to be derived from Oswald's death there and the legends surrounding it. His feast day is 5 August. The cult surrounding him even gained prominence in parts of continental Europe.

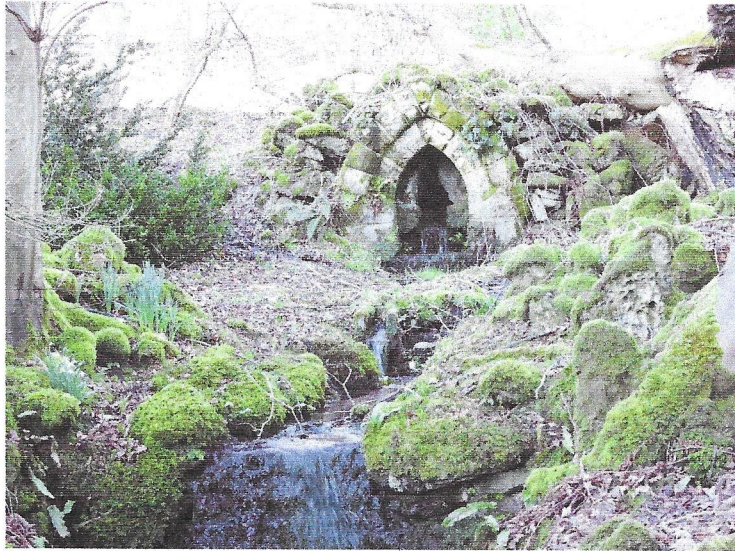
Oswald's head was interred in Durham Cathedral together with the remains of Cuthbert of Lindisfarne (a saint with whom Oswald became posthumously associated, although the two were not associated in life; Cuthbert became bishop of Lindisfarne more than forty years after Oswald's death). It is generally believed to remain, although there are at least four other claimed heads of Oswald in continental Europe. One of his arms is said to have ended up in Peterborough Abbey later in the Middle Ages. The story is that a small group of monks from Peterborough made their way to Bamburgh where Oswald's uncorrupted arm was kept and stole it under the cover of darkness. They returned to Peterborough and a chapel was created for the arm...Oswald's Chapel. This, minus the arm, can be seen to this day in the south transept of the cathedral.

He was venerated throughout Northumberland and beyond.

Aebba of Coldingham ( St Aebba the Elder) was Oswald's and Oswiu's sister

She founded the monastery at Coldingham and acted as an emissary for the Northumbrian court.

The holy well in the grounds of Ayton Castle, close to the chapel, is Abba's well



Abba's Well

Edgar granted lands and privileges to Coldingham Priory. Part of the medieval ruins are still referred to as Edgar's Walls.

Think of it... you are King Edgar gifting a chapel to your favourite ecclesiastical establishment. You wouldn't want it dedicated to the king, saint or not, who had ruled part of your kingdom up until 1018 and whose descendants had threatened to annex it several times since.

The House of Canmore would be aware that, being descended from Pictish and Scottish royal houses, they had no more dynastic claim on southern Alba than the Northumbrians. Both had won it by conquest.

Not wishing to glorify an adversary, he would decree there be a change in the dedication to something less controversial.

'A beheaded saint? Find another one... St Dionysius. He was beheaded. He'll do.'

The locals probably could not have cared less. Scottish or Northumbrian, they would still have to pay their tithes and obey the ecclesiastical courts. None would have known who St Dionysius was. They would still have gone to drink or bathe at Abba's well as a cure for their many ailments.



Hmmm? It's a thought isn't it ?