David Adam was born in Alnwick, Northumberland. He was Vicar of Danby on the North Yorkshire Moors for over twenty years, where he discovered the gift for writing prayers in the Celtic pattern. His first book of these, *The Edge of Glory*, achieved immediate popularity. He has since published several collections of prayers and meditations based on the Celtic tradition and the lives of the Celtic saints. His books have been translated into various languages, including Finnish and German, and have appeared in American editions. Many of his prayers have now been set to music. After thirteen years as Vicar of Holy Island, where he had taken many retreats and regularly taught school groups on prayer, David moved to Waren Mill in Northumberland from where he continues his work and writing.

THE HOLY ISLAND OF LINDISFARNE

DAVID ADAM

Illustrations by Monica Capoferri

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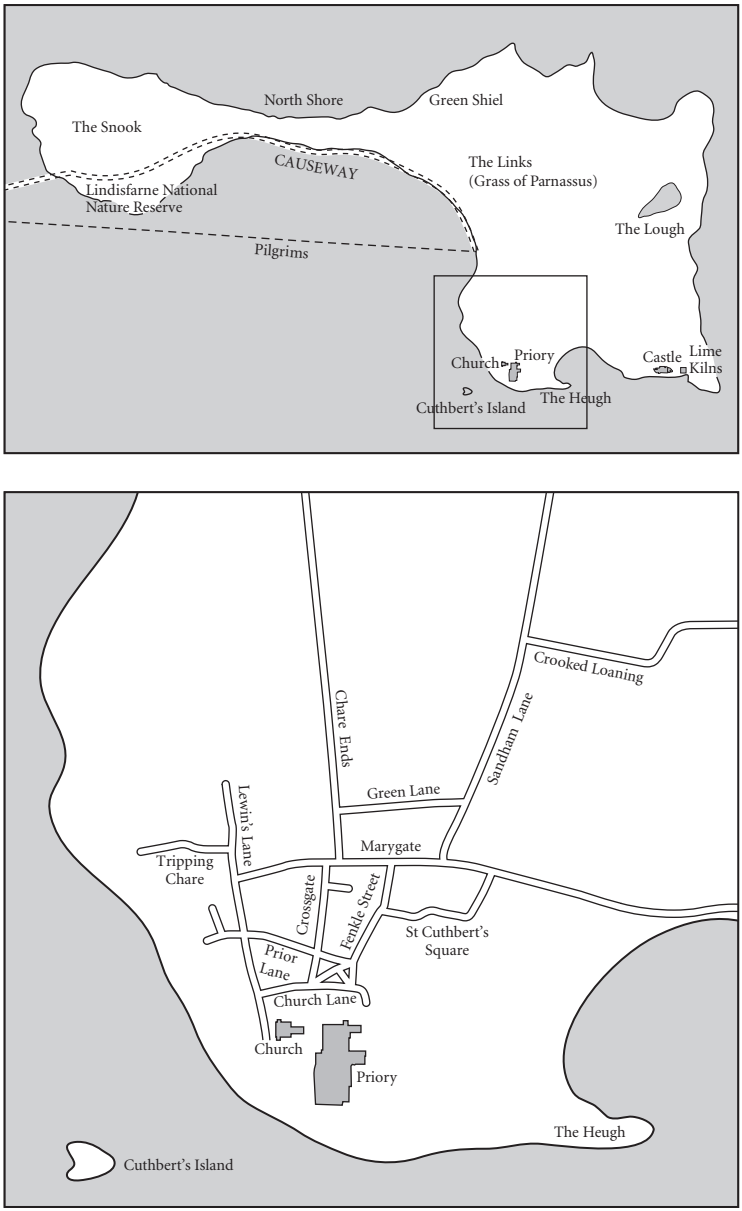
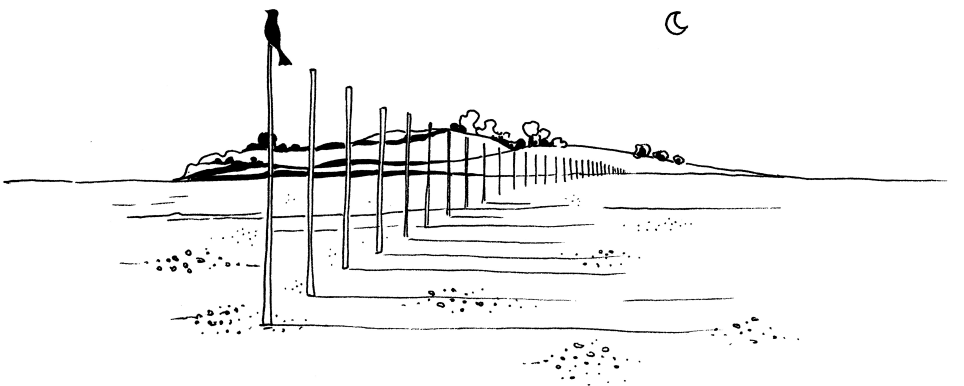


The Holy Island of Lindisfarne, showing inset detail.



A Now and Then Island

> For, with the flow and ebb its stile
> Varies from continent to isle;
> Dry-shod, o'er sands, twice every day,
> The pilgrims to the shrine find way:
> Twice every day, the waves efface
> Of staves and sandaled feet the trace.
> (Walter Scott, *Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field*, II.9, London, Cassell, 1904, pp. 39–40)

As a young child in the early 1940s, I often passed Lindisfarne when we took the train up to Dundee to stay with my grandparents. Set in a silver sea, its fairy-tale castle rising up to touch the sky, I imagined it must be an extraordinary place, a place of mystery.

In fact, my first visit to the island was in a lorry loaded with concrete pipes! My father and I had often driven past Lindisfarne in his NAAFI van during the last years of the Second World War, and he had told me that Aidan and Cuthbert lived there. At first I was uncertain if he was talking of now or long ago; it was not until much later that I began to learn how the past often vibrates in the present.

This particular day he thought would be a good opportunity for me to see the island. We waited – in growing anticipation on my side – as the tide went out. There was no metalled road then, and driving all the way across the sands was exciting in itself. Bamburgh castle stood majestically down to the south; the Cheviot hills with their frosting of snow were behind me, and we passed a wealth of birds, including more ducks and geese than I had ever seen before in my life. The wooden poles, sunk into the seabed to mark a safe crossing, gave a wonderful

sense of perspective as they disappeared into the distance. When we arrived on the island proper, I felt I had travelled to another land. Somehow, though it looked much like the countryside we'd left behind, the island seemed not of the same world as the rest of England. Perhaps this was the very thing that attracted St Aidan and his monks: here the Other does not invade, but rather pervades, at every turn – for those who have eyes to see.

While my father encouraged me to think of the island as a place of story, romance and adventure, my uncle Jackie's view was rather more down to earth. He delivered coal there; for him it was a place of work, and tough in many ways. He related how local football teams were afraid of playing against the islanders because there was always the danger, if the visiting team won, that the islanders would throw them into the sea!

Of course, Lindisfarne is only a now and then island, governed by the moon and the tides. When I was its vicar, a child would often approach me with a most difficult question, 'Where is Holy Island?' Though she was standing on it and had walked around it, the answer was not simple because at that moment it was not an island at all! The truth is that for most daily pilgrims their journey's end is a village built on the far reaches of the mainland. They have not crossed any sea, but only driven along the road or walked the Pilgrim's Causeway.

But twice a day, for two spells of five hours, Lindisfarne is completely cut off and the only way you can get to it is by boat from Seahouses. Then it takes on a stillness and a brightness that can almost be felt, with the sea all around increasing the amount of light through reflection. The Venerable Bede (*c.* 673–753), who was interested in the tides and their relationship to the phases of the moon, said of Lindisfarne:

> As the tide ebbs and flows, this place is surrounded by sea twice a day like an island, and twice a day the sand dries and joins it to the mainland.
>
> (Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, Book III:3, trans. Leo Sherley-Price, Penguin, 1968, p. 145; hereafter, Bede, *A History*)

Later in the ninth century Aethelwulf, a monk of the Cuthbert folk, living at Crayke near York, mentions the tide change over the island:

> . . . where the waves are eager to curl over the shores with grey water: but rush to lay them bare as they go to their backward course, and the blue depths encircle a sacred land, and afford a ready journey when they lay the shores bare.

Those who live on Lindisfarne, and those who visit, soon realize that the sands are not covered by only a negligible amount of water at high tide. It is the North Sea that floods in! It comes not with a mighty rush, but in a manner that ensures you cannot then drive on or off the island at all. There are plenty of notices and warnings concerning the danger, yet every year many have to be rescued from their cars by lifeboat from Seahouses or by helicopter from nearby RAF Boulmer. Sometimes cars can be completely submerged at high tide and suffer serious damage, at least to their electrical works and interior. Driving to the island late one night, I saw a 4x4 that had been swept off the causeway in the dark and it was buried up to its axles in sand. Fortunately the occupants made it safely to the island. It cannot be emphasized enough that all visitors must pay high regard to the tide and check times carefully, for these change every day of the year.

In the registers belonging to the parish church, there are several accounts of people being caught by the tide and losing their lives:

> Jan 8th 1584, old John Stapleton drowned
> Nov 5th 1641 Samuel Waddell and his son drowned in the Low

July 28th 1746 Rob Brown, Clerk of Holy Island drowned
April 8th 1801 William Macmillan drowned in passing the sands
Dec 15th 1802 Alexander Warwick drowned in crossing the sands.

There is no doubt the island is an attractive place visually, spiritually and romantically. It is full of surprises and contrasts: a place of peace where there have also been battles and slaughter; a place of holiness and sanctuary that has been invaded more than once and well-nigh destroyed; a place with a small population that hosts almost half a million visitors a year. But though thousands visit each day in the summer, there are still great stretches of silence and emptiness. The expanse of beaches, the sky and the seascapes take the breath away, and fill any feeling person with awe. When the island is at its busiest, you can still escape to the Grass of Parnassus and hear the larks sing as they rise on the air. You can walk among the meadow orchids and northern marsh orchids and listen to the curlew's call, or look across an expanse of thrift and hear the common seals singing on the sandbanks. On a misty morning, this can be a wonderful, eerie experience!

The Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve, of which Holy Island is a central part, covers around eight thousand acres – from Goswick Sands in the north, down to where I now live, at Budle Bay in the south. The sands, mudflats, dunes, salt marsh and estuary of the River Low are a delight to the botanist, the explorer and, of course, the birdwatcher. The island itself is the first landfall after the North Sea for many migrating birds: I have seen the streets filled with tiny goldcrests exhausted after travelling from Scandinavia, and, on another occasion, the wonderful spectacle of nine short-eared owls circling together on a sunny January afternoon.

On the Reserve, wildfowl and waders over-winter in great flocks. Almost all the two thousand pale-bellied Brent Geese

from the Spitsbergen breeding grounds in Norway stay on the mudflats, though they are outnumbered by wigeon, whose numbers were as high as 19,955 in October 2002. Waders in winter include knot, dunlin, bar-tailed godwit, curlew and oystercatcher in abundance. The bird many most like to see, though, is the eider duck because of its association with St Cuthbert (of which more later).

The island is not large, and it is easy to cover its eight-mile perimeter in a day. From quite a few vantage points, it is possible to see the sun rise and set in the sea, and there are not many places in Britain you can do that! Having looked down on the island from the air, once in a Tiger Moth and once in a helicopter, I have seen for myself that it is shaped like an axe. Legend has it that when Satan made war in heaven, his battle axe was struck from his hand, fell to earth and landed in the sea, becoming the island of Lindisfarne. The head of the axe is about a mile square, and along its sharp edge lies most of the village, with names like Fiddler's Green, Crooked Loaning, Tripping Chare, St Cuthbert's Square and Fenkle Street telling of its past. (For many years, the profile of the island reminded me of something else, and one day, when I opened a favourite book of mine, *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, I realized it was the Little Prince's picture of a boa constrictor digesting an elephant that his grown-up audience mistook for a drawing of a hat! Look at the castle in its position on rugged Beblow Crag, and you will see why!)

Walking round the island you will discover upturned herring boats used for sheds, sandy lanes with wind-blasted hawthorns, and sand dunes where it is possible to see the remains of an early medieval farming settlement. The lovely freshwater lake, the Lough, has a hide which offers wonderful birdwatching: the flight of starlings in their thousands to the reeds of the Lough on autumn evenings is a sight not to be missed. Not far away, on the edge of the island, is a stone pyramid painted white, which acts as a warning guide to shipping – the island has some low-lying cliffs and two outcrops of the Great Whin Sill, which

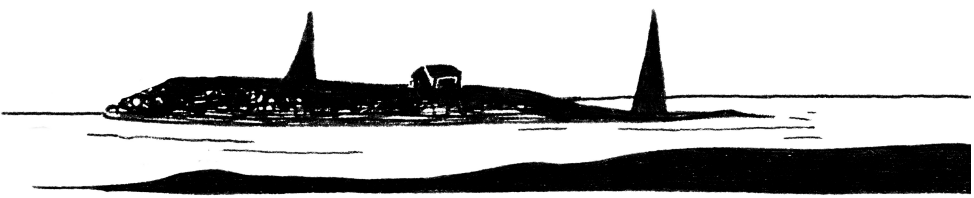
stretches right across Northumberland. Dolerite rock has thrust its way through the limestone to create Beblow Crag, on which the castle stands sentinel over the harbour, and the Heugh, from where you get a wonderful panoramic view of the Farne Islands out at sea, Bamburgh castle to the south, the Cheviots to the west, and the towns of Berwick-on-Tweed, and St Abbs Head (over the border in Scotland) to the north. Just below the Heugh on the landward side lie the ruins of the Norman priory, the Church of St Mary the Virgin, and the vicarage. Just west of the vicarage is the little tidal island known as Cuthbert's Island.

Before the last glacial period of the current ice age (yes, technically we are still in one!), when England was linked to Europe by a land bridge, the Lindisfarne section of the coast was probably about four miles out from its present position. However, when the ice began to melt and sea levels to rise, Britain and Lindisfarne became islands. During this time, nomadic hunter-gatherers followed vast herds of deer, akin to the giant Irish elk, which were perhaps a million strong. These deer could have an antler span of around 15 feet and when caught would supply up to nearly 1 ton of meat. Excavations at nearby Howick have revealed the site of a house occupied by such hunters for a period of over three hundred years: its position, near the estuary stream and the sea, shows they knew how to supplement their diet with the harvest of stream and sea. In fact, nomadic hunter-gatherers seem to have occupied much of the south-east coast of Scotland. There is evidence they made effective spears by the process of embedding a series of specially shaped flint blades in grooves in a length of bone, and using beech bark resin as an adhesive. Flint tools and flints used in food preparation, such as cutters and scrapers, have been found in considerable quantities on Lindisfarne, including mesolithic (middle Stone Age) microliths, and the leaf shaped and tanged arrow

heads of the neolithic ('new' Stone Age) and Bronze Age. I know of one woman on the island who treasures a neolithic polished stone axe head she dug out of her garden. In the grounds of the vicarage, various finds from the Bronze Age and each era up to the present have been discovered.

The history of Lindisfarne feels to me like the history of England in miniature, and the rest of this book tells the island's vibrant story from the sixth century up to the present day. This tiny place was the setting of one of the last stands of the 'British' – the Celtic peoples who occupied most of Britain before the English, otherwise known as the Anglo-Saxons (an assortment of Germanic peoples). The island has been the home of saints and scholars. It saw the making, in the late seventh or early eighth century, of one of our greatest artistic and religious treasures, the Lindisfarne Gospels. It experienced the first recorded Viking invasion in 793. It has one of the best preserved early medieval farm settlements. Its eleventh-century priory and sixteenth-century castle still draw pilgrims and visitors from all over the world. The island was involved in the seventeenth-century Civil War, and the eighteenth-century Jacobite Rebellion, and signs of the burgeoning Industrial Revolution may be found too.

Wherever you walk on Lindisfarne, the past impinges on the present. The island's legends and stories are very much alive, and you may well suddenly feel that you have left the now and entered an age hidden away . . . just beneath the surface.



The Case of the Severed Head

A head I bear by the side of my thigh,
That was the shield of his country,
That was a wheel in battle,
That was a ready sword in his country's battles
A head that I bear on my sword . . .
In Aber Lleu* has Urien been slain.
(sixth-century poem attributed to Llywarch
Hen in William F. Skene, *Four Ancient
Books of Wales*, Edinburgh, 1868)

*Aber Lleu is thought to be the Ross Sands (on Lindisfarne) where the River Low runs into the sea.

The year was 1993. It had been a strange morning. I had taken a phone call from the Dean of Trondheim Cathedral in Norway, who told me that a group of Norwegians were keen to make a pilgrimage to the island in penitence for the Viking invasion of 793. Sorrow being expressed for an event now more than twelve hundred years old! It is amazing how race memory seems to be at work in our times. This visit, however, would strengthen the growing bonds between the Norwegian church and the diocese of Newcastle. After we had amiably discussed various things the visitors might do on Holy Island, the Dean's final remark came as a bit of a shock: 'We would like to present you with St Olaf's Head.' What could I say? I had a vision of myself as a present-day Hamlet, meditating, 'Alas, poor Olaf!' Only later did I realize I was being offered not this wonderful relic, but a copy of a stone carving of St Olaf's head from the cathedral. It came as quite a relief.

The causeway was about to open, but there was time for a quick walk before the daily invasion of pilgrims. I stood on the Heugh, the highest point on Holy Island, and gazed southwards

through a light mist towards the beacons on Ross Sands. These two strange-looking pinnacles, rather like Cleopatra's Needles, guide boats into Holy Island harbour and have to be seen in line for entry to be safe. Near the pinnacles, on the lonely stretches of Ross Sands, terns make their nests in places that appear to be out of harm's way. It all looks quite idyllic, but at this moment I am watching a kestrel searching for an easy meal. This little colony of terns is being decimated by predators – kestrel, crow and fox – and on my last visit I had seen three decapitated adult birds. As I continued gazing this misty morning, I noticed a man beyond the pinnacles carrying something in his right hand. It may have been a bag of winkles, but with my mind still full of poor Olaf, my thoughts immediately went to the first ever recorded event on Lindisfarne: the case of the severed head.

Somewhere by the Ross pinnacles lies the body of a long-forgotten British king.

In the late sixth century, the warlord Urien ruled a kingdom known as Rheged. It stretched down the west coast, from Galloway to the estuary of the Dee, and across towards the east, through the Yorkshire Dales possibly as far as Catterick: the poet Taliesin says Urien was 'lord of Catterick'. It is largely because Taliesin's songs about Urien survived long enough to be committed to writing in thirteenth-century Wales – in the 'Canu Taliesin' or 'Book of Taliesin' – that we know Urien's story at all. He is remembered as a heroic figure, who sought to unite the British against the invading English.

Those who lived in Urien's hill-fort stronghold were a cultured people, with a highly developed sense of art and beauty: here you would find exquisite clothing, mead, beer, wine, and gold work of a most intricate and artistic standard. Urien's warriors were great horsemen, the horse being regarded as a

symbol of their power and wealth. The leaders of these men underlined their position and authority by wearing torques of gold when all rode out to battle; round shields, shining blue armour and throwing spears would also be on show. A leader who was victorious in battle would show his generosity by sharing out any spoils with his men, and a strong leader like Urien was a good man to follow.

He was certainly given great support by the poet Taliesin. In the upbeat song, 'The Battle of Wensleydale', Taliesin tells of a victorious battle in which Urien-ap-Rheged is described as a 'king of the baptised world' – in other words, a Christian fighting the pagan English, and making a stand, for his land and for his faith. Though, notice Urien is also described as a cattle rustler!

> The men of Catraeth,
> at the break of dawn,
> arise,
> around your triumphant rustler-king.
> For this is Urien,
> famous leader.
> He keeps his chiefs at bay
> and scythes them down.
> Warlike daimon has he,
> In truth the king of the baptised world,
> The scourge of the men of Britain
> In their battle lines . . .
> (*Taliesin Poems*, trans. Meiron Pennar,
> Llanerch, 1988, p. 51)

'The Battle of Wensleydale' was composed when the British appeared to have the upper hand against the English. Though the invaders had taken the coastal area, the Britons seemed to be unconquered further inland, and Taliesin was sure that with such a strong leader, the northern British could drive the English out. This song would be sung by the warriors around the campfires and as they travelled:

sense of perspective as they disappeared into the distance. When we arrived on the island proper, I felt I had travelled to another land. Somehow, though it looked much like the countryside we'd left behind, the island seemed not of the same world as the rest of England. Perhaps this was the very thing that attracted St Aidan and his monks: here the Other does not invade, but rather pervades, at every turn – for those who have eyes to see.

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