

Venerable Bede



"Baeda writing the History" A relief from the Bede Memorial (From Report of the Sunderland Auxiliary Bible Society 1905)

Who was Bede?

Baeda, or Bede as he is usually called, was born in 672 or 673AD around Wearmouth, now known as Monkwearmouth, in Sunderland. When he was seven years old, Bede was taken to the monastery of St Peter at Wearmouth. Here he was looked after and taught how to read, write and pray by the Abbot, Benedict Biscop, and the monks.

Bede lived at Wearmouth until he was about twelve. He then moved to the new monastery of St Paul at Jarrow, where he lived for the rest of his life, as a monk.

Bede was ordained deacon at the age of nineteen and priest at thirty. He wrote many books on history, nature, and astrology and was the first to use the calendar we still use, which dates events from the birth of Christ (AD). He was also the first to write books in English.

Sunderland in Bede's time

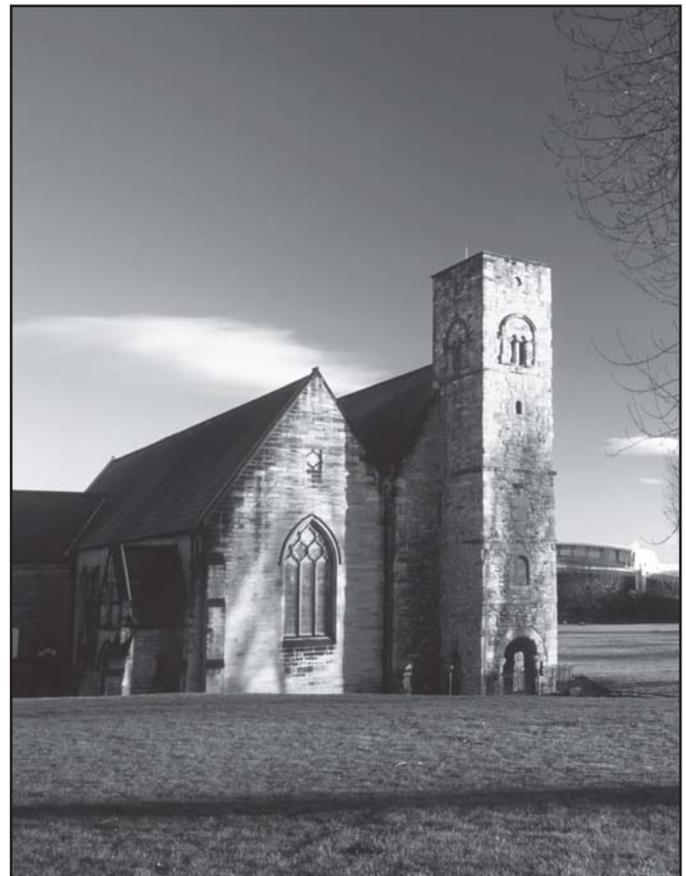
When Bede was alive, Britain was divided into a number of kingdoms. Sunderland would have been within the Saxon kingdom of Northumbria. It was Ecgrith, the King of Northumbria in 672, who gave Benedict Biscop the land at Wearmouth where St Peter's monastery was built.

In the 7th century AD, Wearmouth would have been open land. The few houses there, would have been made of timber with thatched roofs. However, the monastery was built of stone and had glazed windows, so it would have stood out. Today, part of the monastery survives in the 7th century west wall and lower stages of the tower of St Peter's church in Monkwearmouth. The Saxon doorway of the west porch is where Bede would have entered the building. (See photo)

Life as a monk in Bede's day

As a monk, Bede would have lived quite a simple life. Monks were mostly self-sufficient. They produced or caught their own food, brewed their own beer and baked their own bread. They also sewed their own clothes, made the furniture and forged the metalwork for the monastery.

All this had to be fitted around seven separate church services, teaching and study, so the day would begin very early in the morning. Bede may well have been excused certain duties, such as farming, so that he could concentrate on studying and writing his books.



St Peter's Church today

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Sunderland
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Bede's books

Bede was the greatest scholar of his day and was famous even in his lifetime. Many of his books were written in Latin, which was the language used by the Church, and copies of his books were in monastery libraries throughout the Christian world. Bede's work is a very important source for British history up to 729AD, because he carefully investigated available information to try to make sure his work was correct, and he usually quoted the sources he used.

His most famous work is the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (The Ecclesiastical History of the English People), completed in 731AD at Jarrow. This was the first history of the English people and is still in print today. The picture opposite shows a page from an 8th century handwritten copy of the original book. The book tells of the conversion of English people to Christianity, the invasions of pagan Angles, Saxons and Jutes, and their conversion from pagans to Christians.

(From "The Leningrad Bede")

Remembering Bede

Bede died on Ascension Day, 25 May 735AD. He was buried at Jarrow, although his bones were reburied in 1370 in a tomb in the Galilee Chapel at Durham Cathedral, where they remain today.

Bede was referred to as the "Venerable" soon after his death, but it was not until 1899 that he was officially made a Doctor of the Church by Pope Leo XIII, which entitled him to be officially called the Venerable Bede.

In 1904, Sunderland honoured Bede with a memorial, which was paid for by contributions from the people of the town. It is a cross, and has carvings on all sides that are in the style of original Anglo Saxon stone carvings, made when Bede was alive. The images on the cross represent the many parts of Bede's life, including his work, his friends, and his interests. The memorial is located at Whitburn Road, Roker, Sunderland.

Bede's Way is a walk between the twin Anglo-Saxon monastery of St. Peter's in Monkwearmouth and St. Paul's in Jarrow. Today the route follows a safe and enjoyable path through the Great North Forest, covering twelve miles of beautiful landscape. Details of how to follow in the footsteps of the seventh century pilgrims is available at www.sunderland.gov.uk/bedes-way-route



Bede memorial, east side
(Sunderland Year Book 1905)

Find out more about Bede

For more information, visit the Local Studies Centre at Sunderland City Library and Arts Centre, which has many books on Bede, such as:

- "The Leningrad Bede" (facsimile copy of the Leningrad manuscript of *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*) by O. Arngart (1952)
- "Bede Historical Works" vol I-V (Loeb Classical Library) (1963)
- "All About Bede" by Terry Deary (1996)
- "The Illustrated Bede" by John Marsden (1989)

It also displays a modern copy of another monastic book, the Lindisfarne Gospels (<http://www.sunderland.gov.uk/libraries/Lindisfarne-gospels.asp>)

To experience where he lived and what life was like in Anglo Saxon England, visit St Peter's church, Monkwearmouth and the living history farm and museum of Bede's World (www.bedesworld.co.uk) and St Paul's monastery and church at Jarrow. Another website with information on Bede's life and works is http://www.medievalchurch.org.uk/p_bede.html.