

THE HISTORY OF WETHERAL PARISH CHURCH

WHO WAS CONSTANTINE ?

This church is dedicated to the Holy Trinity and St. Constantine and until the Reformation also to the Virgin Mary. Constantine and Mary are pictured in the windows above the main door in some of the few pieces of medieval stained glass to have survived in Cumbria. It is a fragment of an earlier, larger memorial window. This is one of only two churches in England dedicated to a man called Constantine. The other is in Cornwall, in the village of Constantine five miles from Falmouth. However the dedication is more common in Scotland. The Scottish border is only 12 miles away; in the past Wetheral was in Scotland. Three caves or cells in the red sandstone gorge above the River Eden are traditionally said to have been used as a hermitage by Constantine. They are known as St. Constantine's Cell and, in the past, also as Wetheral Safeguard.

MAXIMVS. SCRIP(S)IT....LE(G) XX. VV. CONDISIVS. SIVS.

This inscription cut in the face of the rock a few feet above the river's edge was the work of Roman soldiers and takes us back to around the year 400 AD. The writing implies that the Twentieth Legion was quartered here. St. Constantine may have been the Cornish saint from a century or so later. He was of royal birth and brought Christianity to this area, which was then part of the Kingdom of Strathclyde, together with the better-known Celtic saints, Columba and Kentigern. St. Cuthbert came from what is now the North-East of England in the following century and the other saintly link is to St. Patrick, who was probably born on the Roman Wall to the east of Brampton, at Banks, about 10 miles from here. The patron saint of Ireland may well have sailed across the sea from the Cumbrian coast.

WETHERAL PRIORY

For almost 500 years a Benedictine Priory existed about a quarter of a mile to the south of the church. All that remains is the gateway and porter's lodge which are in the care of English Heritage. Admission is free. The Benedictine custom was for the mother house to be the Abbey, in this case St. Mary's Abbey at York, hence the pre-Reformation dedication of Wetheral.

www.english-heritage.org.uk/daysout/.../wetheral-priory-gatehouse/

900 YEARS AGO

According to the old county histories, Nicholson & Burn 1777 and Hutchinson 1797, the Priory was founded by a Norman, Ranulph le Meschines, the first Norman Lord of Cumberland, in 1086 or 1088. Others have dated the foundation 20 years later but it is certainly more than 900 years ago and pre-dates the Augustinian Priory of Carlisle which, founded by King Henry I in 1123, became a cathedral ten years later. Carlisle Cathedral is the third oldest cathedral in the Church of England Province of York. Wetheral Priory initially came under the authority of Stephen, Abbot of St. Mary's Abbey, York. The monks were granted the valuable rights to a sluice and fish pond on the river together with a mill which was not to be 'interfered with' by the Lord of Corby.

It is not known what kind of church building existed on the present site in Norman times though a mile and a half north the sanctuary of Warwick Church dates from those days and was served from Wetheral Priory. From the *Register of the Priory* published at the instigation of Archdeacon Prescott in 1897 we know that the Priory was endowed with the manor and church and certain lands near, with the chapel of Warwick and the churches of St. Michael and St. Lawrence in Appleby in Westmorland. They are about 35 miles to the south-east. King Henry I also added the right to feed pigs in the King's Forest of Inglewood which extended from

here 20 miles south. Initially there were 12 monks.
http://archive.org/stream/registerprioryw00priogoog/registerprioryw00priogoog_djvu.txt

AN IMPORTANT OUTPOST

The country was ravaged in the centuries which followed by the Scots who burned buildings and stole food and animals just as those from this side attacked the villages across the Border. Wrongdoers could invoke the right of sanctuary by tolling a certain bell and swearing before the bailiffs that they would keep the peace.

No fewer than six of the Priors of Wetheral were appointed Abbot of St. Mary's Abbey in York; one became Prior of Durham. In those days Wetheral had considerable ecclesiastical significance. It is likely that the Benedictine monks wanted men of authority to watch the Augustinian houses at Carlisle (5 miles west), Lanercost (8 miles north-east) and Hexham (35 miles east).

ROYAL VISITS

The appointment of William de Tanefield as Prior of Durham in 1309 was probably in the patronage of King Edward II. As Prince of Wales, Edward stayed at Wetheral Priory on 20 October 1301 and again on 19 February 1306. This latter visit was merely a few months before he ascended to the throne. At Wetheral he received Dungal MacDowil who brought with him some prisoners whom he had taken in battle, amongst them Thomas and Alexander, brothers of Robert the Bruce, then the King of Scots. The Bruce family came from Annandale (30 miles north-west). These two brothers were hanged in Carlisle. MacDowil also brought the heads of slain Irishmen to the Priory. He was rewarded by the King with 50 marks.

POPE DISPUTED PATRONAGE

After William de Tanefield moved to Durham, the Pope decided to appoint the new prior in place of the rightful nominee of the patron. Pope Clement V chose Robert de Gyseburgh. The matter went to the King's Court where the Papal nominee was upheld. However some years later the Prior was declared guilty of an offence, excommunicated and dismissed.

THE DISSOLUTION

The Priory, its buildings, church and other property were surrendered to King Henry VIII on 20 October 1538. The following year the last Prior, Ralf Hartley, was granted a pension of £20, later revised to £12 plus the Rectory of Wetheral and Warwick but by then most of the valuables had gone. William Grene, the King's Receiver gained the silver chalices and jewels. The monastic property sold included alabaster tables, brass candlesticks, choir stalls, vestments, censers, a lectern, farming stock and implements. In 1555 Lancelot Salkeld, Dean of Carlisle, reported 'that one bell of the thre bells perteyning to the layte sell of Wetherell came to Carlyle, whiche bell was hanged upon the walle called Springall Tower in Carlyle to call the workmen to worke at the making of the new cytydall in Carlyle and mending of the castell ther.'

<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=39960>

The patronage of Wetheral and Warwick Churches passed to the Dean and Chapter of Carlisle where it remains to this day. Hutchinson's Directory of 1797 claims that stone from the monastic buildings here was used to construct buildings in the Carlisle Cathedral close known as The Abbey. It is also said that the Lord of the Manor of Corby, the descendants of Sir Richard Salkeld, could be described as early conservationists for they offered to buy the Priory. The Cathedral rejected their approach. Not surprisingly Archdeacon Prescott, Canon of Carlisle Cathedral, rejected this story but the fact remains that much less was left here than at other

monastic sites. It is said that Thomas Cromwell, the King's Chief Minister responsible for the dissolution of 800 monasteries, preferred ruins to remain as evidence of the shift in power and wealth within England. What had dominated Wetheral for half a millennium had all but disappeared within a few years. Thomas Denton writing in 1687 said that only the gatehouse remained entire and in good repair. It was thought to have been the house of the Rector in those days.

THE CHURCH BUILDING

The structure is much as it would have appeared at the dissolution of the Priory, yet nothing in the present building, unlike Warwick, seems to date from the Norman foundation. The monks can be credited with most of the present building which dates largely from the 13th and early 16th centuries. The association of the church with Wetheral Priory is commemorated with a pair of inscriptions to priors William Thornton (1500-1530) and Richard Wedderhall (1534-1539). Within the church, the most interesting historical features include the 13th century font and a tomb chest with effigies to Sir Richard and Dame Jane Salkeld, from about 1500. The nave and chancel are a mixture of early pointed style in the pillars and arches with perpendicular in the clerestory and aisle windows. The nave was heightened shortly before the dissolution and refurbished in Victorian times. The present octagonal tower dates from 1882 when it replaced a square tower of 1760.

SPLENDID SCULPTURE

Wetheral Church contains the finest statue in Cumbria. One of the greatest sculptors of the late 18th century, Joseph Nollekens, RA, was commissioned by Henry Howard after the death of his wife, Maria aged 22, in childbirth at Corby Castle, across the river in Gt. Corby in 1789. Although the family was, and remains, Roman Catholic they built a chapel for the statue *Faith* beneath which many members of the family are buried. The cost of *Faith* was £1,500 which at today's prices is almost £2 million. On the open art market today its value would be even greater. The life-sized figure *Faith* points upwards with one hand whilst with the other she supports the head of the dying mother with the dead baby lying across her lap. The inscription reads : "This tribute of sorrow is paid to the memory of her who approached near to perfection by the afflicted husband and sisters". It is said to be Nollekens' finest work, a statement supported by the bas relief above his tomb in the sanctuary of St. Mary's Church, Paddington Green, London which shows the sculptor working on *Faith*. When Nollekens realized that his work was destined for so remote a part of the Kingdom it is said that he burst into tears as he felt so few people would see it. The terracotta model is in the main sculpture gallery of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London which also houses the plans.

Howard - [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Howard,_Henry_\(1757-1842\)_\(DNB00\)](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Howard,_Henry_(1757-1842)_(DNB00))

The chapel extension on the north side of the choir and sanctuary was built in 1791 to house the statue. It is a Gothic Revival structure which includes some of the earliest cast/wrought iron windows in the country and a fine rib vaulted ceiling. The window tracery and the cross at the east end are made entirely of cast iron. It was visited by the poet, William Wordsworth who wrote a sonnet –

*Monument of Mrs. Howard (by Nollekins) in Wetheral Church, near
Corby on the banks of the Eden*

*Stretched on the dying mother's lap, lies dead
Her new-born Babe, dire issue of bright hope !
But Sculpture here, with the divinest scope
Of luminous faith, heavenward hath raised that head
So patiently – and through one hand has spread
A touch so tender for the insensate Child –
(Earth's lingering love to parting reconciled.
Brief parting – for the spirit is all but fled)
That we, who contemplate the turns of life
Through this still medium, are consoled and cheered;
Feel with the Mother, think the severed Wife
Is less to be lamented than revered;
And own that Art, triumphant over strife
And pain, hath powers to Eternity endeared.*

(Wetheral and Great Corby – an illustrated history by Denis Perriam and
David Ramshaw published in 2008 covers the broader history of this area)

Nigel Holmes, 2013.