

Columba and Aidan

The Angles and Saxons

Foundation

In the previous unit we saw how by the early 4th century there were clearly many Christians and churches amongst the various tribes in the British Isles. By the early 5th century the Roman empire was threatened by various outsiders and their armies withdrew from Britain.

Faced with outside invaders some of the British hired mercenaries who were then allowed to settle from and then others followed as migrants. Soon there were large numbers of Picts, Jutes, Frisians and particularly Angles and Saxons. But apparently there weren't Christians amongst these settlers.

We might hope that the British Christians tried to share their faith with their new neighbours but it seems that they did not. One later writer, the English historian Bede, said of the British:

Among other unspeakable crimes, recorded with sorrow by their own historian Gildas, they added this - that they never preached the Faith to the Saxons who dwelt among them.

“And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?” (Rom 10:14)

Soon there was conflict between the old and new occupants. The most famous person on the British side was Arthur who is said to have led the British armies, though most of the stories about him seem to be from hundreds of years later. The British won a significant Battle at Mount Badon around 500BC, but it was their last.

By the mid 6th century the British had mostly been driven into Scotland, Wales and Cornwall. Most of modern-day England was made up of a

Modern statue of Aidan beside the ruins of the mediaeval priory on Lindisfarne.



number of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms including Wessex (the West Saxons), Essex, Sussex and East Anglia.

Columba was from Ireland but it was in Scotland that he met Oswald King of Northumbria and the latter came to faith in Christ. As a result Aidan was sent to Northumbria and built a church on Lindisfarne. So the message began to spread in that kingdom.

Meanwhile Gregory, the Bishop of Rome had heard about the Anglo-Saxons and sent a group of thirty monks, led by an Italian, Augustine, to the Kingdom of Kent. The King of Kent already had a Christian wife from France. To some it seems to have been more about the influence of the church, but to others what mattered was knowing and trusting in Jesus, and the message spread.

Other missionaries arrived too, Felix of Burgundy evangelised the East Angles and Birinius the West Saxons. By the middle of the seventh century there were Christians and churches in all the Anglo-Saxon countries except Sussex. It would be another 150 years before there was a single kingdom of England but the beginning of the Church of England can be dated from a meeting of their Bishops in Hertford in 673AD.



At first the British failed to share the message about Jesus with their new neighbours. But eventually they, and others, did.