



1898

Caedmon's Cross in Whitby

Caedmon was a man who lived at Whitby Abbey in the 7th century, at the time of Abbess Hilda, a great spiritual leader. Whitby was then a double monastery, where communities of nuns and monks lived alongside each other.

In addition to the nuns and monks there was a lay community (in other words people who were not part of the official religious community). The lay community included a man called Caedmon, who looked after the Abbey's cattle. On special occasions a banquet (a great feast) took place, with entertainment afterwards when those present were expected to make music. However, Caedmon would often leave early because he could not sing or play a musical instrument.

On one occasion, having left the banquet, he fell asleep in the stable and had a dream in which he was asked to sing. Caedmon said he could not, but the person in his dream persisted. When Caedmon asked what he should sing about, he was told to "sing the beginning of creation". He did so in English and astonishingly, when he awoke he remembered his song.

He told a monastery official about his dream, and was taken to Abbess Hilda. She believed that Caedmon had been given a gift from God, and encouraged him to become a monk. We know that Caedmon was able to turn many stories from scripture into song, but unfortunately, only his initial 'Song of Creation' survives. Caedmon died in AD 680.



Hundreds of years later, in 1898, a stone cross in memory of Caedmon was carved and placed in the churchyard of St. Mary's, Whitby. The cross is 5.5 metres high and made of hard sandstone. The cross-head on the east side is carved with the Lamb of God (Jesus) together with the four Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). This side also has four panels down its length. At the top is Christ in the act of blessing, King David playing a harp, the Abbess Hilda, and finally Caedmon in the stable being inspired to sing his hymn.

On the west face, the cross-head has a Celtic pattern and a dove representing the Holy Spirit. Down this face is a vine. In the loops of the vine are four scholars working in the Abbey at

the time of Caedmon, and below this are the first nine lines of Caedmon's 'Hymn of Creation'. The two narrower sides of the cross show a design of a rose, birds, animals and an apple tree representing Eden.

QUESTIONS

1. Who was a great spiritual leader at Whitby Abbey in the 7th Century?
2. What type of community did Caedmon belong to?
3. What does this mean?
4. What type of work did Caedmon do?
5. Why did Caedmon leave the banquets early?
6. In Caedmon's dream what was it suggested that he should sing about?
7. Why did Caedmon become a monk?
8. How many of Caedmon's songs survive?
9. When was the stone cross commemorating Caedmon carved and placed in St Mary's churchyard, Whitby?
10. What type of pattern is on the cross-head of the west face?

Find out more:

- St Mary's Church, Whitby YO22 4JR
- Caedmon's 'Hymn of Creation' in Old English and in translation - <http://www.thehypertexts.com/C%C3%A6dmon's%20Hymn%20Translation.htm>