



## Caedmon's Cross in Whitby

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**C**'ademon' or 'Cadmon'? The 7th century Anglo Saxon poet is known locally as 'Cademon', but further afield is widely referred to as 'Cadmon'.

Caedmon was a herdsman who lived at Whitby Abbey during the time of Abbess Hilda. Whitby was then a double monastery, where communities of nuns and monks lived alongside each other. It was a great centre of learning and in AD 664 hosted the Synod of Whitby, where it was finally decided when the date of Easter should be celebrated.

In addition to the nuns and monks there was a lay community, and Caedmon, a lay brother, looked after the cattle within the grounds. His story can be found in Bede's 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People'. Bede describes Caedmon as a man without learning, and how when attending banquets after which there was entertainment when those present were expected to sing: "if he saw the harp come towards him, he would rise up from table and go out and return home".

On one such occasion, having left the banqueting hall, he fell asleep in the stable and had a dream in which he was asked to sing. Caedmon claimed he could not, but the person in his dream persisted with the request. 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 the reeve (a monastery official) who promptly took him to Abbess Hilda. She believed that Caedmon had been given a divine gift, and encouraged him to take monastic vows and be received fully into the monastery. Bede describes that through his learning, Caedmon was able to turn many stories from scripture into song. Unfortunately, only his initial 'Song of Creation' has survived.

In October 1897, following an initiative by the Revd. Canon Rawnsley of Keswick (a founder of the National Trust), a public meeting was held and a committee appointed to create a memorial cross which would celebrate Caedmon's contribution to sacred literature in English. Subscriptions were invited and approximately £250 was raised, including a donation from America.

On 21st September 1898, a ceremonial unveiling of the new cross took place. There was a large gathering including the Poet Laureate Alfred Austin, bishops and other clergy and local dignitaries. Canon Rawnsley's address made mention of the word of God being borne through the poems of Caedmon to "the hearts of wild Northumbrians and the homes of the dwellers upon Danby Moor".

The cross is almost 20 feet high and made of hard sandstone. The cross-head on the east side is carved with

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the Lamb of God (Agnus Dei) together with the four Evangelists and their symbols. This side faces the Abbey and 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. At the base is a plaque which reads: "To the glory of God, and in memory of Caedmon, Father of English sacred song. Fell asleep hard by AD 680."

On the west face, the cross-head has a raised boss in Celtic knotwork and a dove symbolising the Holy Spirit. Down this face is a double vine symbolising Christ.

In the loops of the vine are four scholars working in the Abbey at the time of Caedmon. Underneath this is carved the first nine lines of Caedmon's 'Hymn of Creation' in English. The two narrower sides of the cross depict a design of a rose, birds, animals and an apple

tree symbolising Eden. In pairs of letters in two scripts – Celtic uncial on one face and runes on the opposite – is Caedmon's Hymn of Creation in his native Anglo-Saxon. (Letters written in an uncial script are more curved, whereas runes are made up of straight and angled lines.)

A sealed glass bottle to date the event was counter-sunk into the base of the shaft. It contained silver coins of the year, a photograph of Queen Victoria, the names of subscribers and the sermon given by Canon Rawsley.

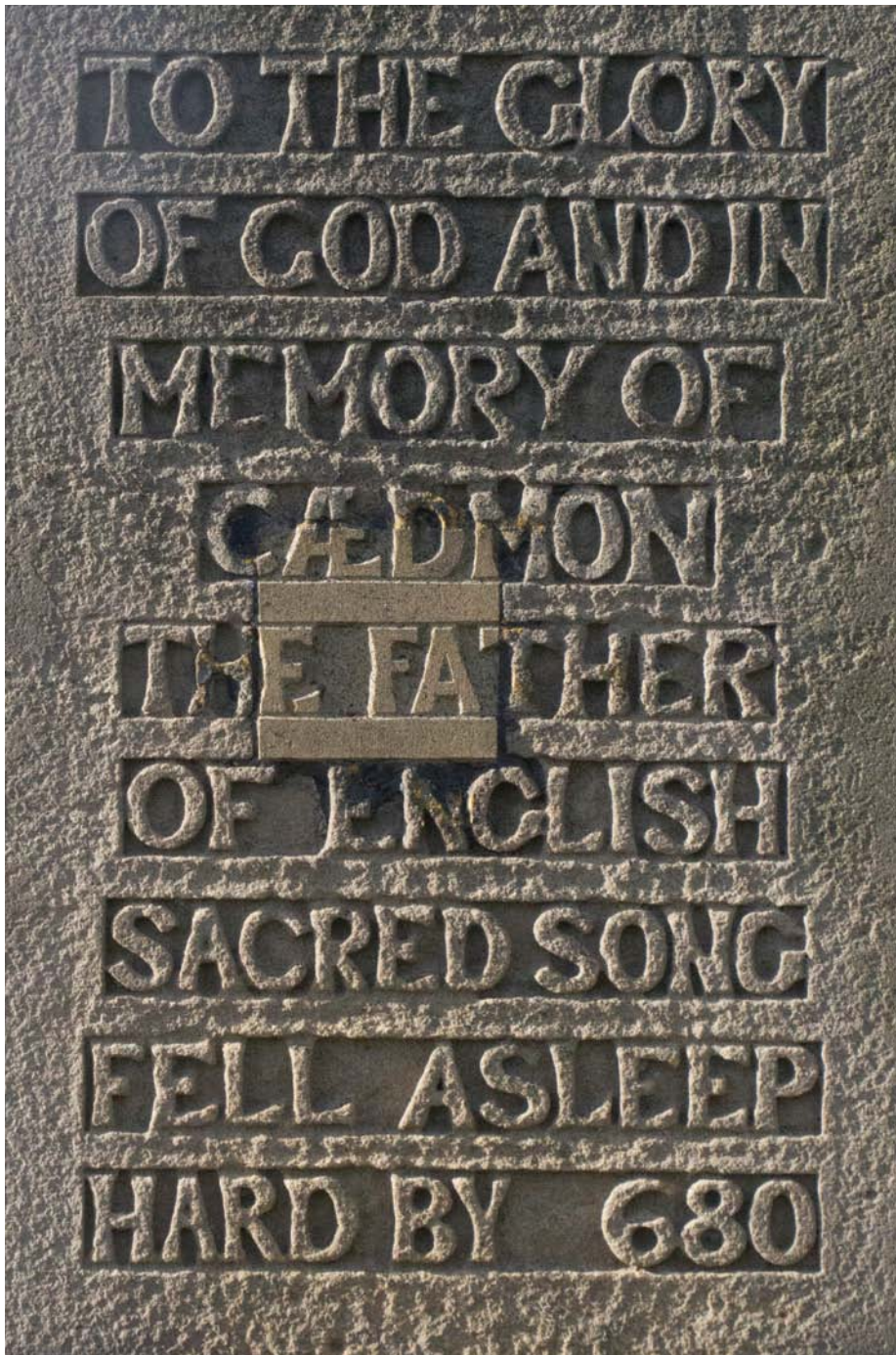
Many years later, Mrs Mabel McMillan, a Whitby councillor, expressed concern that there was no memorial to the Father of English verse outside his home town. This was rectified in 1966, when in the 900th anniversary year of the foundation of Westminster Abbey a memorial to Caedmon "who first among the English made verses" was unveiled in Poets' Corner.



### 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>



*Caedmon Cross inscription*



*Caedmon Cross, St Mary's churchyard, Whitby*