

Talk for the Scottish Pilgrim Routes Forum. Friday 5th October. Why North Berwick?

It is not immediately obvious today that North Berwick was a pilgrim town in the Middle Ages.

The street plan does not look suitable for pilgrim processions like the one of St Andrews, where the 3 main streets converge on the Cathedral. The widest street in the old burgh, however, Trongait - which is now called Quality Street, led north from St Andrews Well to the large St Andrews Church located at that time on an island reached by a causeway beside the harbour. Neither the well nor the church can now be seen. The well is in the garden of the Wall House or Well House beside the entrance to the Lodge grounds. The church was so badly damaged in a storm in 1652 that it was abandoned. Much of the stone was removed for other buildings in the town, leaving only the small south porch and the outlines of some of the walls on the Kirk Ness. The Eastgait, now the High Street, at right angles to Quality Street is very much narrower and the old Tolbooth is on the corner of the 2 streets.

Pilgrimage can be defined as "The undertaking of a journey to a site which holds specific relevance to the pilgrim's system of belief" But North Berwick itself had no specific relevance in the middle ages. It had no shrine with saints bones although there were plenty of sites in the area to attract pilgrims. Sites associated with the local 8th century St Baldred are **Auldhame, Tynninghame, Prestonkirk** in East Linton and of course the **Bass Rock**, but not actually North Berwick. He died in his hermitage on the Bass Rock around 757 where a chapel was later built. Legend has it that Auldhame, Tynninghame and Prestonkirk all prayed to hold his remains and that these then appeared in each church at the same time.

Excavations which are ongoing each year have revealed evidence of an important early Christian site near the church in Aberlady. The central portion of a carved cross-slab and part of a bishop's crozier are now in the National Museum, but there is a replica of the cross-slab in Aberlady. This dates from the time when this area was part of Northumbria, and on the pilgrim route from St Columba's Iona to St Aidan's Lindisfarne, via the abbey of Dunkeld, to which at one stage Aberlady belonged, before it became the port of Haddington.

Whitekirk had a holy well and shrine dedicated to the Virgin Mary and attracted many pilgrims, including the most famous pilgrim to pass through East Lothian. It was to Whitekirk that Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini walked 10 miles barefoot in December 1437 to fulfil a vow to the Virgin made when his ship was caught in a storm in the North Sea and finally made landfall south of Dunbar. He was on a diplomatic mission to King James 1 and later became Pope Pius 2. There are ten frescoes by Pinturricio telling the story of his life around the walls of the library in Siena Cathedral, including one of him at the court of the Scottish king. When he came to write his memoirs he didn't have happy memories of Scotland. The site of the well and the shrine in Whitekirk can no longer be found.

St Ethernan or Adrian, a martyr was buried on the Isle of May after he and his monks were slaughtered by the Vikings in 875. His shrine seems to have been regarded as particularly good for healing, as many of the skeletons excavated here seem to have had health problems. One of these skeletons had a scallop shell in his mouth, which raises interesting questions. Had he been or was he on his way to Santiago de Compostella? King David 1 founded a monastery on the Isle of May, which later belonged to the Abbey of Reading.

So, if there was no shrine with relics of a saint in North Berwick, why was there a very large pilgrim church? The earliest mention of a church on Kirk Ness was in 1177, and in 1199 Malcolm, Earl of Fife gave the church, lands and a hospice to the nunnery which he established in North Berwick to

provide for the pilgrims going to the shrine at St Andrews. He did the same at the Fife end of the ferry route at Earlsferry. This religious foundation for nuns in North Berwick, which was probably originally Benedictine and later became Cistercian, is variously referred to in the documents as a priory, nunnery, monastery or abbey. It was located to the west of the town beyond the Westgait, which was separate from the royal burgh of North Berwick. There is very little left of it today, and most of the ruins on the site are those of later buildings erected by the Hume family who got the lands after the Reformation.

So North Berwick was a staging post for pilgrims rather than a destination in itself. Nevertheless, pilgrims brought considerable wealth to the town throughout the Middle Ages. Estimates of their numbers are probably exaggerated but at its peak, there are said to have been about 10,000 a year.

You can see from the map why the Earl of Fife, who owned land on both sides of the Forth Estuary, chose this route for his pilgrim ferry. It is the shortest crossing of the estuary until you get to Queensferry where St Margaret had set up a ferry for pilgrims in the 11th century. North Berwick Law must also have been a very useful landmark for pilgrims travelling either by land or sea without signposts or GPS satnavs to help them.

St Andrews Church on the Kirk Ness must originally have been quite small, but became larger over time, with altars to the Virgin, St Ninian and St Sebastian along with other saints. There was a nave, choir and presbytery and eventually a tower for the Kirk Bell which was added at the west end. There was a large graveyard round the church and once the site started eroding, bones kept falling on to the beach.

Various objects associated with pilgrimage have been unearthed on the site. The most obvious is the mould for making pilgrim badges and ring brooches, which is now in the Museum in Chambers Street with a replica in the Coastal Communities museum in North Berwick. There were also candle snuffers and a small jug along with shroud pins from the graves, which can also be seen in the museum in North Berwick.

Pilgrimages were probably in decline before the Scottish Reformation in 1560, and the nunnery in North Berwick was in ruins by 1587. In 1581 pilgrimages were banned by the Scottish Parliament and as far as I know the ban has not yet been lifted.

In 1652 the combined effects of a great storm and erosion caused by quarrying for volcanic red leek stone, (good for lining ovens) meant that the church was no longer fit for purpose. After much deliberation, it was decided to build a new St Andrews church on a different site, and the church at Kirk Ports was opened in 1664. Much of the stone from the old Kirk was used in the building of the new one.

This St Andrews church became too small as the town grew after the arrival of the railway in the 19th century and it was abandoned as a "romantic ruin". A new St Andrews church was built on what had been the site of the manse in the High Street and opened in 1883. A tower for the bell was added in 1907.

In 1989 with the closure of St John Blackadder church in North Berwick it became the combined St Andrew Blackadder church.

The Kirk Bell dating from 1642, has moved from each of these St Andrew churches in turn, being left behind in the older church until a bell tower could be built for it. It developed a crack and in 1928 was replaced in the bell tower. It now rests at the back door of St Andrew Blackadder church.

So for a long time after the Reformation not a lot happened in North Berwick. It was still a royal burgh and therefore entitled to govern itself and to trade overseas, but it became quite run down.

After about 300 years, the railway arrived in the 1850s bringing a new kind of pilgrim. Still groups of like-minded people on a walk, but now walking on the links in pursuit of their golf balls.

North Berwick welcomed them and all the holiday visitors who still flock to the town today, and provided hospitality in club houses, bars, cafes and restaurants etc.

We are now especially delighted that with the growth of interest in pilgrim routes, we are able to welcome 21st century pilgrims, like yourselves to the town.



North Berwick around 1300 – St Andrews Church on Kirk Ness