

# **COLDINGHAM PRIORY**

**TIMELINE 1098 -2015**



**£1**

**1098** -Edgar, King of Scots, (born 1074 – died 1107, reigned 1097 – 1107) issued a 'founding charter' for a church to be built at Coldingham. The foundations of Edgar's Norman church lie under the present church. The size of Edgar's church was about the size of today's church, approx. 33mx7m. In 1098 with the (limited) help of King William Rufus of England, King Edgar drove out his uncle Donald III, and took the Scottish throne. St Cuthbert had appeared in a vision to Edgar and to ensure success, told him to take the saint's banner from the Durham Monastery and to carry it on horseback on a spear at the head of his army. The banner was returned to Durham after Edgar's victory. The church was given by King Edgar in 1098 to the Benedictine monks of St Cuthbert of Durham. The Church and later the Priory were dedicated to St Cuthbert because of his help in ensuring Edgar's accession to the throne of Scotland.

**1100** – King Edgar attended the dedication of the priory to St Mary and St Ebba, as well as St Cuthbert; however the dedication to St Mary was most often used alone. Shortly after this a Benedictine Priory was established. The first mention of a prior is of Prior Symon at Coldingham in reign of David 1 (see below 1150). The prior's retinue was equal to any in the kingdom –most priors were Englishmen sent from Durham. Although the first church was not a monastic church it was probably serviced by the monks from Durham Priory. Even when Coldingham became a priory in its own right it remained a subordinate to Durham Priory. The archives of Durham Cathedral contain over 1000 charters and other documents relating to Coldingham Priory.

**1141 – 1214** Little is known of the names of the early priors but there were six: Symons, Herbert, Bertram, Aernald, Radulph or Ralph and Gaudfrid or Germanus.

*It is important to note that the subsequent priors were not always religious men but appointed to the position by the monarch or the Pope, and the Priory was one of the richest of the Border prizes to be fought over and on occasions to commit murder for. They included Alexander Stuart, (c1493 – 1513) an*

*illegitimate son of James IV, and who also became Archbishop of St Andrews at age 11! David Home, Robert Blackadder, William Douglas, John Stuart, son of James V, and an infant at the time! His appointment was approved by the Pope. Some of the priors were exemplary but others were noted for their vice and profligacy. Robert de Quixwood was ejected because of 'intemperance and remissness in discharge of his duties'. William de Scaccario was excommunicated for incontinence (!) and embezzling money belonging to the priory. William de Bamburgh was expelled on account of his vices. William Drax or Drake (see below) charged with many crimes of a sacrilegious nature including planning with English to set fire to the priory and its offices. Aided by Alexander Home of Wedderburn he also robbed the Scottish ambassador near Cockburnspath carrying 2000 merks to be paid to the King of England.*

*The monks also were not ordained priests and could not administer sacraments nor give absolution. In the 15th century the monks became subject to powerful barons in the area and a want of discipline prevailed and inmates became dissolute in their habits. In May 1442 the Prior received a reproof from Durham:-*

*'John Mosely our brother living under your government conducts himself intemperately and dissolutely going about the town of Coldingham and entering the public houses of the laity and frequenting taverns, drinking beer, against the honour of our religion, the decorum of manners and to his own personal hurt. – we beg and require you to restrain John from such misconduct and that he confirm himself to a better life'.*

*Later again they write in 1453 that they received reports of brethren who do not lead a regular life of decency of morals and 'insolently wander through the towns and villages of the district and conduct themselves scandalously'. They are asked to warn the brethren to neither eat nor drink in Coldingham except in 'your presence' nor go beyond the bounds of our Monastery without special license –must report cause of journey, places and hour of return – 'they should be inhibited from violently drawing their knives or other arms or threatening or other insolence'.*

**1150** -By this time the Church of St Mary had been given much land so that it became possible for the church to become the centre of a new priory and in 1150 David I (born 1084 – died 1153, reigned 1124 – 1153), brother of King Edgar and son of Saint Margaret, Queen of Scots founded the Benedictine Priory of Coldingham. David I was one of medieval Scotland's greatest monastic patrons having founded among others Melrose Abbey and Holyrood Abbey.

**1188** – An oratory was built on Kirk Hill, the reputed location of St Ebba's 7th century double monastery. The king and the Earl of Dunbar had to be paid in kind or money by the Priory.

**1202** – Prior Aernald held court on Homili Knowe at Coldingham Sands. His tomb lies in the churchyard to the west of the present church. Around this time, too, the Leper's Hospital was founded at Aldecambus (present day Old Cambus).

**1216**- King John of England invaded the south of Scotland in an attempt to stop an alliance between his northern barons and King Alexander II of Scotland (born 1198 – died 1249, reigned 1214-1249). The Priory was set fire to and destroyed in this conflict. Berwick upon Tweed sacked. New priory built 1216 by Prior Thomas De Melsonby and existing north and east walls of current church are from this period. Chapels dependent on Coldingham included St Ebba, Ayton, Eyemouth, Lamberton, Mordington, Berwick, Chirnside, Oldcambus, Fishwick, Swinton, Ednam and Earlston.

**1225** It was noted at this time that the prior was buying serfs from Robert de Prendergust. People residing on property were classified with the lands and waters suggesting 'absolute slavery'. They were not free to find employment but transferred by monks to wherever they were needed. Half a mark of silver

for every carucate of land had to be paid yearly to the monks. Many breweries and bakehouses abounded and there were '000s of acreage, cottages, mills, tofts and orchards. Tenants were allowed fallen wood as fuel or for repairing houses but they were not allowed swine, geese, venison or rabbits. For their work they received two ploughmen's lunches, three herrings and cheese! The Priory was one of the richest in the country. Immense revenues were received from tithes of corn, lamb's wool, fish and lint. Monks larders were full of goods, oxen, cows, salmon, wine, wheat and barley etc. Other revenues came from offerings from those who came for religious worship and to seek prayers from the priests and to make confessions, marriages, baptisms and deaths. A portion of the revenues were paid to Durham but mostly revenues were spent on sustenance and drink and costly habits of the priesthood and office bearers.

**1293** Coldingham Priory had the highest income from rent for the monastic houses in the Archdeaconry of Lothian. It was fourth in the list for income from wool.

**1296 – 1357** the Wars of Scottish Independence. Key dates 1296 –English invasion -sacking of Berwick. Scotland all but conquered. Stone of Destiny removed to Westminster Abbey; 1314 – Battle of Bannockburn- Scottish victory; 1320 – Declaration of Arbroath affirming Scottish Independence from England; 1333 Battle of Halidon Hill near Berwick –Edward III defeats Scottish forces under Sir Archibald Douglas. By now much of Scotland, i.e. around one eighth of Scottish lowland counties were under English occupation.

**1346 -1371** – marked the beginning of the Black Death plagues.

**1410** -This is the time of Prior John Aklyff; the 'last great Prior of Coldingham'. Increasingly the King, parliament, and local lords tried every means, fair or foul, to take the lands back from the priory. Prior John Aklyff held supreme

authority over Coldinghamshire about which he moved with a considerable retinue living in the best accommodation and on the best food.

**1420** A group of Scottish Reivers barricaded themselves in the Priory. The prior, William Drax, either smoked them out or burned them alive. This action was condemned by the King and the Scots Parliament. Drax fled to Durham taking the Priory's charters, where they still are. Drax later returned to Coldingham.

**1435** James I confiscated the lands of Earl of Dunbar, the most powerful person in South East Scotland. The result was the destabilising of the whole area for about 100 years as local families fought each other for the pickings and with the monarch joining in. The Priory was one of these pickings being one of the richest in the Borders. It was the Homes who gained the upper hand over Coldingham although their fortunes did vary.

**1453** Around this time the Priory seemed to have been in a defenceless state and revenue greatly reduced. The monks took shelter at Lindisfarne.

**1472** King James III had the Pope suppress the Priory and it became a collegiate church, so giving James easier access to priory funds and to help pay for the Chapel Royal of St Mary of the Rock in St Andrews, which he was building at the time. To the Priory he added an annexe known as the "Chapel of the King of Scots".

**1488** After the defeat and murder of James III, the Priory was re-instated but only as a shadow of its former self. The ruthless way of James III in dealing with the Priory and the Homes was typical. He made many enemies who

confronted James at Sauchieburn (near Bannockburn). James was defeated but escaped. He was discovered hiding and was killed.

**1502** Margaret, daughter of King Henry VII travelling from Berwick to Edinburgh to marry James IV, lodged at Fast Castle while the rest of her company lodged with the prior at Coldingham where they had meat and drink and livery for horses.

**1509** Detached from Durham and attached to Dunfermline. Robert II attempted to annex the Priory to Dunfermline Abbey in 1378 by expelling the monks of Durham in order that they would be replaced by Benedictine Monks from Dunfermline. This was opposed by Durham and litigation dragged on so that it was 1442 before the Papal Court decided in favour of Durham. John Olle, an Englishman, was made prior but he was the last English prior and the last Durham monk was expelled in 1462. The Pope finally ordered that the Priory be withdrawn from the control of Durham Priory and joined with Dunfermline Abbey.

**1514-1517** Dispute arose between Henry VIII and the Scottish Crown over who should be prior of Coldingham. Also Henry VIII wished to reunite Coldingham with Durham. The Scottish Crown persuaded the Pope to appoint David Home. He was murdered!

**1519** Times became even more lawless. Prior Robert Blackadder 1518-1519, nephew of Earl of Bothwell, was appointed prior next and he was murdered by another David Home of Wedderburn.

**1544 -1545** The Priory and the town was seized by the English and fortified against the Regent Arran. It was again destroyed by fire in 1545 during the Rough Wooing (1543 –1551) when Henry VIII declared war in an attempt to

force the Scots to agree to a marriage between his son Edward VI and Mary Queen of Scots. The Priory was always caught in these conflicts along with the perennial border skirmishes of the Border Reivers.

**1553** The Priory was described as 'much reduced'. In 1566, however, it was visited by Mary Queen of Scots and it was still able to accommodate her train of about 1,000.

**1560** With the Scottish Reformation in 1560 monasticism in Scotland stopped.

1588 The last signing of an existing Coldingham paper by a monk named George Acheson.

John Stewart, (c 1586 – c 1650) second son of Francis Earl of Bothwell (1562 – 1612) succeeded his father as the last Commendator of Coldingham, and 1st secular feudal Baron of Coldingham. Francis himself had been made Commendator of the Priory in 1563 at one year old. John died in straightened circumstances and his son Robert was cited as the heir to his father's debts when the barony of Coldingham was acquired by Home of the Renton family. A Commendator performed no ecclesiastical functions.

**1603** – Union of the Crowns of Scotland and England under James VI of Scotland 1st of England, son of Mary, Queen of Scots.

**1606** The scant remnants from the once grand title 'Prior of Coldingham' were held by the sixth Lord Home. Home gave up this spirituality, and the Scottish Parliament confirmed it.

**1650** After Cromwell's success at Dunbar against the Scots he came across some royalists occupying the old buildings of the Priory. Cromwell used his

canon to oust the royalists and after a siege of 2 days left only two walls standing. These were two walls of the choir of Thomas de Melsonby's church. The Priory had been fortified and when the tower was shattered they were forced to capitulate.

The tower fell about 80 years ago. At its base was found a female skeleton – a nun buried alive for breaking her vows or an 'in church' burial? We will never know!

**1650-1662** This is the only period in its long history that the church was not used as a place of worship. Coldingham Church is the only major medieval church in South East Scotland to continue to be used as a church today and is owned by the Church of Scotland. Minor alterations and additions continue to be made.

**1662** A major restoration of the church was completed incorporating the east and north walls. New south and west walls were built, allowing the choir of the church to be returned to use. Much of the church restoration work from this time destroyed important features. These walls were rebuilt in the 1850s, when the church assumed pretty much the form you see it in today. The column bases south west of today's church were formerly part of the south transept, and parts of the south and west walls of the south transept also remain as does the arch that once connected the south transept to the south aisle of the nave. Of the domestic buildings that once surrounded the cloister garth south of the church, the low walls and rubble you see today are all that remain. There has been Christian worship on the site for over a thousand years and our present church building includes walls dated to around 1200.

**1688** The succession of William and Mary to the throne in 1688 and the Revolution Settlement of 1690 finally established the reformed, Presbyterian Church as the national Church of Scotland. The monarch even today has a special relationship with the Church of Scotland and renews that every year by

sending a representative to attend the General Assembly. The first Presbyterian minister of Coldingham Parish Church is generally assumed to be Rev John Dysart, died 1732. During the Covenanting period people were not permitted to worship in churches and driven to seek shelter in caves etc. Feelings ran high and at one stage the minister apparently felt it necessary to carry a brace of pistols which he would place on either side of the bible during services. The greater proportion of inhabitants was Episcopalian and they worshipped in a barn a short distance from the church. People were often rebuked for not attending church and would often state that they worshipped in the barn not the church. Coldingham once had an Episcopal Meeting House, a Congregational Church and a Catholic Church however evidence of remains of these buildings cannot be found today.

Between 1694 and mid 19th century there were only six ministers.

**17th/18th centuries** – extensively used as a quarry by local residents.

**1855** – Extensive renovations including lowering the ground and floor levels, rebuilding the south and west walls in their present shape and adding the porch. The roof was replaced with oak, white paint removed, pillars and bases restored or replaced where they were beyond repair. The pulpit was placed on the south wall and pews arranged across the area – sittings apportioned amongst the heritors according to legal rule – each heritor having a share allocated to him in proportion to his valuation of property and according to his share of the expense. Board of Works contributed £625; heritors £843 – field to west purchased and a hearse shed and apartment for garden implements built.

**1950s** – Further interior renovations including the relocation of the pulpit and altar to the east end of the church and re-siting the pews to face the pulpit.

**1966** – Excavations and conservation in precincts begun.

**1968 – 1970** Outside church walls repaired and conserved.

**1998** – 900th anniversary celebration of granting of King Edgar's Charter and the reconsecration of the church by the Bishop of Durham.

**2000** -The Friends of Coldingham Priory (FOP) were formed following the celebration of the 900th anniversary of the Founding Charter. The charity's aims are to promote the historical and architectural importance of the Priory and to work toward improving the Priory and its surroundings. FOP undertakes various fundraising activities and uses these funds to contribute to the ongoing improvements to the Priory, its surrounds, ongoing archaeology and educational projects, in conjunction with other funding bodies.

**2012** – Garden to the south of the church was created, paths improved and signage erected. Further conservation of the walls and arch was undertaken. The stones in the lapidarium were removed to Edinburgh for cleaning and then re-sited. Markers showing the layout of the original priory were positioned in the churchyard. An emergency exit was introduced on the south wall, new wheel chair access door was installed, along with a lift, a new disabled toilet installed, a kitchen and underfloor heating. The pews were removed and in their place new seating was installed which allows the church to be used as a multifunctional space.

**2014** – Geophysical surveys undertaken in the Glebe field east of the church and adjacent to the old manse, by Durham University. Some archaeologists hold the view that St Ebba's first 7th century monastery was located near the priory rather than on Kirk Hill. In the early 20th century it was reported that 'a large number of British graves were found on St Michael's Knowe, near the Glebe field. Permission was not granted to survey this field. Further burials were discovered in the area in the early 1990s. In the early 2000s archaeological excavations confirmed a number of graves and a ditch were 7th century. It is hoped that digs will commence in the Glebe field in the not too distant future.

The terms ‘the Priory’ and the ‘church’ have been used here for the pre and post reformation periods respectively. However it is still known as Coldingham Priory and is an A listed historic monument.

**Friends of Coldingham Priory**  
**Scottish Charity No: SC034929**  
**[www.friendsofcoldinghampriory.co.uk](http://www.friendsofcoldinghampriory.co.uk)**