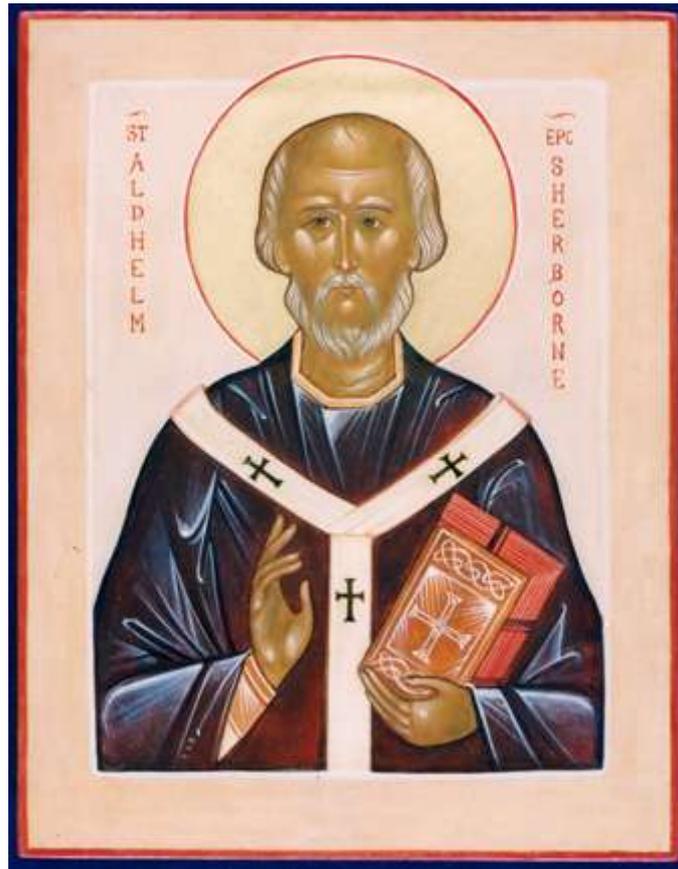


***SAINT ALDHELM –
“the Greatest Englishman Ever, possibly!”***
Jim Gunter: WAHNS Talk - 14th July 2010
(augmented by my own research)



St Aldhelm, or to give him his Old English name, “Ealdhelm”, was born about 639 AD at Wareham. He died 25th May 709 in Doulting, Somerset. His body was carried to Malmesbury, where it was buried in the presence of Egwin, Bishop of Worcester. Stone crosses were placed as markers every seven miles along the route between the two towns and it was not long before his body was placed in a magnificent shrine and revered as a saint.

He is said to have been the son of Kenten, who could well be one and the same as “Centwine” of the royal house of Wessex (the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of the West Saxons, in South West England). The name “Ealdhelm” could signify “Senior Crown” or Crown prince – “helm” relating also to the word “helmet”. His grandfather had been converted to Christianity.

The kingdom of Wessex functioned from the 6th century, until the emergence of a united English state in the 10th century, under the Wessex dynasty.

Wessex became an earldom from 1020 to 1066 after Canute the Great's conquest of 1016.

After the Norman Conquest, however, there was a dissolution of the English earldoms, and Wessex was split among the followers of William the Conqueror

In AD 500 Wessex was known as Gewisse. It focused on Dorchester on Thames.

Over the years its territory shifted and by 628 it was spreading southwards. By then Winchester had taken over from Dorchester.

Accomplishments:

Aldhelm is believed to have been the first Anglo-Saxon to write in Latin verse, and his letter to the King of Northumbria was a treatise on Latin prosody for the use of his countrymen. In this work he included his most famous productions: **101 riddles** in Latin hexameters. Each of them is a complete picture, and one of them runs to 83 lines.

He was a literary genius, writing in Old English and Latin. He wrote prose, poetry, and riddles. He was also a talented musician

Jim Gunter alluded to the contention put forward in the 1920s that Aldhelm in fact wrote Beowulf – this was also contended by scholars in the 1980s.

His merits as a scholar were early recognized and Bede speaks of him as a wonder of erudition. His fame reached Italy, and he paid a visit to Rome at the request of the Pope. (See later)

On his return, he brought back privileges for his monastery and a magnificent altar, and received a popular ovation.

King Alfred quoted Aldhelm quite extensively and placed him in the first rank of the vernacular poets of his country.

There is no doubt he was a charismatic figure. It is related how he would stand at the river bank at Malmesbury. Crowds would gather around him as he told stories. In this way he would introduce to them the Christian message, and would persuade many to be baptised. That is almost certainly why the bridge that stands at the point where this all took place is called St. John's Bridge, after John The Baptist. The field nearby is also known as St. Aldhelm's Mead, but that is because the fair in his honour used to take place there.

Aldhelm was not a voluminous writer. The works, which alone have given him celebrity, are his two treatises on Virginité and his Aenigmata.

William of Malmesbury recorded that, even as late as the 12th century, some ballads he had composed continued to be popular.

To be a poet, it was necessary at the time to be a musician also and Aldhelm's biographers wrote that he excelled on all the different instruments then in use: harp, fiddle and pipes included.

Long after he became Abbot of Malmesbury, Aldhelm appears to have devoted much of his leisure time to music and poetry. King Alfred entered into his notebook, an anecdote which is peculiarly characteristic of the age and which probably belongs to the period that preceded the foundation of the Abbey. Aldhelm observed, with pain, that the peasantry, instead of assisting as the monks sung mass, ran about from house to house gossiping and could hardly be persuaded to attend to the exhortations of the preacher. Aldhelm watched the occasion and stationed himself, in the character of a minstrel, on the bridge over which the people had to pass. Soon he had collected a crowd of hearers, by the beauty of his verse, and, when he found that grabbed their attention, he gradually introduced, among the popular ballads he was reciting to them, words of a more serious nature. At length, he succeeded in impressing upon their minds a truer feeling of religious devotion; "Whereas if," as William of Malmesbury observes, "he had proceeded with severity and excommunication, he would have made no impression whatever upon them."

Few details of the latter part of Aldhelm's life have been preserved. We know that his reputation continued to be extensive. After he had been made Abbot of Malmesbury, he received an invitation from Pope Sergius I to visit Rome, and he is supposed to have accompanied Caedwalla, King of the West Saxons, who was baptized by that Pope, and died in the Eternal City in AD 689. He did not, however, remain abroad for long.

In AD 692, Aldhelm appears to have taken part, to a certain degree, in St. Wilfred's great controversy against the Celtic usages of the Northumbrian Church and later he was involved in the same dispute with the Britons of Cornwall about the celebration of Easter. A synod was called by King Ine, about AD 700, to attempt a reconciliation between the remains of the ancient British Church in the extreme west with the Anglo-Saxon Church, and Aldhelm was appointed to write a letter on the subject to King Gerren of Dumnonia (by then reduced to Cornwall), which is still preserved.

Aldhelm is still considered one of the pre-eminent scholars of his time. Many of his writings survive, including a fascinating collection of riddles on subjects as diverse as a cloud, the wind, and even the elephant.

Aldhelm:
founded new churches
translated psalms
worked with people in times of conflict
united the English and British churches in the southwest
linked the Irish and English churches
attended the synods of Whitby and Hertford
was the first Wessex saint.
Church and State worked together at this time.

He was the first English literary giant
The first translator of the Bible
He inspired the king to make tolerant laws

“Without Aldhelm there would be no England as we know it”.

Stories arose in later years of his miraculous powers. One legend relates that while he was in Rome, a baby was born in the house of the Pope's chamberlain. There were rumours that Pope Sergius was the father, so Aldhelm enquired of the nine-day old infant, who stated in a clear voice that the holy father was pure and undefiled and ever had been!

Early life and education

Aldhelm received his first education in the school of an Irish scholar and monk, Máeldub who died c. 675. Máeldub had settled in the British stronghold of Bladon (or Bladow) on the site of the town called Mailduberi, Maldubesburg, Meldunesburg, etc., and finally Malmesbury, after him. *(One school of thought states that Malmesbury was actually called after Aldhelm himself: Mael means 'devotee', or 'servant' and Dubh means 'black' – therefore “Maeldub” means 'black servant' [black robes or black monk]. The Anglo Saxon chronicle refers to Malmesbury being Aeldham's burg – may be Aldhelm was the black robed monk and the founder of Malmesbury).*

In 668, Pope Vitalian sent Theodore of Tarsus to be Archbishop of Canterbury. At the same time the African scholar Hadrian, became abbot of St Augustine's at Canterbury. Aldhelm was one of his disciples, addressing him as the 'venerable preceptor of my rude childhood.' He must, though, have been 30 years old when he began to study with Hadrian.

His studies included Roman law, astronomy, astrology, the art of reckoning and the difficulties of the calendar. He learned Greek and Hebrew and introduced many Latinized Greek words into his works.

Ill health compelled him to leave Canterbury, and he returned to Malmesbury Abbey, where he was a monk under Máeldub for fourteen years, dating probably from 661, and including the period of his studies with Hadrian.

Abbot of Malmesbury

When Máeldub died, Aldhelm was appointed to succeed him and he became the first abbot of Malmesbury. According to a charter of doubtful authenticity by Leuthere, Bishop of Winchester (671–676) and cited by William of Malmesbury, he became Abbot in 675 AD.

Aldhelm introduced Benedictine rule, and secured the right for the monks themselves to elect the abbot.

The community at Malmesbury increased, and Aldhelm was able to found two other monasteries as centres of learning – one at Frome, Somerset and the other at Bradford on Avon, Wiltshire.

The little church of St Lawrence at Bradford on Avon is felt by some to date back to his time, and therefore can be regarded as potentially his.

At Malmesbury he built a new church to replace Máeldub's modest building, and obtained considerable grants of land for the monastery.

Bishop of Sherborne

In 705, or perhaps earlier, Hædde, Bishop of Winchester, died, and the diocese was divided into two parts. Sherborne was the new see, and Aldhelm reluctantly became its first bishop in 705. He wanted to resign the abbey of Malmesbury which he had governed for thirty years, but was prevailed upon by the monks and continued to direct it until his death.

He was now an old man, but showed great activity in his new functions.

He built a cathedral church at Sherborne which was described by William of Malmesbury (this was later replaced by a Norman church in fact). As bishop, he displayed much energy - going into public places where he would sing hymns and passages from the gospels interspersed with bits of clowning to draw attention to his message.

St. Aldhelm's Chapel



The chapel is over 1½ miles out of Worth Matravers village and does seem a long trek for worshippers from that locale. There is no evidence for any settlement ever having been located nearer it.

The chapel may have been built as a warning to sailors who were traversing what is certainly a dangerous part of our coastline. The cross on the roof could have been a bell or beacon to warn sailors below, but evidence is lacking.

It has been considered that St. Aldhelm's Chapel was a lookout disguised as a religious building. That is probably negated by its lack of openings. Something that is suspicious, however, is its orientation which is North-East, South-West etc., where churches and chapels tended to be orientated East, West, etc., for spiritual reasons. This relied on it being architecturally possible, and in this case there is nothing to prevent it. If there were an earlier earthwork with no particular orientation the chapel may of course follow it for convenience.

If we look at St. Aldhelm's Head from the mariners point of view it was better known as St. Albans Head, after a completely different martyr who had nothing to do with Purbeck or Dorset but was however the first martyr in Britain and of Roman origin, and executed in the 3rd century.

The Bishop of Sherborne was however responsible for a number of churches and chapels in the Dorchester area and possibly at Corfe, so this could this be a much later celebration of him.

The building is seemingly Norman, with what some consider a Saxon door. The roof is vaulted and supported by a central pier which divides the roof into four vaults. Some would justifiably suggest the central pier is much more robust than it need be. Could this be an obscure one-off construction, an early folly perhaps? Could it be a chantry? There are signs of a small one-man enclosure near the door where a resident priest could spend all his time praying for sailors passing beneath, or of course lighting a beacon, or ringing a bell.

There is a popular local story of a local family losing a daughter and son-in-law by drowning, and erecting the chapel as a remembrance, and where they could pray for their souls. This supposedly occurred in 1140.

A popular name for St. Aldhelm's Chapel was also the Devil's Chapel which perhaps suggests something sinister and unknown. It fell into disrepair over the centuries, to be restored by 1874 by the Earl of Eldon.

All things considered, we don't know who built it, when it was built (accurately), or specifically why it was built. That aside it is a delightful building at a delightful and scary location.