

St Wilfrid, Apostle of Sussex (+ c. 709)

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Source: OrthoChristian.com

Wilfrid, the exiled Bishop of York and future saint, came to Sussex in 681 and with King Ethelwalh's approval set up a mission to convert Sussex to Christ, his centre in Selsey.

Sussex became a diocese when St Wilfrid began to convert the pagan kingdom between 681 and 685. St Wilfrid (c. 633 – c. 709) was a Northumbrian noble who became a monk and then Bishop of Northumbria. Exiled by the Northumbrian king who had quarrelled with him, Bishop Wilfrid spent these years of exile in Selsey in west Sussex, where he founded his see with a monastery on an estate of 87 hides, granted to him by King Ethelwalh. Here in the Manhood peninsula he began converting the pagan inhabitants to Christianity, before returning to Northumbria under its new king.

St. Bede attributed Bishop Wilfrid's ability to begin to convert Sussex in part to his teaching them how to fish. He also wrote that the Sussex area had been experiencing a drought for three years before Wilfrid, but miraculously when he arrived and started baptising converts, it began to rain. Bishop Wilfrid worked with another future saint, Econwald, Bishop of London, in helping to set up the church in Sussex.

His mission was jeopardised when King Ethelwalh died during an invasion of his kingdom by Caedwalla of Wessex. However, Bishop Wilfrid had previously had contact with Caedwalla and may have served as his spiritual advisor before he invaded. And after Ethelwalh's death Bishop Wilfrid became one of the new king's advisors and he was converted. Caedwalla confirmed Ethelwalh's grant of land in Selsey and Wilfrid built his cathedral nearby at the entrance to Pagham Harbour, in what is now Church Norton.

Caedwalla also sent Wilfrid west to the still pagan Isle of Wight with the aim of converting the inhabitants. The King gave Bishop Wilfrid a quarter of the land on the island as a gift. In 688 the King gave up his throne and went on a pilgrimage to Rome to be baptised, but died shortly afterwards. St Wilfrid may have been involved in founding monasteries in other parts of Sussex, but the evidence for this is based only on wording used in founding charters which resembles that used by him in other charters.

After this mission, Christians in Sussex were placed in the Diocese of Winchester and it was not until c. 715 that Edbert, Abbot of Selsey, was consecrated the first Bishop of Sussex. There were eventually around fifty monastic (minster) churches across Sussex and these centres supplied clergy for the surrounding areas. Examples are at Steyning, Singleton, Lyminster, Findon and Bishopstone. The jurisdiction of each of these churches seems to have matched the early land divisions, called rapes.

Thus, it was not until 200–300 years after conversion to Christianity began in the 680s that a network of local parish churches came into existence in Sussex, the earliest being recorded at Henfield in central Sussex in 770. Several monasteries were also established here in the early English period in, for example, Selsey, Lyminster, Aldingbourne, Beddingham, Chichester, Bosham, Ferring and South Malling. In 1075 the Normans transferred the cathedral for Sussex to nearby Chichester. The original cathedral at Selsey is now under the sea. St Wilfrid's feast is on 12 October.