



Bishop of York, son of a Northumbrian thegn, born in 634; died at Oundle in Northamptonshire, 709. He was unhappy at home, through the unkindness of a stepmother, and in his fourteenth year he was sent away to the Court of King Oswy, King of Northumbria. Here he attracted the attention of Queen Eanfleda and by her, at his own request, he was sent to the Monastery of Lindisfarne. After three years spent here he was sent for, again through the kindness of the queen, to Rome, in the company of St. Benedict Biscop. At Rome he was the pupil of Boniface, the pope's archdeacon. On his way home he stayed for three years at Lyons, where he received the tonsure from Annemundas, the bishop of that place. Annemundas wanted him to remain at Lyons altogether, and marry his niece and become his heir, but Wilfrid was determined that he would be a priest. Soon after persecution arose at Lyons, and Annemundas perished in it. The same fate nearly came to Wilfrid, but when it was shown that he was a Saxon he was allowed to depart, and came back to England. In England he received the newly founded monastery at Ripon as the gift of Alchfrid, Oswy's son and heir, and here he established the full Benedictine Rule. The Columbite monks, who had been settled previously at Ripon, withdrew to the North. It was not until he had been for five years Abbot of Ripon, that Wilfrid became a priest. His main work at Ripon was the introduction of Roman rules and the putting forward of a Roman practice with regard to the point at issue between the Holy See and the Scottish monks in Northumbria; to settle these questions the synod of Whitby was held in 664. Chiefly owing to Wilfrid's advocacy of the claims of the Holy See the votes of the majority were given to that side, and Colman and his monks, bitterly disappointed, withdrew from Northumbria. Wilfrid, in consequence of the favours he had then obtained, was elected bishop in Colman's place, and, refusing to receive consecration from the northern bishops, whom he regarded as schismatics, went over to France to be consecrated at Compiègne.

He delayed some time in France, whether by his own fault or not is not quite clear, and on his return in 666 was driven from his course by a storm and shipwrecked on the coast of Sussex, where the heathen inhabitants repelled him and almost killed him. He succeeded in landing, however, in Kent not far from Sandwich. Thence he made his way to Northumbria, only to find that, owing to his long absence, his see had been filled up, and that a St. Chad was bishop in his place. He retired to his old monastery at Ripon, and from thence went southwards and worked in Mercia, especially at Lichfield, and also

in Kent.

In 669 Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury visited Northumbria, where he found Chad working as bishop. He pointed out to him the defects of his position and, at his instigation, St. Chad withdrew and Wilfrid once more became Bishop of York. During his tenure of the see, he acted with great vigour and energy, completing the work of enforcing the Roman obedience against the Scottish monks. He founded a great many monasteries of the Benedictine Order, especially at Henlam and at Ripon, and completely rebuilt the minster at York. In all that he did he acted with great magnificence, although his own life was always simple and restrained.

So long as Oswy lived all went well, but with Ecgrid, Oswy's son and successor, Wilfrid was very unpopular, because of his action in connection with Ecgrid's bride Etheldrida, who by Wilfrid's advice would not live with her husband but retired into a monastery. It was just at this juncture that Theodore, possibly exceeding his powers as Archbishop of Canterbury, proceeded to subdivide the great diocese over which Wilfrid ruled, and to make suffragan bishops of Lindisfarne, Hexham, and Witherne. Wilfrid, whether or not he approved of the principle of subdivision, refused to allow Theodore's right to make it, and appealed to the central authority at Rome, whither he at once went. Theodore replied by consecrating three bishops in Wilfrid's own church at York and dividing his whole bishopric between them.

An attempt was made by his enemies to prevent Wilfrid from reaching Rome, but by a singular coincidence Winfrid, Bishop of Lichfield, happened to be going to Rome at the same time, and the singularity of the name led to his being stopped while Wilfrid got through safely. At Rome a council was called by Pope Agatho to decide the case, and Wilfrid appeared before it in person, while Theodore was represented. The case was decided in Wilfrid's favour, and the intruding bishops were removed. Wilfrid was to return to York, and since subdivision of his diocese was needed, he was to appoint others as his coadjutors. He came back to Northumbria with this decision, but the king, though not disputing the right of Rome to settle the question, said that Wilfrid had brought the decision and put him in prison at Bambrough. After a time this imprisonment was converted to exile, and he was driven from the kingdom of Northumbria. He went south to Sussex where the heathen inhabitants had so inhospitably received him fifteen years before, and preached as a missionary at Selsey.

In 686 a reconciliation took place between Theodore and Wilfrid, who had then been working in Sussex for five years. Through Theodore's good offices Wilfrid was received back in Northumbria, where Aldfrid was now king. He became Bishop of Hexham at once, and before long, when York again fell vacant, he took possession there once more.

For some years all went well, but at the end of that time great difficulties arose with the king because Wilfrid utterly refused to recognize what had been done by Theodore but annulled by Rome in the matter of the subdivision of his diocese, and he once more left York and appealed to Rome. He reached Rome for the third and last time in 704.

The proceedings at Rome were very lengthy, but after some months Wilfrid was again victorious. Archbishop Brihtwald was to hold a synod and see justice done. Wilfrid started again for England but on his way was taken ill at Meaux and nearly died. He recovered, however, and came back to England, where he was reconciled to Brihtwald. A synod was held, and it was decided to give back to Wilfrid, Hexham and Ripon, but not York, a settlement which, though unsatisfactory, he decided to accept, as the principle of Roman authority had been vindicated.

Beyond all others of his time, St. Wilfrid stands out as the great defender of the rights of the Holy See. For that principle he fought all through his life, first against Colman and the Scottish monks from Iona, and then against Theodore and his successor in the See of Canterbury; and much of his life was spent in exile for this reason. But to him above all others is due the establishment of the authority of the Roman See in England, and for that reason he will always have a very high place among English saints.

Eddius, the biographer of St. Wilfrid, was brought by that saint from Canterbury when he returned to York in 669. His special work was to be in connection with the music of the church of York, and he was to teach the Roman method of chant. He was an inmate of the monastery of Ripon in 709, when St. Wilfrid spent his last days there, and he undertook the work of writing the life of the saint at the request of Acca, St. Wilfrid's successor in the See of Hexham. The best edition of the work is in Raines, "Historians of the Church of York" (Rolls Series).

*(Taken from Catholic Encyclopedia)*