

When is Easter? Well, it depends...

Video transcript for: May the strongest saint win! Narrated by Dr Robert Beckford

With tensions growing, a meeting of the clergy - a great synod - was organized at Whitby Abbey in 664, specifically to resolve the matter of Easter.

Bede's Ecclesiastical History, which was completed in 731, gives a wonderful account of what happened.

It was a very civilized clash between the two sides.

The debate centred around saintly authority: which of the saints had the right way of calculating the date?

Representing the Irish monks was Bishop Colman of Lindisfarne who, according to Bede, forcefully argued that their custom originated with John the Evangelist.

But his opponent Wilfred produced a masterly series of arguments for the Roman side, claiming the authority of St Peter, chief of the Apostles and of the church universal.

Presiding over the meeting was King Oswy of Northumbria, who would have the final say. At his side his wife who practised the Roman form of Christianity.

At stake was a vital, political, issue. Would England remain on the edge of Europe, siding with Northern Christendom, or join the mainstream, western tradition?

The King's mind must surely have wandered as the minutiae of different systems of counting were rehearsed in all their technical detail.

Finally, he declared, reportedly with a smile, that as he hoped to gain admittance into heaven and that Saint Peter was its gate-keeper, that Saint's customs would henceforth be adopted.

Bishop Coleman was outraged at the thought of having to celebrate Easter the Roman way, and immediately resigned. He went back to Ireland with a group of like-minded monks, and never returned.

Up until this point the Northern Churches had looked to Lindisfarne as the mother church. Their allegiances now switched southwards towards Rome.

After the Synod of Whitby, the English church was now broadly aligned with the continental churches - until the Reformation, that is.