

**THE  
VENERABLE BEDE**

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The venerable Bede by G. F. Browne

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**G. F. BROWNE**

**THE  
VENERABLE BEDE**



The Fathers for English Readers.

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THE  
VENERABLE BEDE.

BY THE  
REV. G. F. BROWNE, M.A.,  
LATE FELLOW OF ST. CATHARINE'S COLLEGE.

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# THE VENERABLE BEDE.



## CHAPTER I.

### THE PERSONAL HISTORY OF BEDE.

THE Venerable Bede is one of the most striking figures in the history of the English Church. It would be difficult to find a parallel to him in the history of any Church. A voluminous and learned Christian writer on many subjects, theological, historical, grammatical, and physical, he sprang from an immediate ancestry of unlettered pagans. The first preacher of Christianity who visited his fathers arrived in the country only fifty years before Bede's birth. Forty years before his birth, the kings of the land were heathens; one, indeed, was worse than a heathen, for he had been called a Christian and had abjured the faith of Christ. The progress made in those forty years was marvellous. We find kings and people vying with one another in paying honour to Christian bishops and priests; churches rising in one town and village after another; large grants of land—grants too profuse, Bede says—for the foundation of monasteries. At the time when Bede was born, we find a Northumbrian noble building the monastery which after-



wards received him, employing workmen and manufacturers of glass from Italy, where he studied all the details of the monastic life, in order that his church and all his arrangements might be worthy of his holy purpose. Here, in a monastery built by one who must have passed his boyhood while the land was still pagan, Bede lived and wrote and died but one generation later. In these present times of active missionary enterprise it is difficult to imagine anything more encouraging, and more full of hopeful prophecy, than the final conversion of Northumbria, with its speedy outcome in the person of the Venerable Bede.

The life of Bede was the quiet uneventful life of a monastic student in time of peace. Very little information has been put on record respecting him, probably because there was little to record. The main outlines of his life are all that we know. There is a singular absence of personal allusion in his writings, even where some reference to himself or to his surroundings would have been natural. Thus, to take an instance, in his sermon on the dedication day of the Church at Jarrow he makes not the slightest reference to any detail of the building itself. He gives an account of the founder, describes minutely the Temple of Solomon, entering into much curious explanation of the symbolism intended by its dimensions and arrangement, and then raises his hearers at once to the Temple not made with hands.

The Venerable Bede was born in the year of our Lord 673, or possibly a year earlier. The actual place

of his birth cannot be determined. He tells us that it was somewhere in the territory assigned about the time of his birth to Benedict Biscop, who founded there the twin monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow. The former of these, the monastery of St. Peter, on the north bank of the river Wear, was built in the year 674, and here Bede was placed at the age of seven years under the charge of the founder, who ruled the monastery as its abbat. Boys in Saxon monasteries did not fare badly. We have a colloquy in which a boy is made to describe his daily food in his monastery. He had worts (*i.e.* kitchen herbs), fish, cheese, butter, beans, and flesh meats. He drank ale when he could get it, and water when he could not : wine was too dear.

The sister monastery of St. Paul, at Jarrow, on the south bank of the Tyne, was built by Benedict in the year 682, and Bede was transferred to that establishment under Ceolfrid, its first abbat. Here he remained for the rest of his life, occupying himself in the practical work of the monks, in the priestly office, and in incessant study, literary work, and teaching.

In a striking sermon on the text, "Every one that hath forsaken houses, &c.," preached on the anniversary of Benedict Biscop's death, a sort of Commemoration Sermon, Bede gives a summary of this good man's useful life. A noble by birth, he gave up his place and prospects in the king's household, and went to Rome. There he studied monastic institutions, and was tonsured, and there he determined to spend the rest of his life. Pope Vitalian, however,

sent him to England again with Theodore, the great Archbishop of Canterbury whom England owed to the discrimination of that pontiff. King Egfrid gave him sites for two monasteries, not taking them—as Bede significantly remarks—from some one else, but giving from his own property. Here Benedict built, as has been said, Monk Wearmouth and Jarrow, the latter about five miles from Wearmouth; and over these twin establishments he ruled for many years.

Benedict frequently visited the Continent. He never came back empty,—unlike many of those who have made a continental tour, as Bede remarks. He brought over with him at various times all sorts of treasures for his monasteries. Now a supply of holy books, now the relics of martyrs; now architects for building his church, now glass-makers for filling and beautifying its windows; now masters in the art of chanting, keeping them with him a whole year; now a letter of privileges from the Pope, declaring the monasteries free from visitation. Pictures, too, he brought, representing scenes from Scripture; intending these not only for ornaments in the church, but also as a means of instruction for those who were not able to read. Indeed, he stored his monasteries so abundantly with things necessary for learning, that the inmates had at hand all the information and assistance they required in the courses of study open to them.<sup>1</sup>

How extensive those studies were may be to some extent gathered from a list of the books and treatises

<sup>1</sup> See a more detailed account of Benedict Biscop in Chap. VI.