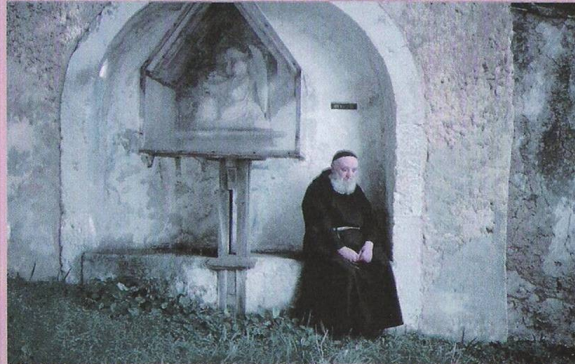


# ST. CUTHBERT'S JOURNEY



## THE STUFF OF LEGEND OR THE VICTIM OF UNRECORDED FACT

I would like, if I may, to discuss in this paper not one but several possible scenarios. The first is the itinerary arising out of Pryor Wessyngton's fifteenth century list of churches dedicated to St Cuthbert; the second is my own assessment of what would have been likely; the third – and with it perhaps the fourth – is that suggested by Professor David Rollason of the University of Durham.

Before doing so I would like to deal with a couple of preliminary, personal issues. First, I am neither a historian, a chronologist nor – Heaven forbid – a hagiographer, just a linguist interested in history. Second, and arising out of that fact, what I have to suggest about the journey of St Cuthbert's body is no more than that – a suggestion. But I do not apologise. I carried out very traditional research: using Milroy's model I collected evidence from correspondence, travel, conversations and the literature; I then classified that information to see what could be deemed

useful and useable; next came the analysis – what did this information tell me? Finally the interpretation: what conclusions could I draw which were worth telling you about today?

When, about five years ago, I asked why St Cuthbert's body had "rested" at the original site of my local St Cuthbert's Church in Southport, I could not get an answer. Then I discovered that ten miles away in the village of Halsall there was another St Cuthbert's Church of similar age – and with a similar claim to be a resting place of the body. Since then I have been in contact of various kinds with 41 such churches across the northern counties of England and the southern counties of Scotland.

In his "Notes on North Meols" of 1924 F.H.Cheetham discusses the possibility that St Cuthbert's body might have rested there: he concludes probably not. However, he does refer to the fact that the area was indeed within the boundaries of what Symeon of Durham mentioned in the twelfth century: bearers of the body "wandered all over the districts of the Northumbrians with never any fixed resting-place". After all, the Mersey was one boundary of Northumbria until Edward the Elder in 923 took possession of "Manchester in Northumbria."

Research proceeds best from the general to the particular. The relevant volume of the Oxford History of England, Stenton's "Anglo-Saxon England 550-1087", made an appropriate but depressing starting point: really we have hardly any evidence worthy of the name. An anonymous life of Cuthbert, written between 698 and 705; Bede's "Lives", written around 716 and 721, and a few lines in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.

So where do we begin? For a start there is the literature about St Cuthbert, his life, his work and his community, about the period in general. A basic reading list might include C.J. Stranks' 1964 booklet "The Life and Death of St Cuthbert", "St Cuthbert: with an account of the state in which his remains were found upon the opening of his tomb in Durham Cathedral in the year MDCCCXXVII" written in 1827 by James Raine, whose posts included that of Librarian of Durham Cathedral; "Two Lives of St Cuthbert" (1940) by Bertram Colgrave, then Reader in English at the University of Durham; and a number of works by David Rollason, currently Professor of History at Durham University. There is a much fuller bibliography below.

This represents a variety of scholarship, but it leads me to a fundamental problem facing historians and would-be students of such distant history: of what the literature tells us can we actually believe?

In 1944 John Betjeman, that most acerbic of poets, complained in a radio broadcast that contemporary historians are notorious for seeing eight sides to a question that possibly has only two, and then taking none of them. This paper will seek to answer some questions about what happened to St Cuthbert's body between 875 and 883. It will also leave much unanswered. For instance, what do the following words and phrases have in common?

- ❖ Is supposed to have....
- ❖ There seems little doubt
- ❖ It is a reasonable guess that...
- ❖ May have been
- ❖ Might seem to point to
- ❖ It is reasonable to suggest
- ❖ Does not appear to have been
- ❖ The only options are the rather dubious translations
- ❖ Cannot be established
- ❖ Our estimate must of necessity be conjectural
- ❖ It is at least certain that it took place, even if no extant narrative source supplies its calendar date
- ❖ It cannot be determined at all precisely on the available evidence
- ❖ In short, the sources provide no evidence for our first possible explanation

The answer is that they are all part of the strangulated, desperate attempts by acknowledged experts in the field of what is grotesquely described as "CUTHBERTIANA" to avoid saying "I don't know" or even "I've studied the topic for years and I still haven't got a clue".

### **Why Cuthbert?**

It might be useful to pause for a moment and ask why it should have been Cuthbert who was being given so much attention. Why was he so special?

The gist of his background is that he was born in 635 (in the same year that Aidan founded the monastery on Lindisfarne). He came from a well-to-do family and was

brought up a Christian, but was also taught the arts of war. On 31<sup>st</sup> August 651, i.e. when he was sixteen, he was out guarding sheep against northern raiders, when he saw a vision of Aidan's soul being taken to Heaven. That decided him on a monastic career. He spent the next thirteen years as a monk at Melrose.

In 665 he moved to Lindisfarne as a missionary, spiritual guide and healer. In 685 he became a bishop, but lasted only two more years. Cuthbert died at the age of fifty two in 687 and was buried on Lindisfarne. Eleven years later his body was exhumed and found to be incorrupt. This, together with reports of miraculous deeds, served to confirm Cuthbert as both saint and cult figure with radiant powers of healing and influence.

Of his miracles there are many stories, told in documents still lodged in the Library of Durham Cathedral. Raine described them as "such as make fools stare and wise men suspect". For example:

- ❖ An angel cured Cuthbert's swollen knee
- ❖ Cuthbert rescued boats off Tynemouth by the power of his prayer
- ❖ Cuthbert's horse pulled down meat and bread from the thatched roof of a hut during a journey to Melrose
- ❖ Whilst Guest-Master at Ripon he received a visit from an angel and subsequently found three Heaven-sent loaves
- ❖ At Coldingham he prayed all night standing in the sea and at dawn his feet were dried by otters
- ❖ He was supplied miraculously with a dolphin, sliced in three and ready for cooking
- ❖ An eagle brought him fish
- ❖ His prayer extinguished a fire set up by the devil
- ❖ Crows left his crops alone after he reproached them
- ❖ One crow, reproached for damaging his thatch, made amends by bringing him lard
- ❖ He cured Abbess Aelfleda and a nun with his girdle
- ❖ He turned water into wine
- ❖ The water of the stormy sea into which the Gospel fell turned to blood
- ❖ Cuthbert's body remained "incorrupt" for many years after his death
- ❖ A paralytic was cured by putting on Cuthbert's shoes
- ❖ A youth was cured of a tumour in the eye by touching it with a hair of the saint belonging to the Priest Thuidred
- ❖ The dead Cuthbert "killed" Viking leader Ragnall for stealing his land

He was obviously a “celebrity” who needed to be persuaded to accept the Bishopric of Lindisfarne (or of Hexham, which he then swapped for Lindisfarne). It took the Archbishop of Canterbury and the King to convince him, and then only after repeated requests!

Cuthbert’s body lay undisturbed and his stature as a cult figure grew and grew over the next hundred and six years. Then on 8<sup>th</sup> January 793, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, “the harrying of the heathen miserably destroyed God’s church in Lindisfarne by rapine and slaughter”. Most of the monks were either slain or taken into slavery. The few escapees regrouped and trained replacements. They found that the grave of Cuthbert had remained unharmed.

Then in the Winter of 875 it was reported to the monks that Halfdan was anchored in the mouth of the River Team, preparing to attack Northumbria in the Spring of 876. So Eardwuf, the Bishop of Lindisfarne and Abbot Eadred of Carlisle dug up the body once again, together with ceremonial vestments and relics including St Oswald’s head and parts of the skeleton of St Aidan, plus some bones of earlier bishops, put them into a coffin and made their getaway.

### **The Journey**

Let us for a moment consider some of the logistics involved: over the next seven years a small group of monks is said to have transported Cuthbert in his coffin for a total which I calculate to be around nine hundred miles. At first they literally bore it on their shoulders; later they used a cart, sometimes with, sometimes without the aid of horse power. We are told that at first only seven privileged monks were allowed to touch the coffin, though this rule was subsequently relaxed.

It is my belief that they would use roads where possible. Certainly there were Roman roads which connected many of the places they visited. Here my research was aided by the Ordnance Survey Maps of Ancient and Roman Britain. Frequently, however, they would have to cross fields and moorland. So the terrain varied; and so too did the weather. In the best of circumstances progress would have been slow – in the worst it would have been well-nigh impossible. (In this respect jump forward a hundred or so years and recall the moment when the monks finally reached Durham: it was when they were stuck on a muddy track that they received the visionary instructions to seek out the “dun holm” where Durham Cathedral now stands!). I doubt they would have made more than about four or at most five miles a day. Given also that they will have rested, that inclement weather or other problems will have beset them, the figure seems reasonable. Seven years is

approximately 2500 days. At four miles a day it would have taken them 250 –ish days of walking to cover the distance. That means they could have had about thirty substantial rests, averaging, say, fifty days each. This would fit quite well with the itineraries I will describe later.

Other considerations would have been food and accommodation. We are told that more or less every time they stopped they were greeted by well-wishers who gave them food, shelter and also precious gifts. After all, this was no ordinary procession! Some people will have volunteered to share the work. From time to time members of the group would drop out through injury or ill-health.

Remember, Napoleon said an army marches on its stomach, and he made sure that adequate provisions were commandeered en route. The Duke of Wellington used to send ahead and take possession of not only every pair of shoes but of every shoemaker on his route, because he reckoned that an army marched on its feet! These are points worth bearing in mind when you read that “General X marched his troops to Y”. That’s as glib a statement as “Henry VIII built Hampton Court”. (Oh, really??) Think, then, of those pall-bearing monks.

## **The Itineraries**

Where did the monks actually take Cuthbert’s body? I shall present for your consideration three main possibilities.

### **1. James Raine’s Itinerary (1828)**

This was based on Pryor Wessyngton’s 15<sup>th</sup> Century List of Churches dedicated to St Cuthbert, a document still in the Treasury of Durham Cathedral. Various experts scorned both the list of churches and the itinerary derived from it. Wessyngton’s poor grasp of geography, misreading of the original documents, and sheer lack of proof are cited in condemnation. My own view is that a journey DID take place and that this could have been a logical route. In all of the places mentioned there is a St Cuthbert’s Church and most of these hold the belief to this day that “St Cuthbert’s body rested here on its journey”.

Lindisfarne and thence to

- Elsdon
- Bellingham
- Bewcastle
- Salkeld

- Mouth of the River Derwent(Workington)
- Up the coast to Whithorn (seeking, then finding, the Gospel)
- Carlisle
- Cotherstone
- Marske
- Forsett
- Crayke Abbey
- Chester-le-Street (from 883 until 995)
- Ripon
- Warden Law
- Durham – arrived 997

Two inscriptions stand beside the present-day tomb of St Cuthbert . The first, attributed to Aldhun, the first Bishop of the Cathedral, until 1018:

Magnus milles mirabilis  
 Multus effulgens meritis  
 Cuthbertus nunc cum domino  
 Gaudet perenni praemio

The second simply states:

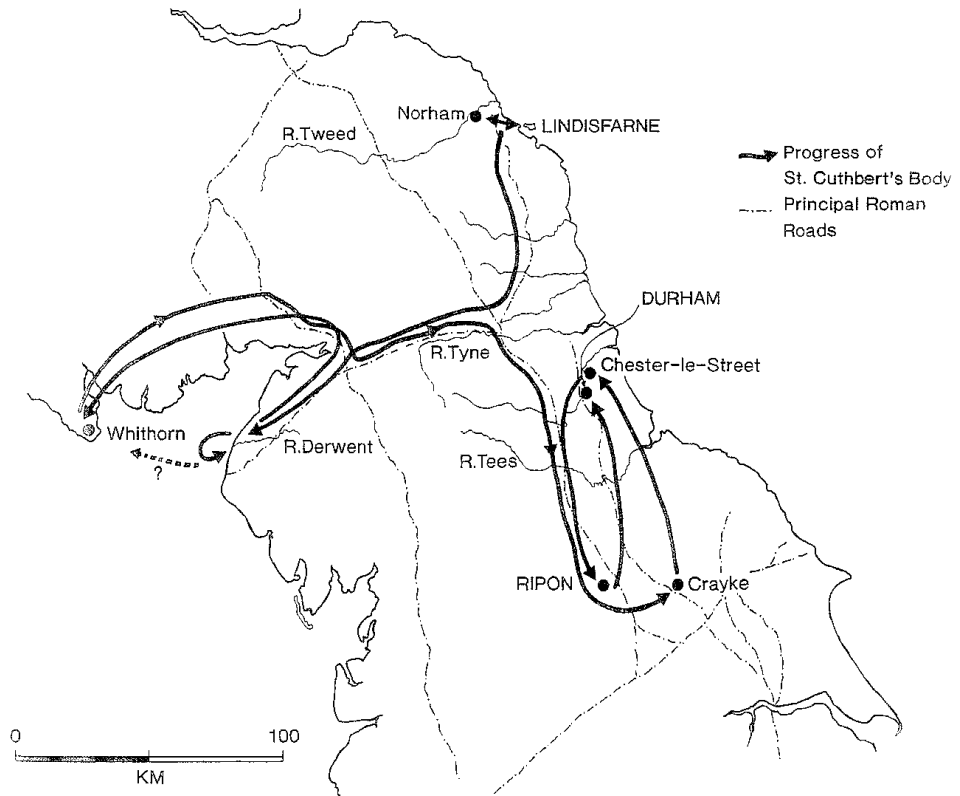
“Borne by his faithful friends from his loved home on Lindisfarne. Here, after long wandering, rests the body of St Cuthbert in whose honour William of St Carileph built this cathedral church and at his side lies buried the head of St Oswald, King of Northumbria and Martyr, slain in battle by the heathen whom he so long defied.”

## **2. Professor Rollason’s Itinerary**

David Rollason gives a much less-detailed itinerary: this too tends to follow the Roman road system:

- Lindisfarne
- Mouth of Derwent
- Whithorn
- Crayke
- Chester-le-Street

- Ripon
- Durham



### 3. My own suggestion

The very first step I took in this project, once I had become convinced that a journey did take place, was to feed all the above place names in the same order into



the famous Microsoft Autoroute programme. The result was stunning! It quite clearly bore out the theory.

Next I contacted the present incumbents of as many as possible of the churches on Pryor Wessington's list. Almost without exception the response was along the lines of: "We have no proof but it has always been said that this was a resting place of St Cuthbert's body".

I asked myself, "Why has it always been said – and when did that start being said?" I am prepared to believe that oral history is not necessarily a case of Chinese Whispers. My own St Cuthbert's Church has a continuous list of Rectors dating back to 1175. That seems like a long time, but it is not actually that many generations. The church itself – like many of the ones on the list – is said to be built on "the site of a much older church, or at least some form of place of worship".

A friend of mine, Tom Wade, drew the map alongside, showing the location of all the Churches, making distinctions between those places merely known to have been visited at some time by Cuthbert, those places where there is a church dedicated to him and those places where there is a claim that his body rested. I am grateful for this.

Stepping back from this map I was struck by two thoughts: one that there was a clear grouping or bunching of the places. Could it be that the body was in these areas and the locals have simply "claimed" the connection, in a desire to have the illustrious association? Secondly I noticed the frequency of Scandinavian place name origins: the body arrived in a place only to find that the Vikings were either already there or subsequently arrived to present a renewed threat.

This is the basis of my "stages", nine in all:

#### Stage ONE

- Lindisfarne
- Norham
- Tillmouth
- Cornhill
- Wark
- Dryburgh
- Melrose
- Colinton?

## Stage TWO

- Elsdon
- Bellingham
- Bewcastle
- Haydon Bridge
- Beltingham
- Carlisle
- Plumbland
- Embleton
- Mouth of Derwent

## Stage THREE

- Up the coast, seeking Lindisfarne Gospel
- Holme Cultram
- Kirklington
- Isle of Whithorn – book found

## Stage FOUR

- Carlisle
- Great Salkeld
- Edenhall
- Dufton
- Cliburn
- Hawkeshead
- Kirkby Ireleth
- Aldingham
- Over Kellet

## Stage FIVE

- Lytham
- North Meols (Meles, Meiles, Melus)
- Halsall

## Stage SIX

- Ackworth
- Fishlake
- South Cave

### Stage SEVEN

- Bolton Abbey
- Burnsall
- York

### Stage EIGHT

- Marske
- Forsett
- Redmarshall
- Darlington
- Stokesley
- Kirkleaton
- Ormesby
- Marton
- Wilton
- Chester-le-Street

### Final Stage

- Chester-le-Street
- Ripon
- Crayke
- DURHAM

So, three suggested itineraries might just – on the principle of “no smoke without fire” – allow us to deduce that a journey was made along roughly these lines.

But speculation does not end there. I am indebted to Mike Rutter(Chester-le-Street) for his suggestion that the journey might have some reasonable basis – but not the reason for it:

“The gradual concentration of land holdings in Southern Northumbria (i.e. representing present day Co Durham, Teesside/North Yorkshire) is a sound reason for moving the Community H.Q. from Lindisfarne to Chester-le-Street with or without the existence of hostile Danish activities. It seems likely that the places visited by the community in the wandering period 875 – 883 AD were not bolt holes but were existing landholdings, that they were laying claims to. I believe that

the very presence of the “incorrupt” body of the saint in a place was sending the message “this place belongs to St Cuthbert, so hands off!!”

To quote also Professor Rollason:

“...the period of wandering between 875 and 883 does not so much suggest the flight of a band of destitute refugees from the onset of the Vikings as of a community which retained its power and influence throughout the various moves described.” Again, Rollason is of the opinion that “it is just possible that the community was in that period taking the opportunity to visit and perhaps to strengthen its links with its outlying estates”.

In support of this theory I would refer to the fact that this whole episode took place at a time when Celtic influences were still strong. After all, one of Cuthbert’s major tasks was to oversee and strengthen the transition from Celtic to Roman practices such as the celebration of Easter.

A visit to Hochdorf, not far from Stuttgart in Germany, would bring one to the relatively recently excavated grave of a Celtic Prince. It was the custom for the body of a deceased nobleman to be paraded over the length and breadth of his territory. This journey sometimes lasted months or even years, and represented a final opportunity for the Prince to receive the acclaim of his subjects – and to “beat the bounds” of his possessions.

I conclude – but do not leave you with much by way of conclusions – with two final questions:

Is it really Cuthbert who lies beneath the slab in Durham Cathedral?

Modern “Scene of crime” investigators would go absolutely hairless if their corpse were treated half as badly as that of Cuthbert on the occasion of the opening of his coffin in 1827. John Lingard, a Roman Catholic historian from Hornby, Lancashire, wrote in a letter that a Dr Gilly, conducting a service in the Cathedral, heard some noises. As soon as the service was over he ran, still wearing his robes, to the feretory containing the shrine and the relics. INSIDE the coffin he saw workmen, trampling about on its contents, picking up and putting down bones and bits of fabric.

That would not suggest that was then gathered up, placed in a new coffin and re-buried would necessarily be in the best of order!

Again, in 1899 the tomb was opened by Canon Greenwell and the coffin revealed a full skeleton with two heads at its feet. As the coffin was being moved it collapsed, spilling a mass of bones and fabric. The bones included: 3 lower jaws, 20 ribs, 35 foot bones, 26 portions of backbone and SEVEN left shin bones.

This was sufficient to permit the reconstruction of St Cuthbert and the head of St Oswald. It is known that at least one tooth and several fragments of vestments and other items were either sent away for examination or simply given away to people who wanted to own them.

Not terribly scientific!

And finally, from correspondence received from Prof. David Rollason, the acknowledged leading expert on this subject:

“What is known is very limited (and maybe the journey never took place as such at all)”

Ah, well..... What do you think?

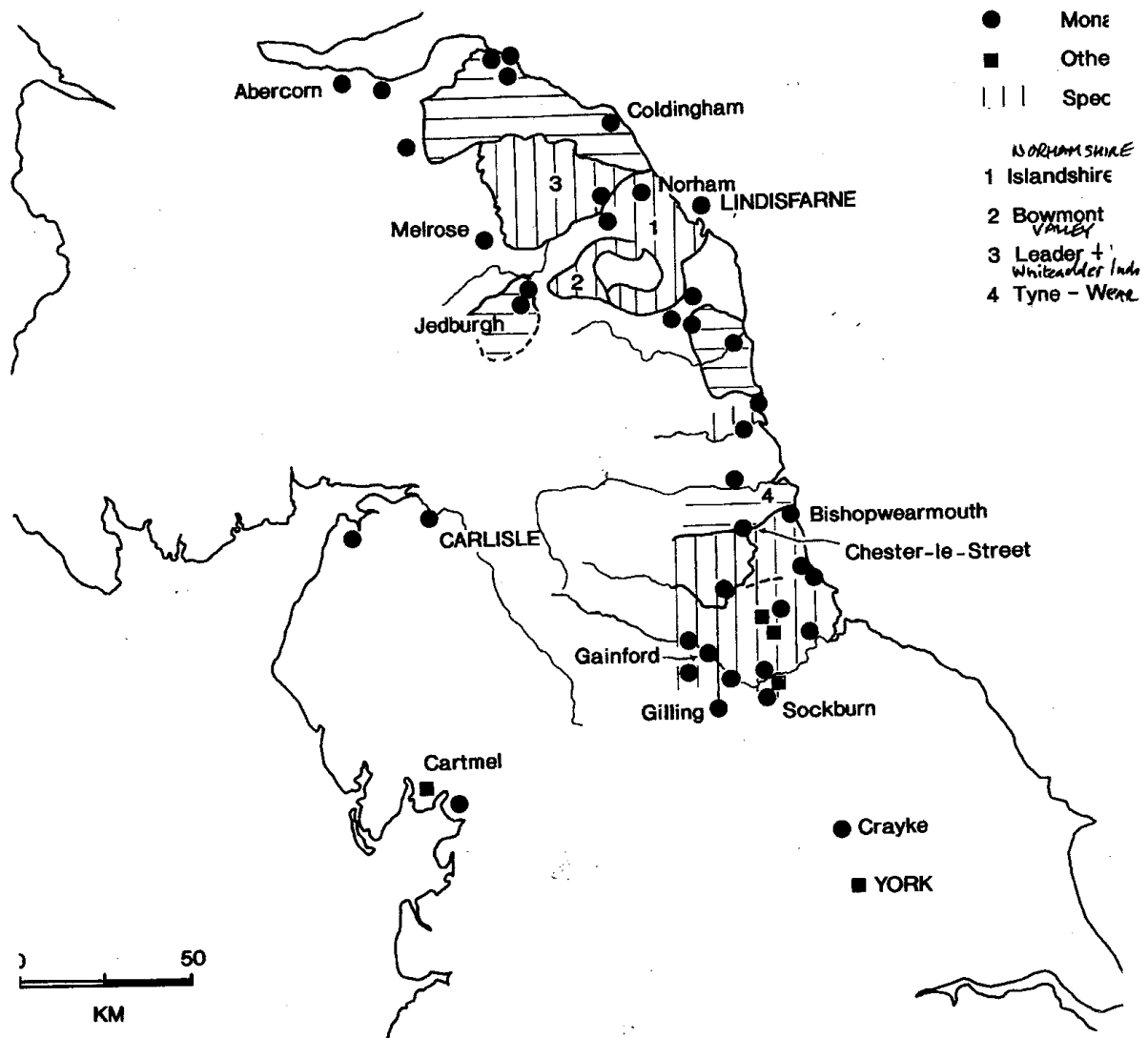


Figure 1. Map of North East England showing the locations of the sampling sites and the regions of the area.

## **Acknowledgements**

Many people have offered help with my research, many others have very kindly responded to my requests for assistance. To them all – my sincere thanks.

Miss Janet Duckworth	St Cuthbert's North Meols
Mr Tom Wade	St Cuthbert's North Meols
Mrs Audrey Price	St Cuthbert's Halsall
Fr Stephen McGrattan	St Cuthbert's Maybole
The Revd Canon Dr Myrtle Langley	St Cuthbert's Dufton, Milburn
Canon Dr Richard Pratt	St Cuthbert's Carlisle
Rev Martin Jackson	St Cuthbert's Benfieldside
Professor David Rollason	University of Durham
Miss Joan Williams	Durham Cathedral Library
A.I. Doyle	University of Durham Library
Mrs Sheila West	Ayr Local History Library
Mr Mike Rutter	Chester-le-Street
And others too numerous to mention.....!	

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