Pilgrimage Bonus Material:

St John of Beverley

This document is to give you detailed information about Beverley as a centre of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages (and to a lesser extent, today). According to the AQA specification you need to know the following things:

‘The role and importance of pilgrimage ... including:

• two contrasting examples of Christian pilgrimage: Lourdes and Iona’

There are two saints from Beverley called John. To confuse matters still further, both were bishops. The more recent one is St John Fisher c.1469-1535 who seems to have been a pupil at Beverley Grammar School and was later martyred by Henry VIII for refusing to swear an oath saying that the king was the Head of the Church of England. You can read more about him online. Likewise, these two should not be confused with the most famous St John the Evangelist who was one of the Twelve Disciples of Jesus and who wrote four books of the Bible, including John’s Gospel.

This document is about the original St John of Beverley who lived in the seventh and eighth centuries. At this time in history, England was split into seven Saxon kingdoms with no overall king of England. Christianity was being reintroduced to England and was replacing the Saxon pagan religion which worshipped Thor, Wodin, etc. This was before the Viking invasions began. John was the Christian Bishop of Hexham in Northumbria and later Bishop of York. These events happened before Beverley was called Beverley; it was called Inderawood. Deira was the Saxon name for the region of Yorkshire and this area was covered in thick forest.

John (who had no surname, as was normal in those times), is the founder of the original Beverley Minster (not the present building; the original was made of wood). He also is also said to have founded Beverley Grammar School in about 700 AD, making it one of the oldest surviving schools in the world. John was noted for his acts of kindness to others and is said to have done miracles.

After he died, his relics were kept at Beverley Minster, including his bones and a sacred banner. At this time, people began to see Beverley as a place of pilgrimage and people would travel hundreds of miles to pray at his shrine. Two hundred years after St John died, Athelstan King of England (grandson of King Alfred the Great) came to Beverley to collect the sacred banner of St John from the minster. The king was facing an invasion from an international alliance of enemies and he rode with the banner to meet them at Brunanburgh (near Liverpool) in the year 937. Here Athelstan won a huge victory which made England safe for years to come and established him as the overlord of Britain centuries before King James I. Athelstan believed the reason he had won the battle was that St John of Beverley had prayed for him in heaven (intercession of the saint). This can only have made Beverley even more popular for pilgrimage than before.

Bishop John’s saint’s day is 7th May. He also has a secondary saint’s day on 25th October which is called a feast of translation. Translation here means when the saint’s bones are moved to a new shrine. This might have been when the present Beverley Minster was built in the Middle Ages. On 25th October 1415 King Henry V of England won a famous victory over the French, in spite of being greatly outnumbered. Like King Athelstan, Henry believed that the victory was due to the intercession (prayer) of St John of Beverley.

Below are pages relating to St John of Beverley from two different books. The first is from the famous *History of the English Church and People* by the Saxon priest, Bede.[[1]](#footnote-1) Bede was from Jarrow in Northumbria and knew Bishop John personally. Bede was in fact ordained priest by him. You can read this from the link in the footnote. They are good stories. The second is the entry for St John of Beverley in *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the latter book, an asterisk next to a person’s name means that he or she is also a saint.

As regards your GCSE studies, you can use the information in this document as an example of a famous holy person whose shrine was a centre of pilgrimage. At the same time, you are learning about the place where you live. John of Beverley is less well-known today but he is still considered a special person by some believers and the minster itself is a place that Christians travel for hundreds of miles to worship there because it is one of the finest mediaeval places of worship in the whole of Europe. Beverley Minster is unusual in that the same style of architecture was used throughout the whole building. In other minsters and cathedrals in Europe there would nearly always be a mixture of styles and architectural fashions because they often took more than one lifetime to complete. Obviously, you do not need to remember all of this information but the more you know, the easier it is for you to think of something relevant to write.

From the *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*



1. Bede, *A History of the English Church and People* (eighth century), translated from Latin. You can read this on pages 359-368 at this link: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/38326/38326-pdf.pdf?session_id=70572afae54f0bdda316832ec2e94547161a480a> . [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, second edition (Oxford University Press, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)