

Bishop Walcher

The earliest important event being the murder of Walcher, Bishop of Durham in A.D. 1080. The exact date is known, being recorded as May 14th.

After the Norman Conquest, the North of England proved difficult to control. The border with Scotland had not yet been defined and Saxon nobles used the area as a sanctuary to strike at the invading Normans. The Saxons of the North East were persecuted as a warning to other unruly persons. There was one exception: Liulph, an ancestor of the Lumley family of Lumley Castle, near Chester-le-Street, was on good terms with Walcher, to the great annoyance of the bishop's Norman advisers.

This jealousy resulted in the murder of Liulph. Unlike some bishops, Walcher was a timid cleric, and realising the possible results of this, took refuge in Durham Castle. He sent out messengers proclaiming his innocence and offered to meet and explain to Liulph's relatives. The place chosen was Gateshead, near to St Mary's which stood slightly to the north of the present church.

Walcher came with a large group of followers, obviously a body guard; amongst them were the murderers. A mob gathered, and, urged on by Liulph's family and friends, attacked the Normans. The bishop and his followers took refuge in the church; those remaining outside were killed. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle gives the figure of one hundred dead. St Mary's was put to the torch and one by one the Normans were forced to leave and were killed. Walcher's pleas were of little avail and with shouts of 'Short rede, good rede, slay ye the bishop' the crowd hacked him to death. (Rede is an Anglo-Saxon word meaning plan or solution, advice or counsel.)

His badly mutilated body was eventually recovered by monks from Jarrow and taken to Durham.

This small success encouraged a general uprising, including a brief siege of Durham Castle, but it was short lived and an army under William the Conqueror's half-brother laid waste the area. Gateshead probably suffered badly as it was the scene of the crime.