For Christians investigating the history of the Celtic churches in the British Isles, the variety of saints, their roles and how their missions fit together can be somewhat confusing.

The notion that there was ever a singular Celtic nation or church has faced overwhelming academic criticism in the face of linguistic, historical and archaeological evidence, although there was a period in the 600s when the ecclesiastical centres in Ireland, Iona and Lindisfarne were united, and had a strong influence over the spread of Christianity in Scotland and much of England, north of the Thames, and connections with the churches in Wales and Cornwall.

Wales and Cornwall seem to have retained their Christian faith during the period of Roman withdrawal and the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, but the nature of their doctrine and practice probably varied as the topography of those areas made inland journeys difficult. Their saints typically travelled around the coasts and up the river valleys, often lending their names to settlements which still exist today.
A Basic Timeline of the Saints of ‘Celtic’ Times in the British Isles

Pelagius
D.circa 350

Ninian
D.circa 432

Patrick
D.circa 461

Brigid
D.circa 500

Columba
b.circa 521

Finnian
D.circa 549

Brendan
D.circa 577

David
D.circa 589

Augustine
D.circa 601

Hilda
b.circa 614

Columbanus
d. 615

Fursey
D. 634

Aidan
d. 651

Bede
b. 673

Not all of these were ‘Celtic’ or accepted as saints!

Pelagius fell out with Rome on the doctrine of Original Sin, believing that people were born without sin, but then always went on to commit it. He was also condemned for appearing to claim that we could be saved by good works, rather than the sacrifice of Christ – the so called Pelagian Heresy. He fell victim to a lot of internal Roman politics.

The lives of Cuthbert and Caedmon overlap the Synod of Whitby and Bede post-dates it and so all three would express the faith in the Roman Catholic tradition of the day.
Other Key Dates

- Around 450 BC the Greeks refer to the people living north of the Alps as ‘Celts’, with a heartland identified near the source of the Danube.

- 400 BC ‘Celts’ plunder Rome.

- 200 BC Largest expansion of Celtic art and culture.

- 58-58BC Julius Caesar wins the Gallic Wars. Celts remain temporarily undisturbed in Britain.

- 313 AD Conversion of Emperor Constantine.

- 371 Martin Of Tours elected Bishop.

- 537 Death of King Arthur.

- 634 Aidan founds a monastery on Lindisfarne.

- 664 The Synod of Whitby sees the Celtic church in England assimilated into the RC Church.

- 700 Lindisfarne Gospels.

- 800 Book of Kells.

- 1093 Lindisfarne Priory founded by the Benedictines.
So, what do we really know for sure?

Our knowledge of the ‘Celtic Church’ in the British Isles relies on a number of sources:

- The Roman historian Tertullian (AD 155–222) tells us in his work “Adversus Judaeos” that Britain had already received and accepted the Gospel in his lifetime. Trade with the Mediterranean down the Atlantic seaboard of Western Europe is a probable explanation, but some may also have been evangelised by the later Roman population itself.

- Bede’s “Ecclesiastical History of the English Church”, the “Book of Kells”, the work of “Gildas” etc. Parts of these are known be accurate, e.g. Bede’s account of the life of Cuthbert was taken from people who actually knew Cuthbert during his life. Other parts are oral tradition, hagiography, and sometimes some pure legend and myth!

- The archaeology of Celtic times – hermit cells, monasteries, etc. Very often they chose spots that had spiritual significance in pre-Christian times, often places of great natural beauty such as coastal bays and headlands, rivers, springs and wells.

- A possible living tradition – the Carmina Gadelica, a Gallic collection of Christian songs and poems from the Western Isles of Scotland, where resistance to the Synod of Whitby was strong and the area beyond the effective reach of church authorities for hundreds of years.
How can we use this today?

There are many possibilities, but what we definitely cannot do is re-invent the Celtic Church in today’s world. However, from our limited knowledge we can:

- Find inspiration in the missions of the Celtic saints to bring Christ once again to our country, to a culture that has drifted rapidly into materialism, consumerism and the *pick and mix* of relativism.

- Adapt the gentle style of evangelisation of the Celtic saints to our time. As far as we know, there were no Celtic *Martyrs*.

- Look at the structure of the Celtic church, its limited hierarchy, its policy of only have small local congregations in each church, and its greater acceptance of women in ministry, then see if and how these may be applied today.

- Rediscover and develop the role of the *anamcara*, the soul friend, to provide guides for those on the spiritual journey.

- Plus many more things that you may pick up by browsing the rest of the Community of Aidan and Hilda website, or, more importantly, things that The Holy Spirit reveals to us about our own vocation whilst we investigate the *Celtic* past.