I shall be talking this morning about three people. Two of them, Aldhelm (died 709) and William of Malmesbury (died c. 1142), are familiar names. The third, Faricius (died 1117), the hero of this occasion, is less well-known. I ask you to bear in mind the enormous gulf between Aldhelm and the other two: as long as the gap between Shakespeare and the present day.

But first a word about the place. We call the marvellous building up the road from here ‘Malmesbury Abbey’. It was under construction in William’s time, around 1140, and was built to replace a far older church.

William did not call either of these churches ‘Malmesbury Abbey’. He normally refers to the town as *Meldunum*, and to the monastery as *Meldunensis ecclesia* or *Meldunense monasterium,* the church or monastery of *Meldunum*. He once comments on the name ‘Malmesbury’, *Malmesberia*: that is what in his day people called the place (I suppose he means contemporary speakers of Latin), but they belong, he says, to a *corruptior aetas*, a debased generation. As for Faricius, thirty or so years earlier, he always speaks of *Meldunum*, with its associated adjective *Meldunensis*.

As to the term ‘abbey’: Faricius never uses it at all, and William only once of the church at Malmesbury.

I take it that both writers avoid the word ‘abbey’ because the word was still only slowly making its way into England. The Oxford Dictionary of British Latin cites a first instance as late as Domesday Book. William is happy to use the term of, for example, St Albans and Chester; but he avoids it for his own beloved church and home. As for *Meldunum*, both he and Faricius before him apparently preferred it for scholarly and literary reasons. The word closely recalled the supposed founder of the monastery, the Irish Maildulf, known to Faricius as Meldun (William made it Meldum). *Meldunum* sounded plausible Latin, and bred a plausible Latin adjective, *Meldunensis*; both words sounded better in a Latin work of literary pretensions than the English *Maldulfesburg* or whatever.

I hope you will forgive this pedantic opening. Now to the persons.

On St Aldhelm’s Day in 1083 the monks made their customary procession through the church at Malmesbury: not, of course, the present basically Norman structure, but the big earlier church that Aldhelm himself was said to have founded. The monks went round the place, and came back to the main door. The bier in which the saint was being carried had been placed, as was customary, across the entrance in such a way that you had to bend down to pass underneath it into the church. Hubald, archdeacon of Salisbury, who had come to Malmesbury specially for the occasion, reached up furtively and put his hand on the bier. At once he was cured of the agonising pain that had long afflicted him, in his shoulder, his back, and one arm right down to the fingertips.

We know all this because it was recorded by an Italian, Faricius of Arezzo, in his Life of Aldhelm, written between 1093 and 1099. Faricius was an intimate of Hubald’s: indeed they were both Italians. Faricius was present in person at the miracle, and immediately cross-questioned his friend. The story was told again, around 1125, by the great historian William of Malmesbury, in the fifth book of his *Deeds of the English Bishops*. William was not there in 1083, but we know that both he and Faricius were present at the time of a rather later miracle, when a crippled woman was cured. Both he and Faricius speak of many miracles they had seen in the place, and neither expresses the slightest doubt of their genuineness. They were recurring reminders of the continuing power of the patron saint of Malmesbury.

These then are my *dramatis personae*: Aldhelm, Faricius, William, to whom we may add Hubald, archdeacon of Salisbury.

Aldhelm and William were very different men: the one a close relation of King Ine of Wessex, founder of churches and bishop of Sherborne; the other a monk who did not aspire to be abbot. But they have two things in common: they wrote a great deal, and there is little that can be said about their lives. William complained how little he could learn about Aldhelm, and we are hardly better off today. Bede, who died thirty years after Aldhelm, tells us that after being monk and abbot of Malmesbury he was made bishop of one part of the newly divided bishopric of Wessex; he does not even name Sherborne. Apart from that, he does no more than register some of Aldhelm’s many writings. From one of these, what we know as the Epistle to Geraint, he was aware that Aldhelm tried to put right some men of Wessex who were celebrating Easter at the wrong time: a matter of high importance to Bede. He also comments on his ‘brilliant’ style. Perhaps he had not read a great deal of the saint’s works. Few people have, and fewer still have made much of them. He was not sanctified for his style. And we have no chance whatever of discovering what Aldhelm was ‘really like’. He hides himself behind the coruscations of his learned style.

Faricius’s Life lists the writings, and tells us that he had access to them in an ancient manuscript preserved in the library of Malmesbury. Relatives of this book exist to this day. I doubt if Faricius made much headway in reading it, but Aldhelm’s writings do give us two precious facts concerning his career. He had studied at Canterbury under Abbot Hadrian: something that accounts for his astonishing learning. And he had made a journey to Rome. Faricius knew these facts, from this or some other source. But it will be from oral tradition that he learned how, in Rome, Aldhelm’s chasuble had suspended itself on a ray of the sun penetrating the Lateran. But not from oral tradition only, for Faricius, like William after him, speaks of pictures engraved on a shrine of Aldhelm at Malmesbury, one of which illustrated the miracle of the chasuble. The garment was, in fact, on display at Malmesbury in Faricius’s own time. William saw it too.

Faricius tells us the subjects of three other pictures. All concern miracles performed by Aldhelm during his lifetime. Faricius recounts all the stories concerned, and the later part of his book continues this theme. For miraculous events went on occurring at Malmesbury, as we have seen, right up to his own day. It was this, indeed, that led to Aldhelm becoming a saint. It has been thought that Faricius’s Life was part of an orchestrated campaign to bring that about. All we are told, and this by William, is that a miracle wrought on a crippled child was reported by the monks to their abbot, who happened to be away at court. *He* told Archbishop Lanfranc, and Lanfranc, so William asserts, proclaimed Aldhelm a saint to be worshipped through all England. And a market was set up to coincide with the feast day.

We cannot then hope to get much idea of Aldhelm the person. And William too is an elusive creature, whose personality we can judge only from his writings. William gives us more handle than Aldhelm, but not much more. He speaks to us in his own person all too seldom. He tells us about his education (though not where it took place). He tells us how he used to help Abbot Godfrey in the monastery library (that must be between 1091 and 1106); he praises himself for his efforts to build up the stock, and hopes it will be properly looked after in future. This role was no doubt part of his duties as precentor or cantor. A cantor, according to Dom David Knowles, ‘had charge of all the writing and illumination in the cloister, and of all the choral service of the church’. That would be much to William’s taste.

What comes over very strongly is his personal devotion to the Virgin Mary, but also to Aldhelm. His account of the saint, alive and dead, is made the culmination of his book on the bishops of England. He speaks of the ‘urgent affection’ he feels for the saint. ‘Would it be fair for me,’ he writes, ‘to refuse to use my voice in praise of one who, second only to God, conferred on me what small ability I have? Should I not give the services of my tongue to one for whom if necessary I would give my life?’. Here William is expressing the love and gratitude he feels towards the founder of the monastery that was his only home.

William used Faricius’s Life, though he damns it with faint praise. He claims that he himself as a monk of Malmesbury is better equipped for the topic than an abbot of Abingdon: yet (we may object) Faricius had been a monk of Malmesbury too, and wrote his book before he went off to Abingdon. ‘The fact is’, says William, ‘that Faricius, though not without style, lacked exact knowledge, at least on this subject, for he was a native of Tuscany, and did not know the language.’ In seeking to improve on his predecessor, he exploits Aldhelm’s letters, delves into the charter records, reads material in Anglo-Saxon, writes Latin better. The Old English sources included a work now lost, King Alfred’s Handbook, which enabled him to revise Faricius’s account of the best-known episode in Aldhelm’s life. Faricius had told how the abbot used to meet traders coming to Malmesbury on a Saturday and preach to them on the bridge, tempting some of them to go up to attend church. The Alfred version is the better story: Aldhelm would meet the people when they come down to the bridge immediately after mass, singing like a professional minstrel, in order to persuade them to return to church for his sermons. Who are we to believe?

I come now to Faricius. His is in a way as remarkable a story as that of Aldhelm or of William. And in his case we do know what impression he made on others. People thought him over-rigorous. In 1117, Anselm had been dead for some time, and the archbishopric of Canterbury lay vacant. Faricius, abbot of Abingdon, was high in royal favour, and his candidacy was supported by the king. But Henry did not carry the day. The factors that militated against Faricius were varied and interesting. He did not know Norman French (just as William had thought him deficient in English). He was a doctor who, his detractors said, inspected the urine of women (including, it may be assumed, that of Queen Matilda). He was a foreigner, and they had had enough trouble with foreign archbishops before. As for his rigour, it might lead to schisms. The job went to another.

How did an Italian black monk come so close to being elected to the premier see of England?

That he was an Italian making good in England was not in itself so surprising. Most recently there were the instances of Lanfranc of Pavia and Anselm of Aosta. We have already met Hubald, Ubaldo, archdeacon of Salisbury. Being a doctor, trained no doubt at Salerno, was no disadvantage; he would make himself useful in a monastery. At Malmesbury he was cellarer, in charge of provisioning and hospitality.

Then there was the good fortune of royal favour. Malmesbury had always had its share. It boasted a string of royal charters down the centuries, and we have seen that Aldhelm came of royal blood. William was prompted to write his book on the English kings by a request from the empress Matilda to conduct research into her ancestors. And it may be that Faricius became acquainted with royal persons while he was still at Malmesbury. Certainly at Abingdon he moved in the highest circles, and that because of his medical skills. The elaborate local history (would that we had something so good for Malmesbury!) tells us that ‘the king himself believed he could often be cured only by the compounds of *his* antidotes’. Queen Matilda swore by him as well, and men of the highest nobility.

He was apparently a nice man too: ‘of such affability and urbanity that his speech seemed not at all prolix to those who listened to him’; no wimp either, ‘agile for every kind of activity’, and wonderfully able to endure cold and heat. We are assured that ‘you might see crowds gathering round him out of admiration for his conduct and his noble sayings’. Faricius, in short, had presence, even charisma; and his being considered for Canterbury begins to sound more plausible.

Add to that the sound business sense he showed at Abingdon, in the management of the estates, in the renovation of the monastery, and in the care with which he supervised the monks’ cheese ration. Hostile critics could see this as his ‘inflexible standard of justice’.

Business-like, too, was the amassing of relics. Faricius was a great collector, not least of bits of Aldhelm. We may like to think that the saint’s body lies buried somewhere near us, along with King Æthelstan and William himself. But we must reckon with the dispersal of his bones. Faricius himself tells us more than William does about the negotiations that led to the cession of part of Aldhelm’s left arm to neighbouring Salisbury; that church already possessed part of his left hand. Arrived at Abingdon, Faricius, no doubt using his local contacts, obtained from Malmesbury the whole thigh bone, part of the skull, a tooth, and part of the shoulder blade. What was left after that may, or may not, lie somewhere near us now.

It had been back in Malmesbury, however, that Faricius had written his life of Aldhelm, and to this I now turn: but first to my own recent dealings with it. I edited the Latin text in an American journal in 2005. I used two manuscripts where only one had been used before, and was able to advance on previous editions, by printing a text closer to what Faricius wrote, and also by adding some material that had not hitherto been known: the dedicatory epigram and epistle to Osmund bishop of Salisbury, and a miracle of which I shall speak later. Subsequently, one or two people asked me if there was any translation available. There was not. But a year or so ago, encouraged by Tony McAleavy, I embarked on making one. I cannot say I found the task at all easy, even though as editor I had thought I understood it passably well. The Latin is long-winded and contorted, and Faricius, that capable administrator, does not always seem to think very straight. Still, I did my best. But at that point it occurred to me that for someone wanting just to know the story of Aldhelm (and Faricius was the first to tell it) all this verbosity might be off-putting. Faricius was not very good at calling a spade a spade, and he would rather call Aldhelm ‘the man of God’ than give him his name. He tends to repeat himself, and loves to introduce parallels with biblical situations. So I conceived the plan of producing two versions. One is the untouched translation, with all its pious verbosity, which is now in the throes of publication.; the other is an abbreviation that preserves all the essentials but leaves out the guff. It is this second version that is being launched today. I cannot sufficiently thank Tony and the Malmesbury History Society, that wonderful and welcoming group, for the generosity and care with which they have enabled this little book to be produced.

It contains an introduction telling the reader about our heroes, Aldhelm himself, William and Faricius. Then comes the abbreviated version. It is noticeable, by the way, that the need for abbreviation decreases as Faricius approaches the present day. It is when he is talking of the distant past, about which he had so little real information, that he has to pad out his narrative. I do, however, include two or three complete passages to show what Faricius sounds like before treatment; and I will quote one a little later. The footnotes try to be helpful, but not too laborious. Finally, I have included a kind of prolonged appendix where I put William of Malmesbury centre stage, summarising what he did to adapt and supplement his predecessor. I haven’t aimed to give a full account of his additions to Faricius, or what he removed from him. But if, for example, you wanted to know what William, as opposed to Faricius, said about what Aldhelm did on the bridge, this is the place to look.

The other version, the long one, is, as I say, being published, in a local journal. This version is the frightening one, bristling with footnotes that tell you (for example) where I am translating a different Latin text from the one I published many years ago, and go into much more detail about Faricius’ sources and Latinity. The notes incorporate, but go well beyond, those in my old edition. The little book, by contrast, will be more user friendly, though equally subject to my errors. I hope that if you find any mistake you will let me know. I don’t like getting things wrong, but the older one gets the more difficult it is to avoid slips: not to speak of the gaps in my knowledge.

May I give you a taste of the book, or rather three tastes? All concern Hubald, archdeacon of Salisbury.

The dedication starts like this:

‘I have resolved that especially to you, Osmund, most blessed bishop [of Salisbury], and Hubald, a teacher ornamented by learning in the liberal arts, should be consecrated something worth your getting to know, and worthy of the ardent expectations of all my brothers. It concerns the works, so profound and so sublime, of the most holy bishop and most prized confessor of God, Aldhelm; works that have not previously, I think, come to be written down. It has been cobbled together as best I could with the help of the Lord, so far as my slender intellect allowed. I took this resolution because one of you [he means Osmund], distinguished by perfect morals, priestly rank, and (what is greater than them) zeal for holy study and unshaken chastity, began to pursue the sublime ordinances of the saints not, like some, out of personal presumption; rather, it was at the prompting of the Holy Spirit that, before he rose to the heights of a bishopric, he embarked on the lawful path of doctrine, and preferred to be trained not so much in his own inventions as in the teachings of the holy fathers, in accordance with which he now in peace distributes to others the learning that belongs to him. With this man the very etymology of his name duly accords; for truly the mouth of his heart and the lip of his mouth shine unpolluted by any infection of thought or word. The other [Hubald], filled quite full of the seven streams of philosophy and packed with the sentiments of the holy scriptures, famous for praiseworthy eloquence and ornamented by the highest degree of humility and pleasantness of character, has now gone up many steps towards the stars on the Israelite ladder that was made famous by the angels who climbed it.’

This is Faricius at his most ornate, untouched by my abridging hand.

Now for the scene where this same Hubald has been cured of his pain by touching Aldhelm’s bier:

‘As we went into the church—for we were compatriots and he was my best friend—he rushed up to me in his happiness, his smiling face telling in its joy a different tale from the one it had told only a short while before. He always looked cheerful, talked pleasantly, and was generally amenable. So now: he began to praise Saint Aldhelm in happy tones and well-chosen words: “A man to be praised for his qualities, high in sanctity, full of piety, packed with mercy, rich in charity, worthy to be praised far and wide, Saint Aldhelm, who cured me by his prayers quicker than a word could be spoken, who restored me to my old soundness of health by the mere touch of his bier, who has made me light and capable of anything just as if I were outside the bounds of humankind.” Hearing this, beside myself in my extreme joy, I began urgently to inquire of him if he really felt all the health throughout his body that he spoke of so happily. But he, extending his hands to heaven and casting his eyes upward, began to call God to witness, that he was in all truth in the state which he was reporting to me and to the many other respectable men at my side. Whereupon all of us in unison most devoutly rendered, so far as our understanding permitted, our thanks to the bishop and to God himself.’

Finally, the fate of Hubald’s horse:

‘One day during Aldhelm’s festival, this same Hubald, archdeacon of Salisbury (which is thirty or more leagues away), sent one of his men with a horse and cart into the forest to bring back a load of wood for his kitchen. Peter, a cleric in Hubald’s entourage, said to him anxiously: “A wise man should not neglect the festivals of saints and the practices of our ancestors. It not only offends the saint but sets a bad example to lesser folk.” The archdeacon grew more angry than he should have. “Such folk are the saint’s men, and they often sympathise with us in our problems. They know we cannot live without food, and so we have their licence when we look for what is needed for our provisioning.” The servant, having chopped the wood and loaded the cart, was attaching the horse and getting ready to return home, having, as he thought, arranged everything satisfactorily, when the horse fell down dead without warning, though shortly before it had been plump and healthy. The servant, thinking over what his master and the cleric had said, was scared stiff, and he hurried back. The archdeacon took fright, and from then on told all his subjects to be quite sure to observe Aldhelm’s feast day. And he told me the story.’

An old friend, long dead, John Morris, author of a learned and little believed book on King Arthur, told me ages ago that medieval miracle stories are worth reading if only for the incidental details they give of life in that period. That is very true of Faricius. The recent miracles he recounts bring us into the world of eleventh-century Malmesbury: the constant mud in the streets, the lame and deformed crawling haplessly through it, the sick with no one to cure them except the saint, the monks doing their best to help. It is not for an agnostic like me, and especially not in Malmesbury, to speak sceptically about the miracles themselves. Faricius, and William too, intelligent and principled men, speak of things they have say they have seen. Aldhelm was very present to them. Here is Faricius dreaming of him:

‘That year I was myself weighed down by much illness. Though I was unworthy and was void of any good work, I had remained at Malmesbury as a monk: perhaps God so willed it. One night, sleeping among the brothers in my bed, I dreamed that I was standing in prayer before the tomb I have often spoken of. And, behold, I heard as it were the breathing of someone asleep there. Then, terrified—for I was alone and hearing something so unexpected and unheard of—I raised my head a little and trembling looked inside the tomb to see what it was. At once I saw an old man with venerable white hair and a face like an angel’s, lying on his back in the sepulchre as though on a bed: a bishop in his sacred robes, with staff and mitre, ring, gloves, and boots. If I were to see him now alive in the flesh, I should recognise him beyond all doubt, without anyone prompting me. He was neither tall nor that short in stature, but in between, just right{—I pause here to remark that William, who had seen Aldhelm’s chasuble, judged from its size that the great man was also a tall one—}; he was not so fat or so thin as to be unsightly, but in the middle, an appropriate and becoming size. He stretched himself like someone waking from sleep, raised his body half way, and began to look around the monastery with a terrifying stare. Seeing this I slunk from the church, and woke just when I was going up to the brothers to tell them this tale. I recounted my vision to Warin, father of the monks, and many others, and kept it fresh by often going over it in my mind, which clung to the memory, until, just as God by the merit of his servant brought it about that I saw this miraculous sight, so He brought it about that I realised what a vision like this portended.’

In my youth there was a philosopher called C.E.M. Joad, a star on a radio programme called The Brains Trust. Nowadays he would be a TellyDon. In later life he abandoned his previous agnosticism, and published a book called *The Recovery of Belief.* His main argument, if I recall it aright, was that the continuing existence of the Church made the truth of Christianity incontrovertible. In rather the same way, it seems to me that the monks of medieval Malmesbury must have felt that the survival and flourishing of their monastery for almost five hundred years, despite all that fire and Danes and rapacious abbots could do, could never have taken place without the presence in heaven of Aldhelm, always there to pass their prayers on to God.