

HYDE ABBEY AND THE REMAINS OF ALFRED THE GREAT

Hydre Abbey was established in the first decade of the twelfth century to accommodate the community and the treasures of New Minster, Winchester.

New Minster had been built in the years 899-904 in the centre of the city - close to where the cathedral is today - as the final resting place of King Alfred the Great (reigned 871-899), his wife Alswitha, his son King Edward and other members of the Royal House of Wessex.

However, in the decades after 1066, as the new Norman regime entrenched itself, the abbey had to move to a new site in Hyde, to the north of the city.



Left: 11th Century, from the 'Liber Vitae' (Book of Life), illustrating the donation of a gold cross (one of the 'Treasures of Hyde Abbey') to New Minster by King Cnut and his wife Emma.



Bird's eye view of Hyde Abbey from the south-west. Drawing by Nick McPherson.

1110-1538: The abbey flourishes and then dies

Despite suffering from the effects of civil war, fires and the Black Death the Abbey survived for more than four hundred years and over this time it became a place of pilgrimage.

However, with the start of the English Reformation under Henry VIII, the abbey's days were numbered. The Abbey was finally dissolved in 1538 and the 'stripping of the altars' commenced. But, as far as one can tell, what lay underground - including the royal graves - was mostly left undisturbed.



The procession transferring the bones of King Alfred and his family from Old Minster to New Minster in 1110.

In 1110 the royal remains (and accompanying treasures such as the Gold Cross of Canute, illustrated above*) were carried with great pomp and reverence to their new resting place for reburial before the high altar of the abbey church.

Four years later, when the famous antiquary John Leland visited the site in 1542 the Abbey was already a thing of the past. "In this suburbe stood the great abbay of Hyde..." he commented. "The bones of Alfred, King of the West Saxons, and of Edward his sone and king, were translated from he Newan Ministre, and laid in a tomb before the high altar at Hyde. In the which tomb there was of late found two little tables of lead, inscribed with their names."

The 'great abbaye' was no longer there. But the great King and his family remained.