

IN SEARCH OF ALFRED THE GREAT



Stained glass window, 20th century, commemorating the anniversary of St. Bartholomew school in the church of St. Bartholomew, Hyde. Photograph by Joe Low

“In the year 899. the magnanimous Alfred passed from the world. King of the Saxons, unshakeable pillar of the western people, a man replete with justice, vigorous in warfare, learned in speech, above all instructed in divine learning. For he had translated unknown numbers of books from rhetorical Latin speech into his own language – so variously and richly, that his book of Boethius would arouse tearful emotions not only in those familiar with it but even in those hearing it for the first time. For the king died on the seventh day before the Feast of All Saints...

HIS BODY LIES AT PEACE IN WINCHESTER

Now reader say, ‘O, Christ Our Redeemer, save his soul.’”

(From the tenth century account of Ealdorman Aethelweard)

HYDE ABBEY AND THE REMAINS OF ALFRED THE GREAT

Hyde 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.



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.



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.

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.

1788: THE YEAR THAT DISASTER STRUCK

For 250 years - from 1538 until 1788 – the choir end of Hyde Abbey where Alfred and his family members lay buried - was gradually forgotten about. This all changed, however, in 1788 when the land was taken over by the county authorities as the site of a small local prison or ‘bridewell’. The convicts

themselves were put to work digging the foundations and in doing so – or maybe in reburial materials from other parts of the site – they started to come across a number of subterranean graves from across the abbey site.

One observer, the local Catholic priest, Dr. Milner wrote:

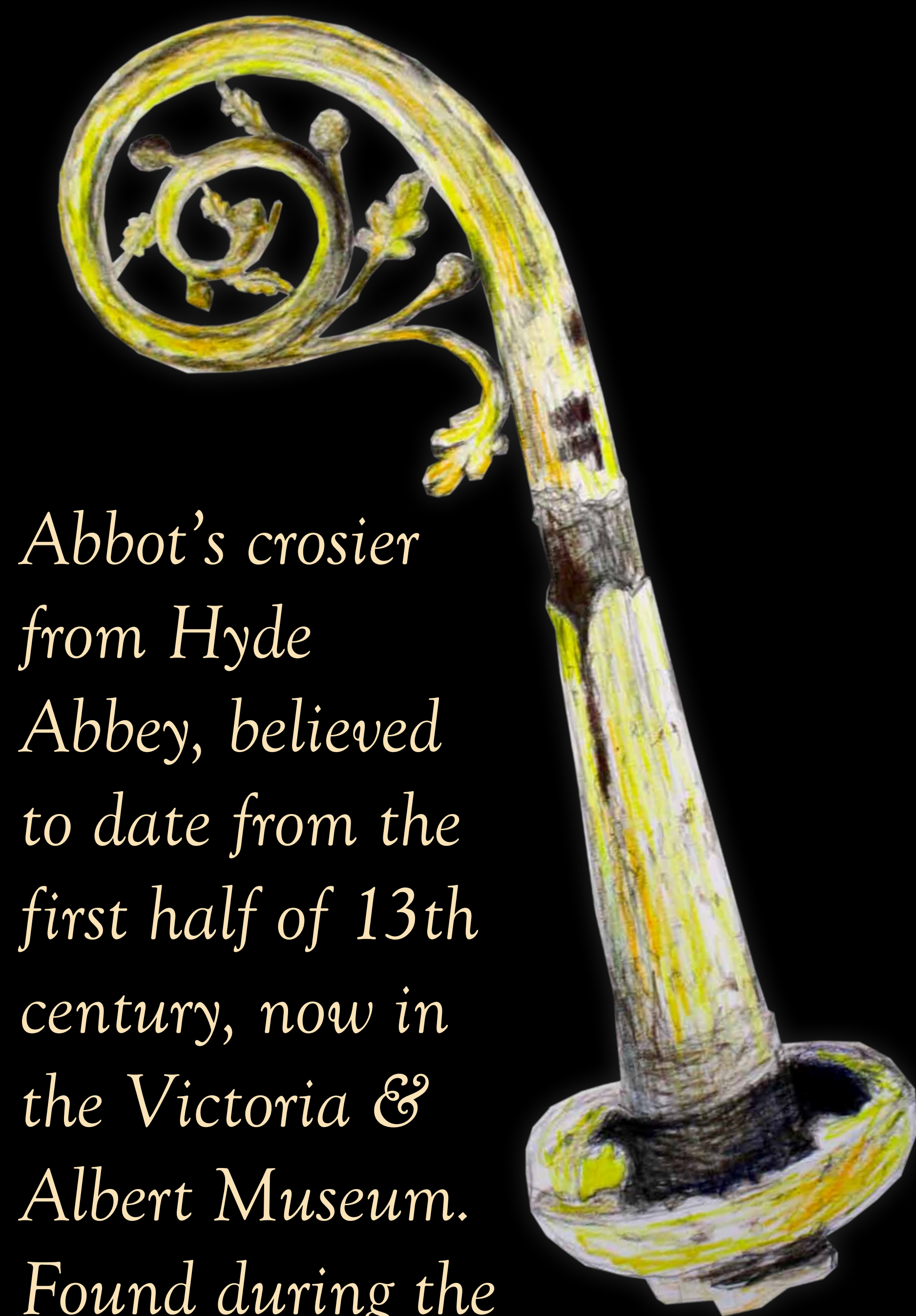
“Miscreants couch amidst the ashes of our Alfreds and Edwards..... In digging for the foundations of that mournful edifice [the bridewell] at almost every stroke of the mattock or spade some ancient sepulchre was violated, the venerable contents of which were treated with marked indignity.”

‘The bones thrown about’

The overseer of this horror was a man named Page (the Keeper of the bridewell). Ten years later Page was to provide a detailed account of what

happened in the area of the Royal graves (before the altar) to a visiting antiquary, Captain Henry Howard who drew up a rough plan of the east end of the church as a record of the lay-out. Subsequently Howard reported what he had been told:

“A great stone coffin was found, cased with lead both within and without, and containing some bones and remains of garnets. The lead, in its decayed state, sold for two guineas; the bones were thrown about and the stone coffin broken into pieces. There were also two other coffins and no more found in this part, which were also broke for the sake of the garden in which they lay, broken up and buried as low as the spring.”



Abbot's crozier from Hyde Abbey, believed to date from the first half of 13th century, now in the Victoria & Albert Museum. Found during the excavations of 1788.

This was the critical point when the Royal bones – along with many others – were wrenched from the relative security of their graves, disarticulated and exposed to the rough elements.

So by the end of 1788 the royal bones were probably smashed in part, scattered and reburied to the level of the water-table. But exactly where was not clear.

Two carved stone capitals, 12th century, probably from the cloisters of Hyde Abbey. Now on display in the church of St. Bartholomew, Hyde. Photos: Sophie Cunningham Dawe.

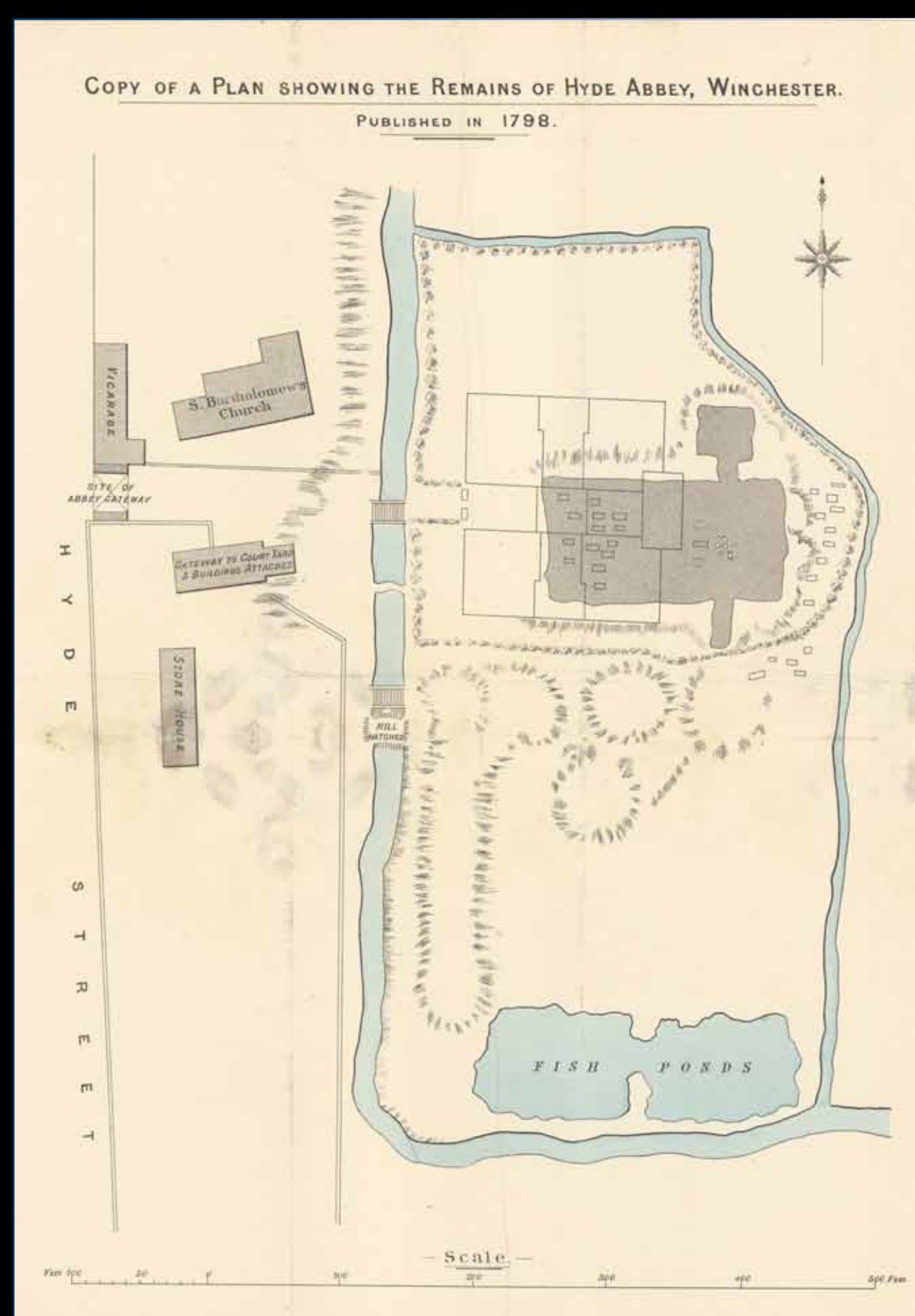


Window glass from Hyde Abbey recently found by Wessex Archaeology. Image: Winchester Museums.



Tracery work from Hyde Abbey, re-cycled into the north wall of the church of St. Bartholomew, Hyde. Photo: Sophie Cunningham Dawe.

1800-1866: THE AGE OF INDIGNATION



Sketch plan of the area of Hyde Abbey Church from ‘Enquiries etc. concerning the Tomb of King Alfred at Hyde Abbey’ by Henry Howard published in Archaeologia 1798.

A little later, in October 1825 the great writer and campaigner William Cobbett, visiting Winchester, wrote:

“How am I to describe what I felt when I saw in Hyde Meadow, a County Bridewell, standing on the very spot, where stood the Abbey, which was founded and endowed by Alfred, which contained the bones of that maker of the English name.”

In the first half of the 19th century understanding gradually spread of what had happened on the Hyde Abbey site. Many visitors to Winchester expressed their shock and indignation. Captain Howard was foremost amongst these as he wrote:

“You will lament with me the failure of my researches, and feel some share of the same indignation, when I inform you that the ashes of the great Alfred, after being scattered about by the hands of convicts, are now probably covered by a building erected for their confinement and punishment. And when you are told that this occurred so lately as the year 1788, and that no-one in the neighbourhood, led either by curiosity or veneration for his remains, attempted to discover or rescue them from this ignoble fate, your surprise will not, I think, be any less than my own.”

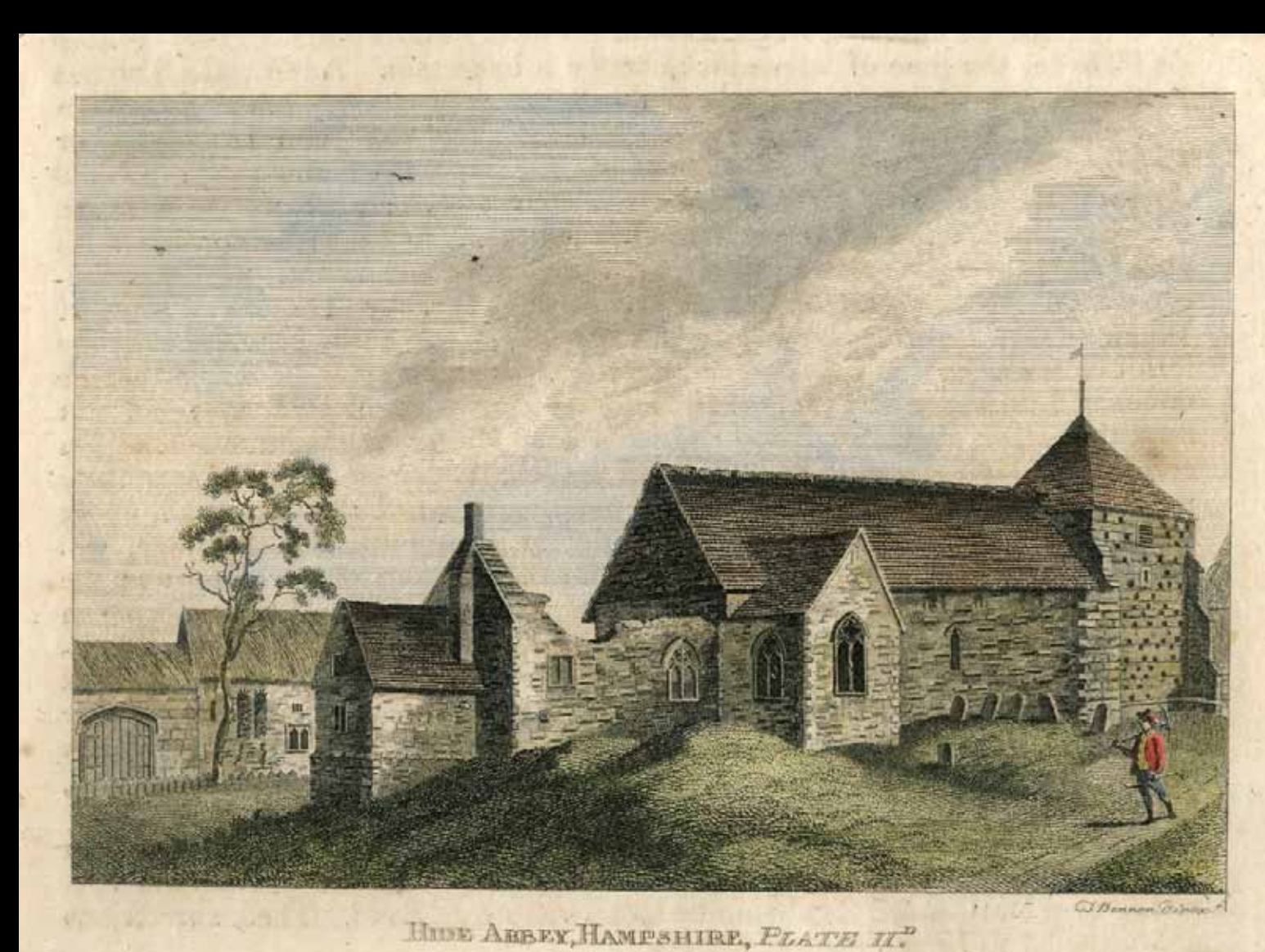
John Mellor arrives on the scene

In 1866 ‘The Chronicle and Chartulary of Hyde Abbey’ was published. This collected together a large number of ancient Anglo-Saxon texts. It generated a lot of interest and put Hyde Abbey and its link with the Royal House of Wessex back on the map.

One especially keen reader was a somewhat eccentric antiquarian, John Mellor, a ‘historian and strolling student’ who had also read Dr. Milner’s account of the disgraceful 1788 excavation and was inspired to

The bridewell, however, was not to last long. It was demolished in the late-1840s and once again the site of Hyde Abbey was turned over to rough land.

Twenty years later a literary event was to set off a train of events which culminated in the construction of the ‘Unmarked Grave’.



Illustrations from around 1800 of the church of St. Bartholomew with the east end in a state of neglect, and Hyde Gate and the Almoners Hall used for agricultural purposes.



venture into the murky ground of ‘searching for Alfred’.

His impact on the story create waves which are still felt today.

Arriving in Winchester in the Autumn of 1866 Mellor gained permission to explore the site of Hyde Abbey. Armed with a copy of the plan (above left) drawn up by Captain Howard, Mellor felt confident that he could rediscover the bones of the Royal House of Wessex and, as he put it, ‘gaze upon the skeleton of the much loved and venerable Saxon warrior, the bravest of England’s sons.’



View of Hyde Gate and Almoners’ Hall from the north, late 18th century taken from “An Historical Account of Winchester” by Charles Ball, 1818.

THE MELLOR EXCAVATIONS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE UNMARKED GRAVE

The last few months of 1866 and the beginning of 1867 marked a time of deep controversy in Winchester caused by the antics of John Mellor which cast an adverse shadow over subsequent investigations.

Mellor's made a 'best guess' as to where the altar area of the church lay and was successful in turning up a number of skeletal remains. These were put on display on the site and exposed to the shocked gaze of local worthies. Photographs were taken of the five impressive skulls which Mellor had discovered one of which, Mellor asserted, was Alfred's own.

Unfortunately Mellor then made a series of manifestly false claims about what he had found – including a silver sceptre – and compounded this by planting obviously fraudulent lead tablets purporting to be from the tenth century into the ground by way of authentication. Not surprisingly he was derided as a charlatan and there was extensive correspondence in the Hampshire Chronicle about his activities.

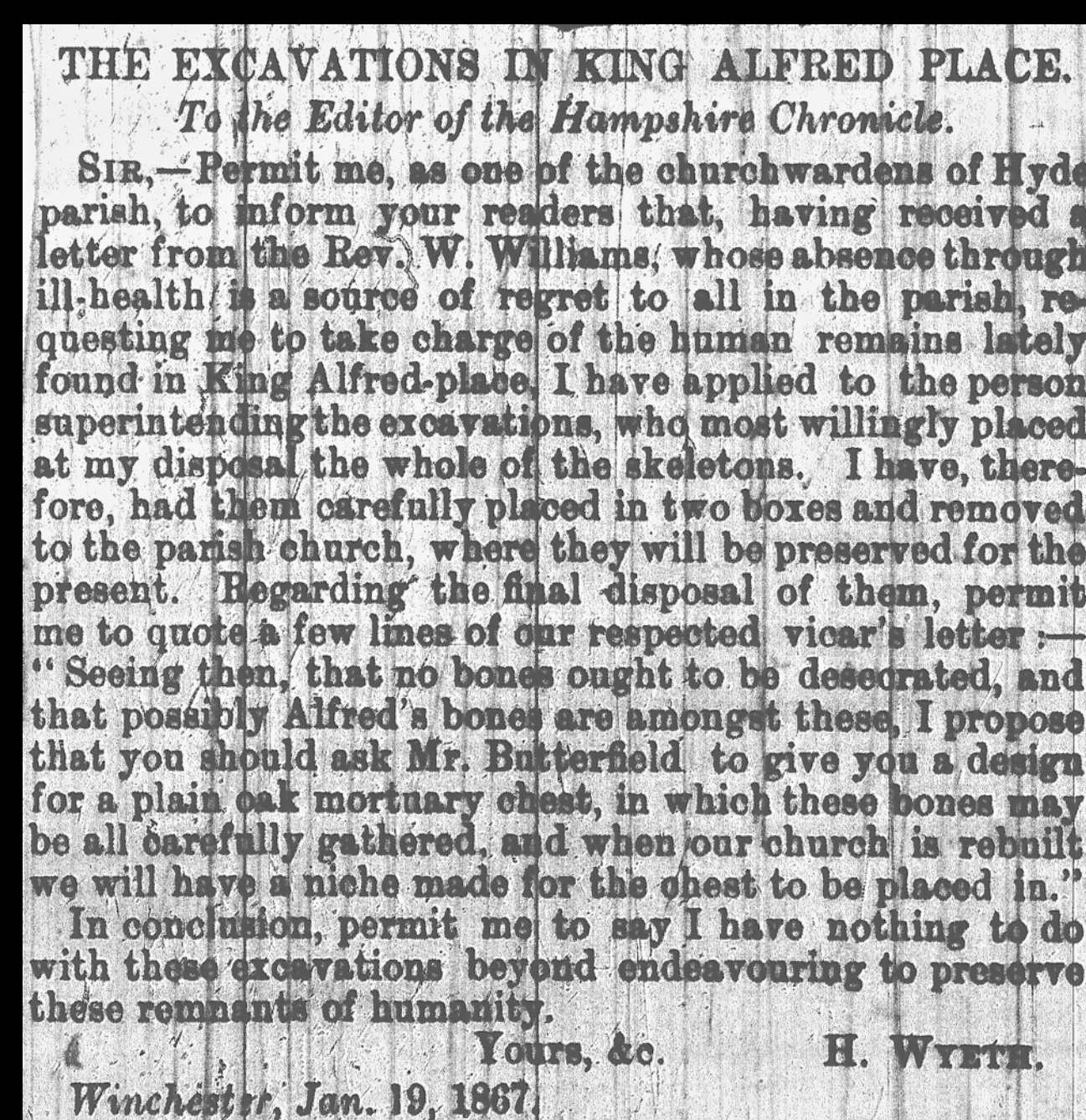
Bones for Ten Bob

Yet however foolish Mellor might have been there were some people, including the Revd. William Williams of St. Bartholomew Church, who were intrigued by the discoveries. They did not discount the possibility that they might indeed be those of Alfred and his family. As a result Hugh Wyeth, the churchwarden of St. Bartholomew's, was instructed to buy from Mellor the skeletal remains which he had found. The price paid was ten shillings.

A variety of grandiose proposals were made for the burial of the bones but in the end, due to their uncertain provenance, they were deposited in a brick-lined vault, under a ledger stone, adjacent to the east end of the church. The 'Unmarked Grave' was now to be a focus of debate and speculation for nigh on the next 150 years.



Photograph of the five skulls found by John Mellor in 1866 and claimed by him to be those of King Alfred and members of the Royal House of Wessex. These were subsequently deposited in the Unmarked Grave and reappeared when the grave was opened in March 2013. Source: Hampshire Archives and Local Studies



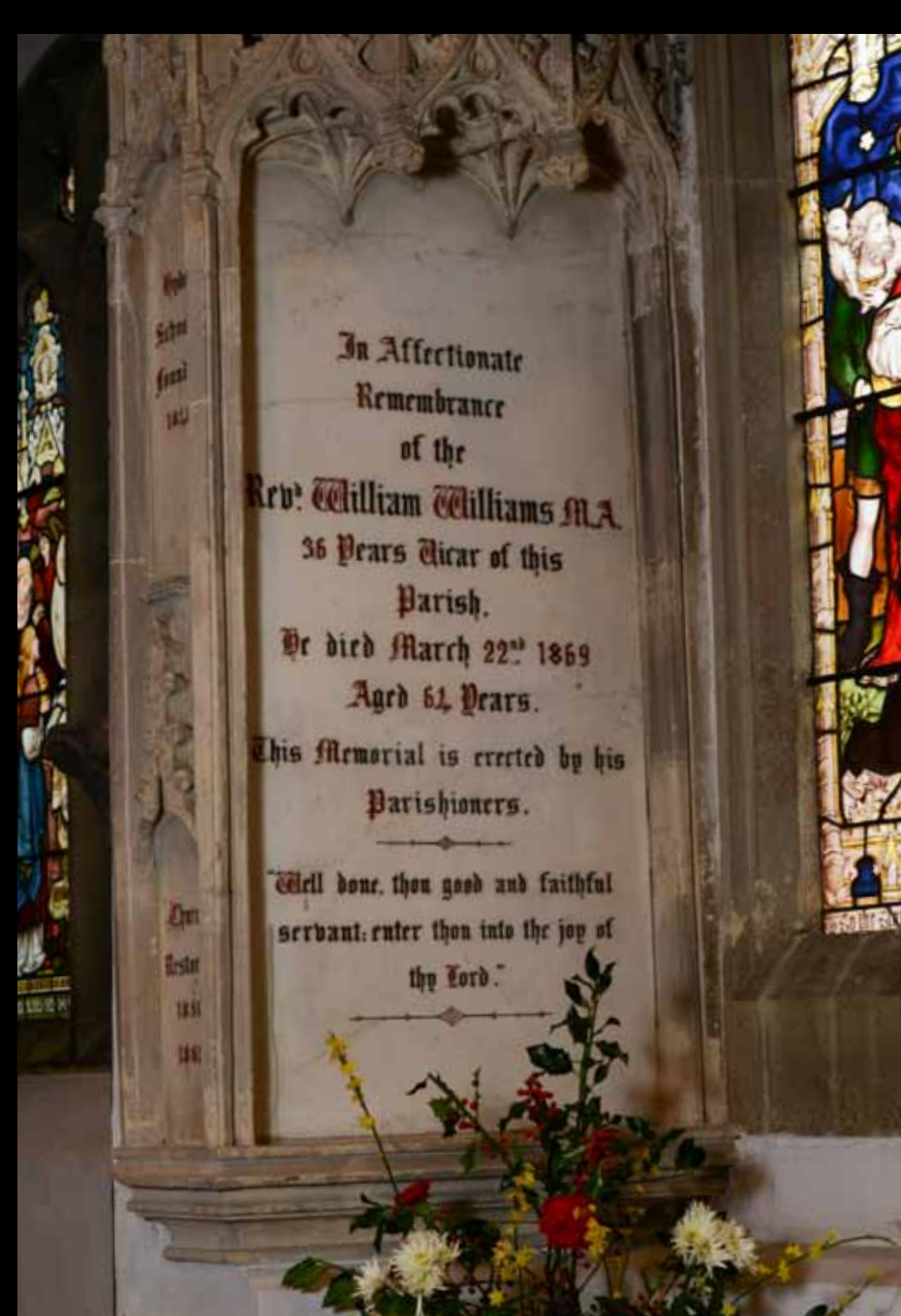
Part of the lively correspondence in the Hampshire Chronicle in January 1867 regarding John Mellor's excavations. Source: Hampshire Archives and Local Studies



Hyde Street looking North, 1903. Photo: W T Green. Winchester Museums.



Church of St. Bartholomew, Hyde from the south showing how it would have looked before the construction of the tower in 16th century from stones of Hyde Abbey. Photo: Rose Burns



Memorial to the Revd. William Williams, south wall of the church of St. Bartholomew, Hyde. Photo: Joe Low.



The Unmarked Grave built in 1867 in the graveyard of St. Bartholomew, Hyde on the instructions of the Revd. William Williams for the reburial of bones discovered by John Mellor. Photo: Joe Low.

A CENTURY OF SCEPTICISM

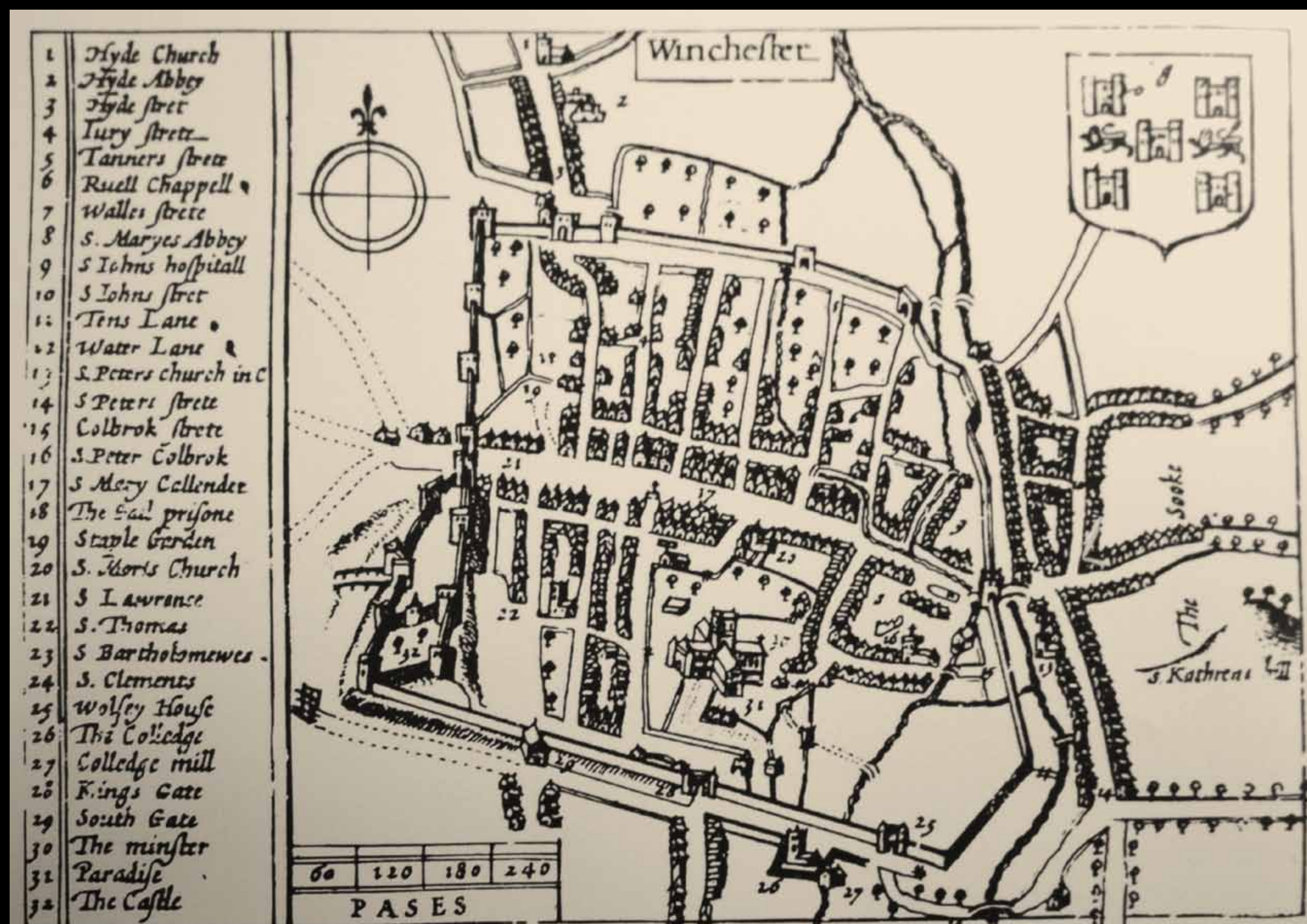
The storm of controversy brewed up John Mellor's showmanship gradually subsided. There were still many sceptics but, nonetheless, the fascination with the site of Hyde Abbey persisted.

The first major renewal of activity came in the 1890's. By this time public interest in King Alfred had soared on a wave of imperial idealism and, with the approach looming of the thousandth anniversary of his death (mistakenly to be believed to be 901 although actually it was 899), Winchester worthies decided to revisit the grave site. The key mover was Alfred Bowker, Lord Mayor of Winchester from 1897 to 1898, who was responsible for the installation of the statue of King Alfred in the Broadway and heavily involved in the 1901 Millennium celebrations for Alfred. Under his auspices in 1897 there was a fresh excavation in the area of Mellor's work and various smaller bones appear to have resurfaced and been reburied in the 'backfill'. Their significance was not, perhaps, fully understood.

Community archaeology and 'The Search for Alfred'

Between 1995 and 1999 a community project – 'The Search for Alfred' – was led by the Winchester Museum Service. This ranged extensively over the whole site of Hyde Abbey (not just the abbey church) and achieved significant results in clarifying details about the abbey buildings. There was also much excitement at the discovery of fine sculpted female head, probably a corbel, which highlighted once more the quality of the carving in the abbey.

When it came to an examination of the choir and altar area of the church, the excavators were able to get a better understanding of the possible location of the royal graves. Meanwhile, at the upper level, a female pelvis was found which proved to be of the late medieval period. But, as far as human remains were concerned, nothing else of significance was noted at the time.



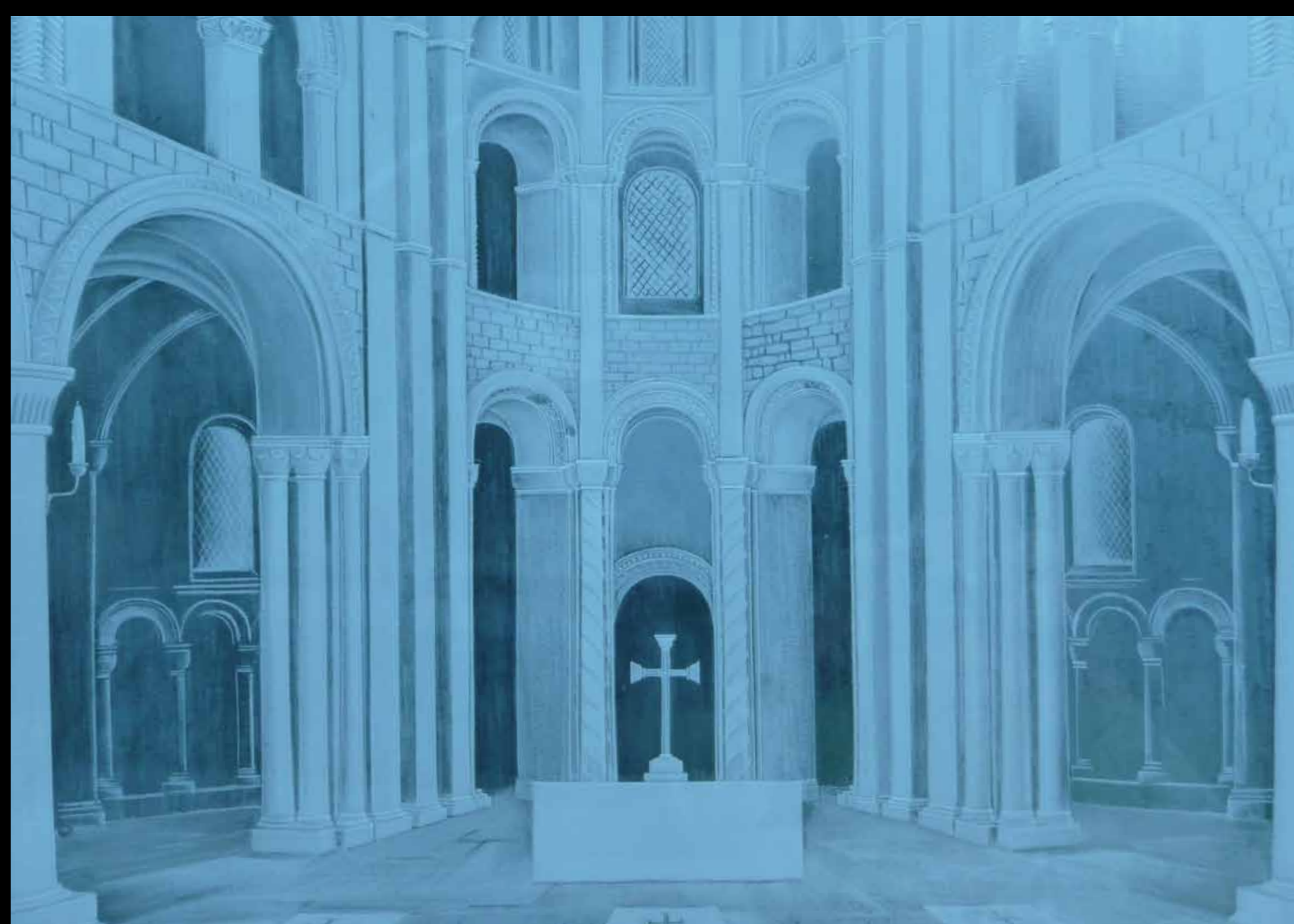
Eighteenth century map illustrating the suburb of Hyde and the site of Hyde Abbey and the church of St. Bartholomew. Source: Hampshire Archives and Local Studies.



Eighteenth century map illustrating the suburb of Hyde and the site of Hyde Abbey and the church of St. Bartholomew. Source: Hampshire Archives and Local Studies.



1999 Hyde Abbey Community Archaeology excavation. Photo: Winchester Museums.



A representation of the choir of the abbey church from the glass engraving by Tracey Sheppard on Hyde Abbey Garden. Photo: Sophie Cunningham Dawe

Artist Kate Dicker's painting of Hyde Abbey Garden from the Hyde900 exhibition, 'Re-imagining Treasures of Hyde Abbey', 2010. Image: Kate Dicker.



THE HYDE900 INVESTIGATION

2010-2014: SETTING UP

The year 2010 marked the nine hundredth anniversary of the establishment of Hyde Abbey and the arrival in Hyde of the bones of the Wessex Royal family of King Alfred the Great, his wife Alswitha and their son King Edward.

In order to mark the occasion a group of local residents set-up Hyde900 as a community-based charity to organize a wide series of events to celebrate the history of the area, its environment and the character of its residents. A range of activities followed including, notably, a re-enactment of the procession which brought the royal bones to Hyde. But there were also a number of exhibitions organized, books written and published, literary groups established, concerts held and social events set-up.

With so much focus on the legacy on the abbey, the question was raised whether advantage should be taken of the latest technology to examine the contents of the Unmarked Grave (now popularly regarded as containing the royal bones).

With the encouragement of the Revd. Cliff Bannister and the support of the University of Winchester, a Grave Investigation Group (made up of a doctor, a scientist, a lawyer, a journalist, a local studies librarian, an artist and an archaeologist) undertook the complicated tasks of persuading the Diocesan authorities to give approval for the exhumation and testing of the bones. Following two years of work and discussion with various partners – and against a background of renewed national interest in royal bones following the discovery of Richard III in Leicester – a ‘faculty petition’ (that is, a request for permission) was submitted to His Hon. Judge Christopher Clark, Q.C. the Chancellor of the Diocese of Winchester in connection with the bones in the Unmarked Grave.

*Plan of Hyde Abbey overlaid on the contemporary street layout.
Image: Dr Christine Grover*

In Spring 2013 approval was given for the Hyde900 project to go ahead and on Monday 25th March, in the presence of a BBC film crew, the grave was opened by a team from the University of Winchester led by osteo-archaeologist Dr. Katie Tucker. This revealed a large collection of bones including those which appeared to be those found by Mellor.

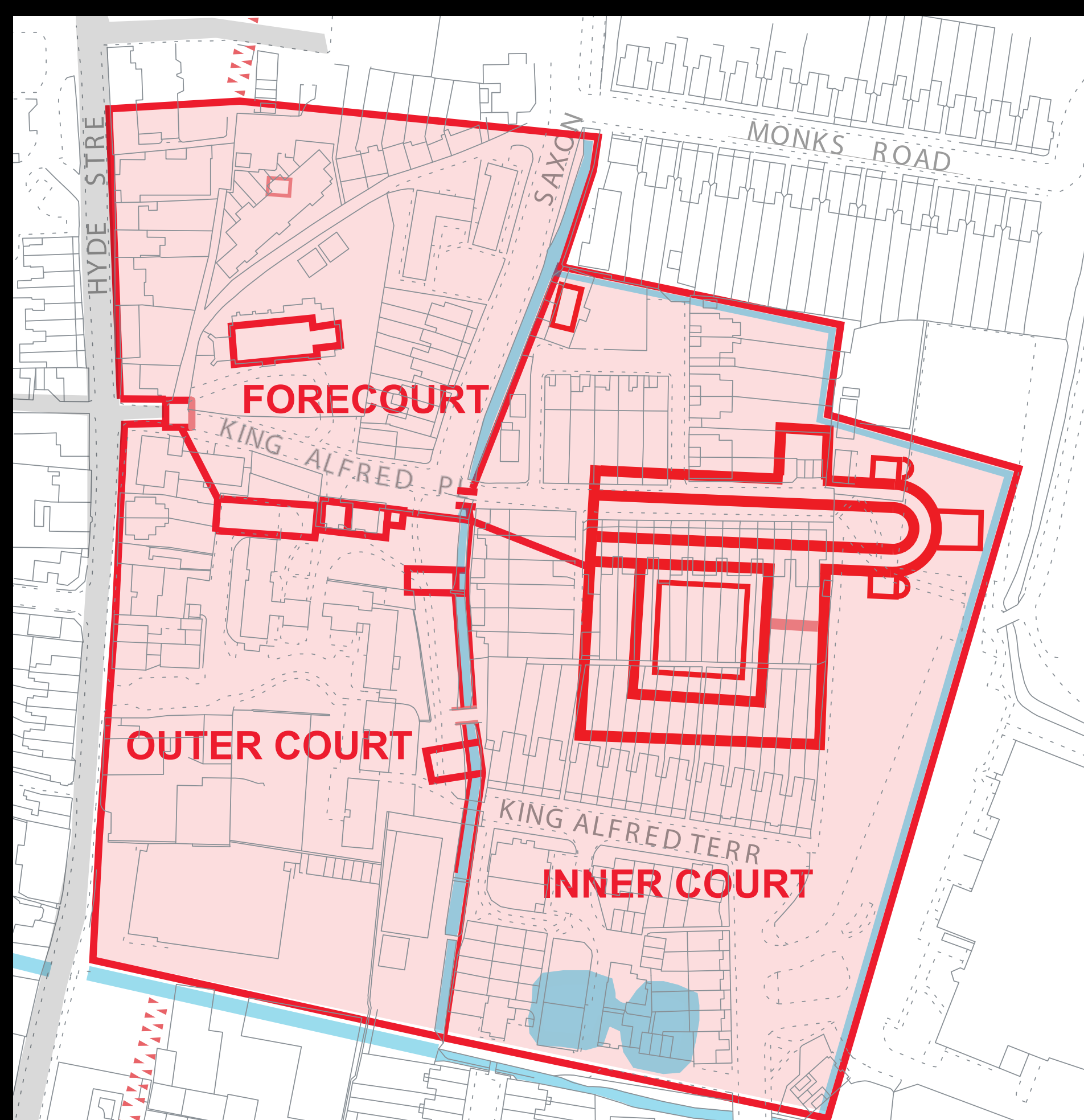
These were then taken to the University of Winchester and stored until August when permission was given by the Diocese for Dr. Tucker to clean and examine the bones and prepare them for radiocarbon dating by Dr. Tom Higham of the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit at the University of Oxford. What would the analysis reveal?



*Scene from the Hyde900 community procession in 2010, from the site of New Minster to Hyde, to mark the 900th anniversary of the arrival of the remains of Alfred the Great and his family in Hyde.
Photo: Joe Low.*



Prayers were led by the Bishop of Basingstoke before the opening of the Unmarked Grave. Photo: BBC/Hyde900.



THE HYDE900 INVESTIGATION 2010-2014: THE RESULTS

The results from Professor Higham at Oxford finally resolved the ‘Mystery of the Unmarked Grave’. It had contained bones from five individuals whose dates ranged from 1230 to 1500 and who displayed a wide variety of degenerative conditions suggesting that they might, possibly, have ended their lives in the abbey’s infirmary. In addition, there was one individual who dated from around the year 1100 indicating that he could have been amongst the first cohort of monks who moved from New Minster to Hyde Abbey. Collectively these findings represented a fascinating link with the history of the Abbey in medieval times.

The ‘pelvis revelation’

Meanwhile, however, Dr. Tucker also took the opportunity to re-examine some of the human remains which had been found (but never carbon dated) by the 1999 ‘Search for Alfred’ community dig. It was decided that a number of these bones should also be tested by Professor Higham.

This produced a startling discovery which established a firm connection with the Royal House of Wessex.

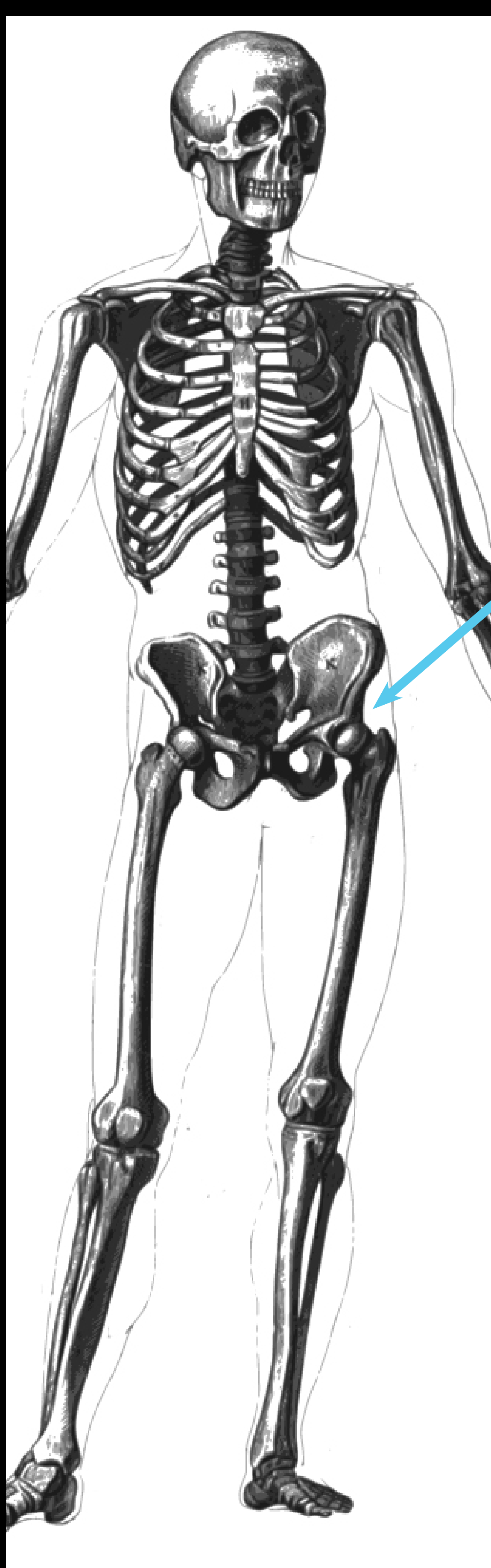
A pelvis was identified which dated from the end of the ninth century or the years of the tenth century. This made it definitely a ‘New Minster’ bone (the first ever found) and, given its context and age, there is a strong likelihood that it belonged to either King Alfred or King Edward.

The ‘Search for Alfred the Great’ was not over but a major clue had been found as evidence that his remains were not lost for ever – but, instead, were still waiting, possibly, to be revealed (albeit scattered and shattered) within the grounds of Hyde Abbey.

A new chapter has opened in the fascinating, posthumous story of King Alfred the Great.



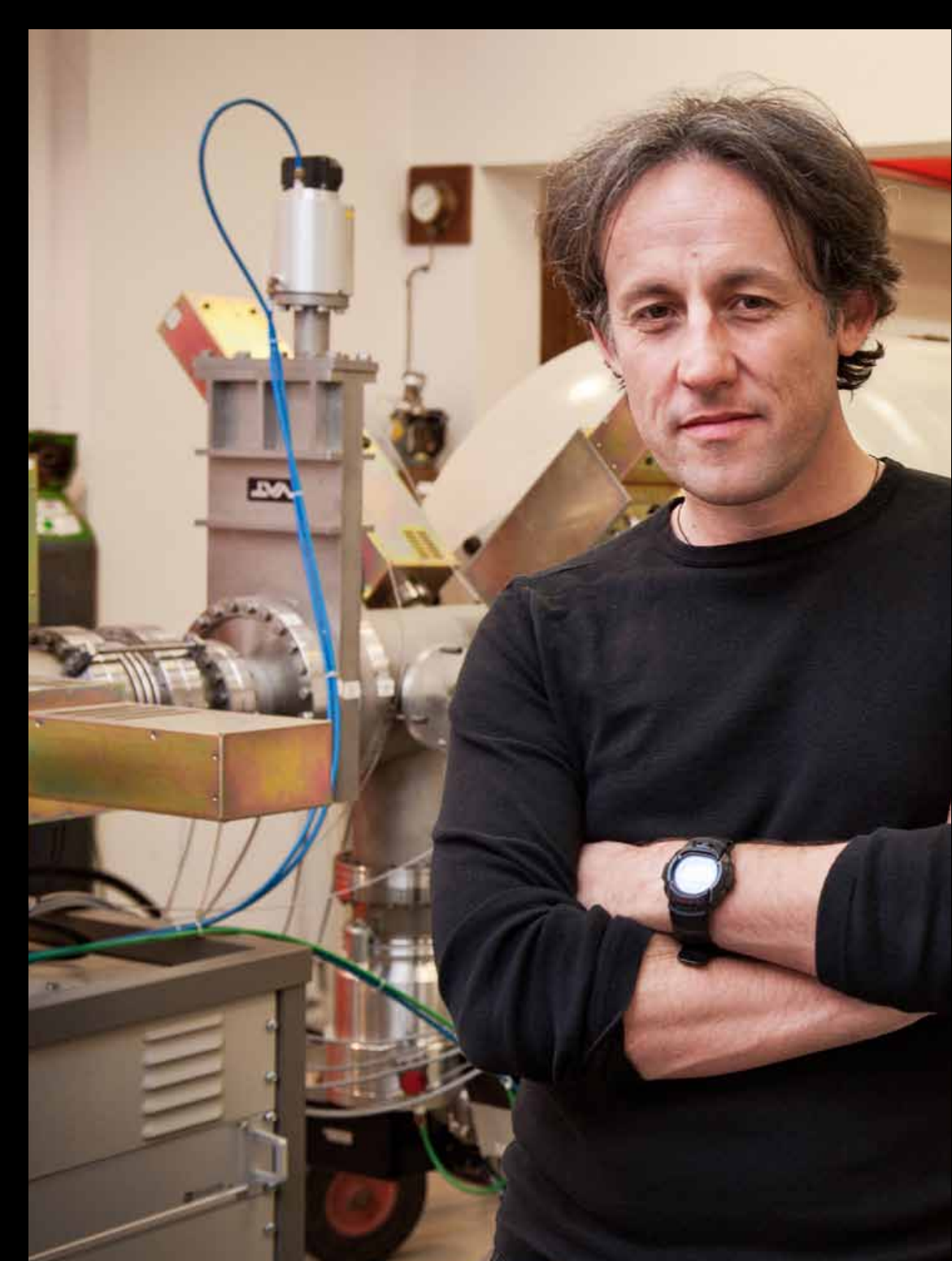
Representatives from the University of Winchester, the Diocese of Winchester and Hyde900 meet with the Revd. Canon Cliff Bannister at the Unmarked Grave to plan its excavation. Dr. Katie Tucker, who led the excavation, is second from right.



The ‘Power Pelvis’ dating from the late 9th to early 10th century found in the altar area of Hyde Abbey, making it very likely that it belonged to either King Alfred or King Edward.



Dr Katie Tucker examining the bones at the University of Winchester.



Professor Tom Higham with the radiocarbon accelerator at Oxford University.

WHY IS KING ALFRED REGARDED AS ‘GREAT’?

ALFRED THE GREAT was a pivotal and landmark figure in English history, proving to be a towering figure in both war and peace.

Born in 849, as the youngest son of King Ethelwulf, he was never expected to become king. But as his fathers and older brothers died – worn out in part by relentless battles – Alfred took on the mantle of national leader just as it seemed Wessex could fall to the invading Vikings.

Over the next 25 years Alfred turned the tide on the invaders, drew up secure borders with the Danelaw (the area occupied by the Vikings) and re-built the foundations of the Anglo-Saxon state, military and legal infrastructure. He also invested in re-invigorating scholarship and education as well as strengthening the Christian church. No wonder he was described by the Ealdorman Aethelweard as the ‘Unshakeable pillar of the western people.’

His principal achievements include

- defeating in battle and then turning the tide on the pagan Viking invaders who threatened to take-over all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms
- stabilizing Wessex and establishing it as a base from which his son and grandson could then progressively unite England
- re-invigorating learning in England following the depredations of the Vikings
- establishing a strong administration
- promoting the use of the English language for government and scholarship
- publishing a new law code
- weaving England back into the political and cultural network of western European
- establishing an effective system of Royal administration

In many respects an essential core of Englishness was consolidated under the leadership and influence of King Alfred. His influence can still be seen today – especially in a city like Winchester!

A WORTHY TITLE

During the years 871 and 899, at a critical point in English history, Alfred proved to be a ‘Great;

Military leader,

Statesman and administrator,

Law giver,

Educational pioneer

And

Patron Of The Church@

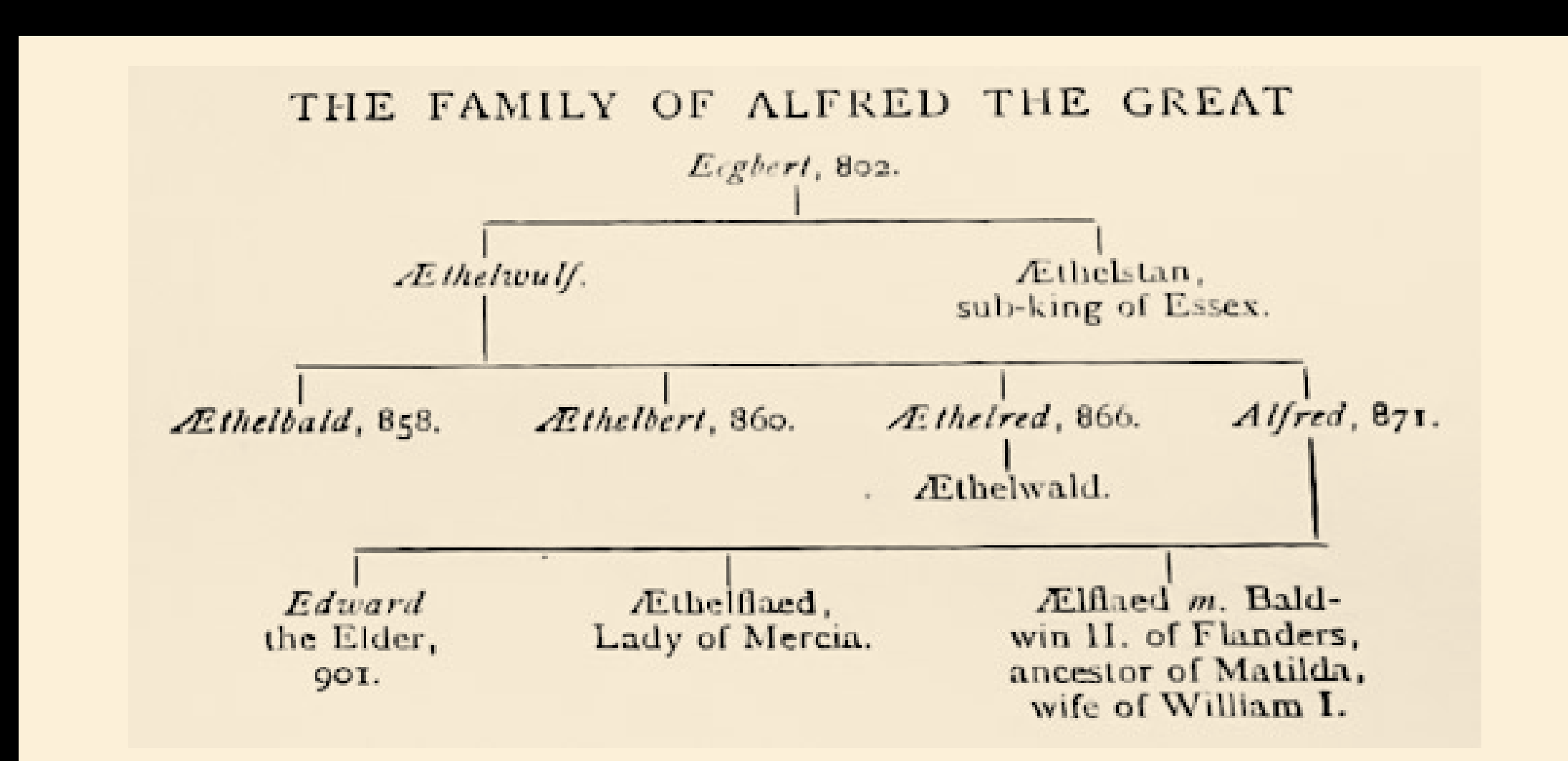
Victorian statue of Alfred, Winchester High Street. Photo: Joe Low



The ‘Alfred Jewel’, made of enamel, quartz and gold, is one of the most popular exhibits at the Ashmolean Museum. Dating from the reign of Alfred its Anglo Saxon inscription means “Alfred Ordered Me Made”. The jewel was once attached to a rod and used for pointing to words when reading from a book. Illustration: Sophie Cunningham Dawe.



A coin depicting King Alfred discovered at New Minster by Professor Martin Biddle during his 1960s excavations. Photo: Winchester Museums.



Acknowledgements

Hyde900 wishes to express its admiration and appreciation of the work undertaken by Dr. Katie Tucker together with the support offered by the University of Winchester.

It also wishes to thank Winchester Museums Service, the Diocese of Winchester, the Revd. Canon Cliff Bannister, the congregation of St. Bartholomew and the community of Hyde. It is also grateful for the support of Chris Granlund and the BBC.