

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.

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

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."

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.