

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.

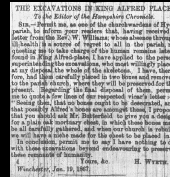
Bones for Ten Bob

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.