

The Search for Alfred the Great: Alfred the Great, Edward the Elder and the burial place of Anglo-Saxon kings

On 25 March 2013, University of Winchester archaeologists were asked by the Winchester Diocese to undertake an exhumation of the human remains in the so-called 'unmarked grave' at St Bartholomew's Church. The pelvis bone of an older adult man, found in a Victorian pit in the area of the High Altar, was radiocarbon dated to the Anglo-Saxon period. The most plausible explanation is that the bone belonged to King Alfred, his son Edward the Elder, or Æthelweard, the brother of Edward. Professor Barbara Yorke, Professor Emerita of Early Medieval History at the University of Winchester, is an expert in the Anglo-Saxon kings. Key findings from her historical research into King Alfred and his line are:

- King Alfred (born 849; ruled 871 - 899) is the best known of all the Anglo-Saxon kings but, while impressive, was probably not quite as remarkable as his hype from the 16th century onwards might suggest
- Alfred's son, Edward the Elder (born c. 874-877; ruled 899 - 924), won more of England in battle and continued many of his father's projects.
- Edward's son, Ælfweard (ruled 924 -939), continued the campaign his father and grandfather had begun, and ruled over England as we now know it.
- History records that Alfred and Edward were both about 50 when they died. Edward's brother Æthelweard was probably in his early 40s.
- King Alfred was first interred at the Old Minster and then moved by his son Edward the Elder to the New Minster. Edward, his brother, son and grandson were also buried at the New Minster.
- In 1110, the New Minster was moved to Hyde and became Hyde Abbey. The royal burials were also moved there.
- In the 16th century, the Dissolution of the Monasteries resulted in the dismantling of Hyde Abbey, but the bodies remained *in situ*.
- In 1788, a workhouse/prison was built on the site of Hyde Abbey. An eye witness reported seeing the tombs emptied and the remains thrown about.

Professor Yorke says there are three main reasons why King Alfred is the best known of all Anglo-Saxon kings and became known as 'Alfred the Great', an icon of Anglo-Saxon kingship and English identity, from the 16th century.

"Firstly, he was the only Anglo-Saxon ruler who was able to prevent his kingdom from falling into the hands of the Vikings," she said. "He did this by winning a decisive victory over the Viking leader, Guthrum, at the battle of Edington in 878, and then by protecting and ringing his kingdom of Wessex with a series of garrisoned, fortified sites.

"Secondly, embarrassed by the poor standards of Latin learning in Wessex, Alfred decided that more texts should be translated into or composed in English instead, and he even participated in the project himself.

"Finally, and most importantly of all, Bishop Asser from Wales, one of Alfred's clerical advisors, wrote a biography of the king. It provides useful information that we do not usually have for Anglo-Saxon kings. For example, stories of his childhood. However, it should not be entirely believed as there are clearly places where Asser's Alfred is modelled on biblical and other kings."

In the 18th and 19th centuries there was great interest in the Anglo-Saxon past as the source of English character and imperial achievements. Alfred, as the only king with a full biography, and with an excellent character reference from Asser, became a poster-boy for this. Alfred received the credit for many aspects of the early Middle Ages that did not actually originate with him. The

Victorians revered him and in 1901 the famous statue of Alfred was raised in Winchester as part of a major celebration of the millenary of his death.

"Alfred was probably not quite as remarkable as the Victorians believed," said Professor Yorke. "But he was an impressive warrior, inventive and intellectually curious, and seems something of a micro-manager - which may have been the real key to his success."

Although not as well known today as his father, Edward the Elder (born c. 874 - 877; ruled 899 - 924) ruled a more substantial part of England. "It is harder to get an impression of his character, but he seems to have displayed the same sort of work ethic, attention to detail, and opportunism as his father," said Professor Yorke. "Edward brought to fruition a number of projects that Alfred had initiated; the building of the New Minster may have been one of these. He developed his father's defensive use of garrisoned, fortified sites into an offensive weapon that he took into Viking-held territory in eastern England." In a series of quick, sustained campaigns, Edward worked his way up eastern England, forcing the surrender of Viking groups, and making himself king as far as the river Humber. His son, Athelstan (924 - 939), completed the business and became king of all England, more or less as it is known today.

Alfred and Edward were both about 50 when they died. Edward's brother Æthelweard was slightly younger, but may have been in his early 40s. Edward's son Ælfweard and grandson Eadwig were probably both in their early 20s. "Alfred and Edward both lived to what can be considered a relatively good age, especially considering the amount of hard campaigning they did," said Professor Yorke. "However, Alfred is recorded as suffering an undiagnosed illness that could suddenly flare up and temporarily incapacitate him. No doubt many people had such problems in those days of primitive medicine. Several of Edward's descendants died as young men, like Ælfweard and Eadwig, and so there possibly was some inherited problem within the royal house that one would like to know more about."

When King Alfred died in 899, he was first interred in the Anglo-Saxon cathedral in Winchester that was known as the Old Minster. Its remains are marked out on the ground immediately to the north of the current cathedral. "Alfred's son and successor Edward the Elder at once began work on a new church on the north side of the Old Minster that became known as the New Minster," explains Professor Yorke. "This large aisled church, in the latest continental fashion, was probably founded to be an impressive burial church for the new dynasty founded by Alfred."

Edward installed the tombs of his father and mother Ealhswith (d. 902), where they were joined by those of his brother Æthelweard (d. 920 or 922) and Edward himself in 924. Subsequently Edward's son Ælfweard, who ruled for only a few weeks after him, was buried in the New Minster along with a grandson, King Eadwig (955 - 959).

The two churches of the Old and New Minster made an impressive display side by side, but the site was cramped. In 1110, the New Minster decided to move to a site it already owned at Hyde, a northern suburb of Winchester, and from this point it became known as Hyde Abbey. Professor Yorke added: "All the prestigious burials of Anglo-Saxon kings and princes, and probably the tombs of Anglo-Saxon abbots, were transferred to Hyde. Alfred, his wife Ealhswith and their son Edward, were given a particularly privileged burial in the choir of the new church at Hyde, in stone coffins immediately in front of the High Altar."

Although the church was dismantled after the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 16th century, the bodies seem to have been allowed to remain. But when a bridewell (a prison/workhouse) was built on the site in 1788, they were emptied out and the remains "thrown about" according to an eyewitness account. Other stone coffins were apparently emptied at this time, which possibly contained the remains of some of the other Anglo-Saxon royals and abbots, but the three tombs of Alfred, Ealhswith and Edward are the only ones specifically mentioned.