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ALFRED’S WINCHESTER

Part One

In folk memory Alfred is inextricably linked with Winchester. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle has its own way of putting it: “This year, 901, died Alfred, the son of Aethelwulf, six nights before the Mass of All Saints. He was king over all the English nation, except that part that was under the power of the Danes. He held the government one year and a half less than thirty winters. Then prince Aethelwald took to the government.”

Winchester Tourism Office produced a leaflet, which began, “On your journey Alfred will be your constant companion, from his famous statue in the Broadway, around the walls he repaired to keep the Danes at bay, through the streets which he laid out in the 9th century, and to his final resting place at Hyde.” Of those four Alfredian attractions the statue is 19th century; and the walls largely medieval; but the street plan was certainly known by Alfred and walked by him, and the Old Minster dates from the 7th century. Alfred gave the building instructions for the New Minster but it was completed by his son Edward the Elder. This New Minster was located alongside the Old Minster, but relocated in 1110 when the church was moved to the northern suburb of Hyde. It is always difficult to imagine the relocation of a minster, but the story is there to prove it.

So we go to Hyde for Alfred’s relocated New Minster, and we use its new name, Hyde Abbey. In 1863 John Mellor excavated the site of Hyde Abbey and claimed to have found King Alfred’s bones. Few records were kept and considerable doubt exists over the find. The bones were reburied in St Bartholomew’s churchyard, outside the east wall of the church, marked by a stone slab with a simple incised cross. The ground plan of Hyde Abbey Church has now been imaginatively re-created, as a garden near the Leisure Centre, making it very easy to envisage the great edifice that it originally was.

There was another great Church in Winchester in the 9th century. This was a convent of Benedictine nuns and was dedicated to Saint Mary and founded by Alfred’s wife Alswitha. The buildings stretched from the present Abbey Gardens to the wall of the Bishop’s palace on one side and the City Mill on the other.

As you can imagine, ideas abound of what historical facts are true about Alfred and Winchester, and those that are fabricated for a variety of reasons. Contemporary historians seem to thrive on overturning long-held beliefs, stories and legends from the past. That’s hardly surprising and can be quite invigorating. History is always on the move, and is a sort of living art form: one of the most recent books on Alfred, by

Alfred Smyth, energetically questions the veracity of quite a lot of the treasured memories and stories of Alfred. Tackling history in any one century is quite different from tackling history in any other. It can be very bracing to reconfigure history. How we see and read history is very much conditioned by who we are, and what we want to know and feel.

As recently as 1995, there was an academic argument as to who was responsible for the creation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Some thought that Alfred had a hand in it, some definitely thought he didn't. The historian Frank Stenton writing in the 1940s, and Alfred Smyth in the 1990s, differed over the depth of connection Alfred really had with Winchester. Smyth wrote: “To say that Alfred is buried in Winchester is one thing, but to know that he actually chose to be buried there is quite another,” thus suggesting that Alfred did not necessarily hold undying affection for Winchester alone.

However, Smyth goes on to say, “Alfred was buried first in the Old Minster in Winchester and his body was later moved for reinterment in the New Minster, or Hyde Abbey. In his Will he left 50 pounds ‘to the church in which I shall rest’. Alfred's generous burial gift to Winchester amounted to no less than half the legacy in coin which he bequeathed to his wife and to each of his daughters.”

Edward, Alfred's son, completed the New Minster at Winchester as one of the earliest acts of his reign. Edward was surely sustaining a commitment to a church which had earned the special favour of his father. Alfred's queen, Alswitha, who died only three or four years after Alfred, was also buried in Winchester. Their son King Edward, and their grandson Alfwearð were both buried in Winchester in 924. Winchester, which acquired three major monastic centres, was clearly the holiest place for the earliest generations of the Alfredian house.

David [Scott] had it in mind to accompany this series on Alfred, with music of the period: easier said than done! There's not a great deal of music from the early medieval period and we thought we were beaten until Andrew Lumsden, director of music at the Cathedral, mentioned the 10th-century chant, the Winchester Troper, and recommended the excellent recording from *Schola Gregoriana of Cambridge*, which you have heard during this series.

The word ‘Troper’ describes the way in which extra verses – or ‘tropes’ – were added to plainchant in order to fill out, and in a sense add a commentary, to the liturgical text for a special occasion. The Winchester Troper represents what you might have heard at the Old Minster if you had come to Mass on Christmas Day with the young Alfred.

Almost every part of this Christmas Mass has been embellished with these added verses which make the celebration especially magnificent for all who came to worship. Listen and you will hear the infectious enthusiasm that adding these tropes generates in, for example, the Sanctus: Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of Sabaoth ...

“Holy

*Admirable splendour and light inaccessible
God the Father*

Holy

The Word that in the beginning was with God

Holy Lord

The Spirit, the Paraclete, proceeding from both

God of Sabaoth

Heaven and earth are full of thy glory

Hosanna in the highest

*To whom every knee is bowed
And every tongue proclaims, saying*

**Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord
Hosanna in the highest.”**

This is the English translation, but the original language of the Troper is interesting too – the sharp-of-hearing will have realised that there is both Latin and Greek in some tropes – which Mary Berry, in the CD cover note explains, dates back to Jerusalem in the 4th century. So we are talking about really very ancient music. It is perhaps surprising that it is so easy on the ear!

The Winchester Troper has both borrowed sections, taken from around Europe, as well as ones which are thought to be unique to Winchester – possibly the work of the Cantor of the day, Wulfstan.

The details of the CD you have been listening to are available on the website and are in the series’ card, but before we move on to part two of today’s talk, here is another taste of the Troper, that rather jubilant Sanctus that we have just been speaking about: *Holy, Holy, Holy Lord ...*

Music: Sanctus

Part Two

Fascinating though it might be to explore our particular historical labyrinth about how fond Alfred was of Winchester, there certainly was a very strong bond between Alfred and Winchester’s religious house known as the Nunnaminster, otherwise known as the Nunnery of St Mary. There is a reference to it in a work by William of Malmesbury in his account of the bishops of Winchester. Telling of the efforts of the 10th-century Bishop Athelwold to further the progress of religion, William of Malmesbury says that on the spot where Athelwold placed the nunnery, “...there had been before the Bishop’s day a ‘little monastery’ .” It was believed to have been founded by King Alfred or by his queen Alswitha, or perhaps by the combined desire of the king and queen, about the end of the 9th century, and continued as a religious house until the Reformation.

There is a rather wonderful description from the 10th century concerning the problem of the crowding of large ecclesiastical and monastic buildings in a small area in Winchester. “Eadger the king commanded that the monasteries in Winchester should be separated by a space, after he, by God’s grace turned the monasteries to monkish life, and commanded it to be borne in mind that none of the monasteries therewithin should have strife with the others on account of that space; but if the property of one monastery lay within the space assigned to another monastery, the principal of the monastery which takes to that place should acquire the property of the other monastery for such consideration as should be acceptable to the convent which owned the property.”

If you think that sounds complicated, you should read on in the small print as to the exact demarcations of the land and the mills and the water-courses involved.

Here we offer you three glimpses through the windows of the Nunnaminster – giving you an idea of the sort of activities in which these 10th-century women were involved:

First, we find the sisters busy at their sewing. The Nunnaminster had a very wide reputation for the beauty and skill of its needlework. It is quite possible that this community of nuns helped in the making of the Bayeux Tapestry, as related in a recent novel, ‘Odo’s Hanging’, by Peter Benson. The claim in the book is that Bishop Odo, who commissioned the hanging, or the Bayeux tapestry as we call it, recommended Turot the designer to go to Winchester and let the nuns of the Nunnaminster work the design into a tapestry, with their famous, skilful needlework. There is also a strong connection between the Nunnaminster’s needlework and the remarkable work of St Cuthbert’s ecclesiastical vestments, of

which the stole and the maniple are to be seen on permanent display in the Durham Cathedral Treasury.

Second, and of quite a different order, is the story of one of the nuns of the Nunnaminster, the wonderful Edburga, who was Alfred’s granddaughter. She joined the community in Winchester, and William of Malmesbury wrote of her spiritual attributes that “her humility grew as she grew, so much so that at night she would steal among the socks of all the nuns, then give the socks a thorough wash, anoint them, and put them back on their beds”.

The third window shows the nuns at their prayers. We have to assume that their prayer life was rich and fruitful, as exemplified in the collection which goes under the name of *The Nunnaminster Prayers*. The consensus now on the origin of these prayers is that they were written, not in the first place in Winchester, but in the Mercian area, possibly in Lichfield. However the 9th-century copy of the prayers held in the British Library is definitely connected with the Nunnaminster in Winchester: it contains both the prayers and a map of the area that the Nunnaminster covered in the city.

The Nunnaminster prayers centre on two main themes, the offering of ourselves body and soul to God; and the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, by which he saves us in our frailty. A prayer on each of those subjects, written by the Winchester nuns, follows:

On Christ’s Clothes

O protector God
and defender of my life,
you would never discard the garments
of your goodness.
You allowed your perfect body
to be shamefully stripped
so that the nakedness of the first man
could be redeemed.
I thank you and,
by your being stripped,
loose me I pray
from the misery of sin,
and so clothe me
that at the entrance to the Kingdom
I shall not be naked,
but clothed with the wedding garment
of your life-giving goodness.

I pray this through the loving mercies
of my Lord Jesus Christ: Amen.

On the Closed Eyes

Omnipotent, eternal God
light of light and source of all our seeing,
who by your holy death
have closed the eyes
by which you saw the heavenly secrets,
and the glorious face of your exalted Father.
I give you thanks and plead with all piety
that in whatever way my soul suffers
by its own light,
you will grant me forgiveness
by the honour of your holy sight,
Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As a significant site in Winchester the Nunnaminster is all but gone, save for some tombs and foundations of pillars still to be seen between Abbey Gardens and the Guildhall, but its history and the sweet odour of its faith remain in its prayers, in its faith, and in the beauty of its needlework.

We end with the theme of water. Coming to Winchester for the first time, visitors may notice many things, but it's the surprise discovery of streams and rivers that often catches the eye. Alfred would have seen almost the same streams as we do now, and in this translation that he made of a section of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* you can't help feeling that he enjoyed the theme of water as it bubbles up through this writing of Gregory's. The water is an image of God's grace.

“These are now the waters, which the God of hosts promised as a solace to us earth-dwellers. He said that he wished in the world, ever-living waters to flow from the hearts of those who believed in Him, beneath the sky. There is little doubt that the source of the waters is the kingdom of heaven, that is, the Holy Spirit, from which the saints drew, like all those who obey God, and direct it through the minds of people, variously. Some make a dam for the water, the stream of wisdom, within their minds; hold it with their lips so that it doesn't flow out to no purpose. But the well remains in the person's heart, by the grace of God, deep and still. Draw water now to drink, since the Lord has granted that the holy ones should direct to your doors the Lord's stream. Let him now fill his vessel who has brought to the stream a watertight pitcher, and let them return and return ... If anyone here has brought to this spring a leaky bucket, let him repair it carefully, lest he spill the clearest of waters, or lose the water of life.”

When I [David Scott] first came to Winchester, the meadows, and the river flowing under the bridges, made me think of Gregory’s writing translated as it is by Alfred, and I made this out of it:

A Priest in a New Parish

The river draws me, always, running
like fingers through my hair. It leaps out
unexpectedly; makes itself available
just to be heard: its voice over chalk.
Sunday afternoons catch the current
with bits of bread for ducks to scoop.
The swans live in a world of their own.
This same Saxon riddle of water has
been here since flint was first
put next to brick, and kings
were shut in dusty boxes, and books
went to seed along the shelves.
Rivers are largely why any of us are
anywhere in particular. They choose us.
Struggling to settle in, to find my voice,
my place, I listen to this water’s
mute capacity to sing.

(from David Scott, **Selected Poems**, Bloodaxe Books)

Our final taste of the Troper, to end this week’s talk, will be the last track of the CD, a setting of Psalm 94, *Come let us sing joyfully to the Lord, let us acclaim the rock of our salvation ...*

Music: Invitatory: Christus natus est nobis (Ps. 94)

Music from *Christmas in Royal Anglo-Saxon Winchester: 10th-century Chant from the Winchester Troper*

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