

King Alfred the Great bones believed to be in box found in museum

The remains could be that of King Alfred the Great or his son Edward the Elder, scientists say



Alfred the Great, King of Wessex (871-899) and his statue in Winchester Photo: Alamy

By Nick Collins

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The first remains of King Alfred the Great may have been found at last after tests on a pelvic bone unearthed in Winchester revealed it belonged to either the Anglo-Saxon King or his son Edward.

But after a high-profile excavation of an unmarked grave where the Anglo-Saxon King was believed to be buried, the location of the bone was much more mundane - a storage box in the bowels of a local museum.

Archaeologists from the University of Winchester had initially analysed six skeletons excavated from a grave at St Bartholomew's Church, the historic site of Hyde Abbey, last March.

They believed that the remains belonged to Alfred and other members of his family, whose were

known to have been interred at Hyde Abbey centuries after their death.

But when each skeleton was found to date from the 1300s - several hundred years after the death of Alfred in 899 - the researchers turned to a set of remains found in the late 1990s during a previous excavation of the same site.

In a dusty storage box filled with animal remains at Winchester's City Museum they found a fragment of human pelvic bone, including the right hip joint, which had been buried beneath the historic site of the high altar in 1999 but had never been examined.

Scientific analysis of the bone revealed it had belonged to a man aged 26-45, who died between 895 and 1017 AD - meaning it could conceivably belong either to Alfred or his son and successor Edward.

Although no DNA tests have been carried out, the bone is almost certainly from a member of the King's family because it predates Hyde Abbey itself, experts said.

Alfred, who died in 899, was initially buried at Winchester's old minster but was subsequently moved to another church to be alongside his wife and children, and all were later reinterred at Hyde Abbey after it was consecrated in 1110.

Dr Katie Tucker, who led the excavation, said: "The simplest explanation, given there was no Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Hyde Abbey, is that this bone comes from one of the members of the West Saxon royal family brought to the site.

"Given the age at death of the individual, and the probable male identity, the plausible candidates are King Alfred, King Edward the Elder, or the brother of King Edward, Aethelweard. All were buried in the Abbey.

"However, historical evidence indicates that only the coffins of Alfred and Edward were at the site of the High Altar. The discovery of the bone in a pit dug into the graves in front of the High Altar makes it far more likely that it comes from either Alfred or Edward."

Members of a local historical society, who were behind the search for the King's remains, are now calling for further excavations of the Hyde Abbey site in the hope that more bones may be uncovered.

The fact that only the pelvis has been found is likely the fault of 18th Century convicts, who disturbed a number of graves while building a prison, they said.

Edward Fennell, founder of the Hyde900 group, explained: "Almost certainly the royal graves were found in 1788 when they were building a prison on the site. The graves were destroyed and the bones were thrown around and buried hither and thither. That is why finding a random bone is not surprising - they were thrown around a significant part of the site."

King Alfred the Great is remembered as the medieval King who protected southern England from the Vikings, as well as introducing a host of social and educational reforms.

His son Edward later reclaimed vast swathes of land as he forced the Danes back into a corner of north-eastern England, constructing a series of forts as he went.

Dr Nick Thorpe, head of the department of archaeology at the University of Winchester, said he was "extremely excited" to be able to "plausibly link this human bone to one of these two crucial figures in English history.

Alfred or Edward has become the second English King to be unearthed in the space of two years, after the remains of Richard III were identified beneath a council car park in Leicester in 2012.

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