

From a Cloister Arch to Medieval Glass and Some China Eggs!

Intro: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts as well as enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Emily: Welcome to this week's episode of Hampshire HistBites where we are talking all about community project Hyde 900, a group that was originally set up to mark the 900th anniversary of the foundation of Hyde Abbey, the burial place of King Alfred the Great. Today's guest is the project's current trustee and community dig organiser, David Sperling.

Alongside his role with Hyde 900, David is also a board member and trustee of Hampshire Archives Trust and committee member of WARG, the Society for Winchester archeology and local history.

Hello, thank you for talking to us today. Can you please tell us a little bit about yourself?

David: Yes, with pleasure Emily. I was born in Brighton, graduated in physics and my first job was actually designing guided missiles, I did that for a couple of years, and I decided I really wanted to play on a wider scene and went to do, back in Brighton, a post-graduate management course. I've certainly enjoyed that a lot more than physics and I actually joined Esso in the chemical side, which was in London, And, luckily with time when I was about to get married to my wife, Trish, the company moved to Southampton. So we were able to move and find a place in Headbourne Worthy, where we live now, just outside of Winchester. We lived there for over 50 years. We had four children and they've flown the nest naturally enough, but actually live within 50 miles of us, which is very nice.

Emily: Fantastic. have you got any other interesting tidbits of trivia about yourself?

David: I suppose my real interest was actually tending towards the history and really the archeology within the Winchester area because we bought this house and in fact, it had been renovated in the fifties and when we bought it in 1970, we discovered that most of the period features had been covered over. And so we actually spent a lot of time uncovering those and that's been going on for many years and we discovered that the house actually had a chimney that was made from stone. We looked at it and it was quite nicely molded some of the stone and it was obviously reused, and it was all pretty old because the house we dendro-dated to 1580, and this chimney had obviously been put in afterwards because it was wrapped around the timber framing.

We joked that it came from Hyde Abbey, and it was only within the last eight years that we actually decided to have a closer look at things. And that led to actually looking at where this stone came from and I googled 'stones from Hyde Abbey' and was highly surprised to find a website that was half devoted to it and organised by an organisation, Hyde 900. And so it was with them, I developed further interest in historic houses and particularly Hyde Abbey. And I found myself looking at all the stonework that was around Hyde because in fact, we discovered the church had about 50,000 tons of stone when it was built. To give you some

idea, it was 80% of the size of the current cathedral. So there was a lot of stone around and for people who are familiar with their area, they'll see it in the walls and around in their own houses. And as with my colleague Susan Jones, we went around photographing this because we could actually deduce a lot of the architecture from the shape of the stones. And so we naturally intrigued people with what we were up to, at the top of ladders, photographing pieces of stone, and they actually began to start producing their own pieces from their gardens, said 'is this of interest?'. So we will be able to redraw the Abbey because Hyde 900's aim, apart from being a community group was also to bring the Hyde Abbey back to life.

Like so many of the Abbeys, it was dissolved in 1538, at the instigation of Henry VIII and Thomas Wriothesley¹ was actually responsible personally for pulling down the Abbey church, which was quite a challenge, I would have thought. And it then developed because people were actually beginning to think, well, if I dig a bit in my garden, maybe I can find some more of this stone that Hyde 900 are interested in. And so we then started the Hyde 900 community digs. And these were in 2016 and the first one was fairly small scale, it was done in Chrissie and Martin Leydon's garden, and I think we had about 40 people. The nice thing was at least 10 of those were young children. And they just loved it. Things didn't go very fast, but that wasn't the object of the exercise, it was to introduce people to archeology, get them interested in what was around them and make them feel pleased about the area they lived and looked after the heritage that was there.

Emily: It's all about forming that connection between past and present, and then with the local community as well.

David: Absolutely.

Emily: So, can you tell me a little bit more about Hyde 900?

David: It was founded in 2008 and it was set up to celebrate the 900th anniversary of the move of Hyde Abbey from New Minster to Hyde itself. It had been founded by King Alfred the Great and it was actually built as New Minster after his lifetime and unfortunately it was built about 10 feet apart from the Old Minster, which has now become, of course, the cathedral. The Old Minster, of course, the head of that was the Bishop. Hyde Abbey had its own Abbott and there was a horrendous situation where the bells clashed, the singing clashed, and they were just too close together for comfort. Unfortunately, the Bishop had the upper hand because he owned most of Winchester and in order to get rid of these tiresome people, he diverted the sewers of Winchester through the Abbey. And so at that point, Hyde Abbey actually took the option of relocating to Hyde. And so Hyde 900 actually for the 900th anniversary in 2010 of the move to Hyde recreated the procession, which took place taking the bones of Alfred and his relatives, from New Minster to Hyde Abbey, and they were interred there. And one of the reasons that Hyde Abbey is so famous, it is of course the final resting place of King Alfred the Great.

Hyde 900 would go on to have a look at some of the bones that were around and potentially have found the pelvis belonging to Alfred, at least of that era anyway. Hopefully as DNA

¹ pronounced Risley

techniques improve, we can start discovering any relationship because there is a relation of King Alfred I think, with reasonable DNA located in Germany. So there's a possibility as technical developments improve, then we can actually match it.

But the whole Abbey was really very important because it was again the resting place of Alfred, and therefore what we found in our looking around, that in fact, the architecture in the sculpture is absolutely exquisite. In the second community dig we moved across from Alswitha Terrace to King Alfred Terrace and we dug in numbers 14 and 15 King Alfred Terrace. That was courtesy of Chris and Anne Prior and of Justine Field's number 15. We were incredibly lucky because we came across a set of stonework in Chris's garden that actually was recycled stonework from the cloister. A little bit of background here, as many people know there was a civil war in Winchester between Stephen and Matilda and the poor old monks really had a raw deal in the 12th century because having been booted out or forced out from New Minster, they just finished building Hyde Abbey and having moved in 1110, in 1141, the whole place was burned down in this civil war.

Emily: They're not really having very much luck at all, are they?

David: It dealt them a fairly mortal blow, but in fact, they survived and presumably rebuilt the church, at least the east end, which was the important bit. But what we found in Chris's garden was reused stonework from the original Abbey build from 1110,/1120. And this was actually in form of a wedge-shaped stones called voussoirs, which were part of the original 12th century Abbey Cloisters and we found seven of them in the 2017 dig. Chris was kind enough to invite us back and we moved his shed so that we could see what was further up the garden and we found a further 17 of these wedge-shaped pieces. And the amazing thing was that they matched the stonework that was preserved in St Bartholomew's church, which were five wonderful capitals from the Abbey Cloisters, and we were able to match these wedge-shaped stones to those, and so we were able to rescue this. They were only a spade's depth down below the surface and for security, we lifted these, and the result is they are now on display as the re-creation of the arch from the 12th century cloisters, in the City Museum. They make a magnificent sight and arguably some of the best Romanesque sculpture in England.

Emily: Fantastic. That sounds well worth moving the shed for.

David: Yes. And we've continued that, and we organised these digs in 2018 and last year. Finds have been really spectacular. Last year we discovered what was probably the Abbott's building, a two-story building and a huge pile of food waste from medieval times beside it, so we have a good idea of what the diet of the monks was, And so we will be putting on an event to coincide with your Heritage Open Days as part of it and we'll be recreating their dinners for you.

Emily: Fantastic! How much else do you know about the lives of the monks there?

David: There's not a lot around for the history of the Abbey. We think, because it was so important, that it was very important for Henry VIII to demolish it completely in terms of the church. And what wasn't demolished by him, and his minions, was actually demolished by the subsequent owner Richard Bethel. But there are two very attractive documents, which is the Liber Vitae of Hyde and the Monasterii of Hyde. And both these documents give you some insight as to how many monks there were over the period of the life of the Abbey, but there's

very little other information available. The other source, courtesy of the Hampshire Record Office, is of course the reference books for the Bishops of Winchester, and there is a huge detail because it seems the bishops did have oversight and some responsibility for the activities within the Abbey. And there are many interesting times where they've been taken to task for say, example, the monks using their cemetery for target practice for archery, and slightly more dubiously visiting the - not only visiting the loose women of Winchester - but in fact entertaining them in their cells. And so there was serious consequences when the Bishop found out this was happening and they were put on bread and water for some time.

Emily: Where can we find these documents? Are they all held locally?

David: The documents relate to Hyde Abbey mostly in the National Archives. There are some of course in the Record Office and I'd really recommend that because one of my other interests is actually, I am a board member of the Hampshire Archives Trust and that is there to try and preserve and secure the long-term future for the archives, which represent the history of the area. We provide grants as Hampshire Archives Trust to actually help people and not just preserve the archives, but actually document them, catalogue them, and then importantly, make them accessible to the public and that's one of the activities that I've been involved in, in particular launching their new website, which has now got 50,000 visitors a year which is quite satisfying. And of course it does provide a calendar to feature the events that take place in the heritage area, in the Hampshire region.

Emily: Brilliant. What other events do you put on throughout the year in terms of Hyde 900?

David: We've got three major events this year. There's recently been published a book by Hampshire Cultural Trust on Hyde excavations, and we are taking part in the launch of that, which is being planned potentially for the start of the Council of British Archeology Festival. And we're planning to put on a meet and greet facility, just outside the City Museum. It's the 28th of July to the 1st of August and this coincides with the Festival. And at that time, people can talk about what we get up to in terms of the archeology and taking part in various activities, putting on music events which we hope to kick off again after the pandemic.

Hopefully, Hyde in Conversation, which is interviewing some of the residents of Hyde because it does seem to attract some very interesting people and so we hope to kickstart that. After that we've got a community dig which takes place over the 19th to the 22nd of August and that is available on our website, which is hyde900.org.uk. You can read about that, and we'll be launching the bookings for that in July. And we're going back to the Abbey Cloisters and seeing whether we can understand more about this major building and really understand what was an amazing find last year, which is over five kilograms of Medieval glass, a very special find that is going to be analysed by Historic England. And so hopefully we might be able to recreate the stained-glass window that existed in this building. And then of course very importantly, the Heritage Open Days where we're hoping to take part with some foods it's going to be supplied courtesy of Rick Stein and my colleague Mike Caldwell is organising this. We have for the last Heritage Open Days, featured medieval tile making and that's another inclusive thing where young people can take part, and what we're doing is enabling them to recreate the medieval tiles that you will see in abundance in the cathedral. They can make these using a stamp, so they will get the correct patterns from the tiles using the tile finds that we've had in Hyde, and we then glaze and fire those tiles and so six months later, they can collect that tile and say, Ooh, I made that.

In addition, we will, of course be showcasing the finds from this year's dig and hopefully being able to explain a bit more about the Abbey.

Emily: It sounds like really an opportunity for people just to come and get involved and get stuck in with the heritage of it.

David: Absolutely, Emily. I think it's really important that we put at this stage a play out for some volunteers to help us run these events. We've got a small core dedicated team under our acting chair, Caroline Scott, and we really try very hard to be inclusive and put on events which will include as wide a range of people as possible, and this means that we, for instance, in the community digs have about 150 taking part. And so that's quite a major logistical exercise and if any of your listeners would be happy to help out and get involved apart from of course, coming along, we'd very much welcome them.

Emily: I'm sure there'll be many people very interested in that. As a little enticement, what would you say have been your most interesting discoveries? What have been your favourites personally?

David: Personally, I think that whilst for the general public it's the cloister arch, because that is undoubtedly quite special, I think it's some of the small finds which tell about the people, you know, a commissionaires button from the war, you know, that was just a little button and when you discover that it was actually from the Guild of Commissionaires, yes, this was issued to soldiers from the war who after the war took jobs as the Commissionaires at the entrance to these important buildings. We came across a couple of china eggs and apparently these were used by householders who kept chickens, I think to encourage the hens to lay - I'm no expert on this. And then of course, you've got the items which actually date back to the medieval times where we actually find a stonework that has been used for the first build of the Abbey, and then it's been recut to be used in the rebuild, which took place mainly in the 14th century, because Hyde Abbey was actually in ruins from about 1141, right until the 1300's, 1350. One of the other interesting finds was in fact in Hyde Street, there's a household, Hyde House, and we discovered in the roof, there was a re-used timbers which was practically the complete roof from Hyde Abbey that dated back to 1300. It was a lovely re-use roof, which is practically intact.

Without the CBA and the Hampshire Field club along with Belgarum, the local estate agents, without their help, we wouldn't have been able to keep the prices for people taking part in these activities as low as they are, and most activities children come free.

Emily: That's wonderful, really encouraging people to get involved.

David: Absolutely.

Emily: I think with that in mind, what message would you like our audience to take away from this episode today?

David: I suppose, you just reiterating the point, please do get involved in organisations like Hampshire Archives Trust, Hyde 900, and you know, with City of Winchester Trust. Everybody, I think should be involved in trying to preserve our heritage because we're just so incredibly lucky in Britain, we've got this heritage and quite a lot of it is well-documented and as I say, we always, in Hyde 900, welcome volunteers, www.hyde900.org.uk.

Emily: Well, brilliant. Thank you so much for talking to me today, David, it's been really interesting to find out more about the project and find out more about you as well.

David: Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure, Emily.

Emily: If you're interested in getting involved with, or finding out more about Hyde 900, be sure to take a look at their website, you can also see the group for yourself at their meet and greet outside Winchester City Museum between the 29th of July and the 1st of August.

If you fancy it, why not even sign up and go along to their community dig in the Hyde Abbey area between the 19th and 22nd of August. You can find these dates and further details in the show notes on the Hampshire HistBites website.

Thank you for listening to today's episode, join us again next week.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you.