THE MORTUARY CHESTS
at
WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL

INFORMATION PACK
03/02/15
The Dean and Chapter of Winchester has announced that, as part of an initial assessment of the Cathedral’s Renaissance Mortuary Chests and an inventory of their contents, a project to record and analyze the contents has begun. The Chests are thought to contain the mortal remains of some of the early Royal Families of Wessex and of England, and three bishops, amongst other artefacts and mortal remains.

The contents of the six Mortuary Chests in question were disturbed by the Parliamentarians in 1642. So mixed up were they that the then Cathedral authorities returned them to the chests in no particular order.

The work which is to be undertaken will assess the likelihood of whether the human remains in the chests relate to the historical burial records.

Since the C16th, there have been several inspections of the contents at the times that the chests themselves were cleaned and partially restored. However, the type of scientific analysis proposed did not take place on any of these occasions.

Recent developments in forensic archaeological study mean that it is now possible to examine the contents with a minimum of intervention and a greater certainty of accurate results. These developments make this something that the Dean and Chapter has an aspiration to do, always bearing in mind that the chests are burial places in their own right.

Today’s news follows radiocarbon-dating of some of those mortal remains, which suggests that it is likely they originate from the period in question.

Queen Emma, pictured here with her husband, King Cnut, presenting a huge golden cross to New Minster.
The Project

The work to be undertaken will assess the likelihood of whether the human remains in the chests relate to the historical burial records.

Alongside that, a Heritage Lottery Fund grant towards new projects means that these discoveries could be used to inform and engage visitors to the Cathedral today and in future generations. Notably, Kings and Scribes: The Birth of a Nation, a three part exhibition to be created in the South Transept, will explore the rich veins of personal and architectural history represented there.

These discoveries could place Winchester Cathedral at the birth of our nation and establish it as the first formal national mausoleum, of similar importance to this country as St Denis and Reims are to France.

The principal objectives of the current study are:

1. To record the contents of each chest.
2. To determine the number of individuals represented by the collection of co-mingled skeletal remains within the six mortuary chests.
3. To determine the dates at which those individuals lived.
4. To determine, where possible, their sex, age at death, and physical characteristics, such as stature.

What do we know?

Various historical sources place members of Anglo Saxon Royal Family and former Bishops in a number of locations near the High Altar in Winchester Cathedral.

Their location across the centuries, in such an honoured position as the Presbytery (Sanctuary), supports the hypothesis that they are likely to be Royal in origin or, at the very least, individuals of significant historical importance. C14 dating has recently taken place, the only invasive procedure which has occurred, in highly controlled conditions and on selected fragments.

This dating, by the Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit at the University of Oxford, has placed the analyzed fragments as being from the late Anglo-Saxon and early Norman periods, which is consistent with the historical burial records of the named individuals. There are also a number of indications of Royalty from the chests themselves, notably some of the inscriptions on the chests, their location, and that some are decorated with shields and/or crowns.

We have discovered in the chests some unexpected contents which are not mortal remains, and one of the aspects of the next stage of analysis will be to discover why they are there.

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MEDIA RELEASE

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The Dean and Chapter of Winchester has announced that, as part of an initial assessment of the Cathedral’s Renaissance Mortuary Chests and an inventory of their contents, a project to record and analyze the contents has begun. The Chests are thought to contain the mortal remains of some of the early Royal Families of Wessex and of England, and three bishops, amongst other artefacts and mortal remains.

The chests and their contents have recently been resting in the Cathedral’s Lady Chapel and initial analysis has taken place on the chests themselves, with a view to their conservation as part of King’s and Scribes: The Birth of a Nation, which will bring to the Cathedral’s South Transept a three stage exhibition space, designed both to make more accessible the twelfth century Winchester Bible but also telling many of the stories about the Cathedral, to which its Anglo-Saxon origins are key.

And so, it is with anticipation that The Dean and Chapter is able to announce that some of the mortal remains in the Mortuary Chests have been formally dated by the Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit at the University of Oxford, and their origins are thought to be from the late Anglo-Saxon and early Norman periods, which is consistent with the historical burial records of the named individuals. The continued recording of the contents will be carried out by the University of Bristol.

Speaking of this discovery, and the coming project, The Dean of Winchester, The Very Revd James Atwell, has this to say. “This is an exciting moment for the Cathedral when we seem poised to discover that history has indeed safeguarded the mortal remains of some of the early Saxon Kings who became the first monarchs of a united England. Winchester holds the secrets of the birth of the English nation and it does seem that some of those secrets are about to be revealed as future research continues. The presence of the bones in the Cathedral, where they would have been placed near the High Altar and the relics of St Swithun, remind us just how significant the inspiration of the Christian faith was for the foundation of our national life.”

As this pack explains, the primary purposes of the project are academic research but, quite obviously, the stories which the research may tell, if Royal Family members they are, place Winchester Cathedral at the birth of our nation and establish it as the first formal national mausoleum, of similar importance to this country as St Denis and Reims are to France.

The Project Director is the Cathedral’s Receiver General, Canon Annabelle Boyes. “This welcome news marks a further stage towards achieving our aspirations to tell the stories of the people who have inspired and been inspired by the Cathedral.”

Further information on all of our development projects can be found at: http://www.winchester-cathedral.org.uk/conservation-action/

Although an information session is planned for the near future, now that the preliminary dating results have been received, there will be no further information as to the next stages until further results have emerged, but any enquiries should be directed to:

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The Mortuary Chests in their current location of the Lady Chapel at Winchester Cathedral.

The Mortuary Chests have, for some centuries, been placed on the Presbytery Screen, close to the High Altar.

A side view of one of the Renaissance Mortuary Chests.

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