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News Release



THE CATHEDRAL AND
ABBEY CHURCH OF
SAINT ALBAN

St Albans Cathedral Finds Lost Abbot

Archaeologists from the Canterbury Archaeological Trust (CAT) working at St Albans Cathedral have discovered the grave of John of Wheathampstead, a former Abbot of national and international renown, who died in 1465, and whose burial site has remained a mystery to this day.



In an extremely rare development, the team also discovered three papal seals, known as 'papal bulls', inside the grave, issued by Pope Martin V (1417-1431).

It is the presence of these bulls that confirm that this is the grave of Abbot Wheathampstead. Professor James Clark (University of Exeter), who is an expert on the Abbey's medieval history, has found that early in his career Abbot John secured three special privileges at an audience with Pope Martin and that he was remembered ever after for his great success when visiting the papal court.

Professor Martin Biddle, working with the team from CAT and who led the excavation work for the Cathedral's new Chapter House in 1978, commented, "The finding of three leaden seals is a unique discovery in archaeology."

The dig at St Albans Cathedral is taking place in advance of the construction of a new Welcome Centre, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and part of the *Alban, Britain's First Saint* project. The project aims to raise the profile of St Albans Cathedral, the oldest site of continuous Christian worship in Britain and birth place of Magna Carta.

The archaeological dig provides a unique opportunity to explore the buried history of the Abbey. For a hundred years from 1750 until around 1852 the area served as the parish graveyard where whole families were buried together often victims of devastating epidemics such as the great cholera outbreak of the 1830's. Beneath these post-medieval burials are the substantial remains of a 14th to 15th century building which historians now think may be the chapel which Abbot John built. The foundations of this chapel overlie earlier evidence for the lost Norman Apsidal chapels that formed part of the original Cathedral built by Paul of Caen in 1077.

The Dean of St Albans, the Very Rev'd Dr Jeffrey John, said, "It is a wonderful thing to have found the grave and relics of John of Wheathampstead, one of the most interesting and successful of the Abbots of St Albans. The papal seals that were found in his grave are a reminder of some of the privileges that he won for his monastery, and of his own national and international influence on the Church at a time when (not unlike today) it was faced with threats of division and decline".



He continued, "Abbot John added a great deal to the renown and the beauty of the Abbey, and attracted many new pilgrims from Britain and overseas. He also defended the Abbey from destruction during the Wars of the Roses and was proud to say that he had preserved its treasures for future generations. It seems appropriate that he should appear just as we are trying to do the same through the 'Alban, Britain's First Saint' project, which aims to make the Abbey much better known, and to provide better resources to welcome and inform new visitors. As John would certainly wish, in due course his body will be laid to rest again, with proper prayer and ceremony, along with his fellow Abbots in the Presbytery of the Cathedral and Abbey Church. We trust he prays for us, as we do for him."

Professor Clark said, "Not only did Abbot John raise St Albans Abbey to the pinnacle of the English church, he was also celebrated in his own right, a Renaissance man when the Renaissance was still in its infancy, a renowned churchman, scholar and politician, who was courted by princes as well as popes."

Archaeological work continues at St Albans Cathedral until early 2018 and the new Welcome Centre opens in June 2019.

ENDS

NOTES FOR EDITORS

Abbot Wheathampstead

- Born in c. 1390 in Wheathampstead and died on 20 January 1465.
- Abbot at St Albans 1420–1440. He resigned due to ill health but was re-elected in 1451 and remained in office until his death in 1465.
- He travelled to Italy in 1423 and secured an audience with Martin V. He made three requests to the Pope for privileges to be granted to his abbey and its monks. Pope Martin assented and three bulls were issued to the abbot, two dated 19 November 1423 and one 24 November 1423.
- At his death, Abbot Wheathampstead was remembered for securing these three bulls from Pope Martin and details of them were recorded in the Abbey Book of Benefactors.
- In his obituary, entered into the same book, it was said that he should be remembered for his 'three-fold' character which may be interpreted as a gesture to the recollection of the three privileges he had won for the Abbey so long before.
- His relics have been found in a brick lined tomb, positioned close to both the presbytery and transept and almost certainly situated within a building dating from the fifteenth century.

Papal Bulls

- The papal bulls discovered have been identified as those of Martin V, Pope from 1417 to 1431.
- Initial enquiries to specialists suggest that a grave with more than one bull is highly unusual and marks the burial of a significant individual.
- The bulls themselves consist of circular lead disks approximately 40mm in diameter. The name of the pope (written as *Martinus*) is semi-legible. Also visible is the legend PP.V, with the PP standing for *Pastor Pastorum* (Shepherd of Shepherds).
- The bulls would have been attached to a vellum document by either hemp or silk cords depending on whether the role of the charter was respectively a letter of justice or grace. Traces of the cord may be preserved in the soil that adheres to the bulls, but identification requires further specialized analysis.

Alban, Britain's First Saint - Heritage Lottery Funded Project

- The development project is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund with match funding from over a thousand individuals and organisations.
- The Cathedral is building a new welcome centre, and creating a new centre for schoolchildren, a new exhibition area, and a new adult study centre and library.
- A new interpretation scheme will present the Cathedral's stories and treasures for visitors, including illuminating the rare collection of medieval wall paintings and rebuilding the ruined medieval shrine of St Amphibalus.
- The Welcome Centre is due to open in June 2019.

St Albans Cathedral

- St Albans Cathedral is built on the site of the martyrdom of St Alban, Britain's first saint.
- It is the oldest site of continuous Christian worship in Britain.
- It houses the shrines of St Alban and St Amphibalus, and is a major site of Christian pilgrimage to this day.
- In August 1213, St Albans Abbey was the venue for the very first meeting between barons and clergy to discuss their grievances against King John. This historic meeting ultimately led to the articles that became Magna Carta, sealed at Runnymede two years later.
- St Albans Cathedral is the mother church of the Diocese of St Albans which serves the people of Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, the Borough of Luton and parts of the London Borough of Barnet, Cambridgeshire and Buckinghamshire.

Canterbury Archaeological Trust Dig

- The team from Canterbury Archaeological Trust are working on a long-closed parish graveyard to the South East of the Cathedral.
- Over 170 recorded burials had been interred on the site from the Dissolution of the Abbey in 1539 until around 1852, when the burial ground was closed.
- The dig taking place on the Cathedral grounds is unique for those working on it since it is such a concentrated graveyard which requires careful work to uncover and remove the finds.
- The assemblage of human bone is well preserved and the work forms an excellent opportunity to provide information about the late 18th and early 19th century population of St Albans.
- An exciting aspect of the current dig is the uncovering of original Norman apse ended chapels on the site which were demolished in the 13th century and replaced in the 15th

century by a large rectangular building which was probably destroyed shortly after the Dissolution of the Abbey.

- This building probably contained a treasury, sacristy, vestry and chapels accessed from the transept and presbytery. The building may also have formed the Abbot's quarters with access via the slype to the cloisters.
- Professor Martin Biddle is working closely with the team from CAT. With his late wife, he also led excavation work in 1978 on the site of the Cathedral's new Chapter House (opened in 1982). During this excavation work, the graves of 11 abbots and four monks were discovered. Sadly, all but one had been robbed.
- In the coming weeks the excavation will begin to explore these remains, revealing some of the features that would have been prominent during this period when the Abbey was a major centre of pilgrimage.

Images courtesy of Canterbury Archaeological Trust.

www.stalbanscathedral.org