



News and events



This is the face of 15th century Abbot John of Wheathampstead, reconstructed from the skull found at St Albans Cathedral in 2017. The reconstruction was done by FaceLab at Liverpool John Moores University. For more about Abbot John go to www.stalbanscathedral.org/Blog/face-to-face-with-a-medieval-abbot

- **Next meeting:** All our meetings are cancelled until further notice.

Notes and queries

The sword in the tree

I was approached by an excited lady who had just found a sword in a tree in St Helen's churchyard and asked what did I know about it. Although I've lived here for 57 years I admit to not knowing of this and felt the need to investigate further.

Indeed what appears to be a sword complete with hilt is buried in a yew tree and gradually being consumed and lost forever. What mystery is this? Does it compare with the mysteries of Camelot? Is it the sword waiting for a future King Arthur to pull it free from its symbolic stone and claim the English throne? Or could the sword and its story be less romantic? I've always believed the truth should not get in the way of a good story but in this case the truth should be told.



The 'sword'

The supposed sword is in fact a grave marker in the form of a cross with the deceased's details cast into the hilt or cross-tree. No sword would be made of thick, brittle cast iron with a reinforcing ridge along its length. So why is it buried in a yew tree? The scenario is simple; it was almost certainly removed and placed there by someone wishing to mow the grass without the obstruction of an iron marker sticking up from the ground. It's not the first iron marker to share this fate (See 'Percy's Cross', Bulletin number 5). The grass-

cutting person failed to replace it and left it lodged in the tree. Years go by and trees grow.

Cast iron grave markers were popular in Victorian times and the early 20th century; they were cheap and easily made to order. Few if any such markers still stand in our churchyard and this was clearly the simplest and cheapest of examples.

I wanted to establish the name of the deceased so I took an impression of the name which revealed these details: *M.P. 1861*. So, who was *M.P. 1861*? Looking through the parish register of burials for that year gave only one contender, *Mary Pearce age 79, February 17th, 1861, Wheathampstead*.



The 'hilt'

Mary does not appear in the register of memorial inscriptions held in the church and updated by Margaret Pankhurst in 2017. This would indicate that the marker has been in the tree since before the first survey in 1996.

The marker could possibly be removed with a little force and the details verified and recorded. I can assure you that, in removing it, I would not make any claim on the English throne but removing it would destroy the mystery of the sword in the tree. But we can and should remember Mary Pearce, a villager who died in 1861.

Terry Pankhurst