

Woolhope Club Field Meeting. The President's Field Day in Hereford: 11 August 2021

On a temperate, dry day about twenty members and visitors gathered at the Pavilion on Castle Green and accompanied the President, David Whitehead, on a tour of the old castle site, patiently enduring a two-hour harangue on the early development of Hereford (his words). See below.



The President explaining the history of Castle Green



The site of St Ethelbert's Well

On the basis of the history and archaeology of the site, Mr Whitehead believed that religious activities commenced on this high point of the Hereford Terrace in the 6th or 7th century when a Christian burial ground was established above the Wye. This increasingly sacred site required caretakers and thus, at a later date, encompassed a minster church, later dedicated to the East Anglian saint, Guthlac. Somewhat later this establishment was joined by the minster of St Mary and St Ethelbert, which eventually, in 803, was recorded as the seat of the bishop of Hereford. This Cathedral would eventually eclipse its more ancient neighbour.

The President explored the archaeological evidence provided by Ron Shoesmith's excavation of 1973 and combined this with contemporary historical research on early minsters and, more specifically, the recent monograph published on St Guthlac, whose body (or part of it) was placed in a shrine on the Green, which survived until it was accidentally burnt in the late 13th century. St Guthlac's minster, the speaker believed, was the primary church of the southern Marches and came into existence in a sub-Roman/Celtic environment.

Vestiges of its pre-eminence survived until after the Conquest in its extensive portfolio of property—much of it subsequently redistributed after the Conquest—and the retention of a monopoly of burial rights in the local area. This prevented the Cathedral from enjoying one of its fundamental privileges until the mid-12 century, when St Guthlac's minster was humiliated by being re-founded on a new site in the By-Street suburb of Hereford. Subsequently, it was regarded as a Benedictine priory and a mere cell of Gloucester Abbey. Gloucester, it should be noted, was the favoured repository of orphaned Welsh minsters in the years immediately after the Norman Conquest. Clearly, St Guthlac's was seen in this light. This was the nadir of Hereford's first Christian institution, which suffered a long process of decline until its dissolution in 1536.

In the afternoon the party re-assembled in the busy Cathedral Close. The object of this tour was to investigate the archaeological context of the Cathedral, both in relation to St Guthlac's and the city that emerged in its shadow. Here considerable use was made of Andy Boucher's excavations, ahead of landscaping work between 2009 and 2011. Other excavations ranging from those recorded in the 1640s by Silas Taylor, the new Library (1993) and the toilet block (2003) in the Chapter House Yard were also exploited. Mr Whitehead pointed out that the lack of a burial ground left the Cathedral exposed to secular activities and especially with the foundation of the 'burh' by Aethelflaed, the Lady of the Mercians, in the 890s. The 'close', as it became in the 14th century, was thus the focus of a great deal of ironworking and other quasi-industrial activities, confirming the role of the Church in the struggle against the pagan Vikings. As at Worcester, which is better documented than Hereford, the church became truly militant. The royal interest in Hereford,

represented by Aethelflaed, the daughter of Alfred the Great and wife of Aethelred, the earl of Mercia, also prevented Herefordshire being re-absorbed into Greater Powys, with which the southern borderland was associated before the Mercian age.



The group finally explored the site of the putative 'great hall' located by Andy Boucher, in St John's Quad, in the shadow of the present Lady Chapel. The afternoon ended with tea in the Chapter House Yard.