

# 50 years of excavations and research

## WINCHESTER EXCAVATIONS COMMITTEE

Prof Martin Biddle, Dick Selwood and Dr Simon Roffey at Winchester Guildhall

**A** PACKED Winchester Guildhall heard distinguished speakers explain three aspects of the city's rich history. The event last Tuesday (November 26) was organised by the Winchester Excavations Committee which is publishing the results of 50 years of excavations and research.

Prof Martin Biddle, director of Winchester Research Unit, described Winchester's links with Charlemagne, the 'Father of Europe'. He suggested that there is a direct link between the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, site of the tomb of Jesus, dedicated in 335 and the building added to the west end of the Winchester Old Minster in 971-5 around the site of St Swithun's tomb.

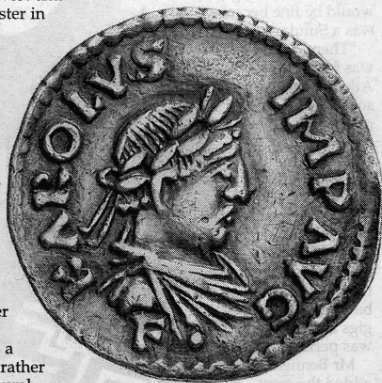
The rotunda built in Jerusalem to enclose the Edicule or 'little house' protecting the tomb of Jesus measured 99 Long Roman feet in diameter. The rotunda built at Aachen, near Cologne by Charlemagne about 800 for his palace chapel was also 99 Long Roman feet in diameter and so was the double-apsed building built at Winchester around the tomb of St Swithun in 971-5. This was a time when measurements, rather than exact plan or architectural style, could be the key factor in 'remembering' a building. Charlemagne's silver penny minted about 813, depicting on one side his

own portrait and on the other an image of the 'Edicule' in Jerusalem provides striking proof of the emperor's devotion to the tomb of Jesus and explains why the Aachen rotunda might be copied again at the Winchester Old Minster.

Dick Selwood, Chairman of WARG — Winchester's Archaeological and Local History Society — gave a riveting account of its work, its founder archaeologists in the '70s and its development from rescue archaeology to research.

He described various areas where the group has been involved — including the Brooks, Oram's Arbour and Hyde Abbey — but he focused principally on its own digs at St Cross where geophysics helped archaeologists locate ancient buildings, walls, conduits and gardens and where the group this year uncovered the first buildings of Henri de Blois.

He touched on the threat to archaeological remains posed by development and government policy changes and inspired the audience to appreciate the urgency of continuing rescue and research and the need for



societies such as WARG to act as pressure groups.

Dr Simon Roffey, Reader in Medieval Archaeology at the



Above: Grave cuts at the excavations of Hospital of St Mary Magdalen

University of Winchester, illustrated the ongoing excavations at the Hospital of St Mary Magdalen, to the east of the city. This is a multi-period site whose history stretches from medieval times through the English Civil War to the First World War.

He focussed on its role as a medieval hospital or "leprosaria" for sufferers from leprosy which was founded in the late 11th century. Cemetery excavations between 2009 and 2012 showed skeletal evidence of this horrific disease on a wide range of people, young and



Above: Dr Simon Roffey, Professor Martin Biddle and Dick Selwood

since 2007 over 300 students have worked on this complex dig.

The University is holding a major two-day conference in April under the auspices of Winchester Excavations Committee, Winchester College and the University of Winchester. Topics will range from Iron Age Winchester, The Cult of the Saints, Winchester and the First World War and King Alfred in Myth and History. To register an interest email [susanne.haselgrove@ntlworld.com](mailto:susanne.haselgrove@ntlworld.com).

The evening concluded with an appeal for help by Prof Biddle to find missing pictures of the city of

## 'Measurements, rather than exact plan or architectural style, could be the key factor in 'remembering' a building'

old. Well-cut graves indicated respect and care for victims. This was a pioneering establishment, with patients being given emotional support — indeed their suffering may have given them what were deemed to be special spiritual qualities. Much work remains to be done and Dr Roffey explained that



Above: A doorway at the St Cross Hospital excavation. Left: Coin of Charlemagne

Winchester from the 1700s and 1800s. These will help to complete *The Historic Town Atlas of Winchester*, Volume 11 of *Winchester Studies*, shortly to go to press. He urged people to contact him: [martin.biddle@herford.ox.ac.uk](mailto:martin.biddle@herford.ox.ac.uk) feeling sure that such pictures exist in the city or county but just need bringing to light. **Contributed**