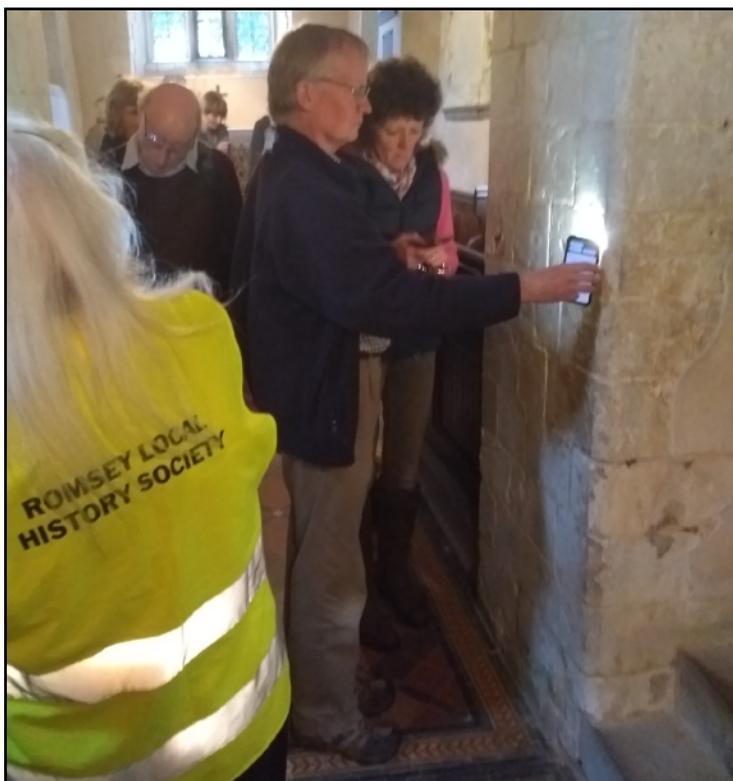
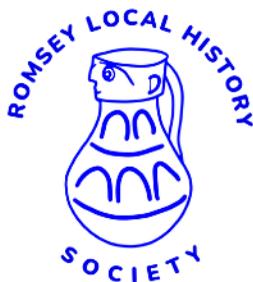


# *Romsey Local History Society*

*[LTVAS Group]*



Studying graffiti in Ashley Church

Autumn 2024

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### **Memories of Growing-up in Ampfield ( Part 3) by Lynda Emery**

In the last episode I related my memories of Christmases and birthdays, as a young child, growing up in the 1950s in Ampfield. There were, however, other exciting days and occasions which took place throughout the year. These were always anticipated, at times with some trepidation.

After the Christmas holidays, including, of course, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, it was back to school. So much excitement had been fitted into those two weeks off. New Year meant nothing when I was very young but when I was 11 or 12 I was allowed to 'see it in' for the first time. It felt so special, almost as if something magical happened when the clock chimed midnight. Nowadays, I'm afraid I am in bed long before the chimes!

Returning to school meant that the routine was back in place and life would tick along until we came to the end of March when school would begin preparations for the May Fayre. This was an



*Maypole dancing at Ampfield School*

annual fundraiser for equipment, outings and the like. The Maypole emerged from its store, its braids were untangled and mended, if necessary, and then practising the dances would begin. Mrs Loader, the Headteacher, knew all the steps and routines. She taught us carefully and with her usual attention to detail. It was her 'top' class that performed this yearly ritual. Those who have taken part probably still recall the dances and the music, Spider's Web, Gypsy's Tent, Double Plait and Barber's Pole. The girls wore white bonnets and skirts with yellow or blue braid around the hem. The boys had a white shirt, black trousers and a coloured braid across their chests. Later on we did not have this 'uniform', I guess it probably disintegrated through age. Another aspect was the election of the May Queen from among the older girls. This was carefully done using a voting system. The winner was crowned during the May Fayre with a 'gold' and red velvet crown covered with May (hawthorn) blossom. One year I was lucky enough to be chosen. Mum made me a long white dress, and I had to process in the playground where the Vicar, the Rev Ifor Wynne Evans, performed the coronation. Then, and this is where the trepidation fits in, I had to read my speech. I can remember my nervousness to this day, but I think I did it alright! An added joy was the Fancy Dress competition in which children, and undoubtedly parents, vied to see who had the best and most inventive costume. My Mum's skill with the needle came in very handy, and my sister and I were often well placed among the winners. One triumph I remember was being dressed as an Eastern lady complete with yashmak and baggy silk trousers and holding a bar of Fry's Turkish Delight!

Summer weather meant that we could play on the grass as well as the asphalt playground, walk to the Ampfield CC ground for rounders, have the occasional nature ramble, but also it heralded 'School Sports', running, relay, egg and spoon, wheelbarrow, 3 legged, sack and ball races, all were constituents of the competition. Although slight in stature, I was never a runner or, indeed, an athlete of any sort. I had a go, but 3rd place in, I think, a ball race was the acme of my athletic prowess! Others though, revelled in the experience. My friend, Lesley Read, was excellent at all things sporty. Other children ran rounders and whacked the 'really hard' ball to the other side of the field. I usually fielded in the deep where I picked daisies and played scant attention until someone yelled that the ball was coming my way.

The summer term ended with the school outing which parent(s) always accompanied. This was usually a coach ride to a seaside, but once we went to London Zoo! We travelled quite some distance to reach a beach, with Weymouth or Swanage being popular destinations. I was usually fine, once I got there! I'm afraid travel sickness loomed large during these outings, and not just me! The combination of bumpy roads, stuffy coach and excited children did not always make for the happiest travelling conditions! However, this was all forgotten on arrival and a great day was had by all. Strangely, the journey home was much more pleasant, a singsong, a break at a pub(!) and a coachload of sleepy children by the time we got home in the dark.

The church fete is still an 'occasion' for Ampfield. When I was a child it was a real highlight. Not a great many 'whole village' get-togethers occurred and the fete was such fun. The school usually performed Maypole dancing or country dancing, there were sideshows and competitions, a selection of stalls, toys, cakes, jewellery, jumble, white elephant, plants and rides. The ponies were walked along part of Laundry Lane (now called Morleys, I think) and children queued to have a turn. At the early fetes I remember a small train ride which was in the Vicarage grounds next to the stalls. The results of the competitions were announced with a draw at the end, it was all so exciting.

Endings were far from our minds as we began the LONG summer holiday from school! It was a time of great excitement, no more school for six weeks! It seemed an eternity and one that was to be enjoyed and relished. Strange, really, because we didn't do a lot. It was just the relaxing change of routine that was exhilarating.

Mum would take us two or three times into Southampton or Winchester on the bus during the six weeks. We ate at British Home Stores if it was Southampton. I remember that they had a large display of ladies' hats which were on tables, accessible to children. We tried them on and admired ourselves in the large mirror! These excursions were usually to buy clothes or shoes but sometimes it was for the cinema, the Odeon or the Gaumont, magical.



*British Home Stores, Above Bar, Southampton in the 1950s.*

We had many walks during our summer holidays. Ampfield woods, via Wingham Lane, were the main venue but we also walked down the Mile Wood to Crampmoor and returned via Green Lane.

When Dad was home we might go to Farley Mount to play ball games and have a picnic. Often Mum and Dad 'had a drive' after Sunday lunch and we would be ferried around the local area (and sometimes further afield) to see places of interest and have a walk there. I enjoyed getting to the places, but the back of a Morris Minor or a bumpy sidecar ride was not my preferred method. Still, today at 70 years old, I wish we humans had the ability to snap our fingers and be at our destination, travelling is not my 'thing'!

When I was older I was allowed to cycle round the village on my own, but, during primary school I had to play in and around my house. We did have a lovely large garden so I was very lucky. I made mud cakes and decorated them

with daisies. These then were put to harden on the flat roof of the coal bunker and used as food in a pretend house. Being in the large chicken run was a treat, digging worms for them, watching them have dust baths and peck at old cabbage stalks and, occasionally, at each other (chickens can be quite argumentative). So you can see that the long holidays were far from boring; interspersed with the odd treat, the seaside being the ultimate joy.

However, the return to school was not unwelcome. The prestige of being a year older, and possibly in a different class, was reward enough for the return to routine, and seeing friends again was a bonus. September was Harvest Festival at school and at Church. Produce from the garden was gathered, taken in, and finally given to folks who needed it. The Church always looked and smelt so wonderful at this time. When I was older I would help with the decoration, also at Easter.

Bonfire Night was a November occasion. Fireworks were bought in Romsey, from Davidson's toy shop, and stored away. The making of the bonfire, and the Guy to go on it, was integral to the anticipation and excitement. Dad had to donate an old shirt, trousers and anything else he felt like adding, and then the stuffing of the Guy's limbs, with newspaper, could begin. His head was a stuffed paper bag onto which a cardboard mask was attached. Sometimes a hat was found for him. The fire was built on the land at the back of the garden and, as soon as it got dark (which seemed to take forever), we were outside. Mum and Dad were very careful with us and we always had to stand well back from the fireworks and the heat of the bonfire, but it was amazing fun! The year was, of course, brought to an end by Christmas and all that entails.

And so we come to the end of my childhood years in Ampfield. I left home, aged eighteen years, to go to Teacher Training College in Roehampton, London and embarked on an adventure which would see me working in education with children with special needs, marrying, having two children of my own and now being a Granny to four lovely grandsons!

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## **Romsey Abbey Register of Births, Marriages and Deaths, January 1570 to December 1629 by Ronnie Munday**

Hampshire Records Office has recently released scans of all of the pages of Romsey Abbey Register to a Genealogy website 'ancestry.com'. This has enabled subscribers to the site to inspect the Register page by page on their computers without having to resort to microfiche readers. Of course, this data has been made available to several genealogy websites in the past, but in many cases the data has been misinterpreted because of the hard-to-read handwriting, indeed the index accompanying the Ancestry scans has many transcription errors. In addition, the actual Registers reveal so much more than the genealogy sites which merely specify names, parentage and location. The

Register often records in which area of Romsey the individual lived, his occupation, and status.

Transcribing the first 60 years of the Register has revealed a view of the social history of Romsey in the late Tudor and early Stuart years. Of course, previous local historians, such as John Latham in 1800 and Major General Sir Richard Luce in 1942, have carried out analyses of the Registers selectively quoting particular entries and Jessica Spinney typed out much of it onto paper, but there has been no complete transcription.

From December 1584, the Register starts using Latin terms to describe individuals and events eg *senex* for aged person; *puer* for boy; *puella* for girl, *mater* for mother and *virgo* for spinster. However, this ceases after a period of years when, presumably, the registrar no longer had the Latin skills to continue the practice.

## Demographics

The demographic data is interesting in itself. A book was published in 1662 by John Graunt (1620 to 1674) who was a great friend of Sir William Petty, Romsey's very own polymath. The book, 'Observations on Bills of Mortality', compared demographic data in London with a "country parish" for a period of 60 years from 1592. It is believed that Sir William Petty, who was a skilled mathematician and surgeon, did most of the work compiling the book and that the 'country parish' used for the comparison purposes was Romsey itself.

This first Abbey parish register finishes at the end of 1629 whereas the Bills of Mortality appear to have ended in 1662. The current analysis to 1629 reveals a summary of the data as in the following table:

		Christenings	Marriages	Deaths	Illegitimate	Stillbirths
	Average	65	18	58	2	2
<i>Value in middle of yearly totals</i>	Median	67	17	54	2	0
<i>Most frequently occurring values in yearly totals</i>	Mode	78	16	42	2	0
	Max	96	29	109	11	12
		Year 1610 is max	Year 1581 is max	Year 1597 is max	Year 1603 is max	Year 1617 is max

As can be seen, the year in which most christenings took place was 1610 with

96 and the most burials took place in 1597 at 109 which was almost double the average. One obvious theory was that this was the result of an epidemic. According to one source, a plague incident occurred in London between 1592 and 1593<sup>1</sup> but there seems to be no indication of a subsequent major plague occurring until 1603. It is more than likely that the excessive deaths in 1597 can be attributed to harvest failures which had been occurring across the country (and throughout Europe) from 1593 to 1597 resulting in many food riots countrywide.

Events were recorded in the Registers for every month during the 60 year period except for the months of May and June 1628. There is no obvious reason for this. The burials for that year were quite above average at 81 and so it is possible that the vicar and his assistants were indisposed during that period through illness.

Generally, stillbirths (born before time or untimely born or 'ded borne') were not recorded in the Register until the start of the 1600s. Illegitimate births were recorded throughout the 60 year period and were variously described as *bastard*, *nothus* (latin for illegitimate child), '*lyctole*', '*holy son*', or *baseborne*. Twin births were also specified in the christenings and, during the 60 year period, there were 54 such births. Notably, there was just one incestuous birth recorded. Sadly, that child only survived for two months.

The burial entries reveal some sad stories. Romsey was a town surrounded by many exposed waterways and 5 drownings are recorded in the Register, including two children one of whom does not even have a first name recorded: - '*Child DAVYS taken out of ye water drowned*'. In many instances, one can detect how a disease has affected a whole family where the entries follow one after the other on the same or consecutive days. Also, in many instances, it is possible to detect where the mother has died in childbirth as the christening is quite often followed by the burial of the infant and mother on the same day.

### **Romsey Abbey history**

A careful reading of the scans has revealed errors in the accepted history of vicars as set out on the board in the Abbey church giving the list of vicars, eg. Sir Hew Langley was vicar from 1575 not Hugh Kingley and Roger Richardson was vicar until 1586 and not Hugh Richardson. Also, the scans reveal two names of Mayors of Romsey not on the Town Hall board namely William Raynold in 1576 and Edward Vynables in 1580.

Reverend Samuel Adam, vicar from 1590 to 1620, appears several times as his four children are baptised in the Abbey (one born in Sutton). In one instance, there is a record of Mr Childly, curate of Timsbury, filling in for him for a baptism in his absence in 1617. Then on the 20<sup>th</sup> September 1620, the Register records Adam's burial in Latin.

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[1.Creighton Charles 1891 A History of Epidemics in Britain: From A.D 664 to the Extinction of Plague Cambridge University Press pp 353-354](#)

Two events were noted in the Register in 1623 and 1624 which were obviously regarded as significant at the time:2

1. 5<sup>th</sup> June 1623 *The 25<sup>th</sup> of this month was begun the painting of our church Sandely Holmes (appears on the Mayoral board in the Town Hall for 1625) and Richard Thomas being churchwardens.'*

Sir Richard Luce observed that this was no doubt the whitewash which had to be removed with so much labour in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

2. December 1624 *'This yeare were the bells hung up in the Tower and the worke finished in this month of December a little before Christmas and in January next following year was the Belfry taken down John Cooper and Wm Tolderfeild being churchwardens'*

Also, an entry for July 29<sup>th</sup> 1626 records the appointment of Joseph Avery as vicar of the Abbey and a subsequent entry records *'Memorandum that the 29 day of July Ano Dom 1626 Joseph Avery Minister tooke possession of the Church of Rumsey as Vicar of the place. Item that the same Joseph Avery did read the booke of Articles the next Sabbath following being the 30th day of the same month.'* Joseph Avery subsequently left the Abbey around 1634 as a result of the religious conflicts between the puritans and traditionalists. He intended to emigrate to America with his family but, unfortunately, his boat was caught in a storm and he and his whole family were washed overboard and drowned.

A few church clerks are included in the register but none appear to have been vicars.

## **National Events**

National events were also recorded in the Registers, including the accession of James VI of Scotland to the throne following Elizabeth I's death on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1603 and subsequently the coronation in July 1603 and the proclamation of the establishment of Great Britain in November 1604. These are all made using Latin terminology.

Another national event features in this first Abbey Register. In August 1628 it is reported that *'George Duke of Buckingham was stabbed by one Feltham at porthmouth the 23rd day of this mounthe being St Bartholmews even'*. This clearly was a huge news item in that month as George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, was considered to be one of James I's favourite counsellors and possibly a lover of the King who is widely believed to have been bisexual. In some ways, this could be considered to have been a local event as it took place at the Greyhound Inn in old Portsmouth (now a private house).

## **Occupations and locations**

The register notes the location of many of the persons named in the Register. It is not clear whether this is to indicate that the person is from outside the

catchment of Romsey Parish or whether to distinguish that person from another individual bearing the same name.

Some of the locations specified include: Spitelstret, Tothill, Bannoc Street, Lusberey, Kuppernam, Assfolde.

There are several references in the burials column to persons who appear to be passing through or temporarily resident such as William Munday, a sojourner, and Nicholas King, peregrins (traveller or foreigner) and two unnamed persons who are referred to as 'stranger of the court'. The term 'court' probably refers to a coroners court but perhaps is a reference to the Piepowder Court which was a short-lived court held during the annual fairs in which instant justice was meted out to troublemakers. There are numerous other burials of named and unnamed individuals described as strangers. Some of these strangers refer to the location, presumably, of their death. Broadlands features occasionally, as well as other households such as that of Frances Nash and Ector Jerams.

Various persons in the christenings and burials are referred to as *poor man*, *woman* or *maid* and two references in the burials describe the individuals as blind. Similarly, a number of occupations are specified in the christening and burial columns. These include:- *Robert, shepherd of Denham; Anthony Smythe, Weaver; Harye Coke, servant to Mr Foster; Osman Locke, preacher; John Thomas, showemaker; Agnes Jones, Midwife.*

One notable marriage record between John Martin and Elizabeth Ufman in 1629 has the comment "*these parties were married in my church by Mr Batt but the marriage was illegitimate*". It seems the vicar was not impressed!

## **The Gentry**

Finally, the gentry, who generally owned landed estates outside central Romsey are specifically identified as gentry. These include: John Uvedale, gentleman; Ann Kember, gentlewoman; The Dowse family including Pawlet Dowse, John Dowse, Mary Dowse and Alice Dowse, gentlemen and gentlewomen; and Sir William Pawlett.

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## **The Women Who Founded Romsey Nunnery**

**by Ian Clark**

*This paper is a follow-up to the earlier Nunnery paper in the Spring 2023 newsletter and is a condensed version of a more detailed paper that can be found on the Society's Saxon website at <https://saxonromsey.wixsite.com/website> or through the Society's main website at <https://itvas.org.uk> This includes detailed footnotes of sources, a bibliography and timeline. The author has simplified Old English spelling of names. To distinguish the two*

*Æthelwolds, the abbot/bishop is Ethelwold, whilst Half-King's eldest son and Elfhryth's first husband is Athelwold.*

## TWO PUZZLING QUESTIONS

Most modern authors repeat the 19th century version that Romsey nunnery was possibly founded by King Edward the Elder around 907 and then (re-)founded about 967 by his grandson King Edgar. However, recent academic historians are unconvinced by the flimsy evidence of the earlier foundation and its dating. This paper explores two puzzling questions about the foundation of Romsey nunnery: why Romsey was chosen as the location, and why it was founded as a nunnery rather than a monastery.

The first problem relates to why Romsey was the chosen location, a small undefended hamlet not mentioned in any surviving Anglo-Saxon sources before the late 960s. The Viking raids of the 9th century and lack of sustainable funding had left most of the monastic institutions in ruins. King Edward had followed the plans drawn up by his parents, and spent the first years of his reign building New Minster (for monks) and St Mary's Nunnaminster (for nuns) in central Winchester, defended by a wall. There are no records of him starting other monastic institutions. Similarly, whilst king Edgar helped to fund several monasteries, they were generally in defensible locations (e.g., Ramsey, Ely, Peterborough, Thorney), and overwhelmingly for monks, not nuns.

The second problem relates to why Romsey was founded as a nunnery, rather than a monastery. King Edgar and his key ecclesiastical bishops (Dunstan, Ethelwold and Oswald) were committed to increasing the number of disciplined Benedictine monks, who could be promoted to bishoprics to control the parish clergy and secular canons. It seems highly unlikely that king Edgar and close advisor bishop Ethelwold of Winchester on their own would have come up with the idea of a nunnery in an unimportant hamlet called Romsey. There must have been some other factors at work to get them to agree to build a new nunnery. To understand these factors, we need to see what was developing at a national level in the royal and political spheres as well as the church.

## AN EARLY ANGLO-SAXON MINSTER CHURCH IN ROMSEY?

Romsey as a place, yet alone with a church, does not appear in any surviving Anglo-Saxon records like wills or land charters before the 960s. Archaeology has shown that there was a settlement in central Romsey from the Romano-British period through Anglo-Saxon times. As well as iron smelting, there is evidence from food waste of a fairly high-status diet, suggesting the presence of relatively wealthy people, perhaps clergy or monks, from as early as the 8th century.

From a historian's perspective, the most exciting development in the Abbey's story in the last century or so occurred in 2019, when a Ground Penetrating

Radar (GPR) study was carried out. Whilst only a preliminary report is currently available, this enables the full extent of a late Anglo-Saxon church to be mapped, the precursor to the current Norman building. This is the nunnery's first church, built in the late 10th century, part of whose foundations can still be seen in the north aisle behind the choir stalls.

Excitingly, the GPR study also showed even older structure(s), occupying roughly the south-west quadrant of the Abbey's current floor plan. The Abbey's massive Norman walls and pillars meant the GPR was only able to provide a partial view of the structures. At this stage we do not know when this earlier structure was built, by whom, or for what purpose. Answers to such questions may only come if it is ever possible to carry out archaeological excavations beneath the Abbey floor. But it is reasonable to assume it may be some kind of ecclesiastical structure.

One possible explanation is that it was a 'minster' church, staffed by clergy and laity. It probably served an area much wider than the current Romsey parish, perhaps as large as the current deanery that covers the southern Test Valley from Longstock and Stockbridge in the north to Rownhams and Nursling in the south. Minster churches were the 10th century precursors of large 'mother-churches' in Norman times, from which the current parish system emerged.

This earlier Saxon Romsey ecclesial structure is probably the '*monasterio*' (the Latin word means any community that offers daily worship, including churches as well as monasteries) building that the monk John of Worcester refers to as being constructed by king Edward the Elder. John wrote his chronicle *Chronicon ex chronicis* in the early 12th century. As there are no records of Edward setting up *monasterio* outside Winchester, it is more likely that the chronicler John was meaning that a *monasterio* was established during Edward's reign (900-925), rather than directly by the king. He gives the nunnery's foundation date as 967 during king Edgar's reign. John's account was also copied by four other medieval chroniclers.

#### CONTEMPORARY ANGLO-SAXON SOURCES FOR ROMSEY'S FOUNDATION IN KING EDGAR'S TIME

The principal contemporary source for Romsey nunnery's foundation is King Edgar's charter (Sawyer 812). This copy is undated, but most historians accept the original as written in 967, based on John of Worcester's 12th century *Chronicon* and the date of the Edington estate gift a year later in 968. It is one of a group of *Ortodoxorum* charters (so-called from the opening phrase: *Ortodoxorum uigoris ecclesiastici*), all with a similar structure and style, dealing with the (re-)establishment of monasteries. The earliest charter (dated 959) relates to Abingdon, which had been re-founded in 954 with Ethelwold as abbot. It appears probable that Ethelwold himself was the author, as he was also acting as king Edgar's legal secretary at the time, and the style is

consistent with his other known works. The Romsey charter appears to have used the text of the Abingdon charter as a template, as did later ones at Pershore and Worcester, both c972. In the Romsey one, the king appointed Merwenna the first Abbess, but gave the community of Romsey nuns the privilege of choosing her successors as Abbess, as required by the *Benedictine Rule*.

In 968 there is another royal charter (Sawyer 765) granting Romsey the important Edington estate in Wiltshire which provided a reasonable proportion of the nunnery's income in subsequent centuries. At Domesday in 1086 the Wiltshire estates provided just over half (54%) of the nunnery's wealth, with Romsey itself adding another 20%.

Another key document mentioning the nunnery's early history is *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Unlike some other Anglo-Saxon kings, the annals for king Edgar's reign are few in number, with several years containing no entries at all. Luckily for Romsey (and this paper) there is just one entry for the year: "A.D. 971. This year died Edmund atheling (=prince), and his body lies at Rumsey." Edmund was king Edgar's eldest son and potential heir, clearly being cared for by the nuns in Romsey when he died.

Two contemporary wills mention Romsey nunnery, showing it was rapidly growing in importance. The first is the will of Elfgifu (Sawyer 1484), the widow of Edgar's elder brother Edwig who preceded him as king. The will is generally dated in the period 969-975. In it Elfgifu gifts an estate and paten to the Romsey nunnery, as well as gifts to the king, queen and bishop Ethelwold. The other will is that of ealdorman Ethelmer, the wealthy governor of Hampshire, dated probably in the late 970s (Sawyer 1498). After his main gifts to the New and Old Minsters in Winchester, and to his wife, he then gives small gifts of typically one to three pounds to a number of other monastic institutions, including 2 pounds to Romsey.

There are no contemporary Anglo-Saxon mentions of Romsey as a place before 960, then suddenly in the 960s and 970s there are five independent sources that provide confirmation of a nunnery. The sources are highly credible – even if the charters are later copies of the originals. It seems highly probable that the nunnery was founded in the mid-960s, even if the exact date is unknown.

## NORMAN AND MEDIEVAL SOURCES

Like John of Worcester, most later historians also placed the foundation of Romsey nunnery in King Edgar's time. The most famous of these was William of Malmesbury, whose abbot encouraged him to visit other monasteries to research their manuscripts. From his researches William produced two histories in 1215, one about the English kings *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, and the

other about the English bishops *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*. In the latter he mentions Romsey as "a house founded by that most excellent King Edgar."

Three later medieval historians say Romsey nunnery was founded in King Edgar's time. We have already mentioned John of Worcester. Peter Langtoft, writing his chronicle in verse in the late 13th century, also credits Edgar with founding Romsey. The historian who mentions Romsey nunnery's foundation in greatest detail was John Capgrave (1393-1464), a prolific 15th century author. His *Nova Legenda Angliae* was the first comprehensive collection of lives of English saints, probably compiled in the mid-1400s but not published in book format until 1516. His version of St Ethelfleda's life suggests that her mother Brithwina gave birth when staying in Romsey. The mother died soon after the birth, but asked her husband Athelwold (eldest son of Athelstan Half-King) to found a monastery in Romsey, presumably in her memory.

## THE WEST SAXON ROYAL DYNASTY – AND THE EMERGENCE OF KING EDGAR

When King Edward of Wessex died in 924, the crown passed to his eldest son from his first marriage, Athelstan, who had been brought up in Mercia. It has been suggested by Marc Morris that his widowed step-mother Edgifu (Edward's third wife) agreed to allow Athelstan to reign unchallenged during his lifetime, provided he did not create any heirs, so that her young sons could inherit the throne after Athelstan's death. During his reign Edgifu took a back seat, leaving the Winchester court, but when Athelstan died in 939, she ensured that her sons Edmund (reigned 939-46) and Edred (reigned 946-55) succeeded him, followed by Edmund's sons, Edwig (955-59) and Edgar (959-75). All four came to the throne fairly young – aged about 18, 23, 15 and 14 respectively. The dowager queen Edgifu (c902-c968) took a fairly active regency role for her sons and grandsons in the affairs of state, witnessing charters and influencing senior appointments.

King Edgar's mother Elfgifu probably died soon after his birth, and his father (king Edmund) was killed in a brawl in 946 in his mid-twenties. Whilst his older brother (and presumed royal heir) Edwig was brought up in Winchester, the orphaned toddler Edgar (c944 – 975) was fostered by the powerful Mercian ealdorman Athelstan in East Anglia, who with his brothers controlled the Danelaw from 932 to 955. His nickname was "Half King", and he was the senior non-royal adviser to the young kings Edmund and Edred, effectively acting as co-regent alongside their mother, the dowager Edgifu. Athelstan and his wife Alfwyn fostered Edgar and heavily influenced his development. They arranged for him to be educated at Abingdon monastery (a leading school), where he first met his future principal church advisers – the abbot Ethelwold, and his friend Dunstan, the abbot of Glastonbury.

The 10th century monk Byrhtferth of Ramsey and two 12th century chroniclers (William of Malmesbury and the poet Gaimar) relate a story about the young teenage Edgar that has a bearing on the foundation of Romsey nunnery. The story undoubtedly became exaggerated over time, but probably contains some elements of truth. The core facts appear to be as follows. From around 957 when Edgar was a young teenager and had recently ascended the Mercian throne, he was clearly a ladies' man, having quasi-marriage relationships with at least two named women (Ethelfled and Wulfthryth) in the next few years. When he became king of all England, these relationships were not deemed suitable, so Edgar ended them. He provided for his former 'wives' and their children (Edward and Edith) by housing them in Shaftesbury and Wilton nunneries long-term, as was permitted under the Danelaw. He acknowledged his eldest son Edward's role, even although he had not been born to a church-approved royal mother.

When he unexpectedly became king of all England in 959 and moved from Mercia, where he had been in effective control, to Wessex and Winchester, Edgar needed a new high-status wife. He had heard rumours about the beautiful Elfthryth, daughter of a wealthy Devon landowner (thane Ordgar, already a junior member of the king's inner circle of advisers, the Witan), living in deepest Wessex. So Edgar (still a fairly naïve teenager) asked his older foster-brother eldorman Athelwold (probably a decade older) to check her out. Now Athelwold's first wife Brithwina had recently died (possibly giving birth to a daughter Ethelfled), so Athelwold was also looking for a new wife! Athelwold instantly fell for Elfthryth's charms, and not telling her parents of the king Edgar's interest, married her instead. On returning to Edgar, he reported that Elfthryth was not at all suitable to be Edgar's new queen, and made sure she stayed at home in East Anglia, and never appeared at the Winchester court. But sometime later other courtiers told Edgar of his foster-brother's deception, and by 963 Athelwold was conveniently dead, either in a military skirmish or hunting accident or (likeliest) from natural causes. Edgar started courting the young widow Elfthryth, probably in 963. They had to wait a year to get married, as Elfthryth would otherwise have lost possession of the wealth left by her late husband. This left the path clear for Edgar to officially marry Elfthryth in c964, making her queen. The royal line was secured when two sons, Edmund and Ethelred were born.

#### POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS – THE CREATION OF THE ENGLISH NATION DURING THE 10TH CENTURY

King Alfred had been heavily influenced by European ideas, and particularly the policies of Charlemagne (reigned 768-814) and his successors, as they ruled over much of modern mainland Europe. The Carolingian dynasty enabled a mini-renaissance in European art and learning. When King Alfred died in 899, he only directly ruled over Wessex, an area roughly south of the Thames. He had established friendly relations with Mercia (roughly the West Midlands) by

marrying his eldest daughter Ethelfled to the Lord of the Mercians, but he still needed to pay the Danes in East Anglia to stop their regular pillaging. The following tenth century saw the gradual and somewhat erratic development of an English nation, and the first steps towards a wider unification of these regional kingdoms.

His son Edward the Elder (reigned 899-925) forged an alliance with his sister Ethelfled, the Lady of the Mercians. Together they managed to secure a measure of control over most of southern England and the Midlands. Edward's son Athelstan (reigned 925-939) and his half-brothers Edmund (939-946) and Edred (946-955) extended this rule over York and Northumbria, effectively forming the modern English nation. King Athelstan also formed alliances with various European states, marrying off his sister and four half-sisters to their rulers or heirs.

Starting with Alfred, a system of fortified towns 'burhs' (like Chester, Oxford etc) was developed. These became the bases of powerful local lords known as ealdormen, and became the basis for local government based on 'shires', a concept developed in Wessex over the centuries. Each shire held an annual assembly of freemen to discuss local issues. The king appointed the ealdorman to each shire, who represented the shire on the king's national advisory council. The ealdorman's main task was to raise and lead any troops the king required. The king also appointed a sheriff in each shire, responsible for local taxation and justice. Each shire was sub-divided into hundreds or wapentakes for tax, military service, and criminal justice purposes. In Edgar's time a standard national coinage was developed (replacing local currencies), improving internal trade. The royal council or witan, made up mainly of the ealdormen, bishops and abbots, became the king's key advisors.

This gradual process of English standardisation nearly foundered when king Edred died in 955, with England effectively split in two between Edmund's two young sons Edwig (aged about 15) who reigned in Wessex for only four years, and Edgar (aged about 11), who reigned in Mercia and the north from 957. Edwig died young, and Edgar succeeded as king of all England in 959, reigning until 975.

## CHURCH DEVELOPMENTS – THE BENEDICTINE REFORMATION

Christianity slowly took root in England during the 7<sup>th</sup> century, with Augustine and his Italian monks converting from the south, whilst Irish missions were in Wales and northern Britain.

King Edgar, educated at Abingdon by Ethelwold, recalled Dunstan from exile and appointed him bishop of Worcester, London, and finally Canterbury. Edgar used Ethelwold as his principal secretary and legal adviser, promoting him to bishop of Winchester in 963. After Edgar's marriage to Elfhryth in 964, they

commissioned Ethelwold to translate the Rule of Benedict into Old English, the first vernacular version in Europe.

The key Benedictine reforming bishops - Dunstan, Ethelwold, and Oswald - held a synod to establish the *Regularis Concordia*, rules for all monasteries to follow. This synod likely took place in 966, with Ethelwold as the main author. The *Regularis Concordia* adapted the European principles set out in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century Aachen councils to form a standard English practice based on the Benedictine *Rule*. Notable innovations included enhancing the roles of the King and Queen as 'Guardians of Monks and Nuns' and requiring bishops to live as monks. Monasteries were to hold all property institutionally, and monks or nuns could choose their own abbot or abbess, subject to royal approval.

Edgar's reign saw a rapid expansion of monasteries, often placed in fortified burhs for protection against Viking raids. Many were founded by the three main reformers, while others were established by wealthy laymen. John of Worcester, writing nearly 300 years later, credited Edgar with establishing more than forty monasteries. Though in reality Edgar probably had little to do except sign the founding charters drawn up by the churchmen.

#### THE WOMEN – AND MEN – WHO FOUNDED ROMSEY NUNNERY

This section is my personal reconstruction of Romsey nunnery's foundation, suggesting that most of the work was done by influential women in the king's court, with men playing mainly administrative roles. It explains why it was sited in Romsey, and why it was a nunnery for women. First some details about the key players.

Abbess Merwenna, the first abbess of Romsey, is a somewhat mysterious figure. She is mentioned in the c967 Romsey nunnery charter and listed as the highest non-royal lady in a 1031 list of praiseworthy women to be prayed for by the monks of Hyde monastery in Winchester, the wealthiest in England at that time. She was buried at Romsey nunnery and later portrayed as a loving foster mother to Ethelfleda in hagiographies. Merwenna was said to have been an advisor to Bishop Ethelwold. Her name is not Anglo-Saxon, suggesting foreign (possibly Celtic, Welsh, or Irish) noble origins. She was likely a charismatic and mature leader, probably in her 30s or 40s when appointed abbess, and may have influenced the inclusion of women's ministry in Benedictine texts.

Queen Elfhtryth, daughter of Devon thane Ordgar, was first married to Athelwold (Edgar's foster brother) before marrying King Edgar. She drove a hard bargain in marrying Edgar, insisting on being crowned co-ruler queen. Later Norman chroniclers portrayed her negatively, partly due to suspicions about her stepson Edward's death, but recent biographers present a more favourable view. Elfhtryth was clearly influenced by her own family's (Ordgar and son) and first husband's (Athelstan Half-King and sons Ethelwold and Ethelwine) family's support of new monasteries. She is listed as a witness in

the 966 New Minster charter, emphasizing her role as legitimate queen and mother of the young heir Edmund.

Bishop Ethelwold was a polymath who transformed Winchester into a cultural centre. He produced illuminated manuscripts admired across Europe, developed liturgical plainchant and early polyphony, and enlarged the Old Minster, including a 400-pipe organ. Ethelwold focused on translating Latin texts into Old English, effectively creating the rules of Old English grammar. He also helped design new fresh-water supplies for his monasteries and part of Winchester town.

My theory is that the experienced courtier Merwenna took the new queen Elfhryth under her wing when she first came to Winchester to get married in about 964. She introduced her to two previous royal consorts: Elfgifu (wife of king Edwig) and the elderly dowager Edgifu (wife of Edward the Elder), still an enormous influence on her grandson king Edgar. Elfhryth shared with her new lady friends her late husband Athelwold's wish to found a monastery at Romsey. The women, possibly with Ethelwold's support, decided to establish a new nunnery at Romsey, fulfilling Elfhryth's new role as "Guardian of the Nuns" following the *Regularis Concordia*. Merwenna was chosen to lead the nunnery due to her connections and leadership skills. The nunnery provided a home for Elfhryth's stepdaughter Ethelfleda and possibly care for her young son Edmund. Elfhryth likely asked Edgar to provide royal estates to fund the new foundation, and Bishop Ethelwold provided his Abingdon charter as a template for Romsey, and he may have advised on construction and water engineering for the site.

This theory explains both why Romsey was chosen (to fulfil Athelwold's dying wish) and why it was a nunnery (Elfhryth's role as 'Guardian of Nuns'). It places Romsey as a key early outcome of the Benedictine Reformation, inspired and driven forward by influential royal women. It was the first new nunnery after the *Regularis Concordia* and *The Rule of Benedict*, standing out among the mostly male monastic foundations of the period.

After Edgar's death in 975 and Edward the Martyr's in 979, Elfhryth continued to play an active role during her son Ethelred's early reign. She was associated with the foundation of two other nunneries, Amesbury and Wherwell, before retiring to the latter and dying around 1001 AD. The importance of these women in the foundation of Romsey is further evidenced by a list compiled by the monks of New Minster in Winchester about fifty years later, which includes all five women featured in this paper: Edgifu, Elfgifu, Elfhryth, Merwenna, and Ethelfled. Notably, Merwenna is the highest-ranked non-royal woman on this list.

## CONCLUSION

This paper provides reasonable answers to the two initial questions: Romsey as a location was chosen because Queen Elfhryth was trying to honour the dying wishes of her first husband, Athelwold, and his first wife, Brithwina. It was built as a nunnery because the queen had recently been made 'Guardian of the Nuns', and this was her way of playing a leading role in the Benedictine Reformation. It also provided a safe home for her stepdaughter Ethelfled and possibly her young son Edmund. Romsey should be seen as the first new tenth-century nunnery to follow the Benedictine rule, with Queen Elfhryth acknowledged as the key founder. This perspective challenges the traditional view of Romsey's foundation as an isolated event initiated by King Edgar, instead placing it within the broader context of the Benedictine Reformation and highlighting the often-overlooked role of royal women in shaping 10th-century English religious institutions.

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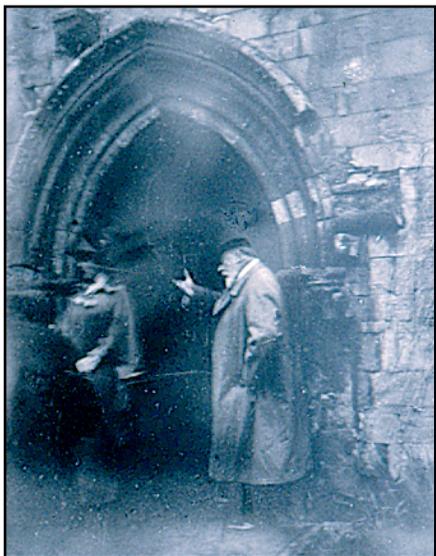
## Commemorative Brass Plaques in Romsey Town Hall by Barbara Burbridge

Some significant events in Romsey's past have been marked by creating brass plaques. These are displayed around the Town Hall staircases.

Starting from the entrance foyer and taking the stairs to the offices, the first of these brasses commemorates the return of volunteers who had taken part in the Boer War of 1899-1902. A small number of men had sailed to South Africa as volunteers in this conflict. Twelve are listed on the plaque as those who returned – Thomas Barnes, Sidney Bedford, Donald K. Bridger, Frank Brown, Robert P. Chignell, Stanley H. Delamare, Herbert H. Down, Frederick J. Lucas, George T. Medley, Leonard G.T. Mills, Albert R. Moore and Alfred G. Morgan. Of these, some surnames immediately sound familiar, linking them, for example, to prominent shopkeeping families, such as Bedford at No 3 The Hundred; Chignell on the north side of the Market Place and Medley in Cherville Street east side. The Medley name, in particular has been chased back to the 1700s. Another possible link is to the Lucas family, 19<sup>th</sup>-century coachmakers in Latimer Street.



Just above this Boer War plaque is another brass marking a visit made to the Abbey by King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1909. The King and Queen were making a visit to nearby Broadlands House and their outing to the Abbey was meant to be a private one. It is said, however, that word travelled swiftly to Mayor, James Coleclough, who gathered other officials and rushed to greet the monarch and his wife, who, apparently curtailed their very



brief visit in very uncomplimentary words about the weather. The rather dim photograph taken by the north door certainly endorses the idea of pouring rain. Determined to make the best of the occasion the Mayor commissioned the brass plaque.

Coming next is yet another brass plaque, this one rather worthier of its existence. It is set into wood and is another war dedication. It records that 873 Romsey men served and returned from the traumas of the First World War (1914-1918). Too many to list, nevertheless these 873 men make an encouraging contrast to the 150 or so men from Romsey who lost their lives during those four terrible years. There was a small ceremony on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1920 at which the brass was revealed

and a message from King George V was read out by Charles T. Waters, Mayor of Romsey.

On the main landing and set against the east wall is a collection of items linked to the Town Hall itself, mostly to do with its original building in 1865-66. But underneath is a modest brass plaque dated 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1986. This records the return to Romsey town of the ownership of the Town Hall which had passed in 1974 to the newly created Test Valley Borough Council into which Romsey had been subsumed, its independent borough status being lost.

Romsey had been obliged to repurchase its own town hall and then pay for refurbishment. The brass does not record this financial burden but that there was a grand opening at which Mayor G.F. Street officiated.

A turn in the stairs reaches another small secondary landing where two complementary brass plaques are side by side. One is dated 6<sup>th</sup> April 1957 and records the visit of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip who joined the celebrations to mark the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Romsey's royal charter of 1607. Romsey's celebrations were for one day only but was full of colour and excitement. There was an exhibition in the Town Hall and a whole ox was roasted in front of the Corn Exchange. The Queen planted mulberry trees in Romsey and later in Broadlands Park. Prince Philip was guest of honour at a luncheon in the Town Hall, the signatures of those attended is displayed in the foyer. Hosting the day was Romsey's mayor, Cllr George Mackrell.

The 6<sup>th</sup> April was the actual date on which James I signed the 1607 charter incorporating Romsey Infra as a borough. The next brass plaque

commemorates the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this charter and there was a whole summer season of events. The Queen and her husband made a return visit on Friday, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2007 in a day of brilliant sunshine.

After a service in the Abbey in which the actual charter was displayed, the Queen unveiled the plaque, designed and created by Rod Hoyle, and then she and Prince Philip did a 'walkabout' among the watching crowd. Then, after another presentation in the Market Place they attended a reception in the Town Hall Council Chamber. Those attending signed an illuminated scroll, once again the work of Rod Hoyle, and this, too, is displayed in the foyer of the Town Hall. On this occasion the Mayor was Cllr Mark Cooper, supported by the Town Clerk, Judith Giles.

There are no further brass plaques until reaching the top of the secondary stairs. Tucked away in a less obvious place, just to the right of the double doors into the Council Chamber, is the oldest plaque. It marks the Romsey celebrations to mark the golden jubilee of Queen Victoria, stating that the celebrations were held on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1887 and began with a service in the Abbey, followed by a procession to Broadlands Park.

The host at Broadlands was Lord Mount Temple (previously William Cowper-Temple, Lord Palmerston's heir). A dinner was held for 2000 poor people, followed by tea and sports for 1800 children. William Overbury Purchase, Mayor of Romsey, was chairman for the day's events with G.F.W. Mortimer, Town Clerk, as secretary. The plaque also records that townspeople defrayed £342 of costs.

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## **ROMSEY'S ALLOY PLAQUES**

**by Professor Roger Leech**

Keen observers of the streets of Romsey may have noticed that scattered across the town are a number of cast alloy plaques providing information on historic sites and buildings. The purpose of this note is to enquire of you the reader who and what initiative were responsible for them? To remind you of what and where the plaques are:

The route followed by those carrying the body of King William Rufus from the New Forest to Winchester for burial - in Bell Steet on the side of the Town Hall

The White Horse Hotel built c.1500, containing original frescoes - on the north side of the Market Place, just inside the double doors to the street, on the east side of the passage.

A skirmish of 1643 in the English Civil War, on the south face of the north



parapet to the bridge at the south end of Middlebridge Street.

Palmerston Street, on the exterior wall of the Manor House, now Prezzo's Restaurant.

This year is the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Romsey and District Society, so I am placing this same note in their newsletter. That same Society was also responsible for the blue plaques to be found similarly but more widely across the town, so a rapid perusal of the Society's earlier newsletters might be in order to establish if this was an earlier such initiative.



During the time in which I have been considering this conundrum, I have come across one similar plaque in another town, namely Beverley, marking the north gate to the town.

This brought to my mind and that of fellow archaeologist Tim Tatton-Brown a recollection that these plaques may be of a form similar to

some to be found on historic buildings formerly in the guardianship of the Ministry of Works, now the properties open to the public and managed by English Heritage. I will therefore also offer this note to the newsletter of the Royal Archaeological Institute, whose members may include former staff of the Ministry from times long gone by, and who might recollect the initiative which caused these to be researched and placed. Those in Romsey are certainly a strange eclectic mix, and it would be of interest to know more about the thinking behind this project now lost in the mists of time.

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## News from the Society 2023-24

by Mary Harris

### Some recent donations to our archives:

- Copy of a letter written by Florence Nightingale from Scutari in January 1856.- the original is held by King John's House.
- Photos and information about local Football teams from several different sources.
- Postcards of Braishfield
- School reports from Romsey Boys School from the 1950s.
- Sales documents giving details of buildings in Romsey 1919.
- 'Vision of Romsey' on VHS.
- Glass plate photos from 1950s
- Stares' ledger covering the rationing of meat during the Second World War.
- Four framed prints of Rex Traythorne's reconstruction pictures of Abbey Court.



*Stares Ledger*

- DVDs from Chas Burnett on Strong's Brewery and Botley Road cemetery.
- Books on how to research family and local history. These will be added to our bookshelves. These books are available for members to borrow.

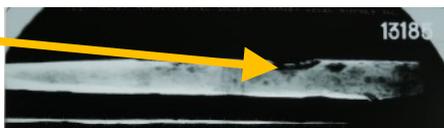
### Archaeology

We have had an X-ray done of the Saxon spearhead which was found at Greatbridge in the late 19th century, and is now held by Romsey Abbey. The X-ray unfortunately shows little except the placing of a rivet hole for fixing the spearhead to its shaft. We are hoping that experts on spearheads may be able to tell us more.



*X-rays of the spearhead found near Greatbridge in the late 19th century and now held by Romsey Abbey*

*Place where the spearhead was fixed to the wooden shaft*



### SORP

The Survey of Romsey Streets and buildings Project continues. Meetings are held every first Thursday of the month in the Town Hall basement. We are working on a number of aspects: Several individual buildings, revision of the Middlebridge Street booklet, and a study of the late Victorian and Edwardian terraces. We are looking at the houses in Romsey which have date plaques in order to use the architectural details to be able to date similar buildings. A walk in August round those in Middlebridge Street and Greenhill View was very instructive. Most of these date stones are from the years around 1900 when it seemed to be the fashion. In addition Roger Leech proposes to do a survey of the Manor House in Palmerston Street. More help would be welcome, especially on sorting out photographs to show the changes to each building.



*Test Cottages 1889*

### Revision of 'So Drunk He Must Have Been to Romsey'

We discovered to our dismay that we have few copies left of our booklet 'So Drunk He Must Have Been to Romsey'. Before having a new print run done we decided to try to revise and up-date the book. The original book was written in 1974 when there was no internet and all research of documents like the censuses and trade directories had to be done in the Winchester Record Office



*A Boules match at the Star in  
1980*

or laboriously transcribed from microfilms. Even the first revised version, published in 2007, did not benefit from much easier access to archives. Now with so many records available through sites like Ancestry and Find My Past as well as easier copying of documents from HRO and the National Archives at Kew we have access to far more information. We are trying to check the material already included in the previous two editions of the book and to add the new information discovered as well as correcting the few mistakes we are aware of. The work already done as part of the Survey of Romsey project is helping with some of the town centre pubs.

**Monday Morning workshops** have been busy all year. Our regular researchers continue to work on records of weddings and

local football teams from the Romsey Advertiser. Further study is being done on the historic landscape using our QGIS maps and LiDAR.

### **Visitors**

Most weeks we have visitors with queries about local families or local buildings. In May we had visitors from Tasmania tracing the locations where their ancestor, John Tongs, lived and worked. He was the blacksmith at Timsbury who was transported for his part in the Swing Riots of 1830. He returned to England to fetch his family and became a prosperous pillar of the Methodist church in Longford, Tasmania with many descendants. Another visitor from the West Country turned out to be a distant cousin of the chairman (we share great great great grandparents!).

### **Third Thursday Zoom Chats**

We have continued with Zoom talks, chats and discussions every third Thursday of the month from 11am to 12 noon. These have covered a wide range of topics including the history of King John's House, the career of Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Guard, and the history of the United Reformed Church building. If anyone wishes to give a chat one Thursday or has a suggestion or request for a topic please let us know.

**Recent visits/walks** have been interesting. In May we visited Ashley Church and Castle where we were given access to the castle grounds and given an interesting additional talk on recent inhabitants of Ashley. Members tried to read the interesting graffiti in the church, dating from the 16th century (see cover photo). In June Roger Leech led a walk through Sloden enclosure where we located some Roman pottery, evidence of the Roman pottery kilns and also

found the site of a Medieval hunting lodge. The walk was rounded off with a magnificent view over the Forest landscape into the setting sun.

In August Phoebe Merrick conducted a walk along Latimer Street studying the shops and



*Investigating Ashley Castle*



*Looking at Latimer Street buildings.*



*Looking for Roman pottery, traces of the Roman kilns in Sloden Enclosure*

houses. In September Alec Morley led a walk around the Abbey and its surroundings giving some fascinating detail on some of the Abbey monuments.

### **Showcasing Hampshire History**

In September we took part in the Showcasing Hampshire History Event organised by Hampshire Field Club in Winchester There were many local history societies with stands illustrating their recent work as well as a series of lectures including one by Phoebe Merrick.

