

FROM THE ARCHIVES: THE STONE COFFINS OF BOSHAM CHURCH

I have kept to the old spelling of Canute throughout this article, since this was how it was spelt until quite recently, but it is now more usual to spell it 'Cnut'.

Is King Canute's Daughter buried in Bosham Church?

Unfortunately, it is not possible to give a definite answer to this question but I did think that visitors to the church via the website or in person to the church itself, might be interested in the long held tradition that King Canute's daughter was drowned in the millstream early in the 11th century, and buried in Bosham church and the subsequent finding of a small stone coffin in front of the chancel arch in 1865. Canute was King of England from 1016-1035 and although we have no written evidence that Canute had a Manor House in Bosham or indeed ever had time to come to Bosham, this tradition has been handed down from generation to generation and the story has gradually evolved over the years from Saxon princess to King Canute's daughter. There is also the little stone effigy which is on the recessed tomb by the organ in the chancel of the church and which was thought to represent the little princess but carved much later, possibly, in the reign of Edward I (1272-1307), as a suitable memorial to her. The effigy and tomb do not appear to go together.

In 1865 when considerable restoration work was being done in the church the Reverend Henry Mitchell, Vicar of Bosham from 1845-1912, decided to take the opportunity to test this long held tradition. Those were the days when vicars could do what they liked to their churches without having to get permission from higher authority. Here is Mitchell's Report on the project which appeared in the Sussex Archaeological Collection No. 18 and was later published in his book, 'The Early Traditions of Bosham'. Below is also a reproduction of the drawing that Mr Varley, the artist, made at the time of the opening.

THE OPENING OF THE STONE COFFIN 4TH AUGUST 1865.

For some time the scaffolding, which had been erected for repairing the chancel arch, and for pointing the east wall of the nave, stood in our way; but this being removed, and the floor also taken up, on the 4th August 1865, in the presence of my son, Henry Godwin Mitchell, Mr Edgar J Varley, the artist and Mr C.

Sturgess-Jones, surgeon of Chichester, I directed the masons who were at work in the church, to sound the spot which tradition had pointed out as the site of the child's grave. The iron bar at once struck upon a stone and on removing the mould which covered it a stone coffin was presented to our delighted gaze. The mason in raising the lid, which was firmly fixed to the coffin by concrete, broke in two places; but when it was raised the remains of the child were distinctly visible, and Mr Varley, the artist, at once made a most correct and careful drawing of the coffin and its contents, a reproduction of which is given.



No vestige of any ornament or clothing was found. From the size of the body the child must have been, as handed down by tradition, about eight years of age at the time of her decease.

The stone was replaced on the coffin after a suitable time to allow people to view it and a tile with a raven, a revered bird in Danish folklore, was placed in the newly laid floor.

Rev Henry Mitchell

Drawing by Edgar J. Varley of the contents of the stone coffin, 1865.

The next time the subject of the stone coffin is mentioned is some 40 years later in 1906 when the Reverend Kenneth MacDermott, Vicar from 1902-1915, decided that the tile bearing the raven in the floor of the nave was not an adequate memorial to a little princess. He decided that the children of the village should contribute towards a more suitable stone slab to be placed in the floor beside the tile. The coffin was not exposed this time so MacDermott never saw the coffin and its actual position under the nave floor. The slab has the following inscription:

TO THE GLORY OF GOD/AND IN MEMORY OF/A DAUGHTER OF KING CANUTE/WHO DIED EARLY IN THE 11TH CENTURY/AGED ABOUT 8 YEARS/WHOSE REMAINS LIE ENCLOSED IN A/STONE COFFIN BENEATH THIS SPOT/PLACED BY THE CHILDREN OF THE PARISH, AUGUST 1906.



East

West

The original tile of 1865 and additional floor slab of 1906.

The total cost of the stone, including fixing was £2.2s.6d, towards which the Vicar received £1.16s 4½d, from the children. The stone was placed on the floor beside the tile with the head of the slab towards the west end of the church.

The re-opening of the Small Coffin and the discovery of the larger coffin

Then in 1954 when the floor of the nave was again being repaired the Reverend Bransby Jones, vicar from 1949-1963, decided to investigate the coffin and asked one of the workmen to probe under the slab put there by MacDermott but no coffin was found. However, after further probing towards the centre of the nave a small stone coffin was found. There was nothing in it but some rubble and a small bottle containing brown liquid which, despite extensive analysing, could not be identified. Then while probing further to the left the workmen found another larger, more refined coffin. But more of this coffin later. Both coffins were temporarily covered until an official examination could be arranged. The inspection took place on April 7th 1954 by Mr Gilyard-Beer from the Ancient Monuments Department of the Ministry of Works. Also present, in an official capacity, were: The Venerable Lancelot Mason, Archdeacon of Chichester. The Rev. Bransby Jones, Vicar. Mr D.A Langhorne, Surgeon. Mr J.E.M. Macgregor, Church architect. Mr J. S. Wilson, Civil Engineer. Rev H.K.G. Bearman, Curate and Mr H.F. Follett and Mr C.W. Scales, the Church Wardens.



The open coffins – 1954

David Martin, who lives in Bosham, recalled how he happened to be just arriving for work as Manager of Barclays Bank in Bosham on that April morning and having some minutes to spare before the Bank opened he walked up the High Street towards the church. Seeing several dark- suited men going into the church, he decided to see what was happening and as he was also wearing a suit he was able to follow without drawing attention to himself. Being a very keen amateur archaeologist, geologist and historian, he was thrilled to find he was about to witness the official re-opening of the coffins. He must certainly be one of the last 'survivors' of those attending that day - the only other person I know of is Nicholas Langhorne, son of the surgeon. Both coffins were measured, photographed and the contents thoroughly examined and then the coffins were re-closed and the repairs to the floor completed.

The Memorial for the Small Coffin

In 1957 the original tile placed in the nave floor by Henry Mitchell came under scrutiny and the following saga came from some notes which I found made by Mr R.L.(Dickie) Austin the jeweller, late of North Street, Chichester. Mr Austin was approached by an American pilot, Amos Nielson, who had fought in the Second World War and was at the time living in Southwood Cottage, Bosham. Amos Nielson's parents were Danish, although now living in America. When his mother visited him from Utah she was very interested in the grave of the 'Danish Princess', but was disappointed at the condition of the tile which, being level with the floor, had become very worn and cracked from countless people walking on it. She said that she would like to replace the tile. It was decided that this kind offer also provided the opportunity to preserve both the new tile and the existing memorial stone, put in by MacDermott, by mounting them both on a plinth of Portland stone. After discussing the proposition with the Vicar, Bransby Jones, Amos Nielson contacted Mr Austin who, in view of the Danish association, suggested that he commissioned the Royal Copenhagen Porcelain Company in Denmark to make the replacement tile.

It was now necessary to obtain a Faculty, the official document from the Chancellor of the Diocese giving permission for any work to be carried out in the church and to that end designs were prepared of heraldic ravens, the raven being a Norse emblem. This entailed visits to Denmark, the Danish Embassy and discussions with the Royal Copenhagen Porcelain Company. But the design was not accepted and more correspondence followed with the Chancellor, the Archdeacon, the Advisory Committee, Francis Steer the County Archivist, and several other important 'bodies'. Then the next design, a drawing of Odin, a Teutonic God, supplied by an artist in Denmark was also over-ruled and an altogether different design had to be prepared for approval. These were the guidelines set out by Francis Steer, the County Archivist:

"Two factors over-ride any other considerations. In the first place, as there was no organized system of heraldry in the time of King Canute, it would be quite wrong to regard any design for a commemorative tile as having any heraldic origin or significance: the raven is an appropriate emblem for Denmark and nothing more. Secondly any representation of the raven must be recognizable and not a copy or adaptation of a sculpture or anything else which is unintelligible if taken out of its context. Some of the birds shown on the Bayeux Tapestry, for example, may be ravens, but if divorced from their historical associations would not be identifiable.

I strongly recommend that the design should follow the enclosed drawing which shows a bird with a heavy bill and the long throat-hackles which serve to distinguish it from the crow, but the bill is open and the aggressiveness of the bird is apparent. The colour should be black with fine lines to indicate the eye and the shape of the wing. It would be difficult and undesirable to show the purple iridescence which one would see on the plumage of a live raven. The tile should be square or diamond shaped and not shaped as a shield".

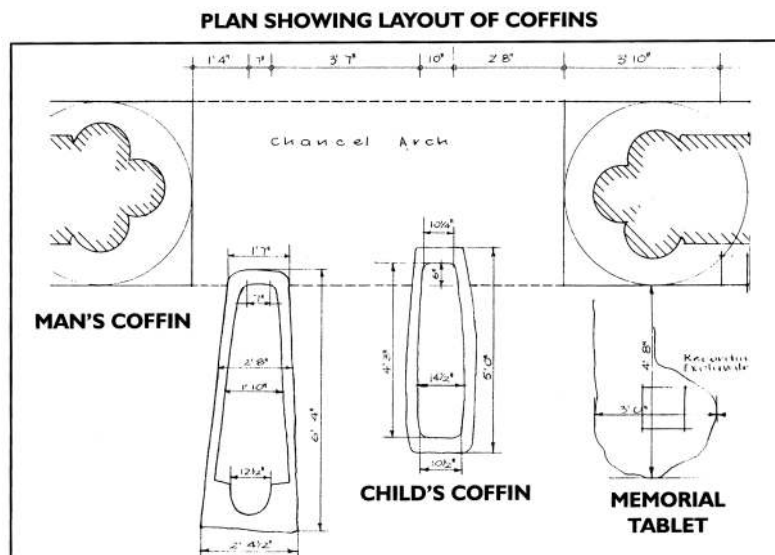


Following Francis Steer's recommendations, a new design, in fact his own suggested drawing, was submitted on October 13th 1958 and at last a Faculty was issued. Mr Nielson was then able to approach The Royal Copenhagen Porcelain Company only to be told that they would require approximately a year to eighteen months to complete the commission. Bransby Jones was heard to remark, 'I hope that I shall be alive to see it in place'. He was, but sadly Amos Nielson's mother was not.

The tile by its very nature had to be fired at a very high temperature and difficulty with the pigment running was encountered. In the end the company fired about 40 tiles before getting one that satisfied them. By this time the expense of the undertaking had risen out of all proportion but the awkward situation was saved by the decision of the Copenhagen Company and Mr Allen who generously agreed between themselves to provide the tile without charge to Amos Nielson.



Finally, the Portland stone plinth was set into the floor of the nave with the new tile and the re-incised, shortened slab, mounted on the top and the memorial was dedicated at a special service held on Sunday 28th June 1959. The Plinth was laid almost in the same position as MacDermott's slab but was turned right round with the top at the east end near the base of the arch. So, for the second time, despite the position of the coffin being known the memorial was still not actually over the coffin. However, in view of the height of the plinth it is just as well that Bransby Jones did not position the new slab over the coffin as it would have been almost in the centre of the aisle. From the floor plan below the position of the two coffins can be seen. The original tile was left in the floor but its position was moved slightly so that it was covered by the new plinth. If you look along the right-hand side of the plinth you can just see the very edge of the old yellow tile. Remember that all this effort, time and money was expended when everyone concerned was quite sure that the coffin had contained the daughter of King Canute.



So, here we have a long held 'tradition' passed down from generation to generation that a young daughter of King Canute drowned and was buried in the church and then over 900 years later a small stone coffin is found in a prominent position in the church - what are we to believe - it must surely be the grave of the little princess? But did Canute even have a home in Bosham? Did he ever have time to come to Bosham?¹ Did he have another, younger daughter?² Will the precise age of the coffins ever be known? We shall probably never know the answers to any of these questions so we shall probably never know for certain that it was King Canute's daughter that was buried in this small coffin in Bosham church. It is important that we do not lose sight of these early 'traditions' but of course equally important that they do not get handed down as fact. However, we should also remember that a large amount of history is, after all, made up of hypothesis and conjecture.

¹ Canute was not only King of England (for 18 years) but also King of Denmark, Norway and part of Sweden. He had two wives- one in England, one in Denmark. He waged war against the Scots, travelled to Rome to visit the Pope and was only 40 when he died in Shaftsbury.

² His only recorded daughter, Gunhilda died aged 18 in 1038, and was buried in Germany.

The Larger Coffin

As previously mentioned, in 1954 when the floor of the nave was again being repaired the Reverend Bransby Jones decided to look for the small coffin that had been discovered in 1865 and while doing so he also discovered a larger, more refined coffin. Here is Bransby Jones's own description of the event.

'The larger coffin was found to the right of the chancel arch and in such a significant position to arouse expectations as to whom could have been buried in such a prominent place. The coffin was more refined than the smaller one with a tapered and rounded end. It contained a thigh bone and other fragments including some vertebrae. These were examined by the people present and photographs and measurements were taken and then after about a week the lids were repaired and the flooring replaced over the coffins.'



From left to right, Mr Langhorne holding the thigh bone, the Rev Bransby Jones and Mr Gilyard-Beer. 1954

As Earl Godwin (King Harold's father) was known to have held the Manor of Bosham and kept his fleet in the harbour it was immediately thought that it must be his grave. However, his death and burial are well recorded. In 1053 Godwin, and his sons Tostig, Harold and Gyrth spent Easter in Winchester with the King, Edward the Confessor and on Easter Monday when they and other nobles were at dinner, Godwin was accused of being involved in the murder of Alfred, Edward's brother. There is a story told is that he swore he was not guilty of the crime and that God should strike him down if he was lying and at that moment he fell forward speechless and never regained consciousness. He died on the 15th April 1053 and was buried in The Old Minster, Winchester with his noble patron King Canute.

During the reigns of both Canute and Edward the Confessor, Earl Godwin had amassed enormous wealth and vast estates which included the extremely wealthy secular Manor of Bosham and almost all of this passed to his son Harold at his death. Harold's remains have never been found and his burial place has not been positively identified. At the time of his death in 1066, Harold's main home was Bosham where his mother, wife and children lived and where he kept his fleet of ships. So, the *possibility* of Harold being buried in Bosham church is quite strong but all available evidence suggests otherwise.

The increased desire to trace family history and the easy accessibility of information provided by the Internet has sparked people's interest in the past and the very exciting discovery of Richard III in Leicester obviously awakened interest in Harold's whereabouts. The headlines in The Guardian –

'we've found Dick now let's find Harry' was probably not so surprising. There are several Societies who feel very strongly that not enough is being done to find out if it is King Harold that is buried in Bosham Church. Some of the reports call for the *body* to be exhumed, obviously believing there is much more in the coffin than just a few random bones. Others do not realise that nowadays vicars and PCCs have no authority to start digging up coffins but are rightly controlled by the Chancellor of the Diocese.



The Possible Re-opening of the Coffins

In 2001 Canon Thomas Inman, vicar from 1986-2010, was approached by a film company who put forward a request to have the coffins excavated and the contents examined. They were prepared to meet all expenses incurred providing they were allowed to make a film of the whole process. The Parochial Church Council (PCC) appreciated that the chances of getting a definitive answer on exactly who had been buried in the coffins was slim but it was agreed this would be a great opportunity to find the answers to some of the questions that so far were unresolved. The Petition dawn up was firstly for permission to carry out a detailed archaeological investigation of the site, secondly to open up the putative grave of King Harold for visual examination and thirdly authorisation for the removal of a sample of bone for DNA testing against the DNA of modern individuals claiming descent from the Godwin family.

After much discussion, the PCC was agreed that the necessary steps should be taken and in April 2003 an application for a Faculty was made to the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC). But without success - on 13th June 2003 the Diocesan Advisory committee certificate was received which stated: *The Committee does not recommend the above works/other proposals for approval for the following reasons. The committee considered that with the current presumption against the unnecessary disturbance of human remains and the difficulties in ensuring reliability of genealogical records, together with consistent Y-chromosome typing, it could not support this work.*

If a Faculty Application is not supported by the DAC the procedure allows the 'petitioner', in this instance the PCC, to take the Petition to Court and argue the case before the Chichester Chancellor of the Diocese, a specialist in ecclesiastical law and the person who passes the final judgement. The PCC decided to use this prerogative and submit a petition to the Chancellor. In view of the controversial nature of the petition the Chancellor decided that it was appropriate for the case to be determined in open court. The date chosen for the Consistory Court was 24th November 2003, to be held in Bosham Church.

The Consistory Court

In 2001 when the archaeological investigation of the stone coffins in the church was initiated, the Keeper of the Fabric of Bosham Church was Jeremy Grindle. I am very grateful to him for much of the following information which has been taken from his large dossier of the whole process in which he was involved consisting of agreements, funding, solicitors, statement of needs, faculties, experts and clergy and which lasted from 2001-2004.

The Petition, subsequently put forward by the PCC, was somewhat modified to reflect some of the reasons why the DAC had not recommended the proposed work and it was also decided not to include the smaller coffin in the proposed excavations.

The Consistory Court set up in response to the Petitioners request was held on 24th November 2003 and the Worshipful Mark Hill QC, Chancellor, presided. The Archdeacon of Horsham (Bosham was at that time in the Archdeaconry of Horsham) was represented by Mr Justin Gau QC, acting archdeacon, as Counsel to the Court. The PCC were represented by Mr Tim Briden QC and both sides had witnesses to support their case. The arguments in favour of Bosham being at least a possible site for the burial of Harold were put forward as follows:

- The coffin uncovered in 1954 was certainly that of a significant person, lying as it is in a prominent position under the chancel arch.
- The examination revealed no skull in the coffin and a leg bone sliced right through by a blade, creating damage that had no time to heal before burial; clearly this a battle victim. The injuries closely resemble those that were inflicted on Harold at Hastings on October 14th 1066 and recorded by his assailants.
- Bosham was the Godwin family home.
- A discreet grave at Bosham would have addressed the fear of the Normans than a more public place, such as Waltham which might have led to his bones to becoming a shrine and a focus for a revolt by the defeated nation.

Witnesses for the Petitioners representing Bosham PCC were:

Richard Meynell, Church Architect: He described the area to be covered, and his interest in investigating the under-floor 'anomaly' under the pews to the left of the arch which was causing recurring rot in the wooden flooring.

Tim Tatton-Brown, Consultant Archaeologist who was in the process of concluding the full archaeological and geological survey of the church. He emphasised the importance of a full professional exploration of the area in front of the chancel arch which would be valuable in helping to determine the history of the arch itself. He also confirmed that the records of the 1954 work showed that the coffins had not been properly recorded and that the remains found in the larger one at that time had not been properly treated. He would hope to remedy this situation.

During the cross examination by the Chancellor both Richard Meynell and Tim Tatton-Brown expressed the opinion that it was unlikely that Bosham Church was the resting place of King Harold. Canon Thomas Inman, the Vicar: The Vicar outlined the reasons for the PCC's support of the project and made it clear that they did not necessarily expect to have a 100% answer 'Harold, yes or no', but that they were interested in getting as close to the truth as modern technology could achieve. He drew attention to the Statement of Needs that stated 'the investigation would form part of a substantial, serious and not sensational, television programme about the death and burial of Harold... It is the very fact of the present mixture between history and conjecture which justifies an attempt to get closer to the truth, even if a full scientific resolution cannot be guaranteed'.

John Pollock, local amateur historian was present at the hearing but was not called to give evidence. His booklet, 'Harold: Rex', which he himself called '*a Speculation*', and in which he puts forward several persuasive ideas contending that Harold is buried in Bosham Church, was discussed at length. The experts were unconvinced, however, by his arguments.

Witnesses opposing the Petition:

Dr Joseph Elders, The Council for the Care of Churches

Miss Judith Roebuck, English Heritage

Martin Brown, formally archaeological adviser to the Chichester DAC

The reasons the Petition should not be granted were set out by Dr Elders.

- The Policy of the Church of England contains a strong presumption against disturbing any Christian burial, and will only allow it in exceptional circumstances (which the PCC of course believed existed in this case).
- Dr Elders also stated that he knew of no professional historian or archaeologist who considers it likely that King Harold is buried in Bosham Church.
- Similar opinions were expressed by Judith Roebuck and Martin Brown who also added this comment. 'I would advise that the decision is taken not to proceed with this project, as it would simply amount to an unjustifiable despoliation of this individual's remains. No disturbance of this important church should be undertaken on the basis of this unfounded speculation'.

Other experts from relevant fields of study, although not present at the Hearing, had been invited to give their opinions on specific parts of the Petition. Professor Campbell of Worcester College, Oxford, an expert in Anglo-Saxon History had submitted a paper entitled 'Could King Harold be buried in Bosham Church?' which had been commissioned by the Petitioners. Having made a complete and careful study of the early chroniclers and the conflicting arguments for the various burial places of Harold, including Bosham and Waltham Abbey, he concluded that it was not at Bosham. He did concede, however, that 'the evidence against the identification of the remains found in 1954 with those of Harold does not mean that this burial is not interesting and raising questions worth pursuit.' However, he ended by saying 'nevertheless Bosham's claim to the body seems weak'.

James Kenny, Chichester District Archaeologist submitted the following succinct points:

1. 'There is no firm evidence that King Harold was buried at Bosham
2. There is no firm evidence that King Canute's daughter was buried at Bosham.
3. Radiocarbon dating will not determine a date with sufficient precision to be of any help in the matter.

Notwithstanding any of the viewpoints the fact is that it is extremely unlikely that it will be possible to prove that Harold was or was not buried at Bosham. This being the case I fear that the only outcome will be further publicity and perpetuation of the mythology.'

Prior to the Court Hearing, Dr Mark Thomas, University College, London, had been approached to report on the success of the proposed DNA analysis and had submitted the following notes: 'I would be cautious about identifying patrilineal descendants of Harold II based simply on the criteria of having the surname 'Godwin' and living in Cheshire. Additional genealogical evidence would be needed to identify putative patrilineal descendants of Harold II. In addition, Dr Joseph Elders, explained the system of Anglo/Danish name form: First name/father's name/son, thus Harold Godwinson. Harold's eldest son was Harold Haroldson. Modern Godwins probably derive from people whose first name happened to be Godwin in the 12th century or much later and a genealogical link to Harold and his family is extremely unlikely.' In effect the patriarchal name 'Godwin' passed out of that family with Earl Godwin's death in 1053.



The final examination

During the closing submissions of Mr Briden, the Council for the Petitioners, there occurred what the Chancellor described in his Judgement as *'a coup de theatre, rarely witnessed in the consistory court'*, for Mr Briden suddenly announced that none of the DNA test results, from the three people who claimed to be descended from the Godwin family, matched. This information had been telephoned through to his instructing solicitors by Dr Mark Thomas, who had examined the samples. In a written statement received by the Chancellor after the Court hearing, Dr Thomas stated: *'Had a match been found between any of the three individuals and DNA extracted from the remains at Holy Trinity, Bosham (the putative remains of Harold II) such a match was unlikely to constitute statistically significant evidence that the remains are in fact those of Harold II.'* This information meant that the possible DNA testing of the remains might well be of little value and, therefore, could not justify the disturbance of the grave. In his Judgement, The Chancellor mentioned *'The Theology of Burial'* and quoted, *'The permanent burial of the physical body or the burial of cremated remains should be seen as a symbol of our entrusting the person to God for resurrection.'* By the end of the Court hearing it did appear that all the various reports and statements from the experts who had given evidence weighed heavily against the Petition. The final judgement from the Chancellor, The Worshipful Mark Hill QC, was delivered on 10th December 2003. His judgement was long, deeply considered, and impartial but his closing words were ...'I therefore order that the petition be dismissed'.

So, in view of this Judgement, unless some new and remarkable information comes to light, it is very unlikely that the Stone Coffins of Bosham Church will ever be disturbed again and we will never know for certain who was buried in either of them.

Joan Langhorne
Bosham Church Archivist