feeling evidently shared by Warner. Fidelio is magnificently if rawly sung by Anja Kampe, whose name, and not only that, puts one in mind of the great Fidelio of the late 1960s and 1970s, Anja Silja. Like her, Kampe is tall and slim, and like her she wears a cap which, at the crucial moment — 'First kill his wife!' — she snatches off so her hair can cascade down her shoulders: a gesture which always acted like a rejuvenating drug on Klemperer. She gives a no-holds-barred performance, which might be improved by saving some intensity, but she is a thrill and a real find. Florestan is too: Torsten Kerl, anguished and plangent of voice, singing with accuracy and passion, accompanied by wonderfully judged chords from Mark Elder and the LPO. Against them Peter Coleman-Wright, wearing a drab suit and clearly middle management, makes a low-keyed and unthreatening Pizarro: the wrong kind of villain. Nor does he get much support from the colourless Rocco of Brindley Sherratt. As soon as we meet these characters the outcome is a foregone conclusion. If only what we saw on stage was what we hear from the orchestra and from Kampe and Kerl and the two young non-lovers, this would be close to a great performance.

Archaeology

In search of Alfred

Russell Chamberlin

I sat behind the bicycle shed of Winchester's Historic Resources Centre, holding a fragment from what was probably the coffin of the greatest of all our monarchs, the king who founded our nation and gave it a moral purpose and direction: Alfred, surnamed by posterity the Great. Labled 'HA99 22041', the fragment was visually unimpressive: no inscription, no painting, simply a small piece of light-coloured stone, evidently broken from a larger mass. But it had solved a centuries' old mystery, for it told us where Alfred had finally been buried.

Alfred died in 899 and was buried, together with his wife and son, in the Old Minster in the heart of Winchester. The remains were transferred to the New Minster and then, in 1110, were removed, in a splendid procession, to a great new abbey that had been built in the village of Hyde just outside the northern walls of the city. With Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries, the abbey was totally destroyed. Leland, Henry VIII's historian, recorded that during the demolition of the church three lead tablets were found, bearing the names of the royal family, in coffins near the high altar. But these tablets were of a later date than the coffins. Thus Alfred's grave disappears from history.

In 1788, a bridewell (or prison) was being constructed in part of the abbey grounds. The governor wanted a garden and ordered that the huge lumps of masonry which littered the area be removed. The easiest way to do this was to dig a series of pits and simply push the lumps into them. During the digging, three stone coffins were found, one of which had been completely — and expensively — encased in lead. The lead was stripped off and sold for three guineas, and the coffins were broken up and, together with the human remains, dumped back in the hole. An antiquarian, Captain Howard, interviewed the governor and became convinced that the coffins had been those of the royal family.

When the bridewell was demolished in 1850, John Mellor, an amateur local antiquarian, conducted digs on the site. He claimed to have discovered the royal remains, together with the lead tablets, and displayed them for payment. His reputation was such that someone quipped, 'It is surprising that he did not find the burnt cakes.' There was considerable local uproar, and Mellor was constrained to bury the fragments in the graveyard of the nearby Saxon church of St Bartholomew; their site is marked by a slab with an incised cross.

Today Hyde is a suburb of Winchester, and, though barely ten minutes' walk from the city centre, is a world in itself. Hyde Street, the Roman road to London, is still a main artery, but leading off it are tranquil roads winding through hidden gardens. A modern estate nestles among the abbey ruins, with a small stream burbling between green banks. A blacksmith works his forge as his predecessors have done for centuries (one of them forged Mellor's lead tablets). The Historic Resources Centre, which organised the recent archaeological excavations, occupies the kitchen block of a long-vanished mansion.

In 1985 British Telecom excavated a trench in the area to lay a fibre-optic cable, and uncovered an angle of ancient stone. Graham Scobie, the ebullient French–Canadian archaeologist based at the Centre, who organised the excavations, takes up the story. 'We began looking not for a grave, but for a church in order to find the grave.' The excavations went on for five years. 'It was an entirely community affair. Altogether we drew in some 3,000 volunteers.' Most of the area had been built over in the late 19th century and there was a dead-end road running through. 'We traced the outline by a series of trial pits, then joined up the dots, so to speak.'

The 'joined-up dots' disclosed an immense church, fully as big as the great cathedral itself, its total destruction evidence of the religious fervour that wrought such changes. Henry VIII's Commissioner, who was responsible for its ruin, had boasted in a letter to Thomas Cromwell: 'We intend both at Hyde and St Mary's to sweep away all the rotten bones that be called relics.'

Among the recent finds was that piece of stone I held in my hand. 'It's oolitic limestone. Oolitic was never used in Winchester after the Norman Conquest. The abbey was built in 1109. Therefore,' Scobie confirmed, 'that piece of stone must have come from one of the three coffins containing the royal remains, brought from Winchester.'

The foundations of the most important part of the church, the chancel, fortunately lie under open ground. This fact has been utilised by the landscape architect Kim Wilkie in his brilliantly simple archaeological park that now marks the spot. It is situated at the end of the road where a glass engraving by Tracey Sheppard depicts, in a suitably ghostly manner, the chancel as it would probably have appeared. Beyond is a gravel area, with a line of tiles marking the outline of the foundations. The sites of the great pillars are marked by shrubs held within metal railings. And in the very centre are three immense grave slabs, each marked with a cross, indicating the last resting places of Alfred the Great, his wife Ealhswith and their son Edward.