

WHAT WE MIGHT HAVE LEARNT if we had been able to join Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews on his walk 'Saxon Hitchin and the search for Clofesho' on 20th September.

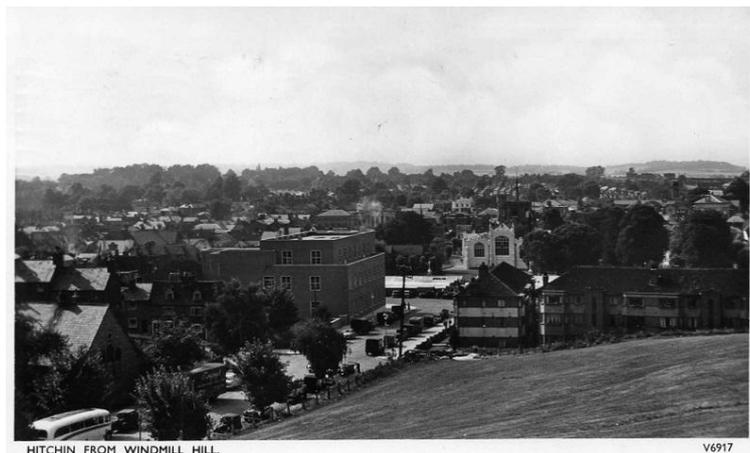
For most of the visits planned but cancelled for this year we have been able to provide a brief assessment of 'what we would have seen' if the events had taken place. The September walk, planned as an exploration of Hitchin's Saxon past and the search for Clofesho is, however, somewhat different because it covers a topic that is very much 'cutting edge' in developing new understandings of our local history.

Now almost twenty years ago Clifford Offer, during his time here as Vicar of St Mary's, published his In Search of Clofesho: The Case for Hitchin. This account builds on work that Clifford began while researching the history of King Offa of Mercia's traditional links with Hitchin. Clofesho has been described as the most famous 'lost place' in Anglo-Saxon England by Katy Cubitt, one of the foremost academics of the period. Clofesho is important because it was the location of several key Church Councils of the Saxon church and became a meeting place of great symbolic importance from the 670s and well into the 820s. At these Councils important business of various kinds was transacted including awarding land grants, settling disputes and the discussing the details of church governance. In this context Clofesho should be as well known in the history of the early church as, say, the Synod of Whitby.



**Coin of King Offa
(HHS collection)**

A number of places have been put forward as possible locations for Clofesho but none is uncontested. Clifford argued very persuasively that this list of locations should definitely include Hitchin. He based his case on linking the fragmentary documentary evidence with a careful examination of the topographical and place name features of the town and of its place in the wider landscape of what is now northern Hertfordshire



Windmill Hill / Hollow Lane

and southern Bedfordshire. We do know that Hitchin was a key Saxon royal centre and home to an important Minster (central) church. Its potential role as Clofesho would very much fit into this picture. Keith, through examination of the town today, would have explained what we might be able to understand of its Saxon past and how archaeological finds, many of them recent, help flesh out the story. Most importantly the site and situation of St Mary's Church and its positioning in relation to Windmill Hill and Hollow Lane – a potential 'Cloven spur', the meaning of Clofesho – bolster the importance of Hitchin's claim.

In the summer of 2019 the society hosted a one day meeting at Hitchin Priory for Clifford and Keith. Katy Cubitt, John Blair, Lee Prosser and Tom Williamson, all academics with a close interest in the period, attended to look more carefully at Hitchin as a potential Clofesho location. An important consideration is how people travelled to such meetings and how accessible Hitchin was to the rest of the country in the 7th century. Work, particularly on this question of accessibility, although disrupted by the current health emergency, is still underway and we hope, before long, to develop Hitchin's case further – watch this space.



**Pin c750-850 of a type used by a high status Saxon woman, such as an Abbess, found at St Andrew's Hill
(Hitchin Collection, North Herts Museum)**

HHS

September 2020