Fifty-two of us signed up for this year’s trip to Winchester Christmas Market and tour of the Cathedral and despite the rainy & windy start in Bicester, the weather improved as we approached Winchester. On arrival members went their various ways - to the first tour of the Cathedral, the City Museum, to Jane Austen's house, the Coffee Shop or directly to the Christmas Market.

Denise had organised three separate guided tours of the Cathedral so that we were a small manageable number on each one. As the Guides varied in their presentation and depth of detail it was potluck as to which took the different groups. I can't speak for the others, but the guide(s) on the 2 & 3 o'clock tours was excellent. He made the visit of the Cathedral interesting even for those uncultured visitors among us. We heard that Winchester Cathedral still boasts the longest nave and overall length of all Gothic cathedrals in Europe. The Cathedral was originally built in 1079 and contains much fine architecture spanning the 11th to 16th centuries and is the place of interment of numerous Bishops of Winchester such as William of Wykeham and Egbert of Wessex, and later monarchs such as King Canute and William Rufus.

We learnt the origins of many words, including that of cathedral itself, from the cathedra, the bishop’s chair. Also nave from Latin navis (ship), the underside of the roof resembling an upturned ship.

We heard also about the heroic efforts a century ago of William Walker, known as 'Diver Bill' who single-handedly “saved“ the Cathedral which had been in danger of collapse from sinking into the unstable peaty ground due to being built on marshland. See Appendix for additional information. By 1905 experts had decided that the peat had to be removed and replaced by concrete blocks. The peat was below water level and with no means of creating a temporary support the work had to be carried out in small sections under water by one man. This man was William Walker, 'Diver Bill'. Starting in May 1906, the five year job saw him handle some 25,800 bags of concrete and 114,900 concrete blocks. The work was incredibly tiring - each of Walker's boots weighed 18lb, his helmet 40lb - and the work was carried out in complete darkness. Slowly, he underpinned the foundations of the Cathedral. By August 1911 he had finished.

Although he was honoured at a Thanksgiving Service the next year, sadly he perished in the influenza epidemic that swept across Europe at the end of the First World War in 1918.

In 1964, however, a statuette in his honour was unveiled, and it stands today in the shadow of many an eminent divine in tribute to the efforts of this modest workman.

After the guided tour some members visited the crypt to see Anthony Gormley’s sculpture of himself, which stands knee deep in water after heavy rain. Jane Austin is buried in the Cathedral and there is an interesting exhibition about her. There was much more to see but no more time.

Then there was an opportunity for tea and cake in the Cathedral Refectory, followed by more shopping in the market and surrounding shops.

For those readers who have not visited Winchester, it is an extremely attractive town, once the capital of England and well worth a visit outside the Christmas period too.

We all enjoyed the day out in excellent company and would like to thank Denise and Audrey for their hard work in organising it so excellently.
W.R. WALKER, M.V.O. as a young man
sented in his memory to the Friends of Winchester Cathedral by his
daughter, Alice Ellen Nettley

William Walker as a young man