

THE RENDLESHAM SURVEY: Investigating a Royal Anglo-Saxon Landscape. by
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Joint Meeting with NAHRG at the Town close Auditorium, Castle Museum. 6th Dec.2014

Jude began by saying she is not an Anglo-Saxon specialist and that Rendlesham has been quite a collaboration, particularly between four metal detector users, several archaeologists and the local landowner. She paid tribute to all involved and especially her colleagues Faye Minter (Senior Finds Recording Officer) and Chris Scull, Visiting Professor at Cardiff University and University College London.

Rendlesham is set apart from Naunton Hall and the church of St.Gregory, which overlook the river Deben, in the SE corner of Suffolk four miles north of Sutton Hoo. The site is situated on mainly sandy soil but with clay soil on the valley side. Historically well-known, being mentioned by Bede as the vicus regius (royal village) residence of Rendil. He records how King Aethelwold of East Anglia hosted the baptism of King Swithelm of the East Saxons here in around AD 660. Antiquarian records of the 18th and 19th centuries describe finds of pottery and silver crowns. In 1837 an urn was found on How or Haw Hill indicating there might be cremation burials. Fieldwork a century later in the 1940s failed to locate a cemetery or Anglo-Saxon (A-S) settlement evidence even though Sutton Hoo had been discovered in 1939 four miles down river to the south-west. In the 1980s field walking the land near the church and Naunton Hall and excavation of the footprint of a new barn at the hall produced Ipswich ware, hand-made A-S pottery, a middle Saxon ditched track-way and medieval features – all of which confirmed a settlement in the area.

In 2008 Sir Michael Bunbury reported looting on his land by illegal ‘nighthawk’ metal detectorists; regular attacks which occurred after ploughing. His letter was passed to the Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service (SCCAS) which put together a pilot survey. This looked for objects using systematic metal detecting and a magnetometry survey for deeper level evidence plus plotting of existing aerial photography. Detecting finds included A-S bronze brooches and 6th century gold coins (tremisses); the magnetometry showed a series of linear features and a roughly D-shaped enclosure, intersecting with a ring ditch which also showed on air photos. Illegal exploration and theft continued so a more extensive Project was set up to study the archaeology: to understand settlement and activity in its landscape setting and develop ways of protecting it.

The resulting collaborative approach involved group of four skilled metal detectorists working in a private agreement with the landowner to systematically survey the whole estate to create a full picture of all finds. They walked fields in different directions and conditions, recorded dates hours walked, ground and weather conditions so as to compare and calibrate concentrations of material and their precise location. All finds were passed to SCCAS which provided the management and infrastructure to identify and record them. This was combined with geophysics, magnetometry, topographic surveys, and aerial photos with help from the Sutton Hoo Society and English Heritage. Full archaeological records were made using Portable Antiquities Scheme standards. It was hoped this intensive work would deter the criminal element.

Jude illustrated the discoveries with numerous pictures and lists of the finds and maps of the area. Some 3,897 finds (1023 Roman, 75 Prehistoric, a majority 1239 A-S with some medieval and later) point to Rendlesham being a favoured location for settlement from the Iron Age through the Roman period to the A-S; an important and substantial archaeological site.

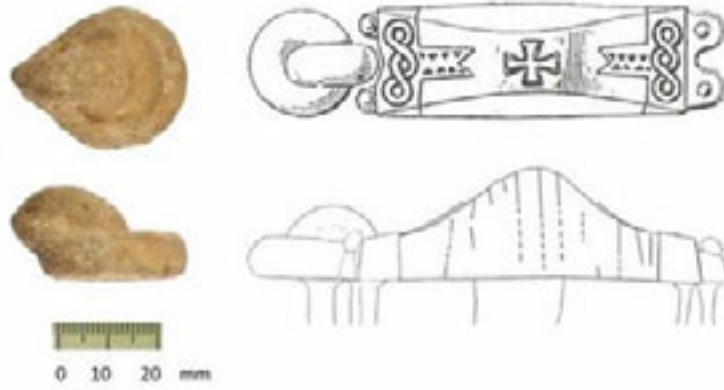
The core Anglo-Saxon area at Rendlesham on a LIDAR plot (darker greens = higher ground) showing possible activity areas and the fields (Park and Sand Walk) where evaluation trenches were excavated

The total survey area is 143 hectares on sandy soils and some clay soils on the east side of the valley of the river Deben including the church of St. Gregory which stands on a promontory overlooking the river. Just north of the church the field called The Park is part of the most productive. Here a D-shaped enclosure ditch was identified in the geophysics which proved on excavation to be Iron Age in origin despite some speculation about comparable Middle Saxon examples. At the south end of the survey area a hoard of Roman denarii deposited around 170AD was dispersed by ploughing to spread over 200 metres to the north and 100 metres to the south, although ten coins were concentrated in one place. In the north and north west of the survey some Roman assemblages of artifacts were typical of east Suffolk coin groups giving a rural profile of low use before the late 3rd century, little or no silver coinage and a decline in use after the mid 4th century. By contrast in the core Anglo-Saxon areas there were high levels of very late Roman bronze coinage; in the two fields where the finds of 5th-6th dress accessories suggest Anglo-Saxon graves there were also re-used Roman coins.

The core area of the recorded A-S finds covers about 45 hectares, on the promontory overlooking the Deben near the church, and to the north of a small tributary. The scrap gold, silver items, dress fittings, buckles and jewellery and an unfinished copper alloy sword fitting, demonstrate considerable metal working for an elite group and patronage, whilst low value copper items such as buckles, pins, and bag catches were for a range of other people. Also production waste from scrap gold, silver and copper alloys, lead models for making moulds, globules and other spilled fragments from smelting and discarded items, are evidence of a workshop/production area for skilled craftsmen.

Metalworking: elite patronage?

Lead model for sword ring



Recycling precious metal



Metalworking debris



Unfinished Style II mount

Elite metalwork of the 6th and 7th centuries





Discoveries include fragments of exquisite gold jewellery, Saxon pennies and weights associated with trade, and metal off-cuts from a Smith's workshop

Imported material and inter-regional contacts



Footring fragment
from east Mediterranean
copper-alloy bowl



Hanging bowl escutcheon



Merovingian coinage
(565-578)



Follis, Justin II, Constantinople 575/6
Byzantine copper coinage late 6th – 7th C



Continental brooches (6th century)
parallels from Marcheipot, France



A large number of discoveries date from the C6th onwards and show direct trade and foreign contact: such as continental brooches; foot-rings of coptic bowls from East Mediterranean; mounts for hanging bowls. Byzantine copper coins and Merovingian gold coins. Such items in the 6th century are usually seen as gifts and dowries rather than commercial transactions, but the copper coins suggest foreign traders may be present. Local production of Anglo-Saxon coins starts in the C7th and after AD670 there is a switch from gold to silver pennies (sceattas). The widely scattered Continental and A-S gold coins and silver pennies and coin weights (with Byzantine gold coin denomination markings) are not from hoards but probably lost during high-value currency transactions. They may have changed hands as taxes, fines, gifts, payments for services rendered. Gold coins show a higher echelon function as do dress adornments of gold and garnet jewellery, pins, coin mountings, elaborate harness fittings. These suggest links with the Sutton Hoo burials.

The magnetometry was extended over the entire central area where the Anglo-Saxon finds occurred. North of the tributary this showed many pit-like features but few linear systems, whereas to the south there were enclosures and many linear features showing.

The Project Team felt a need to test their ideas and the magnetometry results against the evidence in the ground. They opened 6 trenches in Oct 2013 and another one in April 2014; all 10 metres by 5 metres. The ploughsoil was partially dug by hand in 10 cm spits, with the soil sieved, and where machine stripped it was checked with metal detectors at 10 cm intervals.

- (a) Trenches 1 to 4 in the Sand Walk in the north showed burials and some settlement.
 - (b) Trenches 5-7 in Park Field showed continuous activity from Roman to A-S but strong C7th concentration. Both areas were damaged by ploughing and erosion, and especially by recent subsoiling which can cause unreliable stratification.
- Trench 3 in the north of Sand Walk produced cremation burials of the C5th in several very damaged pottery urns, burnt bone residue, a piece of Roman window glass and a burnt glass bead.
- Trench 2 in Sand Walk produced C5-6th pottery and a sunken feature two- post building; with a brooch and clay loom weights in the backfill.
- Trench 4 gave evidence of a pit containing pottery plus evidence of another C5th to C7th sunken featured building, also some shallow, possibly Iron Age features.

By comparison with sites like West Stow the presence of sunken featured buildings, which can be seen over an extensive area in the magnetometry, suggests there are also post-built halls that cannot be picked up in the magnetometry. There is not much indicating activity beyond the C8th in this area and perhaps it was used for periodic markets which would account for dropped C8th coinage. A linear ditch on the west side proved to be a medieval roadside enclosure.

Park Field trenches included the section across the D-shaped enclosure ditch which showed it was backfilled in the 1st century. A second trench was put in to test a linear feature shown by magnetometry. The finds suggest C7th to C8th from an A-S rubbish area; the dark soil containing animal bone mainly cattle, pigs and sheep but also deer and bird remains indicating hunting which had built up next to the boundary ditch with a possible fence. Below the midden was part of a feature containing late roman pottery.

The final Trench in spring 2014 in Park Field was to examine less defined features on magnetometry. All the linear features proved to be ditches of late Saxon and Medieval period, probably part of enclosures adjacent to a small green.



Excavation of Anglo-Saxon dark earth layer in Park Field, 2013

No remains of any royal palace or buildings have been found but the discovery of high quality metalwork and jewellery indicates an elite residence. Gold pins and broaches indicate rank and wealth, a social elite supported by a large number of farmers, servants, slaves, retainers, craftsmen - hence the wide range of personal items found made of copper-alloy. Rendlesham appears to have been a major centre with luxury goods trade and manufacture but its decline began in the C8th when commercial activity shifted to Ipswich.

The speculative plan of activities is based upon surface finds, geophysics, evaluation trenches, topography and informed guesswork. This raises many questions. In the broader context how does Rendlesham relate to the Sutton Hoo elite burials with a second cemetery at Bromeswell? How does it compare to the main A-S port area of Ipswich which in the C7th century was smaller than Rendlesham? Is it similar in function to other A-S settlement in Suffolk like Coddensham and Barham in the Gipping Valley? So far Rendlesham seems to be longer established than other potentially royal sites. The Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History, which supported the excavation, has described the results as 'conclusive evidence of the long-lost Anglo-Saxon royal settlement whose people buried their kings at Sutton Hoo'. As such the site is of huge historical and archaeological significance.

Jude ended with an overhead showing a long credit list of the numerous people and organisations which have spent so much time and effort on the site during the over the past five years. She was by thanked by the NNAS President, Sophie Cabot who invited questions from the large audience of one hundred and ten people. Surprisingly there were few. One was about anyone else doing similar work in other parts of the Deben valley. Jude said there was a brief foray at Ufford, west of Rendlesham which came up with nothing. Asked if anything had been published Jude mentioned the article 'Rendlesham rediscovered' in British Archaeology

Issue 137 July-August 2014 which contains an overview, maps, photographs and speculation about what Rendlesham was used for and how it operated.



Some of the items found at Rendlesham at the Sutton Hoo Visitor Centre.

Edmund Perry
| - (edited by Jude Plouviez)
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