RIVER RAIDERS
Anglo-Saxon
and
Viking Breckland

A Report by The Breckland Society

Front cover:
The landing of the Danes, as depicted in a 12th-century illuminated
manuscript about the life of Saint Edmund produced at St
Edmund's abbey in Bury St Edmunds (detail).
The Morgan Library and Museum: MS M.736 fol. 9v

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Contents

Legend:
- BFER Scheme Area
- Brecks National Character Area

Map labels: Swaffham, Oxborough, Mundford, Illington, Ringmere, Santon, Brandon, Middle Harling, Thetford, Rushford, Lakenheath, Holywell Row, Mildenhall, Rymer Point, West Stow, Culford, Lackford, Kentford, Westgarth Gardens, Bury St Edmunds

Scale: 0 5 10 km

Introduction

We are often told that the most important date in English history is 1066, the year in which Duke William of Normandy defeated the Anglo-Saxon King Harold Godwinson at the Battle of Hastings, earning his title 'the Conqueror' and claiming the English throne. However, as well as marking the beginning of Norman kingship in England, the Battle of Hastings also marked the end of a 600-year period during which many aspects of the East Anglian landscape that we recognise today emerged.

During the Anglo-Saxon period, which spanned the 5th to the 11th centuries, communities were transformed from a subsistence economy based around short-lived riverside settlements to a complex society, which over time gave rise to the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of East Anglia and witnessed royal ship-burials, the foundation of villages, towns, bishoprics, monastic houses and churches. The period also witnessed the widespread conversion of the population to Christianity, the adoption of the use of coinage, significant advancements in farming practices and fenland drainage, and the implementation of laws, language and local administration.[1]

From the middle decades of the 9th century, Anglo-Saxon East Anglia was an integral part of the Viking world, which spanned the North Sea basin. In the year AD 869, the Breckland area became a focus for the Viking Great Army, which made camp in Thetford and killed the East Anglian King Edmund in battle. East Anglia remained under Viking control as part of the Danelaw, before the region became part of the newly forged kingdom of England in the later 10th century. Indeed, by the time of the Norman Conquest, it is fair to say that much of East Anglia as we recognise it today was well established and had been for hundreds of years.

At both national and regional levels, academic and popular interest in the Anglo-Saxon and Viking periods has grown considerably during the 21st century. This is doubtless in no small part due to significant, high-profile discoveries, such as the discovery in Essex in 2003 of the high-status, 7th-century burial of the 'Prittlewell Prince',[2] and the unearthing in 2009 of the 'Staffordshire Hoard', the largest collection of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver treasure ever found.[3] In 2014, the British Museum staged a major exhibition entitled *Vikings: Life and Legend*, which brought together materials from across the North Sea world,[4] and in 2018–19, the British

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[1] For good introductions see Blair (2000), Hamerow, Hinton and Crawford (2011), Richards (2018), Hadley and Richards (2021) and Morris (2021).

[2] Blackmore *et al.* 2019; https://prittlewellprincelyburial.org/

[3] Fern *et al.* 2019; https://www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/

[4] Williams *et al.* 2014; https://www.britishmuseum.org/vikings-live/

Figure 1: The 7th-century
Winfarthing Pendant
before its conservation.
Actual size.
PAS: NMS-E95041.
© Norfolk County Council

Library presented the *Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art, Word, War* exhibition, which featured manuscripts and artefacts from across the country, including a significant number from East Anglia.[5] Within the region, the discovery in Norfolk of the Winfarthing pendant by a student at the University of East Anglia made headlines in 2014 and at the time of writing the site is the focus of an excavation by the *Time Team* (Figure 1).[6] Likewise, the discovery of an early Christian cemetery at Great Ryburgh in 2016 was also widely reported, especially because waterlogging of the site had preserved the Anglo-Saxon wooden coffins.[7] The initial results of the long-running Rendlesham project, focusing on the Anglo-Saxon landscape of south-east Suffolk, were made public in 2016 and attracted a lot of attention, not least because of the connection between the site and the Anglo-Saxon royal dynasty.[8] Fieldwork continues at Rendlesham, under the auspices of the Rendlesham Revealed project, which is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.[9]

At a more popular level, the Anglo-Saxon and Viking periods have become a subject of particular interest in recent years. This is seen in the 'Warrior Chronicle' novels of Bernard Cornwell (2004–2020) and their BBC and later Netflix adaptations screened as *The Last Kingdom* (2015–22), together with other television series such as *Vikings* (2013–21) and *Beowulf* (2016). On the big screen, Viking mythology was also the inspiration for the 2022 film *The Northman* (Figure 2),[10] while 2021 saw the release of *The Dig*, based on the 2007 novel by John Preston, which focuses on the excavation of the Anglo-Saxon royal ship-burial at Sutton Hoo and featured a critically acclaimed performance by Ralph Fiennes as Suffolk-born archaeologist Basil Brown (Figure 3).[11]

[5] Breay and Story 2018; https://www.bl.uk/events/anglo-saxon-kingdoms

[6] https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/659168

[7] Fairclough and Holmes 2016; https://www.mola.org.uk/blog/discovery-rare-anglo-saxon-burials-revealed

[8] Scull *et al.* 2016; https://heritage.suffolk.gov.uk/rendlesham-resources

[9] https://cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk/community/discover-the-past/archaeology-in-your-area/rendlesham-revealed/

[10] https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11138512/

[11] https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3661210/

Figure 2 (left): Promotional poster for the 2022 film *The Northman*.

Figure 3 (right): Promotional poster for the 2021 film *The Dig*.

The River Raiders Project

Drawing on historical sources, archaeological sites, artefacts and place-names, this report presents an overview of the history and archaeology of the Anglo-Saxon and Viking periods in the Breckland area of East Anglia. This report has been researched and written by volunteers working with the Breckland Society on the River Raiders project, which is one of many projects being undertaken across the area as part of the Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers (BFER) Landscape Partnership Scheme. The contributors to this report and the subjects which they have researched and written about are listed on the inside front cover.

The Breckland Society was established in 2003 to encourage interest and research into the natural, built and social heritage of the East Anglian Brecks.[12] It is a membership organisation working to help protect the area and offers a range of activities to those who wish to see its special qualities preserved and enhanced. Since its inception, the Breckland Society has initiated several projects designed to generate interest and expand knowledge into various aspects of the wider Brecks heritage, ranging from a survey of local vernacular architecture and an assessment of the significance of flint to the historical importance in the area of rabbit warrening and sheep. A list of reports resulting from these projects can be found at the end of this report.

Following the successful Breaking New Ground Landscape Partnership Scheme, which ran in the Breckland area between 2014 and 2017 and resulted in the delivery of 37 projects,[13] the Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership Scheme

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[12] http://www.brecsoc.org.uk/

[13] http://www.breakingnewground.org.uk/

is a £3.5m five-year scheme focused on celebrating and conserving the landscape and heritage of the Brecks' key freshwater habitats and river valleys.[14] Consistently overlooked in a landscape that is famous for being sandy and dry, water has been the driving force behind the Brecks' unique heritage, providing the conduits for biodiversity and early settlement of an otherwise hostile landscape. Supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the BFER scheme is supported by more than sixty local, regional and national groups focused on delivering a wide range of projects between 2020 and 2025.

The River Raiders project was developed with the aim of exploring the history and impact of the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings in the Brecks, with activities including seminars, workshops, archival research and archaeological fieldwork, resulting in the creation of this report and supporting online resources.[15] However, no sooner had the project begun in early 2020 than the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic began to bite, with lockdown being imposed and all in-person social contact curtailed. The closure of archives and museums and inability of groups of volunteers to meet meant that many of the originally planned activities were no longer possible, but the project was able to be redesigned and we switched instead to online seminars and meetings held via Zoom. While this was a new and different experience for many of us, it did mean that we were able to attract a much wider geographical spread of volunteers than might otherwise have been achieved, and many of those volunteers have contributed to the writing of this report. The other major benefit was that the online seminars were able to be recorded and uploaded to the BFER YouTube channel, where they have since been watched several hundred times.[16] Details of these online resources can be found in the guide to finding out more at the end of this report.

A Note on Terminology

There has recently been a great deal of controversy surrounding the modern use of the term Anglo-Saxon, despite the fact that it has its origins in the 9th-century and is, therefore, a contemporary label.[17] Throughout this report, the term Anglo-Saxon is used to refer to the period between the 5th to the 11th centuries and also to the distinctive material culture which was exhibited during this period. Indeed, East Anglian archaeologists tend to sub-divide the Anglo-Saxon period into three main phases: the Early Anglo-Saxon (AD 411–650), the Middle Anglo-Saxon (AD 651–850) and the Late Anglo-Saxon (AD 850–1066). As is explored in this report, the boundaries of each of these phases broadly coincide with major events and social changes which occurred during the Anglo-Saxon period, but these periods are again only referred to for convenience. Similarly, the term Viking is used to refer to the period from the 9th to the 11th centuries, as well as to those Scandinavians who raided, traded with and settled in East Anglia during that time.

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[14] https://brecks.org/bfer/

[15] https://brecks.org/bfer/projects/under-the-surface-discovering-heritage/2-4-river-raiders/

[16] https://www.youtube.com/c/BrecksFenEdgeRiversLP

[17] http://www.fmass.eu/uploads/pdf/responsible_use_of%20the%20term%20_Anglo-Saxon.pdf

1: The Arrival of the Anglo-Saxons

We begin with an as-yet-unanswered question. The exact circumstances surrounding the date and nature of the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons – the *Adventus Saxonum*, as it was referred to in early sources – remains something of a mystery. Although there are some historical accounts of what happened following the withdrawal of the Roman army from the province of *Britannia* in the early years of the 5th century, these accounts date from later periods, were written in different parts of the country and must be treated with caution. These fragmentary sources are complemented by a rich and varied archaeological record, which within East Anglia, and the Breckland area in particular, has the potential to shed considerable light upon these 'Dark Ages'. In the words of John Blair, one of the foremost experts on the Anglo-Saxon period, 'the early fortunes of the English can only be glimpsed through the hostile eyes of Britons, through the ill-informed eyes of foreigners, and by means of their own half-remembered traditions.' He concludes that, 'until the late 6th century, informed guesswork must make do for history.'[18]

The traditional account of the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons is that recorded by the Venerable Bede, a monk at the monastery in Jarrow, who completed his *History of the English Church and People* in AD 731.[19] In his account, he recorded that: 'In the year of our Lord 449 ... the race of the Angles or Saxons, invited by Vortigern, came to Britain in three warships and by his command were granted a place of settlement in the eastern part of the island, ostensibly to fight on behalf of the country, but their real intention was to conquer it.'[20]

Bede went on to tell how the mercenaries drove back the northern Pictish invaders and sent back news to their Germanic and Scandinavian homelands that the country was fertile and the Britons cowardly. Consequently, we are told, a larger fleet crossed the North Sea to join forces with the original invaders, making an invincible army to fight for the Britons. They apparently received grants of land and money in return for maintaining peace and security.

Famously, Bede set out what was understood of the origins of the various groups who had settled in the country: 'They came from three very powerful Germanic tribes, the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes. The people of Kent and the inhabitants of the Isle of Wight are of Jutish origin and also those opposite the Isle of Wight, that part of the kingdom of Wessex which is still today called the nation of the Jutes.

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[18] Blair 2000, 1.

[19] Colgrave and Mynors 1969.

[20] Colgrave and Mynors 1969: *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.15.

Britain 400 – 500 CE
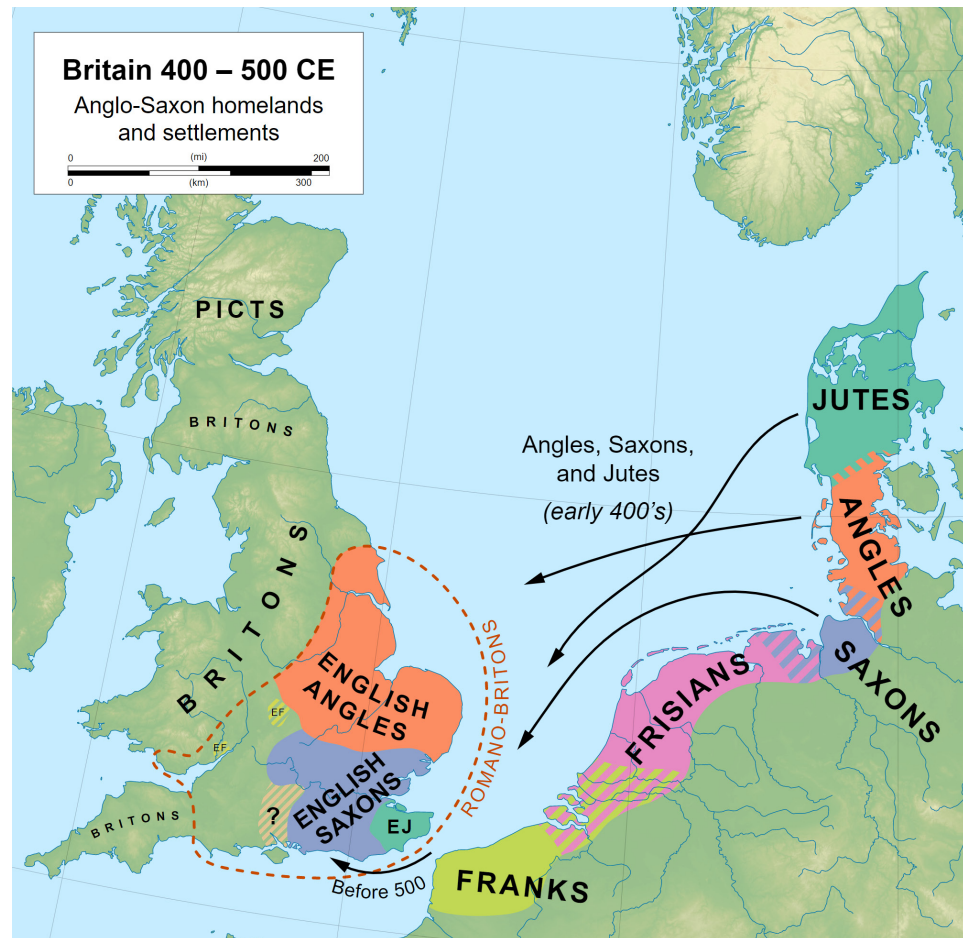Anglo-Saxon homelands and settlements

Figure 4: Typical example of a map depicting the extent of the Anglo-Saxon migration.
© *mbartelsm*

From the Saxon country, that is, the district now known as Old Saxony, came the East Saxons, the South Saxons, and the West Saxons. Besides this, from the country of the Angles, that is, the land between the kingdoms of the Jutes and the Saxons, which is called *Angulus,* came the East Angles, the Middle Angles, the Mercians, and all the Northumbrian race (that is those people who dwell north of the river Humber) as well as the other Anglian tribes.'[21] Bede's account has given rise to many maps of the kind reproduced here as Figure 4, which attempt to illustrate this arrangement. While this distribution has been given some weight by place-name evidence, linguistic evidence and archaeological evidence, we know that Bede's account was over-simplistic and did not provide a full picture because, amongst other things, he did not mention some of the other peoples known to have been part of the migration, including the Franks and Frisians.

Events apparently soon took a turn for the worst, and Bede went on to recount that: 'It was not long before hordes of these peoples eagerly crowded into the island and the number of foreigners began to increase to such an extent that they became a source of terror to the natives who had called them in.'[22] They demanded

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[21] Colgrave and Mynors 1969: *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.15.

[22] Colgrave and Mynors 1969: *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.15.

greater supplies of provisions from the natives and threatened that if they were not forthcoming, they would break the treaty and lay waste to the whole island. The Angles made good their threat, 'the fire of their brutal conquerors should ravage all the neighbouring cities and countryside from the east to the western sea, and burn on, with no one to hinder it, until it covered almost the whole face of the doomed island.'[23] Regardless of rank, people were killed by fire and sword with no one left to bury them. Survivors captured in the hills were butchered, while others, driven by hunger, surrendered into slavery. Some fled abroad to Gaul, leaving a remnant to eke out their existence in the wilderness.

Of course, Bede was writing about events which occurred 250 years before his birth. Although his scholarship is known to have been thorough and he is understood to have been meticulous in striving to verify the information he drew upon, he nevertheless had very few sources on which to base his account of the *Adventus Saxonum*. Indeed, in compiling his history, Bede relied heavily on the work of Gildas, a British monk believed to have been born near Glasgow in about AD 500.

Gildas is best remembered for his book *On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain*, which was probably written within living memory of the events he described.[24] His main purpose was to preach a vivid and ferocious sermon to the Christian Britons who had apparently brought destruction on themselves by their sinfulness, incurring God's just punishment. However, it was Gildas's more lurid account of the catastrophe, stating that the heathen vengeance 'devastated town and country round about, and, once it was alight, it did not die down until it had burned almost the whole surface of the island and was licking the western ocean with its fierce red tongue', which gave Bede the bones of his later narrative.[25] According to Gildas, eventually the routed Britons gathered themselves together under Ambrosius Aurelius, a modest man of Roman origin. A series of battles was fought against the Angles, with victory swinging 'first to one side and then to the other',[26] culminating in the Battle of Mount Badon, possibly fought about the time of Gildas's birth at an as-yet-unidentified location in the south-west. Following the British victory, a prolonged period of relative peace between the Britons and the Angles apparently followed.[27]

This narrative of the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, derived from these scant literary sources, held sway over our understanding of the period until well into the second half of the 20th century, when new historical perspectives, place-names studies and the wealth of material provided by major advances in the techniques of archaeological excavation and artefact analysis began to produce a much more mixed picture of the *Adventus*. Likewise, the significant contribution made to our understanding of the Anglo-Saxon period by metal-detectorists, particularly those working in East Anglia, cannot be overstated and we owe them and those who have helped to record their findings since the 1970s an enormous debt of gratitude.

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[23] Colgrave and Mynors 1969: *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.15.

[24] Winterbottom 1978.

[25] Winterbottom 1978: *De Excidio*, Chapter 24.

[26] Colgrave and Mynors 1969: *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.16.

[27] Winterbottom 1978: *De Excidio*, Chapter 24; Colgrave and Mynors 1969: *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.16.

More recent studies have contradicted the idea of a wholesale and sudden (and presumably violent) replacement of the then-indigenous Brittonic culture with a Germanic one, presenting instead a more nuanced picture in which greater emphasis is placed on the process of acculturation.[28] This is the means by which, instead of slaughter, a smaller number of charismatic foreign leaders might have inspired local populations to take on Germanic clothing, weapons and language, resulting in the picture we see today. However, several decades of scholarly debate, informed by the detailed analysis of historical texts, archaeological evidence and, more recently, genetic studies,[29] have failed to provide a conclusive answer to the question of Anglo-Saxon origins. As Catherine Hills, one of the foremost archaeologists working on this early period, states: 'Identity is and was a complex and fluid phenomenon, not always easy to understand in the present, and extremely difficult to explore in the past through the medium of incomplete surviving material evidence.'[30] Although the matter remains unresolved, and we may never have a conclusive answer, it is clear from the evidence which we do have that the eastern seaboard of Britain, in particular the areas of the Wash, the Brecks and associated fen edge which form the focus of this project, was one of the earliest places to adopt an Anglo-Saxon identity. The extensive archaeological evidence for Early Anglo-Saxon place-names and settlements, together with the cemeteries within which their inhabitants were buried, is discussed in the following sections of this report.

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[28] e.g. Hills 2003; Hills 2011; Brugmann 2011; Oosthuizen 2019.

[29] e.g. Gretzinger *et al.* 2022.

[30] Hills 2011, 7.

2: Anglo-Saxon Place-Names

One of the most extensive forms of evidence which we have for the Anglo-Saxon settlement of the East Anglian landscape comes from place-names. These give us a detailed understanding of the physical character of the landscape which was inhabited by the Anglo-Saxons and also provide an insight into how they thought about the landscape. A large number of books about place-names have been published, including several dictionaries,[31] and websites such as the *Key to English Place-Names* website give definitions of their likely meanings.[32]

In general, a very small number of place-names are British/Celtic in origin and a number may derive from the Roman occupation of the country, but the vast majority of place-names in Breckland, as elsewhere, are names given to settlements by the Anglo-Saxons. By far the largest number are what is called 'habitative' place-names, which refer to different types of settlements, and contain the place-name elements *–ing*, *–ham* or *–ton/tun* preceded by either a personal name or a reference to a topographical feature, plant or animal characteristic of the area.

One group of these habitative place-names contains the element *–ing*, meaning 'the people of', preceded by a personal name. Older place-name studies regarded these *–ing* names to be the earliest of all, but this is not now considered certain. The earliest documented examples belong to the AD 620s, others occur in documents in the decades around AD 700. The *–ing* names do seem to be especially common in eastern and south-eastern England, the places where the first Anglo-Saxon incomers settled, but there is no apparent correlation between *–ing* place-names and Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, perhaps indicating that these names are not as early as was once believed.[33] However, some experts think that 'the fact that they do not correlate with pagan cemetery sites may be due to their function rather than the date of their creation … it is possible that this type of place-name was commonly given to a British community when that community and the land unit which it farmed had passed under the control of a member of the English warrior aristocracy'.[34] As with so many aspects of this period, it is likely that we will never be certain on this point.

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[31] e.g. Ekwall 1960; Gelling 1978; Mills 1991; Watts 2004; Taggart 2011; Briggs and Kilpatrick 2016.

[32] http://kepn.nottingham.ac.uk/

[33] Hooke 1985, 37.

[34] Higham 1992, 207.

Figure 5: 'Icklingham' incorporates both *–ing* and *–ham* elements, meaning 'the place of Yccel's people'.
© *Fr. Lawrence Lew*

Examples of *–ing* place-names in the Breckland area include the following places:

- Cressingham: 'homestead of Cressa's people' or perhaps 'people of the cress beds'

- Didlington: 'place of Dydda's people'

- Harling: 'place of Herela's people'

- Herringswell: 'the spring of the Hyrningas' or perhaps 'spring by the corner of land (Hyrne)'

- Honington: 'settlement of Huna's people'

- Icklingham: 'place of Yccel's people' (Figure 5)

- Illington: 'place of Illa's people'

- Larling: 'place Lyrel/Lyrla's people'

- Tottington: 'place of Tata's people'

- Worlington: 'place of the people at Wridewella' (Wordwell is supposedly the old name for the River Lark)

In addition to *–ing* names, by far the two most common place-name suffixes are *–ham* and *–tun/ton* (Figures 5 and 6). The *–hams* appear to be central estates or settlements, while the *–tuns* refer to their outlying subsidiary settlements. The *–ham* element may be preceded by a personal name, a topographical feature or the name of a plant, bird or animal. The *–tun* element may also be preceded by any of these,

but very commonly is a direction from the major settlement. Another common form is Barton, meaning an outlying farm, or Stoke, which has similar meanings.

Examples of *–ham* place-names in and around Breckland include the following:

- Personal name plus *–ham*: Barnham, Beachamwell, Buckenham, Brettenham, Cavenham, Fakenham, Garboldisham and Tuddenham, amongst others. More uncertain examples include, Hockham, which could either be a personal name or 'place where mallow or hock grows', and Lakenham.

- Topographic feature plus *–ham*: Bradenham, 'wide homestead or enclosure'; Bridgham, 'bridge homestead'; Higham, 'high homestead or enclosure'; Downham, 'hill homestead'; Saham Toney, 'lake homestead' (the Toney is a medieval affix from name of family owning the estate).

- Natural feature plus *–ham*: Fincham, 'finch homestead'; Roudham, 'rue homestead'; Fornham, 'trout homestead'; Shipdham, 'sheep homestead'; possibly also Wretham, 'crosswort or hellebore homestead', both of which plants had medicinal uses.

- Some place-names ending in *–ham* actually derive from *–hamm*, meaning 'land hemmed in by water or marsh, river meadow, cultivated plot in marginal ground'. One of the foremost place-name scholars, Margaret Gelling, had previously thought that *–hamm* did not occur in areas of Anglian settlement, as opposed to areas of Saxon and Jutish settlement, but she later thought she was mistaken. Although she does not cite any examples of *–hamm* in Norfolk or Suffolk, it has been suggested that Lakenham or Wretham in the lists above may fall into this category.[35]

Some examples of *–tun* place-names in the Breckland area include the following:

- Personal name plus *–tun*: Ampton, Caston, Euston (Figure 6), Gooderstone, Snetterton, Threxton, Troston and Watton.

- Topographic name plus *–tun*: Houghton on the Hill, 'settlement at or by a hill-spur'; Roughton, 'settlement on rough ground'; Santon, 'settlement on sandy soil'; Wilton, 'willow-tree farm'.

- Direction plus *–tun*: Coney Weston, 'coney' being a word for 'rabbit', no doubt added in the medieval period; Norton, a now-lost hamlet in Stoke Ferry parish.

- Outlying 'barton' farms: Barton Bendish; Barton Mills; Great Barton; Little Barton.

- Uncertain examples: Flempton, may refer to a native of Flanders or a fugitive; Sapiston, could relate to 'soap-makers'; Stanton, 'stone' could refer to a structure, a quarry or stony soil; Kilverstone, the first element is the Old English *cylfe*, the prow of a ship, used to describe the shape of a hill, or perhaps used as a by-name of someone who guards the prow of a ship.

[35] Gelling 1984; Watts 2004.

Figure 6: The place-name Euston incorporates the *–tun* element, meaning 'Efe's farm/settlement'. The village sign features the family arms of the Duke of Grafton, who owns the village and lives at Euston Hall.
© *Adrian S Pye*

In analysing Suffolk place-names, Edward Martin has noted that *–ham* and *–ing* names are especially common in eastern England, but are largely absent from the sandy soils of central Breckland. He considers *–ton* names to denote secondary settlements dating from the 8th century onwards and relating to smaller places, which quite often did not develop into medieval parishes.[36] In his own assessment of Norfolk's place-names, Tom Williamson agrees that *–ham* names are on the choicer ground, with *–ton* names occurring in more marginal and peripheral locations, suggesting that they were later settlement developments.[37] In this way, we can infer not only something about the relative relationships between settlements, but also the quality of the agricultural land within which they were located. The dearth of names from the sandy soils of the Breckland is strongly indicative of their having been extremely marginal land during the Anglo-Saxon period, and this interpretation is strengthened by the fact that so many Anglo-Saxon place-names are concentrated within the river valleys, where the Anglo-Saxon settlements were founded. This riverine environment is the main focus of the BFER scheme.

Apart from attempts to date the foundation of settlements from their place-names, the topographical elements of names can tell us about the landscape features of the time. Place-names give an impression of Breckland in Anglo-Saxon times, such as the many refences to rivers, including *–ford*, *–bridge* and *–well*, or to the wider landscape. Examples include the sandy soil of Santon (Santon in Norfolk, Santon Downham in Suffolk) and vegetation and wildlife, like the broom of Brandon and Broomhill or the cranes of Cranwich.

Topographical names include Thetford and Brandon, now the largest settlements in the Breckland area. Thetford means 'the people's ford' or 'nation ford'. It is not a unique name: there is another Thetford in Cambridgeshire and a Tetford in Lincolnshire. It perhaps indicates the ford's special importance – it is where the Icknield Way crossed the river. Not surprisingly, there are several other places in Breckland that contain the word 'ford', which in turn reflects the concentration of river-based settlements. It may be prefixed with a personal name, as in Culford, Lackford and Mundford, or a descriptive element, such as Langford, 'the long ford', Stanford, 'the stone ford', and Wangford, the 'waggon ford' and one of only two ford names in England relating to wheeled traffic.

Other riverine and maritime place-name elements include *–well*, meaning spring or stream, and Breckland examples include its use with personal names at Bardwell, Beachamwell and Eriswell. Examples also include uses with natural names at Feltwell, after the plant called 'felte', perhaps marjoram or mullein, and at Wordwell, the

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[36] Martin 1989.

[37] Williamson 2005.

'winding brook' and apparently the Anglo-Saxon name for the River Lark. Landing places are denoted by *–hythe*, such as at Methwold Hythe and also at Lakenheath, where the first element is an *–ing* name, meaning 'Lacu's people' or the 'people of the river'. Lakenheath can then be read as 'the landing place of Lacu's people' or the 'landing place of the river people', which makes some sense when considered in the context of the archaeological evidence discussed below (Figure 7). Marshy ground may be indicated by the Old English *–wisce*, which gives us Cranwich, the 'crane's marshy meadow', and Weeting means 'the wet place'. Lakes are indicated by *–mere*, as in Livermere, Ringmere and Fowlmere, and possibly also Londmere and Portmere.

Figure 7: The place-name Lakenheath incorporates both *–ing* and *–hythe* elements, meaning 'the landing place of Lacu's people' or the 'landing place of the river people' the place of Yccel's people'. © *Adrian S Pye*

The names of the local rivers themselves are also instructive. The Wissey is translated as 'the stream of the Wissa people', but Tom Williamson identifies the name as an Old English word simply meaning 'river' and suggests that its British name was Wigora, 'the winding one'.[38] This name is preserved in the bankside village name Wereham (Wigorham in a charter of AD 1060), but it seems that the name had changed by the 8th century when the Wissa were mentioned in an account of the life of St Guthlac.[39] Likewise, the Ouse is derived from the Old Welsh word for 'water' and is the only pre-Anglian river name still current in Norfolk. The Lark, by contrast, is an Old English name, which may refer to the bird, although, as discussed, it is suggested that the older name for the river is the Wordwell. Different again, the Thet is considered to be a back-formation from the name of Thetford, through which it passes.

Regarding physical topography, the name Brandon means 'hill on which broom grows', as does Broomhill. In the case of Brandon, though, this describes the landscape which provides the hinterland for the settlement – Brandon itself lies by the River Little Ouse, but the name refers to the large raised heath – the 'don' – to its south, which can never have been suitable for settlement sites (Figure 8). Both *–ford* and *–don* are place-name elements that occur in the earliest English names. Margaret Gelling ranks them as some of the elements coined 'during the earliest years of English speech in this country'.[40] It is a very common place-name element in areas where there are flat-topped hills, so it is perhaps not surprising that there are few examples in low-lying Breckland. The only other local example is Foulden, 'bird hill', which Gelling notes as being in a similar landscape situation to Brandon. More specifically, an island or hill within a marsh is signified by an *–eg* ending, which appears in a corrupted form in Bodney and is a common place-name element in the Fens. In a related manner, the *–den* in Elveden refers to a valley, and may be 'elf valley or 'swan valley'.

[38] Williamson 2005.

[39] Colgrave 1956.

[40] Gelling 1984, 140 and 153.

Figure 8: The place-name Brandon means 'hill on which broom grows' and refers to the large raised heath – the 'don' – to its south.
© *Adrian S Pye*

As might be expected, other place-names indicative of upland areas are also absent from the Breckland, apart from the three –*wold* names – Northwold, Methwold and Hockwold – on the higher land at the edge of the Breckland area. The word means 'wood', but it is not clear how thickly wooded 'wold' areas actually were. Harold Fox commented that 'a stranger coming into a wold one evening in the seventh century or the eighth would have entered a wood pasture … he would have seen clumps of wood casting long shadows over the great open spaces and, everywhere on the pastures, domestic animals of all kinds.'[41] The word 'ley', meaning wood or a clearing in a wood, occurs a few times, as in Westley, the 'west wood', and in Cockley Cley, 'cocks' wood', where the 'cley' element refers to the type of soil. The distinction between 'wold' and 'ley' is probably a matter of date rather than meaning, 'wold' being the earlier, while 'ley' apparently did not become fashionable until the mid-8th century.[42]

By contrast, Norman Scarfe noted that –*field* is the third most common place name suffix in Suffolk, after –*ham* and –*ton*. It is derived from –*feld*, open country or land free from wood, but the suffix does not appear in the Breckland area. More generally, there are far fewer place-names with elements suggesting woodland in Breckland than elsewhere in Norfolk and Suffolk, and the same is also true of the Fenland.[43]

In addition to topography, place-names can give us a sense of the way in which the landscape was administered or thought about by its inhabitants. The hierarchical relationship between –*ham* and –*tun* was discussed above, but other place-name elements are also instructive. 'Stow' denotes a place of assembly or even a holy place, such as in West Stow and North Stow, both probably part of former larger landholding, and Stow Langtoft, which was held by the Langtoft family in the medieval period.

Households and enclosures are denoted by –*worth*, often with a personal name, as in *Beodricsworth*, the settlement which later became Bury St Edmunds, Cranworth, Ixworth, Timworth and Riddlesworth. Also included in the category is Rushford, the older spellings of which end in –*worth* rather than –*ford*, and Hillborough, the earlier versions of which take –*worth* and –*well* with the personal name Hildeburh. Areas of land detached from the main area of its administrative unit can be indicated by –*halh*, as in Knettishall and Mildenhall.

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[41] Fox 2000, 51.

[42] Gelling 1984, 225.

[43] Scarfe 2004, 14; Rackham 1986, 83.

Fortified places were indicated by the *–burh* element, such as Ickburgh, which may be the 'fortified place of the Iceni people',[44] and Oxborough, relating to oxen. Oxborough was known as Oxburgh (still the name used for Oxburgh Hall) until the 1920s, when its name was apparently changed by the Post Office! Most notably, Bury St Edmunds is so named not because it is the burial place of the saint, but because the first element here means 'fortified place' and refers to the monastic precinct. A similar situation is found in Peterborough, which refers to the 'fortified place' of the monastery dedicated to St Peter.

Finally, with particular regard to the current project, it is important to remember that the word 'breck' means heathland broken up for cultivation for a time and then allowed to revert to its former state. This is captured in the place-name Breckles, 'the meadow by newly-cultivated land', and is the name given to the whole area, having been first used by the local historian and naturalist W.G. Clarke in 1895.[45] Such, then, are the insights which place-names offer into the nature and workings of the Anglo-Saxon landscape of Breckland. The next section explores the degree to which this evidence is corroborated by the archaeological evidence for the settlement of the Breckland river valleys during the Early Anglo-Saxon period.

[44] Scarfe 2004, 12.

[45] Clarke 1925, 22.

3: Early Anglo-Saxon Settlements

The archaeological record for Anglo-Saxon East Anglia is exceptional in both its quality and its quantity. This richness is enhanced further by the numerous campaigns of formal and informal archaeological fieldwork which have examined and documented it during the last few centuries. Yet for all this wealth, an inherent contradiction lies at the heart of the Anglo-Saxon archaeological record in the region. Specifically, the Early Anglo-Saxon period (*c.* AD 450–650) is characterised by artefacts primarily derived from burials – cremation urns, grave-goods and human remains – while the remains of the period's settlements are ephemeral and remain largely elusive. In stark contrast, the archaeological record of the Middle Anglo-Saxon (AD 650–850) and Late Anglo-Saxon (AD 851–1100) periods represents a near-complete reversal of this picture. Middle and Late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries are rare discoveries in East Anglia, yet Middle and Late Anglo-Saxon settlements can be readily recognised because of the prevalence of domestic pottery and associated metalwork which serve as strong material indicators of their presence. Many of these Middle and Late Anglo-Saxon settlements still exist today.[46]

Despite these quirks, we are extremely fortunate to have a relatively complete archaeological sequence which spans the entire Anglo-Saxon period, albeit with variable strengths and weaknesses as the period developed. It is easily forgotten that this is not a luxury afforded to archaeologists in other parts of the country, and many archaeologists have been drawn to the region precisely because it is possible to trace developments in both settlement and burial archaeology across the full range of the Anglo-Saxon period. However, things are not entirely in our favour, and the richness of the material record is offset by the poor survival of complementary documentary material. Indeed, any attempt to study the history of Anglo-Saxon East Anglia is seriously hindered by the fact that the handful of surviving contemporary sources provide an incomplete and unreliable coverage. This state of affairs only serves to emphasise the importance of the archaeological record, without which we would be able to say very little about these most important and formative centuries.

West Stow

Despite the large amount of fieldwork undertaken within East Anglia, including within the Breckland area, there are still very few sites at which Early Anglo-Saxon settlements have been fully excavated. We are particularly fortunate, therefore, that one of the most important and well-understood examples of just such a settlement is located at West Stow, on the northern bank of the River Lark (Figure 9). Major

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[46] Hamerow 2002; Hamerow 2012; Blair 2018.

Figure 9: A drone's-eye view of the West Stow Anglo-Saxon Village showing the experimental reconstructions of Anglo-Saxon buildings which stand on the site.
© Alan Clarke

excavations began at West Stow half a century ago, resulting not just in the discovery of the Early Anglo-Saxon settlement, but also giving rise to a unique architectural and archaeological experiment.[47]

Situated on a low sandy knoll, the archaeological significance of West Stow was first recognised in 1849, when an Early Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemetery was discovered nearby. Yet evidence for Early Anglo-Saxon settlement was not recognised until nearly a century later. Credit for that discovery belongs to renowned Suffolk archaeologist Basil Brown, who had begun the excavation of the Sutton Hoo ship burial in 1939 (Figure 10).[48] Fresh from that experience, he excavated a pair of Romano-British kilns at West Stow in 1940. While re-excavating these kilns with archaeologist Stanley West in 1947, Brown noted early Anglo-Saxon artefacts and features in a sandpit then being dug into the north-eastern edge of the knoll. West later brought the site to the attention of Vera Evison, an Anglo-Saxon specialist, who excavated on the knoll for five seasons between 1957 and 1961 under the auspices of the Ministry of Works. Her work confirmed that substantial Early Anglo-Saxon deposits survived, and led to the main excavation campaign under West's direction between 1965 and 1972. Over the course of eight seasons, what remains one of the most extensively excavated Early Anglo-Saxon settlements in the country was revealed.

Although the West Stow site is best known for the Early Anglo-Saxon settlement, the excavation also revealed the knoll to be densely packed with prehistoric and Roman features. Several scatters of Mesolithic flint-working waste were identified, as was a late Neolithic inhumation surrounded by an enclosing ditch associated with 47 cremation burials. There was also an Iron Age settlement on the knoll, comprising a series of enclosures, roundhouses and numerous pits. These were

[47] West 1985; West 1990; West 2001; Crabtree 1990; Tipper 2012; Hoggett 2015.

[48] Plunkett 2014.

Figure 10: Basil Brown (left), the original discoverer of the West Stow site, captured on camera during a visit to the 1965–72 excavations. © *Eric Houlder*

superseded by a cluster of five Romano-British pottery kilns, two of which had first brought Brown and West to the site.

The Early Anglo-Saxon settlement lasted from about AD 420 until the early AD 600s, when the inhabitants abandoned the site. The excavation revealed two main types of building: rectangular timber halls, represented by rows of post-holes (Figure 11), and what are referred to as 'sunken-featured buildings' (SFBs), comprising sub-rectangular hollows with one or more post-holes at either end (Figure 12). The seven identified halls measured 8–15m long, each being about half as wide as it was long; most had a southern door and a central hearth. One hall was subdivided at one end, suggesting it may have been more important than the others or performed a different function. In addition, the hollows of 68 SFBs were excavated, typically some 4m long by 3m wide. Seemingly built in clusters around the halls, they fell into two main types. One had a single post at either end, presumably supporting a ridge-beam. The other had three posts at each end, with the four corner-posts providing extra roof support. The hollows were mostly filled with rubbish, accumulated during the building's life or deposited after dismantling.

The halls have been interpreted as communal buildings, each the focal point of an extended family group. Satellite groups of SFBs are thought to have had a range of functions, such as dwellings, workshops and store rooms. Artefacts from the SFB fills allow the buildings to be phased into a sequence spanning 200 years. This shows that there were only two or three family groups of this kind in residence at any one time.

Although confined to the knoll, the focus of the settlement appears to have drifted around the hilltop as halls and SFBs rotted, were dismantled and replaced. During the final phase of occupation, around AD 600–650, at least one of the family groups seems to have drifted away from the knoll to join a new focus of settlement elsewhere. This is most likely to have been to the east, where the medieval village and parish church of West Stow developed.

Figure 11: Excavated view of a typical rectangular timber hall ('Hall 1') at West Stow, showing the holes where structural timbers formerly stood. *© West Suffolk Council Heritage Service*

Figure 12: Excavated view of a six-post sunken-featured building ('SFB 22') at West Stow, showing the holes where structural timbers formerly stood. *© West Suffolk Council Heritage Service*

A vast array of artefacts and ecofacts was recovered during the excavations, enabling a great deal to be said about the settlement's economy and environment. Wheat, barley and rye were all cultivated, the crops being supplemented by wild fruit, nuts and edible plants. Over 175,000 pieces of animal bone were collected, indicating

the farming of large numbers of sheep, cattle and pigs, as well as wildfowling, fishing and deer-hunting.[49] The strong emphasis on sheep-rearing matches the large quantity of excavated loom-weights, spinning and weaving tools, suggesting that textile production was one of the specialist skills practised on the site, with surplus cloth being traded. Other crafts in evidence were bone- and antler-working, especially in the form of combs, and pottery-making, with a clay heap and decorative stamping tools surviving, along with the pots themselves. The other major skill in evidence, of course, was the high level of woodworking and carpentry required to construct and maintain the settlement's numerous timber buildings.

However, the excavations are only half the story. What happened next, once the digging was over, confirmed West Stow's status as one of the most important Anglo-Saxon sites in the country. Of course, the site is now best known, not least to generations of East Anglian schoolchildren, as an educational centre and tourist attraction (Figure 9). Behind the reconstructed Anglo-Saxon village, however, is a vast and ongoing exercise in experimental archaeology, with different interpretations and building techniques being tried and tested and the results constantly being compared to the original archaeological record.

In terms of the original buildings' appearance, the rectangular halls are not too difficult to reconstruct, with vertical posts defining walls and supporting roofs. Reconstructing the superstructure of the SFBs, however, has always been much harder. SFBs have been recognised across much of Early Anglo-Saxon England, but the exact nature of their construction and appearance has been debated – without resolution – for the best part of a century. There are no modern counterparts.

Until the West Stow excavations, the prevailing interpretation of the SFB imagined a tent-like thatched roof set over a hollow in which the occupants worked and dwelt. West Stow, which provided one of the largest excavated samples of SFBs, caused Stanley West to challenge this idea, and brought a new dimension to such reconstructions. Two of the West Stow SFBs had burnt down (unlike the vast majority of the buildings, which had been dismantled). As a result, traces of planked floors and timber walls survived, suggesting a much more complex, albeit conventional-looking building than had previously been supposed. Rather than a place to live in, it seems that the hollows offered ventilation or insulation to floors raised from the ground, and a space beneath that could perhaps be used for storage.

When the excavations ended, Stanley West was keen to test his new ideas. Meanwhile, a group of Cambridge students had formulated a desire to reconstruct an Anglo-Saxon building. The two parties met, the West Stow Environmental Archaeology Group was formed, and work began on the first reconstruction in 1973. This was a six-post SFB built to test West's ideas, with a plank floor suspended over the hollow and timber walls. It was made using only tools, materials and techniques which would have been available to the Anglo-Saxons. Crucially, it worked! This first house is still standing, although it is no longer accessible to the public for safety reasons. Its design has gone on to underpin many of the reconstructions which have been built since, each experimenting with more sophisticated approaches to timber joints, thatching, planking and pegging.

[49] Crabtree 1990.

Continuing the experiment, a second SFB was reconstructed in 1974. This followed the traditional sunken-floored interpretation, with a view to comparing and contrasting it to the raised-floored version. One problem which was immediately apparent with this interpretation was the speed with which the hollow silted up and levelled off as a result of the sandy soils into which it was dug. This contrasts starkly with the clearly defined hollows recovered during the excavations, which were sufficiently intact at the end of a building's use to have a second life as rubbish pits. This is one of many ways in which the sunken-house design does not match the excavated evidence, indicating that the reconstruction is flawed.

To date, ten reconstructions have been built at West Stow: five variations on West's version of the SFB, two halls, one workshop, the original sunken house and the new sunken house, constructed in 2015 (Figure 9). In that time, only four buildings have been deconstructed, thus completing their experimental lifecycle. One of the SFBs built in 1974 became structurally unstable and was dismantled in 1987. One of the halls, built over a number of years in the late 1970s, also became unsound and was dismantled in 1999. In one extreme case an SFB, built in the mid-1990s, accidentally burnt down in 2005. Although not planned, this latter incident was turned to positive use when the remains were excavated to see how they compared to the burnt SFBs found during the original excavations. It also allowed many different archaeological techniques to be calibrated, given that the design and layout of the building immediately before the fire were known.[50]

The original sunken house stood for over 40 years, but in 2015 the decision was taken that the structure had reached the end of its practical life and it was recording and dismantled by a group of young volunteers as part of the National Lottery Heritage Fund-supported 'Sunken House Autopsy Project'.[51] This work concluded that the structure had probably outlived the typical lifespan of an SFB, as some of the major structural elements had decayed heavily, but the majority of the timbers were still sound and could have been reused effectively in other structures. The profile, fills and finds of the excavation proved markedly different from those recorded in Anglo-Saxon examples, due to the nature of the structure, how it was used and backfilled during its lifetime, and then eventually demolished. While it has not been conclusively shown that sunken-floored structures of this design did not exist, it is clear that this particular design was not an accurate representation and/or used and demolished in the traditional manner. The West Stow experiment continues!

Other Sites

For a long time, West Stow remained one of the most completely and most comprehensively excavated and analysed example of an Early Anglo-Saxon settlement, and it has become something of a type-site for such settlements nationwide. However, there is a growing number of similar sites which have continued to add to our understanding of the Early Anglo-Saxon landscape, many of them situated within East Anglia's river valleys. Large-scale excavations

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[50] Tipper 2012.

[51] Brooks 2016.

Figure 13: Aerial view of excavations in progress at Kentford in 2015, showing a mixture of rectangular timber halls and sunken-featured buildings. *Photograph taken by Commission Air © Cotswold Archaeology*

undertaken at Mucking, Essex, between 1965 and 1978 revealed more that 200 SFBs and 11 rectangular timber halls, while more than 800 burials were recovered from two associated cemeteries. Although excavated at broadly the same time as West Stow, the post-excavation analysis of the site was not completed until 1993.[52] Likewise, excavations undertaken at Carlton Colville, near Lowestoft, in 1998 revealed a well-preserved and almost complete Early Anglo-Saxon settlement, dating from the 6th to early 8th centuries AD, and a mid- to late 7th-century cemetery, which lay within the settlement itself and included high-status female graves. The site produced the remains of 38 SFBs, at least nine well-defined post-buildings, four extensive middens (rubbish heaps) or surface spreads of domestic rubbish, and approximately 270 pits, as well as five hearth or oven bases.[53] The interpretation of both of these sites was greatly informed by the results of the West Stow excavations, and they have in turn fed back into the ongoing experimental reconstructions and reinterpretation of the West Stow site itself.

Further archaeological excavations undertaken since the 1970s have revealed that the settlement at West Stow was not an isolated or significant site, despite its 'Stow' place-name element. Rather, it is simply a well-preserved and well-excavated example of the typical type of settlements which occupied the fertile river valleys of the Breckland river valleys and fen edge during the 5th to the 8th centuries. Within the environs of West Stow, two further SFBs were discovered to the east of the excavated settlement area in 1977 and further SFBs, pits and ditches were excavated within the Lackford Bridge Quarry to the west of the main site in 1978–9. When the new museum store was constructed adjacent to the West Stow visitor centre, situated on the next knoll to the east of the excavated settlement area, archaeological evidence for a cluster of five more SFBs and an associated rectangular post-hole

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[52] Hamerow 1993.

[53] Lucy *et al.* 2009.

building was found.[54] Further up the Lark Valley, extensive excavations undertaken within the grounds of Culford School in 2015 revealed a row of four SFBs, in the bottom of one of which was a deliberately placed deposit of three deer antlers (possibly a ritual act) alongside more common domestic artefacts, the number of which suggest that bone/antler tool production was being carried out on the site.[55] Also in 2015, archaeological excavation of a 1.2 hectare site at Kentford, Suffolk, revealed Anglo-Saxon settlement evidence across the majority of the excavation area (Figure 13). This included 21 SFBs, alongside two complete rectangular post-hole buildings, with evidence of perhaps three further incomplete examples, and a large post-in-trench building. The site lies immediately north of the core of Kentford village and overlooks the valley of the River Kennett, a tributary of the River Lark. The range of buildings seems to conform to the pattern of small groups or clusters of SFBs associated with a single, earth-fast, post-hole building or hall, as observed at West Stow, and this was the first site where such remains had been discovered in the Kennett valley.[56]

These sites are just a handful of examples of the increasing number of Early Anglo-Saxon settlement sites which are being uncovered during the routine archaeological excavation of proposed development sites. In most cases, these sites are relatively small, with only a few buildings revealed, but some excavations, usually relating to large-scale residential development or quarrying, are sufficiently large to encompass the full extent of the settlement areas. As might be expected, many of these sites are situated within the fertile river valleys which drain into the Wash, making them easily accessible and attractive to settlers entering the region from the sea.

[54] Gill and Riddler 2012.

[55] Minter with Wreathall 2016, 622.

[56] Everett 2017.

4: Early Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries

Whereas archaeological evidence for Early Anglo-Saxon settlements does not survive well and is rarely excavated, Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries are very well represented in the archaeological record. This is primarily because of the prevalence and longevity of the grave-goods which were placed in graves or the ceramic vessels in which cremated remains were buried. As a consequence, we know considerably more about death in the Early Anglo-Saxon period than we do about everyday life!

In particular, two main burial rites were practised: cremation, with remains being buried in pottery vessels, and inhumation, with the corpse being buried in a grave. Cremation had ceased in the 3rd century, but from about AD 430 it was again used, with Breckland cremation cemeteries providing archaeological evidence for the arrival of continental migrants, in whose north-German Saxon homelands large cremation cemeteries have been found. Their custom was to burn the body of the dead on a funeral pyre, sometimes with the bodies of animals, and then to collect and bury the ashes in an urn. The other new practice that revealed itself from about AD 425–450 was the inclusion in graves and on pyres of grave-goods – personal items, such as jewellery, combs or weapons which had belonged to the deceased. These are sometimes found in cremation cemeteries, buried along with the ashes in the urns, and more often found buried in the ground as part of an inhumation. This, too, had been practiced in Saxony about a generation or so before the practice appeared in the Brecks.[57]

As is apparent in the Breckland examples discussed below, Early Anglo-Saxon cremation and inhumation cemeteries exhibited a considerable degree of 'conspicuous consumption', meaning that large quantities of resources were expended on them. This can be used to infer something of the importance which the Anglo-Saxons placed on burial rites, and in turn might say something about the status of the individuals being buried. Although the end result of the cremation rite can be rather minimal in archaeological terms, the rite itself required many resources to be gathered together, particularly wood for the construction of a pyre, and these materials were then burned before the remains were collected and buried in cemeteries, which may have been some distance from the site of the cremation. Inhumation was also resource intensive, with grave-goods often buried with the corpse, although the digging of a grave required fewer resources than the construction of a pyre, and there was no equivalent of the collection and transportation of the remains after the funeral, the grave simply being filled in. Although a simpler burial rite, archaeologically the end result of inhumation is often more spectacular and easier to interpret, as is illustrated by several of the Breckland cemeteries.

[57] Lucy 2000; Williams 2006; Sayer 2020.

In both the cremation and inhumation rites, the body was laid out for the mourners to view – on the funeral pyre and in the grave – and this was apparently a very important part of the process. For burials, the corpse was most commonly arranged stretched out on its back – the position in which it could best be viewed from the grave side. It was often dressed, perhaps in special funerary clothes, and personal ornaments were placed as they may have been used in life. Melted material has been found in cremation cemeteries, indicating that there was a similar placement of jewellery on the necks, shoulders and wrists of bodies when they were burned on the pyre.

Although grave-goods were deployed in both funerary rites, they were not employed in all burials and are found in only about half of inhumations.[58] It is harder to be certain of the proportion of cremations which featured grave-goods. To some extent, different grave-goods reflected the age and sex of the deceased individual: infant burials rarely had grave-goods, the use of which increased from puberty until late maturity, when the number and range of weapons decreased and some kinds of jewellery were no longer deposited. Other patterns of use were clearly not related to age or sex, reflecting characteristics of which we are unaware. Grave-goods have been interpreted as evidence of pagan belief and as symbols of the identity of the dead, important for mourning.[59] Ethnographic parallels suggest that grave-goods might represent mourners' gifts to the departed, may be intended to prevent the dead returning to the world of the living, or might have been reminders of a person's deeds or character, or represent provision for the afterlife. The finding in inhumations of ox, sheep and goat bones with butchery marks and burned animal bones and cereal grains in cremation urns support the latter idea, with foodstuffs also being provided, although these may equally be the leftovers of funerary feasting.[60]

The artefacts in cremation and inhumation are different, and this is often attriuted to the destructive effects of the pyre. Their altered appearance after burning may also have been important for the mourners. Weapons, apparently a symbol of male identity, are often absent from cremations, perhaps because they survived the pyre with little distortion or damage and so are insufficiently changed to accompany the dead. The most common animal sacrifices in cremation are sheep, goat and horse. These may not have been as food offerings, as whole animals were sacrificed, perhaps so they could share the same destruction and transformation as the corpse.[61]

Combs and tweezers are more common grave-goods in cremations than inhumations. It has been suggested that this could be because symbolically cremation was for destruction and then reconstitution, so toilet implements, combs, tweezers, shears and other personal toilet items stood for the 'new surface' of the deceased. These items were not related to age or gender identity, but were connected to the aim of cremation to destroy and re-build the dead into a new identity. Describing the Lackford cremation cemetery in 1951, T.C. Lethbridge wrote: 'The combs, tweezers and shears were invariably unburnt when they were placed in the

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[58] Hines and Bayliss 2013.

[59] Williams 2005.

[60] Perry 2013.

[61] Williams 2004.

Figure 14: An artist's reconstruction of a cremation ceremony, which attempts to capture the multi-sensory nature of the experience.
© *Niels Bach*

funerary urn. The combs, in practically every case, had been deliberately broken. They were objects so closely associated with the personality of the dead individual that no one must be allowed to use them again … The comb in particular had to be deliberately 'killed'. As the original belief grew weaker, small dummy or token copies were put in the urns as a symbol [in place of the real objects].'[62]

Although pyre sites have been found at some cremation cemeteries, such as that at Illington, this may not have been the common pattern, with the composition of pyre debris in most urns suggesting that cremation took place at sites outside, and perhaps some distance from, the cemeteries (Figure 14). Whether the corpse was carried long distances from the settlement, perhaps accompanied by a procession, and cremation then took place at a discrete site near the cemetery, or whether cremation took place near the settlement and the ashes were transported to the cemetery, is not known.[63]

The placement of bodies in inhumation cemeteries had ritual significance, too. Although there were apparently no rules about the alignment of burials, unlike later Christian burials, Early Anglo-Saxon burials were often aligned with their heads or feet to the east and west in a position perhaps linked to the importance of the rising or setting sun in beliefs about life and death. Some scholars have suggested that slight variations in grave orientation may be linked to the position of sunrise and sunset at the time of year when burial occurred, but research has been inconclusive. Early Anglo-Saxon burials often re-used ancient barrows as cemetery sites, perhaps because the Anglo-Saxons viewed ancient monuments as inhabited by the spirits of the dead, and burials in these landscape features were aligned on the barrow itself.[64]

Finally, where human remains are preserved we are able to study the bones themselves, which can tell us a great deal about the age, sex and health of the

[62] Lethbridge 1951.

[63] Williams 2004.

[64] Semple 1998; Semple 2013; Chester-Kadwell 2009; Hoggett 2010.

deceased, as well as highlighting illnesses, wounds or trauma which they may have experienced in life or which might have caused their death.[65] More recently, it has been possible to extract ancient DNA from some of these skeletons which is beginning to tell us more about the origins and lifepaths of the buried individuals.[66] Such studies are still relatively rare, but as the necessary technology becomes more accessible and affordable we will start to see it being used much more widely. There is a strong chance that such studies will completely transform our understanding of the period during the next few years. Unfortunately, as is apparent from the local examples which follow, the acidic sandy soils of Breckland, which make the landscape so barren, also have the effect of dissolving bone, so that many of the area's Early Anglo-Saxon graves appear empty apart from the surviving grave-goods.

Lackford Cemetery

The Lackford cremation cemetery is situated on Mill Heath, a spur overlooking the River Lark, near where the supposed route of the ancient Icknield Way crosses the river. This Early Anglo-Saxon burial ground, suspected from chance pottery urn finds in 1917, was revealed by ploughing in 1945 and excavated by T.E. Lethbridge in 1947.[67] Some 500 cremations were excavated, although the full extent of the cemetery was not established. Many of the cremation vessels were highly decorated, combining a freehand linear ornament with stamped decoration (Figure 15). While large numbers of pots had been disturbed by warrening or ploughing, many urns and their contents remained intact. In many cases, the urns, which were sometimes lidded, were covered by a layer or heap of flint nodules or even Roman tiles. More rarely, indications of post-holes were seen. Both features suggested to Lethbridge that visible markers had been present above ground. In 2015 and 2016, the Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service excavated further urns from the site after they were exposed by ploughing. These urns are the first from the site to be excavated and studied under modern conditions, and are the focus of a research project funded by Historic England, the results of which are due to be published soon.[68]

Adults, adolescents and infants were cremated, with children often placed in smaller vessels. Human ashes, together with burned animal bones, were found with grave-goods, which often reflect the sex of the cremated individual: burned brooches, girdle hangers, rings and beads with female remains, and buckles, sword-scabbard fragment and ivory playing pieces with male remains. Commonly, unburned combs, tweezers or shears were placed with the remains. Lethbridge found no apparent relationship between the quality of the pot and the quality of the objects burned with the dead: 'If anything, the reverse is the case. The fine objects ... were contained in one of the poorest examples ... while more than one unornamented vessel contained the remains of expensive objects.'[69]

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[65] Brothwell 1981; Mays 1998; Roberts 2018.

[66] e.g. Margaryan *et al.* 2020; Gretzinger *et al.* 2022.

[67] Lethbridge 1951; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T._C._Lethbridge

[68] https://heritagesuffolk.wordpress.com/2020/06/25/investigating-suffolks-largest-anglo-saxon-cemetery-lackford/ and https://heritagesuffolk.wordpress.com/2021/05/14/lackford-cemetery/

[69] Lethbridge 1951.

Figure 15: One of the cremation urns excavated from Lackford by Lethbridge. This example typifies the work of the so-called 'Illington–Lackford' potter. © *Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge*

Lethbridge noted that a large proportion of the cremation urns had a post-firing hole deliberately cut in the side or base, some of which retained a lead plug residue. He assumed a previous use as a churn, and one question which still occupies scholars has been whether such finely made, richly ornamented pots were specifically intended as funerary urns or were made originally for domestic use. Whilst not excluding the possibility of 'a relative specially acquiring a fine pot for the dead person's ashes', Lethbridge candidly added 'I think he may just as frequently have tipped the milk or corn out of a pot already standing on the floor of the hut'.[70] Twenty ornamented pottery sherds have subsequently been found at nearby West Stow Early Anglo-Saxon settlement, ten from the primary fills of five of the sunken-featured buildings, indicating that such pottery may indeed have been used in a domestic context.[71]

A major re-examination of Early Anglo-Saxon domestic and funerary pottery from Lincolnshire used ceramic analysis to identify use-alteration characteristics, backed up by comparative ethnological studies. It convincingly showed that Early Anglo-Saxon cremation urns had a pre-burial domestic use, many as vessels used in the production and consumption of fermented foodstuffs (brewing) or churning (dairying).[72] This conclusion is supported by the results of the analysis of the more-recently excavated pots, which suggests that several of the vessels held dairy products, such as milk or cheese, before they were used as burial containers.[73] The Lincolnshire study concluded that the pre-burial function of the selected cremation

[70] Lethbridge 1951.

[71] Green *et al.* 1981; Arnold 1988.

[72] Perry 2011; Perry 2013.

[73] https://heritagesuffolk.wordpress.com/2021/05/14/lackford-cemetery/

urn was extremely significant in terms of culturally controlled rules. Therefore, if such domestic pots were decorated according to family traditions, then this would account for their clustering in cemeteries, as seems to be indicated at Lackford.[74]

Illington Cemetery

At the site of the Illington cremation cemetery, located to the north-east of Thetford, Early Anglo-Saxon pottery fragments were found in a field in the spring of 1949. Within a few months the site was excavated revealing a large cremation cemetery, probably in use from the 6th century into the 7th. Some 200 ceramic cremation urns and at least one copper-alloy urn were found, with pottery sherds from up to another 200 urns discovered by fieldwalking the area in the 1970s and 1980s. Around the urn field there were some areas of darker earth and when one of these was excavated it was found to contain burnt earth, flints and a few pottery fragments. It was thought to be the site of a funeral pyre on which cremation had occurred.[75]

Archaeologists have found no trace of an Early Anglo-Saxon settlement in Illington parish. This seems to confirm the conclusion that cremation cemeteries and the settlements from which the deceased came were almost always separate, with people from several settlements interred in the same cemetery. A recent study of Early Anglo-Saxon cremation in Lincolnshire found that one cemetery contained the dead from settlements within a 6km radius of the cemetery.[76] Cremation cemetery sites were important places for the living as well as the dead, where people from different communities gathered and took part in the funeral rites, settled disputes, and formed alliances through the exchange of gifts.[77] Illington is close to both the Peddars Way and the Icknield Way, enabling good access from further afield.

Of the cremation urns excavated at Illington, only three were buried on top of each other, so that whilst their positions do not suggest a particular plan, it is unlikely that placement was random. As at Lackford, surface position markers may have been used to organise placement and the excavation discovered one such post-hole. Some urns were placed so close together that simultaneous burial may have occurred, suggesting that urns were collected up and buried together, perhaps reflecting a family group. At least three urns had accompanying food vessels and one cremation urn was found inside a large food bowl. The urns ranged in size from 15cm to 30cm at their widest points, some with decorative bosses and many with a hole in the bottom, perhaps from root damage. Analysis of the ceramic material of the urns in the 1980s concluded that up to 40% of the pottery did not originate locally. Those urns identified as being from the Illington–Lackford pottery workshop had stamps and line-markings from five distinctly different decorative schemes. The bronze urn may have contained the ashes of a high-status individual, from the later part of the Early Anglo-Saxon period, though overall our understanding of why particular urns were used is limited. However, it appears that deliberate and meaningful choices were being made.

[74] Perry 2011; Perry 2013.

[75] Davison *et al.* 1993.

[76] Perry 2020.

[77] Williams 2002.

At Illington, the amount of bone found in the urns was unrelated to their size. One urn contained so much bone it may have come from more than one body, whereas some pots were found empty. Another contained bone from two children's bodies, cremated separately and then mixed in the urn. Some contained bones from sheep and oxen as well as human bones, representing animals sacrificed or butchered and burnt on the pyre. Grave-goods were recorded in 48 urns. These included bone combs, finger-rings, glass beads in different colours, buckles, iron knives and miniature knives, tweezers and miniature tweezers, shears and miniature shears, a razor, ivory and antler rings, a bone pottery stamp, a bone pin, and bone gaming pieces. Many of the grave-goods showed signs of having been burned. No combs or fragments were recorded as burnt, indicating that they were placed in the urn without being on the pyre, perhaps having been deliberately broken.

The Illington cemetery also contained three Early Anglo-Saxon inhumation burials, recorded as being more recent than the cremations. Their presence indicates that while Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries tended to be either cremation cemeteries or inhumation cemeteries, this division was not exclusive and many of the region's cemeteries exhibit a mixture of burial rites, several of which appear to been used contemporaneously. The reasons why one burial rite might be chosen over another are one of the many elements of Early Anglo-Saxon funerary practices which we still do not fully understand.

The Illington–Lackford Potter

An Early Anglo-Saxon potter's selection of a favourite stamping tool, be it of wood, bone, antler or tooth, combined with the tell-tale impression characteristics of its application served to introduce a personal element to a pot, which allowed identification of the work of an individual potter or workshop. The professional-looking regularity and precision of three size-graded vessels of identical design, using two identical stamps, from neighbouring West Stow and Lackford, both in our study area, hinted to J.N.L. Myres, one of the foremost scholars of Early Anglo-Saxon pottery, that they resulted from a limited form of mass production. This question rose to the fore when the Lackford and Illington cemeteries were discovered in the late 1940s. Although located 20 miles apart, some of the pots from both sites bear near-identical decorative patterns. Additionally, pottery of the Illington–Lackford type has been discovered in smaller nearby cemeteries, with northern outliers at Castle Acre (Norfolk) and southern outliers at Little Wilbraham and St John's (Cambridgeshire). Questions about the production and distribution of this so-called 'Illington–Lackford Ware' have come to fascinate academics ever since.

In the ensuing years, lengthy discussions about mass production, itinerant potter(s) or organised trade, have been had. However, despite increasingly sophisticated analytic methodologies by different academics, based in turn on stamp impressions, petrological analysis of fabric type, or die-linked pattern analysis, the question still remains difficult to resolve. Study of pot-stamp (die) impressions and stamped patterns established a putative typology, but it was 'still not possible to resolve the question of the production centre of this distinctive pottery'.[78] However, two distinct

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[78] Green *et al.* 1981.

groups of decorative styles were recognised, a southern style clustered around Lackford and a northern style clustered around Illington. The existence of antler stamps (dies) and a clay dump at West Stow gave reason to believe 'that decorated pottery was made in village communities of this sort'.[79] Based on fabric analysis, Russel suggested that the potter or workshop moved between Illington and West Stow.[80] That said, Arnold subsequently found little direct correlation between his die-linked groups and the earlier fabric types.[81] Pattern analysis suggested that while some sort of division occurred in the principal regions of the manufacture of Illington–Lackford-type pottery, there was also a distinction made at some stage in the modes of production in the two areas. Over time, potters, clearly using cultural templates, probably came to use pot-stamps as heraldic devices, with new designs representing the merger of members of different families. Such 'special' pots could perhaps be used for culturally significant, food-related purposes and as a treasured pot on the occasion of death. The southern (Lackford) group appeared to Arnold to be more like the pottery production of a limited number of individuals, based on the large size of the stamp-linked groups and their limited innovation in range of design. The northern (Illington) group analytics suggested production largely on non-commercial lines because of the impractical complexity of stamp-usage in production. Additionally, no evidence for a specialist group of cremation-vessel makers was found.[82] The best part of a century after the pottery tradition was first recognised, the identity of the Illington–Lackford potter, indeed even their very existence, still remains something of a mystery!

Westgarth Gardens Cemetery

The Westgarth Gardens cemetery, comprising 65 inhumations and four cremations, was discovered in 1972 during a building project on the south side of the Linnet valley on the edge of Bury St Edmunds.[83] Whilst some of the burials were well preserved, even with traces of textiles still present, others had decomposed so badly that they were almost non-existent, perhaps because the cemetery was unusually close to the river. No traces of coffins or coffin nails were found, although a few graves were noticeably square-cut, suggesting that coffins may have been used. Almost all of the graves were found intact, the majority with grave-goods still present. As was then common practice, the character of these grave-goods was used to identify the biological sex of the buried individuals, although today we might take a more nuanced view. The large number of burials made Westgarth Gardens an important site for studying repeated patterns in burial practices, although as the cemetery was probably much larger we need to be wary of treating the burials as a representative sample of the wider population and conclusions should only be drawn cautiously.

The undisturbed graves were examined for burial position. All the bodies had been placed with their heads to the west and their feet pointing east, with burials described as male being the most closely aligned to an west–east orientation. Ten

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[79] West 1985.

[80] Russel 1984.

[81] Arnold 1988.

[82] Arnold 1988.

[83] West 1988.

of the infants and juveniles were found within a 9m² area in the centre of the graveyard, suggesting deliberate zoning of the burials, but the four cremations were widely spaced. The majority of bodies had been placed in the ground on their backs, with six different arrangements of the arms and legs of the corpse in evidence, although movement might have occurred during decomposition. There was only one definite example and one possible example of overlapping burials, which, given that the cemetery was probably used for 250 years, suggests there was strict organisation of grave-digging, probably involving surface position markers, although no archaeological evidence for these was found.

Of the 24 graves identified as containing 'male' grave-goods, 17 contained a spear and 17 contained a knife. Shield bosses were found in 14 graves, while six graves contained other shield furniture. Two examples of swords and glass beakers were found, as well as examples of buckles, boxes, pots, glass beakers, purses, buckets, tweezers, shears, a sword bead and a seax (small sword). The position of weapons in relation to the skeletons was recorded: shields were almost always found placed over the head/chest or at the pelvis and most of the spears were found placed on the left-hand side of the body.[84] This suggests that there were cultural rules determining the deposition of weapons around the bodies, but the reasons for these and their meaning is lost to us.

Two graves contained glass beakers – one cone-shaped and the other with two handles in the rim. The glass would have originally been Roman and then re-worked, probably in continental Europe, although the beaker with handles may have come from or via Kent. These objects would have been owned by and buried with high-status individuals.

Of the 27 graves containing 'female' grave-goods, 25 contained brooches (of five different types), 12 contained beads and seven contained wrist-clasps or half a wrist-clasp. Ten burials contained knives, and examples of girdle hangers/chatelaines, buckles, pots, wooden bowls, purses and rings were found in other graves. Of the ten juvenile graves containing grave-goods, five contained beads, four contained knives, and iron buckles, silver pins, pots, shields and spears were also discovered.

Three graves were markedly too long for the bodies they contained, one with space at the head and two with space at the feet, suggesting the inclusion of perishable grave-goods, which no longer existed at the time of the excavation. These serve as a timely reminder that the archaeological record only contains those materials which survive in the ground, and that there is a growing body of evidence for wooden structures, fabrics, mats, plants, flowers and even feathers having been placed in graves.

West Stow Cemetery

At West Stow cemetery, which is located near to what is now the entrance to the site of the reconstructed Anglo-Saxon settlement, weapons and personal ornaments were found during gravel extraction in the 1850s. Dark streaks in the sand and gravel were found to indicate the sites of graves. Samuel Tymms, writing in 1853, described how the site was excavated: 'The men worked in a trench, running from north to south and the skeletons, about 100 in number, were found lying in nearly the same direction, i.e. with the heads to the south-west and feet to north-east. In

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[84] West 1988; Williams 2006.

one spot, several skeletons were found lying in all directions … nothing was found with them but one small knife.'[85]

The skeletons were found buried just 40cm below the surface. Some were in coffins, including one coffin of Barnack stone, which was subsequently identified as a reused Roman coffin. It contained a few small bones, probably of a youth or young adult, half a copper-alloy clasp and one or two pieces of iron. Next to the coffin was a spearhead and a shield boss. The other skeletons were un-coffined. Five cremation urns were also found, one containing ashes of bone and wood and the others apparently empty. Despite an appeal for funds, no proper excavation could be arranged and the artefacts that were discovered with the skeletons were simply collected.

At least five notable local figures were involved in the excavation: one, a collector and dealer from Ixworth, recorded in his journal for 1876 that he and two others had materials from the cemetery. Objects were presented to the Bury St Edmunds Museum by the Reverend Benyon of Culford Hall and to Cambridge by the Reverend Banks of Mildenhall. A few pieces, including a stave bucket, went to Thetford Museum and other pieces to the British Museum. There were discrepancies between Tymms's report and the journal entries of the collectors, although he may have just been describing objects given to Bury Museum. Neither did he clearly identify the site of the cemetery – an accurately drawn 19th-century map showed the site, but the early Ordnance Survey maps identified two possible locations. This situation exemplifies the challenges posed by using antiquarian sources to shed light upon archaeological sites where the finds were removed and dispersed before being adequately documented.

Between 1965 and 1985, in parallel to the excavation of the West Stow settlement, 340 grave-goods from the cemetery were tracked down and catalogued.[86] These included two silver pendants, bronze brooches of five different types, spiral fasteners, five buckles of iron and copper-alloy, four finger-rings and a bracelet. Other grave-goods located included a necklet, eight sets of wrist clasps, buckets, two iron swords, shield bosses, spears (five of which are in Moyse's Hall Museum), arrowheads and knives. Personal adornments were represented by girdle hangers, eight sets of tweezers, two combs and one comb case, three bone pins and one bone needle. The assemblage was completed by 18 pots, a chain fragment, an iron strike-a-light and four coins.

In total, 193 beads from the cemetery are now in museum collections, all of them dissociated. Jet beads were extremely uncommon, and amber beads most numerous, but there is a record of one crystal bead, one fine pentagonal blue-glass bead nearly an inch long, one very large green-glass bead inlaid with white, and one black bead inlaid with white. Tymms's report also noted two ceramic drinking cups – one 3 inches high and ornamented with angular indentations and one with projecting knobs or bosses, formed by a finger pressing the clay when in a soft state. Fragments of two small coffers or boxes riveted and held together with circlets of bronze were also found, one close to the head of a skeleton.[87]

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[85] Tymms 1853.

[86] West 1985.

[87] Tymms 1853.

A second, smaller Early Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemetery has since been located 2km to the west of this one. It contained at least 25 burials clustered around a Bronze Age barrow. Metal-detecting close to the West Stow settlement has suggested that there may have been a third local inhumation cemetery, too.[88] The physical separation between settlements like that at West Stow and the surrounding cemeteries means that we cannot tell whether the inhabitants were buried exclusively at one cemetery or afforded the same burial rites, or whether different choices were made on behalf of each deceased individual. The factors guiding the choice of cemetery and burial rites are an aspect of Anglo-Saxon funerary practices which we do not yet fully comprehend, but are perhaps something which the application of genetic analyses might help us to recognise kinship groups located within and spread between cemeteries.

Holywell Row Cemetery

Writing the preface of his 1931 report on the excavation of the Holywell Row cemetery, Lethbridge lamented the fashion for such publications to be as colourless as possible, 'making it impossible to describe our feelings when a skull began to walk away with a young rabbit inside it' nor record the numerous 'droll remarks' of onlookers who invariably opened their conversation with 'They didn't bury them very deep in those days, did they?'[89]

Holywell Row, near Mildenhall, is described by Lethbridge as a 'typical village graveyard of the East Angles in the pagan period'. Located on a small rise above marshy land, it contained more than 100 skeletons in graves which were excavated and their contents recorded. Many of the skeletons were poorly preserved, the bodies having been buried in sand, though a few were found in chalk, mostly at a depth of between 50cm to 90cm. In total, 98 of the 100 skeletons were found with their heads to the west and their feet pointing east.

The range of grave-goods was similar to those from the West Stow cemetery. One grave (number 11) is described here in some detail as the grave-goods it contained give us a picture of the 'finery of a young Anglo-Saxon lady' from the beginning of the 7th century. She had been buried exceptionally deeply, some 1.3m deep in chalk and sand, in a wooden coffin of which a large fragment remained by her skull. An unusual flanged and embossed bronze bowl had been placed on her coffin, but it had been crushed to pieces by the weight of the soil as the coffin decomposed. A second more common type of bowl had been arranged outside, at the feet, and was better preserved because it had filled with sand. Also outside the coffin was an iron weaving batten.

The skull was found beneath the bronze bowl, but only teeth could be distinguished. Mixed with these was a fine square-headed brooch set with garnets, of which one remained. A few inches away were two annular brooches. Strings of amber, jet and glass beads and girdle ornaments were present. The girdle hangers were the largest specimens that Lethbridge had seen and a bronze ring with them

[88] Hoggett 2010, 119–20.

[89] Lethbridge 1931.

may have formed part of the girdle from which they had hung. Three pendants were amongst the beads: two simple silver discs and one of a circular silver framework containing three garnets and green glass set into compartments and cemented onto silver backing. Spiral silver bracelets were on the skeleton's wrists and one silver ring had been on a finger. Other items from the grave included a strike-a-light, gold braid, buckles and plain strap-ends. Many of these items would have been imported from elsewhere in Britain or the Continent, indicating brisk and wide-reaching trading activity.

Figure 16: The fully-excavated grave of the Lakenheath Warrior and his horse in 1997.
© *Suffolk County Council / Cotswold Archaeology*

Eriswell/Lakenheath Cemetery

Finally, we turn to one of the largest and most significant examples of an Early Anglo-Saxon cemetery to be excavated in the country, which happens to be located within the River Raiders project area. Between 1997 and 2008, four large but discrete Anglo-Saxon burial grounds near Eriswell were excavated by Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service (SCCAS) within the boundary of RAF Lakenheath.[90] In an area surrounded by Bronze Age bowl-barrows and at about 10m elevation on the fen-edge, the place chosen by the Early Anglo-Saxons for the cremation or, later, burial of their dead is adjacent to an ancient routeway called the Lord's Walk, which is a late Iron Age droveway running further south. The nearest known contemporary settlement for this fen-edge funerary complex is some 500m to the north-west around a spring called *Eofores welle*, from which the name of Eriswell derives, and small stream called Caudle Head on the Eriswell/ Lakenheath parish boundary.

At the excavation outset, SCCAS targeted a circular barrow, later shown to be surrounded by a ring-ditch, suspecting a high-status burial lay beneath. Indeed, a male warrior and his horse were found buried together beneath the earth mound (Figure 16). This relatively young (25 to 35 years old), high-status individual of muscular build has been shown, by strontium oxygen isotope analysis, to have been local. The burial is thought to date from between AD 490 and AD 540. Dubbed the 'Lakenheath Warrior', the man was equipped with a sword, a silver-tipped shield held protectively in front of him, and a spear. A richly bridled horse, showing major trauma to the forehead suggesting it was killed at the graveside, was placed in the same grave pit – evidently it was important for a warrior to pass into the afterlife with his horse. The preservation of the bridle and reins on the horse's head was unique and of national importance; recovery of evidence of this quality is extremely rare from Anglo-Saxon England and experts can reconstruct how the harness was worn. The skeleton of the warrior and his horse, together with their grave-goods, are now on display in Mildenhall Museum.[91]

Such burials offer tangible links to high-status burial rites of the Continent and southern Scandinavia, and to animal sacrifice. Horse-related symbolism and ritual were major components of pre-Christian belief and cult in the Early Anglo-Saxon world.[92] Horses represent the most frequent funerary animal sacrifice and the reverence for horses may in part be related to the Anglo-Saxon foundation myth of 'Hengist and Horsa', brothers and founders of England, believed to be the descendants of the pagan god Woden. The brothers' names serve as roots for the Old English words for 'stallion' and 'horse', respectively.

Across the wider excavation area, 435 Early Anglo-Saxon burials and up to 17 cremations were found in chalky soil, which had suffered very little agricultural or other erosion. Less acidic grave-fill conditions have allowed good skeletal and artefact survival and the cemeteries yielded a good cross-section of the

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[90] Hines 2021; Caruth and Hines forthcoming.

[91] https://mildenhallmuseum.co.uk/collections/lakenheath-warrior/

[92] Fern 2010.

local Anglo-Saxon population, with adults and juveniles and their grave-goods present. Juveniles were represented in surprisingly high numbers, one of the highest proportions found in the region. Not uncommonly they were buried with weapons, usually only a spear (which was even the case for one infant) or a spear and shield. Some bones showed evidence of leprosy or poliomyelitis, osteoarthritis was very common in adults and, although a statistically low level of trauma was found, healed fractures including head wounds were observed. There were even two cases of trepanation, where holes were drilled in the skull of a living person, although both of the patients probably died as a result of the procedure.

Grave-goods spanning the mid-5th to the mid-6th centuries include the 'standard' range of Early Anglo-Saxon artefacts, such as those described above, including beads, brooches, pins, spearheads, knives and shield bosses. Some indication of how Early Anglo-Saxons brooches were worn comes from an observed association with string and bead festoons, or brooches sewn onto clothing, although this this may have been strictly a burial practice. Mineralised textiles, preserved in contact with metal, were wool and perhaps flax and exhibited coarse- to fine-weave textures. There is some evidence that textiles may have been placed over the deceased at burial.[93]

Studying the chronology of the site, Professor John Hines used 50 mostly high-precision radiocarbon dates to offer, for the first time, a comprehensive study of the chronological development of Early Anglo-Saxon culture and burial rites in which furnished burial was the norm.[94] Three of the four Early Anglo-Saxon burial grounds at Lakenheath – the West, Central and East cemeteries – are shown to have been used concurrently, in two phases between the mid-5th and the mid-6th centuries. The West cemetery came into use first, where cremation was evidenced dating from the mid-5th century, at the earliest, but by a quarter of a century later a change to predominantly inhumation with grave-goods was evident. By the 6th century, at least two additional cemeteries – the Central and East – came into simultaneous use, meaning that individuals, or their mourning relatives, would be making a choice, selecting which of three cemeteries they were to be buried in. Coffined burials occur throughout the three sites as a distinct, but minority rite, mainly in coffins carved from tree-trunks, rather than made of planks. The West cemetery continued in use long after burials ceased at the other two locations.

A fourth cemetery was established at a separate location 300m to the south, at Lord's Walk, where eight inhumations containing no grave-goods were inserted into a Bronze Age barrow. Although following on sequentially, these must by their dates be designated Middle Anglo-Saxon. The Eriswell/Lakenheath funerary complex is the first known archaeological instance where a successor Middle Anglo-Saxon burial ground has been found to be 'co-located' with its Early Anglo-Saxon predecessor(s). Furthermore, Hines's chronological model indicates that it is possible that there was some degree of overlap, seamless continuity in effect, with the southern burial area at Lord's Walk coming into use *before* the West site was abandoned. There was evidently a coordinated

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[93] Hines 2021; Caruth and Hines forthcoming.

[94] Hines 2021.

abandonment of traditional burial sites, specifically the less populous Central and East cemeteries, and eventually the West cemetery, involving choices and subsequent moves to another burial site.[95]

The full results and analysis of the Lakenheath cemeteries are eagerly awaited and are due to be published in the *East Anglian Archaeology* monograph series in late 2023.[96] This series has previously published reports on many of the settlements and cemeteries discussed here and the reader is directed towards the series website, where digital copies of many of these volumes can be downloaded.[97] Moving forward in time, the next section considers the developments which occurred within the East Anglian kingdom during the following centuries, setting the scene for the arrival of the Vikings in the mid-9th century.

[95] Hines 2021.

[96] Caruth and Hines forthcoming.

[97] East Anglian Archaeology Monograph Series: https://eaareports.org.uk/

5: Middle Anglo-Saxon East Anglia

While the archaeological record of the Early Anglo-Saxon period is characterised by settlements and cemeteries of the types described above, the archaeological record of the Middle Anglo-Saxon period (AD 650–850) exhibits an almost complete reversal of the picture. Although the continued use of timber for building meant that the ephemeral nature of Early Anglo-Saxon settlements continued into the Middle Anglo-Saxon period, the material culture associated with those settlements became much more plentiful, robust and, crucially, datable, meaning that Middle Anglo-Saxon settlement sites can be much more readily identified archaeologically. At the same time, the highly visible Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries with their extensively furnished burials were phased out in favour of much more simple, unfurnished burials clustered in cemeteries situated within settlements. This had the effect of making Middle Anglo-Saxon cemeteries much harder to identify and date archaeologically.

These changes are a direct reflection of the fact that during the course of the 7th century, in particular, Anglo-Saxon society was transformed from a subsistence economy based around short-lived riverside settlements to a complex society, which over time gave rise to the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of East Anglia. As part of this process, the period witnessed major changes in settlement patterns and hierarchies, the adoption of the use of coinage, significant advancements in farming practices and fenland drainage, and the implementation of laws, language and local administration. The period also saw the widespread conversion of the population to Christianity, arguably the most revolutionary social and cultural change that Europe experienced during this period. Christianisation affected all strata of society and transformed not only religious beliefs and practices, including the foundation of bishoprics, churches and monastic houses, but also the nature of government, the priorities of the economy, the character of kingship and gender relations.[98]

The physical and political geography of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of East Anglian can be reconstructed with a reasonable degree of certainty. The kingdom, which comprised most of modern-day Norfolk and Suffolk and perhaps the eastern part of the fen basin, appears to have emerged as a political entity in the second half of the 6th century and by the early 7th century the kings of south-eastern Suffolk – known as the Wuffings – had risen to prominence.[99] These kings apparently made their capital at Rendlesham, which was identified by Bede as being a royal vill, and which

[98] Hamerow 2002; Plunkett 2005; Hoggett 2010; Blinkhorn 2012; Hamerow 2012; Loveluck 2013; Williamson 2013; Rippon *et al.* 2015; Wright 2015; Fleming 2016; Oosthuizen 2017; Blair 2018; Oosthuizen 2019; Morris 2021.

[99] Yorke 1990, 1–24 and 58–71; Scull 1992; Plunkett 2005, 55–96.

has been subject to an extensive campaign of archaeological investigation during the last two decades.[100] This work has revealed an exceptionally large and high-status settlement spanning the Early and Middle Anglo-Saxon periods, which can be confidently identified as the complex referred to by Bede and from which a wide range of artefacts has been recovered, but the survey has also revealed a much longer period of occupation both before and afterwards. Of particular note is the decline of the high-status element of the settlement in the second quarter of the 7th century, which seems to coincide with the rise to prominence of Ipswich and may be related. The Wuffing kings also founded and used the royal barrow cemetery at Sutton Hoo, the most famous burial from which is the richly furnished ship-burial discovered by Basil Brown in 1939, attributed to the East Anglian King Rædwald, who died in about AD 625.[101] There have since been more extensive excavations at Sutton Hoo, in the 1960s and the 1980s, which have identified numerous other burials and, indeed, located other cemeteries. The relationship between Rendlesham and Sutton Hoo and the wider Anglo-Saxon occupation of the Deben valley continues to be investigated under the auspices of the Rendlesham Revealed project, which is managed by the Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service and supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

In addition to the power-focus in south-east Suffolk, some of the boundaries of the wider kingdom are relatively easy to identify. To the north-west, north and east the kingdom was bordered by the North Sea, at once both a natural boundary and a thriving maritime link to Scandinavia and the northern reaches of Germany.[102] The processes of coastal erosion and deposition have greatly altered the shape of the coastline since the Anglo-Saxon period, with deposits having accrued along the central northern coast, while at the same time the east coast has suffered erosion, most famously around Dunwich. Sea levels apparently rose slightly during the Roman period, inundating much of the fens throughout the Early and Middle Anglo-Saxon periods before receding again in the Late Anglo-Saxon period to leave large areas of alluvial deposits bordering the Wash and the Norfolk and Suffolk coasts.[103]

To the south, the border with the neighbouring kingdom of the East Saxons has traditionally been assumed to have followed the line of the River Stour, which forms the modern boundary between Suffolk and Essex. However, recent scholarship has challenged this assumption and demonstrated convincingly that the Rivers Gipping and Lark, which apparently formed a near-navigable corridor running north-west to south-east approximately between Bury St Edmunds and Ipswich, marked a much more substantial cultural boundary throughout later prehistory, the Anglo-Saxon period and well into the medieval period.[104] Consequently, much of what is now south-west Suffolk may once have lain outside the kingdom of East Anglia and therefore have been subject to different cultural influences. Such differences are indeed visible in the archaeological record, including burial practices.

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[100] Scull *et al.* 2016.

[101] Bruce-Mitford 1975; Bruce-Mitford 1978; Bruce-Mitford 1983; Carver 1998; Carver 2005.

[102] Hines 1984.

[103] Green 1961; Williamson 2005b, 128–32.

[104] Williamson 2006, 29–30; Martin and Satchell 2008, 198–206.

To the west of the East Anglian kingdom lay the natural barrier of the fens, although it is not entirely clear exactly where within the fens the Anglo-Saxon political boundary lay. The Tribal Hidage, a document recording the relative sizes of the tribal territories of 7th-century England, listed several small territories lying within the area of the fens, including the North and South Gyrwe, the Winxa and the Willa. Their existence would seem to suggest that during the 7th century the boundary of East Anglia lay somewhere to the east of the fens, yet in the early 8th century Bede described Ely as lying within the East Anglian kingdom, suggesting that the smaller territories recorded in the Tribal Hidage had been subsumed by this date.[105] A fluctuating western boundary to the kingdom is also suggested by the series of Anglo-Saxon linear earthworks, thought to have marked territorial boundaries, which crowd the landscape to the south of the fens in Cambridgeshire and Suffolk. The most famous example is the Devil's Dyke, which is now traversed by Newmarket Racecourse, but other examples include the Black Ditches to the north and south of Cavenham.[106] The Black Ditches are being investigated as part of other archaeological projects being delivered as part of the Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers scheme.[107]

Regarding the settlement patterns of the Middle Anglo-Saxon period, it has long been assumed that there was a dislocation of settlement between the dispersed and often transitory settlements of the Early Anglo-Saxon period and the more settled, nucleated and increasingly regularly laid-out settlements of the Middle and Late Anglo-Saxon periods. Sometime dubbed the 'Middle Saxon Shuffle',[108] the reasons behind this apparent shift in settlement foci are complex, multi-faceted and still poorly understood, although research is beginning to provide more answers. Although settlements featuring both Early and Middle Anglo-Saxon evidence remain extremely rare, the last decade has also seen some examples of potential stability between Early and Middle Anglo-Saxon rural settlements. However, it is this settlement dislocation and the relative stability which followed it which cause difficulties for the archaeological study of Middle and Late Anglo-Saxon settlements. The fact that the vast majority of settlements established during these Middle and Late Anglo-Saxon periods are still occupied today effectively means that the earliest archaeological phases are either sealed beneath and/or have been heavily disturbed and truncated by some 1,500 years of continuous occupation. It is telling that the best-known and most extensively excavated examples of Middle and Late Anglo-Saxon settlement evidence are derived from settlements which failed, drifted away or were deliberately relocated during their later histories, leaving the earlier phases exposed. We are particularly fortunate that the project study area contains one of the best-preserved, most archaeologically significant and most well-known examples of a Middle Anglo-Saxon settlement which has yet been excavated nationwide: Staunch Meadow in Brandon.

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[105] Yorke 1990, 9–15; Oosthuizen 2017.

[106] Malim *et al.* 1997.

[107] https://brecks.org/bfer/projects/working-waters-heritage-skills-for-the-future/3-2-fen-edge-rivers-archaeology/

[108] Arnold and Wardle 1981; Hamerow 1991.

Figure 17: The gold plaque depicting Saint John the Evangelist discovered at Brandon, which may have adorned an Anglo-Saxon bible, together with images of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Actual size: 34mm x 34mm. © *Trustees of the British Museum*

Staunch Meadow, Brandon

Situated on the Little Ouse, the archaeological significance of upstanding earthworks at Staunch Meadow was confirmed during the 1970s, when a metal-detectorist discovered the iconic gold plaque bearing an image of St John the Evangelist (Figure 17). This is thought to derive from the cover of an Anglo-Saxon Bible and was presumably part of a set depicting the four evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Subsequent plans to level the Brandon earthworks and create playing fields triggered a programme of archaeological excavation which spanned the best part of the 1980s and resulted in the excavation of a vast swathe of Middle Anglo-Saxon settlement nestled on an island of windblown sand, linked to the mainland by a causeway.[109] From the earliest days of the excavation the Staunch Meadow settlement was recognised as being nationally important, both in terms of the extent and preservation of the features excavated and the completeness of the finds assemblage.

Although some 11,750 m² of the site were excavated, this only equates to about one-third of the total settlement area, and the rest of the site remains preserved beneath the ground and is protected as a Scheduled Monument. That the Anglo-Saxon features at Brandon remained undisturbed and were able to be excavated is entirely due to

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[109] Tester *et al.* 2014.

the fact the medieval town developed at a slight remove to the south of the site. Had this not occurred, the important Anglo-Saxon features would have been destroyed or would have remained sealed beneath the later settlement.

During the course of the excavation, the foundations of at least 35 rectangular timber buildings were identified, representing one of the largest samples of such features nationwide, and their analysis has added greatly to our understanding of early timber architecture. Foremost amongst these buildings was the most complete example of an Anglo-Saxon wooden church, with its associated cemetery, so far excavated in England (Figure 18). At its greatest extent the church was a three-cell structure, with a total length of approximately 25m. In its first phase it comprised a nave measuring 14m by 6.5m with an adjoining chancel of 5m by 4.3m. The chancel contained an isolated burial which had been disturbed by a later feature, and the remains of a structure at the eastern end of the nave have been interpreted as an altar. The walls were constructed from posts and planks set vertically in foundation trenches and the nave had opposing doors in the centre of each long side. A smaller door entered the chancel from the south. A third, western cell, measuring 5.5m by 4.3m, appears to have been added during a second phase of Middle Anglo-Saxon building and it was also entered via a southern doorway. The function of this third cell remains an open question, but it could have been a baptistery or even the base of a small tower.

A contemporary inhumation cemetery was excavated to the south-east of the church. It comprised at least 220 inhumations of mixed age and sex, some of which had been buried in coffins. This cemetery appears to have fallen out of use at the same time as a third phase of building saw the removal of the chancel and the replacement of the nave and the western cell with a similarly sized building in broadly the same position. It is likely that both the church and cemetery ceased to function at this point and were presumably refounded to the north of the site, where a second, later cemetery was partially excavated. The Brandon assemblage tells us a great deal about Middle Anglo-Saxon burial practices, including the use of coffins, from which many iron coffin fittings survive. Isotope analysis shows that the Brandon population also enjoyed a terrestrial rather than marine diet, and much of the population seems to have survived into middle and old age. There are examples of unusual pathologies, including possible instances of leprosy, tuberculosis and poliomyelitis, which suggest that individuals were cared for during illnesses and survived long enough for these conditions to affect their skeletons.

The finds assemblage from the site is equally impressive, comprising over 157,000 fragments of animal bone, 24,000 sherds of pottery and 416kg of metalworking slag. Window glass, vessel glass, coins, pins and other dress accessories (including several made from precious metals) were also discovered in relatively large quantities. Of particular interest is the evidence for various forms of literacy on the site, with artefacts including three copper-alloy styli, which were used for writing on wax tablets. It is interesting to note that St John is shown holding a stylus and tablet on the small gold plaque (Figure 17). Also discovered were several fragments of glass inkwells together with an inkwell formed from the end of an antler tine, all of which are suggestive of manuscripts being produced on

Figure 18: The excavated footprint of the Anglo-Saxon timber church at Brandon, looking east. © *Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service*

the site, perhaps in a scriptorium. The antler tine was also carved with a runic inscription reading '*Wohs wlfdurn deo*', which translates as 'I grew on a wild beast' and is a lovely example of an Anglo-Saxon riddle (Figure 19).

All of these artefacts are indicative of the site's high status, but issues of interpretation have always dogged the Staunch Meadow settlement and others like it, with much debate about whether the site was a secular establishment or perhaps an early monastic foundation. The excavators have not shied away from these issues, and in their published report on the site they consider the arguments at length. Ultimately, they conclude that there *was* a clear monastic presence on the Staunch Meadow site during the first half of the 8th century and that this grew into a more complex and highly controlled monastic site, perhaps under a powerful

Figure 19: The antler-tine inkwell from Staunch Meadow, Brandon, carved with a runic inscription which translates as 'I grew on a wild beast'. © *Richard Hoggett*

secular patron, during the later 8th and 9th centuries. This is a strong indication of the sophistication and importance of the Breckland rivers and their associated settlements during the Middle Anglo-Saxon period, but of greatest significance to this project is the date at which the settlement was abandoned. The excavators conclude that this occurred in the mid-9th century, and the infamous overwintering of the Vikings in Thetford in AD 869 and ensuing events are cited as a direct cause of the decline of the site. This event, and the actions of the Vikings more widely, are explored in the following sections of this report.

6: The Viking Great Army

The Late Anglo-Saxon period (AD 850–1066) in East Anglia, and in many other parts of the country, is dominated by the Vikings, who arrived on these shores from Norway, Sweden and Denmark as a raiding army during the middle decades of the 9th century, before becoming more settled and integrated into the East Anglian population during the course of the later 9th to 11th centuries. As is explored in this and the following sections, there is a wide range of evidence for the Viking presence in the region, including historical sources, place-name evidence and numerous archaeological artefacts. Archaeological discoveries continue to be made on a regular basis, particularly by East Anglia's very active metal-detecting community, and many of these discoveries have been made within the Breckland area.

The word 'Viking' literally means one who fights at sea, and the invasions, battles, looting and pillaging associated with the term in popular culture have historically shaped our understanding of the Late Anglo-Saxon period. However, as is explored here, the Vikings were much more than just pirates. They flourished throughout the North Sea world and beyond from the 8th to 11th centuries, establishing wide-ranging trading links with Europe, Russia, the Middle East and Central Asia. They were famous explorers, having discovered and colonised Iceland, Greenland and North America, and also skilled craftspeople, producing very fine tools and weapons and intricately decorated jewellery.[110] All of these different aspects of Viking society are represented in the Breckland area.

For a long time the most popular and accessible account of the Vikings in the region was that written by the late Sue Margeson in 1997 and published by the Norfolk Museums Service.[111] In 2019, the Norfolk Museums Service published an updated account of Viking East Anglia, written by Tim Pestell, which draws upon the extensive research undertaken by numerous individuals during the intervening 20 years.[112] This report complements these earlier works. In July 2022, as part of the BFER scheme, the Ancient House Museum in Thetford mounted a year-long exhibition entitled *Vikings: History on Your Doorstep*, examining the Viking presence in the Breckland area and displaying artefacts from Norfolk and Suffolk Museum collections, as well as objects loaned by the British Museum.

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[110] Hamerow, Hinton and Crawford 2011; Kershaw 2013; Williams *et al.* 2014; Richards 2018; Hadley and Richards 2021; Morris 2021; Jarman 2021.

[111] Margeson 1997.

[112] Pestell 2019.

First Contact

The first recorded Viking raid, which focused on the monastery at Lindisfarne, took place in AD 793. It was described in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a collection of annals relating the later history of the Anglo-Saxon period, thus:

> *'Here [the year AD 793] terrible portents came about over the land of Northumbria and miserably frightened the people: there were immense flashes of lightning and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air, and there immediately followed a great famine, and after that in the same year the raiding of the heathen devastated God's church in Lindisfarne island by looting and slaughter.'*[113]

The raiders wanted silver and slaves to trade, so the wealth of isolated, rich, coastal monasteries was a prime target. Throughout the first half of the 9th century there were frequent, sporadic, hit-and-run attacks around the coast, and the forerunners of the Great Army were already operating in Ireland, Frisia and Francia. The famous Viking longship, with banks of oars for rough weather and sails for rapid progress in favourable winds, was highly versatile. The shallow hull enabled the crew to penetrate inland up rivers, and bridges could be negotiated by lowering the mast from its socket. The crew of a longship was a tight-knit unit, often from the same place and working together as a team at sea, which also stood them in good stead as a fighting force on land. These characteristic features of ships and crew were invaluable when trading turned to raiding![114]

During the course of the 9th century, these coastal raids became more frequent and gradually gave way to a more established and prolonged military campaign. The first encounter with this Great Army, as contemporary sources dubbed it, occurred in East Anglia in the year AD 865 and was again recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in an entry which states:

> *'Here [the year AD 865] a great raiding-army came to the land of the English and took winter-quarters in East Anglia and were provided with horses there, and they made peace with them'.*[115]

We cannot be certain where this Great Army made its first East Anglian camp, although later evidence suggests this may have been at Thetford, to which the army returned a few years later. This army was not a unified force, being made up of a number of war bands comprising several thousand warriors, whose leaders worked together or quarrelled and split apart during the years from AD 865 to AD 878, when England was constantly under attack from these invaders. They came from different parts of Scandinavia, from Ireland and from other parts of the Continent. Other sources indicate that this army was led by Ivar, one of the sons of Ragnar Lothbrok and sometimes referred to as Ivar the Boneless, and their other leaders were named as Healfdene, Guthrum, Oscetel, Anwend, Bagsecg and Ubba.[116]

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[113] Swanton 2000, 54–7.

[114] Hadley and Richards 2021.

[115] Swanton 2000, 68–9.

[116] Hadley and Richards 2021.

Figure 20: A campaign map showing the route followed by the Viking Great Army between AD 865 and AD 878.
© *Hel-hama*

'Making peace' with the Vikings, in this context, would have involved the East Anglians paying a heavy tribute, a strategy subsequently employed by many other groups with greater or lesser degrees of success. The supply of horses is significant: although it is clear from excavations that some horses were brought in from Scandinavia, the Vikings needed to obtain horses locally to take advantage of the existing Anglo-Saxon and Roman roads and broaden their attacks in the countryside. The change from summer raiding on the coast to setting up winter quarters inland was also a key factor in the success of the Great Army. The Vikings were always somewhere within the kingdoms, ready to strike. The pressure on the Anglo-Saxons was relentless.

The progress of the Great Army is relatively well documented in subsequent entries in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and other sources, as well as leaving a distinctive archaeological footprint, and the army's path can be mapped with some certainty (Figure 20). In AD 866, the Great Army travelled northwards along the Roman Ermine Street and crossed the River Humber, arriving in York on 1st November. They broke into the city and destroyed its monasteries

and churches. Northumbria's rival claimants to the throne, Aelle and Osberht, drew together and broke back into the city in March AD 867, but their forces were slaughtered by the Vikings and both kings were killed. The Great Army appointed a new king to the Northumbrian throne, Egbert, who was 'in subjection to the Danes' according to the *Chronicle*, and this situation was repeated later in Mercia and probably also in East Anglia. The army then turned its attention to Mercia and took up winter quarters in Nottingham. Besieged there by the combined armies of Mercia and Wessex, they held out and peace was made. Before the winter of AD 868, the army returned to York, where it had allies, its subject king and the means to provision its forces.[117]

Edmund, King and Martyr

The Great Army again returned to familiar territory in AD 869. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that:

> '*Here [the year AD 869] the raiding-army rode across Mercia into East Anglia, and took winter-quarters at Thetford; and in that year St Edmund the king fought against them, and the Danish took the victory, and killed the king and conquered all that land, and did for all the monasteries to which they came.*'

An insertion in one later manuscript of the *Chronicle* gives the names of the leaders who slew the king as Ivar and Ubba, but this is not mentioned in the earlier manuscripts.[118]

The martyrdom of Edmund was one of the most significant events in the history of Anglo-Saxon East Anglia and it was to have significant effects upon the development of East Anglia throughout the Late Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods, when the monastery housing Edmund's relics in Bury St Edmunds became one of the most important pilgrimage sites in western Christendom.[119]

Apart from this entry in the *Chronicle*, our main source of contemporary evidence for Edmund comes from coinage. Coins of Edmund, King of East Anglia, exist in sufficient quantity to show that he reigned for a number of years. Following Edmund's death, coins featuring two kings, Aethelred and Oswald, were minted by Edmund's moneyer and were similar in pattern to Edmund's own coinage. These otherwise unknown kings were possibly Viking puppet-kings, like Egbert of Northumbria. In addition, some 2,000 coins exist which celebrate Edmund as a saint. Referred to as Edmund memorial coinage, about 1,800 of these coins were found in the collection known as the Cuerdale Hoard, named after the place of its discovery, near Preston in Lancashire (Figure 21). From the evidence of the coins within it, this hoard is thought to have been hidden in about AD 903. A small number of coins have 'King Alfred' on one side and 'Saint Edmund' on the other, and these must have been made while Alfred was still living: Alfred died on 26th October AD 899. The existence of these coins proves that within three decades of his death, Edmund was being revered as a saint and martyr. Apart from the

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[117] Swanton 2000; Hadley and Richards 2021.

[118] Swanton 2000, 70–1.

[119] James 1895; Pinner 2015; Young 2016; Hoggett 2018.

Figure 21: A silver penny of St Edmund's 'memorial coinage' discovered near to Bury St Edmunds. Shown three times actual size.
PAS SF-AC29C7
© *Suffolk County Council*

Cuerdale hoard itself, most of the Edmund memorial coins have been found in East Anglia, indicating that the cult of Edmund was well established, even though the region remained under Danish rule throughout the late 9th century.[120]

Although there are no contemporary documentary accounts, many later works exist telling the story of Edmund. Of his early life, for example, the *Annals of St Neots*, probably written in Bury St Edmunds in the early 12th century, are the first to give details of Edmund's accession and state that he became King of the East Angles on Christmas Day AD 855 and was crowned at Bures on Christmas Day AD 856. Likewise, Geoffrey of Wells, writing between AD 1148 and AD 1156, tells the story of Edmund's Continental origins, and states that he landed near Hunstanton (where there is still a chapel dedicated to Edmund) and lived for a year in Attleborough, although we cannot be sure how valid this account is.[121]

Our most comprehensive source for the circumstances of Edmund's death at the hands of the Vikings was set down by a monk called Abbo at Ramsey Abbey between about AD 986 and AD 988. Abbo was writing over 100 years after the death of Edmund, but he is careful to explain the source of his information: he had been told about Edmund by Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury, a man then in his seventies. Dunstan himself was told the story when he was a young man at the court of King Athelstan, by a direct eye-witness, a very old man who was apparently the armour-bearer to King Edmund at the time of Edmund's death. As Dunstan was born in about AD 909, and was at Athelstan's court soon after the latter's coronation in AD 925, the armour-bearer would have been in his late sixties or seventies. Such a direct line of communication is certainly possible, though the story could well have been embroidered as it was retold over the decades by the sword-bearer and then by Dunstan.[122]

Abbo dates the murder of Edmund as occurring on the 12th day from kalends of December (equating to the 20th November in modern reckoning) in the 29th year of his age and the 15th year of his reign. The actual day is very probably correct: it was common practice to celebrate the date of a martyrdom, which represented

[120] Blunt 1969; Pinner 2015.

[121] Scarfe 1970; Whitelock 1970; Young 2018.

[122] Whitelock 1970; Young 2018.

the day of the saint's entry into heaven. According to Abbo, the Danes, led by Ivar, arrived in East Anglia from Northumbria by boat, burning an unnamed town and slaughtering many inhabitants. Edmund was at the royal vill of *Haegelisdun* and Ivar wanted Edmund to rule under him and to divide his treasures. Edmund apparently stated that he would only agree to this if Ivar became a Christian, but instead Edmund was seized, scourged, tied to a tree and shot with arrows (Figure 22). Finally, his head was cut off and thrown into a thicket and the Vikings returned to their ships. When Edmund's supporters subsequently came looking for him, they found his body, but not his head: this was eventually discovered when it called out to the searchers and it was found being guarded by a wolf. When the head was returned to the body, the two were miraculously reunited, and Edmund's body was apparently buried in a small chapel near to the site of his martyrdom.[123]

The site of Edmund's death and the location of the original burial are not known.[124] Over the years, many possibilities have been suggested, based upon Abbo's indication that Edmund died at *Haegelisdun* and a later 11th-century account, written by a monk of Bury St Edmunds called Hermann, which named the site of Edmund's burial as *Suthtun* and described it as being close to the site of his martyrdom. Traditionally, Hellesdon in Norfolk is the most commonly accepted place, simply because it is the settlement name in East Anglia that sounds most like *Haegelisdun*. However, it is a long way from Bury and there is no tradition associating Edmund with Hellesdon – for example, there has never been a chapel of St Edmund there and the current village sign with its image of St Edmund is a very recent feature. Likewise, Hoxne in Suffolk is the only place which has a long tradition as being the place of Edmund's death, the tradition appearing as early as AD 1101, when a charter of Bishop Herbert de Losinga referred to the church of Hoxne together with a chapel of St Edmund 'where the same martyr was killed' (the original charter does not survive, but it is known from copies dating from about AD 1200). By the early 13th century, the chronicler Roger of Wendover also mentions *Hoxa* as the saint's burial place. In the medieval period, there were two chapels in the village dedicated to Edmund, one where he is said to have been killed, the other where his head was supposed to have been found. Many later traditions also associate Edmund with Hoxne, such as a tree said to have been his place of execution and a bridge under which he is said to have hidden. Part of the village is even called Sutton in old documents, a hamlet in the parish now called South Green. The obvious problem is that the name Hoxne is not that similar to *Haegelisdun* and several historians have dismissed the association as a deliberate act on the part of the bishops of Norwich – longstanding rivals of the abbots of Bury St Edmunds throughout the medieval period – to increase the standing of their estate at Hoxne.[125]

More recently, it has been noted that there is a Halesdun within the parish of Hazeleigh, near Maldon in Essex, the name appearing in Little Domesday Book in the late 11th century. There is also a Sutton nearby and it is near the coast, but

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[123] Whitelock 1970; Young 2018.

[124] Whitelock 1970; West 1983; Briggs 2011a; Young 2018.

[125] Whitelock 1970; Carey Evans 1987.

Figure 22: The martyrdom of King Edmund, as depicted in a 12th-century illuminated manuscript produced at St Edmund's abbey in Bury St Edmunds. *The Morgan Library and Museum: MS M.736 fol. 14*

again no tradition of Edmund dying here and the site lies a long way from Bury St Edmunds.[126] Perhaps most convincingly, the archaeologist Stanley West noted that there is a field on the mid-19th-century tithe map of the parish of Bradfield St Clare in Suffolk which is called 'Hellesdon Ley'.[127] The village is just five miles from Bury St Edmunds, there is a 'Sutton' close by, and also a 'King's Manor'. Several recent works find this convincing, but again there is no ancient tradition of Edmund being here, and the subject remains an open question.

Regardless of the location of Edmund's martyrdom and initial burial, Abbo's account indicates that Edmund's body was removed to the site of *Beodricsworth*, the town now called Bury St Edmunds, in the early years of the 10th century.[128] According to Abbo, the corpse remained incorrupt and had no signs of wounds apart from a thin scar like a thread around the neck. Abbo says this incorruption of the flesh was because Edmund had preserved his chastity until death and endured persecution even to martyrdom. He also notes that Theodred, Bishop of London between AD 942 and AD 951, reclothed the body and replaced it in a wooden coffin. By this date people were also leaving money in their wills to the shrine. Abbo describes many miracles ascribed to Edmund, such as the punishment of those trying to rob the shrine, and he ended his account by saying that he could tell of many more miracles. Hermann also described many miracles illustrating Edmund's power, such as his help to the inhabitants of Bury St Edmunds and his saving a knight named Normannus during a storm at sea. Later legends surrounding Edmund include the story that, long after his death, he appeared to the Viking ruler Sweyn, rebuked the Viking for ravaging his lands and struck him with a lance. Sweyn died the following day. Such stories carry little weight, but illustrate the reverence in which Edmund was held.[129]

At a date traditionally thought to be AD 1020, Sweyn's son, King Cnut, approved the replacement of the secular priests who at that point served St Edmund's church with a community of Benedictine monks, an act taken to mark the formal foundation of the Abbey of St Edmund. In AD 1028, Cnut provided the Abbey with a charter of jurisdiction over the growing town and other lands besides, which was extended further by Edward the Confessor in AD 1044. On 18th October AD 1032, Edmund's remains were transferred into a new shrine in a stone-built circular church, which stood to the north of the later abbey church.[130]

Within 50 years, work began on a new abbey church in the Romanesque style, into the eastern end of which Edmund's remains were moved in April AD 1095, and his body was again re-enshrined in AD 1198 after a fire in the abbey church. The manuscript of John Lydgate's 15th-century *Life of Edmund*, now in the British Library, includes illustrations which show the shrine of St Edmund as it was during the later medieval period. By this time, the abbey of St Edmund had grown to be

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[126] Briggs 2011a.

[127] West 1983.

[128] Scarfe 1970.

[129] Whitelock 1970; Pinner 2015; Young 2018.

[130] James 1895; Pinner 2015; Young 2016; Hoggett 2018.

one of the wealthiest and most powerful monasteries in England, and Edmund's shrine became one of the major pilgrimage sites in western Europe. Almost all of the English kings came to Bury, some almost annually, and parliaments were held there, too. Other signs of royal devotion include Henry III naming his second son Edmund and having an image of the saint placed in Westminster Abbey. Likewise, Richard II's personal prayer image (now known as the Wilton Diptych and in the National Gallery) has an image of Edmund alongside Edward the Confessor and John the Baptist, the latter present because Richard was born on 6th January, the feast-day of Christ's baptism by John. As a young man, Henry VI stayed at Bury from Christmas day 1433 until St George's Day 1434, and it was this visit which led to his being presented with Lydgate's illuminated manuscript.[131]

The abbey of St Edmund was dissolved – closed down – in 1539, on the orders of Henry VIII and Edmund's shrine was dismantled, although history makes no mention of what happened to Edmund's remains. It is possible that they were hidden somewhere within the monastery, the more obvious possible hiding places being the monk's cemetery to the south-east of the abbey church, somewhere within the Great Churchyard or within either of the two parish churches – St James's and St Mary's – which survived the Dissolution. In any event, the episode raises the possibility that the mortal remains of Edmund remain buried within the monastic precinct, although it is unlikely that these would or even could be recognised using archaeological methods.[132]

The Vikings responsible for the murder of the young East Anglian king in AD 869 could not have had any idea that the consequences of their actions would echo down the centuries in such a significant fashion and have such a great impact on the development of the physical and political landscape of East Anglia. Indeed, following the martyrdom of Edmund, the Great Army continued its progress across the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and met with another famous king: Alfred the Great.

Alfred and the Danelaw

With Edmund dead and the kingdom of East Anglia conquered and ravaged, the Great Army spent the winter of AD 870 in Reading and Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, written about AD 893, gives an account of their activities there. Part of the army, we are told, was engaged in building a rampart between the rivers Thames and Kennet, while 'two of their earls with a great part of the force rode out for plunder'.[133] In early January AD 871, this expedition was met in battle by Ealdorman Aethelwulf, reinforced by King Æthelred I and his brother Alfred, but the Vikings won the battle and there was great slaughter. However, four days later the Vikings were defeated in battle at Ashdown, thought to be in Berkshire, and their leader Bagsecg was killed. During the following year, the Anglo-Saxons were defeated at the battles of Basing and Meretun and the Vikings gained the upper hand. Shortly after Easter AD 871, Alfred succeeded his brother as king, and a sizeable summer army came from overseas to augment the original Great Army.[134]

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[131] James 1895; Scarfe 1970; Whitelock 1970; Young 2016; Hoggett 2018.

[132] Scarfe 1970; Whitelock 1970; Young 2018.

[133] Stevenson 1904.

[134] Hadley and Richards 2021.

At the end of the year AD 871, the Vikings returned to set up winter quarters in London and peace was made. In AD 872, they returned to York in the kingdom of Northumbria, following a revolt against their puppet king, who had fled into Mercia. From York, the army went south to Torksey in Lincolnshire and made peace with the Mercians. The army stayed in Torksey during the winter of AD 872–3 and it is from Torksey that much of the new knowledge about the archaeological 'footprint' of the Great Army has been obtained.

At Torksey, extensive metal-detecting has revealed artefacts in six fields covering an area of 55 hectares (135 acres) to the north of the present-day settlement which are indicative of the army's encampment.[135] In particular, the archaeological team studying the site has identified several classes of artefact which are indicative of the army's presence. The first of these is hack-metal, taking the form of gold and silver ingots, cut-up pieces of arm-rings, and fragments of silver Arabic coins known as dirhams, all of which were used as bullion. Also allied to a bullion economy is the need for a standardised system of weights and measures against which bullion and trade goods can be weighed. This is evidenced by the discovery of lead and copper-alloy weights of standardised mass, together with sets of weighing scales with which they were used. The discovery of large quantities of coinage outside their original area of circulation is also indicative of plunder or tribute. At Torksey, a large number of Northumbrian coins known as *stycas* were found, as were large numbers of Anglo-Saxon silver pennies from Mercia and Wessex. In addition to coinage, significant quantities of Anglo-Saxon and Irish dress accessories were also discovered, again apparently looted with the intention of them being melted down and re-used. Finally, one of the most characteristic features of the Torksey assemblage was the prevalence of simple thimble-like, lead gaming pieces, which although crude are very distinctive and are indicative of the board games made and played by the members of the camp during their stay.

The evidence from Torksey has transformed discussions about the size of the invading army. It has long been supposed that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* exaggerated the number of longships arriving, and consequently the number of warriors in the army, although the figure of 300 longships is corroborated by Frankish, Irish and Spanish–Muslim sources. However, the size of the Torksey camp and the density of the material recovered indicates that these figures may in fact have been accurate, representing an army of several thousand warriors. It is also clear from the findings at Torksey that the camp probably included women and children, as well as merchants and craftsmen in addition to the warriors. Ship-repairs, metal-working and textile-working took place, and both monetary and bullion economies were in operation. It is also significant that, following the Vikings' overwintering, Torksey developed as an important Anglo-Saxon borough with a major wheel-thrown pottery industry and multiple churches and cemeteries. The parallels between Torksey and Thetford are striking and are considered more fully in the following section.

The following winter, AD 873–4, the army moved to Repton in Derbyshire, where archaeological excavations in the 1980s revealed a large charnel deposit comprising the remains of at least 264 people, mostly men aged 18–45, in the vicinity of St Wystan's

[135] Hadley and Richards 2016; Hadley and Richards 2021.

church. The excavators also discovered a large defensive ditch which connected the church to the River Trent and created a substantial D-shaped enclosure, within and around which were discovered a number of burials containing Scandinavian grave-goods. While the relatively small size of the enclosure at Repton precluded its housing an army numbering many thousands, it seems likely that the army also occupied a large site east of Repton at Foremark, while the enclosure appears to have been a particular focus for burial. Recent reassessment of the dating of the site has indicated that the charnel deposit is very likely to comprise members of the Great Army, while the associated furnished graves may represent those of significant figures within the army.[136]

In AD 874, following their time at Repton, the Great Army began to fragment. Healfdene went north and overwintered on the Tyne and in AD 875 ravaged further north into Scotland before settling in Northumbria where according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* they 'shared out the lands of Northumbria and they were engaged in ploughing and making a living for themselves'.[137]

Meanwhile, Guthrum, Anwend and Oscetel returned to East Anglia and overwintered in Cambridge. From there they moved into the kingdom of Wessex, making their base at Wareham in Dorset, and negotiated a peace treaty with Alfred, promising to leave to the kingdom in return for payment. However, they then broke the treaty and moved on to Exeter in Devon. A further peace treaty was made and this time the Vikings ultimately did leave and went to Gloucester in the kingdom of Mercia, taking half the kingdom, driving Burghtred, who had ruled for 22 years, into exile and installing Ceolwulf II as their puppet-king.[138]

In early AD 878, the Great Army returned to Wessex and took over the royal estate at Chippenham, where Alfred had been staying, and the West Saxons submitted or were exiled. Alfred went into hiding at Athelney in the Somerset Levels, where he remained until he was able to muster sufficient forces to engage in battle. It is to this period that the legend of Alfred's burning the cakes relates, although the story is a much later creation and thought to be largely spurious. Having gathered the army of Wessex, Alfred engaged the Vikings in battle at Edington in Wiltshire in May AD 878. Alfred's army triumphed, the Great Army was put to flight and Guthrum sought peace.[139] Alfred's biography, Asser recorded that Alfred and Guthram agreed the terms of the peace under the *Treaty of Wedmore*, named after the Somerset village, although no other sources mention this and no document survives. Three weeks later, as part of this agreement, Guthrum and thirty of his followers were baptised under Alfred's sponsorship. The converted Guthrum took the baptismal name of Athelstan and the army left Wessex, moving to Cirencester, which lay in Mercia. The army remained in Cirencester until AD 879, when the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that: 'the raiding-army went from Cirencester into East Anglia and settled that land, and divided it up.'[140]

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[136] Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992; Jarman *et al.* 2018; Jarman 2021; Hadley and Richards 2021.

[137] Swanton 2000, 73–5.

[138] Hadley and Richards 2021.

[139] Hadley and Richards 2021.
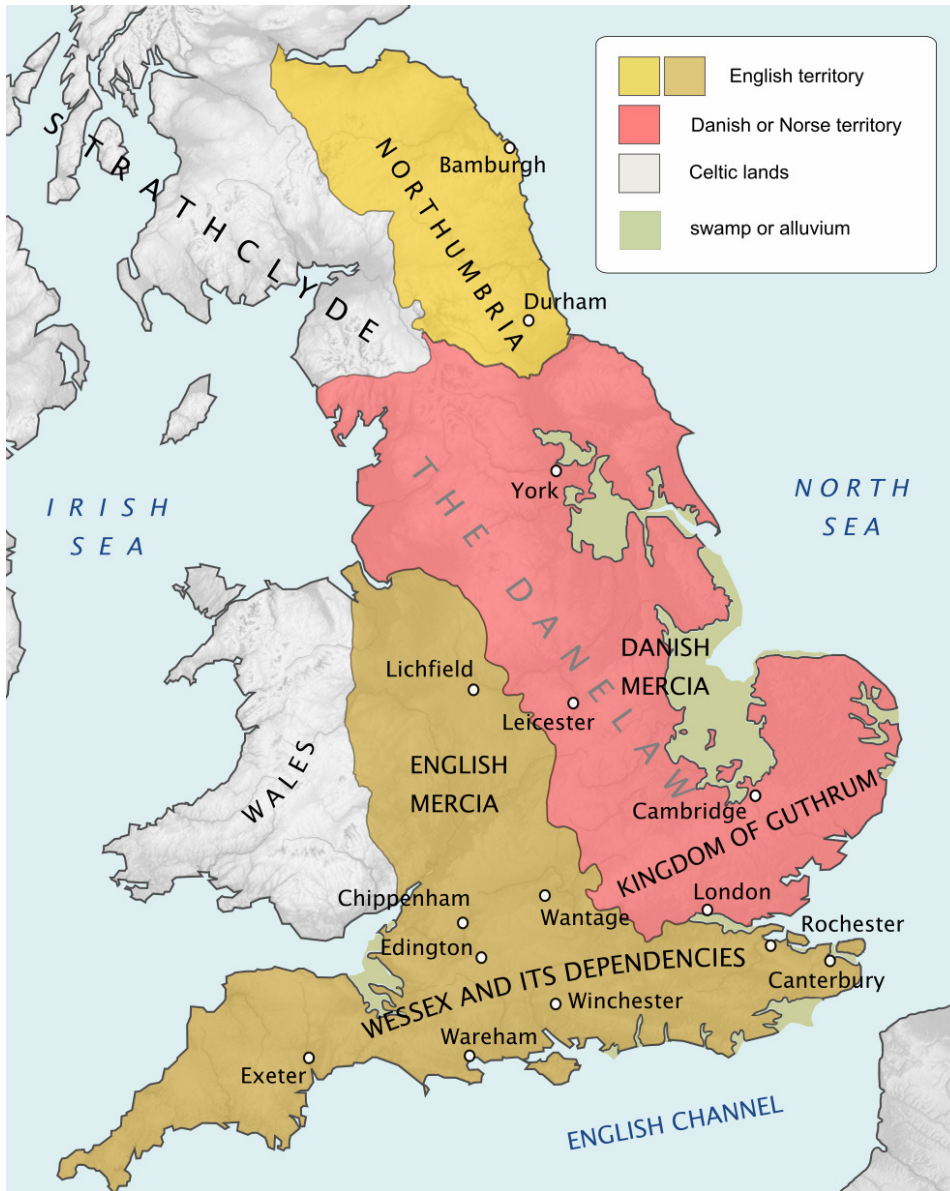
[140] Swanton 2000, 76–7.

Figure 23: A map showing the division of the country between Alfred and Guthrum following the defeat of the Great Army in AD 878.
© Hel-hama

The formal division of the country between Alfred and the kingdom of Wessex and the land held by Guthrum was formalised in the *Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum*, a copy of which survives and which was subsequently incorporated into the *Laws of King Alfred*. The prologue to these laws states that:

> *'These are the terms of peace which King Alfred and King Guthrum, and the councillors of all the English nation, and all the people who dwell in East Anglia, have all agreed upon and confirmed with oaths, on their own behalf and for their subjects both living and unborn, who are anxious for Gods favour and ours.'*

The first of the Laws states that the boundaries between the two sides ran up the River Thames and up the River Lea to its source. From there, the border followed a straight line to Bedford and then up the River Ouse to the line of the Roman Watling Street,

which ran north-westwards across the country. The land to the north and east of this boundary, which included East Anglia, later came to be known as the Danelaw, being that part of the country in which the laws of the Danes held sway over those of the Anglo-Saxons (Figure 23).[141]

In the course of less than twenty years, the Vikings progressed from a raiding force seeking plunder and slaves to conquering kingdoms and sharing political power with the kings of Wessex. During that period, the East Anglian bridgehead used by the army witnessed the martyrdom of its last king and became a significant part of the Danish heartland in England. As has been touched upon here, there is very little documentary evidence relating to East Anglia during the period of the Danish occupation. However, there is a considerable wealth of place-name evidence and archaeological evidence for both the presence of the Viking army in East Anglia and the later settlement and occupation of the region, and the Breckland area in particular.

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[141] Keynes and Lapidge 1983; Hart 1992.

7: Viking Thetford

Thetford is one of the few East Anglian places which the surviving historical sources clearly indicate was associated with the Great Army. The army stayed in the town during the winter of AD 869–70, following the murder of King Edmund in November AD 869. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* also records that the Great Army first came to East Anglia in AD 865 and, although no specific locations were mentioned, it is possible that the army made Thetford its base during this earlier visit, too.

Thetford occupies a strategic location in the East Anglian landscape, being situated at the confluence of two rivers, the Thet and the Little Ouse, which connect the town to the Fenland waterways and enabled the development of regional, national and even international trade networks. The town is also located at one of the highest navigable points of the river system, and the prehistoric and Roman Icknield Way is thought to have crossed the river at the easternmost of the three fords which give the town its name. As such, Thetford occupies a crucial nodal point in both the river- and road-networks, which has made it an attractive location to settlers for millennia. It is no coincidence that historically the boundary between Norfolk and Suffolk ran through the middle of the town.[142]

On the northern bank of the river, east of the later town, the earthworks of an Iron Age hillfort guarded the easternmost of the fords,[143] while some 2km to the north a major Iron Age and Romano-British religious or ceremonial centre stood on Gallows Hill (now Fison Way). This is thought to have connections with the Iron Age Iceni tribe, which was focused on the area and which, under Boudica's leadership, led the uprising against the Roman invaders in AD 60–1.[144] As with much of Breckland and beyond, the Early Anglo-Saxon settlements in the Thetford area were clustered along the river valley, with excavations near to the later Red Castle at the western end of the town revealing evidence for occupation dating from the 5th to 7th centuries.[145] Middle Anglo-Saxon artefacts and features have also been found in the same area and further to the east, indicating that occupation continued to be focused on the southern bank of the river, although the discovery of

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[142] Dunmore with Carr 1976; Crosby 1986; Penn 2005.

[143] Everson and Jecock 2012.

[144] Gregory 1991.

[145] Andrews 1995.

Middle Anglo-Saxon pottery and coins within the Iron Age hillfort is suggestive of the site having been used for meetings, markets or seasonal fairs.[146]

Traditionally, it has been assumed that the most likely site for the Viking's winter camp in Thetford was within the Iron Age hillfort, the earthworks of which would have offered some protection to the army and which were subsequently converted into a motte-and-bailey castle by the Normans.[147] However, historical accounts of the size of the army and new fieldwork at sites such as Repton and Torksey (see pp. 59–60) have indicated that the army was substantial and therefore required a much larger area than that enclosed within the hillfort. Very little archaeological fieldwork has been undertaken within and around the site of the hillfort, and there is a high likelihood that any archaeological traces of the army within the fort would have been disturbed or destroyed by the construction of the later castle. Although, as at Repton, the existing enclosure of the fort may have been a focus for some of the army's activities, it seems instead that the vast majority of the army made their camp on the southern side of the river.

It is now widely accepted that the Late Anglo-Saxon town of Thetford, which was established on the southern bank of the river, owes its origins, later expansion and economic success to the presence of the Great Army, which acted as a catalyst to the development of the town and ensured its prosperity.[148] In this manner, Thetford has a very similar origin to many other towns across England which flourished in similar circumstances following contact with the Great Army. However, despite the historically attested overwintering, there is surprisingly little direct evidence for the presence of the Great Army in the town. Again, this is a characteristic which Thetford shares with many other towns associated with the Great Army, where later urban development and expansion have disturbed and masked the earlier archaeological phases, such as is the case at Nottingham, Reading and London. This also serves to emphasise why sites like Torksey and Repton, where subsequent development has been less intensive, are so important to our understanding of the Great Army and the Late Anglo-Saxon period more widely.

With specific reference to the presence of the Great Army, the discovery of numerous Borre-style brooches, decorated with intricate knotwork designs, together with trefoil brooches, some of which are likely to be of Scandinavian origin, is strongly indicative of the Viking presence in the town. Likewise, a Thor's hammer pendant, a talismanic symbol of one of the major Viking gods, has been recovered (see pp. 79–80). Also suggestive of a direct Scandinavian presence is the recovery of three pieces of steatite (soapstone), which must have originated from Norway or Shetland, and which was soft enough to have been carved into bowls. Regarding coinage indicative of the Great Army, to date at least five Northumbrian *stycas* have been discovered in Thetford. This is particularly significant given the observations made at Torksey that the presence of such coins outside their area of circulation is a strong material indicator of the presence of the army. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* indicates that the army was returning

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[146] Penn 2005.

[147] Penn 2005; Everson and Jecock 2012.

[148] Davison 1967; Dumore with Carr 1976; Rogerson and Dallas 1984; Crosby 1986; Dallas 1993; Andrews 1995; Andrews and Penn 1999; Wallis 2004; Penn 2005.
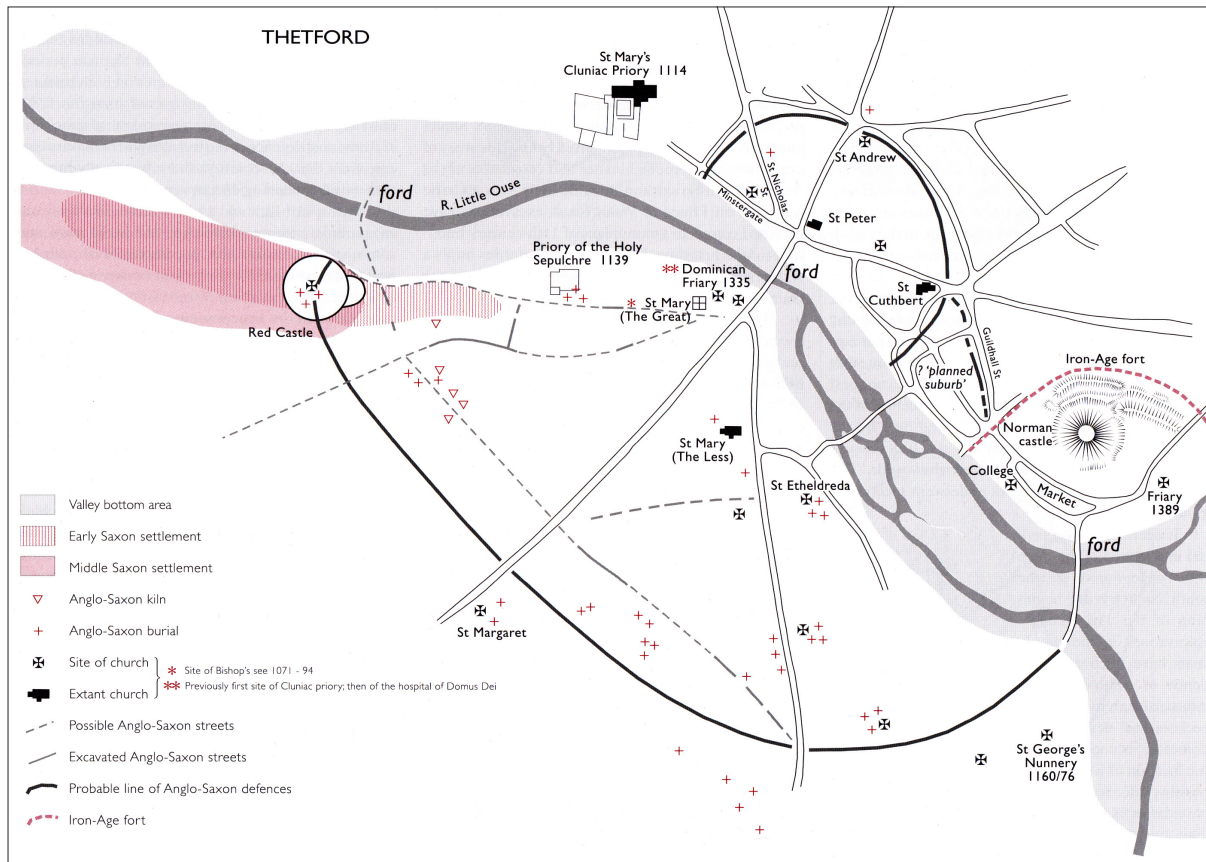
from Northumbria when it overwintered in Thetford in AD 869. Likewise, the discovery of a mid-9th-century Carolingian coin of King Lothar minted in Dorestad and a similarly dated coin of the West Frankish King Charles the Bald are both also likely to be the result of stray losses made by members of the Great Army.[149]

Many isolated burials have been found within the town, buried singly or in larger groups, and many of these are not associated with any of the known churchyards (Figure 24). A few of these graves have included Viking artefacts. It has been suggested that these burials might represent members of the Great Army who perished during their time in Thetford or who lived in the early settlement before the wholesale conversion of the Scandinavian population to Christianity, after which point such burials would have been made in one of the town's many Late Anglo-Saxon churchyards. These burials and other Viking burials from the wider Breckland area are discussed in the next section.

Following its establishment, the southern part of the town was defined by a long, looping, linear earthwork defence, comprising a bank and a ditch (Figure 24). This ran from the river at Red Castle to the west of the town to the ford by the Iron Age hillfort at the eastern end of the town, creating a large D-shaped enclosure centred on the ford where Bridge Street now crosses the river. Several excavations have revealed cross-sections of the ditch, which was 12.8m wide and 3.5m deep. In some locations this ditch had apparently silted up by the 10th century and been built

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[149] Penn 2005; Hadley and Richards 2021, 262–3.

Figure 25: Aerial photograph of the northern half of Thetford taken in October 2014, showing the surviving street pattern, which is shaped by the layout of the Anglo-Saxon town and its defences.
© *John Fielding*

over, suggesting an early date for the defences. On the northern side of the river was a much smaller D-shaped enclosure, also focused on the central ford, which effectively formed a bridgehead on the northern bank and allowed the ford to be controlled. This northern enclosure was also marked by a defensive bank and ditch, traces of which have been discovered during excavations on the site of Thetford Library and elsewhere. It seems that that these northern and southern ditches defined the shape of the early town, and traces of their layout can still be read in the networks of streets which exist on both sides of the river (Figure 25).

Although much of Thetford's northern bank was developed during the medieval period and later, and the southern bank heavily developed during the 19th- and 20th-century expansion of the town, there have been a significant number of archaeological discoveries and set-piece excavations which have shed some light upon the character and extent of the town's earliest occupation.[150] The defensive earthworks enclosed a large, but scattered, settlement, which included dense pockets of occupation, together with areas of open ground and paddocks. Thetford was apparently a town of loosely arranged timber buildings, often set back from gravelled streets and each situated within their own yard, which often contained cesspits, rubbish-pits and wells. Something of the character of these buildings is captured in an archaeological reconstruction painting of a Late Anglo-Saxon house in Thetford made by the famous artist Alan Sorrell in 1966, having been commissioned by Norfolk Museums Service (Figure 26). The painting is based upon a building known as 'Hut 13', the foundations of which were excavated by Group Captain Guy Knocker on the southern side of the town during 1948 and 1949.[151]

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[150] Davison 1967; Rogerson and Dallas 1984; Dallas 1993; Andrews 1995; Andrews and Penn 1999; Wallis 2004.

[151] Rogerson and Dallas 1984, 14–25, esp. fig. 33.

Figure 26: Alan Sorrell's 1966 reconstruction of a Late Anglo-Saxon house in Thetford excavated by Group Captain Guy Knocker on the southern side of the town during 1948 and 1949.
© *Norfolk Museums Service*

Archaeological evidence indicates that during the Late Anglo-Saxon period Thetford became an important industrial centre, particularly in the field of pottery production. Excavations have revealed numerous kilns used for the production of a type of pottery specific to the area, known as Thetford ware, the beginning of the production of which apparently coincided with the foundation of the town. Thetford ware comprised a range of different bowls, storage jars, dishes, cooking pots, lamps and crucibles, and is found widely distributed across East Anglia (Figure 27). The development of a pottery industry in this fashion is a characteristic of many of the sites occupied by the Great Army, including Torksey, Stamford, Lincoln, York, Nottingham, Newark, Northampton and Leicester. It has been suggested that although the Vikings themselves did not have a tradition of making pottery, the Great Army attracted potters from the Continent who brought new technologies with them and who were able to capitalise upon the market created by the Great Army, as well as catering for the local population.[152]

In addition to pottery production, Thetford was host to a wide range of other industries. Crucibles for melting silver and copper-alloys have been discovered, as have chalk moulds for casting ingots and other metal objects, such as brooches. Metalworking of this kind was clearly a major part of the town's economy, and the wider distribution of objects throughout East Anglia suggests that Thetford was something of a local production centre catering for the region. Iron-smithing is also

[152] Blinkhorn 2013; Perry 2016; Perry 2019; Hadley and Richards 2021.

Figure 27: Two examples of simple Thetford Ware vessels. Many such pots were much larger and lavishly decorated. © *Sue Anderson, taken by Carleton Van Selman. Courtesy of Norfolk Museums Service.*

evidenced by metal slag and metalworking tools, and excavations within the town have revealed a wide range of iron objects including axes, adzes, knives, shears, hinges, keys, horseshoes and weapons. Discarded horn-cores and sawn antler tines, as well at the tools used to work them, are indicative of extensive bone- and antler-working, the products of which included combs, pins, spoons, toggles, and even flutes and ice skates. Textiles were also produced, with numerous spindle-whorls, wool combs and needles and cord-making tools indicting that spinning, weaving and dyeing of textiles occurred. Evidence for tanning and the discovery of leatherworking tools indicate that this, too, was a significant part of the town's economy.[153]

Extensive trading within Viking-age Thetford is indicated by the discovery of numerous weights of different masses, some of which have coins or other decorations set into them, and the broken pieces of small sets of balances, which would have been used for weighing goods (see pp. 81–4). The presence of such items indicates an economy based on bullion, rather than coinage, with coins (some of them silver Islamic dirhams) and other artefacts being cut up and weighed as part of transactions. Allied to this is the widespread discovery of ingots, which were cast from melted-down objects and also used for their bullion value.[154] A more obvious indicator of the success of Thetford was the operation of a mint which produced coinage from the end of the reign of King Edgar (AD 959–75) until the 11th century and which for a time was the most productive mint in East Anglia.[155] A coin die, used with a hammer to stamp coins and one of only ten known from Britain, was excavated on the southern side of the town in 1995.[156]

[153] Rogerson and Dallas 1984; Dallas 1993; Andrews 1995; Andrews and Penn 1999; Wallis 2004.

[154] Kruse 1988; Pestell 2013; Pestell 2019; Kershaw 2014.

[155] Carson 1949.

[156] Wallis 2004.

The Danish occupation of Thetford ended in AD 917, when East Anglia was reconquered by the West Saxons under Edward the Elder, after which time Thetford continued to be an important Anglo-Scandinavian settlement. Tensions between the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons persisted in Thetford, and the Worcester copy of the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* for the year AD 952 records that King Eadred (r. AD 923–55): 'ordered a great slaughter to be made in the town of Thetford, in vengeance of the death of Abbot Eadhelm whom they killed earlier.' It is thought that this refers to the abbot of St Augustine's in Canterbury, although there are no other sources which shed light on the reason for Eadhelm's visit or the king's retribution.[157]

Viking raids on the English coast began again in earnest during the 980s, becoming more intensive during the early 990s. In AD 991, the Anglo-Saxons were defeated by the Vikings at the Battle of Maldon, their loss being immortalised in the Anglo-Saxon poem.[158] King Æthelred the Unready paid a tribute to the Danish king to ensure peace, but the raiding continued during the late 990s and into the new millennium. In AD 1002, Æthelred ordered the mass killing of all of the Danes in England, an event known as the St Brice's Day massacre,[159] and this is considered to have triggered two major raids on East Anglia in AD 1004 and AD 1010. As is explored more fully in the final chapter (see pp. 97–8), during the course of both of these campaigns Thetford was targeted, ransacked and burned.

The 11th-century folios of the Domesday Book attest to the significance of Thetford during the Late Anglo-Saxon period, but also capture the beginning of its decline in favour of Norwich as the principal county town. The survey records that, in AD 1066, Thetford contained 934 burgesses (townspeople) and twelve churches, including St Mary the Great and its dependents, St Peter, St John, St Martin and St Margaret. Following the Norman Conquest, the creation of the castle and its associated marketplace on the northern bank of the river, within the former hillfort, was instrumental in drawing the focus of the settlement away from the southern bank.[160] The East Anglian bishopric was located in Thetford from AD 1075, centred on the church of St Mary the Great on the southern side of the river, until the see was relocated to Norwich in AD 1094.[161] In AD 1086, only 724 burgesses were recorded, together with 224 empty houses, the majority of which were presumably located on the southern bank of the river. Archaeological excavations have shown that the southern bank went into decline and was largely abandoned during this period.[162]

[157] Swanton 2000, 112–13; Hart 1992, 575–6, 600.

[158] Swanton 2000, 126–7; Foard 2003.

[159] Swanton 2000, 133–5.

[160] Williams and Martin 2002; Everson and Jecock 2012.

[161] Campbell 1996; Hoggett 2010.

[162] Williams and Martin 2002.

8: Viking East Anglia

As a focus of the activities of the Great Army, Thetford became the one of the principal urban centres of East Anglia during the Late Anglo-Saxon period. However, there is also a considerable amount of evidence for the Scandinavian presence in the Breckland area and East Anglia more widely. Place-names give us a strong indication of the nature and character of the Viking settlement of the region. Archaeological discoveries, including several burials which are unquestionably those of actual Vikings, provide insights into aspects of everyday life (and death), and emphasise the degree to which Scandinavian peoples and culture became integrated into East Anglian society during the course of the 10th and 11th centuries. This section provides an overview of this material and some of the stories which it tells. In researching and writing this chapter, the River Raiders project volunteers have drawn upon the rich collections held in the region's museums, together with the numerous artefacts which have been identified and recorded by metal-detectorists and the staff of the county archaeological services during the last 45 years and, more recently, the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS).

Scandinavian Place-names

The prevalence of Scandinavian place-names within the East Anglian landscape provides an indication of the nature and extent of the Viking settlement which apparently followed the initial raids of the Great Army, although it is hard to know exactly when such place-names began to be used.[163] It also remains unclear whether these place-names might represent the settling of soldiers from the armies or the migration of Scandinavian civilians following the establishment of the Danelaw. Nor can we be sure of the extent to which these place-names indicate new settlements or existing settlements which were renamed. However, despite these limitations, it is widely agreed that place-name evidence remains one of our strongest clues when attempting to understand the character of Viking East Anglia.

Among the most common Scandinavian place-name elements is the *–by* ending, which indicates a village or settlement and seems to be broadly equivalent to the Anglo-Saxon *–ham* ending (see pp. 14–16).[164] It has long been recognised that there is a particular concentration of *–by* place-names in north-east Norfolk, focused around the island of Flegg and including the likes of Hemsby and Ormesby, which may indicate a particular concentration of Viking settlement.

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[163] Martin 1989; Margeson 1997; Williamson 2005; Pestell 2019.

[164] Gelling 1978; Gelling 1984; Martin 1989; Williamson 2005.

Figure 28: The place-name Risby incorporates the *–by* ending, meaning 'village in brushwood' or 'village where brushwood is collected'. © *Adrian S Pye*

However, there are also numerous examples across the rest of East Anglia, including several instances within and around the Breckland area such as:

- Ashby: a now-lost village in Snetterton, perhaps meaning the 'ash-tree settlement'. Ashby is a common place-name in the East Midlands and East Anglia.

- Risby: 'village in brushwood' or 'village where brushwood is collected'; there is also a Risby in Sweden (Figure 28).

- Wilby: an uncertain derivation, but could be 'willow settlement', although this may be an Anglo-Saxon name meaning 'ring of willow trees'.

In addition to *–by* endings, secondary settlements and outlying farmsteads were indicated by a *–thorpe* place-name ending, broadly equivalent in meaning to the Anglo-Saxon *–tun* endings (see pp. 14–16).[165] Traditionally, this place-name was regarded as a sure sign of Scandinavian settlement, but more recently this has become less certain because of possible confusion with 'thorp' and 'throp', which are also Old English for farm/village. It has been noted that places in Norfolk with the name 'Thorpe' were being established well after the period of Viking settlement, but it is considered likely that the majority of *–thorpe* names in northern and eastern England are Scandinavian in origin, given how common they are within the area of the Danelaw.[166] Examples of *–thorpe* names within the Breckland area include:

- Cleythorpe: in Cockley Cley parish, 'clayey farmstead'.

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[165] Gelling 1978; Gelling 1984; Martin 1989; Williamson 2005; Cullen *et al.* 2011.

[166] Gelling 1978; Williamson 2005; Cullen *et al.* 2011.

- Gasthorpe: 'Gadd's farmstead'.

- Ixworth Thorpe: 'farmstead belonging to Ixworth', now lost.[167]

- Thorpe: 'farmstead', one lost example in Harling parish and one example in Wretham parish.[168]

Other examples of Scandinavian place-name elements include –*lundr*, meaning 'wood', such as in Rockland which translates as the 'Rook wood'. Another is –*toft*, meaning 'homestead' or 'piece of land with a dwelling', as in Buckenham Tofts and West Tofts. Place-names including –*holme* indicate an island of dry ground within a marsh, such as at Holme Hale, while –*kjarr* indicates brushwood in a marsh and is commonly rendered as 'carr' in local place-names. Such is the case at Broadcar, a lost settlement within the parish of Shropham, which translates as the 'broad area of brushwood in the marsh'.

In addition to topographical terms of the kind discussed above, there is also a large number of place-names which include Scandinavian personal names added to the Anglo-Saxon –*tun* ending. These are referred to as 'Grimston Hybrids', because many of the examples are named Grimston, 'Grim's settlement', or follow the same pattern. These may be original Anglo-Saxon settlements, elevated in importance by a Scandinavian leader, perhaps acquiring legal independence of some kind and becoming a settlement in its own right. Possible examples from the Breckland area include:

- Colveston: 'Colf's settlement'

- Croxton: 'Croc's settlement'

- Griston: 'Gyrth's settlement'

- Thomson: 'Tumi's settlement'

It is interesting to note that studies which have looked at the inclusion of Scandinavian personal names in the place-names recorded in the Domesday Book in AD 1086, have suggested that these names are more common than has been appreciated previously, perhaps indicating that the Scandinavian settlement was more dense than the place-names might first suggest. Likewise, the study of minor place-names might bring out more Scandinavian elements, such as *gata* (street) or *beck* (stream), while the instances of *carr* and *thorpe* referred to above confirm that a search of minor place-names (for example those found in manorial surveys and extents) could provide many more examples of place-names suggesting Scandinavian settlement (Figure 29).

Regarding the locations of settlements bearing Scandinavian place-names, it has been observed that very often settlements along the major rivers have pre-Scandinavian names, while Scandinavian names ending in –*by* and –*thorpe* lie in the valleys of tributary rivers and small streams. There is a possible pattern even within these names, with the –*thorpes* tending to be at a greater distance from the water courses than the –*bys*, as though they were later settlements. Locally, it has been noted that many Scandinavian place-names occur on marginal land, perhaps land

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[167] Allison 1955.

[168] Allison 1955.

Figure 29: The name of Thetford's 'Minstergate' preserves the Anglo-Saxon word *mynster*, meaning 'monastery' or 'mother church', and the Viking word *gata*, meaning 'street'.
© *Tom Juggins*

that had not previously been cultivated, or were hived off or cut out of older, larger estates.[169] For example, Tom Williamson has noted a cluster of such Scandinavian place-names in the headwaters of the Thet (including Ashby, Wilby and the Rocklands) as being on sparsely settled land on the central watershed of Norfolk. The fact that several of the settlements became deserted during the medieval period, such as Ashby and several of the Thorpes, might suggest that they were indeed on marginal land and as such were among the first villages to be abandoned in later times.

Finally, it is not just the place-names of individual settlements which preserve Scandinavian elements: a number of the region's hundred names also contain them. Hundreds are administrative areas, effectively subdivisions of a county, which are thought to have been created during the Late Anglo-Saxon period.[170] The Suffolk hundred of Thingoe takes its name from two Scandinavian words – 'thing', meaning 'assembly', and 'howe', meaning 'hill' – with the whole hundred apparently being named after the hill which was used as its meeting place. Likewise, the same usage of 'howe' also occurs in the name of the Norfolk hundreds of Grimshoe ('Grim's Hill') and North and South Greenhoe ('Green Hill'). The Norfolk hundred name Wayland also incorporates the Scandinavian place-name element –*lundr*, meaning 'wood', and is thought to take its name from the nearby Wayland Wood. Interestingly, the figure of Wayland was also a master blacksmith and maker of legendary weapons in Anglo-Saxon and Norse mythology,[171] although it is not clear whether there is any connection between his story and the naming of the wood and the hundred.

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[169] Gelling 1984; Williamson 2005.

[170] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hundreds_of_Norfolk and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hundreds_of_Suffolk

[171] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wayland_the_Smith

Talk Like a Viking

In addition to the place-name elements discussed above, the Vikings also left a rich linguistic legacy, which still features in modern speech. It is estimated that only about 150 Norse words have been adopted into modern English, but a brief examination of which words they are gives a strong indication of what mattered to the Vikings and what continued to be considered important once they settled and integrated into the local population. It is noteworthy that many of these words are quite mundane, suggesting that this was the language of day-to-day existence rather than high politics.[172]

In a domestic context numerous Viking words survive, including the words 'window', 'muck', 'bug' and 'egg', and body parts such as 'skull', 'foot' and 'skin'. The Vikings also brought several animal names, many of them indigenous to the north, such as 'bull', 'eider', 'gosling', 'skate', 'lemming' and 'reindeer'. Viking words relating to social structures and practices include 'law', 'husband', 'sale' and 'birth', the pronouns 'they', 'their' and 'them', and verbs such as 'get', 'give', 'lift', 'dump', 'want' and 'take'.

As a seafaring people, the Vikings were responsible for the introduction of several weather-related words into the language, including 'sky', 'fog', 'mug' / 'muggy', 'squall', 'gust', 'roke' (a sea mist) and 'cast' (as in overcast). Perhaps unsurprisingly, a number of words relating to violence and aggression are of Norse origin. These include 'knife', 'gun', 'gang' and 'club', actions like 'kindle', 'stagger', 'slaughter', 'ransack', 'die' and 'haunt', and emotive terms like 'awe', 'berserk' and 'anger'. The lighter side of Viking life is also reflected in the words 'cake', 'happy', 'hug' and 'glitter'!

Today, one of the most common (and perhaps unrecognised) Viking legacies is the name Bluetooth, which is now used to describe the technology by which digital devices can be linked wirelessly. Bluetooth was the epithet of King Harald Gormsson (d. AD 986) and the name is thought to refer to his having a rotten tooth. Harald was King of Denmark from AD 958–986 and Norway from AD 970–986, uniting the two kingdoms as the modern developers of Bluetooth wanted to unite disparate devices. The Bluetooth logo itself is a bind-rune comprising the Viking runes for H and B – Harald Bluetooth's initials.[173]

Music and Poetry

What little is known about Viking music does not portray a very pleasant sound! An Arab merchant, Ibrahim Ibn Ahmad Al-Tartushi, visiting Denmark in the 10th century, wrote 'never before have I heard uglier songs than those of the Vikings in Slesvig. The growling sound coming from their throats reminds me of dogs howling, only more untamed.'[174] It is likely that music, together with poetry, was present at important occasions when great feasts were held to celebrate battle success, to honour chiefs and to mark other significant events. Music could have eased the boredom of long sea journeys, when songs would have perhaps helped communal

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[172] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_English_words_of_Old_Norse_origin

[173] https://www.bluetooth.com/about-us/bluetooth-origin/

[174] http://www.vikinganswerlady.com/music.shtml

tasks such as rowing and the raising and lowering of sails, as it has done throughout history, most famously as sea shanties. Instruments may also have been played in times of calm seas and relaxation.

It is thought that a variety of musical instruments were played by the Viking people. These include the harp, flutes made of bone or horn, hornpipes, bowed strings (similar to present-day viols) and plucked strings (such as the lyre and rebec). In East Anglia, metal fittings from lyres have been recovered from Anglo-Saxon graves at Sutton Hoo, Snape and Lakenheath in Suffolk and from Bergh Apton and Morningthorpe in Norfolk.[175] These have informed reconstructions made by modern instrument makers. An imposing horn-like instrument, the lur, is illustrated on stone carvings and runic stones and referenced in manuscripts. Examples have been found in excavations of Scandinavian longships. Most are made from a piece of wood cut in half lengthways, hollowed out, then bound back together with birch bark. In Icelandic sagas lurs are referred to as war instruments, used to rally the troops and frighten the enemy. They may have had a more peaceful use, as in modern times, for calling cattle and signalling.

In addition to music, travelling poets, known as Skalds, entertained at the courts of Viking chieftains and kings, reciting sagas and poems, possibly with a musical accompaniment. The rhythm and tonality of music may have aided the memory of those who told and listened to the poetry and stories. Passages in Viking sagas refer to music and the epic Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* recalls an occasion where King Hrothgar's minstrel sings about Beowulf's battle with Grendel – an early example of a poem within a poem.[176] The only surviving manuscript of *Beowulf* was written in about AD 1000, but parts of the poem are much older, having been composed years before and handed down the generations. This was likely to have been done orally, but there may have been other written copies which have not survived. The one copy we do have nearly perished in 1731, when the library which housed it burned down. The text describes a mythic, pagan past in 6th-century Scandinavia, in which the hero Beowulf battles first with Grendel, then Grendel's aggrieved mother and, later, a dragon, yet the poem was set down by Christian scribes, probably in a monastery. The poem was added to and adapted over time by many different figures in different contexts, but it has been suggested that the poem may have East Anglian origins and certainly a lot of the imagery in the poem is mirrored in the East Anglian archaeological record.[177]

Many Scandinavian stories and histories have survived and come down to us in the form of the Icelandic sagas. These sagas were originally told by word of mouth and it was only later, in the 12th to 14th centuries, that they were eventually written down. Although some of the sagas tell of the adventures of mythical figures, such as Freya, Odin and Thor, others tell stories of real people who travelled between countries bordering the North Sea and further afield. Some well-known examples include the

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[175] Bruce-Mitford 1975; Bruce-Mitford 1978; Bruce-Mitford 1983; Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001; Caruth and Hines Forthcoming; Green and Rogerson 1978; Green *et al.* 1987.

[176] Heaney 2001.

[177] Newton 1993.

Njáls Saga (telling the story of a 50-year family feud),[178] the Laxdæla Saga (a story of friendship and a love triangle in Iceland),[179] and the Grettis Saga (concerning the life of an Icelandic outlaw).[180] While many view these sagas as literary works, it has increasingly been recognised that there is a considerable amount of cultural and historical evidence contained within them, which sheds a great deal of light upon the workings of the Viking world.

Sports and Games

There is evidence that many types of sports and games were played by Vikings.[181] However, although related artefacts are found in graves and other archaeological excavations, and pastimes are mentioned in the sagas, little is actually known about most of these pursuits. It would appear that some games and sports were (or could become) extremely violent, and many were based on the strategies and skills needed for battle. Gambling on the outcome of sports and games may have been part of the event. The Grettis Saga refers to a game during which Thorbjorn's stepmother threw a playing piece at him, which gouged out his eye, while another saga includes a statement of things which should be avoided which includes 'drunkenness and board games, whores, and bets and throws of the dice.' The conflict and aggression associated with these activities sometimes resulted in efforts to control them, as in Iceland, where the Grágás laws prohibited gambling on dice and board games.

Sports played by Vikings included ball games, wrestling and swimming, stories of which are related in the sagas. These could be part of a bigger social event, such as a feast or religious festival, and may have been held over a period of several days. A game called *Knattleikr* involved carrying a ball and tackling players, bearing a similarity to rugby. The Grettis Saga records how during one such game a player called Auðun hit the ball over Grettir's head so that he could not catch it. Grettir lost his temper, thinking that Auðun had done this to make fun of him. Grettir fetched the ball over the ice and when he returned, he hurled the ball at Auðun's forehead, making him bleed. In return, Auðun struck at Grettir with his bat, but Grettir dodged the blow. They grappled, Grettir lost his balance and Auðun kneed him in the groin. At this point, many stepped forward to stop the fight and the incident was not permitted to develop into a quarrel, but nonetheless a bloody feud ultimately ensued.

Some sports made use of animal parts, such as the game of *Hnutukast*, where players threw bones at each other with the aim of injury. This could have been played with a 'hala', a cube-shaped sheep's ankle bone that can be flicked towards the opponent's head. Another game was 'skin-throwing', a kind of piggy-in-the-middle in which a rolled-up bear skin was thrown over a player's head. There was even a game where opponents tried to drown each other by seeing whether they or their opponent could be held underwater for the longest, and horse fights in which two stallions were goaded to fight each other until one was killed or ran away.

[178] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nj%C3%A1ls_saga

[179] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laxd%C3%A6la_saga

[180] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grettis_saga
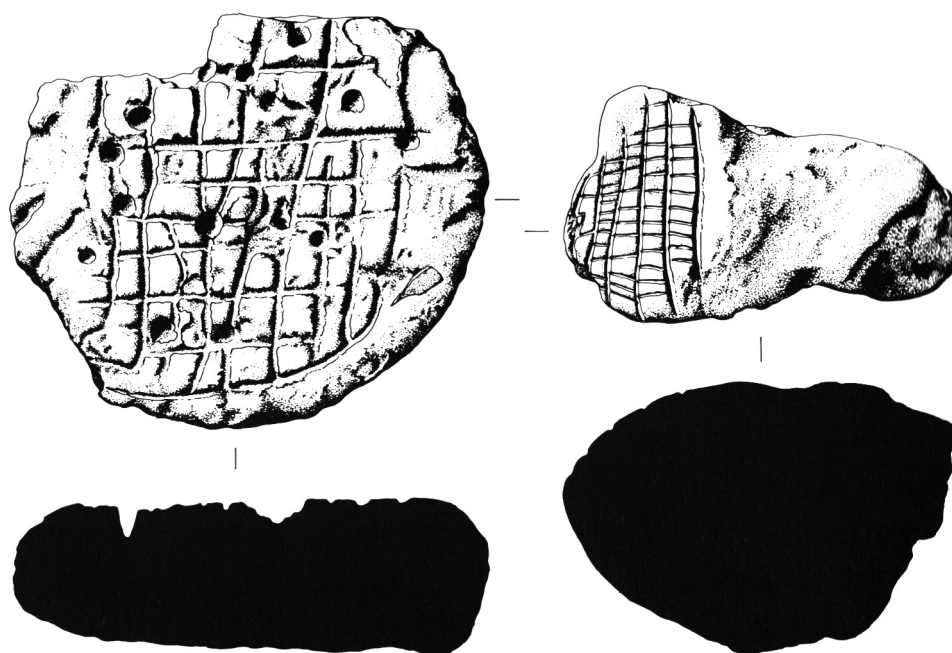
[181] Gardeła 2012.

Figure 30: Two possible examples of game boards, both carved into pieces of chalk, excavated at Brandon Road in Thetford between 1964–66 (Dallas 1993, fig. 132). *Drawing by Sue White* © *Norfolk County Council*

Many sports included tests of strength, such as stone-lifting and tug-of-war, while others included more skilful feats, such as oar-walking (as immortalised by Kirk Douglas in the 1958 film *The Vikings*) and swimming competitions. In *Beowulf*, a swimming match between the warriors Beowulf and Breca is recalled and the poem relates that this match lasted five nights and included the killing of several sea monsters whilst swimming in 'hard-ringed chain-mail'.[182] Finally, in colder periods, skiing and skating races might also be held, and the bone ice skates excavated from Thetford have already been referred to (see page 68).

One of the best known board games was *Hnefatafl*, literally 'Fist Table', a strategy game played on a chequered board in which a large army of hostile pieces attempts to capture the King, whose smaller army of pieces aim to protect him and enable him to escape to the corners of the board. The sagas tell us that men, women and children enjoyed playing the game, and archaeological discoveries have included game boards ranging in size from 7 by 7 squares to 19 by 19 squares. Unfortunately, the rules of *Hnefatafl* were never recorded, and it was subsequently eclipsed by chess, but there have been attempts to reconstruct the rules from later iterations of the game and many different versions of *Hnefatafl* are played today.[183]

Two possible examples of game boards, both carved into pieces of chalk, were excavated at Brandon Road in Thetford between 1964–66 (Figure 30).[184] Playing pieces were made of stone, bone, antler, ivory, glass, bronze, lead or wood, and numerous examples have been discovered locally. They are frequently circular,
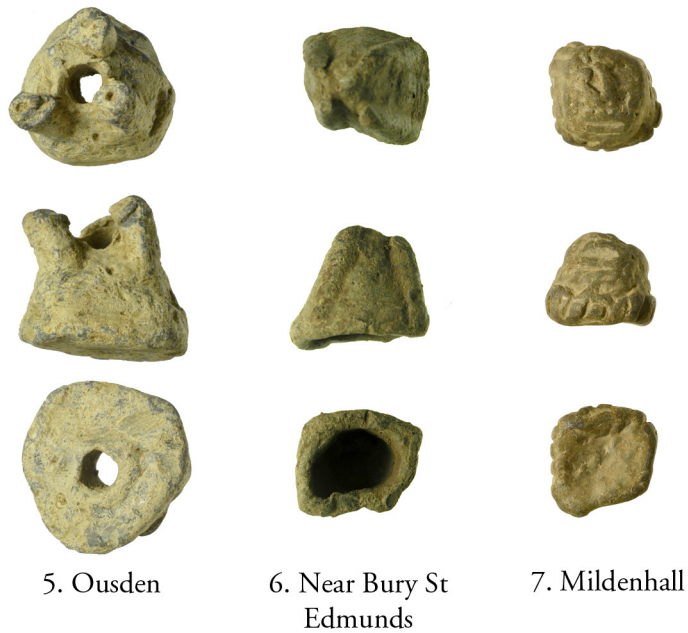
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[182] Heaney 2001.

[183] For an in-depth account of the game and its rules, together with print-and-play boards and gaming pieces visit http://tafl.cyningstan.com/downloads/712/print-and-play-downloads

[184] Dallas 1993, 121–2.
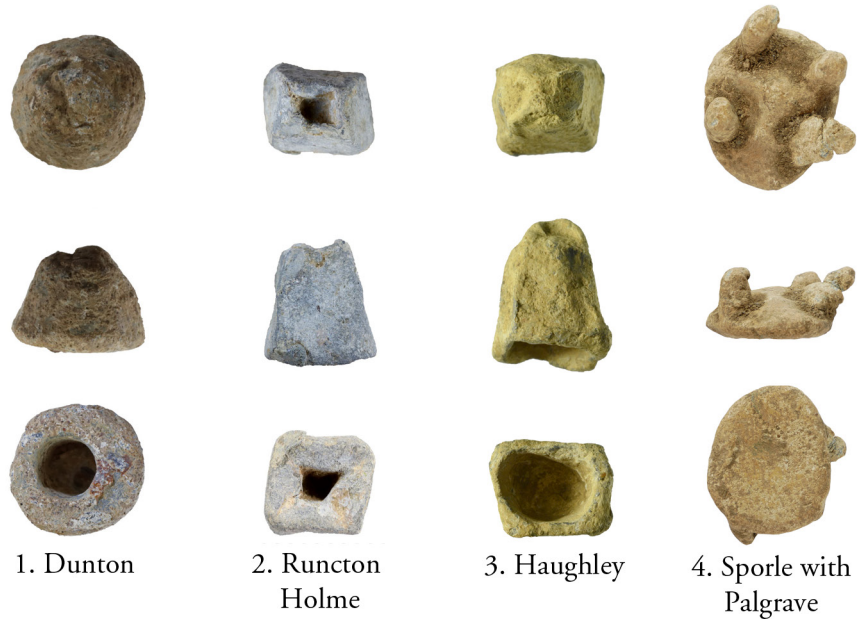
1. Dunton   2. Runcton Holme   3. Haughley   4. Sporle with Palgrave

Figure 31: Examples of cast-metal playing pieces discovered in and around the Brecks. Actual size. *1, 2: © Norfolk County Council; 3, 5, 6, 7: © Suffolk County Council; 4: © National Museums Liverpool.*

5. Ousden   6. Near Bury St Edmunds   7. Mildenhall

triangular or pyramidal, having flat, hollow or concave bases. Many gaming pieces are relatively simple and resemble lead thimbles, but are increasingly being recognised and reported by metal-detectorists and recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme. Plain examples have been found at Dunton,[185] Runcton Holme,[186] Haughley,[187] and numerous other locations (Figure 31.1–3). More elaborate examples, adorned with small pellets or prongs, perhaps representing a crown, have been found at Sporle with Palgrave,[188] Ousden,[189] and near Bury St Edmunds,[190] amongst other places (Figure 31.4–6). A particularly fine lead example with cross-hatched decoration was found at Mildenhall (Figure 31.7).[191] As was discussed in Chapter 6, such gaming pieces are part of the material signature of the Great Army, with large numbers of pieces discovered at Torksey, and their discovery throughout East Anglia could be a similar indication of their presence.[192] Likewise, they may reflect the later phase of Scandinavian settlement. One late example was discovered at Grimes Graves, near Weeting, in 1919. This comprised a square, flattened piece of jet with geometric markings and is thought to be an early chess piece, possibly a castle or rook, and is likely to date from the 11th or 12th centuries, placing it right at the end of the period considered here.[193]

Thor's Hammer Pendants

Another material indicator of the presence of the Vikings is the discovery of Thor's hammer pendants, a growing number of which have been recovered from East Anglia, almost all as the result of metal-detecting. These amulets were made from lead, silver and even gold, and represented the mythical double-headed hammer *Mjölnir*, which belonged to Thor, the Norse god of thunder. They were worn around the neck as pendants, offering protection to the wearer, and are found widely distributed in areas of Viking settlement from England, Iceland and Normandy to Scandinavia and Russia, in both male and female graves, in hoards and at settlement sites.

An example of a lead hammer was excavated from St Nicholas Street in Thetford in 1990 and is thought to have been a model used to create cast examples, given the softness of the metal and the fineness of its suspension loop.[194] However, most of the other known East Anglian hammers are stray finds, many of them from the Breckland area. More elaborate examples include an electrum hammer with punch-stamp

[185] PAS NMS-898168: https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/962629

[186] PAS NMS-F698C3: https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/984587

[187] PAS SF-0C5D76: https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/613972

[188] PAS LVPL-6ADBB7: https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/1072209

[189] PAS SF-B9765E: https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/630709

[190] PAS SF-735931: https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/494560

[191] PAS SF-DA4DC6: https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/567231

[192] Hadley and Richards 2016; Hadley and Richards 2021.

[193] NCM 1945.103: https://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/collections/collections-object-page?id=NWHCM+%3a+1945.103

[194] Andrews and Penn 1999; Pestell 2013, 240–1.

1. Attleborough   2. Gayton   3. West Norfolk   4. Holt
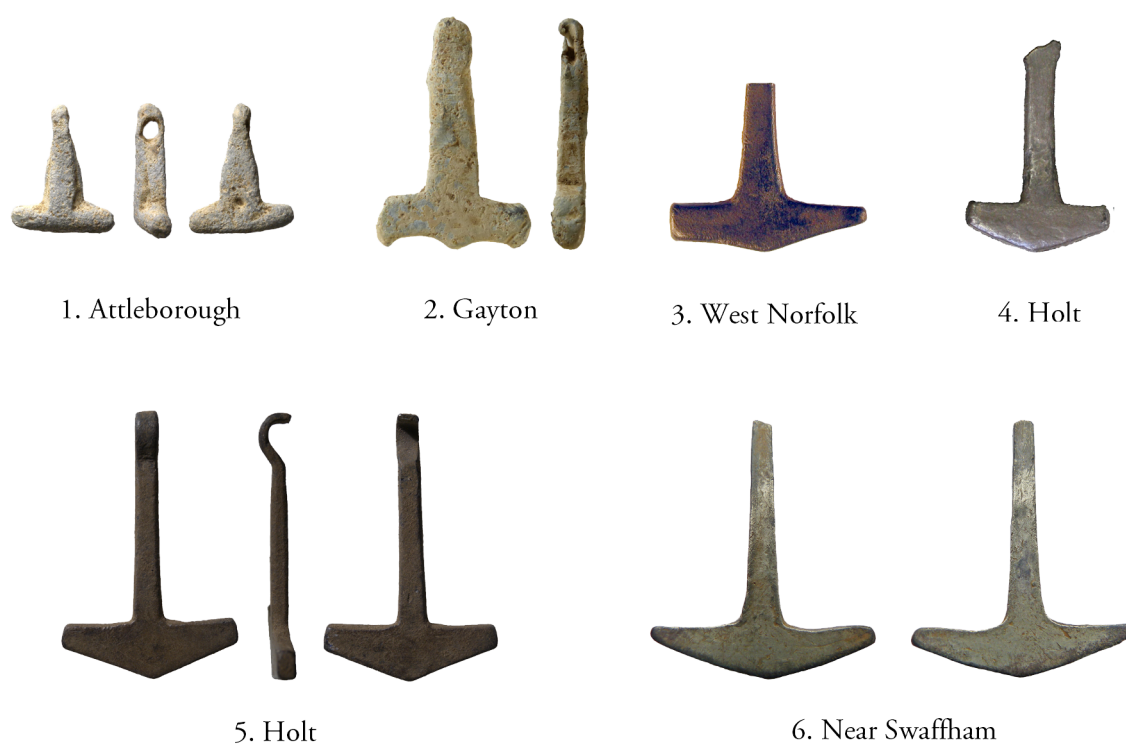
5. Holt   6. Near Swaffham

Figure 32: Examples of Thor's hammer pendants discovered in the Brecks and further afield. Actual size. *1, 2, 4, 5, 6: © Norfolk County Council; 3: © The British Museum.*

decoration discovered at South Lopham (electrum is a naturally occurring alloy of gold and silver) and a particularly fine silver hammer decorated within inlaid gold wire found at Great Witchingham.[195] Most hammers are made from silver or lead and are relatively plain. Two very simple lead examples have been discovered in Attleborough in the same field as a number of other Viking objects, suggestive of an early settlement (Figure 32.1).[196] Another crude lead example was discovered at Gayton (Figure 32.2).[197] A broken silver hammer was found in west Norfolk,[198] with two more-complete silver examples found near Holt,[199] and another near Swaffham (Figure 32.3–6).[200]

Thor's hammer pendants are another artefact type associated with the presence of the Great Army, but they could equally belong to the initial phases of the Viking settlement of the region.[201] Such objects would have fallen out of favour as Viking settlers integrated into the local population and converted to Christianity, and it is likely that the vast majority date from the late 9th and early 10th centuries.

[195] South Lopham: Norfolk HER 31413; Great Witchingham: Norfolk HER 40668 and NWHCM 2005.721.

[196] PAS NMS-A388C5 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/544500

[197] PAS NMS-88D515 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/766746

[198] PAS NMS-A9E816 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/239152

[199] PAS NMS-35FDF0 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/205272 and PAS NMS-8E57D8 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/630322

[200] PAS NMS-BEBB91 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/942504

[201] Pestell 2013, 240–1; Hadley and Richards 2016; 2021.

Ingots and Weights

Reference has already been made to the fact that the Viking economy was bullion-based, with hacked-up pieces of precious metal used in transactions, requiring scales and a standardised system of weights and measures (see p. 68).[202] Many examples of such artefacts have been excavated from Thetford and other locations associated with the Great Army, but, as with Thor's hammer pendants, a growing number of examples has been discovered across Breckland, and East Anglia more widely, both as stray losses recorded by metal-detectorists and occasionally in buried hoards.

Examples include a gold ingot found in Scole,[203] and silver ingots discovered at Old Buckenham,[204] Smallburgh,[205] and Langham (Figure 33.1–4).[206] A silver ring which had been used as hacksilver was discovered at Narborough,[207] and another was discovered at Holt (Figure 33.5–6).[208] Copper-alloy ingots have also been discovered, among them examples found in the Thetford area,[209] at Warham,[210] Shouldham Thorpe,[211] West Acre,[212] Dereham,[213] and Bracon Ash (Figure 33.7–12).[214] One of the finest examples of a silver ingot was found near Downham Market in 2013 and was decorated with stamped triangles and figures of eight (Figure 33.13).[215]

Weights for use with balancing scales are a distinctive class of artefact, which again are indicative of a Viking presence. Many of these weights are formed from a lead body of standardised weight, into which were often set decorative items or coins to give the objects visual interest. Analyses have demonstrated that the standard unit of weight used by the Vikings equated to approximately 24g–26g, and weights representing fractions or multiples of this value are common discoveries, most often as stray finds, but examples are occasionally excavated together in sets.

Many such weights are plain, but a particularly fine example of a Viking-period weight was discovered at Risby in 2015, a settlement which has a typically Viking place-name (Figure 34.1).[216] The weight comprised a square lead body, into the top

[202] Kruse 1988; Pestell 2013; Pestell 2019; Kershaw 2014.

[203] PAS BM-893E52 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/1057045

[204] PAS NMS-23FFF2 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/205145

[205] PAS NMS-71CD27 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/935736

[206] PAS NMS-118FE5 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/892826

[207] PAS BM-0A374D https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/1057936

[208] PAS NMS-3CB76E https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/638355

[209] PAS NMS-14FB08 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/1075768

[210] PAS NMS-515018 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/405494

[211] PAS NMS-5661BF https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/993156

[212] PAS NMS-2BDEB7 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/1016016

[213] PAS NMS-194528 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/1061058

[214] PAS NMS-D1F1E4 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/1021474

[215] PAS NMS-730A92 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/550738

[216] PAS SF-20A507 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/783214

Figure 33: Examples of ingots discovered in the Brecks and further afield. Actual size.
1, 4: © The Portable Antiquities Scheme; 2, 5: © The British Museum; 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12,13: © Norfolk County Council.
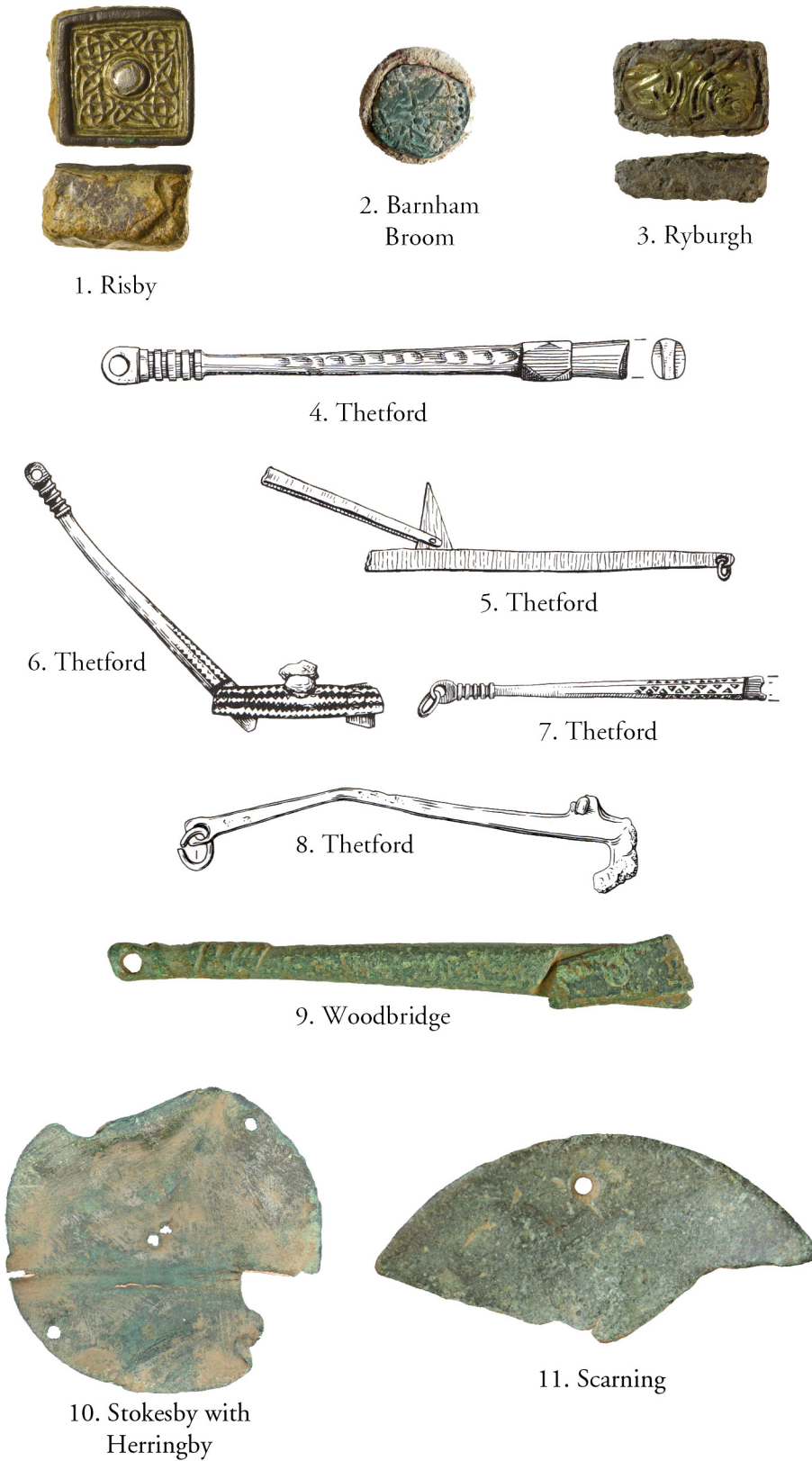
1. Scole   2. Old Buckenham   3. Smallburgh   4. Langham

5. Narborough

6. Holt

7. Thetford

8. Warham

9. Shouldham Thorpe

10. West Acre

11. Dereham   12. Bracon Ash   13. Downham Market

1. Risby

2. Barnham Broom

3. Ryburgh

4. Thetford

5. Thetford

6. Thetford

7. Thetford

8. Thetford

9. Woodbridge

10. Stokesby with Herringby

11. Scarning

Figure 34: Examples of weights, balance arms and scale-pans discovered in the Brecks and further afield. Actual size.
1, 9: © Suffolk County Council;
2, 3, 10, 11: © Norfolk County Council;
4, 5, 6, 7: Drawn by Sue White © Norfolk County Council (Rogerson and Dallas 1984, fig. 113);
8: Drawn by Sue White © Norfolk County Council (Dallas 1993, fig. 116).

Figure 35: Borre-style silver pendant found in the north Norfolk village of Little Snoring in the late 1990s. Shown one-and-a-half times actual size. © *Trustees of the British Museum*

of which was set a decorative silver-guilt mount, with the whole piece weighing 48g, making it double the standard unit of weight. A similar example, weighing half the standard unit and incorporating a Northumbrian *styca* coin into its mass was discovered in Barnham Broom (Figure 34.2).[217] Another half-weight example was discovered at Ryburgh and incorporated a decorative silver plate into its upper face (Figure 34.3).[218]

The balance arms of several sets of scales were excavated from sites across Thetford between 1964–66 and another example was excavated from St Nicholas Street in 1990 (Figure 34.4–8).[219] Pieces of broken balance arms and scale mechanisms have been discovered by metal-detectorists, including a particularly fine example found near Woodbridge in 2018 (Figure 34.9).[220] Pieces of circular scale pans have also been discovered at Stokesby with Herringby (both Viking place-names)[221] and from Scarning (Figure 34.11–12).[222] Of course, such balances continued to be used throughout the medieval period, but early examples of this kind, especially those found in association with other artefacts, are strongly indicative of the Viking bullion economy.

Brooches

Perhaps the most voluminous category of material indicative of Viking settlement and integration within the region is personal jewellery, and brooches in particular. These objects fall into two main categories, the first being objects brought from Scandinavia, presumably as part of the initial conquest and settlement, and the second being objects made in East Anglia in a Scandinavian style. These were presumably made to cater for an emerging market among those who wished to associate themselves with Scandinavian fashion. Again, the vast majority of these artefacts are stray-finds discovered by metal-detectorists and reported to the local authorities and the Portable Antiquities Scheme.[223] An online database of the known examples of Scandinavian and Anglo-Scandinavian brooches dating from AD 850–1050, which includes photographs and drawings, was published in 2012.[224]

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[217] PAS NMS-0D47D0 : https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/571863

[218] PAS NMS-7F2C31 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/819006

[219] Dallas 1993, 96 and 98; Andrews and Penn 1999, 39–40.

[220] PAS SF-514FCE https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/1027976

[221] PAS NMS-D40EC8 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/98533

[222] PAS NMS-B608B1 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/145535

[223] Cattermole 2005; Kershaw 2013; Pestell 2013.

[224] https://doi.org/10.5284/1012709

Figure 36 (left): Elaborately decorated trefoil brooch discovered at Lakenheath Warren. Actual size.
© *Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology*

Figure 37 (right): A fragment of a similar brooch found in Congham in 2014. Actual size.
PAS NMS-412F04
© *Norfolk County Council*

One of the most well-known examples of objects brought from Scandinavia is an exquisite silver pendant found in the north Norfolk village of Little Snoring in the late 1990s (Figure 35).[225] The pendant is in what is known as the Borre style of Scandinavian artwork and features the design of an intertwining beast inside a frame decorated with animal heads. Another typically Scandinavian artefact is the trefoil brooch. In 1911, the *Victoria County History* for Suffolk recorded the discovery of an elaborately decorated example discovered at Lakenheath Warren, which is now held by the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge (Figure 36).[226] A very similar example was discovered at Colton in the early 1990s and is now in the Norfolk Museums Service collections.[227] A fragment of a similar brooch was found in Congham in 2014 (Figure 37).[228] During the course of the Late Anglo-Saxon period, the design of these brooches became more stylised and the character of the pins and catch-plates found on their reverse indicates that these later versions began to be produced locally, in a hybrid style, perhaps using a genuinely Scandinavian brooch to create the mould.

A similar process of local designs being derived from Scandinavian originals is evidenced by lozenge-shaped brooches, which comprised an equal-armed cross, each end of which terminated in a stylised animal head. A particularly fine gold example of the type, again in the Borre style, was discovered near Attleborough in 2013 (Figure 38).[229] More simplified versions in copper-alloy are known throughout Scandinavia and England, indicating that the fashion was widely adopted in cheaper metals. A large number of East Anglian examples of such brooches have a characteristically unbalanced shape and are thought to

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[225] British Museum: 1999,1001.1 https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1999-1001-1

[226] Page 1911, 352; MAA 1902.35: https://collections.maa.cam.ac.uk/objects/428946

[227] NWHCM 1993.201: https://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/collections/collections-object-page?id=NWHCM+%3a+1993.201

[228] PAS NMS-412F04 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/657277

[229] PAS NMS-73CD11 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/550759

Figure 38: A golden lozenge-shaped brooch in the Borre style discovered near Attleborough in 2013. Shown one-and-a-half times actual size. *PAS NMS-73CD11 © Norfolk County Council*

have been manufactured by a local craftworker using a single mould. Examples include brooches discovered at Wood Dalling[230] and Cantley (Figure 39.1–2).[231]

These same tendencies for the production of Scandinavian-inspired designs in local workshops are evidenced by two additional classes of Late Anglo-Saxon disc brooch, examples of which have been discovered across East Anglia: Borre-style knotwork brooches and brooches featuring the design of a backwards-turning beast.[232] The former comprise circular brooches of copper alloy, on the front of which was depicted a group of knotted tendrils surrounding a central circle. Some 250 examples of these brooches have been discovered, primarily concentrated in East Anglia, and typical examples were discovered at Stow Bedon[233] and Great Ellingham (Figure 40.1–2).[234] The knotwork design has late 9th- or early 10th-century Danish origins and was presumably brought to East Anglia by the members of the Great Army and the settlers who followed in their wake. However, after this first contact, the design appears to have become very popular and brooches began to be produced locally to such an extent that the design represents nearly half of all the known examples of Scandinavian and Anglo-Scandinavian brooches discovered in England.[235]

The second design comprised an almost identical brooch decorated with a four-legged animal with paw-like toes and a spiky tail. The animal always faces the left of the scene, turning backwards so that its mane follows the edge of the brooch and its head sits above its back. Its eye is invariably formed by a large ring-and-dot decoration. These brooches are again largely confined to East Anglia and about 40% of the Anglo-Scandinavian brooches discovered in Norfolk belong to this type.[236] Examples

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[230] PAS NMS-4F7CDB https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/856224a

[231] PAS NMS-5D9A12 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/1058618

[232] Cattermole 2005; Kershaw 2013; Pestell 2013.

[233] PAS HAMP-8E5535 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/1030767

[234] PAS NMS-C65692 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/1000316

[235] Cattermole 2005; Kershaw 2013; Pestell 2013.

[236] Cattermole 2005; Kershaw 2013; Pestell 2013.

Figure 39: Copper-alloy lozenge-shaped brooches in the Borre style discovered Wood Dalling and Cantley.
Actual size.
1. PAS NMS-4F7CDB
© Norfolk County Council
2. PAS NMS-5D9A12
© Norfolk County Council

1. Wood Dalling   2. Cantley

Figure 40: Copper-alloy disc brooches with Borre-style knotowrk discovered at Stow Bedon and Great Ellingham.
Actual size.
1. PAS HAMP-8E5535
© Hampshire Cultural Trust
2. PAS NMS-C65692
© Norfolk County Council

1. Stow Bedon   2. Great Ellingham

1. Caston   2. Caston

Figure 41: Copper-alloy disc brooches featuring backward-facing beasts discovered at Caston, Martham and Narborough.
Actual size.
1. PAS NMS-C1511B
© Norfolk County Council
2. PAS HAMP-A49DF5
© Hampshire Cultural Trust
3. PAS NMS-942630
© Norfolk County Council
4. PAS NMS-BCFB26
© Norfolk County Council

3. Martham   4. Narborough

range from the very crisp to the heavily worn and include two examples discovered in Caston, the first in 2018[237] and the second in 2020 (Figure 41.1–2).[238] Unlike the knotwork brooches, these backwards-turning beasts appear to be an East Anglian design and several groups can be linked together by the distinctive characteristics of the moulds within which they were cast. One such group includes brooches found at Martham in 2005[239] and Narborough in 2007,[240] which share a mould with at least seven other brooches so far discovered in Norfolk (Figure 41.3–4).

In attempting to interpret and explain the widespread popularity of these two brooch types, it has been suggested that they may have been appropriated by different ethnic factions within East Anglia, with the Danish-inspired knotwork design being favoured by those of Scandinavian origin or descent, while the more indigenous backward-turning beast motif might have been favoured by the existing Anglo-Saxon population. The similarity of production methods and dimensions of both types of brooch probably indicate that they were made by the same craftworkers, catering for both markets. Alternatively, it has been suggested that, given these similarities and their overlapping distributions, the two different designs were used together or interchangeably and were effectively part of the same expression of an East Anglian cultural identity. In this scenario, they perhaps represented a response to the reconquest of the Danelaw under the kings of Wessex during the early decades of the 10th century, when the East Anglian kingdom was effectively subsumed into the newly forged kingdom of England. Given the nature of the evidence, it is impossible to say which, if either, of these interpretations is correct, but these brooches give us a vivid insight into the character and extent of settlement and integration of the Viking people and their way of life into East Anglian culture during the 9th and 10th centuries.[241]

Burials

In addition to the rich array of place-names and artefacts discussed above, which afford us a tantalising insight into the nature of Viking East Anglia, there is a small number of burials recorded from the Breckland area which are thought to represent the final resting places of first-generation Vikings themselves. The most famous example was discovered at Santon in the 19th century and another was excavated at Middle Harling in the 1980s, while several isolated burials from Thetford may also belong to this group.

Santon

Santon is a small hamlet lying on the northern side of the Little Ouse, which forms part of the boundary between Norfolk and Suffolk. Santon itself is in Norfolk, whereas to the south of the river, in Suffolk, is the later settlement of Santon Downham. As discussed above, the *–tun* place-name element name suggests that Santon was an outlying settlement, linked to a larger place, and located on especially sandy terrain. Famously, the great sandstorms of the mid-1600s engulfed properties in nearby Santon Downham to a depth of some 2m. The settlement

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[237] PAS NMS-C1511B https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/940695

[238] PAS HAMP-A49DF5 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/1030901

[239] PAS NMS-942630 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/99659

[240] PAS NMS-BCFB26 https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/219921

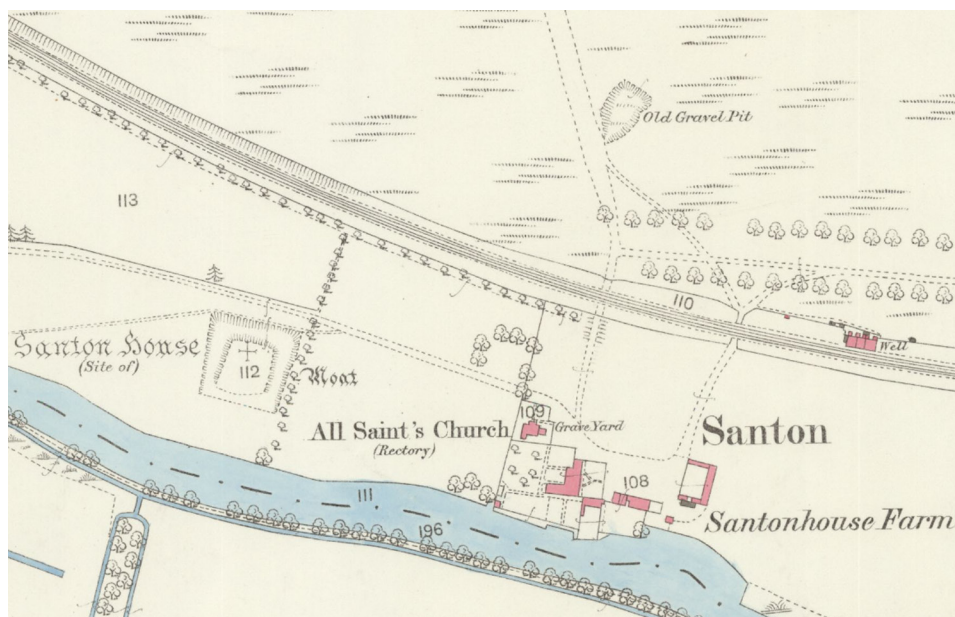[241] Cattermole 2005; Kershaw 2013; Pestell 2013.

Figure 42: Extract from the First Edition of the Ordnance Survey 1-mile-to-25-inch map showing the Santon area. *National Library of Scotland*

at Santon seems to have been a small and reasonably prosperous place at the time of the Domesday survey in AD 1086. Today, there is little left of the village bar some earthworks delineating a square moat, believed to have surrounded Santon House, and nearby All Saints' church, which was largely rebuilt in the 17th century and again by the Victorians. Nestled around the church are the remnants of this depopulated village, including Santonhouse Farm (Figure 42).

In 1870, an account of the discovery of a Viking burial at Santon was published in the *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute for Archaeology and History* by Canon William Greenwell, a local antiquary primarily known for his report on the Grimes Graves flint mines. His report described how 'during the course of the year 1867, some men employed in raising gravel at Santon, in the county of Norfolk, found a skeleton, laid at full length, and about two feet below the surface. … With the skeleton were found an iron sword, and two bronze brooches.'[242] The location where the burial was found was described as being 'on the slope of the hill to the north of the church, and at no great distance from the river Ouse.' In all likelihood, the burial was discovered during the excavation of the feature marked 'Old Gravel Pit', which was clearly depicted on the First Edition of the Ordnance Survey 1-mile-to-25-inch map published in 1884 and can be seen at the top of Figure 42.

The two brooches from the grave are of exceptional quality and design and both are now on display in the British Museum, and they were loaned to the Ancient House Museum for its 2022–23 exhibition (Figure 43).[243] The brooches are a matching pair in the 'tortoise shell' style, which was the most common type of brooch of the period in Norway and Sweden and was produced during the 10th century.[244] Each brooch

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[242] Greenwell 1870, 208.

[243] British Museum: 1883,0727.1 https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1883-0727-1 and 1888, 0103.1 https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1888-0103-1

[244] Evison 1969, 335.

Figure 43: The pair of brooches from the Santon burial. © *Trustees of the British Museum*

is 11.6 cm long, 7.9 cm wide and 3.6 cm high. They are made of cast copper-alloy, which has been gilded giving them a golden appearance, and each has five openwork bosses, some of which are still linked with twisted silver wires to four additional smaller bosses, only two of which survive. The upper 'shell' featured more openwork, with an interlaced design and twisted silver wires, which would have wound around the edge of the upper dome and around the base of the lower dome. Around the base of each brooch are eight panels displaying yet more interlace and possible animal or serpent heads. The bases indicate a method of casting which involved cloth being placed on top of the mould and both show the impression of textiles. A pair of lugs which would have carried a pin and catch-plate are also attached to the back of each brooch. In a 1907 report to the Society of Antiquaries, an expert on this type of brooch stated that 'the under-plate was only used during the tenth century, when its gilded upper surface served to throw up the design of the domed open-work body of the brooch.' [245] In 1969, Vera Evison concluded that 'the burial must have been that of a Scandinavian couple settled in the Danelaw kingdom of East Anglia' and that these oval brooches are the 'most numerous and widespread' type of the Viking period, and were usually worn in pairs on a 'hangerock', an apron-like tunic, with lengths of beads hanging in between.[246]

The sword from the grave has received less attention in the reports than the brooches, but is described as an early Scandinavian form, with a curved guard and a blade just over 30 inches long, but having lost its point (Figure 44).[247] The sword is an example of a type which was produced in England between about AD 875 and AD 950. The date is established by means of associated finds in burials in Norway and confirmed by means of the ornamentation in what is known as the 'Trewiddle

[245] Smith 1907, 8.

[246] Evison 1969, 342.

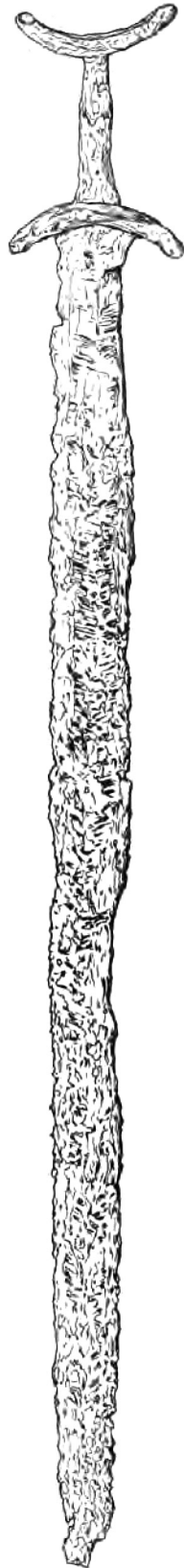[247] British Museum: 1883,0726.1 https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1883-0726-1

Figure 44: The iron sword from the Santon burial, photographed by Hallam Ashley. *© Norfolk Museums Service*

Figure 45: The iron sword found in Thetford in 1953. One-quarter actual size. (Rogerson and Dallas 1984, fig. 145). *Drawing by Sue White © Norfolk County Council*

Figure 46: Modern reproduction of a pattern-welded sword blade, based upon that from the Sutton Hoo ship burial. *© Trustees of the British Museum*

style', which also narrows down the place of its production to England. The blade attached to this type of hilt is usually pattern-welded and the Santon blade is no exception.[248] A very similar style of sword was found accompanying an isolated burial discovered to the west of Bury Road in the southern part of Thetford in 1953.[249] This, too, had a pattern-welded blade, which denotes some wealth and status, and the sword is now deposited in Norwich Castle Museum (Figure 45).

Pattern welding is a manufacturing technique in which rods of iron are twisted together and flattened before they are joined to make the sword blade, creating a distinctive pattern along the surface of the blade (Figure 46).[250] Something of the character of this finish is captured in the various poetic descriptions of swords given in *Beowulf*, which include the phrases: *brogden-mæl*, 'woven-blade' or 'blade with a woven pattern';[251] *wunden-mæl*, 'wound-blade' or 'blade with a winding pattern';[252] and *wæg-sweord*, 'wave-sword' or 'sword with a wavy pattern'.[253] *Beowulf* also gives us a sense of how swords were regarded by the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings. In the poem, the importance of a sword to a warrior is such that Beowulf's sword has a name – *Nægling* – and it was a fine pattern-welded sword, with which he won many battles. The poem describes many of the beasts and un-human foes that the Scandinavian peoples believed in and struggled against. Swords accompanied their dead warriors and rulers at their glorious end, which in Beowulf's case comprised a magnificent funeral pyre, over which was raised a barrow filled with treasure.[254] Weapons of such quality were highly prized and often handed down from father to son, although it has been suggested that swords had greater importance as gifts, given by a lord to a retainer. In *Beowulf*, another sword – *Hrunting* – is lent by a lower-ranked warrior to Beowulf and it has been noted that this sword receives more attention than Beowulf's own sword, probably because the gesture represented a significant reversal of the usual order.[255]

Returning to the Santon grave, the dating of the brooches and the sword suggest that the burial was made in the early part of the 10th century. The character of the brooches in particular suggests that they were imported from Scandinavian rather than produced locally, while the sword is apparently of English origin. Taken together, this seems to suggest that the burial is of someone of significant Scandinavian heritage, likely to be a first-generation Viking settler in the Thetford area.

Perhaps the most striking detail about the Santon burial is the fact that the original account of the excavation describes all of the artefacts being buried with a single skeleton. This account has often been assumed to be incorrect, on the basis that brooches have traditionally been associated with female graves and swords with male

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[248] Evison 1969, 333.

[249] Rogerson and Dallas 1984, p. 53 and fig. 145.

[250] Birch 2013.

[251] Heaney 2001, lines 1616 and 1667.

[252] Heaney 2001, line 1521.

[253] Heaney 2001, line 1489a.

[254] Heaney 2001.

[255] Brunning 2013.

graves, giving rise to many publications describing Santon as the site of a double burial of a Scandinavian man and woman.[256] However, the original description should not be dismissed so easily, and it is perfectly possible that a man buried at Santon with a sword might also have been buried with oval brooches. Opening the online tour of the British Museum's *Vikings* exhibition in 2014, the museum's director Neil Macgregor drew attention to his favourite item: a small statue of the god Odin. Found at Lejre in Denmark, this 2cm silver figure shows Odin on his throne, with his pair of ravens one on each shoulder. Macgregor suggests that whilst Odin is the god of war who oversees raiding and looting, in this statue he is also wearing a dress to show 'his feminine side: magic, sorcery, prophecy'.[257] Conversely, the Santon burial could be that of an armed female, and in recent years a much greater emphasis has been placed on the often-overlooked role which women played in the Viking army and society more widely. Most notably, the remains of what was thought to be a male Viking warrior found at Birka in Sweden have been re-examined using DNA and bone analysis and identified as female.[258] It is possible that the Santon burial might be another example, but in the absence of any surviving bones which could be analysed, the subject of how many individuals were buried as Santon and who they were remains an open question.

Middle Harling

In 1980, a local metal-detectorist began to find coins scattered over a small area immediately to the north of the site of St Andrew's church at Middle Harling, on the eastern edge of the Brecks.[259] He carefully recorded the site of each coin and reported them the Norfolk Archaeological Unit. This led to the conclusion that the 50 or so dispersed coins must have been part of a hoard buried for safe-keeping during the Anglo-Saxon period. The hoard is now known as the Beonna hoard, because all of the coins were of the 8th-century minor Anglo-Saxon king, Beonna. In 1983, the Norfolk Archaeological Unit conducted a careful excavation of the site in order to establish the context of the hoard. The fieldwork revealed domestic occupation spanning the Middle Anglo-Saxon to medieval periods, as well as earlier prehistoric features, and concluded that the hoard was likely to have been buried at the periphery of the settlement area. Also identified was an isolated burial, located outside the boundary of the adjacent churchyard, and buried with a variety of grave-goods indicative of its having a late 9th- or 10th-century origin (Figure 47).

The skeletal remains were in poor condition, but were identified as male, despite the skull fragments subsequently being lost on the London Underground whilst en-route for examination at the British Museum! A copper-alloy buckle with an iron plate was found on the left hip, next to which was a group of three knives and a whetstone with which they could be sharpened. Two of these knives were 'pivoting knives', which rotated around a central rivet so that either a long or a short blade was exposed while the other was inside the handle, and are known to date from the

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[256] e.g. Evison 1969.

[257] https://www.britishmuseum.org/vikings-live
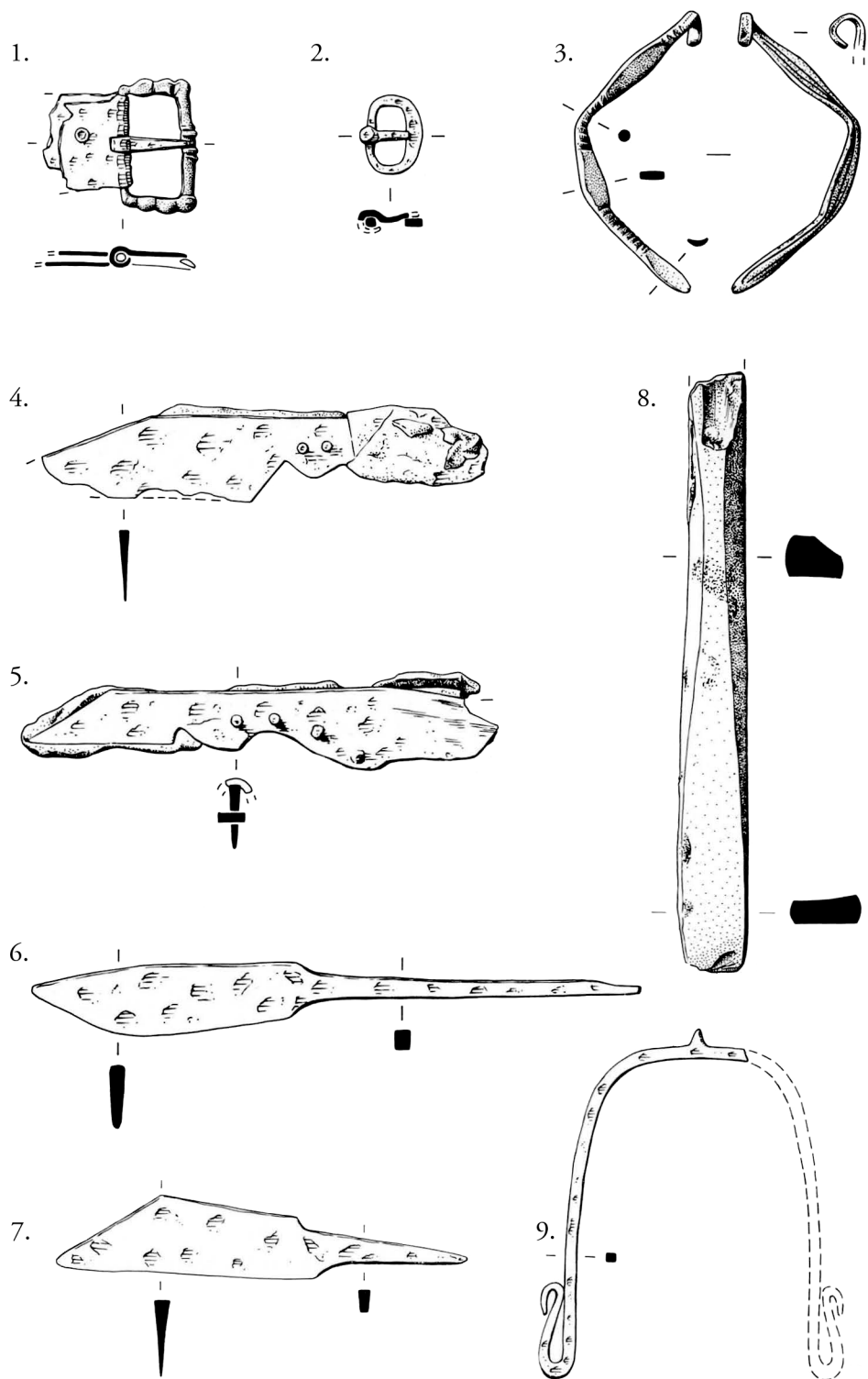
[258] Hedenstierna-Jonson 2017.

[259] Rogerson 1995.

Figure 47: The grave-goods discovered in the Middle Harling burial.
1: Copper-alloy buckle.
2: Iron buckle.
3: Copper-alloy ear scoop.
4–7: Iron knives.
8: Whetstone.
9: Iron spur.
All half actual size, except no. 3 at actual size.
(Rogerson 1995, fig. 76).
Drawings by Sue White
© Norfolk County Council.

9th and 10th centuries. The third knife in the group and a further knife discovered at the left elbow were of a more conventional form, but still of Scandinavian character. A small iron buckle was found by the left knee, perhaps indicating a sheath for the knives which was buckled to the wearer's left leg or a high-cut boot, and an iron spur was found next to the left foot. A decorated copper-alloy ear scoop, a rare object from the period, was also found within the grave-fill. The burial's right hip and thigh had been destroyed by a later post-hole dug through the grave, so it was not possible to identify any corresponding equipment on that side.[260]

As with the Santon burial, the combination of the location, date and character of the Middle Harling burial and the grave-goods it contained indicate that this was in all likelihood the burial of a pagan Viking, presumed to belong to the first generation of Viking settlers. In the case of Middle Harling, it would seem that this was an individual who had not yet converted to Christianity and was therefore not buried within the neighbouring churchyard. This is also suggested by the close proximity of the Santon burial to the neighbouring All Saints' church. The discovery of a single male burial with a pattern-welded sword within the southern part of the Late Anglo-Saxon town of Thetford, an area which contained numerous Late Anglo-Saxon churches, suggests that this was the case here, too.

It is notable that the burials described here, together with a possible example from Saffron Walden,[261] are effectively the only burials so far discovered in East Anglia which have been confidently identified as being of Viking origin. It may be the case that other such burials have gone unnoticed or were simply not buried with grave-goods which would single them out. As was discussed in the earlier sections of this report, there is a lot of historical and archaeological evidence to suggest that the incoming Vikings were quickly assimilated into the existing East Anglian population and adopted many of its customs, including converting to Christianity (as Guthram had done as part of his agreement with King Alfred) and adopting churchyard burial. In such cases, without the widescale genetic testing of churchyard burials, those skeletons belonging to Scandinavian settlers would not be readily identifiable.[262] Overall, the picture presented by the burial evidence is one of a relatively peaceful integration into the existing East Anglian population, certainly in the late 9th and early 10th centuries, but as is explored more fully in the next section, this peaceful period was not to last.

[260] Rogerson 1995, 24–5, 79–80.

[261] Evison 1969.

[262] Margaryan *et al.* 2020.

9: Battles in the Brecks

Following a period of relative peace and stability during the 10th century, Viking raids on the English coast began again in earnest during the 980s, following the ascent of Æthelred II (r. AD 978–1013 and 1014–16) to the English throne. Æthelred was later nicknamed 'The Unready', meaning 'poorly advised' rather than 'ill prepared', which was a pun, as his name meant 'well advised'. Having begun his reign by assassinating his half-brother, Æthelred's kingship was subsequently dogged by Viking raids, which became more intensive during the 980s and early 990s.[263]

Context

The historical background for the Breckland battles is provided by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year AD 991, which records that 'Here Ipswich was raided. Very soon after that, ealdorman Byrhtnoth was killed at Maldon'.[264] These events were elaborated upon and immortalised in the Anglo-Saxon poem known as the *Battle of Maldon*.[265] The only original manuscript of this poem was destroyed in the same fire which nearly claimed the *Beowulf* manuscript, but copies of the poem indicate that the battle took place beside the River Blackwater in Essex and the verses record how Earl Byrhtnoth, Ealdorman of Essex, and his thegns led the Anglo-Saxon army against a party of Vikings who had landed on Northey Island. The Vikings were forced to fight across a causeway to the mainland and were easily held back by the Anglo-Saxons, but the Viking leader requested his troops be allowed to cross to fight a formal battle and Byrhtnoth granted his request. Once ashore, the battle commenced, only for an Anglo-Saxon called Godric to flee the field riding Byrhtnoth's horse. Godric was followed by his brothers Godwine and Godwig. Many other Anglo-Saxons, seeing the horse, thought that Byrhtnoth was fleeing and did likewise. The battle ended in defeat for the Anglo-Saxons and Byrhtnoth was killed on the battlefield, with his golden sword in his hand. Commentators disagree as to whether the poem casts Byrhtnoth as a leader undone by his virtuous belief in fair play or whether he was victim to pride, which famously comes before a fall.

Following the defeat at Maldon, King Æthelred paid a tribute of £10,000 to the Danish king to ensure peace, but the raiding continued during the late 990s and into the new millennium.[266] In AD 1002, Æthelred ordered the mass killing of all

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[263] Keynes 2009.

[264] Swanton 2000, 126–7.

[265] Foard 2003; Grybauskas 2023.

[266] Swanton 2000, 126–7.

Figure 48: Sweyn Forkbeard, as depicted on the Thetford town sign. © *Oliver Bone*

of the Danes in England, an event known as the St Brice's Day massacre, which the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* states occurred because 'it was made known to the king that they wanted to ensnare his life – and afterwards all his councillors – and have his kingdom afterwards'.[267] Reputedly, the sister of the Danish king Sweyn Forkbeard, Gunhilde, was among the victims of the massacre and this is seen to have led directly to Sweyn's attack on western England the following year.

The Battle of Thetford

In AD 1004, Sweyn's army also attacked East Anglia and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that: 'Sweyn came with his fleet to Norwich and completely raided and burned down the town.'[268] The *Chronicle* entry continues with an account of the actions of Ulfcytel Snillingr, a man described in various sources as the leader of the East Anglians, who together with his councillors 'decided that it would be better that they buy peace from the enemy before they did too much harm in the country, because they came unexpectedly and he had not had time in which he could gather his army.'[269] However, the Vikings did not keep their

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[267] Swanton 2000, 133–5.

[268] Swanton 2000, 135.

[269] Swanton 2000, 135.

side of the bargain and 'under cover of the truce which should have stood between them, the raiding-army stole up from the ships and turned their course to Thetford.'[270] When Ulfcytel realised what was happening, he sent orders that the Vikings' ships should be destroyed, although for reasons which are not disclosed these orders were not carried out. At the same time, Ulfcytel set about gathering his army as quickly as he could. The figure of Ulfcytel personifies the Anglo-Scandinavian culture which had become established in East Anglia by the early 11th century, where the dividing lines between Anglo-Saxons and Vikings were increasingly blurred. Despite being the leader of East Anglia, Ulfcytel's name is of Scandinavian origin and many of those who fought for him against the Vikings would have been descended from earlier raiders.

The text of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that 'the raiding-army then came to Thetford, within three weeks of their earlier raiding Norwich, and were inside there one night, and raided and burned down the town.'[271] However, the following morning, when the army wanted to return to its ships, they were met by Ulfcytel and his army and battle was joined. The location of the battle is not given, although it is presumed to have been in the Thetford area. We are told that 'a great slaughter fell on either side' and that 'the chief men of the East Anglian people were killed', before the raiding-army managed to escape in their undamaged ships. Ulfcytel survived the battle and two manuscript versions of the *Chronicle* record the Vikings admitting that 'they never had met with harder hand-play in England than Ulfcytel gave them', while another has them state that had the East Anglian army been up to full strength, the raiding-army would never have got back to their ships.[272] After the battle, the Vikings subsequently left England without causing further disruption, although they were soon to return demanding even bigger payments. Sweyn Forkbeard's attack on the town is commemorated on the Thetford town sign, which depicts him on one side and Thomas Paine on the other (Figure 48).

The Battle of Ringmere

In AD 1009, a Viking army led by Thorkell the Tall landed at Sandwich in Kent and marched towards Canterbury, where they were paid £3,000 in silver by the people of Kent. The army then turned its attention to London and attempted to take the city several times, but were met with heavy resistance and eventually abandoned their efforts. In May AD 1010, Thorkell's army met an Anglo-Saxon army again gathered under Ulfcytel Snillingr on heathland near Thetford in an engagement which has come to be known as the Battle of Ringmere. In many ways, this battle marked a continuation of the earlier, inconclusive battle of AD 1004, but in the case of Ringmere, there are numerous sources which tell different sides of the story. There are also at least two major contenders for the location of the battle, both of them lying in the Breckland area: at East Wretham Heath in Norfolk and Rymer Point in Suffolk (Figure 49). The search for Ringmere's location has preoccupied local antiquarians since the 19th century, but with the development of clearer methodologies for the study of battlefields there is now the opportunity to understand better the location of the battle, although the challenge of securely locating an Anglo-Saxon battlefield is not one to be underestimated!

[270] Swanton 2000, 135.

[271] Swanton 2000, 135.

[272] Swanton 2000, 135–6.

Figure 49: Modern aerial photograph showing the locations of Ringmere and Rymer Point in relation to Thetford.
Microsoft product screen shot reprinted with permission from Microsoft Corporation

Primary sources for battles of this period are limited, with the main source being the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and Ringmere is no exception. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year AD 1010 states that: 'After Easter in this year the aforesaid raiding-army came to East Anglia, and turned up at Ipswich, and went straight to where they had heard that Ulfcytel was with his army.'[273] In a lengthy entry, the *Chronicle* goes on to record how the East Angles soon fled the battlefield, leaving only the Cambridgeshire *fyrd* (militia) to

[273] Swanton 2000, 140.

stand firm against the raiding army. The East Anglian flight was apparently started by a man named Thurkytel Myrehead, and it is recorded that during the course of the battle Æthelstan, the king's son-in-law, was killed, along with 'Oswy, and his son, and Wulfric, son of Leofwin, and Edwy, brother of Efy, and many other good thanes, and a multitude of the people'. The account of the battle concludes that 'the Danes remained masters of the field of slaughter'.[274] After the battle was done, the raiding army acquired horses and took possession of East Anglia, spending the subsequent three months plundering and burning the region, after which they proceeded further into the fenland, slaying men and cattle as they went. Thetford was burned again, as it had been in the conflict of AD 1004, and Cambridge also met the same fate.[275]

Significantly, the *Chronicle* does not give the location of the battle, but the first recorded direct reference to Ringmere can be attributed to the early 12th-century historian Florence of Worcester (d. 1118), whose *Chronicle* has an entry for AD 1010 which states that: 'After Easter (9th April) they sailed to East Anglia, and landing near Ipswich marched to a place called Ringmere, where they knew that Ulfcytel the ealdorman had posted his troops.'[276] Ringmere was also named by the chronicler Symeon of Durham, the relevant sections of whose *History of the Kings* was derived from the content of the former.[277] Where did the insertion of Ringmere come from, given that the entry is practically identical to that in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*? One theory is that Florence turned to Viking primary written sources, specifically the work of two poets who were composing sagas as part of the court of King Cnut (AD 990–1035). They were Sighvat the Scald and Ottar the Swart, who both referred to Ringmere in poems written about Olaf II Haraldsson's time in England. Olaf later became King of Norway (AD 1015–28) and after his death became St Olaf. From the poem *Olafsdrapa* by Sighvat we have the following extract:

> *'Moreover once more Olaf brought about the meeting of swords a seventh time in Ulfcetel's land, as I relate. All the race of Ella stood arrayed at Ringmere Heath. Men fell in battle, when Harold's heir stirred up strife.*[278]

Likewise, from the poem *Head-Ransom* by Ottar gives us:

> *'I learn that your host, Prince, far from the ships, piled high up a heavy heap of slain. Ringmere Heath was reddened with blood. The people of the land, ere all was done, fell to the earth before you in the din of swords, and many a band of English fled terrified away.*[279]

Where was the Battle of Ringmere fought? To try and answer this we return to both East Wretham Heath and Rymer Point. Although these locations are in different counties, lying in Norfolk and Suffolk respectively, they are only ten miles apart. Of

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[274] Swanton 2000, 140.

[275] Swanton 2000, 140.

[276] Forester 1854, 162.

[277] Arnold 1885.
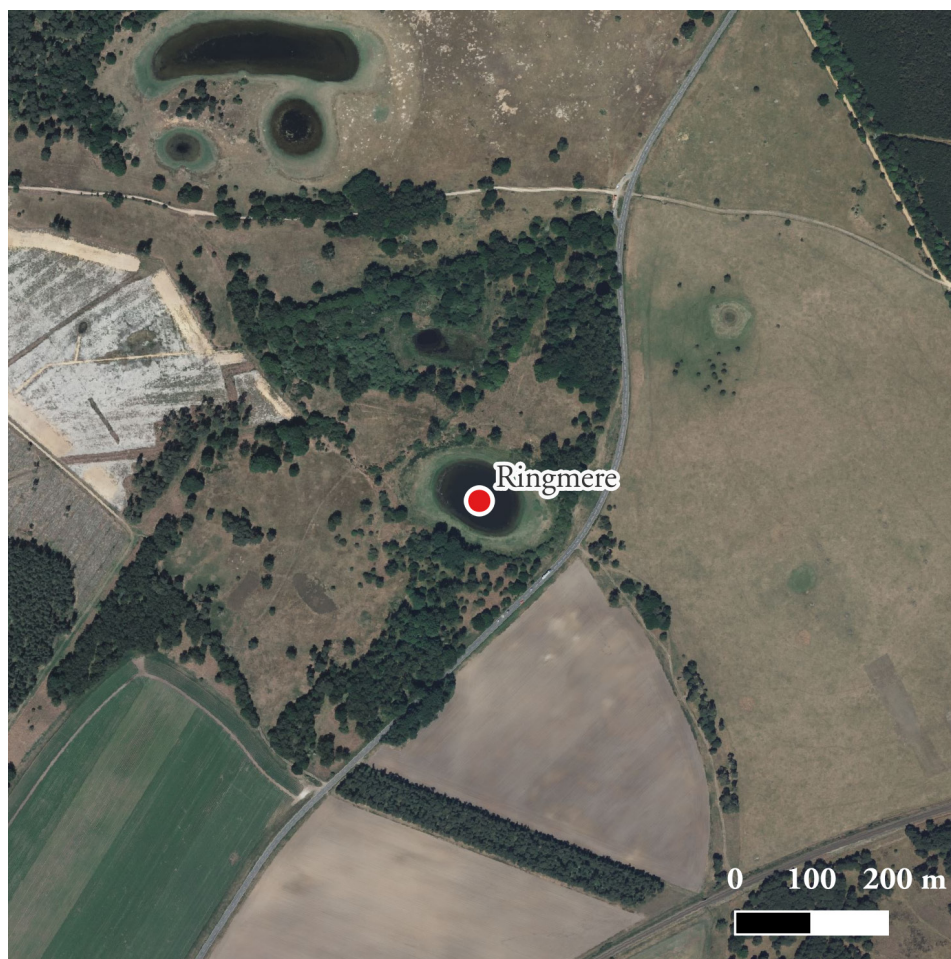
[278] Whitelock 1979, 330.

[279] Whitelock 1979, 330.

Figure 50: Modern aerial photograph showing Ringmere on East Wretham Heath and the circular earthworks to its north-east. *Microsoft product screen shot reprinted with permission from Microsoft Corporation*

the two sites, it is the Ringmere of East Wretham Heath, now owned by the Norfolk Wildlife Trust, that captures most attention as the potential location of the battle (Figure 50). Arguably, this is as much to do with the Ordnance Survey naming the visually striking circular pond as 'Ringmere' and the well-preserved and atmospheric surrounding heathland landscape. However, a convincing case can also be made for Rymer Point being the historic Ringmere, especially when the place-name evidence is examined.

Considering the relative closeness of the two locations there are some factors which do not help to tip the balance in favour of one location over the other. For example, the two ancient trackways which ran through the area – the Icknield Way and the Peddars Way – may both have been significant in respect of the movements of the Anglo-Saxon and Viking armies. The Icknield Way, which passes through Cambridgeshire into Suffolk and Norfolk, would have been the logical route for the Cambridgeshire *fyrd* to use to meet up with their East Anglian counterparts. The Peddars Way was part of a Roman road from Colchester to Brancaster, which runs to the west of Ipswich where the raiding-army are said to have landed. Its route passes about a mile to the east of the Ringmere on East Wretham Heath. Major Gilbert Kilner of the Suffolk Regiment,

a keen historian and archaeologist, believed there was formerly a link-road between the Peddars and Icknield Way which passed Rymer Point.[280]

As mentioned above, the Ringmere on East Wretham Heath is one of the celebrated Breckland meres, a geographical feature comprising a circular body of water within in a larger pit (Figure 50). The mere has a fluctuating water level fed by rising groundwater, which sometimes dries up completely. However, the Ringmere place-name evidence for East Wretham Heath can only be traced back to the late 19th century, specifically its first appearance on the First Edition Ordnance Survey map (surveyed in 1882 and published in 1886). By way of other evidence, just to the east of the mere there is a circular double-banked earthwork enclosure measuring 32m in diameter. In 1934, this enclosure was surveyed and excavated, but results were inconclusive as to its purpose and date.[281] Speculation about its function could include use as a fortification and the Vikings are known to have constructed circular fortifications, but the size of this feature is considerably smaller in comparison. Alternatively, the earthworks may be of prehistoric origin and there is a tradition of such prehistoric features being associated with mustering points for the Anglo-Saxon *fyrd*, such as was the case at East Kennet in Wiltshire.[282] It may be that the mere and earthworks were significant markers in the landscape and a good point for the *fyrds* of the East Anglia and Cambridgeshire to meet.

Although not as promising a site at first glance, Rymer Point becomes more persuasive once the history of its place-name is explored. The Rymer element can be demonstrated to be a corruption of an earlier use of Ringmere, which is included in several early documentary sources. Unlike East Wretham's Ringmere, 13th-century manuscript sources reference both a 'Grangie de Ringmere' and 'Rynggleondbrom' being associated with Rymer, probably in the present-day parish of Euston.[283] This evidential thread continues in a document recording the extent of the lands of Edmund Comyn, which was made in December 1320 and is filed among the records of his *Inquisition Post Mortem* in the Public Record Office.[284] It shows that Edmund Comyn was the owner of the manor of Fakenham Aspis and that the Abbot of Tilty was one of his free tenants, holding a tenement called 'Ryngem' graunge' at a rent of 6s 8d *per annum*. Intriguingly, straddling the modern parishes of Euston, Fakenham Magna and Honington (and also marked on the most current edition of the Ordnance Survey Map) is the working farmstead of Rymer Farm (Figure 51). Are the origins of this farm the grange referred to above? If so, the modern landscape of Rymer Point has a tangible link to the name Ringmere going back to the medieval period.

Rymer Point was itself seventy acres of extra-parochial land that is now part of the parish of Fakenham Magna. Interestingly, the Point is at the centre of nine long, narrow, wedge-shaped parishes – Barnham, Euston, Fakenham Magma, Honington, Troston, Great Livermere, Little Livermere, Ingham and Culford. These parishes were by AD

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[280] Stevenson 1896; Holland 1966.

[281] Clarke 1937.

[282] Williams 2015.

[283] Suffolk Record Office Ipswich, HD1538/2 Vol. 2/fol. 49.

[284] PRO C134/66, no. 15, item 9.

Figure 51: Modern aerial photograph showing Rymer Point and the field-boundaries and roads which converge upon it. *Microsoft product screen shot reprinted with permission from Microsoft Corporation*

1100 part of the Blackbourne Hundred. Hundreds were subdivisions of land and were an integral part of the Anglo-Saxon legal administrative system. The seats of the hundred courts were important meeting places where formal and ceremonial functions took place and were often located at significant landscape features. In the landscape of the 11th-century Brecks, it is possible that the fluctuating meres would have numbered among such features. At Rymer Farm the evidence of one such ancient mere can still be seen, albeit in a much shrunken form, and only 1km away is the larger Broadmere and also Troston Mount. The latter is a Bronze Age bowl-barrow situated at one of the highest points in the landscape and has been identified as a potential meeting place for the Blackbourne Hundred. With the distance between Rymer Point and Troston Mount being negligible, it is reasonable to suggest that in the dry Breckland landscape supplies of freshwater, such as the meres, would have been integral features to the convergence of the nine parishes and a functioning hundred court.

There are several examples of Anglo-Saxon armies stationing themselves at legal or administrative centres, perhaps as a form of challenge, and in purely practical terms using a known meeting-place would seem a sensible way to muster the combined *fyrds* of Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire to counter the Viking threat.[285] For

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[285] Halsall 2003.

logistical and strategic reasons, control of the significant freshwater supplies and high ground of the area would be crucial to mounting a defence against the threat of a Viking army, which, as the *Chronicle* tells us, was coming from Ipswich.

While it is possible to formulate an argument for Rymer Point as a mustering point of the *fyrds*, there is little or no evidence to help to identify where the actual action of the battle itself took place. We are left with rather tentative nuggets, such as the tithe maps for the parishes of Honington and Great Fakenham, both dating from 1839, on which is depicted a field, split between both parishes, called the 'Slaughterings'. This is recored as Plot 24 on the Honington tithe map[286] and Plot 19 on the Great Fakenham tithe map.[287] We can unfortunately only speculate as to whether this field-name has its origins rooted in the battle, but it is certainly a possibility that the conflict was being remembered when the field was named.

Ultimately, the site of the Battle of Ringmere remains elusive, although a much more compelling case can be made for its having been fought at or near to Rymer Point rather than on East Wretham Heath. It is possible that future fieldwork will be able to shed more light on this issue. More thorough research into the rich array of archaeological artefacts recorded in the Norfolk and Suffolk Historic Environment Records and those identified by the Portable Antiquities Scheme may prove illuminating, while systematic metal-detecting surveys have been employed successfully in identifying the sites of later battlefields, most famously for the Battle of Bosworth Field.[288] In the case of Ringmere, any unstratified objects likely to be related to the battle, such as arrowheads, would mostly be made from iron and chances of their survival would be dependent on soil conditions and the agricultural regime of the Breckland landscape. There are methods to mitigate against some of these issues, such as were employed in the archaeological investigation of the site of the Battle of Hastings directed by Glenn Foard, where metal-detecting was undertaken on long trenches that were stripped every 10cm, removing modern rubbish and reaching depths where older, potentially battlefield-related finds may have been located. Encouragingly, as discussed above, systematic metal-detecting surveys have been crucial in finding objects related to the Viking Great Army's winter camp at Torksey[289] and the Anglo-Saxon royal settlement at Rendlesham.[290] There is no doubt that further research into the site of the Battle of Ringmere would serve to highlight the importance of the Breckland area during the Late Anglo-Saxon period and would also help to promote the region's importance in the nationally significant story of the Viking invasions.

The Final Battle

As fate would have it, the two main protagonists of the Battle of Ringmere, Thorkell the Tall and Ulfcytel Snillingr, were destined to meet once more in battle, this time in one of the most little-known, but decisive battles in English history. Following the

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[286] The National Archives IR 30/33/222: https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C2306865

[287] The National Archives IR 30/33/153: https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C2306796

[288] Foard and Curry 2013.

[289] Hadley and Richards 2016 and 2021.

[290] Scull *et al*. 2016.

victory at Ringmere, Thorkell's army continued to harry the English and in September AD 1011 they returned to Canterbury and occupied the city, taking hostages including the Archbishop of Canterbury. The following year, the Archbishop was killed by Thorkell's men and the army ceased its raiding after receiving large payments from the English. A disillusioned Thorkell defected with many of his loyal followers and began to fight for King Æthelred instead, under whose banner they fought against the army of Sweyn Forkbeard and his son Cnut in AD 1013.

Sweyn's new invasion had been launched with the intention of taking the English crown and by the end of AD 1013 he had conquered the country, driving Æthelred into exile in Normandy. On Christmas Day, Sweyn was declared King of England.[291] However, his kingship was literally short-lived – Sweyn died suddenly in February AD 1014, with some later accounts attributing his death to a visitation from the ghost of the martyred St Edmund, who apparently struck him with a lance.[292] Following Sweyn's death, some of his followers proclaimed Cnut the new king, while the English nobility called for the reinstatement of Æthelred, who returned from exile and subsequently managed to drive Cnut out of England.[293]

Cnut and his army returned to England in AD 1016, where Æthelred's son Edmund Ironside had revolted against his father and established himself in the area of the Danelaw. During the ensuing months, Cnut conquered most of England in a series of violent battles fought at locations from the Humber to Cornwall, and laid siege to the walled city of London. Edmund rejoined his father to help defend London and, following Æthelred's death, Edmund became king and waged war against Cnut. Their campaign culminated in the decisive Battle of Assandun, which was fought on 18th October AD 1016, and resulted in a definitive victory for Cnut's army. Following his victory, Cnut agreed to divide the country with Edmund, so that Edmund would retain Wessex, but Edmund died shortly afterwards and Cnut became the undisputed King of England.

Occurring almost fifty years to the day before the more famous Battle of Hastings, the Battle of Assandun was one of the most significant events in English history and marked the point at which the Viking conquest of England was achieved, some 200 years after the first raids occurred. Yet, despite this, the battle remains relatively unknown and we cannot even be certain of its location. It has been suggested that the battle took place at Ashdon, near Saffron Walden in north Essex, although a more convincing case can be made for the battle having been fought at Ashington, near Rochford in south-east Essex.

The defender of Thetford, Ulfcytel Snillingr made one final appearance in the East Anglian story, when he fought for Edmund Ironside against the Vikings at Assandun. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that ultimately he was killed in the battle, along with many of the other 'chief men of the nation'.[294] Although not mentioned by the *Chronicle*, one Scandinavian source identifies Ulfcytel's killer as Erik of Hlathir, one of Cnut's earls, while another Scandinavian source suggests that he was killed by Thorkell

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[291] Swanton 2000, 143–5.

[292] Young 2018, 87–8.

[293] Keynes 2009.

[294] Swanton 2000, 146–53.

the Tall, his former adversary at the Battle of Ringmere. This same source records that Thorkell subsequently married Ulfcytel's widow, Wulfhild, the daughter of King Æthelred, and was instrumental in arranging Cnut's marriage to Æthelred's widowed queen, Emma.[295]

Following the death of Edmund Ironside, Cnut made Thorkell the Earl of East Anglia and, between AD 1017 and AD 1021, he was one of the most powerful men in England, probably serving as regent during Cnut's time in Denmark. In AD 1020, Thorkell was present with Cnut at the dedication of a new church constructed on the site of the Battle of Assandun, which was indented as a memorial to those who fell in the battle, and in the same year he also supported Bishop Ælwine of Elmham's replacement of clerics with monks at Bury St Edmunds.[296] This act, the foundation of the monastic house which was to dominate the religious and political landscape of East Anglia throughout the medieval period, effectively brought the story of the Vikings in East Anglia full circle, from Edmund's martyrdom at the hands of a pagan raiding-army in the 9th-century to the foundation by the newly installed Viking King of England of a monastery to house the revered relics of an East Anglian saint.

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[295] Abels 2004b.

[296] Abels 2004a; James 1895; Young 2016; Young 2018; Hoggett 2018.

Conclusion

Drawing on historical sources, archaeological sites, artefacts and place-names, the River Raiders project was developed with the aim of exploring the history and impact of the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings in the Brecks. As is apparent from the rich array of sites and artefacts described and illustrated in these pages, the archaeological record for Anglo-Saxon East Anglia – and the Breckland area in particular – is exceptional in both its quality and its quantity. This richness is enhanced further by the numerous campaigns of formal and informal archaeological fieldwork which have examined and documented this heritage during the last few centuries. In particular, the numerous artefacts recovered and reported by metal-detectorists during the last fifty years have transformed our understanding of the region in this period. New discoveries continue to be made on a regular basis and the thrill and mystery of what might turn up next is what drives us on.

Attempting to do justice to the full range of sites and stories arising from the 5th to the 11th centuries was always going to be an ambitious undertaking, even before the setbacks posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting restrictions placed on social contact. Despite this, the River Raiders project's volunteers have immersed themselves fully in this most important and formative of periods. This report, which has grown significantly in the telling, is a testament to their efforts. Of course, they could easily have filled these pages many times over – and still had material to spare – but the themes explored here, and the numerous sites and artefacts examined, give a flavour of why the six centuries of the Anglo-Saxon period are among the most important in the history of the Brecks. The guide to further reading and resources which follows provides pointers to those who wish to find out even more.

Above all, this report highlights just how important the fen edge and the river corridors of the Breckland area were to early invaders and settlers during the Anglo-Saxon migrations from the 5th century and to the later Viking traders and raiders from the 9th century onwards. To the people crossing the North Sea in wooden boats, the Wash and the river estuaries which emptied into it were gateways to the resource-rich river valleys which were the key to existence in an otherwise dry and inhospitable landscape. We opened this report by stating that we are often told that the most important date in English history is 1066, the date of the Battle of Hastings. However, as this project has shown, rather than marking the beginning of the Norman kingship in England, the Battle of Hastings really marked the end of a 600-year period during which many aspects of East Anglian society and landscape which we recognise today were formed.

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Find Out More

There are a lot of resources available for those who want to find out more about the wide range of subjects discussed in this report.

River Raiders Online

As part of the River Raiders project, a series of three online seminars was delivered by Dr Richard Hoggett in 2020 and 2021. These seminars were recorded and have been uploaded to the BFER project YouTube channel, where they can be viewed: https://www.youtube.com/c/brecksfenedgeriverslp

Seminar 1: Anglo-Saxon and Viking East Anglia

This seminar presented an overview of the historical and archaeological evidence for the Viking presence in East Anglia, with an emphasis on the role which Thetford played as a Viking camp in AD 869.

Seminar 2: Reading the Anglo-Saxon and Viking Landscape

This seminar looked at the evidence for the settlement and integration of the Vikings into East Anglia during the latter part of the Anglo-Saxon period. This includes the evidence offered by the region's place-names and the material evidence for the adoption of Viking art styles.

Seminar 3: Archaeological Archives Online

This seminar presented an overview of the many and varied sources of archaeological and historical information which can be accessed online and used to inform research projects.

Other Online Lectures

Vikings: Live from the British Museum

In 2014, the British Museum hosted an exhibition about the Vikings, which included a tour of the exhibition which was broadcast live and has since been made available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NuL0Q0tsid4

Rendlesham Revealed

This series of online lectures is presented by the archaeologists who have been investigating the Anglo-Saxon royal complex at Rendlesham in south-east Suffolk: https://heritage.suffolk.gov.uk/rendleshamrevealed

From Rise to Ruins
This linked series of online lectures was recorded by the Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Partnership in 2020–21 as part of the millennial celebrations of the foundation of the abbey in AD 1020: https://www.abbeyofstedmund.org.uk/rise-to-ruins/

BBC Radio Programmes
The BBC have produced a number of radio programmes which are relevant to many of the themes explored in this report and which can be listened to online.

The Essay: Anglo-Saxon Portraits
This series presents 30 15-minute audio portraits of Anglo-Saxon men and women from the era between AD 550 and AD 1066, including the East Anglian King Rædwald, Bede, Alfred, Cnut and Æthelred the Unready: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01nf9g4

This Union
Ian Hislop tells the story of four great Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms of England – East Anglia, Northumbria, Mercia, Wessex – looking for traces of their legacy today: https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/series/m000ydlc

Word of Mouth
In this series, Michael Rosen explores different aspects of the English language, including the influence of the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings on its development.

- Anglo-Saxons: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0007ww2

- Vikings: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00074j4

In Our Time
In this series, Melvyn Bragg and his guests discuss the history of ideas, including topics drawn from philosophy, science, history, religion and culture.

- The Venerable Bede: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p004y26h

- The Volga Vikings: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00vrx8g

- Alfred and the Battle of Edington: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p003k9gm

- The Danelaw: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0003jp7

- Beowulf: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0542xt7

- The Norse Gods: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p004y243

- Icelandic Sagas: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01s8qx9

- Athelstan: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00sv7wd

- Cnut: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001kpty

- Domesday Book: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b040llvb

Online Databases and Archives

Norfolk Historic Environment Record
The database of all the known archaeological sites in Norfolk, comprising records of archaeological fieldwork, monuments and findspots. A version of the HER is available via the Norfolk Heritage Explorer website: https://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/

Suffolk Historic Environment Record
The equivalent database for Suffolk, a version of the HER is available via the Suffolk Heritage Explorer website: http://heritage.suffolk.gov.uk/

Portable Antiquities Scheme
A national database containing details of archaeological objects discovered by members of the public, primarily metal-detectorists, which have subsequently been reported to and recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme: https://finds.org.uk/

East Anglian Archaeology
The East Anglian Archaeology monograph series began in 1975 and has since published over 200 volumes about the region's archaeological sites, including many of the cemeteries and settlements discussed here. Details of the series and digital copies of the out-of-print volumes can be found at: https://eaareports.org.uk

Norfolk Archaeology
The journal *Norfolk Archaeology* has been published annually by the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society since 1847, during which time it has contained numerous articles and notes on a wide range of archaeological discoveries across the county. The series has recently been digitised and can be found online at: https://www.nnas.info/publications/

Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History
The Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History has published its *Proceedings* annually since 1853, and digital copies of every article published can be found at: https://www.suffolkinstitute.org.uk/publications

The Anglo-Saxon and Viking Thetford Trail

Thetford occupies a strategic location in the East Anglian landscape, being situated at the confluence of two rivers – the Thet and the Little Ouse – which connect the town to the Fenland waterways and enabled the development of regional, national and international trade networks. Early Anglo-Saxon settlements in the Thetford area clustered along the river valley, with excavations at the western end of the town revealing evidence for occupation dating from the 5th to 7th centuries. Middle Anglo-Saxon artefacts and features have been found in the same area and extending further to the east, indicating that the occupation continued to be focused on the southern bank of the river from the 7th to 9th centuries.

The Viking Great Army stayed in the town during the winter of AD 869–70, following the murder of King Edmund that November. The Late Anglo-Saxon town of Thetford, which was also established on the southern bank of the river, owes its origins, later expansion and economic success to the presence of the Great Army, which acted as a catalyst to the development of the town and ensured its prosperity. During this time, Thetford became the centre of an important pottery industry, but was also noted for metalworking and textile production.

The Danish occupation of Thetford ended in AD 917, when East Anglia was reconquered by the West Saxons under Edward the Elder, after which time Thetford continued to be an important Anglo-Scandinavian town. The town was attacked and burned by the Vikings in the early 11th century, although it recovered and became the seat of the East Anglian bishopric in AD 1071. By the time that the bishopric transferred to Norwich in AD 1094, the town was in decline and much of the settlement on the southern side of the river was abandoned. The medieval town was focused on the northern bank of the river.

This circular walk will help you to explore Anglo-Saxon and Viking Thetford for yourself. The walk is about 4.5 km and should take between 1 and 2 hours to complete. The route and the numbered locations referred to in the text are illustrated on the map overleaf. The route is based on a tour originally developed by Norfolk County Council in 2001, but we are now able to draw upon important new discoveries made during the last 20 years.

The walk begins and ends at the **Ancient House Museum** ①. This 500-year-old timber-framed building has been a museum since 1924 and houses extensive collections of archaeological and historical material relating to Thetford's rich past, including many Anglo-Saxon and Viking artefacts.

From the museum, head downhill along Whitehart Street and into Bridge Street. On the right you will see signs for **Minstergate** ②, the name of which preserves the Anglo-Saxon word 'mynster', meaning 'monastery' or 'mother church' and the Viking word 'gata', meaning 'street'.

The **Town Bridge** ③, constructed in 1829, marks the location of the main Anglo-Saxon river crossing, from which many of the town's streets radiate. The waterfront would have been a very busy place during the Anglo-Saxon and Viking periods, with extensive quaysides and wharves, traces of which have been revealed during the recent redevelopment of the area.

Having crossed the bridge, turn right to follow the path along the southern side of the river. To the south of the path, **Thetford Grammar School** ④ occupies the site of the church of St Mary the Great, the ruins of which can be seen among the school buildings. This church was the largest in the Anglo-Saxon and Viking town and was the seat of the East Anglian bishopric between AD 1071 and AD 1094.

Going under the road bridge, follow the path up to the left and walk south along London Road to the traffic lights on the junction with the A143 Brandon Road. Turn right to follow the A143 and cross to the southern side of the road when it is safe to do so. The grassed area on your right, to the north of the road, is the site of the **Priory of the Canons of the Holy Sepulchre** ⑤, founded in the 12th century, and the ruins of the priory church still stand.

After 400m, turn south into St John's Way. The open ground to the north of the junction between the road and the river contains the archaeological remains of the Early and Middle Anglo-Saxon settlement phases, as well the **Late Anglo-Saxon town** ⑥. As you follow St John's Way, you will see an area of woodland to the north of the road, which contains the earthworks of the 12th-century **Red Castle** ⑦, which in turn overlie the Anglo-Saxon settlement phases.

Cutting southwards through the housing estate brings you to a surviving stretch of the **defensive earthwork bank** ⑧ which looped from the Red Castle to the Iron Age hillfort at the eastern end of the town, creating a large D-shaped enclosure centred on the Town Bridge. Excavations have shown that the town ditch was 13m wide and 3.5m deep and the pavement here **cuts through the bank** ⑨.

Continuing through the housing estate brings you to London Road. Turn left and walk eastwards along the road. As you do so, you will feel the ground rise and fall as the road passes over the line of the bank and ditch. All of the open ground of the playing fields to the north of the road contains archaeological remains of the **Late Anglo-Saxon town** ⑩, including the site of the church of St John and its churchyard, which was mentioned in the Domesday Book in AD 1086.

When you reach the junction with Icknield Way, cross to the southern side of the road to view the **Thetford town sign** ⑪. One side of the sign depicts Sweyn Forkbeard, the Viking who led the raid against Thetford in AD 1004, and the other depicts Thomas Paine, known as the 'Father of the American Revolution'.

Walk south along Icknield Way, which follows the line of the Anglo-Saxon town bank, and follow the road around to the left. Much of the **land to the east and north of the Icknield Way** ⑫ was excavated in the 1960s and the 1980s, revealing a large, scattered settlement, which included dense pockets of occupation, together with areas of open ground and paddocks. Late Anglo-Saxon Thetford was a town of loosely arranged timber buildings, often set back from gravelled streets and each situated within their own yard, which often included cesspits, rubbish-pits and wells.

Follow Icknield Way to its junction with Bury Road and cross when it is safe to do so. Cut through the footpath into Watermill Gardens and continue onto Mill Lane. Watermill Gardens stand to the south of the former site of **St Etheldreda's church and churchyard** ⑬, likely to be a Late Anglo-Saxon foundation. The area was subject to a large archaeological excavation before the modern houses were built, which revealed more evidence of the Anglo-Saxon town.

Turn right onto Mill Lane and follow the road until it reaches **Nuns' Bridges** ⑭. These three bridges date from the late 18th century and cross the rivers Thet and Little Ouse, which meet in Thetford. They are named for the nearby nunnery of St George, which stood to their south. The defensive bank and ditch which surrounded the Anglo-Saxon town also met the river here, although no traces survive above ground. This was the site of one of the three Anglo-Saxon river crossings.

Cross the rivers and turn right to follow Ford Street and Castle Lane towards the earthworks of **Thetford Castle** ⑮. Follow the footpath on the left to cut through the site of the castle, the mound of which was constructed in the late 11th century and is said to be the tallest earthwork in Norfolk. The castle overlies more Anglo-Saxon defensive ditches which surrounded the town on the northern side of the river. It also reused several large **Iron Age earthworks** ⑯ which had been constructed to guard the ford.

Follow the path northwards out of Castle Park and turn left to follow Castle Street westwards towards the town centre. The **Market Place** ⑰ was the heart of the medieval town and replaced an earlier market located to the south of the castle. The current Guildhall was constructed in 1902, but stands on the site of at least one earlier medieval hall.

To the west of the Market Place is the **church of St Cuthbert** ⑱. Cuthbert was a Northumbrian saint and dedications to him are rare in southern England. There is another church of St Cuthbert in Norwich, which is also situated next to the Anglo-Scandinavian market place. It is likely that the church and its dedication both date from the Late Anglo-Saxon occupation of the town.

As you cross the road towards the pedestrianised King Street, look south down the hill towards **Thetford Library** ⑲. Archaeological excavations behind the library in 1997 revealed part of the Late Anglo-Saxon defensive ditch, which enclosed the town on the northern bank of the river and gave the street pattern its distinctive circular shape.
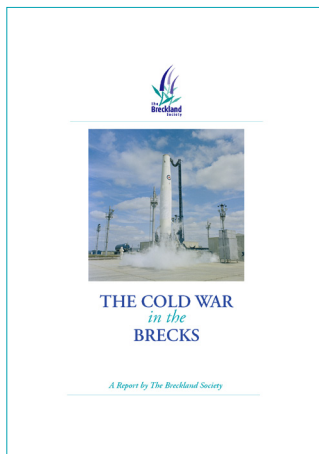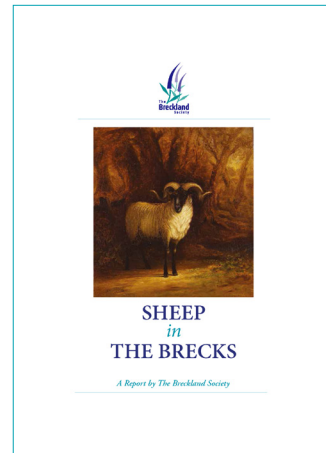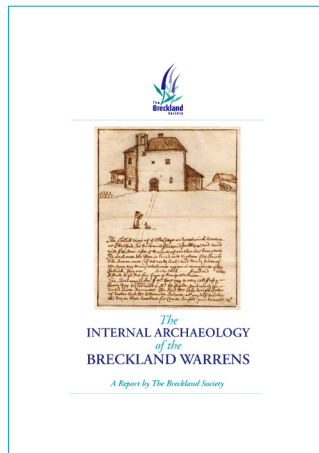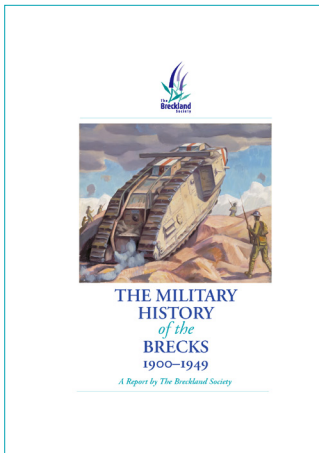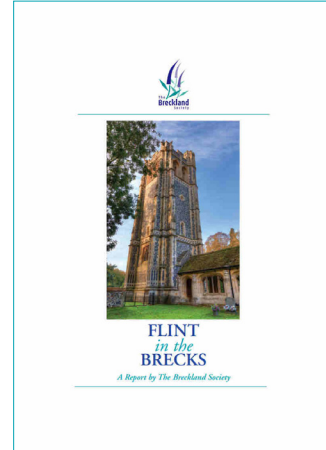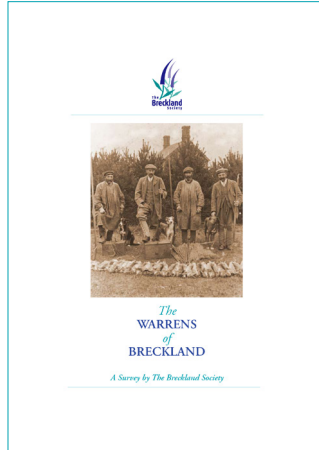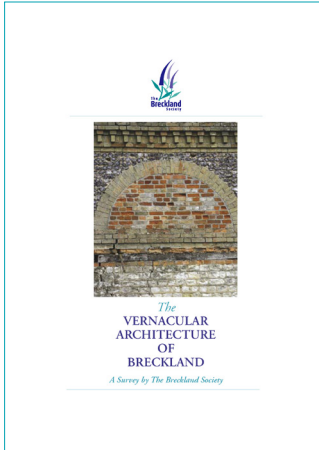
Follow King Street downhill until you arrive back at Bridge Street, with **St Peter's church** ⑳ on your right. St Peter's was mentioned by name in the Domesday Book and was an established feature of the centre of the Late Anglo-Saxon town on the northern side of the river. Turn right in front the church and return to the Ancient House Museum to complete your tour of the town.

Other Reports in the Series

This report is the latest in a series produced by the Breckland Society and its volunteers during the last 15 years. PDFs of these reports can be downloaded from the Breckland Society website:

http://www.brecsoc.org.uk/

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Acknowledgements

The Breckland Society was set up in 2003 to encourage interest and research into the natural, built and social heritage of the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks. It is a membership organisation which works to help protect the area and offers a range of activities to those who wish to see the special qualities of this unique part of England protected and enhanced.

The Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership Scheme is a £3.5m five-year scheme focused on celebrating and conserving the landscape and heritage of the Brecks' key freshwater habitats and river valleys. Supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the BFER scheme is supported by more than sixty local, regional and national groups focussed on delivering a wider range of projects between 2020 and 2025.

This report has been researched and written by volunteers working with the Breckland Society on the River Raiders project. Using a wide range of archaeological and historical sources, they explore the history and impact of the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings in the Brecks.
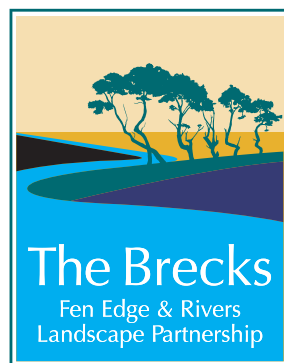
The Breckland Society
www.brecsoc.org.uk