



Rendlesham rediscovered

Bede, a monk at the Northumbrian monastery of Jarrow/Wearmouth in the early eighth century, wrote *A History of the English Church & People*. There he noted that Swithelm, king of the East Saxons, was baptised at the royal settlement of Rendlesham. This must have happened between AD655 and 664.

Swithelm, the son of Seaxbald, was successor to Sigeberht. He was baptised by Cedd in East Anglia [*Orientalium Anglorum*], in the royal village [*vicus regius*] called Rendlesham [*Rendlaesham*], that is, the residence of Rendil. King Aethelwold of East Anglia, the brother of King Anna, the previous king of the East Angles, was his sponsor. (Colgrave & Mynors' translation from the Latin)

Today Rendlesham is a modern village set apart from its isolated medieval church close to the river Deben in Suffolk. Thanks to Bede's mention there has long been interest in the site as a possible Anglo-Saxon royal settlement – interest which intensified after 1939, with the discovery of the Sutton Hoo ship burial four miles (6.5km) down river to the south-west.

Cremation burials were found there in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, but fieldwork in the 1940s, by Basil

East Anglian kings of the early seventh century AD were buried with splendour at the famous Sutton Hoo cemetery. But where did they, and their families and supporters, live? Faye Minter, Jude Plouviez and Chris Scull think they have found the answer to this old question

Brown and Rupert Bruce-Mitford – excavators at Sutton Hoo – failed to locate the cemetery or any other Anglo-Saxon evidence. A scatter of early and middle Anglo-Saxon pottery was found in 1982, in fields west and north of the church; small-scale excavation undertaken before a barn was built nearby revealed a ditched trackway of the same date, as well as later medieval features. There was thus archaeological evidence for an Anglo-Saxon settlement at Rendlesham – but nothing to indicate high status.

This changed in 2008. The landowner, Sir Michael Bunbury, wrote to a local historian, concerned about illegal metal detectorists looting his fields at night. He wanted to know what could be done about it? His letter was passed to the Conservation Team at Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service (SCCAS), which put together a pilot survey to see what was being taken. Some of the looted finds were in fields not surveyed in 1982, expanding the area of archaeological interest.

The Archaeological Service looked for objects in the ploughsoil with systematic metal-detecting, and for deeper intact evidence with magnetometry. They also reviewed



Above: Rendlesham is in the Deben valley upriver from Sutton Hoo

documents and aerial photographs. It soon became clear that there were significant Anglo-Saxon artefacts over a wide area. The survey team noticed that footprints and holes appeared after ploughing in these same fields overnight – people were stealing important archaeological and historical evidence even as the archaeologists worked.

SCCAS therefore set up a full project to study the archaeology of Rendlesham, with two aims: to understand human settlement and activity in its landscape setting, and, through better knowledge of the archaeological resource, to develop ways of protecting it here and at other similar sites.

Total field survey

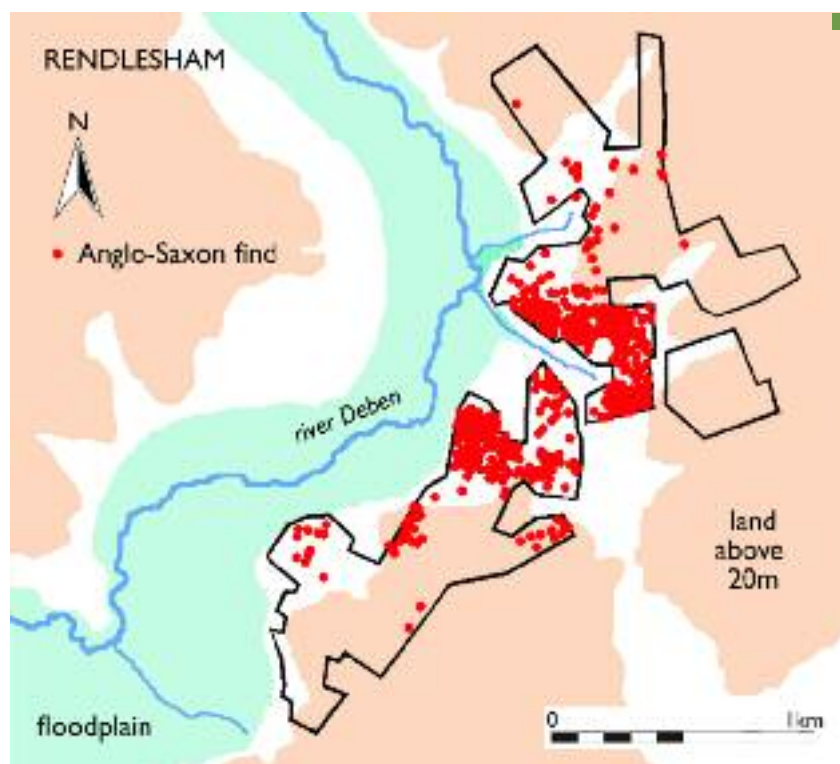
The first step was to establish the extent and density of the artefact scatter. Robert Atfield, Roy Damant, Terry Marsh and Alan Smith – the same four skilled metal detectorists who undertook the initial survey – worked voluntarily in an agreement with the landowner, systematically detecting all of the estate to give a full picture of finds of all periods. SCCAS provided project management and infrastructure, including identifying and recording all finds.

The survey area of 160ha (400 acres) forms a transect 2.25km north-south along the east bank of the river Deben, and 1.25km east-west across the grain of the landscape from valley bottom to interfluvium. This is enough to be sure that patterns of concentration, presence and absence of archaeological material are genuine, and to examine how past activity changed with terrain. The survey was mostly undertaken in autumn and winter, in fields free of stubble or crops. The metal-detecting team has spent about 170 man-days on the survey every year for the past five years.

The project for complete coverage, with all fields being walked at least once – most have been walked in more than one direction and in different conditions to enhance recovery. The detectorists recorded date, transect direction and hours walked, and ground and weather conditions, so that rates of recovery and concentrations of material can be compared and calibrated between fields. As well as metalwork, they collected materials such as pottery and worked flint, dropped in the soil or ploughed up from buried archaeological



Above: Robert Atfield plotting a find with hand-held GPS during the detecting survey



Right: All Anglo-Saxon finds from the survey area, outlined in black



Above: Roy Damant excavating an Anglo-Saxon sunken hut in 2013



Left: Metal detecting, looking across the Deben valley

features. Mostly they recovered broken fragments discarded as rubbish – just as much a part of the story as rarer finds such as coins.

The precise location of every find was recorded using a hand-held GPS device. All finds were then passed to SCCAS for identification, cataloguing and visual recording. The data are held

on a Microsoft Access database, integrated with other survey data in a project GIS for ease of handling and analysis. The density and distributions of different find types, for example, can be mapped easily.

To date 3,563 finds have been recorded, representing activity from prehistory to the 21st century. Although

there are shifts in the concentrations of material over time, the overall pattern points to Rendlesham as a favoured location for settlement and farming from the late iron age (100BC) if not earlier, with finds clustering on the more fertile soils between 10m and 30m above sea level. Magnetometry over 46ha (110 acres), where the concentration of finds is most dense, confirms a complex palimpsest of archaeological features from the bronze age to post-medieval. Trial excavations in autumn 2013 confirmed that some of these are Anglo-Saxon sunken huts and other settlement elements.

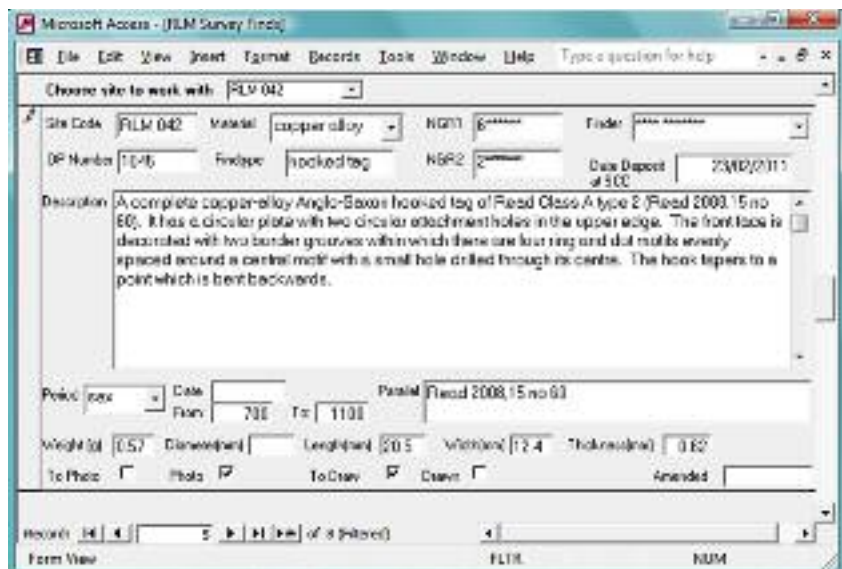
Anglo-Saxon settlement

The proportion of Anglo-Saxon finds is unusually high, indicating a rich and important community. Though activity continued between the fifth and 11th centuries, most of these finds date to the sixth to eighth. At this time the settlement covered an area of up to 50ha (125 acres). Within this were varying concentrations, but the area is as large as the eighth century emporium at Ipswich, and much larger than any other known contemporary rural settlement.

There is direct evidence for a range of activities and a socially diverse population. Skilled craft workers were making dress fittings, jewellery and other items at Rendlesham in the late sixth and seventh centuries. The evidence for this comes from metal finds that represent different stages of manufacture. These include scrap (gold, silver and copper alloy) from old items due to be melted down; lead models used in making moulds for casting metal items; globules and other fragments spilled during melting and casting; casting sprues cut from objects after they had been released from moulds; and items which had been discarded unfinished after casting – these can be recognised because they were thrown away before the casting flash was removed.

Most metalworking finds came from a single area, perhaps indicating the location of one or more workshops. Completed items of the same type as unfinished pieces have been found, indicating that some at least of the material made at Rendlesham was made for and used by the people who lived there.

Both continental and Anglo-Saxon gold coins and silver pennies have been



Left: Screenshot of a catalogue entry

found at Rendlesham. There are also weights, used to check gold coins and to weigh bullion for currency. The distribution of finds tells us that these are not from hoards, but were lost when coins changed hands during payments. So we know that high-value currency transactions were taking place at Rendlesham from at least the beginning of the seventh century.

No coins were minted in Anglo-



Below: Unfinished copper-alloy Anglo-Saxon buckle and pin with finished examples beside and below, with a piece of bronze working debris (unfinished pin 24mm long)

Saxon England before then. Instead, gold and silver valued by weight were used as currency, and gold coins from the continent acquired as raw material for smiths and for their bullion value. The first Anglo-Saxon coins were gold shillings. Towards the end of the seventh century these were replaced by silver pennies (also known as sceattas). Minted in England and on the continent, these were an international trading currency.

Coin may have changed hands at Rendlesham in the payment of taxes or fines, or as gifts by a lord or king to his followers for services rendered and to secure future loyalty; this may explain much of the earlier gold coinage. Silver coinage is more likely to have been used in commercial transactions, and it seems likely that Rendlesham was a site for markets or fairs. Foreign traders in expensive and luxury goods would have been attracted to a high-level settlement when the king and his retainers were in residence, and where the important folk of the kingdom might gather for councils and assemblies.

Further evidence for trade and exchange at Rendlesham includes mounts from hanging bowls, which were acquired from north and west Britain, and two fragments from the foot-rings of Coptic bowls made in the eastern Mediterranean. Contacts

with Europe are seen in continental brooch types as well as by imported coins of the sixth and seventh centuries.

The pattern of coin loss shows that commercial activity at Rendlesham declined in the early eighth century, at exactly the time that the port at Ipswich expanded to become a major centre for manufacture and international trade. Rendlesham probably remained an important administrative centre and residence, but burgeoning trade was increasingly handled through Ipswich.

are the everyday equivalents of aristocratic jewellery.

Accommodating the king and his household would have required a lot of food and drink, gathered from the Rendlesham estate and as rents in kind from surrounding farms. The king probably travelled around his other estates in a regular circuit, spreading the load and making himself visible to the local population. He and his household may have stayed at Rendlesham only at

Links to Sutton Hoo

The discovery of high-quality metalwork and jewellery indicates that Rendlesham was an elite residence. Items such as a sword pyramid mount and a bead made in gold-and-garnet, and a gold pin, were owned, worn and lost by members of the highest aristocracy or royal kindred. Such ostentatious jewellery in precious materials was a statement of rank and wealth. We see here evidence of the use in life of the sort of possessions that were buried with the dead at Sutton Hoo.

This social elite would have been supported by a large population of slaves and servants, farmers, craft specialists, administrators and retainers. The diversity of skills, roles and social positions among this permanent population at Rendlesham is reflected in the range of personal items. Simple pins and buckles made of copper alloy

certain times of the year or for particular occasions, such as assemblies to transact justice or to review the kingdom's fighting men.

Many people would have come to Rendlesham at such times and when fairs or markets were held. We should imagine the open spaces of the settlement, and the paddocks and pastures around it, being used for gatherings and booths, and with temporary accommodation in huts and tents. In some ways it would have been like a modern music festival such as Glastonbury! The coins and many of the other items found by metal detecting may have been lost or dropped at such events.

Our evidence shows that the seventh century settlement at Rendlesham was particularly rich and extensive. We believe that it was an important central

Below: Gold and garnet sword-handle fitting (width at base 21mm), and cut fragments suggesting a goldsmith's workshop (to scale, decorated piece 12mm long)





place at the time of Sutton Hoo: a local administrative centre, the focus of a farming hinterland where livestock and agricultural surplus were gathered, and a royal residence where assemblies might be convened and markets held. It was at one such gathering, as Bede records, that King Aethelwold

sponsored the baptism of King Swithelm of the East Saxons.

If the *vicus regius* at Rendlesham was the main central place in the seventh century Deben valley, it was not unique. There may have been an important settlement closer to Sutton Hoo at Bromeswell, and others are known at

Coddenham and Barham in the Gipping valley north of Ipswich. It is likely that there were equivalents in each of the main river valleys of south-east Suffolk.

Further afield, there is evidence for such sites more widely in East Anglia. Just as Ipswich became the place where international trade was channelled and profits taxed, so central places like Rendlesham were the infrastructure of the early kingdom through which the land's wealth and the kingdom's manpower were mobilised, and the king's rule exercised.

While we believe royal kindred were buried at Sutton Hoo, the permanent population are likely to be have been buried in one of at least two cemeteries indicated by surface finds at Rendlesham. Cremations, where the body was burned on a pyre and the ashes buried in a pot, are signified by sherds from decorated cremation urns and metal grave goods melted in the flames. For inhumations, the body was buried fully clothed with a range of grave goods. These are indicated by metal dress-fittings of types known from excavations elsewhere to have been commonly placed in graves. At some time cultivation has disturbed some of the burials, pulling pottery and goods

Above: Coins and two copper-alloy weights (latter 8mm/13mm across)

Below: Men detect a field at Rendlesham in August 2012, leaving tracks and pits in the ploughsoil



into the ploughsoil.

So the settlement at Rendlesham puts Sutton Hoo in context. Rendlesham is everyday life, while Sutton Hoo is extraordinary death. It is as if we can now study London by looking at the whole city, instead of just Highgate cemetery, or the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral.

Completely new

An important feature of the settlement is that it endured. Until now it had been thought that Anglo-Saxon royal or high-status sites were short-lived, but that was not so here: Rendlesham remained a significant central place for at least three centuries. This in turn tells us that there was a greater continuity and stability of administration and power than we had thought.

As a long-lived central place complex, Rendlesham is also something completely new in the archaeology of the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Such sites are known in Sweden and Denmark, for example at Gudme and Uppåkra, but have not yet been recognised elsewhere in England. The archaeology at Rendlesham therefore is of international importance: it pulls our understanding of seventh century England forcibly into the broader European picture.

In the past we have perhaps underestimated the economic and administrative sophistication (if not the artistic abilities) of the society that created the burials at Sutton Hoo – the earliest English kingdoms. Now we are seeing at Rendlesham the ways in which a kingdom, a complex political entity, could flourish and be ruled without the urban infrastructure – towns – that are the hallmark of government and commerce in the classical, medieval and modern worlds.

Finally, because all periods from prehistory to modern are represented in

Above: A gold and garnet bead (15mm long) and a gold bead (11mm long)

Right: Gilt-bronze decorative mount from a harness, very similar to one from Mound 17 at Sutton Hoo (53mm across)

Below: St Gregory's church, Rendlesham



the archaeology at Rendlesham, there is tremendous potential to examine not only how settlement and activity here changed across the period that saw the emergence of the documented East Anglian kingdom, but also to put this into a much longer sequence of development.

Illegal metal-detecting is theft. But responsible detecting, especially when undertaken systematically as one of several complementary survey techniques, can be enormously valuable. At Rendlesham the partnership of expert detectorists with professional and academic support, managed through with support from the Portable Antiquities Scheme, has identified a site of international significance and secured the academic and public benefit of the ploughsoil assemblage. The support of landowner and farmer and the local museums service have also been critical in creating an effective partnership. In a time of austerity this may be an exemplar for how to approach other sites.

The project also displays a new attitude to dealing with damage caused by illegal metal-detecting and theft. Instead of seeking to sterilise a site by pre-emptive detecting, as has been suggested in the past (an impossible task), the Rendlesham project seeks to protect the site's significance by establishing a baseline of understanding. Local knowledge and informal stewardship, and an approved presence, also afford protection: since the survey began, illegal activity has greatly reduced. In this case, the result has been a very significant addition to our understanding of early England.

The Rendlesham Survey Project is managed by Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service with the co-operation of the landowners, Sir Michael and Lady Caroline Bunbury, and Colchester and Ipswich Museums. It is funded and supported by the Sutton Hoo Society, English Heritage, the Portable Antiquities Scheme, the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology & History, the Society of Antiquaries of London, and the Royal Archaeological Institute.

Faye Minter manages the project's finds identification, recording, cataloguing and analysis; she is senior finds recording officer with the Conservation Team of SCCAS. Jude Plouviez is project manager and a co-director; she is a senior archaeological officer with SCCAS. Chris Scull is a project co-director, and an honorary visiting professor at the Department of Archaeology & Conservation, Cardiff University, and UCL Institute of Archaeology.

Rendlesham Rediscovered, a small exhibition of recent finds, is at the National Trust Sutton Hoo visitor centre until the beginning of November 2014. On August 8 11am–3pm, visitors can meet the detectorists and bring archaeological finds for Faye Minter to identify ■