

The Anglo-Saxons in Leicestershire

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INTRODUCTION

Like much of the prehistoric period the study of the early Anglo-Saxons in Leicestershire has, until recently, been almost entirely artefactual and based around burials, with very few occupation sites known. The social and political background to the period remains uncertain, with many theories as to the nature of the Anglo-Saxon take-over being discussed. There are many more questions to be asked than answers given and it will take many more years of research before our understanding can be significantly improved.

Early 20th century researchers into Anglo-Saxon Leicestershire could at least find some information on the period thanks to the work of John Nichols at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries (Nichols 1795-1815) and the early foundation of Leicester Museum. The variety of objects found in graves had been well recorded although the methods of retrieval were always far from scientific.

Frank Cotterill compiled the first major summary of Anglo-Saxon sites and findspots from the county in 1946. This publication was produced as a catalogue for a major display on Anglo-Saxon Leicestershire. Bob Rutland, Tim Clough and Anne Dornier brought this up to date in 1975 for a second exhibition. These publications give a useful record of how our knowledge has grown over the decades. They clearly show that most of the sites and artefacts known at the time were either standing remains or the result of various forms of development or mineral extraction, with very little proactive fieldwork having been employed. After the advent of fieldwalking in Leicestershire and Rutland in the late 1970s, the picture is dramatically altered with a marked increase in settlement sites being recorded in the landscape (Fig. 1)

Once the Sites and Monuments Record had been recast and sorted and systematic fieldwork was underway, it was possible to write a more in depth summary of Anglo-Saxon Leicestershire. Peter Liddle in *The Present State of Knowledge Volume 2, Anglo-Saxon and Medieval Periods* undertook this in 1982. This was later updated in his paper on Anglo-Saxon Leicestershire given to the conference on Anglo-Saxon Landscapes in the East Midlands in 1991 (Liddle 1996).

The introduction of fieldwalking to the county came in the late 1970s, but at this stage the small and fragile early Anglo-Saxon potsherds were not recognised in the field. No one was claiming to have found sites of this period. In fact, it was often claimed that it could not be done. It would be very useful and interesting to re-examine all of the potsherds found during the early years, looking for previously unidentified early Anglo-Saxon and perhaps Iron Age pottery. For instance, reappraisal of material from Shangton villa, found by Rod Branson in the early

1970s, has identified several early Anglo-Saxon sherds. It is certainly the case that many recently walked Roman sites, and those that have been revisited, have produced a small but important amount of Anglo-Saxon material. It should be admitted here that in some cases small, abraded handmade sherds are still impossible to confidently date as broadly the same clays, inclusions and firing techniques were used both in the Iron Age and early Anglo-Saxon period.

The subsequent use of the traverse and stint fieldwalking method (Liddle 1985), introduced in 1981 at the start of the Medbourne project (Liddle, forthcoming), enabled a much more systematic approach and this slower, more regimented technique allowed smaller, more eroded material to be seen and collected. Once it had been proved that the material could be found and the fieldwalking groups had 'got their eye in' the success rate increased dramatically. The most telling result of the landscape surveys is the sheer busyness of the early Anglo-Saxon landscape. This is best illustrated by the combined surveys in the South East of the county (Liddle, Hartley, Knox and Pollard 1996; Bowman 1996; Wallis *et al.* 1996), but is also clearly shown in the Leicestershire Museums survey at Brooksby (Liddle and Knox 1991) and the extensive work in the Gwash Valley in Rutland (Cooper 2000). These surveys have recorded clusters of very closely spaced early Anglo-Saxon scatters, which are assumed to be farmstead sites. These scatters are most commonly found in river valleys or on promontories in the boulder clay (Fig. 2).

At around the same time the hobby of metal detecting became popular and, although there are still many detectorists with only one or two early Anglo-Saxon objects in their collections, the impact of this technique has been great. Due to the early Anglo-Saxon tradition of burying their dead fully clothed and equipped, metal detecting has found many more burial sites than settlements, which usually yield few metal small finds.

Good examples of this can be seen at Lowesby, West Langton and Foxton (Fig. 3) where various brooch fragments, and polychrome glass beads, form distinct scatters representing several burials disturbed by deep ploughing. Subsequent fieldwalking by Paul Bowman at West Langton and Foxton has produced pottery, including decorated sherds, which may suggest the presence of cremations as well as inhumations. However, single brooch finds, which without further investigation defy interpretation, are quite common. Further metal detecting and fieldwalking on these sites could certainly help to clarify the nature of these sites.

Metal detecting has also enhanced our understanding of the elusive Middle Anglo-Saxon period with the finding of 7th and 8th century objects including a gold

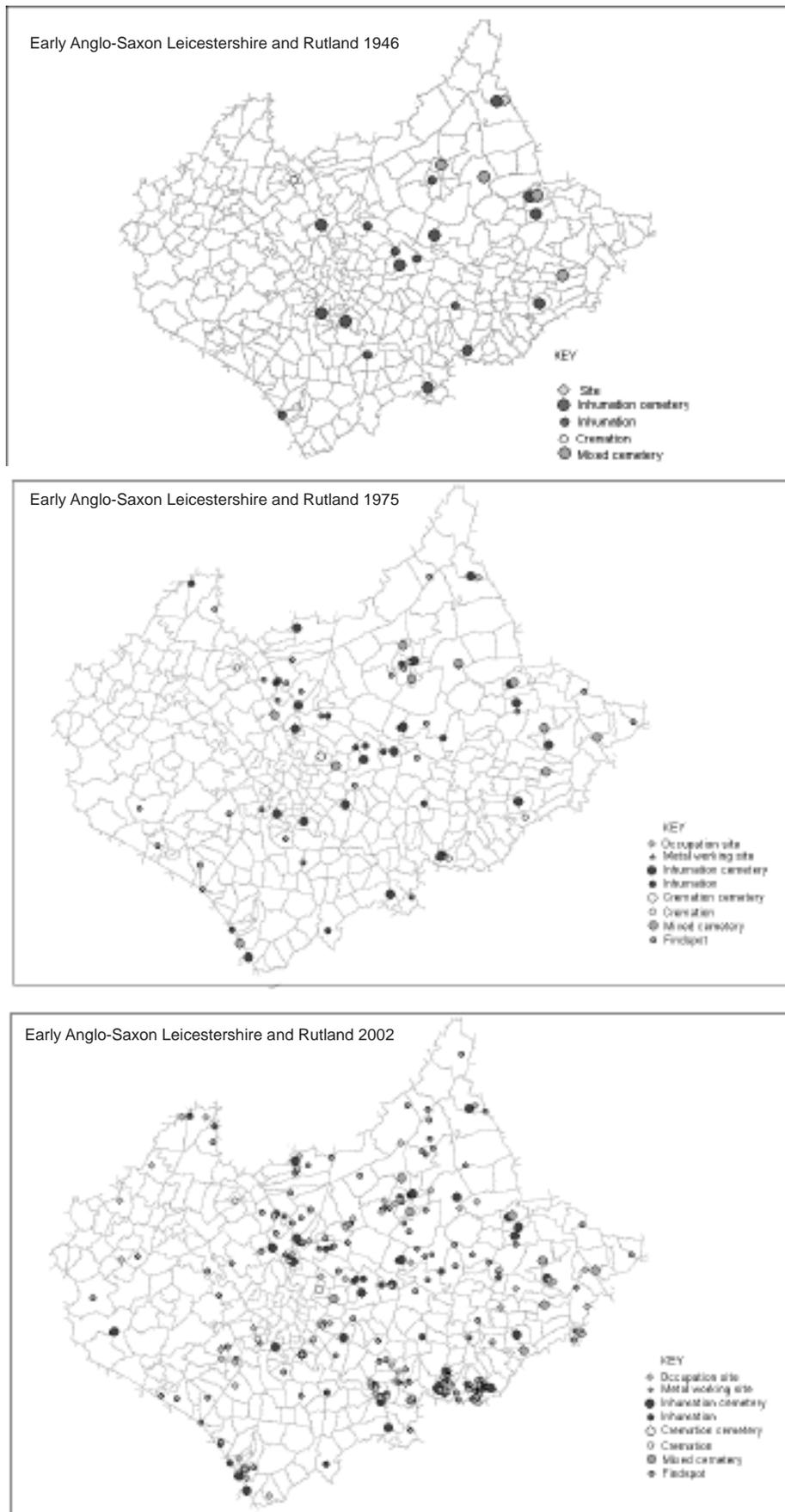


Fig. 1. Distributions of early Anglo-Saxon sites in Leicestershire and Rutland. A 1946, B 1976, C 2003.

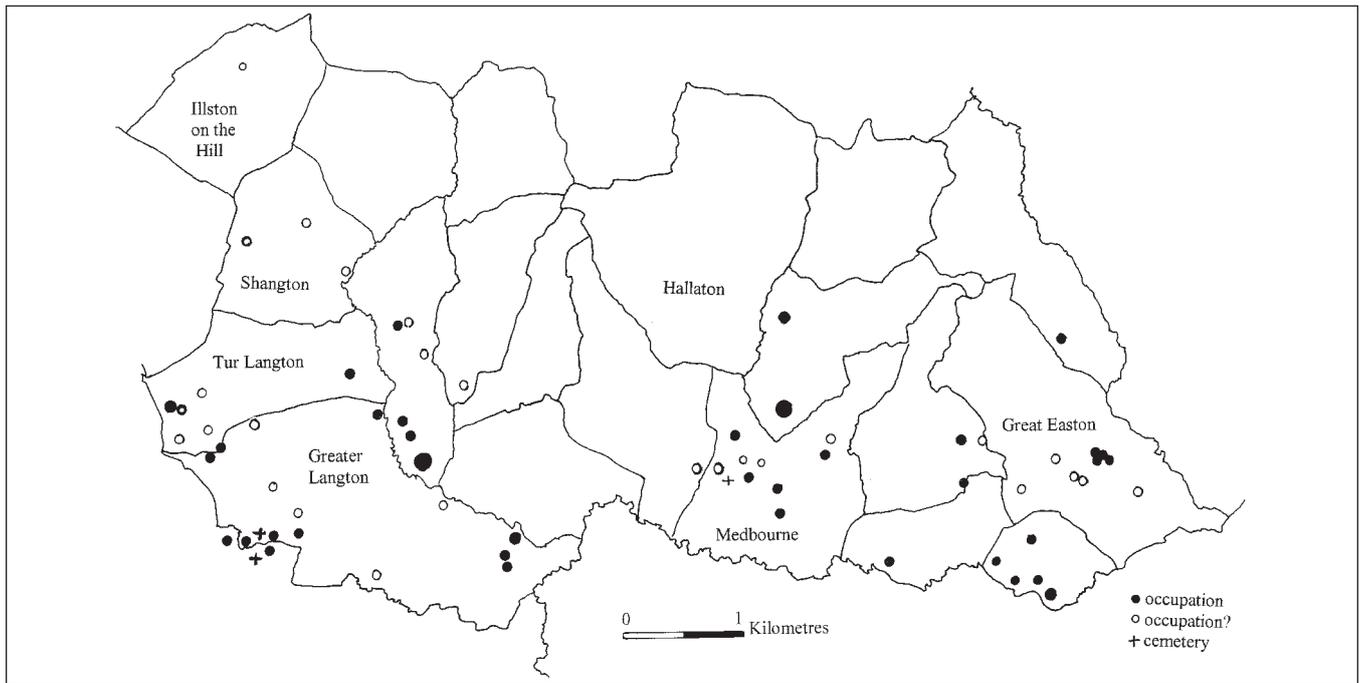


Fig. 2. Distribution of early Anglo-Saxon occupation sites after fieldwalking in South East Leicestershire.

sword pommel from Earl Shilton, a high-status group from Wymeswold, two Irish enamelled buckles from Melton Mowbray, the Irish cruciform mount from Newtown Linford (Fig. 4) (Youngs 2000) and several Sceattas from around the county. Although the nature of these sites is still unclear they provide a starting point for future research.

Compared to those of the Middle Anglo-Saxon period, the artefacts of the later Anglo-Saxons are more commonly found. Coins, strap ends and the recently identified stirrup mounts are the most common finds which can, when found in groups as at Wymeswold, suggest sites of some significance. Occasionally, more unusual finds such as the Thor's Hammer and Viking coin hoard from the Swithland area are made.

While metal detecting results can sometimes offer some interpretation of a site, fieldwalking results can be difficult to interpret. A large scatter of sherds, as seen from fieldwalking at Eye Kettleby (Liddle and Knox 1993), Knave's Hill in Stonton Wyville, next to the River Soar in Kegworth and Cow Closes in Great Easton (Wallis 2000) could represent a small settlement that regularly shifted, a pottery production site, a large sedentary settlement or a cremation cemetery. To determine what is actually happening below the surface requires geophysical survey and, for full clarity, excavation. As we have so many sites recorded now it is not reasonable to expect all of these to be investigated further. A partial solution would be to select three or four scatters, which vary in size and topographical location and investigate them with geophysical equipment, evaluation trenches and environmental sampling. Obviously this would have a major cost and time implication. It must be remembered, however, that many sites will have been ploughed out of existence and that

the field scatters are all that remains.

Since the implementation of PPG 16 (a planning guidance note from central government) in 1991/2, professional archaeologists have been used to greater effect on development sites. This has led to some exciting results both in rural and urban areas. The remains of early Anglo-Saxon buildings have been found at Wanlip (Ripper 1999), Hemington Quarry and Willow Farm in Castle Donington (Cooper and Ripper 2000; Coward forthcoming), Eye Kettleby (Fig. 5 and Finn 1998), South Street in Oakham (Jones 1996) and Bonners Lane in Leicester (Finn 1994) due to this process. So far, early Anglo-Saxon burials have been less forthcoming in developer funded work. The only example is a group of iron knives and spearheads found on a Bronze Age barrow mound at Cossington (Sturgess and Ripper 2000) which, presumably, represent several male burials.

Cultural identity in Anglo-Saxon Leicestershire

The Anglo-Saxons were made up of a wide range of tribes from southern Denmark to northern France. The traditional view, taken from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, is that individual tribes settled within particular areas of England. The Franks and Jutes are supposed to have settled along the south coast particularly in Kent and on the Isle of White. The Saxons held most of southern England while the Anglians held East Anglia, the Midlands and the northern English counties.

The vast majority of metallic objects that have been found in Leicestershire fall neatly into the Anglian tradition associated with the Midlands. The metallic objects found in the graves of most wealthy Anglian women, give us a good idea of what they wore, or at least



Fig. 3. Metalwork and glass beads from an early Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Foxton which was found with by a metal detector user.

what they were buried in. The pair of brooches at the shoulder show that a *peplos* style “tube dress” was worn. Wrist clasps suggest a long-sleeved under dress and the number of accessories found at the waist indicates that some form of belt was usually worn. However, as more artefacts are recorded the number of intrusive, southern-style objects increases. The material from the Lowesby site (Fig. 6) includes a Frankish sword scabbard chape from the Rhine Valley, which dates from the late 5th century. The only other published example of this type from England is at Abingdon, Oxfordshire (Davidson 1962, 90-92 & Fig. 9B).

The two cemeteries at Market Overton produced several examples of southern-style objects including a pair of Saxon saucer brooches and a Frankish radiate headed brooch (Meany 1964). Finding such anomalies raises

several questions. Do they represent a mixture of cultures in the 5th and early 6th century or were the owners visitors to the area and, if so, for what purpose? Could the objects have been traded or given as gifts? As many of the seemingly obtrusive objects date from the fifth and early sixth centuries, perhaps they represent a period in which mixed Germanic tribes were settling in random areas before a regional identity was formed. It would seem that most of the diagnostically cultural artefacts, such as wrist clasps and girdle hangers, are more common in the early 6th century. This might suggest that once the settlement was established the populations of each area adopted their own dress codes and cultural identities. An increased knowledge of continental material from the Germanic homelands would also offer more opportunities for comparison with English material.



Fig. 4. Some of the middle Anglo-Saxon Irish-made metalwork from the county.

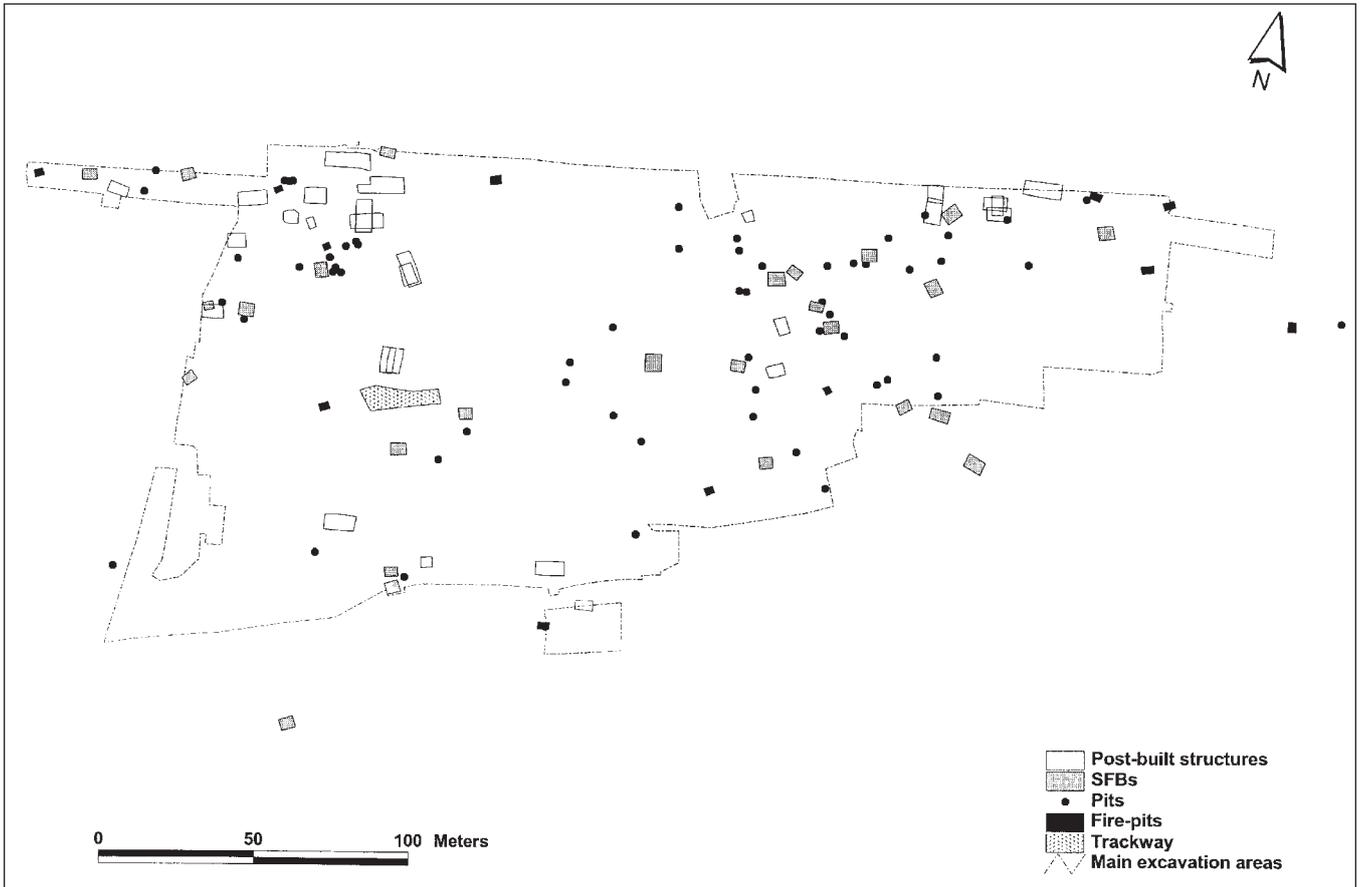


Fig. 5. Plan of the Anglo-Saxon buildings and associated features from the settlement at Eye Kettleby, and photograph of a post built building under excavation.

Manufacturing industries

The most common evidence for Anglo-Saxon industry found by fieldwalking is iron slag. Scatters of iron slag accompany many early Anglo-Saxon pottery scatters found in fieldwork in the Medbourne area. The field scatters often show iron slag within the less dense pottery scatter around an occupation site. This presumably represents the precaution of distancing the furnaces from the highly combustible houses. However, excavation would be necessary to ascertain the actual relationship between the occupation areas and the associated industry and, as yet, none of these sites have been fully excavated. The presence of iron smelting suggests a certain amount of woodland in the area to be used as fuel. The area around Horninghold seems to have been wooded and this may have extended to the south during the 3rd and 4th centuries.

Excavations of both cemeteries and occupation sites can reveal evidence of textile manufacture. Some of the 6th century brooches from the Saxby cemetery have the impression of woven cloth on the corroded iron pins. This shows us the tight herringbone weave that was commonly used in clothing. As most of the equipment used for textile manufacture was organic and has rotted away we are reliant on finding the more durable artefacts such as spindle whorls and loom-weights. Spindle whorls of pottery, bone and rock are often found in female burials as well as on settlement sites but clay loom-weights are usually only found in excavations on settlement sites. Systematic fieldwalking has occasionally

produced fragments of loom-weights within pottery scatters and three large fragments have been found more or less by chance in the last five years by fieldworkers.

Work by John Walker, followed up more recently by Alan Vince (Williams and Vince 1997), has shown that Granodiorite from the Charnwood area is found in early Anglo-Saxon pottery throughout the Midlands, and as far away as Yorkshire and London. The large concentration of Anglo-Saxon pottery found in the 1950s excavations at Proctor's Pleasure Park in Barrow Upon Soar (No author 1958) is a possible candidate for the production site - if, indeed, it was finished pots that were distributed rather than the crushed rock as a raw material. Myres suggested that it is possible to group some of the many pots from the country into workshop types by comparing the stamps used to decorate them. Thurmaston cemetery (Williams 1983), from which around 120 cremations have so far been excavated, represents the largest collection of Early Anglo-Saxon pottery vessels from the county.

Much of the pottery identified in Leicestershire and Rutland as Late Anglo-Saxon was made in the Stamford area but a kiln found cut into a Roman street in central Leicester is the production site for a grey ware of tenth or eleventh century date (Hebditch 1968). The context of the kilns and association with Stamford Ware) dated this material as late Saxon; but in small sherd form in field scatters or even in pits within villages it is not easily distinguishable from Roman grey ware and may have been regularly misidentified as being Roman.



Fig. 6. Brooch fragments and other metalwork from a metal detected cemetery at Lowesby. The object at the centre of the bottom line is a Frankish sword chape.



Fig. 7. Middle Anglo-Saxon foil dies from Heather (above) and Enderby (below).

Working of non-ferrous metals is under represented in the county - and in England. Although we have a large number of finished objects in a variety of metals (although predominantly copper alloy) we cannot tell if they were imported from the continent or produced in England. One metal object type, which is believed to be imported, is the delicate copper alloy bowl with a repoussé rim that occurs in several cemeteries in the area. Empingham I (Liddle, Glaswell & Cooper 2000), Wigston Magna (Nichols 1810, 377; Liddle and Middleton 1994) and Queniborough (Nichols 1815, 135-6) all contain the bowls that are

thought to come from the Rhine and Meuse Valleys (Evison 1987). Detectorists have found fragments of copper alloy slag in various parts of the county, but their date is uncertain. The clearest evidence of decorative metalwork production is from foil dies found at Heather and Enderby (Fig. 7). These are probably both of late 6th or early 7th century date and were used to create interlace ornament on thin sheets of gold, silver and, possibly, very thin copper alloys. The decorated foils would then be applied to objects such as cups and drinking horns. As yet no products of this type of die work have been found in the county.

Similarly, no early Anglo-Saxon glass working sites have been found in this country while most female graves contain glass beads and a small number of glass vessels are known. Clearly, not enough settlement sites have been excavated to rule out production of metalwork and glass in the country.

Perhaps the most intriguing indication of long distance trade is the presence of elephant ivory in the form of bag rings found in female graves. One might presume from this that at least some of the international trade routes are still functioning in this period. Whether the ivory is Indian or African it seems likely to have come to England via the Mediterranean. Cowrie shells from the Mediterranean or the Red Sea are also found in some female graves, such as Empingham I, grave 13 (Liddle, Glaswell & Cooper 2000, 39-41).



Fig. 8. One of the many 8th century carvings built into the medieval church at Breedon.

Religion

As yet we have little firm evidence of religion from the early Anglo-Saxon period. Swastika brooches that are clearly designed to incorporate hammers and a swastika – both symbols of the god Thunor – show some people were particularly devoted to this god (the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of the Viking Thor). As the dead were often buried fully dressed and equipped it seems acceptable to presume that some people believed in an afterlife, where their status would be important. Their cremation rites, which could include equipment either burnt with the body or put into the urn after cremation, or no goods at all, might suggest that some people did not believe that the body needed to be intact to enter the afterlife or that death was final.

There are very few recorded metal artefacts in Leicestershire and Rutland that show the later Anglo-Saxon and Viking religions: the Thor's hammer from Swithland, the cruciform mount from Newtown Linford (Youngs 2001), a small gilt cross and possibly a linked pin spacer plate from Wymeswold and the reliquary fitting from Breedon Hill. These objects supplement the literary sources and the survival of church architecture from the period. The earliest Christian sculpture from the area (Fig. 8) is likely to be the extensive series of eighth century carvings from the seventh century monastery on Breedon Hill that were built into the medieval priory church of St Mary and St Hardulf (Clapham 1928).

The preaching crosses at Rothley and Sproxton (Fig. 9) are thought to be late 9th to 10th century structures. Many other churches contain fragments of cross shafts built into later walls while several others contain late Anglo-Saxon structural elements made noticeable by the presence of characteristic doorways and windows.

Later Anglo-Saxon cemeteries are rarely found as they tend to have been heavily disturbed by later burials within churchyards. However excavations at Breedon Hill (Kenyon 1950) and at Ketton (Fig. 10 and Meadows 1999) have produced a middle Anglo-Saxon and a late Anglo-Saxon cemetery respectively. Both have very few grave goods as is typical of Christian cemeteries and the east - west alignment of the graves is also true to form. A mid 7th century cemetery was found at Empingham during excavations on a Roman villa prior to the flooding of Rutland Water. Dubbed Empingham III this seems to be a "final phase" cemetery with five graves cutting into the floor of the stone villa. The burials were aligned east west and only one had grave goods. It has been postulated (Cooper 2000) that the remains of the villa may have been used as an early church as the burials appear to be Christian. As Christianity must have appeared to be a Roman religion to the Germanic peoples it would be a logical step for Christian rites to be practised in Roman buildings.



Fig. 9. The late Anglo-Saxon churchyard cross at Sproxton.

Landscape Changes

The Anglo-Saxon period saw some major changes in England's landscape.

The late Roman landscape contained a series of towns, at least ten are recorded within Leicestershire and Rutland, with villa complexes and large numbers of timber or cob built farmsteads spread throughout the countryside.

It has long been thought that at some stage in the 5th century the Roman towns of eastern England were abandoned, but evidence from Bonners Lane in Leicester (Finn 1994) has shown at least small scale early Anglo-Saxon occupation around the south gate of the Roman town. Early Anglo-Saxon pottery has also been found within the limits of many of the small towns of Leicestershire and Rutland although, for the most part, the nature of the activity is unclear. At Ravenstone Roman town the LAU excavated a rectangular post built building which appears to be a hall. Although no dating evidence was found in the postholes a pit containing early Anglo-Saxon pottery was located adjacent to the building. The Roman cemetery outside the walls of Great Casterton Roman town contains Anglo-Saxon burials and the busy Anglo-Saxon pottery scatter at Barrow on Soar is on the site of a Roman small town.

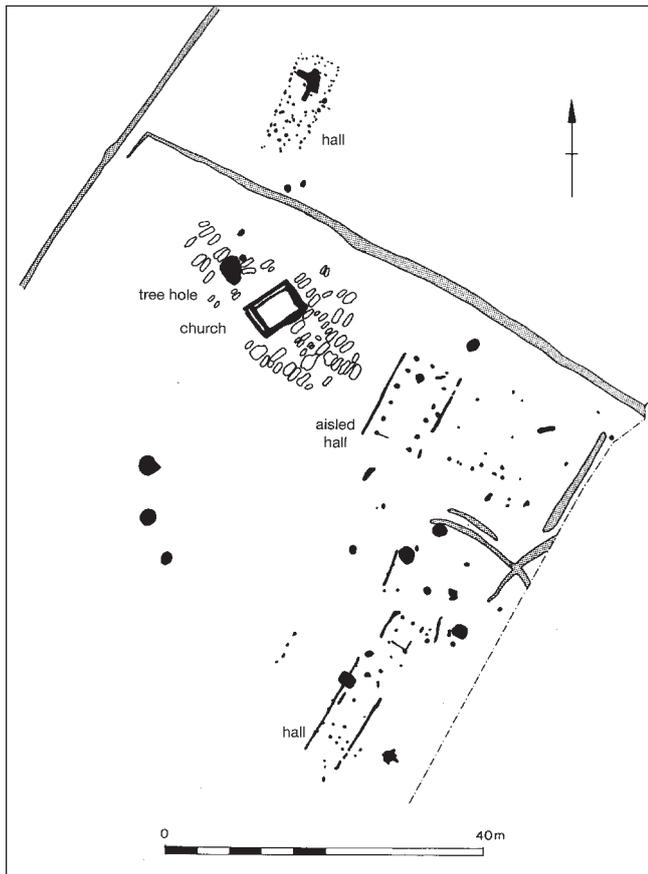


Fig. 10. The plan of the excavated late Anglo-Saxon timber settlement found near Ketton Quarry.

Villas as such do not appear to survive into the early Anglo-Saxon period but like some of the farmsteads do sometimes produce early Anglo-Saxon pottery suggesting a continued settlement of the sites. In the Medbourne area survey, however, the Roman sites on the clay uplands appear to have been abandoned in the third century and no evidence of Anglo-Saxon settlement is found on these sites. Where late Roman material is present on the Medbourne Roman sites early Anglo-Saxon sherds are usually also found. This suggests that the Romano British families continued to farm their land but had to use the new material culture of the Anglo-Saxons. There are, however, some early Anglo-Saxon sites on promontories, which have no Roman precursor. It is possible that these represent actual incomers who warily placed themselves in defendable locations at a discrete distance from the Romano British settlements (Liddle 1994; Bowman 1996).

Occasionally, however, as at Lowesby, Stonton Wyville, Tur Langton and East Langton, the Anglo-Saxon sites are close to but not on top of the Roman scatters. One site at Stonton Wyville shows a curious correlation between Iron Age and Early Anglo-Saxon settlement without evidence of a Roman phase. This may be due to any Roman features being slightly offset and not within the areas investigated.

The traditional view of early Anglo-Saxon settlement in the area is of a series of small farmsteads, inhabited by

extended family groups. Relatively large sites such as Eye Kettleby, where possibly as many as ten buildings - including a high percentage of halls - may have stood at one time, seem to suggest another type of settlement. It is tempting to suggest that these larger sites could be local administration centres, but until the location of more of these sites is known it is difficult to interpret them fully or to determine how large an area they may have controlled.

At some stage in the late seventh to ninth century, after Christianity had been introduced to the country, the farmsteads were abandoned in favour of nucleated settlements in the form of villages and towns. Archaeologically, this can be seen by the replacement of the concentrations of the dark handmade pottery of the 5th to 7th centuries with the wheel-turned fine wares made in Stamford, which cluster round the village sites. Most watching briefs and excavations within village sites produce Stamford Ware. Further fieldwork within villages may reveal whether the new settlements were sited on existing occupation areas. The sunken featured building at Oakham (Jones 1996) and various early Anglo-Saxon finds in other towns and villages may indicate earlier sites under the nucleated settlements. The dating of the earliest of these settlements is very difficult, however as we cannot currently discern middle Saxon pottery from earlier material. It has been suggested that ceramics were not actually used in the eighth century although this theory is based on negative evidence, which has yet to be substantiated.

An intriguing site, which seems to suggest continuous occupation from the Roman period through to the Medieval, is at Kirby Bellars churchyard (Hurst 1968). Here, excavations recovered sherds of early to late Roman, early and late Anglo-Saxon and early medieval date.

The remains of what might be the lost hamlet of Newbottle, found in excavations near Ketton in 1999, show a rarely preserved pre-Domesday settlement with timber halls around a timber church (Fig. 10). Most of the Anglo-Saxon wooden churches were rebuilt in stone, either by later Anglo-Saxons or by the Normans. Although timber was the more traditional building material for the Germanic peoples stone was also occasionally used. The church of St Nicholas, in central Leicester, may have never had a timber phase, as the ruined bathhouse would have provided ample materials for the job.

As the population was gathered together in villages the agricultural system had to be changed. The open field system, which replaced the enclosed landscapes of the late Roman and early Anglo-Saxon periods, is recorded in England by the tenth century although it is uncertain as to when it was developed. Ridge and furrow was laid out to divide plots between families without wasting land with hedges or fences. The strip system also allowed sharing of oxen teams amongst the workers who would plough all the plots in turn.

Conclusion

Due to increased research, the advance of archaeological techniques, the development of improved planning policies and the efforts of many archaeologists - both professional and amateur, more has been achieved in the last 25 years to enhance our understanding of Anglo-Saxon Leicestershire and Rutland than in the previous two centuries

There is still much to learn about the Anglo-Saxon period however. Much of the history of the period, such as how the Anglo-Saxons took power in England and to what extent the Romano-British inhabitants were displaced or anglicised may never be revealed. But by using the many archaeological techniques at our disposal, and those to be developed in the future, we should in time be able to uncover a settlement pattern for Anglo-Saxon Leicestershire and Rutland. With surveys reaching into previously unexplored areas and with further research being undertaken on the recorded sites, it should be possible to build up a useful picture of the varying landscapes of Anglo-Saxon Leicestershire and Rutland.

Acknowledgements

Fig 5a & 5b courtesy of University of Leicester Archaeological Services
Fig 10 courtesy of Northamptonshire Archaeology

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