Lyminge Excavations 2012

Interim Report on the University of Reading excavations at Lyminge, Kent

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Background

2012 marked the beginning of an exciting new phase of excavation in Lyminge (2012-14) funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The target of this current scheme of investigation is ‘Tayne Field’, a 5-acre green space in the centre of the village used as a public amenity and a playing field by the adjoining Primary School. Overlooked by the elevated site of the parish church and, more immediately, by the village pub, The Coach and Horses, Tayne Field forms a low projecting spur within the main axis of the Elham Valley. The setting is made particularly picturesque by the encircling headwater of the River Nailbourne, fed by a network of springs – one capped by the 19th-century ‘Ethelburga’s Well’ – that emerge from the base of a chalk outcrop that defines the south-western extremity of the site.

1. View across Tayne Field looking south west with the 2012 excavation trench in the foreground and the chalk promontory capped by the parish church beyond. The line of trees to the left of the excavation marks the course of the River Nailbourne, which emerges from a spring to the left of the large weeping willow.

Photograph: Hawkeye Elevated Photography

No known archaeological investigations had taken place on Tayne Field prior to the initiation of the current scheme of research in 2007. In that year a magnetometry survey (since updated and expanded) was completed across much of the site, followed by the excavation of four 1x1m test-pits targeting geophysical anomalies. The results demonstrated that several periods of archaeology are present within this locale: scatters of struck flint suggested traces of prehistoric activity, whereas in situ archaeological features indicated post-Roman occupation of two main phases: Anglo-Saxon (6th-8th/9th centuries A.D.), and Saxo-Norman (10th-12th centuries A.D).

The Anglo-Saxon occupation recovered from Tayne Field acquired increased definition and significance in 2010. In that year excavations on a site bordering Rectory Lane, some 200m to the south, recovered substantial remains of an early Anglo-Saxon settlement dating to the sixth and early part of the 7th centuries A.D. (Thomas 2011). Given their contemporaneity, there was clearly a possibility that these two sites might represent a single continuous Anglo-Saxon settlement, and that Tayne Field might hold crucial archaeological evidence relating to Lyminge’s role as an Anglo-Saxon
2. Location of trenches in Lyminge from 2008 – 2012
royal vill in the period leading up to its foundation as a double monastery in second half of the 7th century A.D. (Thomas 2013). There was also the important issue of how this locale was utilised in the period of monastic occupation during the 8th and 9th centuries, when (as excavations in 2008-9 showed), the focus of settlement at Lyminge appears to have shifted onto the chalk promontory to the south of the churchyard (Thomas 2010). These questions lie at the forefront of the AHRC-funded phase of research which is exploiting Lyminge’s archaeological potential to examine the detailed social processes of monastic foundation in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Kent (Thomas 2013).

2012’s excavation took the form of a 30m x 30m trench positioned over an array of the geophysical anomalies appearing at the southern end of Tayne Field, including a large rectangular feature suspected to be an Anglo-Saxon sunken-featured building of the same type as examples excavated in 2010. In light of the longevity of human activity represented on Tayne Field, the following report presents the results of the 2012 excavation in reverse chronological order, commencing with the prehistoric period.

3. Plan of Saxon, Saxo-Norman and Medieval features excavated in 2012
Prehistoric

By David Mudd and Tom Lawrence

Machine removal of topsoil revealed a large flint scatter covering some 200m$^2$ across the east and south sides of the trench, both on undisturbed ground and on top of the fill of archaeological features. Visible flint was hand-picked for the surface, and from the spoil heap. Considerable quantities of struck flint were also recovered (hand-picked and dry-sieved) from Anglo-Saxon and later contexts. Initial examination suggested that the assemblage was typical of the early Mesolithic period, c 10,000-8,800 years BP.

Much of the flint was recovered from Anglo-Saxon and later contexts – pits, ditches and postholes – and was thus not in its original location. However, Grid Square 6, at the south-east corner of the trench was undisturbed by later features, and had the highest densities of flint per m$^2$. Sample squares from this area were excavated down to bedrock and sieved, in order to:

- retrieve all flint from selected sample squares for further analysis
- establish the depth of the flint horizon
- investigate the palaeogeology and palaeoenvironment of the area, and
- ascertain stratigraphically whether struck flint was \textit{in situ}.

Sample squares excavated to bedrock level to ascertain Mesolithic site formation processes.
A range of chipped flint pieces was recovered, including some diagnostic microliths. No faunal or botanical remains were recovered apart from two charcoal fragments. This material, together with statistical and spatial analysis of flint from later contexts, should enable the Mesolithic site to be characterised. Evidence so far suggests, however, that there is no surviving prehistoric horizon due to the disturbed nature of the site.

Work is continuing to catalogue the 13 crates of flint. Just over half the assemblage has now been catalogued, a total of 6400 pieces weighing 51kg. The total will contain about 10-12,000 pieces, making it one of the largest Mesolithic assemblages recorded from East Kent. Full statistical and spatial analysis is not yet possible, but initial observations show:

1. 10% of the pieces are identifiable tools or tool blanks. The remainder are 85% debitage (chips and flakes created during knapping) and 5% which do not show signs of knapping.
2. a high number of cores, and a low ratio of finished tools to cores. At present, the blade to core ratio is 3:1.
3. a low proportion of retouched artefacts.
4. an extremely low proportion of microliths (n=32) compared to assemblages of similar size. Howick and Bolsay Farm, for example, contain 597 and 1057 microliths respectively (Mithen, lake and Finlay 2000: 294; Waddington and Pedersen 2007: 82-95).
5. a proportion of tools which have been retouched through patination, suggesting that they were retrieved and re-used after their initial manufacture.

These features suggest that the site was used for tool production, with the end products being taken for use elsewhere.

6. A range of stone tools are present at Lyminge

There is a high proportion of burnt pieces. About half the cores recovered have been burnt to destruction. Other pieces show a range from light heating to calcination. These effects could have been caused by burning in the Mesolithic period, such as deliberate and prolonged heating of stones as potboilers. It is also possible that some stones may have been exposed to heat and burning in Anglo-Saxon or later contexts – for example, fires on the ground surface containing flint, or the discard of hot embers into refuse pits containing flint pieces. Further stratigraphic analysis and experimental replication will be carried out to find out the cause of the observed effects.

The flint assemblage recovered from Tayne Field is of more than purely local significance for it firmly establishes Lyminge as a key site for understanding the nature of Mesolithic occupation in downland regions of south-east England.
Anglo-Saxon

2012’s results demonstrate that the spur of Tayne Field formed the focus of an early Anglo-Saxon settlement occupied between the later 5th and the 7th centuries A.D. Echoing 2010’s excavation, a sequence of Anglo-Saxon occupation was represented, the earliest phases of which included a sunken-featured building orientated on an east-west axis, accompanied by alignments of post-holes denoting the fragmentary remains of one or more modestly-sized timber halls of a comparable scale to that excavated in 2010 (Thomas 2011).

The undoubted highlight of the 2012 excavation was the discovery of a massive Anglo-Saxon timber hall of post-in-trench construction whose ground-plan occupied most of the trench and whose excavation required meticulous and careful attention to record well-preserved structural detail. Stratigraphically later than the post-built halls and associated sunken-featured building, current dating evidence (artefacts recovered from the wall-trenches), combined with good architectural parallels from Yeaverling and Cowdery’s Down, strongly suggest that the hall was constructed during the first half of the 7th century, probably as part of an extensive remodelling of the Anglo-Saxon settlement. Undoubtedly a discovery of international significance, this structure provides striking confirmation that a major portion of the domestic/ceremonial epicentre of the Anglo-Saxon royal vill survives in a surprisingly good state of preservation under the modern-day core of Lyminge.

7. Aerial view of the 2012 trench with the great hall clearly visible on an east-west alignment (Photo by William Laing)

A smaller post-in-trench building was revealed some 5m to the east of the principal hall, the majority of which extended beyond the limits of the excavation. The fact that it was built on the same axis as its neighbour and shared the same wall-construction technique confirms the contemporaneity of the
two structures (see below). It can therefore be stated with some degree of confidence that Lyminge shares the same axial planning as featured by other well-known Anglo-Saxon royal complexes, including Yeavering and Sutton Courtenay (Hamerow 2012).

8. The subsidiary hall’s west end walls prior to excavation (facing west)

A number of pits discovered in the northern sector of the trench can be attributed to the Anglo-Saxon period on the basis of dated artefacts, but it is not currently possible to attribute them to a particular phase in advance of specialist analysis of pottery and glass. Stratigraphic relationships demonstrate that a proportion of these features post-date the large timber hall, and could well reflect Middle/Late Saxon activity.

Having briefly summarised the main discoveries dating to the Anglo-Saxon period, the remainder of this section lays out the evidence for the sunken featured building and the large timber hall in greater detail.

Sunken featured building

The sunken-featured building, the fifth example to have been excavated in recent campaigns at Lyminge, lay approximately 1.20m from the north wall of the hall on a similar east-west alignment.

Although labelled as a single structure for convenience, the excavated ground-plan actually represents two successive buildings or building phases with overlapping footprints. The first phase of the building was of two-post construction with a rectangular pit with dimensions of c.3.05m x 2.42m and a maximum depth of 0.62m. It appears that the rectangular pit was dug prior to the insertion of the upright supporting gable-end posts, situated on the inside edges of the pit. Three smaller post or stake-holes (one square cut and the other sub-circular) were discovered on the north-east edge of the first-phase pit, perhaps as a measure designed to reinforce the northern wall of the timber superstructure; a large dump of clay situated along the northern edge of the pit may have served a similar purpose.
When the structure was rebuilt a new pit was cut whose northern and eastern edges lay some 0.4m south-east of the respective edges of its predecessor, perhaps to mitigate a structural weakness in the north wall of the original sunken-featured building. The gable-end posts of the new structure were repositioned on the central axis of the recut pit. Two further smaller post holes were added in the north-east and south-east corners of the recut pit, while no further post holes were added to the opposite end wall.

The backfilling of the second-phase pit occurred in two major episodes after the structure went out of use, with lenses of chalk and clay material potentially relating to individual dumping events. The post holes appear to be filled with the same or very similar material to the rest of the SFB pit, indicating that demolition of the timber superstructure occurred prior to the backfilling of the pit. Jess Tipper (2004: 99-111) has argued that tertiary rubbish (i.e. redeposited midden material) represents the chief depositional component of sunken-featured building infilling. In contrast, it is clear that this example, like two of the sunken-featured buildings excavated in 2010 (Thomas 2011; Thomas 2013), contains secondary refuse deposits, evidenced by the high number of complete or near complete artefacts.
The backfill deposits contained unusually rich cultural assemblages, including dense concentrations of Anglo-Saxon pottery, animal bone (c.40kg), and fired daub, augmented by a wide range of manufactured items such as glass beads and vessel fragments, and a range of iron objects. The uppermost fill was characterised by a particularly high frequency of animal bone, dominated by pig and sheep/goat crania, mandibles and limb bones which may represent feasting debris from one or more individual events. Of particular interest was a near-complete handled bowl similar to one found at the late Anglo-Saxon settlement at Bishopstone, East Sussex (Jervis 2010: 95).

Significant finds from the SFB fill included two triangular bone combs with ring and dot decoration (a form more typical to Suffolk), as well as a pierced Roman coin, two possible metalworking crucibles and a well-preserved copper alloy toilet set. It can be suggested that the high density of complete or nearly complete artefacts from this SFB might indicate a form of structured deposition: the deliberate selection of material for use in the closure of the pit (Knox 2012: 260–266; Hamerow 2006). Initial assessment of the pottery and artefacts suggests a 6th-century date for the abandonment of the sunken-featured building.

11. Triangular bone comb in situ, SFB 5

12. SFB5 was excavated in quadranted spits.
Timber hall

13. An aerial view looking east down the long axis of the timber ‘great hall’. SFB 5 is visible in the north-east corner (top left). Photograph: Hawkeye Elevated Photography

Morphology and layout

Measuring some 21m long by 8.5m wide externally, the hall was constructed on an east-west axis on sloping ground at the southern edge of the plateau of the spur of Tayne Field. Its outer walls were of post-in-trench construction, the long-wall trenches being interrupted by pairs of substantial pits marking the position of centrally-opposed entrances. There was evidence for an internal partition forming a narrow chamber, some 3.5m wide, at the eastern end of the building. The partition wall was represented by a discontinuous trench extending from the inner edge of the southern long-wall trench; its northern terminus, marked by a dense arrangement of flint nodules and a large ferruginous stone, likely represents the jamb of a communicating doorway aligned on the central axis of the building. There was no evidence for a continuation of the partition wall-trench on the other side of the doorway, at least not on the same alignment. However, such may be denoted by a slightly inset alignment of post settings extending from the internal face of northern long-wall.

Wall construction

Structural detail was generally best preserved at the upslope (northern and eastern) ends of the building, where the trenches cut through chalk or through a relatively shallow deposition of clay to reach the underlying chalk; in these portions, the depth of the wall-trenches averaged about 0.4m. In contrast, the south and east sides of the building were much more poorly preserved and uniformly shallow; the former was complete but averaged as little as 0.05m in depth, whereas the latter was missing its southern section due to truncation. Quite remarkably, the ghostly impressions of timber uprights, distinguishable from the surrounding orange clay as rectangular patches of a powdery white substance, could still be identified at the base of these poorly preserved sections of wall-trench. In the better preserved parts of the building the structural timbers showed up in
varying degrees of clarity as patches of dark grey silt within the surrounding backfill of redeposited clay/chalk. There was no evidence for structural timbers within the internal partition wall, the fill of which suggested that it either burnt in situ or was dismantled.

14. The north wall trench of the hall under excavation, indicating the paired plank construction method

A consistent wall construction technique was used throughout the building whereby planks of cut timber roughly 0.30m wide and 0.06-0.08m thick were set in parallel alignment at regular intervals along the central axis of the wall-trench. No detail survived for wattle rods, but wattle-and-daub panels (most likely sandwiched in between each of the paired-plank uprights) can be deduced from fragments of daub that survived in portions of the building that appear to have burnt in situ.

Doorways

Opposed entrances were identified at the midpoint of the long axis of the building and measured 1.4m (north) and 1.8m wide (south) respectively. In each case, the doorposts were set in substantial pits whose bases were located some 0.3-0.4m below the floor of the adjacent sections of wall-trench. Excavation established that the post-pits were cut by the termini of the adjacent wall-trenches; this indicates that the construction of the long-walls was initiated by the insertion of the door-posts. Structural detail showed that the posts comprised large cut planks of timber measuring approximately 0.5m wide and 0.1m thick; stone packing was used to align the
posts accurately on the central axes of the respective walls.

There was clear evidence that both of the doorways had been substantially repaired and/or replaced during the life of the building in the form of a secondary post-pit (eastern post of the south entrance) and a secondary stone packing (western pit of the north entrance).

16. Southern entrance to hall prior to excavation. The larger right-hand pit is of two intercutting phases demonstrating that the doorpost had been replaced during the life of the building.

Associated material culture

Neither internal floor surfaces nor a hearth survived within the footprint of the building, a fact that can be attributed to later plough truncation probably related to an overlying medieval field system (see below). In spite of this absence, a surprising quantity and range of artefacts — animal bone, pottery, vessel glass and other personal items — was recovered from the fills of the wall-trenches. Given that the hall was constructed amidst earlier settlement remains dating to the 6th century, careful consideration needs to be given to the interpretation of these cultural assemblages, specifically the distinction between material plausibly contemporary with the construction/use of the building, and residual material incorporated from earlier pre-hall phases of occupation. One should certainly expect a proportion of this material to be residual, but the former scenario must also be considered for the following three reasons. First, the secondary door-post pit of the southern entrance and the internal partition wall represent de facto contexts for the entrapment of contemporary occupation material. Second, the fills

17. Gilded copper-alloy horse-harness mount excavated from the east-end wall trench. c. AD 525-575
of the better preserved wall-trenches were characterised by concentrations of oyster shell, a class of ecofactual evidence very poorly represented in pre-hall contexts, including sunken-featured buildings rich in discarded food remains. Given this departure from previous dietary habits, the oyster (and indeed associated animal bone) could very well signify contemporary feasts/meals partaken by the hall-builders themselves. And third, evidence recovered from analogous Anglo-Saxon hall at Cowdery’s Down, Hants (Structure C12), showed that a gulley ran along the inner edge of the wall-line which might, under appropriate circumstances, act as a trap for contemporary occupational debris (Millett and James 1983: 217, fig. 57).
Saxo-Norman

The results obtained in 2012 demonstrate that occupation returned to the spur of Tayne Field during the Saxo-Norman era (ceramic dating indicates the core period for this occupation is c. AD 1080-1175, but may stretch back into the 10th century). The most obvious evidence was a dense cluster of pits confined to the southern half of the excavation trench, some of which were of massive proportions more familiar in contemporary urban contexts such as Saxo-Norman London. Although some of the pits contained household refuse, the primary component of many was human cess characterised by rich organic horizons abundant in digested fishbone; such horizons were frequently sealed by thick capping layers of chalk and stone building material.

18. Profile view across a Saxo-Norman pit showing cess deposits capped by layers of chalk and stone

Contemporary structural evidence was also found but is difficult to interpret due to poor levels of survival. If interpreted correctly, these buildings appear to have been constructed from widely-spaced timber uprights set upon flint post-pads – a construction technique entirely different to that used during the Anglo-Saxon occupation. Stratigraphical proof for this sequence was provided by several cases where flint post-pads cut Anglo-Saxon features.

A third strand to the Saxo-Norman occupation was a series of north-south boundary ditches confined to the western sector of the excavation. All cut through the Anglo-Saxon timber hall and terminated in the vicinity of its southern long-wall, indicating that they respected an east-west boundary feature. The westernmost of the ditches had the distinction of containing an articulated horse skeleton which lay directly on its base.

These discoveries shed important new light on a transitional period in Lyminge’s history when the Anglo-Saxon monastery and its dependent estates were absorbed piecemeal fashion into the archiepiscopal See of Canterbury - a process which was completed when the Norman Archbishop, Lanfranc, had Lyminge’s relics transferred to his new foundation of St Gregory’s Priory, Canterbury (Kelly 2006, 112-13). Of relevance to this subject is a series of earthworks located
to the west of the churchyard (on land formerly recorded as ‘Court Lodge Green’; HER 1410488) that have been linked to the site of an archiepiscopal residence at Lyminge, partly on the basis of ruinous stone buildings referred to by the antiquarian Canon Jenkins, writing in the 1850s. A programme of trial trenching in 2010 confirmed that Saxo-Norman domestic occupation, including rubbish and quarry pits, is indeed present within this area, although conclusive evidence for contemporary stone buildings was absent. Notwithstanding this uncertainty, the combined evidence from the 2010 and 2012 interventions suggests a fairly intense zone of Saxo-Norman occupation focused on the alignment of High Street. The pits can help to characterise this occupation, for the scale and density at which they are represented at Lyminge is an oddity in a medieval rural context. Managing domestic waste in this systematic way is suggestive of the upkeep of a domestic household sufficiently well-appointed to offer hospitality to visiting archbishops, such as the recorded sojourn made by Archbishop Peckham to Lyminge in 1279 (Jenkins 1874).

**Medieval**

Activity of medieval date was confined to a single east-west boundary ditch which bisected the excavation trench. The alignment of the ditch continues beyond the limits of the excavation as a subtle earthwork; this shows up particularly clearly in aerial views of Tayne Field alongside a further example located some 30m to the north. Taken in conjunction, these boundaries suggest that following the cessation of Saxo-Norman occupation, Tayne Field was parcelled into separate fields and placed under permanent or periodic cultivation.
Conclusions

As the source of the River Nailbourne, Lyminge represents one of the few settlements on the Downland plateau of south-east Kent enjoying a reliable water supply. There can be no doubt that to pre-industrial populations of the locality Lyminge was perceived as a vital, live-giving place and a prime site for habitation. Excavations in 2012 have demonstrated the time-depth of settlement and activity that one might expect for a site that literally commands the River Nailbourne, in the process bringing to light important insights into how prehistoric, Anglo-Saxon and Saxo-Norman people made their mark on Lyminge as a strategic place in the landscape.

Although a long-term context is crucial, it is the second of these three broad phases of archaeology which holds especial significance for the aims of the current research project. Up until 2012 there were hints that Lyminge might offer an unprecedented opportunity to investigate the domestic settlement remains of Anglo-Saxon royal vill in Kent for the first time (Thomas 2010). The inaugural year of the AHRC-funded campaign provided spectacular confirmation of Lyminge’s archaeological potential. The excavation of a major high-status hall - a striking new addition to a select repertoire of Anglo-Saxon ‘Great Halls’ known from Anglo-Saxon England - represents a major contribution to the archaeology of Anglo-Saxon Kent and England more generally. But what gives this remarkable discovery international significance is the fact that it may be situated within a continuous sequence of settlement development stretching back until the earliest horizon of Anglo-Saxon culture in Kent, and forward into the Christian period when Lyminge and other royal centres had monastic communities emplaced within them. Lyminge thus has the distinction of being one of the few archaeological sites in northern Europe offering an archaeological window for exploring the detailed social dynamics of early medieval Christianisation (Thomas & Knox 2012).
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