Lyminge
Excavations
2014

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

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Introduction

2014 marked the final season of a three-year campaign of excavation funded by the AHRC targeting Anglo-Saxon settlement remains preserved beneath Tayne Field, Lyminge. The main objectives of this closing season were twofold:

1) To characterise and date Anglo-Saxon activity in the vicinity of a ploughed-out Bronze Age barrow occupying the north-east edge of the plateau of Tayne Field, one of the principal targets of which was a large geophysical anomaly located on the south-east edge of the ring-ditch (Trench 1).

2) To uncover more of a substantial E-W timber hall identified in the western extension of 2013’s trench forming a component of Lyminge’s newly identified ‘great hall’ complex (Trench 2).

Figure 1. Geophysical survey of Tayne Field, Lyminge showing outline of 2012 and 2013 trenches in yellow.
Figure 2. Phase plan of all trenches excavated on Tayne Field 2012-2014 (plan by Simon Maslin)
Results

Bronze Age

Beaker burial

A completely unexpected discovery made in Trench 2 was a crouched inhumation burial on an N-S alignment accompanied by grave goods - a pottery ‘accessory’ vessel and a perforated bone ‘toggle’ - confirming an association with the Beaker tradition. Both the skeleton and associated grave goods were crushed and in a poor state of preservation due to the severity of truncation of the contemporary ground level.

Figure 3. The Beaker Burial excavated in Trench 2, the crushed accessory vessel can be seen in the foreground.

Figure 4. Bone ‘toggle’ from the Beaker Burial, found positioned underneath the lower back of the crouched inhumation. The toggle is c.60 mm in length and was potentially used to adjust the length of a textile or leather strap or belt.
Barrow

This monument first revealed itself as a 20 m diameter ring-ditch on a geophysical plot of Tayne Field and was subsequently confirmed to be the remains of a ploughed-out Bronze Age barrow in a trial excavation undertaken in April 2014. As well as sampling the perimeter ditch, the latter identified a cluster of four urned and one un-urned cremations at roughly the mid-point of the barrow (see Fig. 2). No new cremations were identified during the excavation of Trench 1 which demonstrated that truncation had removed all traces of the original ground level and barrow mound. The ring-ditch displayed a V-shaped profile and varied in dimensions from a maximum of 2.25 m wide and 1.2 m deep to a minimum of 1.3 m wide to 0.7 m deep. A consistent feature of the ditch’s infill sequence was a high constituent of clay, even in portions which had been dug through homogeneous chalk subsoil (the subsoil under Tayne Field comprises a degraded chalk interdigitated with overlying expanses of clay). Under normal circumstances one would expect evidence for a primary fill of eroded chalk from the sides of the ditch; the absence of this fill in several of the cuttings might indicate that the ditch was deliberately backfilled, either with material from the mound itself or from another source.

The cuttings across the ring-ditch produced a range of cultural material including a fragment of a Bronze Age copper alloy rapier or dirk, some diagnostic flint and a small assemblage of animal bone. A copper alloy tanged chisel was also found in cleaning back over the barrow.
Anglo-Saxon

Trench 1

Post-built hall complex

A complex arrangement of post-hole alignments discovered in the southern portion of the trench demonstrates that an E-W timber hall of multiple constructional phases was built on a prominent site straddling the southern arc of the Bronze Age ring-ditch. There was no direct stratigraphic evidence to indicate that the barrow was visible at the time that this structure was erected. But given that this is the first hall of this (early) constructional type to have been discovered on Tayne Field, it is hard to imagine that its positioning is purely coincidental. What follows is a simplified summary of the evidence, the full elucidation of which must await detailed post-exavation analysis.

Figure 8. Aerial view of the multiple phases of the post-built timber hall, built partially across the Bronze Age ring ditch.

At least three phases of building were represented in the complex palimpsest of post-holes, each of the constituent ground-plans having a fairly consistent internal width of 4 m, but with a greater variation in length ranging from 12 m to 15 m. Two of the halls constructed on this site had substantial doorways in the opposing sides of their long walls comprising cut planks set into oval pits; there was additional evidence to suggest that one of these halls had had its doorways replaced while the structure was still standing.

The function of this building must remain obscure in light of the fact that, as with the majority of excavated Anglo-Saxon timber buildings, its floor levels had long since

Figure 5. Northern entranceway in 6th-century post-built hall
been truncated away. On the other hand, there is some evidence to suggest that its construction/dismantling attracted ritual activity in the form of two potential ‘placed deposits’ - a copper-alloy annular brooch recovered from a door-post and a delicate copper-alloy pin from a post-hole associated with a western end wall. The typology of the artefacts supports the view (along with constructional technique) that these halls were occupied during the 6th century AD.

![Figure 9. Complete pin found in the post hole from the western end wall of the 6th-century timber hall](image)

“Figure 9. Complete pin found in the post hole from the western end wall of the 6th-century timber hall”

![Figure 10. Annular brooch excavated from a door post at the northern entrance to the 6th-century timber hall (41mm diameter)](image)

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“The Blob”

The large geophysical anomaly located on the south-east edge of the Bronze Age ring-ditch turned out to be one of the highlights of the six campaigns of excavation undertaken in Lyminge since 2008. This feature will henceforward be referred to by its familiar name – “The Blob” – in acknowledgement of the fact that its amorphous character and uncertain origin defy technical definition. Ultimately, it was not possible to complete the excavation of The Blob in the time available. At 1.9 m plus, the lower horizons extended below the safe limit of excavation; progress was also very slow because 100% of its infill was sieved to maximise the recovery of small artefacts such as beads and sherds of vessel glass. What follows is therefore an incomplete and highly schematised summary of a remarkable feature with a complex and enigmatic life history.

The Blob initially presented itself as a substantial ovoid feature c.18 m N-S by 12 m E-W, characterised by a dark carbon-rich fill containing a dense surface scatter of cultural material (Anglo-
Saxon pottery, animal bone, marine shell etc.), fringed on the northern side by a spread of flint metalling. In order to gain spatial control on the horizontal and vertical distribution of artefacts, The Blob was initially excavated in a series of 1m x 1m squares established on a grid, the level of selected squares being reduced at regular 100 mm spits in the ‘planar method’. This methodology was soon abandoned when it became apparent that The Blob was of considerable depth, a priority being to establish its full extent and depositionary history within the duration of the campaign. To this end, a series of adjacent squares were excavated on the pre-established grid pattern to give three 1 m-wide sondages: a complete E-W transect across its girth and two further slots driven in from its north and south edges stopping a metre short of the central transect.

Figure 11. (above) The Blob at an early stage of excavation, excavating on a 1x1 m grid and in 100 mm spits

The results of this sampling demonstrate that The Blob is a large crater-like feature infilled by an extended sequence of dumped deposits, some forming recognisable episodes or horizons. The overall sequence can be simplified into three broad phases of deposition: an upper phase c. 55 cm thick similar in character and composition to the infilling of SFBs previously excavated at Lyminge; a middle phase (c. 88 cm at its thickest point) characterised by interleaved deposits of charcoal and burnt clay containing dense concentrations of iron slag; and a lower phase some c.65 cm thick featuring a distinct horizon of dumped midden material at c.1.5 m below the contemporary ground surface.

Figure 12. (left) The metalled surface at the northern edge of The Blob visible here in the foreground, made up of packed flints and pebbles.
Figure 13. South-facing section of E-W transect through 'The Blob'
Figure 14. E-W section through The Blob. The lower midden horizon is visible below the contexts containing burnt material. The hearth in the following image is visible in section here as the orange context in the middle of the photo.

The discovery of an *in situ* hearth 66 cm below the surface of the contemporary ground level in the E-W sondage indicates that these phases of infilling were punctuated by periods of stabilisation when the sunken area of the midden was exploited for industrial and/or craftworking activity, the precise nature of which will hopefully be identified in the future on the basis of samples taken for geochemical analysis. A further hearth cut through the adjacent area of flint metalling overlain by the latest episode of dumping demonstrates that this portion of the Tayne Field spur remained a focus for industrial activity for an extended period of time.

The earliest horizon of dumping yet excavated was found to seal a deposit of flint nodules one layer thick extending over an area of 2 m E-W by 0.3 m thick (full N-S extent unknown), located 1.91 m below the contemporary ground surface. The homogeneous

Figure 15. Plan view of the hearth indicating industrial activity within the midden area
nature of the flints and their tight clustering (ostensibly ‘cobbling’) suggests that they were laid in situ as opposed to being redeposited. The purpose of this cobbling remains unclear as the small area examined failed to produce evidence for an associated activity; none of the flints was heat affected and there were no distinct deposits or artefacts laying directly on their surface. A core taken at this level indicates that deposition within the deepest portion of The Blob extends at least a further 1.4m below the flint horizon.

The deposits excavated from The Blob produced large assemblages of artefactual and bioarchaeological material, diagnostic elements of which confirm that the majority of the dumping occurred in the 6th century though perhaps with an inception in the latter part of the preceding century.

It is possible to identify a number of interesting patterns in the material culture of The Blob. First, the number of complete non-ferrous objects was heavily outnumbered by fragments and offcuts attesting to metalworking, an activity further expressed in crucible and mould fragments. This fine metalworking took place alongside iron smelting represented by large volumes of slag and the redeposited remains of furnace lining/superstructure concentrated in, though not exclusive to, the central phase of dumping. The other cultural activity clearly adducible from the finds is feasting represented by 226 sherds of vessel glass (excluding 18 glass beads) dominated by various contemporary types of cone and claw beaker, accompanied by prodigious quantities of animal bone.
Figure 19. Copper alloy-working scraps and offcuts indicative of manufacture and recycling

Figure 20. Mould and crucible fragments from The Blob

Figure 21. A small selection of the 226 sherds of Anglo-Saxon vessel glass excavated from The Blob
Trench 2

The Western building of the ‘Great Hall’ complex

One of the major achievements of last season’s excavation was to reveal the former existence of a major Anglo-Saxon hall construction at the western end of Tayne Field masked by the demolished detritus of mess huts constructed in Lyminge during World War II (Thomas & Knox 2014, 10-11). The available evidence suggested that we had chanced upon the north-west corner of a building laid out on an E-W alignment displaying what appeared to be multiple constructional phases akin to the complex of post-in-trench halls excavated in the central portion of 2013’s trench. One of the key aims of the 2014 excavation was to recover more of this building to elucidate its constructional history and relationship to the rest of the Anglo-Saxon ‘great hall’ complex now known to have been constructed in Lyminge during the 7th century A.D.

Figure 22. Pre-excavation aerial view of Trench 2. The plank-in-trench hall is in the central third of the trench, and was partially excavated in 2013

The larger window opened up across this building in 2014 confirmed that this was indeed a substantial structure measuring in excess of 21 m long (the eastern end wall lay beyond the limits of the excavation) and 8.2 m wide internally. Remarkably, given the degree of disturbance suffered in this part of Tayne Field (much of the area had been terraced in advance of the construction of the World War II structures and the subsoil was riddled with drains and intrusive features of modern, medieval and Saxo-Norman date), enough of the ground-plan survived to enable the main constructional phases of the building to be identified.

In summary, the evidence indicates that the building passed through three phases of construction/(re-)construction on broadly the same footprint, with each phase displaying a different style of wall construction. One of the challenges involved in interpreting the evolution of this building from the ground-plan evidence is that only parts of the structure, most notably the northern long wall, were completely rebuilt from foundational level; in the case of the southern long wall, the
The foundation trench dug for the first phase of the building appears to have been retained for subsequent phases. The north long wall provided the key for unlocking the constructional history of the building because this was the only portion of the excavated structure where the foundations were re-cut with each phase of reconstruction, resulting in slight divergences in alignment.

Figure 23. View of the north wall of the plank-in-trench timber hall, Trench 2, showing the different phases of construction including the plank construction, the later stone-packed external raking posts, and the final replacement using individual timber posts.

What can be adduced from the north-wall sequence is that the first building to be erected on this site had walling identical to that used in the construction of the E-W hall excavated in 2012 – namely, pairs of planked uprights set in parallel alignment without exterior raking-posts. In a subsequent phase, the building was reconstructed with walls comprising single planked uprights set towards the exterior edge of the foundation trench flanked by massive stone-packed raking posts.
mimicking the N-S halls excavated in 2013. In a final phase, the north wall (but not the south) was replaced by sturdier timber uprights set in individual post-pits instead of foundation trenches without exterior raking posts.

In terms of layout, the first two constructional phases of the building were furnished with an eastern partition wall. This partition was pierced by a central doorway displaying precise axial alignment with an external doorway in the eastern end wall of the building. It may be noted that these entrances display precise alignment with the main doorways through the long-walls of the N-S halls excavated in 2013, a feature recalling the ‘ritual symmetry’ observed in the layout of other high-status hall-complexes of the 7th century (Reynolds 2003, 106; Hamerow 2013, 102-5).

Evidence recovered from the northern portion of the building indicates that long walls were pierced by further, centrally-located entrances, comprising sturdy posts set in deep oval pits held in position with stone packing. Consolidated lumps of opus signinum used as packing material in the partition wall of the second phase structure suggests that one or more phases of the hall which stood on this site could have had elaborate flooring of the type more certainly adduced for the N-S hall complex excavated in 2013 (Thomas & Knox 2014, 9).
**Saxo-Norman**

Occupation of this date, chiefly represented by pit clusters, had been encountered in the previous two excavations on Tayne Field so it was of no surprise to find similar evidence in 2014. All of the pits dating to this period, some 21 in total were found in Trench 2. They were represented in two defined clusters, one at the southern and the other in the central portion of the trench, the latter within and around the footprint of the earlier Anglo-Saxon hall.

**Medieval**

Two perpendicular portions of ditch of medieval date (13-14th century) formed the latest phase of pre-modern activity in Trench 2. These form part of a wider network of ditched field boundaries extending across Tayne Field when this area of the village was presumably brought under arable cultivation.

**Conclusions**

From an archaeological point of view, Tayne Field is a site that keeps on giving. The archaeological riches bestowed in 2014 were in every way as spectacular and illuminating as those of the previous two campaigns, but harboured some notable surprises and novelties. In many senses, this was the perfect concluding season because the results complemented what had been discovered hitherto while opening up completely new dimensions in our understanding of Lyminge’s development as an Anglo-Saxon settlement and place of royal power.

As a result of 2014’s excavation we are incomparably better informed on Lyminge’s origins and incipient development in the 5th and 6th centuries A.D. thanks to the discovery of what can justifiably be called the ‘ancestral focus’ of the settlement. As has been shown to be the case with many Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and settlements up and down the country, Lyminge’s establishment appears to have been entwined with the symbolic appropriation of a prehistoric monument, in this case a Bronze Age barrow (Crewe 2012; Semple 2013). Appropriation during the pioneering stages of the settlement is expressed in the construction of a post-built hall over the southern berm of the barrow, an association which was redefined and memorialised in at least two subsequent episodes of rebuilding; a potential ritual role for this building can be posited on the grounds of placed deposits of metalwork made in its foundations.

Lyminge’s importance as an early medieval ‘politico-religious’ centre can now be elucidated in fine-grained detail thanks to the rich midden deposits recovered from ‘The Blob’ deposited during same general phase of occupation as the sunken featured buildings previously excavated on Tayne Field and the post-built hall immediately to the west. What emerges powerfully from a provisional assessment of these cultural assemblages is the juxtaposition of conspicuous consumption with craft specialisation. This combination speaks directly of the importance of these cultural activities as constructs of social and political power at a time when regional hegemonies – the forerunners of the earliest historically attested kingdoms - were starting to emerge across Anglo-Saxon England (Scull 2011).

The character of Lyminge as an Anglo-Saxon settlement was to be radically transformed in the seventh century when the ancestral settlement was swept aside to make way for the construction of monumental suite of timber halls marking Lyminge’s formal appropriation as a royal vill (Thomas 2013). As a result of 2014’s excavation we now know a great deal more about the most westerly of these structures occupying a dominant position at the highest point of the spur of Tayne Field. Although much disturbed by later activity and partially masked by a modern playground, this was potentially the largest and most opulent of the halls constructed at Lyminge. We can say with confidence that it was built to precise specifications as part of a planned layout for its entrances aligned perfectly with those belonging to the N-S hall complex to the south; like these more
diminutive structures, following initial construction it was replaced (or at least substantially altered) on two subsequent occasions and may have featured opulent opus signinum flooring in one or more phases.

It would be impossible to end this conclusion without a final word on ‘The Blob’ – a feature which has generated more baffled wonderment and head-scratching than any other in the three campaigns of excavation. What is its date of origin? Is it man-made or natural? What were those flint cobbles used for? Thanks to the generosity of a private donor and the HLF-funded ‘Up on the Downs’ Landscape Partnership Scheme we hope that the answers to these fundamental questions will be forthcoming in a final targeted excavation in August 2015. Be sure to keep up with project blog to see the mystery of The Blob unravelled and perhaps even solved.
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Bibliography


