

Old Horsepath Church: The Devil's Work?

Some new thoughts. Chris 11/9/2018

(Mea culpa: In this note I have shamelessly pillaged and greatly shortened an excellent lengthy review published in this month's Current Archaeology journal – essential reading for all amateur archaeologists)

A recently published book by John Blair, the eminent historian of The Queen's College Oxford, entitled “Building Anglo-Saxon England” is based to a large degree on the results of his re-analysis of 30 years of (mandatory) developer-funded archaeology.

In most cases these have been largely unpublished in the wider public sense, except in “grey literature” reports to the funders, as was the case with the recent excavations on the new BMW sports field. (which has still not surfaced in any public document as yet - I have kept a keen watch!)

Blair makes a very valid point that our current knowledge of later Saxon structures – as, say, with our OH church - is greatly limited by the fact that in many cases they had no foundations at all and thus leave no trace in the excavation records; the buildings' timber framework merely resting on a number of large flat stones. The very few of this type that *have* been recorded were only discovered using meticulous and time-intensive procedures of a kind that are rarely possible under the time and cost pressures that prevail under developer-funded contracts.

In cases where evidence for foundations has been found, the signs are not ones to bring joy to any treasure-hunting metal-detectorist! :-

BELOW Perhaps the most familiar of all early to mid-Saxon building types: the sunken-featured building (SFB) – here under excavation by Oxford Archaeology at the Horcott Pit gravel extraction site, Fairford, Gloucestershire.



Likewise, post-holes usually give us no idea as to what the superstructure looked like! :-



Another example of how a post can support a structure we can only guess at. In this case. A modern drinking feast at the shrine of the spirit guardian of the forest in Scandinavia.

However, (the plot thickens..) This reconstruction (below) in the Weald and Downland Museum of a 10th century aisled hall (or church) using timbers from a London waterfront structure. It shows clearly that houses could be made of prefabricated elements that were specifically designed to be assembled and dismantled rapidly using tusk tenons and pegs for the joints. Hence our expectations of test-pitting results for the OH church foundations should not, perhaps, be set too high!





Details of the corner of the building showing dowels.

Focusing on foundations and postholes demonstrates how easy it is to underestimate the sophistication of Anglo-Saxon buildings. Excavated features are often unprepossessing, while postholes and wall trenches –if they exist at all - can look crude and amorphous, and it requires imagination to visualise the fine craftsmanship of the (movable) superstructure and interiors.

In reconstruction drawings, archaeological illustrators have erred on the side of simplicity and plainness. Given the technical excellence and complexity of much Anglo-Saxon art, though, Blair suggests this is timid.

The surviving fragments of early medieval buildings – as well as ethnographic parallels in Northern Europe and Scandinavia – demonstrate technical sophistication in the cutting and fitting of timbers, craftsmanship of a high order that must surely have been extended to the internal embellishments.

Apropos of which, surviving wills from AD 950-1050 reinforce Blair's suggestion that cloth constituted the all-pervasive domestic environment for most Anglo-Saxons – it was the hangings and embellishments that turned a house into a home (or a church..). Some have seen this as primitive: in the 1130s, William of Malmesbury looked back scathingly on the lifestyle of previous generations, when “*communal drinking was universal and they devoted their nights to it as much as their days. In small miserable houses, they consumed their affluence – unlike the French and the Normans*”.

Blair suggests that the importance of these luxurious hangings can be glimpsed in two late-10th-century wills – those of Wynflæd (d. 950/960), an Anglo-Saxon noblewoman and a major landowner, and of the widow Wulfwaru (c.984–1016). They list a long and a short hall-hanging, a bed-hanging, and a chamber-hanging, implying specialisation in the ways that they were made and perceived. How the hangings were used can be seen in manuscripts from around the year AD 1000, which depict rich and heavy drapes running along curtain rails or tied back to flank door posts, demarcating different areas of the building or providing a degree of privacy, perhaps also contributing to warmth and sound-proofing.

Quite handy in a draughty wooden-framed church perched high up on ridge overlooking the Thames Valley in Winter... (not that I'm suggesting for one minute that they had drinking bouts in church!)

Blair concludes : “*Carts bumping along decaying Roman roads laden with poles, rails, panels, and bundles of cloth or leather’ explain much that was distinctive (and transient) about the Anglo-Saxon built landscape. This was not an earth- and stonemoving culture. Although there are enclosures, forts, and linear earthworks, they do not compare with those of the Neolithic, Iron-Age, Roman, or Anglo-Norman eras.*

(NB: But what price, then, the absolute accuracy of the ancient Horspath legend that: “*The Devil moved OH church down to Lower Horspath...?* If so, it must have seemed like a Black Magic miracle to those old country folk. Or a peasant reaction to the Norman bishop pulling down the old church and moving it? Maybe that’s why it became stuck in the collective consciousness of the village down the last millennia ? I had a wonderful vision of the dis-assembled old church creaking its way across the top of our allotments around AD 1200 on half a dozen wonky old ox-carts, accompanied by cheering children; & then being re-erected where its later stone descendant is now. It’s certainly not at the centre of the early village, in my opinion. Perhaps Ford's Close would be a better bet.

The preference for timber structures founded lightly in the earth proved to be remarkably resilient through four centuries of economic, social, and political development and, for all that they were initially disruptive and destructive, the Vikings did not bring about major change – they were, after all, part of the same northern European cultural world as the English.

Below: Our only surviving Anglo-Saxon timber church – St Andrew, Greensted-juxta-Ongar, Essex – has a nave that was built in the traditional Saxon style out of split oak tree trunks c.1063–1110. It is a remarkable survivor of the small, highly decorated spaces resembling a Greek or Russian Orthodox church that had previously served for worship in England, and which was not obviously different in style to the human dwellings that they served.



(NB:I suspect the gable windows are a later feature)

But the fashion for marking out God's house as eternal had already spread from the Continent and as the only Anglo-Saxon timber building still standing in Britain it represents a type of small church that was once ubiquitous in Anglo-Saxon regions until the great period of rebuilding in stone began.

Thus between AD 1040 and 1120, the Normans began a virtual clean sweep of English churches of timber in favour of masonry cathedrals, churches, and abbeys, something that must have been traumatic for those who lived through it. Meanwhile, the domestic builders of the 11th and 12th centuries soon began to use the same materials and techniques for their own dwellings, thus eroding the clear-cut contrast between the habitations of God and man that has persisted ever since, and which is the basis of the modern built environment.

Further reading : Building Anglo-Saxon England (2018), by John Blair, Princeton University Press, £40, ISBN 978-0691162980