17. THE EARLY ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD

The precise date and manner of the English settlement is still a matter of considerable debate. The traditional view is that invading Anglo-Saxons drove out or killed the Romanised inhabitants of Britain. However, at the end of the Roman period we have little archaeological evidence of violent destruction. Some Germanic people were in fact deliberately settled in Britain by the Romans to help defend the province against civil unrest and invading barbarians. Late Roman metalwork of a type associated with these Germanic mercenaries has been found in Suffolk at Lakenheath, Icklingham, Hindolclay, Nacton, Ufford, Sweffling and Felixstowe.

By the mid-5th century the Lark, Blackbourn and Little Ouse valleys of west Suffolk had been settled by a mixed group of immigrants of Anglian, Saxon and Frisian origin. They used 'facetted-angled' pottery of a type that can be matched in the Elbe-Weser area of Germany. Objects of the early 5th century are also turning up now in the south-east of the county (except, for some reason, in the Shotley peninsula). It looks likely that the Anglo-Saxon colonists established themselves at the heads of the Orwell and Deben estuaries, and made use of the Gipping corridor through the central clay region to reach the valleys of the Lark and Blackbourn in the north-west. The recent discovery of cruciform brooches at Flixfon and South Elmham in the Waveney valley hints at similar early settlement along that route as well. The extensive clay soils of central Suffolk show no traces of settlement, although we know that they were occupied in the Roman period. The fate of those Romano-British settlements and of their once substantial populations remains unknown. It therefore seems that the early Anglo-Saxon settlers of Suffolk, whether invited or invaders, moved into an already managed landscape, but for themselves preferred the more easily worked lighter soils and gravel terraces.

West Stow is the only settlement of the period to have been extensively examined, although fragments of others have been excavated at Honington, Grimston End in Pakenham, Little Bealings and Hacheston. The settlement at West Stow is, however, probably typical of communities of the period. It consisted of a number of family units, each with a hall and up to six other buildings for storage, workshops and living accommodation. Their mixed economy was based on the growing of wheat, barley, rye and peas, and keeping of sheep, cattle, pigs, horses and goats, supplemented by fishing, wildfowling and some hunting of red and roe deer. Settlement of this type seems to have been successful and largely self-sufficient, trading by the late 6th century, in only luxury items such as jewellery, occasional glassware and some pottery.

Much of our information concerning the early Anglo-Saxons comes from cemeteries. Both inhumation and cremation burials are known and the distribution of the two rites is shown on the map opposite. Superficially it would appear that cemeteries with inhumations outnumber those with cremations by 2:1, but this could be misleading. Very few cemeteries have been extensively excavated and when they are, as recently at Snape, what is considered to be a cremation cemetery can in fact produce inhumation as well. The cemetery at Lackford with more than 390 cremations appears to have served a large area whereas the inhumation cemeteries probably served individual settlements. The extraordinary ship-burials at Snape and Sutton Hoo must surely be royal and demonstrate the wealth, power and widespread contacts of the East Anglian dynasty, the Wuffingas.

The most prominent features of this period are the large dykes built across the Icknield Way. Only the most easterly of these, the Black Ditches, is in Suffolk. The largest is the Devil's Dyke, just west of Newmarket. The purpose and date of these earthworks is uncertain, but they appear to be late Roman or later, and were built against an enemy approaching from the west.

The 7th century was a period of great change. The consolidation of the kingdom of East Anglia, the advent of Christianity and the development of Ipswich as a town trading with the Rhineland, were reflected in the countryside by the abandonment of old settlements and the establishment of new. Whatever the causes of this shift of population, the move, if West Stow is typical, took place over several generations. Some of the new sites became the cores of late Saxon and medieval villages, while others were merely outlying farms.

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Stanley West

A reconstructed Anglo-Saxon hall at West Stow.
18. THE LATER ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD

The existing framework of villages and towns in Suffolk was established in the four centuries before the Norman Conquest. At the beginning of this period, in the early 7th century, the East Anglian kingdom under the Wuffinga dynasty was independent, powerful and economically successful. However, it was increasingly threatened by its Mercian neighbours to the west. The linear earthworks of Devil's Dyke (just in Cambridgeshire) and the Black Ditches could well represent the East Anglian response to the threat of Mercian invasion. After the death of King Anna in 654, East Anglia was indeed dominated by Mercia, though it did retain its own kings until the late 9th century.

The Fens and extensive claylands of central Suffolk had been largely abandoned after the end of the Roman period, but they were re-occupied during the Middle Saxon period (c. AD 650-850). By the 9th century the majority of our villages had been founded, though not necessarily on the same sites as today. Systematic fieldwork in south-east Suffolk has provided the first comprehensive picture of the density of settlement in the Middle and Later Saxon periods. Although few rural settlements have as yet been excavated, Middle Saxon sites have been investigated at Brandon and Butley. The settlement at Brandon lies on a small 'island' with the Little Ouse River on one side and marsh on the others. Over twenty rectangular timber buildings were excavated, including large halls and a church with a burial ground. Among the items found are glass vessels, window glass, bronze stilt and a gold plaque depicting St John the Evangelist; collectively these indicate a high ranking settlement with a literate and devout Christian population. At Burrow Hill, Butley, limited excavation revealed traces of buildings and a cemetery with predominantly male burials.

The process of urbanisation began when Ipswich was founded in the late 6th or early 7th century (see Map 72). This town remained Suffolk's major industrial centre and trading port until the middle of the 9th century. Royal villas of the Middle Saxon period (the residences of peregrinate kings) probably provided a network for the distribution of Ipswich's products and imports, as well as points where exports could be collected. After the Danes had conquered and settled the region in the late 9th century, markets were functioning at Ipswich, Sudbury, Bury St Edmunds and Dunwich. By 1086, a further seven markets are recorded for Beccles, Blythburgh, Clare, Eye, Haverhill, Hoxne and Thorney (Stowmarket) (see Map 74).

The Great Army of the Danes arrived in 865, and began to settle the area from 879. Curiously, only five major place-names in Suffolk appear to be purely Danish in origin. However, their influence is clearly greater at the level of minor place-names (see Map 21) and 'Viking' objects are being increasingly found in the county, especially at Ipswich where a significant Danish presence is likely in the late 9th and early 10th centuries.

Christianity was smothered at the end of the Roman period, but re-introduced into East Anglia in the early 7th century. The first bishop, Felix, established his see at Dunmow (probably Dunwich, although Walton near Felixstowe is still a possibility) in the 630s, and the population of the kingdom seems to have been quickly converted, at least nominally. A second see was established later in the century, probably in the 860s, almost certainly at South Elmham. In the 10th century, after the Danish invasions, bishops were re-established at Hoxne and at North Elmham in Norfolk.

In the 630s monasteries were founded at Bury St Edmunds and Burgh Castle, and another at Iken in 654, but little is known of these early foundations. Excavations at Burgh Castle in 1960-1 revealed a possible church, cemetery and some curious oval structures interpreted as 'wattle and daub beehives'. In 1977 excavations at St Botolph's church at Iken revealed traces of Middle Saxon occupation; built into the tower was a carved cross-slab of the late 9th or early 10th century which had possibly been a memorial to Botolph, founder of the monastery. It is possible that the excavated sites at Brandon and Butley, mentioned above, were also monasteries. Documents also reveal monastic foundations at Clare, Mendham, Rumburgh, Stoke-by-Nayland, Sudbury and perhaps Blythburgh (see Map 21).

From the late 7th century onwards, churches were constructed in almost all settlements, and over 400 are recorded in 1086. Architectural details of Saxon date only survive in thirteen Suffolk churches, and most of these could well be 11th-century. However, most churches would originally have been built of timber, and it was probably not until the 11th century that stone came into widespread use. Significantly, Saxon details survive mainly in small churches which were not greatly enlarged or improved in later centuries. One early timber church has recently been excavated within the Middle Saxon settlement at Brandon.

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