Rendlesham *revealed*

Archaeologists **Faye Minter**, **Jude Plouviez** and **Christopher Scull** have worked, together with four tireless detectorists, to locate, uncover and excavate the site of an important 7th-century Anglo-Saxon royal settlement in south-east Suffolk

1. The parish church of St Gregory the Great, Rendlesham. © Suffolk County Council.

Rendlesham is a rural parish in the valley of the River Deben in south-east Suffolk. The modern village is on the site of a Second World War airfield, some distance from the parish church of St Gregory the Great, but this is a place with a long history. The tower of the medieval church (**1**), overlooking the river, is a prominent local landmark, and its dedication to the Pope who despatched St Augustine to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity hints at the possibility of an even earlier connection. The Venerable Bede, a Northumbrian monk writing in the early 8th century AD, records in his *History of the English Church and People* that *Rendlaesham* was the East Anglian royal settlement where Aethelwold, king of the East Angles, stood sponsor at the

baptism of Swithelm, king of the East Saxons, at some time between AD 655 and 664.

Because of Bede's reference there has always been interest in Rendlesham and this intensified after the discovery in 1939 of the ship burial at Sutton Hoo, just four miles away down the Deben valley (**2**). It seemed likely that this spectacular grave was somehow linked to the royal settlement recorded by Bede, and that the heartland of royal power in what is now south-east Suffolk may have centred on a royal territory at the head of the Deben estuary.

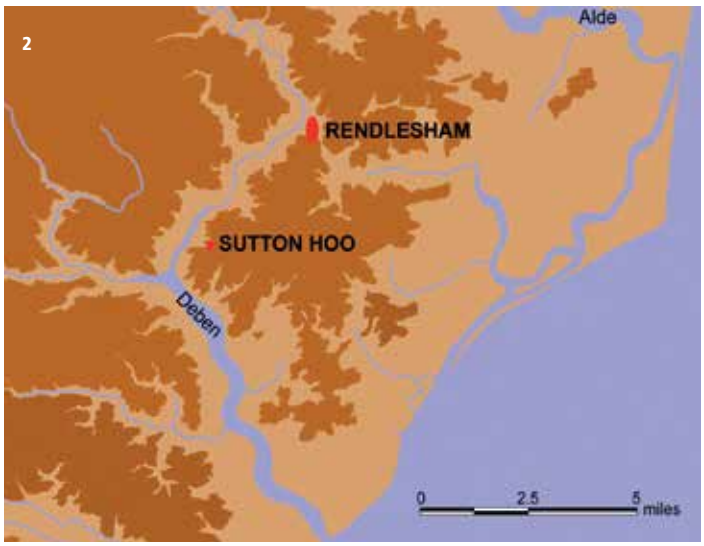
Subsequent excavations by Professor Martin Carver at Sutton Hoo (see pages 26 to 31) have shown that the ship burial was one of several equally high-status graves in a cemetery that appears to have been reserved for the highest social ranks – probably the ruling family of the early East Anglian kingdom.

Hard evidence for the location of a 7th-century royal site at Rendlesham, however, remained frustratingly elusive. Anglo-Saxon cremation burials were dug up in the early 19th century but archaeological excavation in the late 1940s to locate the spot found nothing despite being undertaken by Basil Brown, the local archaeologist who uncovered the Sutton Hoo boat grave, and Rupert Bruce-Mitford, the British Museum expert who oversaw the study and publication of the find.

In 1982, fieldwalking (that is the systematic collection of pottery from the surface of ploughed fields) found evidence for Roman, Anglo-Saxon and medieval settlement near the parish church, but there was nothing about the Anglo-Saxon pottery that would indicate a site of special status.

This changed in 2007 when the landowners of the Naunton Hall estate at Rendlesham, Sir Michael and Lady Bunbury, reported that night-hawks (illegal metal-detectorists) had been active in their fields at night, damaging crops and stealing metal artefacts.

Recognising the likely importance, Suffolk County Council's Archaeological Service, with the landowners' agreement, funded an official metal-detector survey over a limited area to understand what exactly was attracting thieves. This was timed to avoid damaging crops, and differed from the illegal activity in being systematic rather than



2. Map showing the location of Rendlesham and Sutton Hoo in the south-east of Suffolk. © Suffolk County Council.

3. Anglo-Saxon objects found at Rendlesham in 2008. From top left clockwise: two gold coins (*tremisses*) and a silver coin, a fragment of a brooch and a harness mount, both made of copper alloy. © Suffolk County Council.

opportunistic: the precise location of finds was properly logged and the finds themselves were retained for study rather than being sold for profit without any record being made. This yielded firm information about where and what sorts of objects had been lost or buried in the past, from which it is possible to deduce past human activity.

Among the material recovered by the pilot metal-detecting survey were items such as high-quality metalwork and gold coins (**3**) that could only come from an important Anglo-Saxon settlement, which explained why thieves were regularly returning to the site.

Geophysical survey and the study of aerial photographs over the same area showed that the metalwork finds were associated with buried archaeological features such as pits and ditches. The evidence raised the exciting possibility that survey had located part of the royal centre mentioned by Bede, and the distance of some of the fields surveyed from those fieldwalked in 1982 suggested something larger than most Anglo-Saxon settlements.

In order to get a fuller picture of the archaeology, and to understand both what it said about the past and how to protect it for the future, survey of a much larger area was needed. But paying for a comprehensive metal-detector survey would have been prohibitively expensive. Instead, the four detectorists who had undertaken the pilot study, all of whom had archaeological training and experience, made a private agreement with the landowner to survey the whole estate to the same standards. Suffolk County Council co-ordinated finds recording with expert academic and professional guidance, and was able to commission some complementary fieldwork including further geophysics and limited excavation.

The main survey began in 2009 and fieldwork was completed in the summer of 2014. Because this is a working farm, survey and fieldwork had to be fitted in to the cultivation cycle, necessitating very close liaison with farmer and landowner. Announcing any news of the project prematurely ran the risk of further damage to crops and archaeology from illegal detecting, and so it was

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kept under wraps until the end of the fieldwork.

The four metal-detectorists (4) spent 1,206 man-days over the five years covering a 160-hectare (400-acre) survey area. They worked systematically, walking in lines two metres apart to enable 100 percent ground coverage in the detector sweeps. All arable fields were surveyed at least twice, and the detectorists retrieved pottery and flint artefacts, visually identified on the surface, as well as metal items. Finds were located using a hand-held GPS and then catalogued on a database linked to the project GIS (Geographic Information System), allowing the integration and rapid interrogation of different classes of information.

The data base holds records of 3,946 items ranging in date from the Neolithic (4000–2350 BC) to the Early Modern (after AD 1650), but this represents only a fraction of the material found.

The detectorists have made around 100,000 finds, the vast majority of which are the detritus of 19th- and 20th-century farming and

4. Aerial view of the four tireless metal detectorists, Rob Atfield, Roy Damant, Terry Marsh and Alan Smith, working in parallel on a ploughed field at Rendlesham. The pattern of their footprints shows how they systematically covered the whole area. © Historic England.

game shooting. Everything collected comes from the surface or within the top 20cms of the ploughsoil, not from undisturbed archaeological layers, and all modern material is disposed of away from the fields.

Geophysical survey was undertaken across an area of 46 hectares where concentrations of finds revealed by metal-detecting indicated the core of past settlement and activity. The results show an extensive complex of boundaries, enclosures and settlement features, which represent activity from late prehistory to the 20th century.

Mapping archaeological features from aerial photographs provided further information. Because of the ground conditions at Rendlesham some archaeological features that were not detected by geophysics show as crop marks, and vice-versa, so the two techniques complement each other and add an additional dimension to the finds distributions revealed by metal-detecting. A very important discovery is what appears to be the crop mark (5) of a large timber hall (23m long and 9.5m wide). This is comparable in size to the excavated foundations of buildings at Yeavering in Northumbria and Lyminge in Kent, both known royal sites of the 7th century AD, and strengthens the case for this being the settlement recorded by Bede.

Surface finds and remote sensing, however, can only reveal so much, and so conclusions drawn from geophysical survey and metal-detector finds were tested by excavation. Seven small trenches, targeted at specific archaeological features identified by geophysics or concentrations of artefacts in the ploughsoil, gave keyhole insights into the character, date and preservation of the buried archaeology across the site.

Excavation showed that an oval enclosure identified by geophysics belonged to a late Iron-Age farmstead that was occupied until the first half of the 1st century AD, and that boundary ditches close to the edge of the green shown on 17th- and 18th-century maps were dug in the 10th and 11th centuries AD,

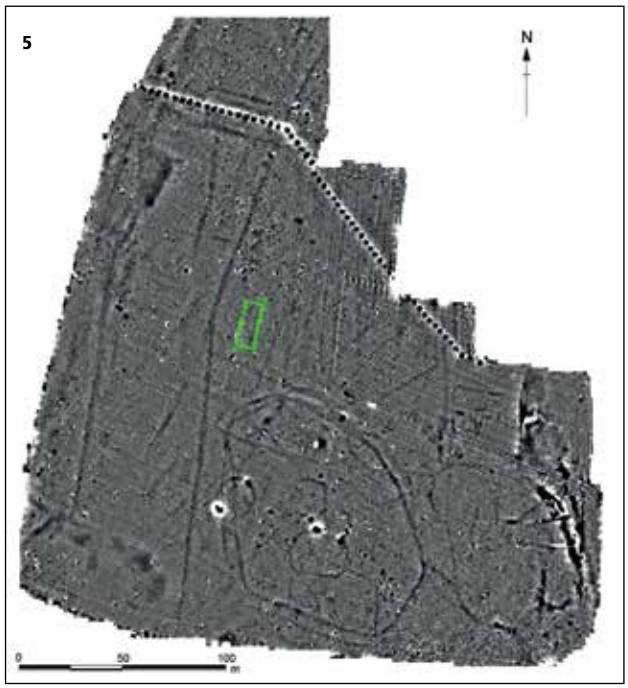
suggesting that the medieval green village had late Anglo-Saxon origins. Most importantly, excavation confirmed Anglo-Saxon settlement features of the 5th to 8th centuries AD across a large area, and located part of an associated cemetery (**6**).

Survey and excavation both show a complex sequence of continuous human occupation and activity at Rendlesham from late prehistory up to the modern day with a particularly large, rich and important settlement here during the 6th to 8th centuries AD. This is the most extensive and materially wealthy settlement of its time known in England, and is almost certainly the site of the royal centre mentioned by Bede.

The Anglo-Saxon finds cover an area of 50 hectares (120 acres) and speak of a complex community with a wide social range and specialised skills: slaves and servants, farm workers, craftsmen and officials as well as warriors and aristocrats.

The metalwork finds include pieces of the highest quality, made for and used by the highest ranks of society, but most are lower value items, and there is evidence that craftsmen at Rendlesham itself were making both elite jewellery and utilitarian metal fittings (**7** and **9**). Gold coinage from the Frankish kingdoms, hanging bowls from western or northern Britain, and copper-alloy vessels from the eastern Mediterranean show that the higher social ranks enjoyed wide-ranging contacts. Some of these items would have been obtained as gifts in the normal course of social and diplomatic relationships between ruling families, and this is how the hanging bowls and Coptic basin in the Sutton Hoo ship-burial have usually been explained, but finds of low value Byzantine copper coinage at Rendlesham suggest the occasional presence of traders from the Mediterranean and so some of these objects may have been acquired through direct commercial transactions.

Animal bones thrown away as rubbish and collected during excavation can shed further light on lifestyles. At least some of the people at Rendlesham enjoyed a diet rich in meat, with young animals (veal, suckling pig and lamb) high on the menu. Remains of horses, hawks and hounds suggest riding, hunting and falconry. Finds of elaborate gilded harness fittings (**8**) also point to the importance of horses to elite culture and identity.



5. Geophysics image of a field at Rendlesham with the crop mark of the possible Anglo-Saxon hall superimposed in green. © Suffolk County Council.

6. Alan Smith working in the excavation trench, with a section cut across a large ditch and dark soil layer containing Anglo-Saxon pottery and much animal bone debris. © Suffolk County Council.

Rendlesham has been identified as a royal estate centre, a place where dues and tributes were collected and where the East Anglian kings would have stayed, feasted their followers and administered justice. There are other sites in the region that would also have served as temporary residences as the royal household travelled around the kingdom but, at present, Rendlesham appears to have been the largest and the longest-lived of these places. It is at such centres that the East Anglian kings would have received emissaries from other rulers, and to which foreign merchants, bringing luxuries for royalty and aristocracy, would have travelled.

Archaeology shows that this was already an important place before the first burials were made at Sutton Hoo at the beginning of the 7th century, and when Bede was writing more than 100 years later. The people buried at Sutton Hoo would have known and stayed at Rendlesham, and derived some of their wealth from it. It is even possible that some of the objects buried as grave goods at Sutton Hoo were made at Rendlesham. It would be a mistake, though, to see this as an exclusive and permanent relationship. Burial at Sutton Hoo continued only for around half a century, a relatively brief episode during the much longer lifetime of the Rendlesham settlement. Later tradition identifies Blythburgh as the burial-place of King Anna, who was killed AD 653–54, and his successors were probably given church burial. Even at the time of Sutton Hoo, some members of the royal kindred may have been buried at or near other royal residences.

So, although Rendlesham and Sutton Hoo are unquestionably linked as manifestations of royal power in the 7th century, it is important to see them not in isolation but as elements of a complex and changing pattern of settlements and burial sites in the

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7. Three 7th-century gold objects from Rendlesham: two beads, one inlaid with garnets; and two views of a pyramidal fitting with garnets from a sword scabbard. © Suffolk County Council.

8. Circular gilded copper-alloy fitting with a central garnet set in white paste from Rendlesham, late 6th or early 7th century. Diameter 57mm (maximum). A very similar example was found on the brow-band of a horse bridle excavated from Mound 17 at Sutton Hoo in 1991. © Suffolk County Council.

9. Evidence for metalworking at Rendlesham. Top row: copper-alloy unfinished objects, a decorative mount, a buckle and a pin. Bottom row: gold debris – sheet offcut, droplet and scrap decorated fragment. © Suffolk County Council.

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landscape. Perhaps the real value of Rendlesham for understanding Sutton Hoo is the broader insights it gives into the society that created them both. Rendlesham represents everyday life whereas Sutton Hoo is death: it is like being able to study life in London by looking at the whole city instead of just Highgate Cemetery or the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral.

The archaeology at Rendlesham is starting to show how the wealth, contacts and ideologies expressed in burial at Sutton Hoo were created, developed and maintained, helping us see the ship burial and its contents as part of, and created by, a living society rather than as an untypical funeral treasure.

Historians and archaeologists have perhaps tended to underestimate the economic and organisational sophistication of English society before the 8th century but Rendlesham is evidence for the ways in which a kingdom could flourish and be ruled without the urban infrastructure – towns – that are the hallmark of government and commerce in the Classical, medieval and modern worlds.

It is paradoxical that the work of archaeological discovery at Rendlesham was prompted by the criminal activity of thieves who destroy our heritage in pursuit of personal gain, but the Rendlesham survey shows how metal-detecting, when undertaken responsibly, can be a valuable archaeological technique. The partnership between the detectorists, other volunteers and professional archaeologists, working with the landowners, has resulted in a major advancement of knowledge with the discovery of an internationally important archaeological site. ■

• Finds from Rendlesham are on permanent display at Ipswich Museum (https://www.ipswich.gov.uk/services/ipswich-museum).

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