

In Search of the Early Medieval Monastic Archaeology of the Middle Thames

**Interim Report on University of Reading Excavations at Cookham,
Berkshire, August 2021**



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Introduction

The report summarises the results of trial excavations by the University of Reading in a parcel of land known as 'The Paddock' lying to the west of Holy Trinity Church, Cookham, Berkshire in August 2021. These results confirm the presence of significant and sustained Middle Saxon occupation in this location, consistent with its identification as the royal minster of Cookham documented in the 8-9th centuries AD. These results will inform a future programme of open-area excavation to be delivered as a University of Reading Field School commencing summer 2022. The report starts by articulating a research agenda for past, present and future investigations at Cookham based upon the current state of understanding and key issues pertaining to early medieval monastic archaeology. This is followed by a brief review of the archaeological and historical background to the site. The results of the investigation are then summarised, commencing with a description of archaeological features, followed by summary overviews of artefactual and environmental assemblages, culminating in a concluding synthetic discussion. Reports from specialists will be posted on the webpages of the Middle Thames Archaeology Partnership (<https://research.reading.ac.uk/middle-thames-archaeology/projects>).

All dates in the report are AD unless indicated otherwise. We follow the conventional subdivisions of the Saxon period: Early – c. 450-650; Mid – c. 650–850; Late - c. 850- 1050.

Questions and issues: a research agenda for early medieval Cookham and the Middle Thames

This project addresses a series of intersecting issues concerning the role played by monasteries in the evolution of early medieval society, framed within the regional context of the River Thames as a crucially important frontier and communication artery. Monastic culture – a key driver in the Christianisation of early medieval societies – had a profound influence on the social, cultural, religious and economic development of Early Medieval Europe. A mountain of scholarship has been devoted to this topic so it is only necessary to highlight strands of greatest relevance to the current project to clarify and contextualise its aims and objectives as research project. Key themes and implications include:

- the role of monasteries in controlling rivers as early medieval geopolitical frontiers and conduits
- the influence of inherited cultural/intellectual traditions on the development of monastic practice;
- the role of monasteries in in reshaping landscapes and cultural practices, including diet, as a process of Christian re-sacralization;
- understanding monasteries as economic enterprises, including their active role in exchange systems and innovations in estate management, infrastructure and extractive technologies.

This project will explore these issues and themes using a multi-scalar framework with the granular detail of Cookham providing the microscale, the (Middle) Thames providing the mesoscale, and the North Sea region forming the macroscale. By such means, the project will seek to deliver nuanced perspectives on how the imported 'monastic' package was adapted and reshaped to suit native circumstances and the processes by which these institutions embedded themselves within the social, political, economic, religious and cultural fabric of host societies.

There is much still to learn about these aspects. Primary documentary sources are scarce, often not contemporaneous with the events they describe, and were mostly written by clerical figures whose accounts of the relations between the Church and the powerful figures in early medieval kingdoms are all too often twisted to fit political agendas. Archaeological investigation, particularly using scientific techniques developed over the past few decades, has the potential to contribute significantly

to our understanding of these issues. However, excavations at a meaningful scale remain at a premium and the record of analysis and publication is poor. There is an over-emphasis on core monastic buildings, at the expense of domestic, industrial and agricultural structures (Thomas and Knox 2017). Discussion has been overly focused on terminology and the assumption that the monastic package seen in Northumbrian/Northern British contexts will be seen elsewhere. The interpretation of even very well documented monasteries (e.g. Lyminge, Kent) has been called into question on the basis of such an assumption. There is a need to refresh and re-sensitize our approach to the interpretation of these sites.



Figure 1. Early medieval Thames-side minsters. Middle Thames sites numbered.

The Thames, and the Middle Thames more specifically, provides a compelling setting for investigating these issues. While a coherent nexus of monastic establishments may be identified along the Thames and its tributaries from historical sources (Blair 1996; 2005), archaeological understanding of the sites themselves is generally poor and very uneven, whether as a consequence of a lack of opportunity for investigation or, in the case of Barking, lack of synthetic analysis and publication. Eynsham remains the best understood of the sites in archaeological terms, but this is based on a relatively restricted window (Gray and Clayton 1978; Hardy *et al.* 2003). Establishments of the Middle Thames – Reading, Abingdon, Sonning, Chertsey and others known from documentary sources – have little or no archaeology to their name. The investigation of Cookham will fill this gap while also addressing the serious shortage of Early Medieval archaeology of the Middle Thames in general, as highlighted in various research agendas (e.g. Astill 1978; Clark 2007; Dodd and Crawford 2014; Humphreys 2019). It will benefit understanding of a wide spectrum of themes and issues that are barely perceptible on current evidence: the constructional attributes of buildings; the spatial and social organisation of settlements; the inter-related issues of diet, agricultural economies and land management; regional and long-distance interactions; how the Middle Thames evolved in relation to political and cultural configurations based on adjacent stretches of the river: in short, defining how its early medieval identity and trajectory was shaped was influenced and shaped by a riverine monastic nexus.

The key questions relating to Thames minsters which will drive our research at Cookham are:

1. When and in what politico-cultural context were minsters of the Middle Thames founded? How reliable are historical frameworks for determining this question?
2. What were the immediate antecedents of Thames minster sites and how was the inherited cultural landscape adapted and transformed through the process of monasticisation?
3. How were Thames minsters organised in respect of social composition, concepts of sacrality and function, both religious and economic?
4. What was the built environment of Thames minsters? What architectural traditions and practices did religious and domestic buildings draw upon?
5. What was the economic basis of Thames minsters and how did this change over their lifetimes? How important was regional and international trade to the livelihood of these institutions? How central were riverine resources to the economy, diet and lifestyle of Thames minsters? What types of production and infrastructure occurred at these sites and what are the implications for understanding monasteries as innovators in estate management?
6. How does the archaeological signature of Thames minsters compare to monastic excavations in other regions of early medieval England? How can such comparisons inform our understanding of regional diversity in Anglo-Saxon monastic culture and its interactions with localised traditions?
7. What were the afterlives of Thames minsters and how is this reflected in their archaeological and landscape trajectories?

Early Medieval archaeology in the East Berkshire Thames Valley

We have set out the background and case for the archaeological investigation of Cookham Minster. This section gives the archaeological context for early medieval occupation at sites in the loop of the Thames between Windsor and Reading.

Investigating the material culture of the early medieval period is not easy (Clark 2007). Anglo-Saxon buildings were mostly of wooden construction, and they have left only traces such as post-holes and occasionally beam slots. Evidence of settlement tends to come from features cut into the ground – pits, ditches, latrines, sunken-featured buildings – and their fills of refuse such as animal bone, plant remains, broken pottery, industrial waste and discarded or lost dress fittings. Anglo-Saxon pottery was hand-made and fired at low temperatures, making it susceptible to breaking up in the soil after it was deposited as waste. The manufacture of organically-tempered wares did not change between the 5th and 9th centuries, and it is difficult to date them within this broad timescale. It was not until the mid-Saxon period that coins again began to be minted and circulated and the names of rulers or moneyers, which would help with dating, were not always struck on coins. As in other regions of Anglo-Saxon England, burials and their grave goods form the most visible element of the early medieval Middle Thames, but the majority are poorly recorded antiquarian finds and their relationship to contemporary (and later) settlements remains at best highly conjectural.

The methods of investigation employed over the past two centuries also leave an incomplete archaeological record. Many sites which were uncovered in the 19th century were inadequately recorded and their finds have disappeared. Modern scientific techniques such as radiocarbon dating and biomolecular dietary analysis are expensive and not often undertaken unless as part of a major commercial project or heritage-funded research. Archaeological investigation prior to industrial or housing development was not a planning requirement until 1990, although there are many excellent reports from small-scale investigations by professional archaeological units from the 1980s onwards.

Many of these reports have been synthesised into major publications such as Oxford Archaeology's "Thames Through Time" series (Booth *et al.* 2007). Last, some important research excavations, such as Old Windsor in the 1950s, have not (yet) been written up and published: <https://research.reading.ac.uk/middle-thames-archaeology/projects/old-windsor/>.

Nevertheless, there are early medieval archaeological sites in this part of the Middle Thames corridor. The list below is taken from the Heritage Environment Records for East Berkshire and Buckinghamshire. (Sites in Cookham and its immediate vicinity are described in more detail later). It shows relevant sites from the early post-Roman period through to the late Saxon pre-Conquest time. The Thames had been a frontier zone between autonomous tribal groups in the late pre-Roman Iron Age (Ford 2012; Fulford 2021: 28-32). Territorial tensions emerged again in the post-Roman period (Fleming 2011: 205-209). The struggle for dominance between powerful and wealthy rulers continued through the early and middle Saxon period between the kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex, as will be seen later.

- Ditton Park, Slough – early Saxon/post-Roman finds (possibly late 4th/early 5th century) and two sunken-featured buildings (Platt 2017)
- 'Marlow Warlord' - burial of an Anglo-Saxon man c. 475-550 with high-status 'warrior' grave goods including a metal vessel likely to have come from the Low Countries (<https://research.reading.ac.uk/middle-thames-archaeology/projects/marlow-warlord-anglo-saxon-burial/>)
- Windmill Field, Hitcham – 'warrior' burial and probable sunken-featured building (Bucks HER 0155204000)
- Aston Rise, Remenham – early medieval (probably pre-Christian) burials (Berks Arch. HER 00652.00.000)
- Braywick Park, Maidenhead – Saxon hamlet with six houses and a sunken-featured building, 5th-early 7th centuries (Colyer 2019)
- Moor Farm, Holyport – wooden stakes, RC dated to 753 ±155; 7th C pottery
- Bisham Abbey – Early/Mid Saxon pottery from pits & ditches (Hunn 2017)
- Manor Cottage, Bisham – ditches and pits containing early/mid-Saxon pottery, comb, spindle whorl (Pine 2011)
- Wargrave – pits and pottery (Clark 2007: 8)
- Taplow – Anglo-Saxon reoccupation of Iron Age fort; 7th C princely burial; high-status metal, glass and other artefacts; reputed baptismal site used by Birinus. Sherds of imported pottery from eastern Mediterranean (Farley 2008: 6)
- Dorney/Boveney sites - pottery assemblage. Early/mid-Saxon handmade wares, with pottery and stone imported from East Anglia and the Rhineland. RC dating ranging from 500 cal AD to about 900 cal AD. Large quantities of metal-working slag. No clear evidence that there was a settlement here, but possibly indicators of high-status meeting or trading site (Foreman *et al.* 2002: 69-70)
- Hurley Priory – possible pre-Conquest foundations and masonry (Rivers-Moore 1934)
- Waltham St Lawrence parish church – 11th C masonry
- Old Windsor – 7th-11th century remains of a late Saxon/early Norman elite complex, with a massive watermill leat, palatial Saxon halls and other settlement remains over a wide area: <https://research.reading.ac.uk/middle-thames-archaeology/projects/old-windsor/>.

There appear to be fewer sites on the Buckinghamshire side of the river valley, although this may be an artefact due to different levels of investigation and publication related to commercial or housing development. Both HERs record multiple finds of Anglo-Saxon metalwork (usually weaponry, often

recorded as 'Viking') in the River Thames, but it not possible to be sure about what these finds represent.

Taken together, these sites point towards significant activity from the Early Saxon period onwards on gravel islands in the Thames floodplain. The Saxon settlements do not appear to re-use the sites of Romano-British villas, which are invariably located further away from the river; they have a generalised spatial relationship with the later medieval and modern settlement pattern. The early riverside sites are accompanied by high-status, high-investment monumental burials on the high ground of the flanking valley slopes (e.g. 'Marlow Warlord'; Taplow). The burials are likely to be the leaders of local lineages, and their siting denotes territorial claims. Some sites have links to the conversion to Christianity in the mid 7th century and the subsequent development of monastic and ecclesiastical centres. There are indications of affiliations with the material culture of NW continental Europe, the homelands of earlier generations of migrants, and there is good evidence of trading with East Anglia and continental Europe. reflecting the importance of the Thames as a crucial artery for travel and trade.

Archaeological sites in Cookham itself are covered in the following section.

Cookham – background

Modern Cookham has three separate areas. Closest to the Thames is Cookham Village, with its ribbon High Street, Holy Trinity Church and Cookham Bridge which replaced the earlier ferry in the 19th century. 1km to the southwest is Cookham Rise, a more recent development focussed on the railway station. Further west is Cookham Dean, a hilly area of dispersed houses and farmland.

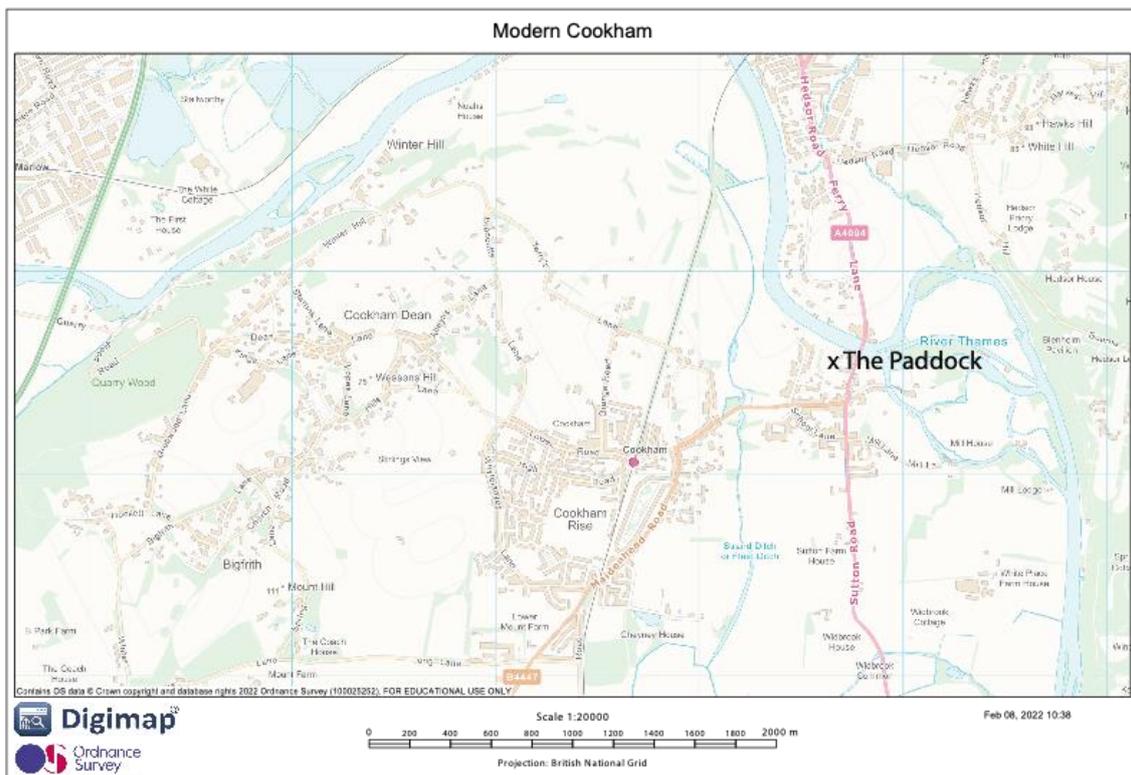


Figure 2. Modern Cookham showing the Paddock. close to the river.

Previous investigations in and around Cookham

Roman period

In the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age and the Roman periods, the Middle Thames valley was in effect a boundary area, between the territories of the Atrebates (south of the river) and the Catuvellauni to its north (Ford 2012). Several Roman villas are known between Reading and Maidenhead, with the nearest at Cox Green and Castle Hill in Maidenhead (6km and 5km respectively from Cookham Village). Romano-British pottery was found at Hindhays Farm, Pinkneys Green (4km), in 1906, and also at Gibraltar Meadow (foot of Winter Hill, 4km), a possible ferry crossing.

In Cookham Rise there is a Romano-British site next to the railway line, with a well, thought to be from the 2nd C AD. The site is at the crossroads of two reported Roman roads – Alderman Silver's Road (Braywick to Cockmarsh; probably Roman or older) and Camlet Way (Silchester to St Alban's, with a river crossing in Cookham across Sashes Island to Hedsor Wharf). Ditches, pits, wells, corn-driers from the 1st-3rd centuries AD were excavated at Prior's Pit, 3km south of Cookham. Similar evidence has been found indicating a farmstead at Strand Castle Pit (2km). Scatters of Roman artefacts have been found at Hill Grove Farm, Cookham Dean. These four sites are close to each other, so possibly are linked to one settlement in the area of Cookham Rise/Widbrook Common, perhaps associated in turn with the Roman estates further away in Maidenhead.

Antiquarian records say that skeletons, javelin heads and swords were found on Sashes Island during excavation of the lock cut in 1830, and these were interpreted as 'Roman' (Over 1969: 36, cited by Berkshire Archaeology HER, SRW4717). However, it is not clear that there was evidence for laid-out graves or an inhumation cemetery, which might indicate a settlement. The dating of the finds is uncertain, and they are just as likely to be early medieval.

Anglo-Saxon period

On the basis of placename evidence, Darby (1909: 133-137) argued that the first Anglo-Saxon settlement of Cookham was at Coxborough or Ham Field, two neighbouring fields in Cookham Rise. These are on higher ground, south of the Pound. There has been a long-held but contested view that by implication the monastery was also at Coxborough. It seems likely that Cookham was polyfocal.

Two burial sites, although undated, suggest pre-Christian burial traditions from the Early Saxon period. In 1874, antiquarians excavated an Anglo-Saxon burial re-using a Bronze Age burial mound at Cockmarsh, next to the river at Cookham Village. Another 19th century excavation in Noah's Ark Field, Cookham Rise, revealed funeral remains with six Anglo-Saxon burials, some with weapons - a sword, two spear-heads, a scramasax knife, and parts of two shield-bosses. These items suggest a pre-Christian Early Saxon burial.

Test-pitting by Hedsor Wharf showed Early/Mid-Saxon midden deposits, datable from pottery (Blinkhorn, in Oxford Archaeological Unit 2000). These were on the main drive to Hedsor Wharf House, thought to be the line of the Roman road/medieval holloway.

At Bourne End (north bank of river opposite Cookham Village), an inhumation cemetery was found in the 1850s with 7th-8th century spearheads, swords and knives (Booth et al. 2007: 109; original source not cited). However, the presence of a cemetery is not necessarily evidence of a settlement.

Other evidence of Early Medieval occupation consists of pottery at Church Paddock & the adjacent Riverdene, a late Saxon ditch at Bridge House, and Early-Mid and Late Saxon pits & gullies at Spencers, in The Pound (Mundin 2008).

The Burghal Hidage (911-19) – records the *burh* of *Scaftesege*, now assumed to be Sashes Island. The fort was probably completed by 886. The BH record suggests its palisade would have been 1375 yards long, enclosing about half of the 54 acres of the present island. Spoil from the excavation of the lock in 1830 would have buried the previous ground level to a depth of 6 feet, a hypothesis confirmed by test-pitting at the south-west tip of Sashes Island (Oxford Archaeology 2009), although no evidence of the fort itself has been found. Late Saxon weapons have been found in the lock cut. On the Bucks side of the river a Saxon burial ground was found near Bourne End Station (Phillips 1993).

The Christian conversion and the minster foundations

The land and treasures of early minsters were mainly given by secular rulers in the decades after the Christian conversions in the mid 7th century. Cynegils, king of Wessex, was baptised in 635, although his successors held to paganism until the 680s. The first Christian king of Mercia was crowned in 655. Large-scale endowment increased suddenly from ca. 670. The multiple micro-kingdoms of the fifth century had coalesced into seven main players in England (Keynes 2018). Kings were rich, and the establishment of large kingdoms from smaller ones must have yielded huge amounts of surplus wealth which could be invested in religious and cultural patronage. Charters recording a king's grant of land to monasteries typically included phrases such as "for the good of his [i.e. the king's] soul". The monasteries were established as centres of religious life, pilgrimage and spirituality, learning and culture. They were treated as assets by royal and aristocratic families, and with their large estates the minsters were economic power houses, active agents in trade, production and market activity (Blair 2005; Foot 2006).

Control of the Thames was key to the territorial ambitions of the increasingly dominant kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex in the 7th and 8th centuries. By the end of the 7th, a network of monasteries had been established along the Thames and its tributaries, from source to mouth (Fig. 1). Their riverside location did not represent seclusion (Blair 1996). On the contrary: they were deliberately built along a major route for communication and trade, and their secular economic role supported the rulers who established them and benefited from the revenue they generated.

The Cookham minster

What is the evidence for a minster at Cookham? While there is no extant record of its foundation, subsequent historical references throw an important light on the role played by Cookham minster in the struggle between Mercia and Wessex for dominance of the Middle and Lower Thames regions in the 8th century. The Canterbury charter S1258 (Haddan and Stubbs 1869-1871: iii, 513; Whitelock 1930: 468-470) records that the monastery and all its lands had been given by Aethelbald, king of the Mercians, to Christ Church Canterbury, when Cuthbert was Archbishop (740-757). It would have been unusual for a Mercian king to have given land to Kentish churches – no other such grant is recorded – so he may have been trying to buy powerful ecclesiastical support in his efforts to gain control of the Middle and Lower Thames (Brooks and Kelly 2013: 150-151, 426-432). The gift shows that Cookham was already a significant minster by the mid 8th century, and Blair (pers. comm.) feels it would be reasonable to assume that it was founded in the 670-720 range.

The charter records an agreement between Archbishop Aethelheard of Canterbury and Abbess Cynethryth, widow of Offa, king of the Mercians, almost certainly made in 798. The background to the agreement is complicated. Unrest in Mercia followed Aethelbald's death, and Cynewulf, king of Wessex, took advantage of this to annexe the Middle Thames region. The title deeds for the Cookham minster were stolen from Canterbury and given to Cynewulf, who then took control of the minster and its estate. Subsequent archbishops complained, but to no avail. Canterbury was thus deprived of revenue from the minster and its estate. Eventually, a remorseful Cynewulf returned the minster

deeds to Canterbury. However, control of the monastery returned to Mercia after Offa's victory over Cynewulf at the major battle of Bensington in 779. Offa continued to hold the land, without the title deeds, and left it to his heirs. The charter S1258 was a settlement of this confused legal position. It was agreed that his widow Cynethryth would have title to the monastery and its lands. In return, she gave to Christ Church 110 hides at three locations in Kent, all of which Offa had previously granted to the church at Bedford, of which she was also abbess. Cynethryth, as the abbess of Cookham, and as Offa's heir, needed to resolve the legal situation in order to secure her own position after her husband's death. Under a new king, new female relatives might have taken over the role of abbess (Stafford 2001: 40-41). So Cynethryth got legal confirmation of her possession of Cookham (protected also by religious sanction), and Canterbury got equivalent land in Kent as compensation for the loss of Cookham. The agreement can also be seen as an acceptance of realities by the archbishop.

If the land in Kent covered 110 hides, then presumably the Cookham estate for which it was exchanged would have been an equivalent size. A hide was defined as the area of land needed to support one peasant and his household, probably up to 120 acres. In effect, the exchange covered the entire Cookham hundred of perhaps 13,000 acres.

There is a further documentary reference almost two centuries later. Aelfheah, appointed ealdorman of Hampshire in 959, left land at Cookham to King Edgar in his will c. 971 (Whitelock 1930: 22-25; Astill 1978: 23; Williams 1981: 147-154; Blair 2005: 324-328; Booth *et al.* 2007: 100) Astill suggests this might have been the whole settlement. It may be significant that the will refers to "*landæs æt Coccham*" but does not mention a minster or church.

There is a subsequent reference to a meeting of the king (Aethelred) meeting with his council at Cookham c. 994 (Whitelock 1930: 45, 47), suggesting that there was a royal residence at Cookham. The estate had presumably reverted to the King in accordance with Aelfheah's will, after his death in 972.

By the time of the Domesday Book, Cookham is recorded as being under the control of Reinbald the priest. He had been chancellor to the Anglo-Saxon king Edward the Confessor, and held the same position under the new Norman monarchy, and so must have been a man of considerable influence and political skill. Domesday says that Cookham had a church, with two priests and 2 hides of land. The great estate of the minster is no more.

The archaeology of Cookham minster

Given the scant documentary records of its history, we must look to its archaeology. The location of the monastery has been contested, some arguing on the basis of Darby's (1909) placename evidence that it may have lain in the vicinity of Coxborough, others that it lies partly under, or next to, Holy Trinity Church, the earliest fabric of which is early 12th century. The Paddock was previously known as "Little Berry" (Over 1994), presumably from the Old English *burh*. The Paddock is located 60m from the south bank of the River Thames, to the west of Holy Trinity Church and its cemetery (Grid reference SU 897 855). The Paddock is a tree-lined grass field which belongs to the PCC, and is used for recreation by church groups and the public, and for seasonal camping and caravans.

The Paddock is on the flood plain of the River Thames. It is protected from flooding by a modern 1m high causeway parallel to the riverbank. The natural river bank has been contained and altered, and is unlikely to reflect its outline in the Early Medieval period. The underlying geology is the Lewes Nodular Chalk Formation, overlain by the Shepperton Gravel Member of sand and gravel, and above this, alluvial silt and clay sediment on which the Paddock and the adjacent cemetery are situated (BGS Geological Map data 2021). The church sits on a slightly higher gravel terrace.

The 2005 excavation

The Paddock was targeted by a small-scale excavation, geophysical survey and limited palaeoenvironment investigation in 2005 under the auspices of a project by the Marlow Archaeological Society, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (Griffin 2005). Three trenches were examined within the north-east sector of the site, all of which yielded in situ archaeology of varying levels of distinctness alongside significant assemblages of pottery, animal bone and other cultural material of mixed dates, but including a consistent Anglo-Saxon element. The most notable feature encountered was a possible trackway comprising flint metalling described as having 'a cambered surface' overlying a coarse bed of stone and tile derived from a demolished Roman building, suggesting that a nearby Roman building was dismantled and re-used. While described as 'multi-period' in the report, it is clear from Blinkhorn's assessment of the post-Roman pottery (Griffin 2005: Appendix 8) and a single radiocarbon date (QUB 1249 ± 39: 672-879 cal AD @ 95% probability), that the main phase of archaeology represented was Middle Saxon, with an overtly domestic character. In the topsoil, redeposited human bone was found, most likely from 19th century reorganisation of the adjacent cemetery, but apart from this there had been little disturbance to earlier levels.

2021 investigations

Geophysics

The results of magnetometry carried out by carried by QUEST (University of Reading commercial service) show a distinct band of highly polarised readings running along the eastern boundary of the site. The foundations of a possible rectangular building or tennis court of fairly recent date appears at the extreme southern edge of the site. Magnetic variation within the remainder of the site falls within a relatively restricted spectrum and possible archaeological features are relatively indistinct. This includes a series of linear features (? boundary ditches) following a consistent ENE-WSW alignment and sub-circular anomalies appearing singly and in more extensive clusters.

Excavation methods

On the basis of these magnetometry and palaeoenvironmental investigations, six pilot trenches were excavated over a two-week period in August 2021. A total area of approximately 220m² was excavated, representing about 3% of the field area. In each trench, turf was removed by hand and a 20-40cm layer of silty topsoil and subsoil topsoil/overburden by machine. The trenches and spoilheaps were checked frequently with metal detectors. Bulk Finds (pottery, bone; location recorded by context) and Small Finds (metal, stone and glass artefacts; locations recorded individually) were removed for specialist analysis and interpretation. Bulk soil samples were taken from contexts 111, 119, 120 and 509 for analysis.

A Temporary Bench Mark was set up at a height of 26.30 metres above datum. The excavated features were recorded on context sheets, plans, section drawings and by photography. At the end of the excavation season, the trenches were backfilled and turf replaced. All excavation records have been recorded on IADB (Integrated Archaeological Database), which will be available online in due course.



Cookham Paddock
Fluxgate gradiometer survey 2020

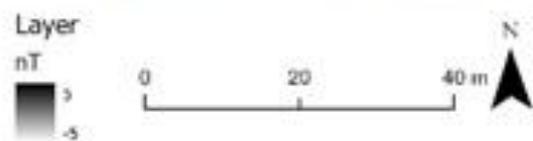


Figure 3. Aerial view of The Paddock overlain by gradiometry survey



Figure 4. The Paddock, with 2021 trenches 1-6.

Results

(Context numbering: the first digit of the Context number denotes its trench.)

Trench 1. E-W 8.0m, N-S 5.0m. Located at the northern end of the site to target a cluster of sub-circular anomalies.

A dense concentration of intercutting archaeology was present in this location of which only a proportion was sample investigated. Beneath the turf, a cleaning layer C101 containing sherds of pottery ranging from Romano-British to 19th & 20th centuries was removed by hand. At the W end of the trench this overlay C102, a clay/sandy layer with dumped material including charcoal, an iron bar,

and Early/Mid Saxon pottery. In the NW corner was an *in situ* cobble feature with defined southern and eastern edges C109 (0.90 x 0.65m x .03m thick), that could possibly represent a post pad or support for a load-bearing timber.



Figure 5. Trench 1: photo and plan after excavation



Figure 6. Trench 1: cobble layer C109, possibly post pad

Also in the NW corner was a pit C124 1.6m x 1.0m x 1.03m deep. This had an upper bone-rich fill C115 (0.6m deep), overlying a second fill C123 (0.35m deep) with some charcoal and animal bone. The pit is probably mid-Saxon, and may have been cut prior to industrial activity to the E side of ditch C117. Below this, a 5cm silty sandy deposit C125 containing only burnt flint may be the fill of a prehistoric palaeochannel defined in the palaeoenvironmental survey C126.

Figure 7. Trench 1: Gravel surface C105

The NE corner showed a gravel spread C105 (2.50m x 2.00m x 0.02m). Its alignment was unclear but was possibly a continuation of the trackway found in 2005. It had no obvious camber, and so alternatively might have been an internal or external surface associated with a building. This surface was truncated by a series of intercutting pits concentrated on the E end of the trench. C107



was the topmost fill of pit C121, 0.64m (slot) x 0.90m, excavated depth 0.68m. Below this were successive fills (C110 0.25m deep), a dump of fired clay, C114 (0.12m), with more lumps of fired clay, and C111 (0.05m) with lumps of fired daub and an iron pin. Some of the clay lumps had smooth faces, suggesting they were from the lining of a hearth or kiln structure. They were not *in situ*, so may have been dumped waste from the demolition of a fire installation. Underlying this were further deposits

of dumped domestic or industrial waste: C118 (0.2m deep), C119, (0.2m), C120 (0.1m) and the primary fill C122 (0.40m). These contexts consisted of ashy charcoal-rich deposits with frequent lumps of fired clay, occasional animal bones, small amounts of Early/Mid Saxon pottery, and a bone comb fragment SF27. The S side of the pit was undercut, suggesting a primary storage function before it was used to dump waste.



Figure 8. Boundary ditch C117

A N-S boundary ditch C117 was excavated in a slot at the southern edge of the trench. The ditch was 0.75m deep, with steep sides and a rounded base. The main fill of the ditch (C113, 0.95m x 1.0m x 0.22m) contained flint, stone, a bone comb fragment, charcoal, copper alloy pin fragments, and several pieces of iron, probably waste from metalworking. Beneath this, the primary fill C127 (0.1m deep) was a clay

spit with no finds, probably washed-in natural deposits.

Trench 2. E-W 5.0m, N-S 13.0m. Dug to investigate a pair of indistinct linear anomalies in roughly parallel, WNW-ESE, disposition.

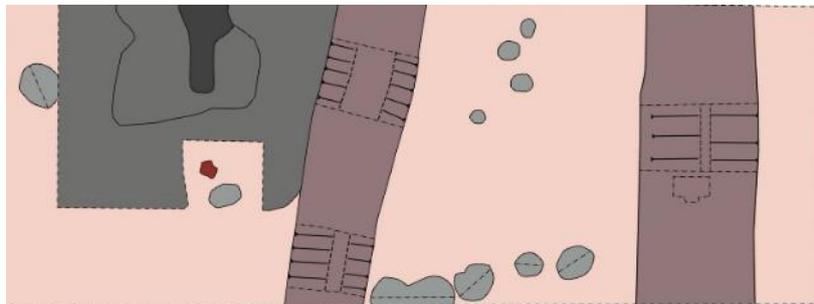


Figure 9. Trench 2 – plan and photo after excavation

Excavation of slots showed these to be ditches with flat bases, possibly boundary ditches running E-W, about 4m apart. C218, to the N, was 0.7m deep and 1.3 m wide at the top, with steep sides and a flat base. It had an upper fill C216 (0.4m deep) containing bone, charcoal and late 8th C pottery, suggesting domestic refuse dumped in the ditch; the lower fill C217 was an erosion deposit sterile of finds. Between the ditches was a N-S alignment of six postholes, consistent with the wall of an earthfast timber building. Two were intercut, which may indicate a later phase of building. The fill of

several postholes contained mid-Saxon pottery, and fragments of Roman ceramic building material. A group of four more postholes, not aligned, was found about 1.5m to the E. A layer of silty loam C206 sealed the postholes. A substantial gravel spread C208 (E-W 3.0m x N-S 7m) covered the NW sector of the trench. This sealed an earlier post hole C209 containing Mid Saxon pottery. Contained within the general spread were denser patches of flint in two roughly linear configurations and a horizontally laid tile (shown in red in Fig. 9) which may be the remnants of a hearth. Beside the latter was a substantially intact Oxford-ware pottery vessel (see Blinkhorn's report). These associated elements may represent the remnants of the platform for a timber or cob-walled building. C208 also yielded the blade of a two-edged iron saw (SF30).

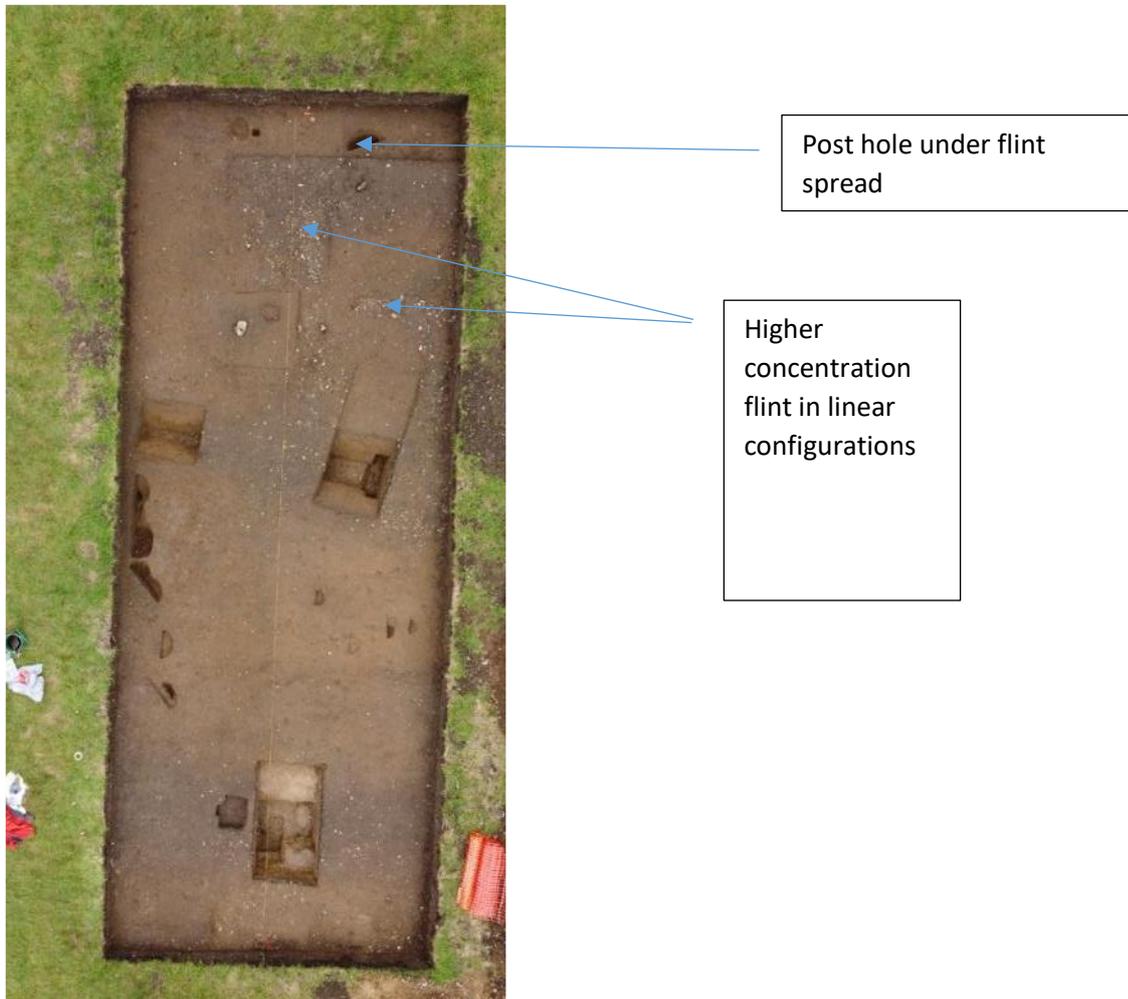


Figure 10. Trench 2 - significant features

The southern ditch C228 may be aligned to the boundary ditch C407 found in Trench 4, although it is shallower in Trench 2.

The second, northern, ditch C226 was 1.35m wide and 0.74m deep with steep sides and a rounded base. Its top fill C219 (0.39m deep) was sandy clay and contained stone quern fragments, Mid Saxon pottery fragments, and an iron axehead SF23. The lower fill contained some bone and redeposited natural silt.

Trench 3. E-W 7.50m, N-S 5.0m. Located in the NE corner of the site at the northern extremity of an area of magnetic disturbance running along the eastern boundary of the site. The trench overlapped trench 3 of the 2005 MAG excavation.

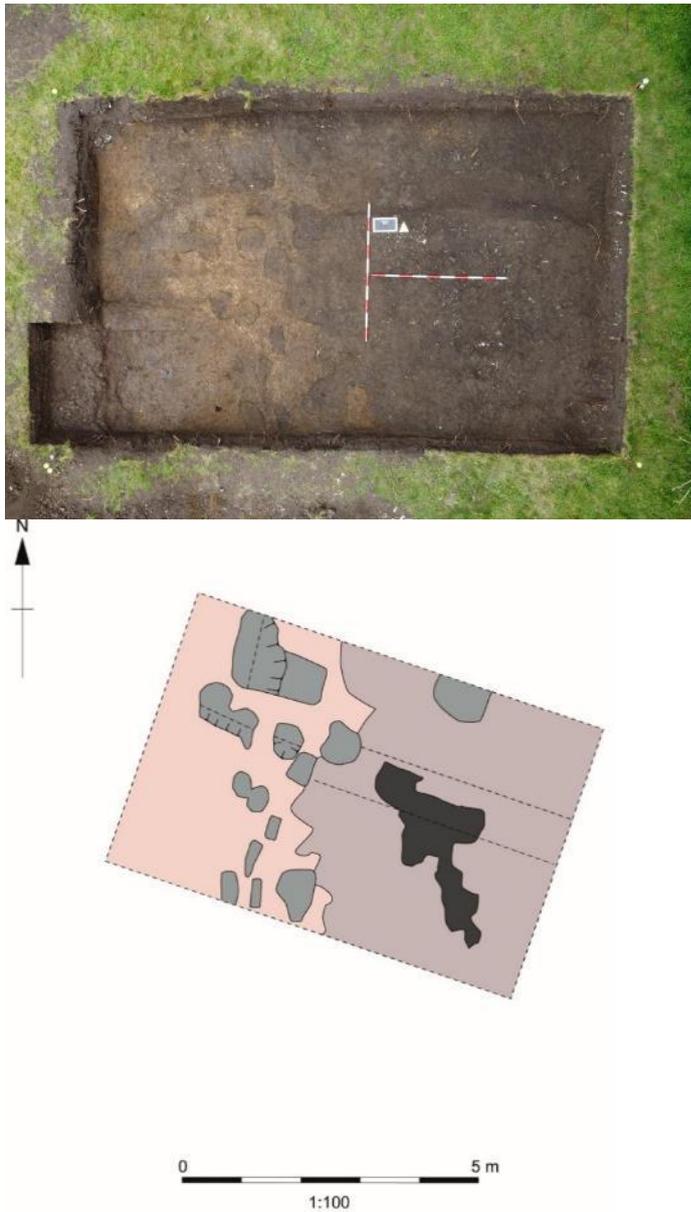


Figure 11. Trench 3 photo and plan after excavation

The key discovery in this trench was an extensive Anglo-Saxon midden deposit C302 (N-S 5.0m x E-W 4.1m x 0.6m deep). It was characterised by a dense concentration of flints interspersed with much animal bone and occasional Roman ceramic building material. It contained iron pins or nails SF25 and SF28, and Early/Mid-Saxon pottery. The lower horizon of this midden contained profuse quantities of animal bone, and sealed a flint cobble deposit C336 at the NE corner of the trench. This may be the remnant of the flint trackway identified in trench 3 of the 2005 excavation. In the W end of the trench were a cluster of post holes, and an in situ layer of burning C332 was present in the western baulk, containing frequent fragments of burnt clay, possibly derived from a hearth or kiln.

Trench 4. E-W 5.0m, N-S 5.0m. Located within the same band of magnetic disturbance running along the eastern boundary of the site.

The trench was excavated in three slots, revealing a slightly curving E-W boundary ditch C407 1.0m deep and 1.0m wide at the top with steep sides and a flat base. The upper fill C402 was silty clay 0.24m deep, consistent through the three slots. Finds included an iron suspension ring SF3 and sherds of

Early/Mid Saxon and 11th C pottery. The lower fill of silty and sandy clays (C403, 0.15m deep) held some bone and Early/Mid-Saxon pottery fragments. This ditch may be aligned to the southern ditch C228 in Trench 2.



Figure 12. Trench 4 showing ditch C407

Trench 5. E-W 5.0m N-S 5.0m. Targeted on a NW-SE linear anomaly.



Figure 13. Trench 5 during excavation. Darker soil top to bottom is the fill of ditch C511

The E-W linear anomaly resolved itself into a substantial boundary ditch C511. This was sampled in two slots at the east and west sides of the trench, each measuring 1.80m across and 0.80m deep. It had steep sides and a rounded base. The upper fill C503 contained mid-Saxon pottery, animal bone and parts of a human skeleton

(SK1). This comprised partial skull minus mandible, scattered ribs, possible sacrum and possible toe bone. The skeleton was securely stratified amongst animal bone and mid-Saxon pottery. The underlying fills C509 & C510 contained mid-Saxon potsherds, an Fe nail, an Fe knife and fragments of re-used Roman ceramic building material. The western slot through the ditch revealed a later recut demonstrating that this was a long-lived feature (C502). The ditch cut was stepped at the W end of the trench, suggesting a terminus.



Figure 14. Ditch C511 w facing section



Figure 15. Human skull SK1

Trench 6. E-W 5m, N-S 5m. Located at the southern end of the magnetic disturbance running along the eastern boundary of the site.

A small pit C604, 1.35m diameter 0.6m deep, was found in the northern part of the trench. It contained as single fill C603 which yielded domestic refuse, animal bone, metalworking slag, Early/Mid-Saxon pottery, and a Cu alloy Anglo-Saxon bracelet SF13. This pit was cut by a second small pit C602 1.15m diameter which contained some animal bone and metalworking slag.



Figure 16. Pits C602 and C604 in Trench 6.

Finds

The table below lists the Small Finds (pottery is dealt with separately below). Metal materials are from the excavator's description, not from metallurgical investigation.

Find	Type	Context	Description	Comment
Coins				
SF1	Coin	Unstratified, Tr 3 spoilheap	Half short cross (late 12 th - early 13 th C)	MD on day 3 of dig so presumably from higher levels of Tr 3
SF43	Coin	Unstratified, Tr 2 spoilheap	Sceat	MD from spoilheap Tr 2 See comments below
SF44	Coin	Unstratified, Tr 1 spoilheap	Silver	MD from spoilheap Tr 1. James 1?
Jewellery and dress fittings				
SF6	Pin	C103 fill of ditch	Cu	
SF7	Pin head	C103 fill of ditch	Cu	
SF13	Bracelet	C603 fill of pit	Cu alloy	
SF17	Pin	C111 dump deposit	Fe	
SF27	Comb fragment	C119 dump deposit	Bone	
SF37	Pin	C335 midden layer	Cu alloy	
SF38	Comb fragment	C103 fill of ditch	Bone	
SF40	Pin	C200 topsoil	Cu alloy	
SF42	Pin	C107 fill above pits	Cu alloy	MD
Household & domestic items				
SF15	Knife	C503 fill of ditch	Fe	117mm long, blade 70mm
SF3	Suspension ring	C402 fill of ditch	Fe	
Querns				
SF18	Quern fragments	C207 top fill of ditch	Lava basalt	Probable import from Rhineland
SF26	Quern fragments	C107 fill above pits	Lava basalt	2 pcs. Probable import from Rhineland

SF32	Quern fragments	C501 topsoil	Lava basalt	Probable import from Rhineland
	Tools			
SF23	Axehead	C207 top fill of ditch	Fe	
SF30	Saw	C208 gravel surface	Fe	Double-edged
	Other metalwork			
SF5	Rod/bar	C102 subsoil Tr 1	Fe	
SF8	Possible binding strip	Unstratified, possibly C103 fill of ditch	Fe	Binding strip for casket?
SF9	Unidentified metalwork	C103 fill of ditch	Fe	
SF10	Unidentified metalwork	Unstratified, possibly C103 fill of ditch	Fe	
SF11	Unidentified metalwork	C103 fill of ditch	Fe	
SF12	Unidentified metalwork	C103 fill of ditch	Fe	
SF14	Unidentified metalwork	C216 upper fill of ditch	Cu	
SF16	Unidentified metalwork	C503 fill of ditch	Cu	
SF19	Slag	C606 fill of pit	prob Fe	
SF20	Unidentified metalwork	C103 fill of ditch	Pb	
SF21	Unidentified metalwork	C204 fill of ditch	Fe	
SF22	Unidentified metalwork	C603 fill of pit	Fe	
SF24	Unidentified metalwork	C115 dump deposit	Fe	
SF25	Unidentified metalwork	C302 midden	Fe	
SF28	Unidentified metalwork	C302 midden	Fe	
SF31	Nail	C509 fill of ditch	Fe	
SF33	Nail	C115 dump deposit	Fe	
SF34	Nail	C503 fill of ditch	Fe	
SF35	Nail	C113 fill of ditch	Fe	
SF36	Unidentified metalwork	C115 dump deposit	Fe	
SF39	Unidentified metalwork	C103 fill of ditch	Fe	
SF41	Unidentified metalwork	C600 topsoil	Cu alloy	Tr 6 spoilheap
	Glass			
SF2	Glass	Unstratified, Tr3 spoilheap		Green

Table 1. Small Finds, by category

Photos of selected Small Finds after conservation



Figure 17. Dress pins (l-r) SF42, SF40, SF37, SF 6. Close-up: head of SF40



Figure 18. Head of SF42



Figure 19. Bracelet SF13



Figure 20. l: Suspension ring SF3. r: Axehead SF23



Figure 21. Knife SF15



Figure 22. Saw SF30



Figure 23. Possible binding strip SF8 (l) and nail SF31 possibly used for suspension (r)



Figure 24. Ironworking slag

Cookham finds synopsis

The pilot excavations yielded an impressive range of portable material culture, much of it diagnostically Middle Saxon in date and character. The following provides a brief synopsis of these items under their functional categories.

Jewellery and dress fittings

This category is dominated by delicate 'dress' pins made of copper-alloy or iron with globular and faceted head forms, with some of the former carrying punched ring-and-dot decoration. Pins of this character are ubiquitous across the Middle Saxon settlement spectrum, although they have a particularly strong association with female monastic establishments in southern England, notably Lyminge in Kent.

The two pieces of bone comb, from a decorated handle and tooth-plate respectively, derive from a composite form of comb that is again a ubiquitous domestic item on Middle Saxon settlements.

The 'bracelet' comprises a delicate band of copper-alloy with an attachment hole and rivet at either end for attachment. The diameter of the band is rather small for a bracelet, so it is possible that it may have alternatively functioned as a decorative binding strap for a wooden cup or vessel.

Domestic and household items

The iron knife blade has a characteristic high-backed form classic to the Middle Saxon period. Knives of this type are very common finds on 7-9th century settlements and were used in association with crafts and food consumption.

An iron suspension ring with an interlocking chain link. Used for suspending cauldrons over fires, such items formed an essential component of well-appointed Middle Saxon kitchens.

The ironwork includes several flat parallel-sided bands with riveted attachments that probably represent binding-strips from small wooden caskets. Several iron nails are also represented within this functional category, including a finely crafted example with a kinked shaft which may have been used for suspension.

Several fragments of 'Niedermendig' lava quernstone were recovered from Middle Saxon contexts. This abrasive stone was quarried at Mayen in the Rhineland throughout the Roman, early and later medieval periods (Röder 1955). It formed an important bulk commodity in the North Sea zone between the 7-9th centuries AD.

Built environment

A single fragment of green glass was recovered. Although from an unstratified context, the character of the glass (soda lime type with air bubbles) and coloration is consistent with an early medieval date. Its flat form indicates that it forms a fragment of window glass.

The excavation yielded a significant assemblage of re-used Roman ceramic building material, including roofing tegulae, tile and brick. This demonstrates the systematic recycling of building materials from a nearby Roman site for use within the monastic settlement.



Figure 25. Volcano Park, Mayen. Sections of hexagonal extruded tubes of volcanic lava, used to make rotary quernstones which were traded widely across Europe. Probable source of quernstone fragments at Cookham. Photo D Mudd.

Pottery

The pottery assemblage comprised 303 sherds with a total weight of 4258g, and was examined and analysed by Paul Blinkhorn. His report is summarised here. The pottery was mostly of early-mid Saxon date, although small quantities of prehistoric, Romano-British, late Anglo-Saxon, medieval, and post-medieval material were also noted.

The Anglo-Saxon hand-built wares are typical of the tradition in the Thames Valley, with vessels in very similar fabrics occurring at other early-mid Saxon sites. All the hand-built wares are undecorated, suggesting that they date from the early-middle Anglo-Saxon period. The sherd of Ipswich ware and the possible imported Continental sherds are of note. Ipswich ware is a quite rare find in the Thames Valley, and usually occurs at sites of higher than normal status. The two continental pieces are even less common. One is likely to be a fragment of a north French or eastern Belgian Redware vessel, a type which has been dated (from a London site) to c AD650-850. The second is a fragment of a *kugeltopf*, the common domestic pottery of many areas of the Low Countries and the Rhineland in the 8th and 9th centuries. These pots were hand-built and wheel-finished, and the only technologically-comparable middle Saxon being Ipswich ware and some of the pottery from the monastic sites of north-east England such as Whitby and Jarrow. Like Ipswich ware, middle Saxon imports only occur at high-status sites.

There is little doubt from the pottery that there was activity at the site in the middle Anglo-Saxon period, with the large quantity of Oxford ware showing that it was occupied in the late 8th-9th century. The *kugeltopf* fragment was a type of pottery which was not normally traded, and so may have been the personal possession, perhaps cooking pottery, of a Frisian trader. The north French and Badorf wares are thought from elsewhere to have been associated with the wine trade. The role of Frisians

in international trade in the middle Saxon period is well-attested. Ipswich ware has a very similar distribution to the continental imports in the Thames Valley, and all are from higher status sites – Offa’s Old Windsor, the nunnery of Elfrida at Reading, the possible royal manor of Alfred near Wantage, and St Frideswide’s minster in Oxford. Blinkhorn concludes that Cookham is very likely also to be a high-status site, and suggests that foreign merchants, possibly Frisian, were visiting the site to trade with the local inhabitants. The evidence is consistent with the site being a nunnery or similar in the 8th-9th centuries.

Blinkhorn’s analysis of fabric type shows that post-medieval and modern pottery was only found in the topsoil and subsoil of trenches 1, 2, and 3. There is very little pottery (14 sherds 100g) from the post Anglo-Saxon medieval period, and this also is nearly all from the subsoil. The *kugeltopf* and north French ware came from refuse dumped in the upper fills of ditch C226 in trench 2. The Anglo-Saxon hand-built ware (early-mid Saxon) was present in every trench. These sherds were organic-tempered wear (type F1) and quartz-tempered wear (F2) both of which Blinkhorn dates to the 5th-mid 9th centuries. The contexts where both types were found were pit and ditch fills and midden deposits, with small amounts in the subsoil. The contexts in which only F2 material was found included several posthole fills in trench 2. There was only a small quantity of Romano-British material (11 sherds 53g), mostly from trenches 1 and 2, and no concentrations were observed.

Sceatta

SF43: *Sceatta*, secondary series c. 710-760, C ARIP group (named from the inscription on the obverse) Type 26-10 with a right-facing bust on the obverse and a ‘pecking bird in foliage’ reverse (Abramson 2021). Probably minted in the south-east or East Anglia. Abramson suggests that the ‘C’ inscription may allude to Canterbury, or to an Archbishop with the initial C, possibly Cuthbert (740-760) who presided over the Council of Clofesho in 747 along with Aethelbert king of Mercia.

Sceattas are small silver coins minted and used by the Frisians and Anglo-Saxons in the last quarter of the 7th and the first half of the 8th centuries. They do not bear the king’s name and have a wide variety of pictorial designs. In England, they have been found mainly in the south-east, particularly Kent, the Thames estuary, coastal East Anglia and Southampton (Metcalf 1984: 27-29), and are considered to be a marker for cross-channel trade between southeast England and Frisia and the Rhine mouths. Gannon (2003: 190) notes that many Secondary Series sceattas are from minster sites, and from the middle and upper Thames.



Figure 26. SF43 Sceat

Animal bone

The table below summarises the number of fragments of animal bone recorded for the major domesticates, birds and other taxa:

Taxon	N
Cattle	273
Sheep/ goat	355
Pig	462
Dog/ fox	5
Cat	1
Red deer	2
Roe deer	4
Rabbit/ hare	2
Small mammal	1
Human	2
Bird*	234
Gadidae (cod family)	2
Frog/toad	1
Land snail	13
Oyster	2
Total Identified	1359
Unidentified	4309

*Domestic fowl, goose, duck, passerine, corvid, swan

The full specialist report on the zooarchaeological remains is awaited. Preliminary observations are:

- It is extremely unusual on Saxon sites to have pigs the most abundant taxon. Generally speaking if the proportion of pigs is over c.20% of the total number of cattle, sheep/goats and pigs then this is a high-status site. At Cookham they are 42%.
- Sheep are often recovered in high proportions at ecclesiastical sites, valued for their wool, which would have been used to make cloth exported to Europe at the time (there is a contemporary letter from Boniface complaining about the length of cloaks coming from Britain. There may be a symbolic link between religious sites and sheep (the lamb of God).
- Hunting is rare on Saxon sites, and is again more commonly recorded at high-status sites. All deer remains would have come from hunted animals.
- High proportions of birds are also good signatures of high-status sites. Most of the Cookham examples were geese and domestic fowl (probably chickens) that would have been raised locally. Again, it is very unusual to have such high proportions.
- There seems to be a predominance of meat-bearing long bones, which suggests redistribution of food, or feast deposits – again very unusual on sites of this period where most animals were culled, processed and consumed in one place, even in wics.

This is an extremely significant assemblage for the period, characterising high status and ecclesiastical markers. It is definitely not a low status rural site (too many pigs and birds), not a wic site (too many sheep, pigs and birds) and there are too many sheep to be typical of a high-status secular site.

Concluding discussion

Clearly there is an uninterrupted zone of intense and sustained Middle Saxon occupation to the west of the churchyard of Holy Trinity. It is firmly dateable to the 8th-9th centuries AD. There is evidence for timber buildings, rubbish pits, middens, trackways, hearths and other structural features, likely forming the domestic and industrial zone of Cookham's documented monastery. The overall spatial configuration is based on a perpendicular framework of E-W and N-S boundary/drainage ditches which may have demarcated zones of activity. Similar spatial arrangements are displayed by other excavated mid-Saxon settlements in the Thames region, including Yarnton, Oxfordshire (Hey *et al.* 2004) and more locally at Wraysbury, Berkshire, which may have been in some way associated with the high-status settlement investigated by Brian Hope-Taylor at nearby Old Windsor (Astill *et al.* 1989). There seems to be a broad spatial distinction in the character and density of the archaeology. In the northern sector of the Paddock closer to the river, the archaeology includes superficial 'positive' deposits – middens, occupation horizons, metalled surfaces. Further south, cut features predominate. More work is needed to discern whether this distinction is real or the product of post-depositional factors and differential survival.

While as yet only provisionally analysed, the portable material culture and biological evidence recovered from the excavations paints a fairly clear and consistent picture. The site served as an arena for conspicuous consumption, most notably embodied in the rich and varied food remains represented by the zooarchaeological assemblage, some of which is likely derived from feasting. Significant levels of production also occurred here, including iron smithing (slag), woodworking (axe) and potentially boneworking (two-edged saw blade). Wealth was clearly concentrated at the site, whether in the form of currency (sceatta) or personal possessions (pins, bracelet). While austere in comparison to the extravagant assemblages of metalwork known from contemporary monastic sites in eastern counties north of the Thames, the range of personal possessions from Cookham is consistent with sites in southern England, with Lyminge, Kent, offering particularly close parallels (Thomas 2013). The high proportion of pins is likely to represent a signature of a female or female dominated monastic community. The single fragment of coloured window glass indicates that monastic buildings of the Middle Thames were adorned with the same continentally-inspired architectural flourishes as seen in premier league religious houses such as Glastonbury Abbey and Jarrow. All this points towards a wealthy and well-provisioned aristocratic community of the type that might be expected at a monastery intimately associated with the assertion of royal authority.

The results of this investigation, while necessarily provisional and small scale, are sufficient to demonstrate that the site holds exciting potential for addressing a research agenda for the early medieval monastic archaeology of the Middle Thames, as set out at the beginning of this report. Future excavation will be driven towards maximising this potential for the benefit of academic and public audiences.

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