

Archaeology around Ashwell Springhead

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Around the springhead in Ashwell village, the main source of the river Rhee which flows north to become the Cam, finds of all periods from prehistoric to post-medieval have been unearthed, including very significant quantities of Neolithic and Bronze Age worked flints, Iron Age, Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon pottery, that may indicate the site of a religious shrine and high-status occupation (Burleigh 2020, 382-4). A Neolithic ritual henge monument lies about 300 m to the ESE of the springhead at around 65 m OD on the chalk escarpment, close to a group of five ring-ditches of ploughed-out late Neolithic/early Bronze Age burial mounds.

About 100 m south of the spring-head on a meadow, Hunt's Close, at the foot of the chalk escarpment, Bronze Age flint-work, as well as Iron Age and Romano-British pottery suggest considerable activity in those periods. Finds continued into the Anglo-Saxon period, including potsherds and high-quality Middle and Late Saxon metalwork, metal detected finds in 1977 by Rod de Normann whose family lived at Ashwell House next door. These included decorated copper-alloy strap-ends (**Fig. 1**) and a unique elaborately decorated copper-alloy sword scabbard chape, each side depicting differing representations of the Tree of Life. One side might be intended to represent the Christian Tree of Life, perhaps the side with an animal head (a lamb?) peering through the foliage (**Fig. 2**), while the other could be the pagan World Tree (*Yggdrasil* – an Ash), associated with the pagan god, Odin (see below). Possibly the owner was hedging his bets with the deities, as artefacts included in the Sutton Hoo and Prittlewell Saxon royal burials suggest may have been sometimes the case. A contemporary gilded copper-alloy pendant also recovered depicts a snarling hunting hound, wearing a broad collar, standing behind a small tree-like symbol (**Fig. 3**). Very similar symbols are incised on the trunk of the Tree of Life on each side of the sword scabbard chape.

Occupation continued again into the Medieval period with finds of pottery and metalwork, including a lead-alloy pilgrim's flask for holy water (*ampulla*), decorated with a scallop shell design (associated with the shrine of St James of Compostella in Spain), and a copper-alloy pilgrim's badge, suggesting a religious aspect to the activity (North Hertfordshire Museum Accession Nos. 70 – 85 1978).

Metal detector finds in 2019 by David Pengelly have included a unique inscribed and decorated copper-alloy handle with probable silver coating from a Romano-British priest's ceremonial ritual rattle displaying the head of Neptune with a trident, a Celtic head and a human cranium (**Figs. 4 & 5**; similar in form to the plain copper-alloy one from the Barkway Roman temple treasure hoard; Jackson & Burleigh 2018, 67 & figs. 106-7 & 171); a Romano-British copper-alloy bird terminal, perhaps from a priest's sceptre; Roman coins, including one with a Minerva reverse, like those in the hoard ritually deposited in the Ashwell End ceremonial hollow (Burleigh in Jackson & Burleigh 2018, 330); medieval coins, one of which is neatly folded in half, like the two folded together from the Ashwell End sacred site (see below); and a medieval lead-alloy medallion possibly displaying the crowned Christ the King. All these finds are concentrated on and around the features discussed in the following paragraphs and perhaps suggest a place held to be sacred over many centuries (see below).

Incidentally, Ashwell Village Museum hopes to acquire the above-mentioned Romano-British ritual rattle handle for public display. Hopefully, the landowner will donate it. It will need to be expertly conserved first which will reveal much more detail of its inscription and decoration. It's hoped that all the finds from the excavations will eventually be placed in the village museum.

In March 2019 local volunteers, including from the North Herts Archaeological Society, led by myself, began a programme of test excavation and surveys on Hunt's Close. Geophysical surveys, led by Kris Lockyear with volunteers from the Community Archaeology Geophysics Group, revealed a buried double-ditched enclosure containing a large hollow, and other ditches on the field, while hand-dug test pits uncovered a Medieval ditch and the terminus of a gully, both also containing residual Roman pottery and Prehistoric worked flints. Further hand-cut test trenches later in 2019 sectioned the outer and inner enclosure ditches, both dated to the Roman period by potsherds and a complete copper-alloy bow-brooch, and the large hollow contained by the enclosure ditches (**Fig. 6**).

The latter was shown to be a flat-bottomed sub-rectangular hollow, about 8.0 m x 4.0 m in plan, with vertical sides cut 0.70 m into the natural chalk bedrock. It had post and stake-holes in the base on its inner edge and possible structured placed-deposits comprising animal bones, pottery, and stone objects. In one trench across the interior of the hollow, an organic soil layer, up to 0.70 m deep, contained much charcoal, sometimes in streaks and patches,

fragmentary animal bone, a complete boar's tusk, ovicaprid horn cores, residual Roman, and probable Saxon pottery, notably many rim sherds. At its base, on top of a surface of redeposited chalk, was a placed structured deposit, about 0.30 m across, comprising an ovicaprid mandible, a broken perforated stone weight, a polished sandstone pebble and a small hard chalk block, together with fragmentary animal bone and potsherds. Underneath the redeposited chalk layer was a thin deposit of organic soil lying on the surface of the natural chalk bedrock, the horizontal base of the hollow. Directly under the position, two layers above, of the placed structured deposit was a pattern of seven stake-holes cut into the chalk base, perhaps the site of a small shrine.

A large probable post-pit, approximately 0.70 m across and at least 1.0 m deep cut through the base of the hollow, on the north side of its inner edge, possibly once holding a carved, painted and decorated totem pole, a tree trunk or maybe a whole tree - ?an Ash. Other apparent placed deposits contained worked bone points, including three perforated large needles, one complete, and a complete small bone pin. Layers filling the hollow included organic soils, some containing much charcoal, alternating with re-deposited tamped chalk nodules forming hard surfaces. They are dated by considerable quantities of probable Early-Middle Saxon potsherds, including many rim-sherds, although some residual Roman pottery was present also. During the life-time of the hollow, its edges had been significantly modified by deposits of very firmly tamped chalk rubble, making it hard to distinguish from the original undisturbed natural chalk edge and base. These tamped chalk surfaces are reminiscent of those associated with both the Ashwell End and Baldock sacred hollows (see below and Burleigh in Jackson & Burleigh 2018).

The probable Anglo-Saxon artificially cut hollow may have been some kind of ceremonial place where religious rituals were performed inside the pre-existing Roman, possibly sacred, enclosure which may have contained a shrine or temple overlooking the springs. It has similarities, although it is much smaller, to the late Iron Age/Romano-British cut ceremonial hollow we excavated at Ashwell End, the site of the discovery of Senuna's temple treasure hoard (Jackson and Burleigh 2018). Similarities include a vertically cut edge and horizontal base, soils sealed by redeposited chalk layers (probable surfaces), notably one inside the perimeter of the hollow, placed structured deposits, and hints of possible feasting. The double-ditched enclosure has similarities also to the double-ditched enclosure containing the Iron Age and Romano-British temples at Hayling Island on the Hampshire-Sussex border. This enclosure also contained a series of ritual pits dated to the mid-Saxon

period. It is possible that the ditched enclosure continued as a sacred site through the Saxon and Medieval periods, perhaps beyond, as the finds suggest.

Professors John Blair and Helena Hamerow of Oxford University, renowned academic experts in Anglo-Saxon archaeology and history, agree with my interpretation of the ceremonial hollow and consider it to be a new type of monument for the Anglo-Saxon period.

While we were carrying out our archaeological excavation in 2019, a planning application was submitted to the Local Authority to construct houses across the field. After we had completed our field investigation, the applicant employed a commercial archaeological company to machine excavate numerous trial trenches across the field. These confirmed our dating evidence for the features on the site. In 2020 planning permission was refused for a number of reasons, including the adverse impact any development would have on the setting of the Conservation Area and on views.

The place-name *Aescewelle* is first recorded c.1060 and means 'Ash well or spring'. A village folk tradition records that Ashwell Springs were associated with the pagan all-powerful god, Odin, whose sacred tree was the Ash (*Yggdrasil* – 'Odin's horse or gallows' - the World Tree – see above). The place-name *Hodwell* by the springhead is thought to mean 'Odin's well or spring'. We know from the Christian Anglo-Saxon historian Bede that the pagan Anglo-Saxons assembled at certain sacred places for the celebration of religious rites, and that springs or wells were among places venerated as sacred. The Ashwell spring water was believed to have magical properties in the cure of diseases of the eye, and until the beginning of the 20th century, people came from far and near to take away bottles of the water for curative purposes. A few people do still today. It is known that until the middle of the 19th century an annual festival was held at the Springs, and old Ashwell and Baldock people made merry with ale, wine and food. Here was evidence of an ancient custom being handed down perhaps from pagan ancestors with a feast by the springhead. Interestingly, since at least 1700 two small alehouses were sited at the springhead (replaced about 1799 by the extant Three Tuns public house).

Further Reading:

Burleigh, Gilbert R. 2020. 'Temples, treasures, heroic burials and deities: a sacred landscape bounding Iron Age and Romano-British Baldock', in

Sacred Landscapes in Antiquity: Creation, Manipulation, Transformation
(ed. R. Häussler and G. F. Chiai), 369-99, Oxford.

<https://www.oxbowbooks.com/oxbow/sacred-landscapes.html...>

Jackson, Ralph and Burleigh, Gilbert 2018. *Dea Senuna: Treasure, Cult and Ritual at Ashwell, Hertfordshire*, British Museum Research Publication 194, London.

This is now freely available on-line to read or download:

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/research_publications_series.aspx