

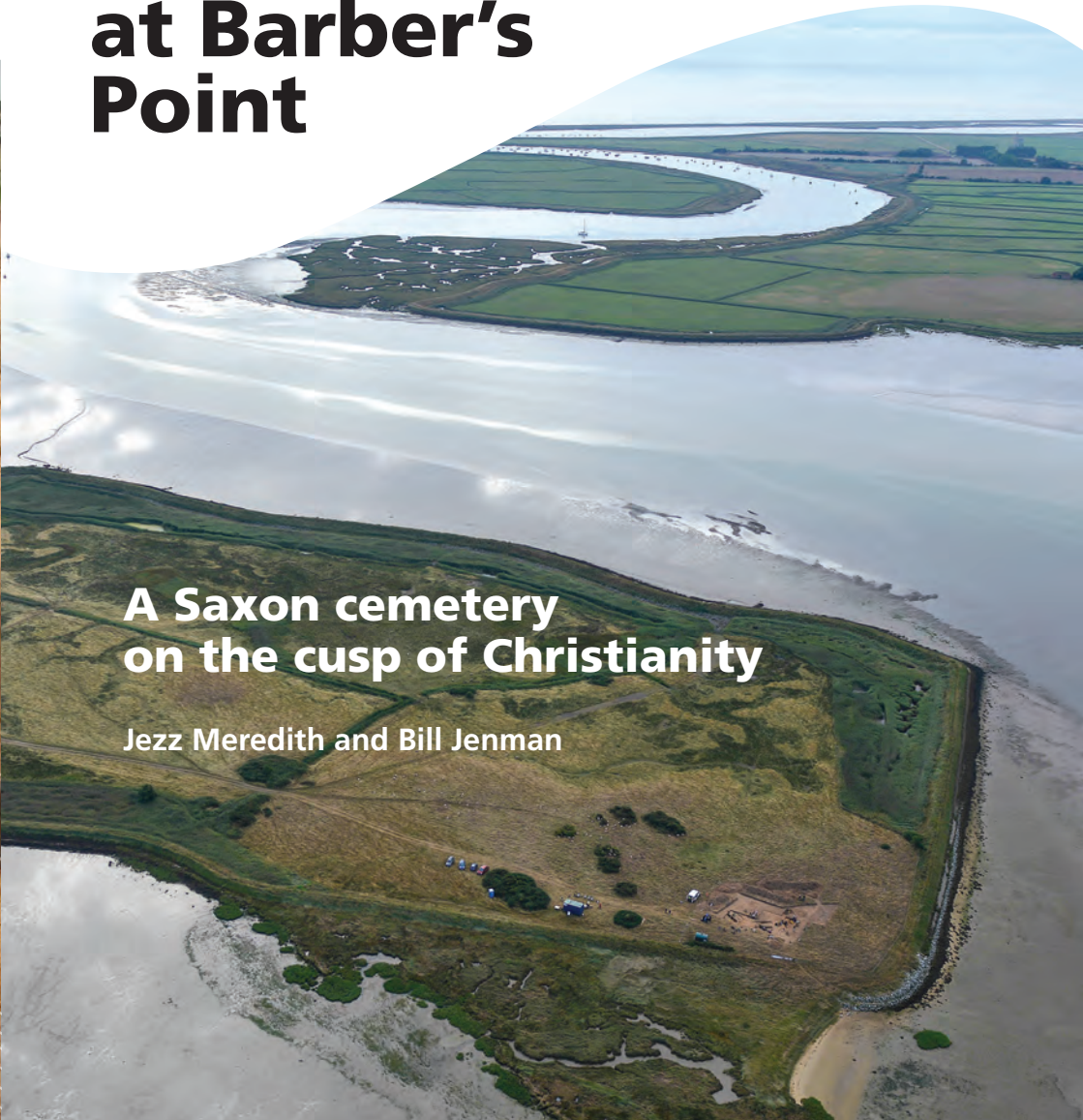


Aldeburgh and District  
Local History Society

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• A HISTORY OF EXPERTISE •



# Life and Death at Barber's Point



## A Saxon cemetery on the cusp of Christianity

Jezz Meredith and Bill Jenman



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**This booklet is dedicated to the memory of Richard Newman 1944-2014, without whom Saxon Barber's Point would have been lost to the sea, quite undiscovered.**

## Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Suffolk Wildlife Trust, owners of Hazlewood Marshes and Barber's Point, for allowing the excavations on their nature reserve.

The authors would also like to acknowledge the professional contributions of all the Suffolk County Council Archaeology Service (now Suffolk Archaeology CIC) staff and consultants involved over the years, as well as all the volunteers from ADLHS who contributed their labour and enthusiasm.

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## 1 Introduction

**In 1907 some historical remains were discovered eroding out of the mud beside the River Alde at Barber's Point. A group of amateur archaeologists from the Aldeburgh Literary Society then undertook a dig, and found pottery and artefacts of Roman origin. There is only a brief record of this dig which doesn't even show exactly where it took place. But, in the folklore of Aldeburgh, it was always said that Romans lived up at Barber's Point.**

In 2004 the first modern dig by the Aldeburgh and District Local History Society (ALDHS) found large quantities of early Roman pottery, some Saxon pottery and a beautiful Neolithic arrowhead. Boundary ditches and post-holes, some Roman, some Saxon, revealed that there had been buildings on the site. Far from providing answers, the dig uncovered more questions. What was the nature of the Roman and Saxon settlements?

It is apparent that the water level in the river had changed radically during the period of settlement. It appears that for a time Barber's Point had been an area of raised land, separated from the mainland by muddy foreshore and probably accessed only from the river. It was inhabited in the early Roman period but total inundation in the 4th century AD meant that it wasn't inhabited again until the later 5th century. We now also know that much of the site has been lost to the winding Alde estuary over the years, so the two settlements were

not only separated by time and tides but may also have had different footprints.

In 2006 ALDHS returned, finding more Roman and Saxon pottery and another Neolithic arrowhead. It is thought that the Roman settlement was of a fairly humble nature, probably associated in some way with the manufacture of salt. There was also considerable evidence of shellfish gathering.

An intriguing pattern of Saxon postholes was discovered revealing what appeared to have been a large building, perhaps a hall or religious building. Even more exciting was the discovery at the very end of the dig of two human bodies (or parts of) in the vicinity of the 'large building'. The bodies were radiocarbon-dated at around AD 850. One was of a young woman, the sex of the other could not be determined. Could the large building be an early church? Could there be more burials? The Saxon occupation looked to have been more substantial than the Roman.

A third dig in 2010 aimed to find out whether or not the Saxon settlement was religious in nature. Was the 'large building' an early church? Could this island site be a satellite religious settlement connected to Saint Botolph's abbey at 'Icanho' just across the river?

The dig did indeed find more burials; nine more graves dating between AD 650-800. A variety of burial rites

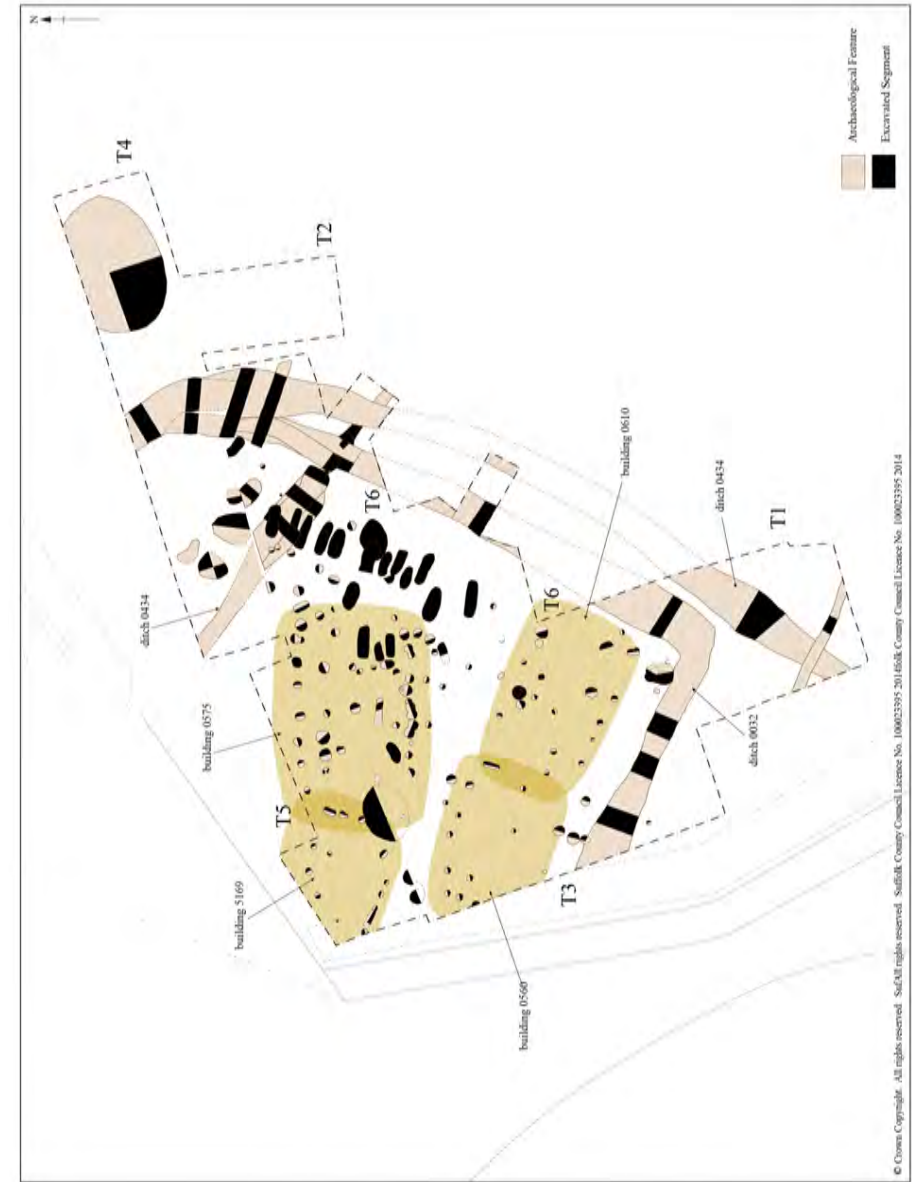
were revealed but the graves all appear to be Christian because they were sited within the settlement and contained no grave goods. Assuming that this Christian identification is correct, this makes Barber's Point the earliest known Christian burial site in the area.

In 2013, in conjunction with Touching the Tide, ALDHS returned for one last investigation.



Barber's Point in September 2013

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Site Plan, showing all the features found at Barber's Point in all four excavations. Note the enclosing ditches to the east side, and the cluster of rounded grave sites in the centre of the diagram.

<b>Palaeolithic</b>	c. 800,000 BC to 10,000 BC	Early humans were present in the area from around 800,000 years ago, as we know from finds of tools at Happisburgh and Pakefield. However the UK was largely abandoned during the coldest periods of the Ice Age.
<b>Mesolithic</b>	c. 10,000 BC to 4000 BC	The Ice Age ended. Rising sea levels fill the deep valley of the Alde with sediments, beginning the formation of the modern estuary.
<b>Neolithic</b>	c. 4000 BC to 2300 BC	Farming arrived in what became the UK. Some arrowheads left at Barber's Point.
<b>Bronze Age</b>	c. 2500 BC to 700 BC	Extensive forest clearance caused soil erosion that filled the Alde valley with yet more sediment. Bronze Age flint and pottery found at Barber's Point.
<b>Iron Age</b>	c. 800 BC to AD 43	
<b>Roman</b>	AD 43 to AD 410	The first major use of Barber's Point was as a Roman saltworks.
<b>Saxon</b>	AD 410 to AD 1066	
<b>Early Anglo-Saxon</b>	AD 410 to AD 650	In the period following the end of Roman rule, the Saxons took control of the area from the native Britons. Sometime in the later 6th century the founding burial took place at Barber's point.
<b>Middle Saxon</b>	AD 650 to AD 850	Traditionally 654 is the date that St Botolph built the first church in Saxon East Anglia at Iken, just over the river from Barber's Point.
<b>Late Saxon</b>	AD 850 to AD 1066	Barber's Point was abandoned sometime in the 800s, probably because of Viking raids.

	AD 1066 to AD 1500	In the medieval period the river walls were built, "reclaiming" the saltmarsh to create Hazlewood Marshes.
<b>Post-medieval</b>	AD 1500 to AD 1900	Hazlewood Marshes were used as grazing land, probably mostly for cattle.
<b>Modern</b>	AD 1900 +	In 1907 the Aldeburgh Literary Society carried out the first excavation. In 1991 Suffolk Wildlife Trust acquired Hazlewood as a nature reserve. In 2004, 2006, and 2010 ADLHS carried out three major excavations of the site.
	September 2013	ALDHS and Touching the Tide, supervised by SCCAS (now Suffolk Archaeology) carried out the 4th and final dig at the site.
	December 2013	A tidal surge catastrophically breached the old river walls; Hazlewood returned to estuary and intertidal habitat. Barber's Point is again an island.
	2015	Suffolk Wildlife Trust undertakes extensive works to restore access to Hazlewood and to maximise its future value for wildlife. The area is once again part of the estuary after maybe 500 years as farmland behind river walls.



**After the December 2013 breach – Barber's point is the small island on the left, just visible under the wing strut.**

## 2 Roman Barber's Point

Small finds of prehistoric flint and pottery were found on the site, but Barber's Point was first used intensively during the early Roman period, in the 1st century AD. During the late 1st to the early 3rd centuries huge quantities of wheel-thrown, greyware

pottery were discarded on site. In the excavation areas alone up to 20,200 individual Roman potsherds were identified, which together weighed 118kg. The type of pottery found suggests that Barber's Point was perhaps only seasonally occupied.



Reconstruction of the Roman settlement by David Gillingwater



#### Roman pots found during the excavations

There was also a great deal of salt-working debris in the form of fragments of large ceramic evaporation trays, referred to as 'briquetage'. Vast numbers of these fragments were found, numbering 6,400 individual pieces and weighing a staggering 168kg! This is the largest briquetage assemblage to have been documented in Suffolk.

It seems highly likely that the main Roman activity was associated with evaporating brackish water to make salt. A number of other Roman salt-working sites have been identified along the Alde valley at Snape Warren and on the other side of the river at Iken. Water at high tide was trapped in clay-lined tanks. This saline water was

then transferred to the evaporation trays placed over fires. Finally the salt was then removed from the trays, resulting in their break-up.

Interestingly, only fragments of the trays themselves have been found at Barber's Point with very occasional pinch pieces, props and other bits of hearth furniture associated with the evaporation process being recovered. It seems highly likely therefore that the main focus of production was down at tidal level. Any traces of this activity which might have survived have long been obliterated by erosion as the course of the Alde has changed over the centuries.

The pottery assemblage tells us that the site was abandoned by the end of the 3rd century AD. There are a number of possible explanations for this. Salt-working along the East Anglian coast appears to have ceased by the end of the 2nd century AD and this has usually been interpreted as due to mineral sources of salt being discovered and mined in Cheshire. There were also sea-level changes during this period. Sea level rises peaked at around AD 400, probably making the island uninhabitable for perhaps a hundred years before and after this date.

These same sea level rises affected

north Germany, where they displaced the Saxon population and encouraged land-hungry Saxon warriors to harass the shores of Britannia and later to settle there. It was these raids that led to the construction of a string of Roman coastal defences called the Saxon Shore forts.

Once the Roman rule had ended, however, the shore forts were abandoned and pagan Anglo-Saxon kingdoms became established over much of what is now "Angleland" (England), while Romano-British Christianity disappeared from the record.

#### Some of the briquetage found on site

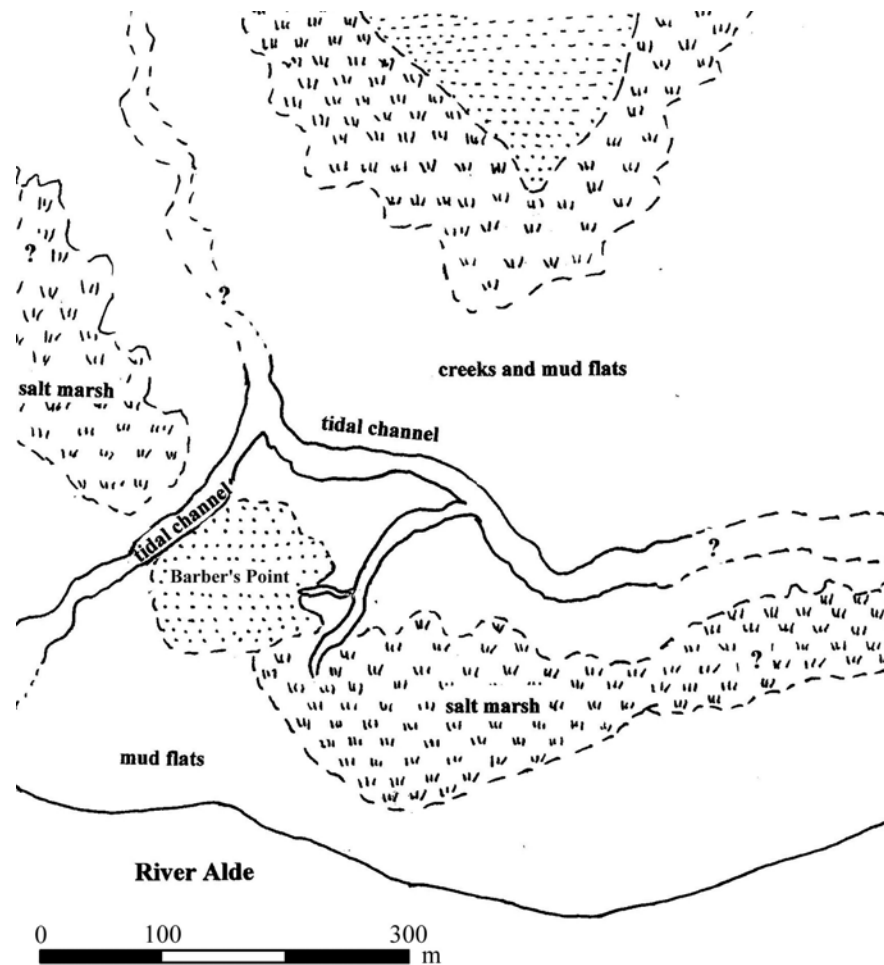


### 3 The Anglo-Saxon settlement

At some point in the 6th century AD the site was reoccupied. Sea-levels had dropped and the pirates who had threatened the coast had disappeared – possibly they had become the new Anglo-Saxon rulers.



Reconstruction of the Saxon settlement by David Gillingwater



**A reconstruction of where Barber's Point was located when Saxon settlement began.**

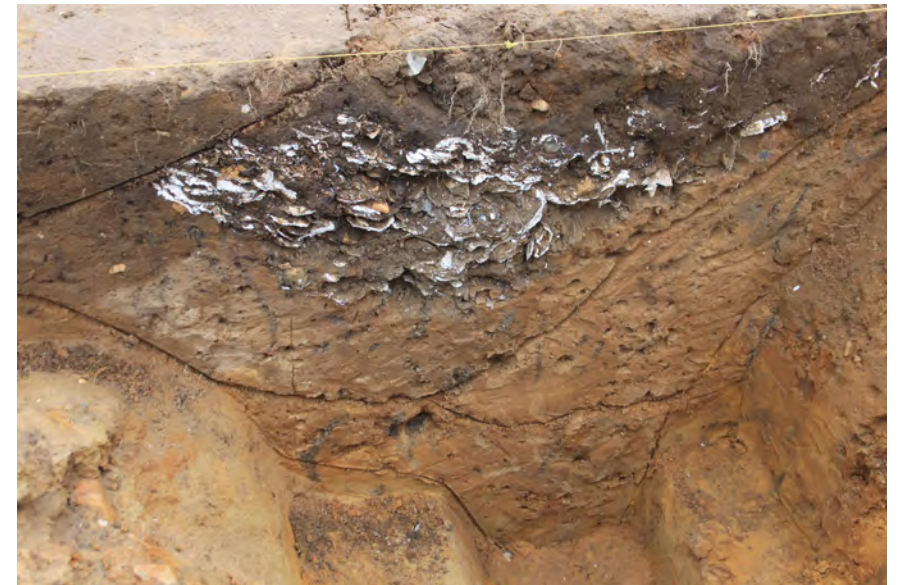
From the end of the 6th century onwards a series of large rectilinear enclosure ditches were dug to protect or define the site, post-hole buildings were erected, graves were excavated and timber post alignments (for fish traps or quays) were arranged along the river's edge. Yet despite this huge

amount of activity very few datable artefacts have been recovered. Only 177 pottery sherds of this period, weighing 3.9kg, have been identified. Dating has therefore relied on the radiocarbon evidence of the 15 burials where sufficient bone has survived to analyse.

## 4 The principal ditches

It is almost certain that at least half the Anglo-Saxon site has been lost to river erosion on the western side, although some of the site might be hidden and protected under the current river walls. This is clearly seen by the ditches that enclosed the site; these are seen running along the east side of the site but disappear as they turn to the west.

They were built in two main phases, further complicated by the internal sub-division of the settlement area by a further slightly smaller ditch which was then repeatedly recut. The fill of the internal ditch contained numerous oyster shells, suggesting that oyster processing (or perhaps feasting) took place.



**A cross section of one of the ditch features, showing the complex sequence of individual ditches dug and re-dug in roughly the same place; note also the amount of oyster shell included in the ditch fill.**



## 5 The fish trap timbers

Although the site has probably been highly eroded by the river, not all evidence has been removed from the western, riverward side of the site. During low tides timbers can be seen out in the river mud c.80m to the west. These have been found to be alignments of stakes, horizontally laid roundwood and ephemeral traces of wattling, possibly part of hurdle panels. The radiocarbon dates from these timbers span c.AD 650 to 800.

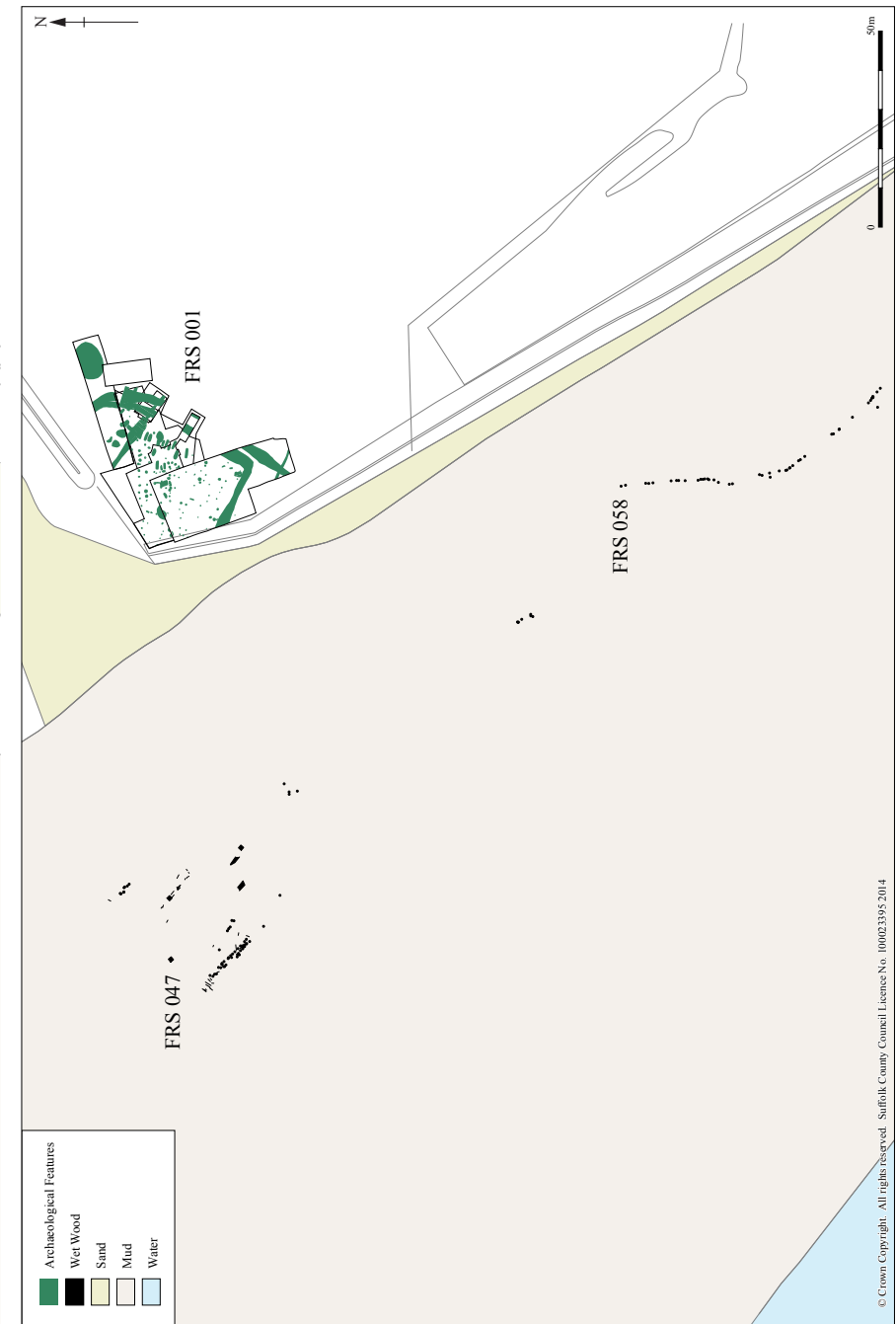
In December 2013 another, as yet undated, alignment was found to the south of the excavation area.

It is likely that these timbers represent the remains of a fish trap as they appear to run parallel to the main river channel and they were probably a source of food for those living at Barber's Point. It is

possible that the wattle traces might represent trackways across the mud, so the timber alignments might possibly suggest informal quays, wharf edges or slipways. It is much more likely that the site faced and was accessed by boat from the river rather than having to traverse the 500m of treacherous saltmarsh and tidal creeks behind.



Waterlogged timbers on the foreshore



## 6 The post-hole buildings

**Two main forms of building are present in the Saxon period. Rectangular post-hole structures, often with rounded corners and centrally opposed entranceways, are thought to be the main dwellings and are sometimes referred to as 'halls'. Sunken-feature buildings (SFBs), sometimes called 'grubenhäuser', were likely to be workshops or storage buildings and were built over a deep rectangular pit.**

No SFBs have been identified at Barber's Point, possibly because a freak tide or the high water-table might have resulted in them filling with water. A number of post-hole alignments, some showing rounded corners, have however been identified. No absolutely clear house-plans have been recognised as there are probably different structures overlapping one another. Variability in the underlying geology of the site also meant that in some cases a line of post-holes were recognised but then disappeared as they turned.

Three clusters of post-holes, probably representing buildings, appear to be aligned on and are respecting the inner enclosure ditch (see page 5). These include one building tucked neatly into the corner of the ditch with another slightly to the west. It is possible that both structures are part of the same long thin building but it is more likely that they represent two slightly overlapping structures from different phases. Probably both buildings were built after the adjacent ditch had been backfilled.

Another post-hole building can be seen partly revealed in the north-western corner of the site. What makes the

final centrally placed building appear slightly unusual is its west to east alignment, different from that of the ditches and other buildings.

This central building is perhaps the best preserved building footprint that we have recognised, but it is still poorly understood. The thing that makes this building interesting is that it contained at least five, perhaps six, graves with four of these on the strict west to east alignment of the building, whereas most of the graves lie at right-angles to the enclosure ditch and are thus orientated west-north-west to east-south-east. This has raised the possibility that this is a church or chapel, into which some of the dead had been interred.



**Some of the excavators mark out the postholes and graves of the possible church.**

## 7 The Anglo-Saxon cemetery

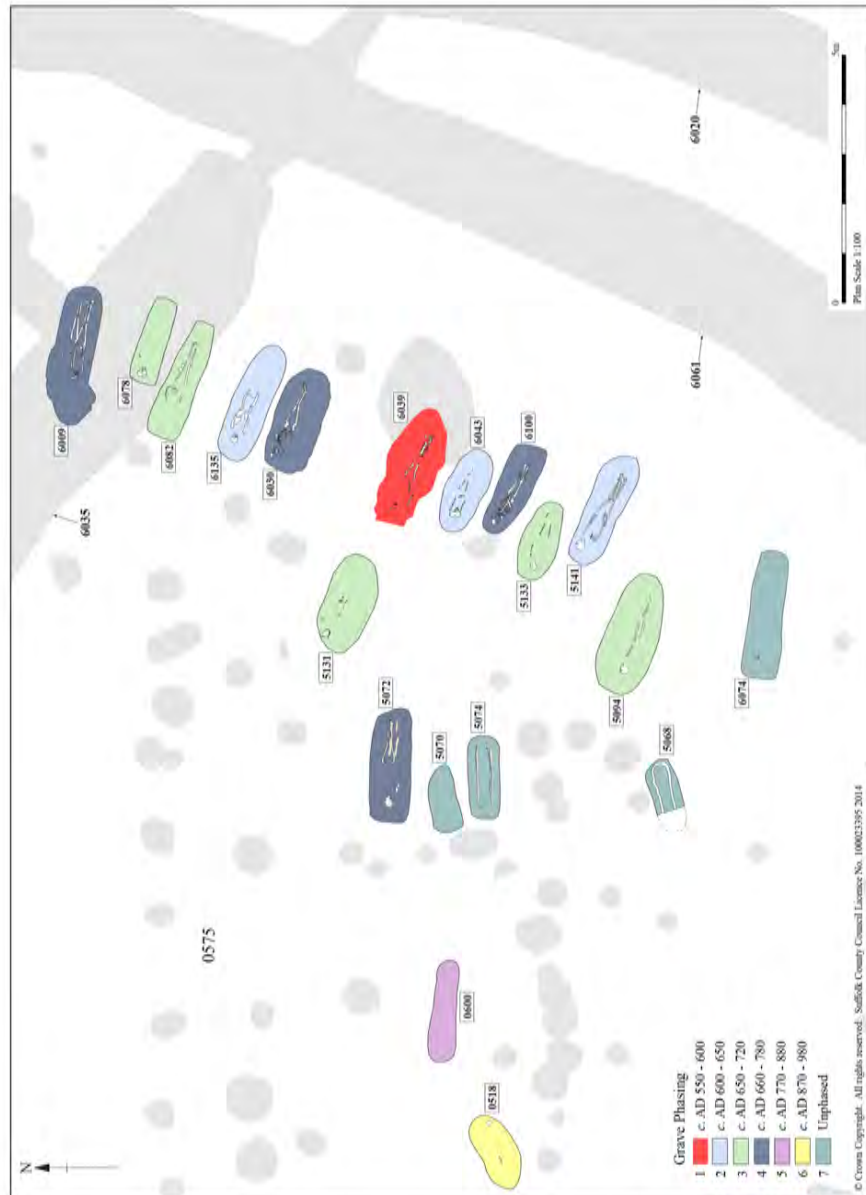
**The survival of human bone was very variable across the site with some skeletons remaining nearly intact while others had completely disappeared leaving empty graves. Such variability was due to the changing nature of underlying geology (sand tends to be acidic and so attacks the bone, while chalky clay will enhance bone preservation) and the nature of the backfill – generally the graves with most oyster shell in their fill were better preserved.**

In total nineteen graves have been identified and this is believed to be the full extent of the cemetery. Of the nineteen, fifteen had sufficient remains to allow radiocarbon dating. The dating has suggested six different periods or 'phases' that span from c.AD 550 to 980. Four graves are undated and are thus 'unphased'.

The initial graves (Phases 1, 2, 3 and some of 4) appear to be in a linear arrangement, parallel with the

perimeter ditch. It is likely that, moving from east to west, the sequence went - ditch, then bank, then graves. All these graves have the west-north-west to east-south-east alignment which shows they have been set out at right-angles to the ditch. The later phase graves (some of Phase 4, all of Phases 5, 6 and the unphased examples) are mainly orientated west to east, and so might be associated with the possible chapel, and have moved westwards, away from the initial linear arrangement.





Dating of All Burials – Trenches 3, 5, and 6

## 8 Phase 1: the founding grave ("Casket Girl"); AD 550-600

It is uncertain what came first - the settlement or the cemetery. There is however a tiny piece of evidence that might indicate that there were already people living here before they started burying their dead at Barber's Point. A small, solitary sherd of handmade Early Anglo-Saxon pottery was recovered from the fill of the founding grave. This was not part of a pot that had been placed in the grave but could have belonged to the general occupation detritus that had got mixed with the grave backfill. Also the grave does look to be positioned at right-angles to the enclosure ditch and appears to be roughly central along the eastern side of this earliest enclosure. It cannot be guaranteed that the enclosure was initially set up to define occupation - it might even have been dug to delineate the cemetery, although, given the small size of the cemetery, this seems unlikely.

The first grave was an irregularly shaped, slightly oval cut c.2.4m long. A young individual, around 16 years old, was placed inside. Although the skeletal remains were too fragmentary to sex this individual, the associated artefacts suggest that the occupant was female. A high precision radiocarbon date from this individual suggests a date of AD 550 to 591 (at 68.2% probability) and, given the associated finds it seems likely that she was buried towards the end of this date range. The tight arrangement of the ankle bones, possibly indicating that the feet were crossed, suggests that the body had been wrapped in a shroud. The drawing on page 22 shows the most extraordinary thing about this grave - the placement of a small maple box with iron fittings at her feet which contained an astonishing arrangement of objects.

- The box was made of field maple boards between 11 and 15mm thick with the backboard slightly thicker (c.18mm) to accommodate the hinge fittings (as seen in the corrosion from the iron fragments).
- A number of the items would have been worn by an adult woman as a mark of status as the mistress of a household. This individual seems slightly young to have warranted this rank but she might have just been old enough to qualify or she might have been eligible to wear these items if she had lived longer (it is possible that is why these objects are put in the box rather than being placed on her person). These objects include a large T-shaped iron key (a symbol of a householder), a

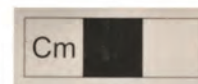


Reconstruction by David Gillingwater

stone spindle whorl and a short bar of iron around which yarn had been wound (possibly part of a sewing kit). These items would have been worn from the waist on an arrangement of chains and hooks often referred to as a 'chatelaine'. Six wire hoops of varying sizes found in the box probably represent the chatelaine, the largest of which was threaded with a bead each of amber and glass.

- A number of unusual, rare and possibly symbolic items were also placed in the box. The largest and perhaps most unusual was a panther cowrie shell, which must have come originally from the Red Sea or Indian Ocean.

- Other items include a pierced echinoid fossil, an irregular lump of amber, two fragments of Roman glass and a miniature Iron Age terret ring (a scaled-down replica of a piece of chariot equipment; the reins would pass through terret rings between the driver and the horses). Although this would have been an 'antique' of over 500 years age, it was found in the ground with the iron key placed through it so it might have been worn at the waist, possible with the key hanging from it.
- A number of fine textiles were placed over the box. A minimum of four different types of cloth have been identified with at least one of these having fine pleats or folds. These could represent garments or soft furnishings.





The casket contents in situ



Detail of the casket contents as found, showing the panther cowrie shell, spindle whorl, terret ring, iron key and fragmented wire hoops. Foot bones from individual 6040 can be seen at the back, a fragment of Roman glass is behind the terret ring, the lump of amber is to the right of the spindle whorl

The placement of the box and its objects within the first and founding grave must have had deep significance, but it is very difficult for us today to gauge the resonances and symbolic consequences of placing these objects within the ground. There are at least three competing theories:

- *The 'keepsakes'*. If these were the remains of a young woman then it is likely many of these objects could have been either hers to wear or would have been hers if she had reached maturity. Thus they might represent her potential inheritance or possibly her dowry. The other unusual items might have been keepsakes that belonged to the individual or were placed there as gifts by the mourners.
- *'Amulets and curing stones'*. One idea is that some individuals during the Anglo-Saxon period were buried with 'purse' or 'bag groups' (occasionally in boxes) that contained strange or exotic items which could include cowries, lumps of amber, fossils and antiques items such as were found in our box. This could be interpreted as signs that the interred individual was perhaps revered in the community as a healer or as a 'cunning woman'.
- *Votive offering*. Very little is known about the religious beliefs of the pagan Anglo-Saxons of the 5th to 7th centuries. There is very little convincing evidence for shrines, temples or cult centres but there is a great deal of investment in the burial rite, which is probably of a highly charged and symbolic nature. Possibly the placing of objects in graves during this period is about the burying of votive offerings in the ground and is mainly for the benefit of the assembled mourners and could be seen as a religious ceremony. The objects from the wooden box are perhaps not just to do with the girl buried there but could have been brought together by the whole community with the purpose of initiating the new cemetery.



Reconstruction by David Gillingwater

## 9 Later Phases

### Phase 2: AD 600-650

Possibly within a generation further burials began to be placed to the north and south of the initial grave. Immediately to the south of the founder another grave was dug containing a child of 5 years age, around whose neck was suspended a Roman bronze coin (a radiate of c.AD 260-296, possibly of Claudius II). The other two graves of this phase were neatly spaced c.3m to the north and south respectively. To the north was interred an unsexed young adult. To the south, was placed a tall (c.1.65m) middle-aged to old female, suffering from at least three separate carries and a considerable degree of arthritis. Stones had been placed under her head and pelvis, possibly to keep her body supine in the grave.

### Phase 3: AD 615-715

This phase has the highest number of graves and is represented by five separate inhumations placed within a gap in the row (grave 5133), at the end of the line (6078 and 6082) and possibly representing a second row of graves (5094 and 5131). Grave 5133 held an unsexed older juvenile. Large stones were placed under the legs of this individual, recalling the treatment of the body in grave 5141 adjacent. At the north end of the row grave 6082 was discovered and beyond this the small grave 6078. The former grave held a young male of 17 or 18 years of age, while the latter grave contained the remains of a child of about 4 years. Interestingly these graves were cut by the internal division ditch 0434. Graves 5094 and 5131 might represent the beginnings of a



Volunteers working on the site – over 35 adults participated in the 2 week dig, as well as pupils from five local schools.

second row to the west of the principal line. Grave 5094, located to the south, contained an elderly female who had been placed on a bier or possibly within a coffin as represented by a rectangular organic stain under the body. She was also likely to be shrouded as her ankles were crossed and her arms held into her body. An unusual conical-shaped deposit of clay was found near her feet. Grave 5131 also showed traces of a rectangular organic stain thought to be a coffin on which were placed the poorly preserved remains of a young, possibly male, individual.

#### Phase 4: AD 660-780

This is a group of four graves, all rather poorly dated (their radiocarbon ranges were imprecise) so they can only be assigned vaguely to a long phase of 120 years that appears to overlap somewhat with the previous Phase 3. But unusual things appear to happen during this phase: they are still finding gaps in the row to fill (grave 6030 containing a young female of 18 or 19 years, grave 6100 a child of 8 or 9 years) or placing at the end of the line and cutting an earlier ditch (6009 with a young male of 16 to 18 years). With grave 5072 (a young male) there is a change in alignment to west-east and a movement westwards, maybe towards the possible church or chapel.

#### Phase 5: AD 770-880

This phase was represented by a single grave 0600 well inside structure 0575. This burial was not fully excavated in 2006 but a sample of bone removed for dating indicated a probable 9th century date.

#### Phase 6: AD 870-980

Grave 0518 was the latest and the most westerly of the graves and was dated to roughly the 10th century. The body was placed within an unusual oval shaped and shallow grave on a new orientation of east-north-east to west-south-west. Very few skeletal remains survived but fragments of teeth and part of a jaw were discovered at the eastern end of the grave suggesting, most unusually, that this individual was placed in reverse to all the other inhumations. The wear on the teeth suggest that this was a young individual, possibly female.

#### Unphased graves

In total four undated graves were recognised. The large grave 6074 was 2.6m long but contained tooth fragments suggesting a child of only 5 or 6 years of age. This grave appeared to be part of the grave row of Phases 1 to 3 but its west to east alignment suggests it could have been Phase 4 or 5. The three other graves had no trace of human remains. Graves 5070 and 5074 with their close proximity and shared alignment with the Phase 4 grave 5072 suggest they may have been contemporary. Grave 5141 was partly revealed in the edge of the site and showed that the body might have been laid within a hollowed tree-trunk coffin.

## 10 Pagan or Christian?

**Very little is known about Anglo-Saxon religion and much has been made by archaeologists about how to distinguish the burial customs of pagans from Christians. Some burial practices are definitely pagan, such as cremation, and some are obviously Christian, such as burial within a churchyard, but there is a considerable grey area during the 6th and 7th centuries.**



photo by Malcolm Farrow

Iken Church

During this time cremation is no longer practised, graves tend to be dug west to east (with the head at the western end) and there is a decline in the use of grave goods (although occasional furnished graves occur well into the Christian era). One criterion that has been suggested is the location of burials: pre-Christian burials tend to be placed away from occupation whereas Christian dead could be placed within a settlement. The Barber's Point cemetery appears to conform to burial within settlement but the dates of the Phase

1 and 2 graves of the late 6th and early 7th century just seem too early. The arrival at Iken (*Icanho*) of St Botolph in AD 654 suggests that Christianity might have only arrived at this Godless part of Suffolk by the middle of the 7th century, or at least was only acceptable to the general populace by then. With our earliest burial dating to AD 600 at the latest we might be forced to assume that the cemetery at Barber's Point originated in the pagan period and then, unusually, continues in use during the Christian era.

## 11 After the Saxons

**The first Viking attacks on East Anglia were in the mid-9th century and the monastery at Iken is thought to have been abandoned soon afterwards. The River Alde and its shores had become a potentially dangerous and hostile place.**

At some point, probably starting in the medieval period and continuing into the post-medieval, the land between the island of Barber's Point and the north bank of the river was reclaimed and consolidated to

form fields of damp grazing land. A network of ditches drained the area. Small quantities of medieval pottery have been found spread across the site and the large pit was likely to be a drinking place for stock.



Digging team 2013

## 12 Hazlewood Marshes today

**Before December 2013, Hazelwood had been the last undrained freshwater grazing marsh on the Alde. It had been bought by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust in 1991 in recognition of its unique habitats. It was full of wildlife, in the ditches and the grassland, and was an important nesting site for species like lapwing, avocet, redshank, and marsh harrier. Barn owls could often be seen in the late afternoon, quartering the site hunting for voles. On the 6th December 2013 all that changed.**



© EA Daily Times

Following the tidal surge, about a fifth of the area is permanently underwater, while most of the rest is covered with every tide. Rebuilding the walls was impractical; the estuary had reclaimed the land that had been taken from it by medieval "improvements".

Since then the Wildlife Trust has been working to restore access and ensure that, while the future Hazlewood Marshes may be different, they will still be just as fabulous for wildlife. The site will be alive with breeding waders each spring, while all year birds will flock to the new mudflats and saltmarsh to feed.

For more information about the site, and up to date access information, visit [www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org](http://www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org)