

Notes on Nick Stoodley's talk 'Surveying for Saxons'

All Saints Church Room, East Meon. Tuesday 12th November 2013

Introduction

Dr Nick Stoodley, Research Fellow at Winchester University, is the lead archaeologist on the project entitled 'Saxons in the Meon Valley'. This was initiated by the Friends of Corhampton Church, of which Guy Liardet is the chair. Peter O'Sullivan is the project co-ordinator.

The project is funded by a Heritage Lottery Fund grant and another from the South Downs National Park Authority, which has enabled three surveys to be conducted in the 'core' territory of Corhampton, Meonstoke and Droxford. Hampshire County Council and Winchester District Councils have also subscribed.

This is a 'community' project, hoping to involve all towns and villages along the Meon river. Activities include a website, <http://www.saxonsinthemeonvalley.org.uk>, school involvement, re-creations of food and gardens, a collaborative tapestry and music.

The focus is on the first part of the Saxon era, 410 – 850AD.

Themes

Roman Britain becomes Saxon

Most lived in settlements

Cultural identity – Jutes or Saxons

Background

In the last years of Roman Britain there were both towns and villages. Manufacture was thriving, many could read and write. Christianity was common.



Towards the end of the 4th century, decline began, especially in towns. Buildings collapsed or disappeared, industry declined.



St Bede



The countries from which the settlers came

The Romans left c410. Soon after, tribes began to arrive from north-east Europe. According to Bede, writing in the 8th century:

- East Anglia, the Midlands and the North East were settled by Angles from Northern Germany (Schleswig Holstein).
- Southern England was settled by Saxons from the north German plain
- Kent, the Isle of Wight and the part of Hampshire opposite the IoW were occupied by Jutes, from Jutland in Denmark.

The early Anglo-Saxon era, 5th – 7th centuries, has been called the Dark Ages. There are very few reliable sources, and archaeology is the main source of knowledge.



Death, i.e. cemeteries, provides one form of evidence – early Anglo Saxon graves are easy to identify because of grave goods and other aspects of the rite which are characteristic of the period. (Some of the dead were cremated, and their ashes kept in pots, but very little evidence of these in the Meon Valley.)



Buildings are hard to detect – mainly built of wood, and because they left little rubbish, only pot holes and trenches remain.

Saxons in the Meon Valley



NS has been involved in research in Droxford (Anglo Saxon cemetery revealed when railway was built) and Shavards Farm, Meonstoke (in whose excavation he was involved as an undergraduate).

With additional evidence from metal detectors, the Meon Valley appears to have been heavily settled in early A/S times.

Bede mentions the Meonwara, the tribe which gave its name to the Meon Valley, and says the wider area was Jutish; we assume, therefore, that the Meonware shared the same tribal identity.

The project is based on community involvement. Members are invited to learn the methods used in non-invasive archaeology and then work to discover remains.

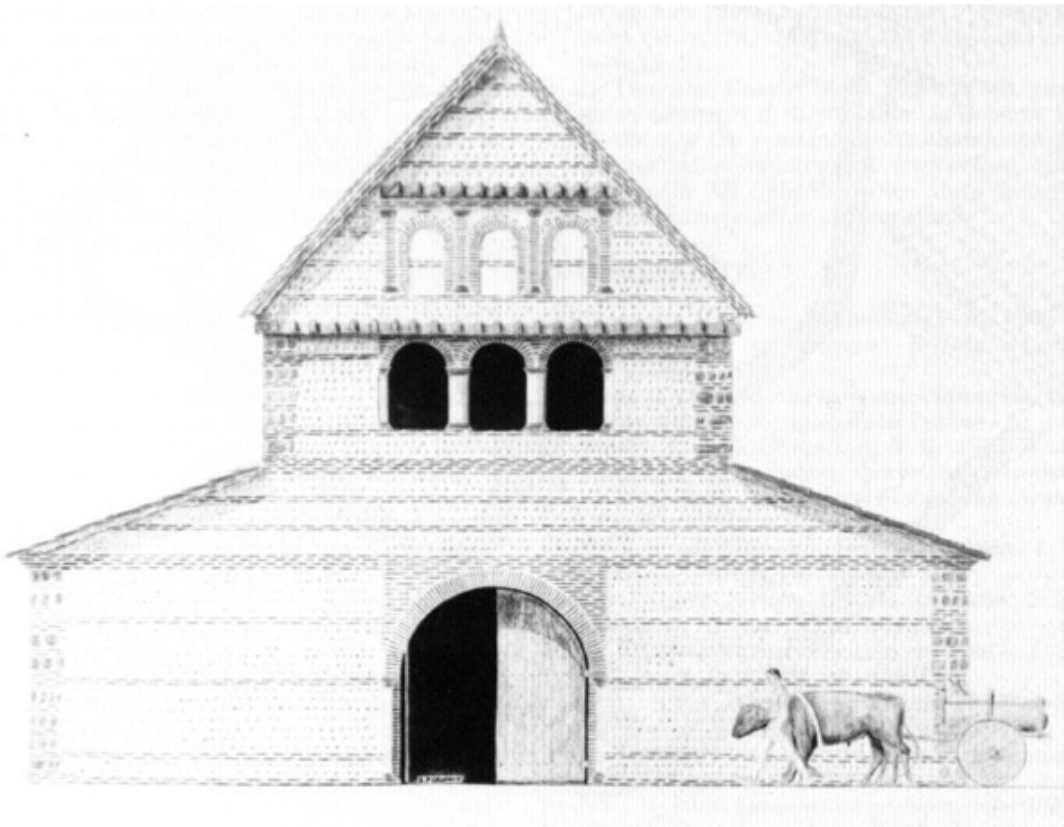
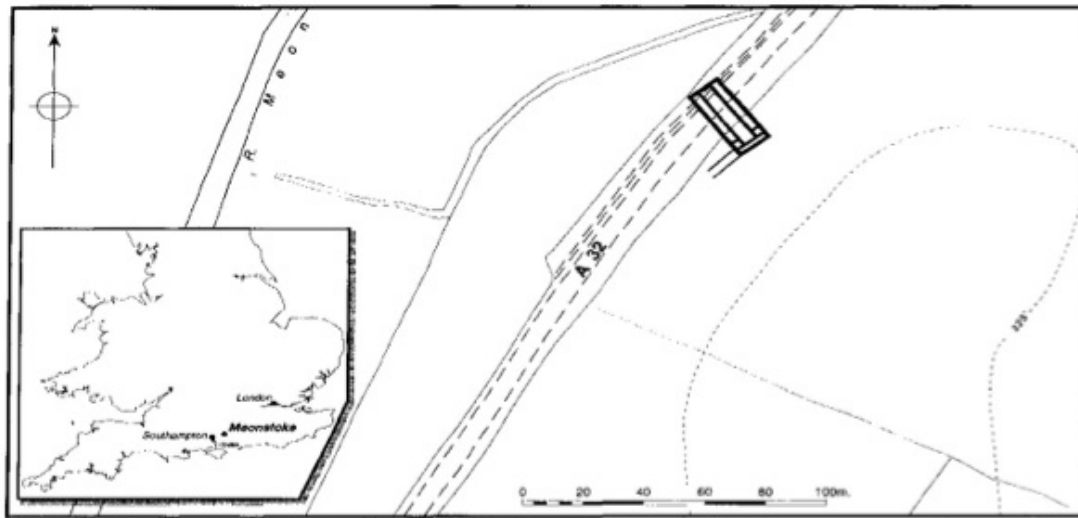
Two types of site:

1. Community surveys
2. Expert sites (kept very secret, because of danger of unauthorised metal detectors ('nighthawks') who steal remains.

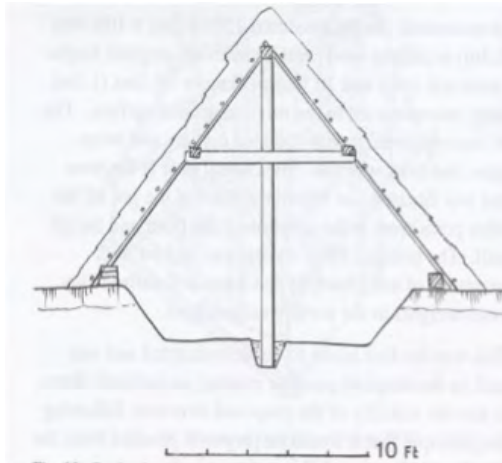
No excavation is involved. Three main means of non-invasive surveying:

1. Geophysics
2. Metal detecting
3. Field walking

Shavards Farm



Shavards Farm, on the A32, was a late 4th century Roman building; its front collapsed and lay on the ground – it was possible to recreate its elevation from this evidence (see above). The excavation also revealed some post-holes of early Anglo-Saxon date and a sunken-featured building whose floor was below soil level and its roof structure above.

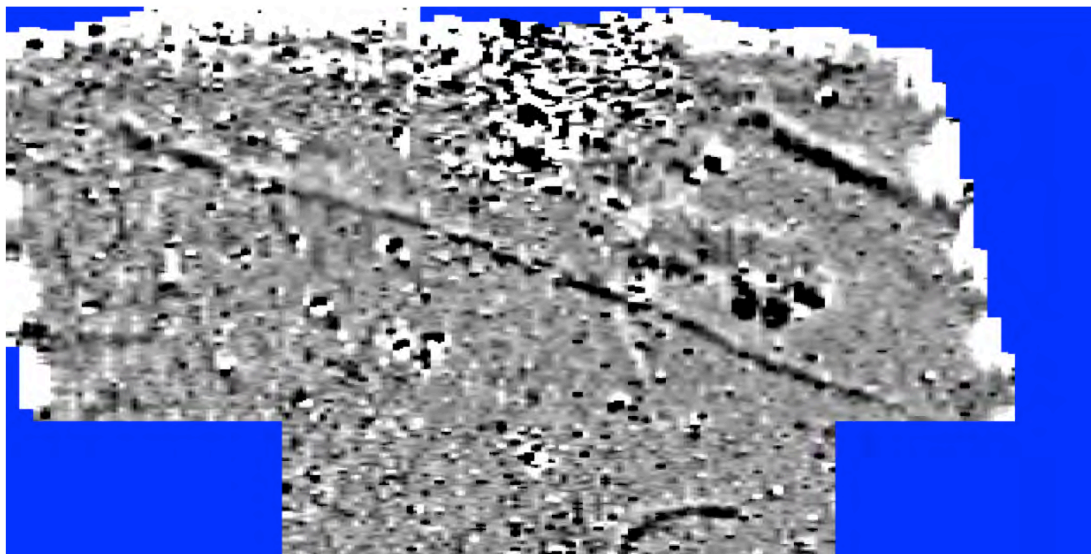


Geophysics

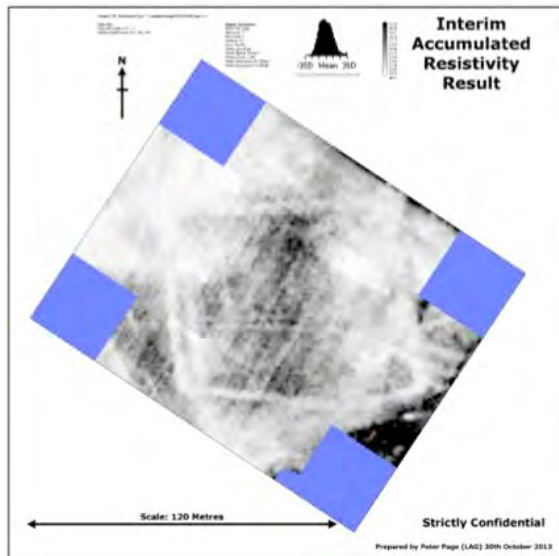


Survey team conducting magnetometry at Shavards Farm

NS showed magnetometer scans, which measure variations in the earth's magnetic field. Magnetometry is based on the measurement of differences in the earth's magnetic field. Variations in the earth's magnetic field which are associated with archaeological features can be detected, such as brick walls, hearths, kilns and disturbed building material, as well as more ephemeral changes in soil, allowing for the location of foundation trenches, pits and ditches.

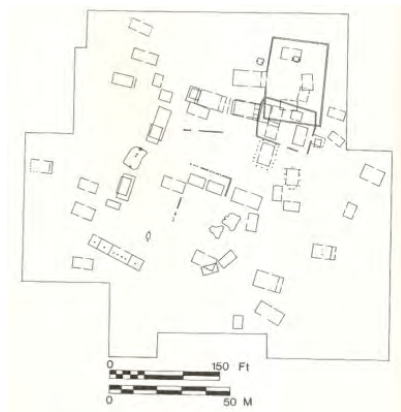


AS settlement features in relation to Roman site and field boundaries suggest that the fields were still being used. Dating of settlement to 5C supports this. Indicates old Roman landscape important in the establishment of settlements in eAS period.



NS also showed images from an expert site, highly confidential, on which some post-holes of early Anglo-Saxon date had been detected. Resistivity survey is based on the principle that sub-surface materials conduct an electrical current passed through them: differences in the structural and chemical make-up of soils mean that there are varying degrees of resistance to an electrical current.

In general, higher resistance features are interpreted as structures which have a limited moisture content, for example walls, mounds, voids, rubble filled pits, and paved or cobbled areas. Lower resistance anomalies usually represent buried ditches, foundation trenches, pits and gullies.



Extensive surveys of Chalton have shown that people in this period lived in settlements, clusters of farms and farm buildings. During the middle Saxon period people migrated into settlements and the process of 'nucleation' began.



Each settlement would include a Saxon Hall House (Grubenhäuser) below, left.

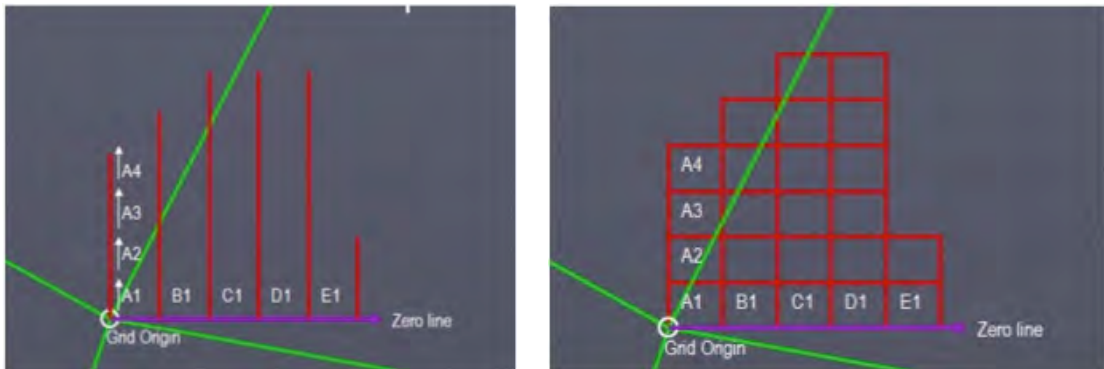
It is hard to identify settlements not least because no rubbish was left.

Survey of Shavards Farm shows evidence of one.

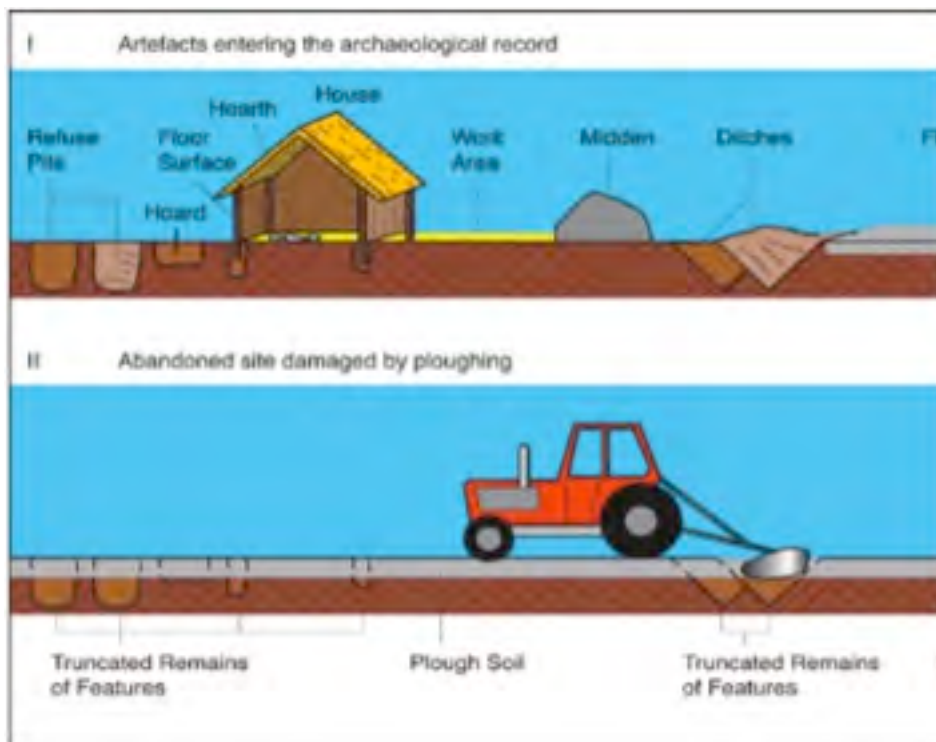
Fieldwalking

Fieldwalking picks up artefactual evidence. Settlements don't produce much debris to pick up when fieldwalking – compared to villas with their stone walling and lots of pottery and coins. Pottery was used but it is poor quality and breaks up in the plough soil, so a handful of early Anglo Saxon pottery is considered a reliable indicator of a settlement.

Ground disturbed by ploughing often throws up evidence – and a tendency towards deeper ploughing throws up fresh materials (diagram below).



Grid mapping of fieldwalking survey (above)



Metal detecting

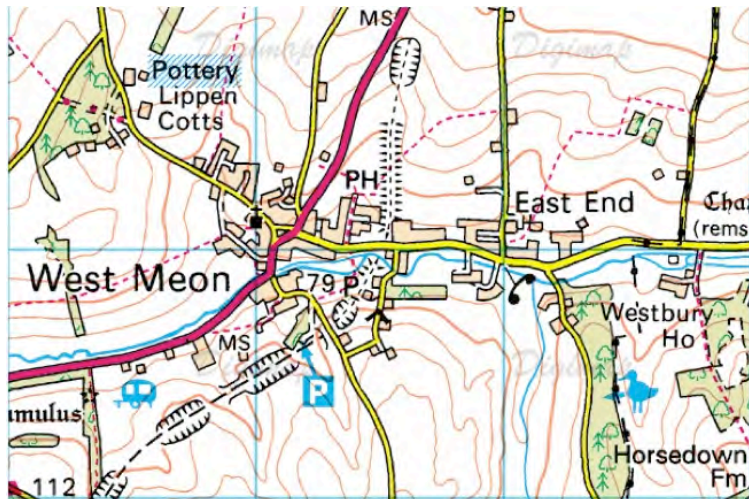
Archaeologists are suspicious of metal detecting because of nighthawks – who illegally detect on sites and sell their finds for profit, e.g. via eBay, Winchester University has contacts with a number of trusted and expert metal detectors who have been very helpful.

Cemeteries

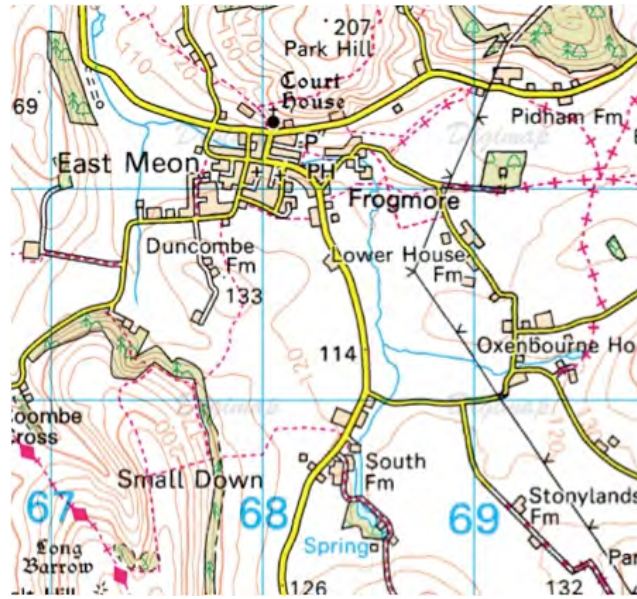
Discovering a cemetery establishes the probability that a settlement was nearby. Men were often buried with weapons, women with jewellery.



In 2012, the development of a housing estate to the north of West Meon revealed a sizeable Saxon cemetery. It can be inferred that there was a settlement nearby, probably where the centre of today's village is located. (Roman and Saxon remains at Lippen Wood and Westbury House suggest other settlements in the West Meon area.: Go to <http://www.saxonsinthemeonvalley.org.uk/meon-valley-saxon-archaeology/monuments-to-the-dead> for a report on this excavation.)



The sources of rivers are promising territory for discovering settlements. Evidence from South and Lower Farms, by the source of the Meon, already suggests that Saxons lived there. 'Ytedene' (valley of the Jutes) was near East Meon.



The question remains, was the Meon Valley Jutish or Saxon? Many Saxon artefacts have been discovered – quoit brooches and saucer and disc brooches which suggest a Saxon identity but research by NS on dress styles suggests that a different costume in S Hants (inc Meon Valley) may differentiate those expressing a Jutish cultural identity for the surrounding Saxons.



Saucer brooches



Disc brooches