

Excavations at Bishopstone, 2004



Third Interim Report

Gabor Thomas, March 2005

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Introduction: the story so far

On the run up to the final season of excavations at Bishopstone it is sobering to reflect on just how far we have come since the first tentative, keyhole explorations were made on the village green back in 2002. Despite some strong Anglo-Saxon leads including the undeniable antiquity of St Andrew's church, the mood at the beginning of our investigations was more one of sober realism than of feverish excitement. Late Anglo-Saxon settlements are hard to locate in the landscape, notoriously ephemeral in physical character, and frequently sealed below or obliterated by later phases of development. Whilst Mark Gardiner's work in the Adur Valley, West Sussex, at Botolphs (Gardiner 1990) had shown that targeting a centrally-located site (also next to the church) could produce valuable insights into pre-Conquest village origins, there could be no guarantee that our work in Bishopstone would do the same. A strong reminder of just how elusive such evidence can be is the regional South Saxon capital of Lewes (10 miles up the Ouse Valley) which despite enviable historical credentials - it is one of the strongholds (or burghs) listed in the famous 10th-century text called the Burghal Hidage - has been singularly unproductive in its yield of Late Anglo-Saxon remains (see Rudling 1983).

In the event we didn't have to wait long for strong signs of encouragement. The first test-pit produced a skeleton - the first of several graves (currently tallying 16) which we now know belong to a pre-Conquest phase of St Andrew's cemetery (Thomas 2002). The fourth was located over a wall-trench and deep pit later established to relate to a timber hall and a latrine from the nucleus of a Late Saxon settlement complex. Since then the story has been one of constant surprise - at times amazement - as the archaeology has taken new and increasingly rewarding turns. Our first training excavation in 2003 revealed that the settlement module is of considerably greater complexity and extent than originally estimated from the keyhole glimpses obtained in 2002 - a salutary lesson in the distorting effects which sampling strategies can have (Thomas 2004). Whilst fulfilling some of our predictions, the 2004 excavation - to be showcased in the remainder of this report - continued on this trajectory, producing some of the most spectacular finds yet.

The Settlement Complex

Our ability to characterise and track the early development of pre-Conquest Bishopstone has been greatly enhanced by last season's excavation. This is partly as a result of the newly targeted areas having a higher concentration of deeply stratified pits (seventeen to 2003's four) rich in pottery and other diagnostic finds but also because the number of discernable stratigraphic relationships was greater. We will never be able to phase Bishopstone with the same degree of precision possible for better preserved sites such as Flixborough, Lincolnshire, where entire building sequences, interleaved with midden deposits, were preserved under a thick deposit of wind-blown sand (Loveluck 2003), but we can at least sketch out a broad sequence, albeit a provisional one in advance of detailed pottery analysis.

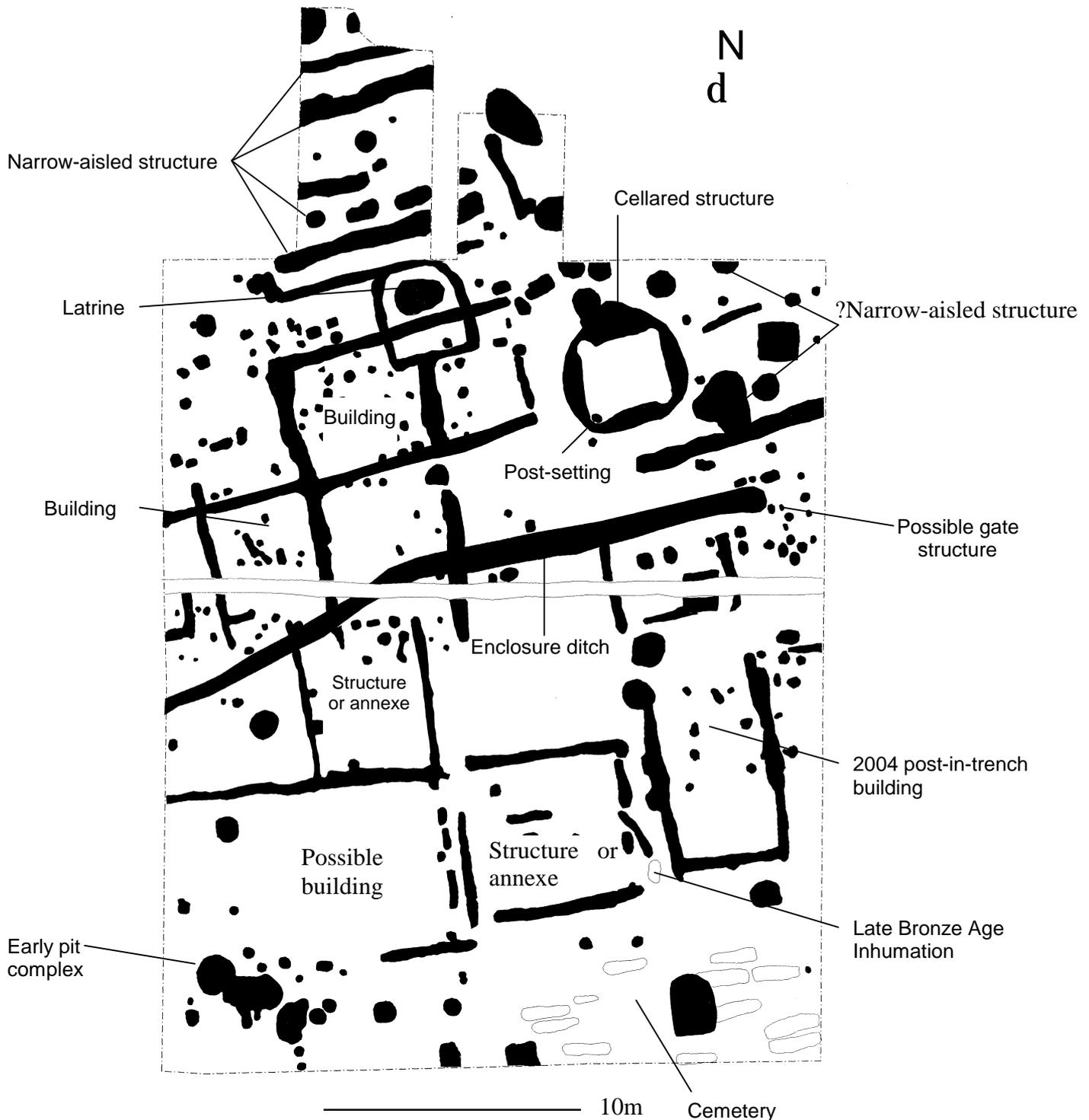


Fig. 1. Plan of features excavated in 2003 and 2004

When was the settlement of Bishopstone founded? This fundamental question, central to our investigation, is one that we are now much closer to answering. Amongst 2004's discoveries was a remnant of Middle Saxon activity discernable from the background noise left by the concentrated occupation of the Late Saxon and Saxo-Norman periods. The vital evidence took the form of group of intercutting pits in the extreme SW of the village

green which produced ring-stamped pottery made in a Middle Saxon tradition as well as detritus (smelt, offcuts and ingots) from copper-alloy metalworking (Fig. 1). This, the only distinct clustering of pits to have been found on the village green, could signify a specialised industrial process which hopefully will identify itself once environmental samples taken from the fills have been analysed.

The occupation represented by the pits may well have been enclosed by a curvilinear boundary ditch, sampled in both years' excavations, which now appears to predate the laying out of the main complex of post-in-trench buildings (contra 2003 Interim report). The section sampled in 2004 included a terminal associated with a grouping of post-holes possibly relating to a timber gate structure. These traces are admittedly scanty, but we should allow for the possibility that some of the unattributed post-holes which peppered the northern end of the 2003 trench could belong to contemporary timber buildings (Fig. 1). If this is the case, then we could be looking at a significant settlement focus of the 8th to 9th centuries, perhaps established under the hand of high-status or religious authority given the boundary with its putative formal entranceway and the non-ferrous metalworking which has superior associations during the Middle Saxon period (Bayley 1991).



Fig. 2. View across eastern trench showing ditch (far right) intersecting with post-in-trench building

When we move into the 10th and 11th centuries - the core period of occupation on the site – the evidence becomes a lot clearer. A considerable expansion in activity across the spur took the form of a planned complex of timber ‘hall-type’ buildings and associated structures laid out on regular north-south and east-west alignments maintained over successive building generations. As well as resolving ground-plans of buildings partially exposed in 2003, last season produced a further example of a rectangular post-in-trench building aligned on the principal north-south site axis (Fig. 3).

Measuring 12m x 4.2m and furnished with an annexe at its northern end, this example was surrounded by a number of pits some of which were undoubtedly contemporary with the occupation of the building.



Fig. 3. Post-in-trench 'hall-type' building with a contemporary pit in the foreground

The contents of these pits serve to illustrate the predominant type-fossils found at Bishopstone; amongst the finds represented were bun-shaped loom-weights, Mayen lava quernstones, bone and baked clay spindle-whorls, hand-made cooking/storage pots and shallow dishes (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. A definite 'one-off' from the associated pit assemblages is this hand-made cup with handle, perfect for serving up a warming cup of Late Saxon soup

A cellared tower?

Consideration of the site plan suggests that this N-S 'hall-type' structure could well have formed one side of a range of buildings surrounding a central courtyard as appears to be a recurrent theme on Late Saxon sites, especially those at the higher end of the settlement spectrum, such as Goltho, Lincs, Portchester and Facombe Netherton, Hants (Beresford 1987; Cunliffe 1976; Fairbrother 1990). Probably also incorporated within this range was the most remarkable structure yet identified at Bishopstone: a substantial cellared building – the first clearly attested example from a contemporary rural context - which alongside 2003's timber latrine, suggests a level of architectural diversity above the norm for settlements of the Late Saxon period. The cellar comprised a large circular pit, 5m in diameter and a little under 2m deep, with a neatly fashioned step at one side providing access to the floor of a lower squared chamber with sides of 2.7m (Fig. 5 & 6). Each of corners was carefully cut back with curved recess to receive a massive timber post, one of which (in the SW corner) sat below floor level in a post-setting.



Fig. 5. Views of the cellar fully excavated. The curved recesses for the corner posts can clearly be seen. That to the bottom right was set below floor level in a setting within which was found the iron hoard.



Fig. 6. Cellar after removal of NW quadrant with the step providing floor access partially revealed.

The contents of the cellar were no less remarkable and provided important clues for reconstructing the events which immediately followed its abandonment. Infilling the large void was a deposit of chalk rubble containing important assemblages of animal bone (see below) and pottery, including decorated spouted pitchers and a large thumb impressed storage jar probably made in Chichester. Sealed beneath the rubble and covering the floor of the cellar was a thin layer of charcoal strewn with structural ironwork - including nails some with diamond-shaped roves attached, hinge-pivots and a barrel padlock – possibly derived from a surmounting timber structure. Before the cellar was deliberately infilled, the four corner posts were salvaged and a cache of ironwork was placed within the sub-floor post-setting (Figs 7 & 8). This comprised a selection of agricultural tools including a horseshoe, harness buckle, sickle, and a wool-comb, together with a series of lock, hasp and hinge fittings derived from an elaborate chest, the latter closely paralleled by Late Saxon chest-burials from the Late Anglo-Saxon minsters at York and Winchester (Kjolbye-Biddle 1995) (Fig. 9) . Given the heterogenous nature of the iron assemblage, it is probably safe to conclude that these items belonged to a smith but we can only speculate as to why this eminently recyclable material didn't end up in the furnace?



Fig. 7. Working overtime; Jack Feintuck, Roo Mitcheson and Liz Wilson undertake the delicate task of extricating the ironwork. Corroded into a single lump, many of the items were cemented to the sides of the post setting.



Fig. 8. The hoard in situ showing the lock and hinges which once adorned a wooden casket.



Fig. 9. A selection of the items from the iron hoard, currently being conserved at the Institute of Archaeology, London. Top Left: horseshoe; Top Right: wool-comb - one of the best preserved from the Late Saxon period - with two rows of 12 teeth and the mineralised remains of a wooden handle; Bottom; locks, hinges and other strap-fittings from a wooden casket.

How are we to interpret this cellared structure and its significance? The first thing to say is that it is somewhat different in character to the cellared buildings from Late Saxon towns: the usual context in which such buildings are found. Setting the Bishopstone example apart from the cellars found at such centres as Chester, Oxford and London is its 'squareness' and the massiveness of the four corner-posts associated with an upstanding timber structure. Whereas the structural traces associated with urban cellars usually indicates the existence of a single-storey timber building at ground level, the evidence at Bishopstone suggests something of an altogether different order.

A key to a possible above-ground reconstruction is the cellar's axial alignment on two of the post-in-trench 'hall-type buildings', a placement shared by the foundations for a stone tower at Portchester which appears at the corner of a

range of buildings forming a Late Saxon thegnly (lordly) residence (Cunliffe 1976, 125, fig. 99). The Portchester tower, along with standing examples of Late Saxon church towers, such as Earl's Barton, Northants, are considered to be representatives of the bell-towers and gate-houses listed as attributes of thegnly status in an 11th-century document known as the *Promotion Law* (Reynolds 1999, 96). Could it be, then, that we have chanced upon the first timber variant of this historically-attested badge of thegnly status?

This question is certainly one that is likely to be debated amongst archaeologists as the results become more widely known, but we must leave it presently to consider one further addition to the structural record. For 2004 also produced one, or possibly two, examples of so-called 'narrow-aisled' buildings (Figs 1 & 10). During the Late Anglo-Saxon period new methods were being devised to increase the life of earth fast buildings, i.e. structures with wooden posts set directly into the ground in either trenches and post-holes. Once such innovation involved placing the load-bearing timbers (usually paired aisle posts) a short distance inside external walls to protect them from the elements (Gardiner 2004). At Bishopstone, associated dating evidence, including chimney-pot and fine, wheel-turned pottery, suggests that these more sophisticated structures belong to a final phase of occupation which extended into the 12th century.



Fig. 10. Ground-plan interpreted as a 'narrow-aisled' building of two phases. the aligned pits for paired aisle posts are located between exterior wall-trenches

Disposing of Bishopstone's dead

On the basis of previous results, the discovery of further burials within a narrow band outside the churchyard was to be expected: more of surprise was their density within the 10m-wide span of easterly of the three trenches opened up in 2004 (Fig. 11). Totalling twelve (plus the disarticulated remains others) the burials represent adults of both genders and a single infant of 2-3 years (Fig. 12), all of which appear to have been placed in simple, unelaborated graves. The skeletal material is currently being studied at the University of Kent by a colleague, Dr Scott Legge, who has already noticed some interesting pathological indicators amongst this sample of Bishopstone's Late Saxon populace, to be reported in a future update. The unequal spread of graves between the trenches (none were found in a western trench which also extended up to the churchyard boundary) appears to indicate that the limits of the early cemetery were curvilinear, although a clear boundary to the early cemetery has remained elusive.



Fig. 11. View of christian cemetery. The two central burials have been 'decapitated' by a Saxo-Norman rubbish pit



Fig. 12. View of infant burial

Bishopstone's earliest inhabitant?

One discovery within the mortuary record which could not have been predicted was that of a crouched, north-south inhumation found in an isolated location 2m beyond the limits of the Christian cemetery (Fig. 13). The treatment of this particular individual immediately triggered the suspicion that we were dealing with a survival from later prehistory as flexed body positions are characteristic of both the EBA and Iron Ages. The topographic position – a chalk spur - certainly seemed to fit this hypothesis given numerous Early Bronze Age barrows occurring on surrounding downland ridges such as Rookery Hill. Whilst a recent radiocarbon determination has indeed confirmed the burial to be prehistoric, the 1260 to 1000BC date-range places it firmly within the Late Bronze Age – a highly intriguing result to say the least. As Sue Hamilton observes: we have minimal evidence of burial practices from the Late Bronze Age nationally, an enigma which is particularly resonant for Sussex which is otherwise relatively rich in contemporary settlement remains. Given this surprise result which has left us with one of our first attested examples of a dead person from Late Bronze Age Sussex, should our search for others begin with a reconsideration of the corpus of isolated flexed inhumations assumed to be from other periods?



Fig. 13. View of Late Bronze Age crouched inhumation burial

Food for thought: a preliminary assessment of the animal bones

Mention of some of the more characteristic types of finds made at Bishopstone together with the spectacular array of ironwork from the cellar has already been made; other significant discoveries included fragments from a sword-scabbard, pottery wasters indicating the presence of a kiln in, or in close proximity to, the settlement and further dress-accessories such as hooked-tags. One of the crucial strands of evidence yet to be considered is the faunal assemblage. Here we include a preliminary assessment prepared by Naomi Sykes, the conclusions of which point in a similar direction to other attributes of high-status occupation considered above.

To date, almost ten thousand animal bone fragments have been recovered from the excavations. Whilst analysis is still at an early stage, some interesting patterns are already emerging. It is clear, for instance, that the material is far richer than the cattle-dominated assemblages that typify the period. At Bishopstone, sheep and pigs are the best-represented animals with domestic birds (chicken and goose), fish and wild mammals (roe deer, hare, wild boar and even whale) all being present in frequencies that surpass, by far, the averages for Saxo-Norman sites. The sheer variety of species suggests that Bishopstone's inhabitants enjoyed a high level of privilege, being able to access a wide range of domestic resources but also having the time and money to engage in leisurely pursuits, such as hunting. Particularly indicative of elite occupation are the remains of whale, an animal which, in this period, was reserved for the aristocratic table (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14. A fragment of whale bone discovered in the wall-trench for the 'narrow-aisled' building. Chop marks can be seen on its upper surface

By the standards of the day, the meals served at Bishopstone would have been sumptuous affairs; even the meat from domestic animals appears to have been of prime quality - cattle, sheep and pigs being slaughtered young when their flesh was at its most tender. Beyond diet, however, the

assemblage is beginning to provide interesting insights into the wider economy: for instance agricultural practices, fishing technologies and rural-urban connections. There is also some evidence concerning belief systems, the presence of several complete cattle, sheep and pig skeletons possibly representing sacrificial deposits. Less ritual in nature were the associated skeletons of 4 cats and 7 kittens, individuals most probably slaughtered and skinned for their pelts.

Full analysis of the material will follow the final season of excavation and promises to reveal much about the social life of the site and its occupants.

Conclusions and future work

The diversity of service structures at Bishopstone, including the putative tower with cellar and 2003's latrine, together with the highly structured, rectilinear ordering of space within the settlement, suggest that the main phase of occupation may represent a Late Saxon manorial complex (for other probable manorial complexes with rectilinear plans see Reynolds 2003). Certainly, the artefactual evidence, whilst lacking in lavish metalwork, appears to point in a similar direction with high-status indicators in the faunal assemblage and evidence for a range of craft activities which one might expect at a busy estate centre. In a broader context, we know from excavations such as Botolphs and further a field that the period spanned by our occupation was a key one for the establishment of church/manor complexes, some of which later developed into villages. Bishopstone may well be providing us with some of the most detailed insights recently obtained for this phenomenon in South-East England.

To allow us to consolidate what we have achieved so far, a final season of excavation to be run (as in 2004) under the joint auspices of the University of Kent and the Sussex Archaeological Society, will take place in August and September 2005. This will be your last chance to take part in or view the excavations, so we very much hope you can make it. Full details can be found on the website: www.sussexpast.co.uk/research

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