

News is written by Mike Pitts

## Were Anglo-Saxon halls home to kings?



**Right:** Excavation at Lyminge in 2013, looking south-west toward the village church in the trees

Excavation continued over the summer at Lyminge, Kent, where archaeologists are investigating evidence for a remarkably well preserved Anglo-Saxon royal complex. Finds included the foundations of three timber halls which succeeded each other on the same spot, each larger than the one before, with carefully laid floors made with Roman-

**Below:** Many people came to visit on a dig open day



style mortar with a crushed tile finish. A fourth hall was built with substantial timbers, buttressed on the outside with raking posts.

**Far right:** Foundation trenches of three successive timber halls; the largest below was the most recent



Lyminge is known to have had a double monastic community (with men and women presided over by a royal abess) by AD700; tradition ascribes its foundation in 633 to Queen Aethelburh, daughter of Aethelberht I and widow of King Edwin, though this is unproven. Discoveries made by antiquarian excavations in the 19th century close to the surviving medieval church had been interpreted as remains of a seventh century minster church, and the village name (after the river Limen with the

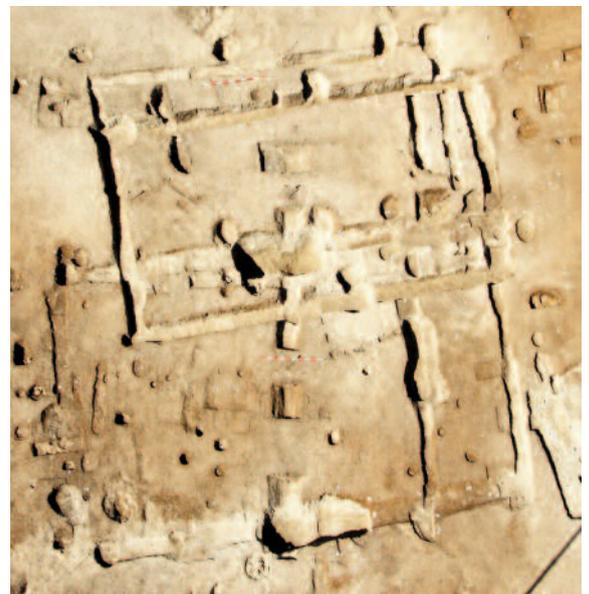
suffix *ge*) had been read as indicative of an Anglo-Saxon royal settlement. The location seemed to offer great promise for understanding how the founding of Christian monasteries in Anglo-Saxon England exploited earlier seats of pagan power.

Today Lyminge – one-time Kent village of the year – is a community spreading into surrounding farmland, but it retains large areas of open space, and thus potential for excavation, around the historic core. Fieldwork, directed by Gabor Thomas, associate professor in early medieval archaeology at Reading University, started with a pilot phase in 2007. Large-scale excavation within the village began the following year.

Since 2012 the project has been funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Excavation moved to Tayne Field, now used as a village green, 125m north-east of the church and earlier monastic focus. In the first season a large and rare Anglo-Saxon royal feasting hall was discovered (Britain in archaeology, Nov/Dec 2012/127). Archaeologists

had “hit the jackpot”, said Thomas.

The evidence suggested that the village originated in the late fifth century with a typical Anglo-Saxon settlement in the valley bottom. A royal pagan focus subsequently imposed itself, to be succeeded by monastic occupation from the late seventh to the ninth centuries on higher ground south of the church. Radiocarbon dates are awaited, but artefacts, including a gilt bridle fitting, make it likely the feasting hall was built before AD650. A curious finding that comes from the very well preserved animal remains, is a huge increase in the consumption of marine fish by the monastic community.



Excavating in July and August 2013, archaeologists continued to investigate the royal complex. Only part of the largest hall was uncovered, but Thomas told *British Archaeology* it was distinguished by massive wall trenches, with huge raking posts that took the weight of the roofs; one of the posts was larger than any seen in the feasting hall. In the wall trenches could be seen “ghosts” of paired upright oak planks, where the wood had decayed in situ and been replaced by fine earth, in one case with a third parallel row of planks, in a style of construction not seen before in



*Left: Pit for large squared planks (shown in outline at the base with a few packing flints still in place) flanking a doorway into the last of the three royal halls. The large scale in all photos is 2m long*



Anglo-Saxon buildings.

The other halls were smaller than that found in 2012 (the largest is 15m long, compared to 21m for the feasting hall), but their architecture was more complex. The trenches of the three halls cut into each other, providing an unusual architectural sequence in which one building must have been taken down before the next was raised, each larger and more elaborate than its predecessor. The final structure, said Thomas, was distinguished by “huge portals with stupendous doors”. Either side of the entrance stood massive planks 80cm by 15cm thick set in very

large pits. Door-posts belonging to so-called Anglo-Saxon “great halls” typically stood in individual pits, but here they were set together in a 3m-long trench. The doorway itself was only a metre across. Towered over by posts, almost certainly carved and decorated, such an entrance must have been designed to make a big impression.

Of key significance was the discovery of lumps of “pseudo *opus signinum*” that had once formed the halls’ floor surfaces. *Opus signinum* was a Roman invention, described by naturalist and writer Pliny, in which ceramic tiles were crushed up with mortar to make a tough building material. Its only other known use in Anglo-Saxon England is in monastic churches, including the pre-conquest (before 1066) phases of St Augustine’s Abbey, Reculver, Glastonbury and Wearmouth/Jarrow. At Lyminge, a lime-based mortar laid over local river pebbles was topped with a red *opus signinum* skim; pieces of broken up flooring were found in the wall trenches of the second and third halls. Also from wall trenches came daub from older walls, with wattle impressions and a whitewashed surface.

As in 2012, associated finds include quantities of high class material such as fragments of fine glass vessels, and a bone and copper-alloy gaming piece. Alexandra Knox, a postdoctoral research assistant at Reading University, said the gaming piece is “of great significance”. The only comparable British pieces known – a set of nine, laid out as if ready for play –

were found in an exceptionally rich, princely Anglo-Saxon burial at Taplow, Buckinghamshire, in the 19th century. They are commoner in Italy.

Such regular structural replacement was not seen at the feasting hall excavated in 2012. Thomas suggests that the whole sequence may span less than a century, so that each hall may have stood for less than a generation. If they functioned as royal accommodation, then perhaps each was built by a new king seeking to make his mark on the community and impress important guests.

*Far left: A wall trench dug for three parallel rows of vertical squared planks, part of a massive building that was only partly uncovered*

*Below: Opus signinum from hall floors (larger lump c 15cm across)*



Could Thomas name the kings? Radiocarbon dating will be critical, he told *British Archaeology*. Several dates obtained from the large quantities of animal bone from all three buildings, combined with the stratigraphic sequence and the evidence of diagnostic artefacts, should allow an unusually precise chronology. Perhaps, even, in parallel with the unique identification of a king in the person of Richard III from remains excavated in Leicester (feature May/Jun 2013/130), it will be possible to fit a historical king list to the Lyminge halls.

The team will return to the field in 2014 for the final AHRC-funded season of excavation. ■



*Above: Rare gaming piece made from several layers of bone fixed by a copper-alloy rivet (c 3.5cm across)*