Shrivenham in the Later First Millennium AD

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The later Anglo-Saxon period leaves few local records but by a process of judicious reading of those records, whether they be written or left in the ground and applying knowledge gleaned from other places at this time we can start to build a picture of what was going on in our part of the world in the later first millennium AD. Of necessity this process produces circumstantial evidence of the local area. I have already produced a mini-presentation about the heathen burials of Watchfield

The Anglo-Saxon Period

The early medieval or Anglo-Saxon period runs from the ending of Roman rule in Britain, traditionally 410AD to the Norman Conquest in 1066AD. Over 600 years. The period we are dealing with here is from the reign of Alfred the Great through to the Norman Conquest, from the mid-9th to mid-11th centuries. This is the time when the small Anglo-Saxon kingdoms finally coalesced to the point of a single Kingdom of England. This inevitably involved the invention of quite complex structures of government so that the king could maintain control

The Hundred of Shrivenham

The English counties and shires were established during this period, with some for example Kent having origins much further back and others, being new inventions. The main administrative subdivision of the shire was the hundred. The origin of the name is obscure, as is the reason for the area geographically defined by the hundred. One idea is that this geographical area was defined by the area of a royal estate.

Domesday Book in 1086AD tells us that the Hundred in which the manor of Shrivenham lay was called Shrivenham and included the manor of Watchfield which by that stage belonged to Abingdon Abbey and the manor of Beckett which belonged to "two free men". The manor of Shrivenham itself belonged to the King. We know from a land grant of 931AD that Watchfield had belonged to the King but had been granted away. We don't know when or how the manor of Beckett formed but it seems likely that this was also a grant from the King. We can see that the Hundred of Shrivenham holds to the idea of once having been a royal estate, although we don't have definitive documentary evidence.

We also know that at Domesday the manor of Shrivenham included what became the villages of Bourton, Longcot and Fernham. It may be that they were fully formed villages in this late Anglo-Saxon period or they may have been small hamlets or farms.

The Anglo-Saxon Minster

In c950AD the Anglo-Saxon noblewoman Wynflæd left a sum of 60 pence to the Minster at Shrivenham in her will. We do not know who exactly Wynflæd was but she had substantial possessions to grant away in her will. This is the first and only recorded reference to a Minster at Shrivenham, so was there a Minster here?

Before coming to that a definition of sorts of a minster is required. Monasteries in the sense of a closed order and the way that I suspect we all think of them in the Middle Ages were only introduced in any number to England after the Norman Conquest. The Church over its two millennia has at various times reformed and changed paths. The monasteries were the product of one of these reformations around the turn of the first millennium.

After the reintroduction of Christianity to England from c600AD onwards religious communities were established. These were the minsters. Rather than being shut off and separate from the secular world they were a part of it "ministering" to it. The communities could consist of only a handful of individuals or could be very large. A number of very important minsters were established in Northern England at an early date, including Lindisfarne, Jarrow and Monkwearmouth. By the later Anglo-Saxon period a large number of minsters had been established often ministering to the lands of a royal estate. Parish churches as we know and understand them were only starting to appear towards the end of the Anglo-Saxon period. In the later Anglo-Saxon period a thegn (or lord) who held five hides of land could establish a church on his land. The idea of parishes and parish churches as we understand them developed from the minsters and from these thegns' churches.

Coming to Shrivenham. We have seen that Shrivenham Hundred probably had its origin as a royal estate. This is exactly the type of place where a minster would be established, but can we find more evidence?

In looking at the later Anglo-Saxon period Domesday Book is often a useful pointer. Domesday records that Shrivenham had a church and that the church held five hides of land. This was a not insubstantial amount of land indeed as noted above to be a thegn you had to have at least five hides. None of the surrounding churches mentioned in Domesday had as much land recorded.

Church	Number of Hides	Additional Features
Shrivenham	5	1 plough, 4 villagers, 5 smallholders with 2 ploughs
Lambourn	1	
Faringdon	1	Held by the Bishop of Salisbury
Great Coxwell	½	
Highworth	3	2 ploughs 6 smallholders 10 acres of meadow 100s

The ground-plan of a church tends to reflect its earlier incarnations even where it has been rebuilt as Shrivenham has. It was clearly a cruciform church with its tower central.

Indeed you can still see the roof scars on the medieval tower from the north and south transepts.
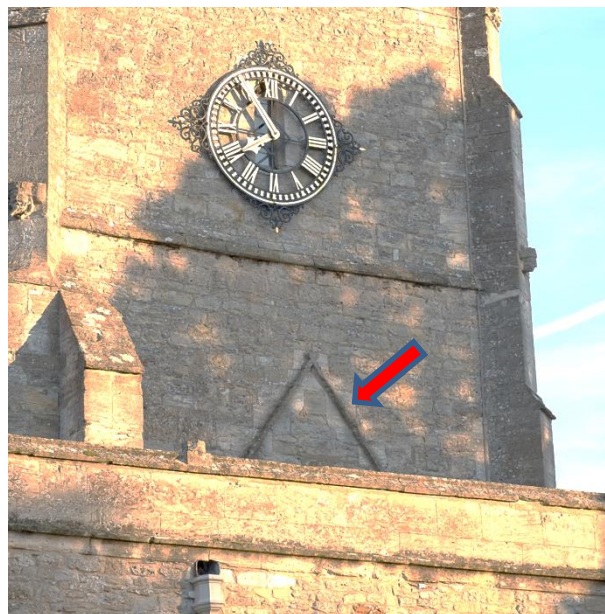
After the Norman Conquest the minsters tended to fade in importance, unless they were fortunate enough to be in important places such as York Minster or Westminster. These were reformed to follow the new monastic ideals. Elsewhere, minster lands were granted to the newly establishing monasteries. The order of Augustine Canons, were often the lucky recipients of minster lands. This was the fate of Shrivenham which was granted to the new Abbey of Cirencester, founded in 1117AD

as a community of Augustine Canons. Shrivenham Church and its lands remained the property of Cirencester until the dissolution.

Is there other evidence for Shrivenham church having been a minster? We know that throughout the middle Ages was the mother church of the Hundred with the churches at Watchfield and Longcot being chapelries of it. This meant that Shrivenham retained the lucrative rights of the medieval church such as burial, at least until in the 13th century Longcot applied to the Pope to have its own burial ground. Being a later "mother church" is again a frequent feature of churches that started as minsters.

We know from elsewhere that minsters were usually established with their own precinct. These precincts had a boundary bank and ditch and were usually either circular in form or rectangles. While the bank and ditch has long disappeared the precinct outline may well be preserved in the road layout around the church.

Looking at the present churchyard of Shrivenham it looks as if it has been truncated, especially towards the South.

There may also be some sign of truncation of the churchyard to the West. On the East side the line of Claypits Lane leads directly to the East end of the church. On the West the churchyard is approached by a small alleyway, but the East/West line of Manor Lane mirrors Claypits Lane in pointing towards the West end of the church.
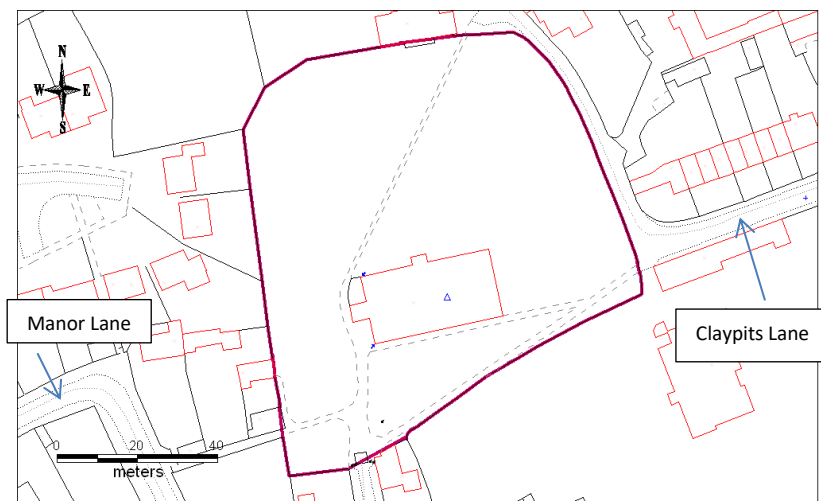
If we look at the wider area is it possible to see the remnants of the outline of the older church precinct?

(19thC OS map)

Just possibly we can see a line (shown in red), incorporating the present Claypits Lane as it curves around the North-East corner of the graveyard, and then going across to run down Manor Lane as it enters the High Street in the West, and cutting across the current Shrivenham House in the East.

The final indicator that Shrivenham was a minster lies at Bourton. Place names are able to tell us a great deal about the Anglo-Saxon period, when many of them have their origins. It is however a study fraught with pitfalls as the sense in which the Anglo-Saxons were using words is often at best debatable, and those words may become changed or corrupted over time. However, with care it can be a rich source of information about this period.

The origin of the name "Bourton" is *"burh tun"*. *Burh* at its simplest indicates an enclosure and it frequently appears in place names in for example the "bury" of Aylesbury. Many hillforts contain the element for example Barbury Castle. The network of defended towns established to protect against Viking raids are known as *"Burhs"*. A nearby example is Cricklade. *Burh* is also applied to the enclosure of minsters. *"Tun"* indicates a small settlement or farmstead. Bourton then translates as something like the enclosed settlement/farmstead. It has been shown elsewhere that "Bourton" as a place-name is found in proximity to Anglo-Saxon minsters. The suggestion is that Bourton was the home-farm supplying the minster. In other words the *tun* of the *burh.*

## Moot Places or Assembly Places

We now head deeper into the world of circumstantial evidence.

We know that Anglo-Saxon governance involved assemblies of the people. This was to administer justice as well as agree administrative matters. There had to be some place for these meetings, which were known as moots.

So to Shrivenham Hundred. Where was its moot place? Well we know that Hundreds were frequently named after their moot place so one must suppose that it was in Shrivenham itself. Indeed the name Shrivenham itself probably indicates this. *Scrīfan* translates as to decree/allot/impose. An obvious location might be the Minster, but then again was the Minster located there because the moot place was there? Chicken and egg.

Looking to other sources of evidence brings us to the fascinating but potentially treacherous world of place-name studies.

I think that many of you will know that the area where the stocks now are, was and is sometimes still called the cross trees? What of this name, where did it come from? I expect that most assume that it is something to do with the cross that at one time stood here. The base was still visible in the early 19th century.

REMAINS OF CROSS IN STREET
From a drawing by J. C. Buckler, 1819
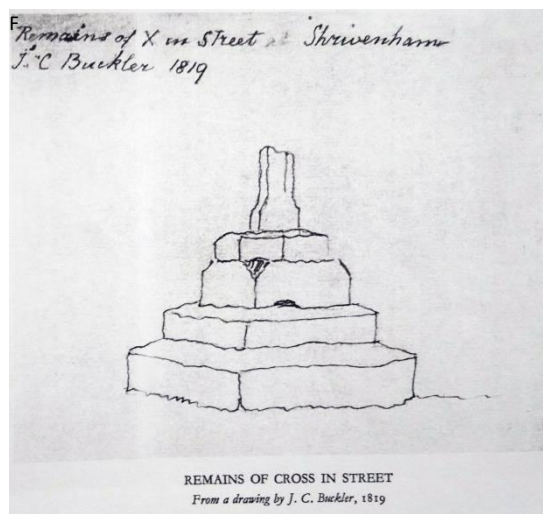
From Canon Hills "A Record of the Parish of Shrivenham" published in 1928

But again why was the cross here; and why trees?

Again if we look to research elsewhere we find that cross trees were originally just that in the Anglo-Saxon period.

If we go back to the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity this was not a sudden or rapid event, but a process that took several centuries. Prior to their conversion the evidence suggest that the Anglo-Saxons worshipped a variety of deities and utilised various natural places as sacred spaces for example groves, streams, and ancient trees. The incoming Christian missionaries as a matter of papal policy, tried to incorporate these into the new religion rather than suppressing them outright. In this way trees came to symbolise the wood of the cross, and "cross trees" appear in a number of locations. These sacred trees are exactly the type of place that the Anglo-Saxons adopted as their moot places, and the tradition of using these places continued.

Summary

Taking the present piece together with my earlier pieces about the Watchfield cemetery and the Watchfield heathen burials we can start to develop a picture of how Shrivenham Hundred developed over the Anglo-Saxon period.

In the early period new people or new ideas arrive in the area and there is the cemetery with important and unusual finds. We don't know where the settlement or settlements associated with this were sited. The present site of Watchfield village is just one possibility.

Later we find it is likely that what had been early sacred sites became the moot place of the Hundred and that the minster church was established in the same area. Bourton village is likely to have had its origin as a "home farm" for this minster. The village of Shrivenham would have grown up around these important features of the landscape.

In keeping with the tradition of minsters this minster was likely to have had a right of sanctuary and also had responsibility for the supervision of judicial trial by ordeal. The whole estate had at one time belonged to the King but the charter granting away Watchfield shows us that there was likely to have been a judicial execution site on the boundary.

This is undoubtedly only a start in trying to unravel the early medieval period of Shrivenham.

(Maps are taken from my MSc dissertation using Mapinfo software and digimap datasets)