

The Watchfield Anglo-Saxon Cemetery

During the building of the Watchfield and Shrivenham bypass an early Anglo-Saxon cemetery was discovered and partially excavated. This short presentation attempts to describe what was found and to put it in context.

The Anglo-Saxon Period – What Was It?

The Anglo-Saxon period of English history is generally taken to run from the end of Roman rule in 410AD, to the Norman Conquest in 1066AD. In other words it lasted over six hundred years. If we go back six hundred years from the present date we come to events such as the Battle of Agincourt.

Various other terms are used when talking about this period. It is sometimes simply called the Early Medieval period as Anglo-Saxon refers solely to England, and is often subdivided into Early, Middle and Late phases.

With the Watchfield cemetery we are dealing with the early Anglo-Saxon period and, confusingly, this is also known sometimes as the “Dark Ages”, in reference to how little we know about it compared to previous and succeeding periods, although this term is out of favour with historians and archaeologists. It is also known as the “migration period” as this is the time when the Anglo-Saxons undertook their journeys to Britain.

What We Know About the Early Anglo-Saxon Period in the Upper Thames Region

We know that Roman rule ended in Britain about 410AD as the Empire was assailed by attacks and invasions. As far as we can tell groups of invaders (the Anglo-Saxons) started coming into Britain from Jutland and Frisia. Whether these were small bands able to exert a large influence on the existing population who in turn took up “Anglo-Saxon” ways, or massive invasions is a topic of considerable debate. Although this is a fascinating subject I do not propose being distracted here (enjoyable as it might be).

In any case these groups seem to have settled in territories which gradually amalgamated into larger territories, and ultimately the first kingdoms. By the end of the early Anglo-Saxon period we see a variety of these kingdoms, including for example Kent and Northumbria. The Upper Thames seems to have been settled by groups who coalesced into a larger grouping called the Gewisse, which in turn gave birth to the Kingdom of Wessex. The core focus of the Gewisse seems to have been in the Dorchester area, and our area is out on its Western edge. Our cemetery at Watchfield dates to the earliest phase of these small groupings, and we may see signs of the groupings starting to coalesce.

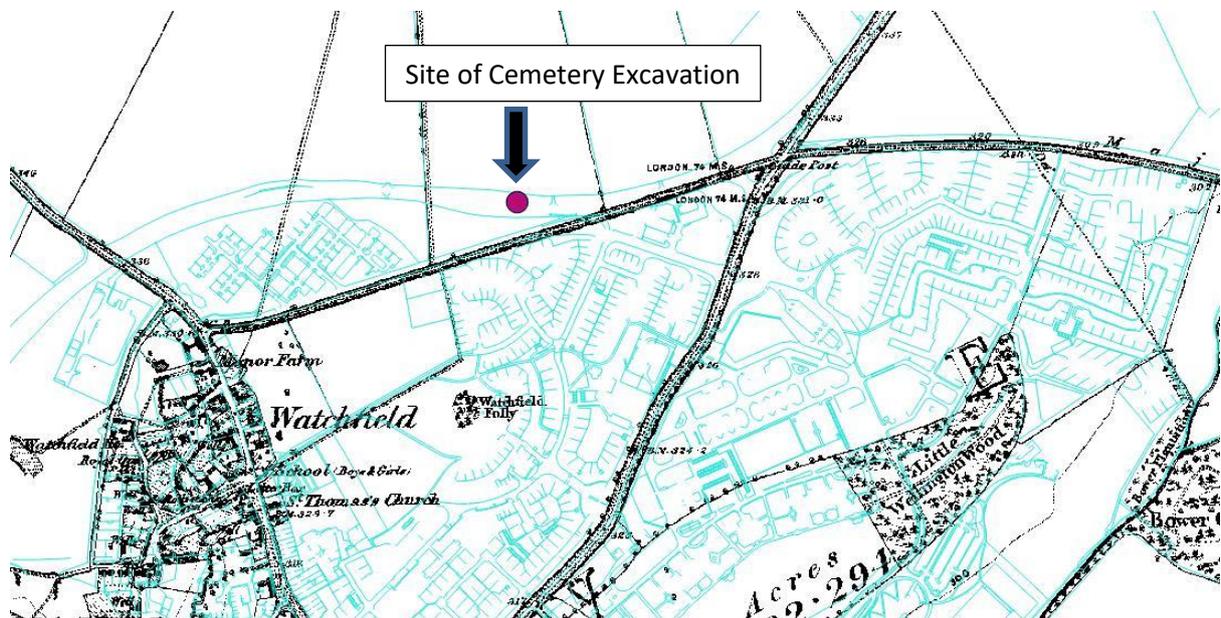
Unlike Roman settlement, the settlements of the early Anglo-Saxons have with a few exceptions been frustratingly elusive. We have however been able to track them with the finds of their cemeteries. Unlike the late Roman period where people were buried with little or no grave goods the early Anglo-Saxons liked to furnish their dead with a variety of grave goods. At the simplest this might be a few dress ornaments and a dagger or at the other extreme the goods might be quite

spectacular. To look at some of these latter have a look at the Sutton Hoo treasures on the British Museum website.

The Anglo-Saxon takeover in Britain was not rapid, taking at least 200 years and arguably longer. In particular the Upper Thames Gewisse butted against groupings in the Cotswold area and further West who maintained a version of Roman ways long after the end of Roman control.

This brings us to Watchfield which is one of several cemeteries of this period on the Western edge of the Gewisse/Wessex controlled upper Thames

A cemetery was excavated at Fairford in the 19th century but sadly it is mostly only known from the report of the time. In the 1980s a large cemetery of late 5th to 6th century date was excavated in Lechlade in advance of building works. Similarly the building of the Shrivenham/Watchfield bypass resulted in the discovery of the Watchfield cemetery.



The Watchfield Cemetery

So to the cemetery at Watchfield

Several limited investigations of the Watchfield site were undertaken from 1983, until in 1989 a more extensive dig was organised. In 1983 the tally of graves excavated was twenty-six and in 1989 seventeen further graves were excavated, together with two cremations, and four further inhumations were noted giving a grand total of forty-seven. The excavation team considered that there had originally been as many as three hundred to three hundred and fifty burials, and that the cemetery had been in use for around 100 years. Given this the excavators postulated that the cemetery served a population that at any time consisted of sixty to ninety people.

No settlement associated with the cemetery has been found but these people could have lived in one focal settlement or perhaps were scattered in a number of nearby farmsteads. We don't know.

The grave goods with the burials suggest that the cemetery dates to the late 5th or 6 centuries. (And show some similarity to Fairford and Lechlade.) Given that the graves were very shallow and badly affected by ploughing and other machinery it was considered likely that many grave goods had been destroyed and lost before the excavations, and of course anything organic is likely to have rotted away.

In general it is thought that grave goods reflect social status rather than necessarily reflecting occupation. Weapons for example did not necessarily indicate a warrior, but may have been considered appropriate to one's social standing. Both men and women frequently had knives and these were probably a routine dress item. In general terms spears seem to be quite common for men but a sword or shield is rarer and probably suggests a person of higher status.

The grave goods with women included dress fastenings and some more exotic items such as amber beads. While these would have originated in the Baltic area it does not imply that these ladies themselves came from there. The beads may have been traded, showing that the Watchfield population had connections to the outside world.

Burial 75 was female aged 35-40 years and was buried with a gilded copper alloy saucer brooch at each shoulder and a large number of amber and glass beads.



(Photo: Neil Maw)

Each brooch had a diameter of 45mm

Some of the men had goods suggestive of high status.

Burial No 2 had several such markers. He was male aged 35-40 years and had sword, spear and knife together with a shield. He also had a small vessel known as a cauldron, which was probably a type of drinking cup.

Burial 2s sword was near complete, while in what is known as an un-stratified context, a further blade fragment was discovered.



(Photo: Neil Maw)

The swords found in the graves at Watchfield were not just simple iron bars. They were made by twisting and forging layers of iron together to produce what is known as pattern welding. This was a frequent practice in the Anglo Saxon period. As well as producing a better sword this can be highly decorative.

The Oxford museum service arranged for a replica of the one with burial 2 to be forged.



(Photo: Neil Maw)

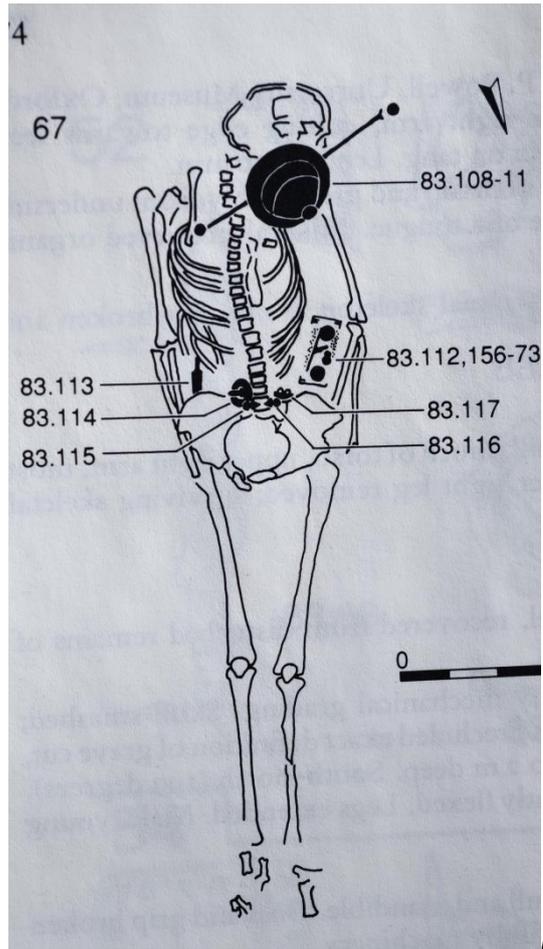
If you fancy a video of the making of pattern welded swords featuring the very sword from burial 2 see

<https://www.archaeologychannel.org/video-guide-summary/2488-unearting-the-anglo-saxons>

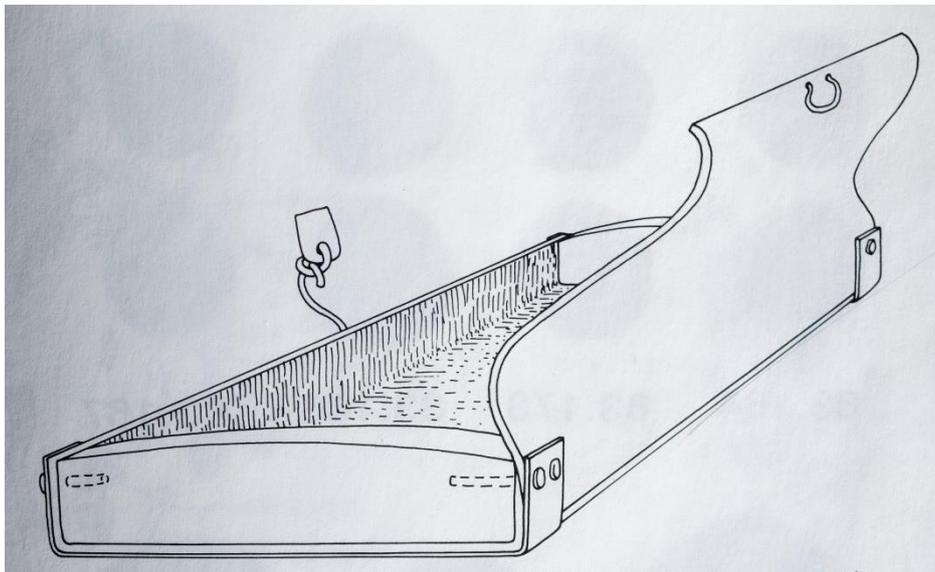
In addition to the pattern welding the edge of the blade fragment had been treated to further harden it, suggesting a superior implement.

If you are curious about the possibilities of the swordsmith I suggest a look www.paul-binns-swords.co.uk).

Although burial 2 has hallmarks of a high status individual there is nothing about him that places as extra special other than in his own community. This brings us to the most intriguing male burial, number 67, who was buried with a belt set, a box in the crook of the left arm which turned out to contain a set of scales and a runic inscription.



Burial 67



Artist's representation of the leather case, the remains of which were found in the crook of the left arm of burial 67



The area of the left elbow was lifted as a single block of soil and then carefully excavated in a laboratory to preserve as much as possible of the contents of the leather case.

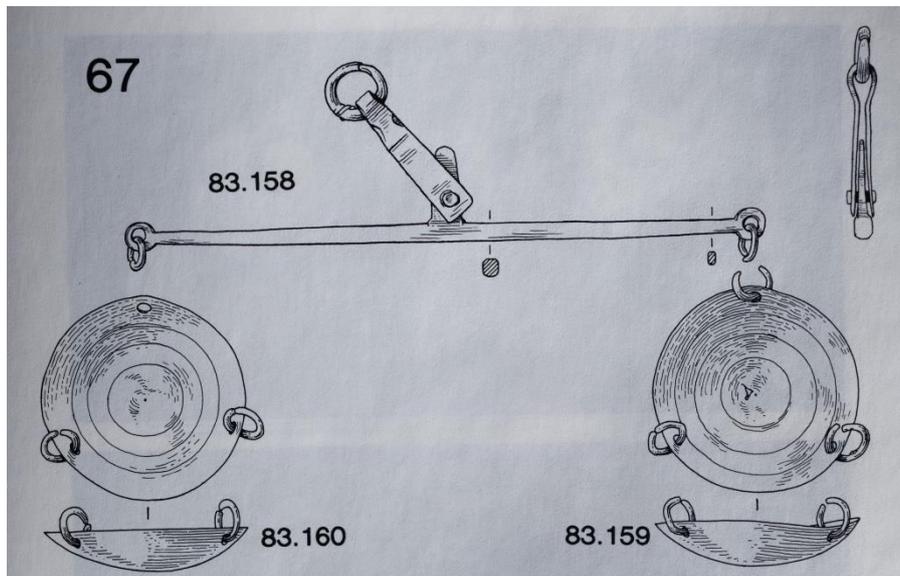
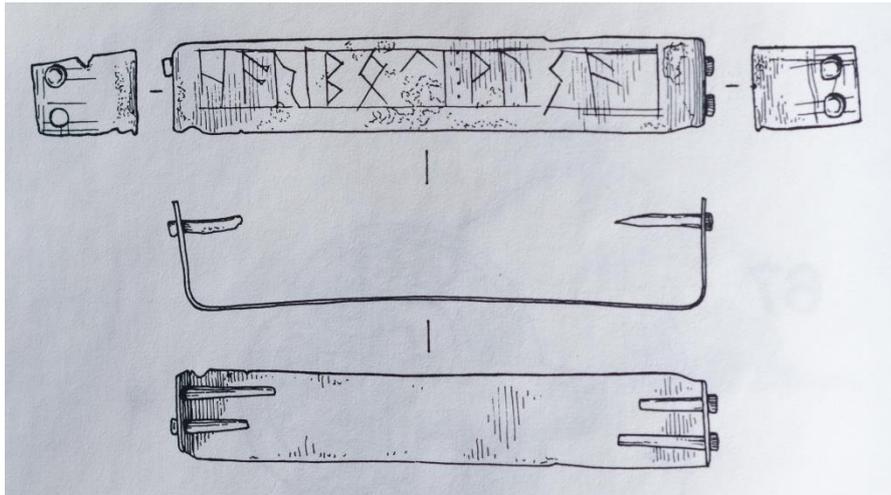


Diagram of the balance and scales from burial 67



The runes experts are not in complete agreement as to what this inscription reads.



Buckle from Burial 67 cast in high-tin bronze and have brass applique dots which would have given the appearance of silver and gold



(Photo: Neil Maw)

Belt rivets from burial 67

Burial 67's shield and belt set are considered unusual in this region, being more characteristic of Kent or even Merovingian France, while the balance scales and runic inscription are very rare finds. Who this person was why he had these items and why he was in Watchfield is unknown. The grave goods with him suggest that he was more than a run of the mill big cheese, although overall Watchfield cemetery fits in with several others dating from that late 5th to 6th centuries from the Western part of the Upper Thames Valley.

Thanks to Neil for the photos from his trip to the Oxfordshire Museum store. Other images are taken from the report on the dig (Archaeological Journal (1992) 149: 124-281, a copy of which is in the Heritage Centre, and Oxford Archaeology's book – The Thames Through Time: Early Historical Period: AD1-1000.(An excellent read if you want to know about the archaeology of this area in the first millennium AD).