

The Watchfield Heathen Burials

Margaret Andrews April 2020

Ærest on þone stan æt þam hæðenan byrgelsan

So starts the Anglo-Saxon boundary charter for Watchfield, translating as “start at the stone at the heathen burials”

In 931AD King Æthelstan granted Watchfield, an estate of 20 hides to a thegn or minor lord called Ælfric. The charter for this was preserved by Abingdon Abbey which came into possession of the estate sometime before Domesday Book in 1086AD.

The boundaries of Anglo-Saxon estates were determined by features on those boundaries that could be expected to be identifiable over a long period of time. For example streams, ancient barrows, ancient trees and large standing stones could all serve as boundary markers. The charters then draw a word map around the boundary, for example from the stone to the ancient tree to the barrow and so on back to the stone at the start.

The boundary of Watchfield can be followed almost exactly around the bounds of the present day parish and Neil has flown over this if you look in the Heritage Society catalogue.

This boundary starts and ends at the “hæðenan byrgelsan” which translates as “heathen burials”. So who or what were these heathen burials?

One candidate suggested has been the early Anglo-Saxon cemetery excavated during the building of the by-pass. This however dates from the late fifth to sixth centuries, some four to five hundred years before Æthelstan made his grant. If this cemetery continued in the memory it would imply that there was some enduring marker for it. More relevant is that the early Anglo-Saxon cemetery is some way from the parish boundary, and elsewhere the charter boundary sticks well to the present parish. So what is the answer?

What follows is of necessity circumstantial in that it is extrapolated from work elsewhere but probably suggests a likely answer.

Heathen burials are not uncommon elements in Anglo-Saxon boundary charters, for example occurring near to us at Abingdon, Longworth, Hinton Parva, Woolstone and Rodbourne. While heathen could possibly refer to pre-Christian pagans hence the suggestion that the 5th/6thC cemetery is the candidate, it is considered more likely that it refers to un-consecrated burial sites for those who were outcasts from society, and therefore relates to conditions at the time of the charter. Much investigation elsewhere has shown that the commonest link of these burials is with Anglo-Saxon execution sites.

By the end of the Anglo-Saxon period justice required prisons in the royal manors, assembly place courts (the hundred court was probably located at Shrivenham), places for ordeal at the superior

churches (of which the likely minster of Shrivenham would qualify) and places of execution. Execution was the prescribed punishment at various times in the Anglo-Saxon period for theft, absconding slaves, plotting against the king, plotting against the life of a lord, witches and sorcerers, amongst other crimes. Some others, for example those who swore false oaths, were also to be denied burial in consecrated ground and therefore likely candidates for interment in heathen burial grounds.

Other terms sometimes appear in boundary charters suggestive of execution sites, including the “heafod stoccen” which translates rather graphically as “head stakes”, for the display of decapitated heads, and even more chillingly “cwealmstow” translating as “killing place”. Hinton Parva has all three terms appearing in its boundary (hæðenan byriels, cwealm stowe, and heafod stoccas).

The next place to look for support for the idea that there was an execution site and burial ground on the Watchfield boundary is in the landscape. The open field system with its subdivisions of furlongs seems to date to the later Anglo-Saxon period in many parts of the country. It has been shown elsewhere that many of these field and furlong names also date to this period, albeit sometimes a little corrupted by time.

The open fields of Watchfield were only enclosed in the 19th century but we have a map created in 1756 the land holdings of Fox-Holland in Watchfield, complete with furlong names and showing their location.



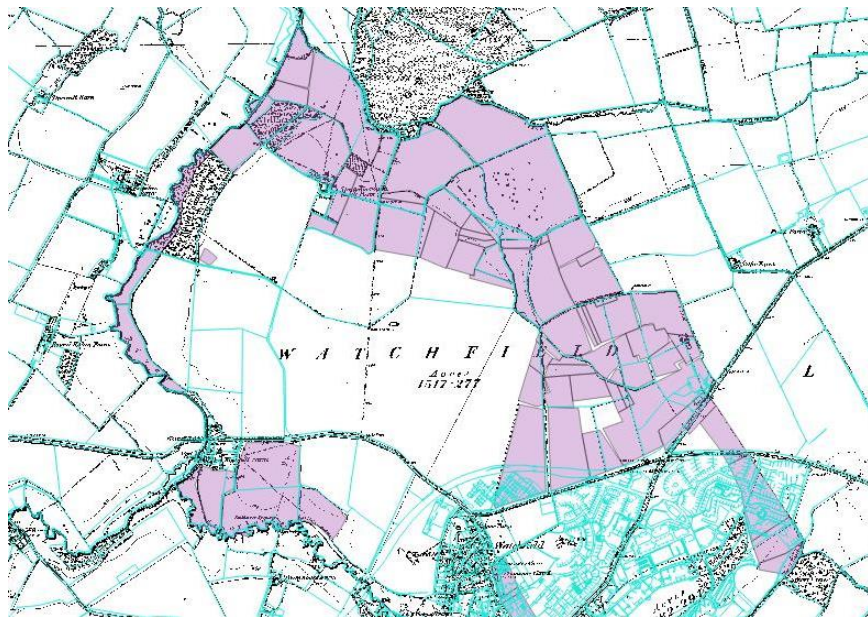
The Fox-Holland Map – oriented with North uppermost

One furlong is called Hairstock. We know from elsewhere that the names Hairstock and Haverstock were sometimes used as alternatives. And indeed in Watchfield we have a land terrier of 1771 referring to a "Haverstock" furlong, in exactly the same open field as "Hairstock". It seems very likely that they refer to the same furlong.

It may be a jump too far and the place name experts may object but one can see Haverstock as being a corruption of Heafod Stoc. In any case it is of interest that the furlong was on the Eastern boundary of Watchfield where we can conjecture from the boundary charter that the heathern burials were also located.

So where exactly was this Hairstock/Haverstock/Heafod Stoc furlong?

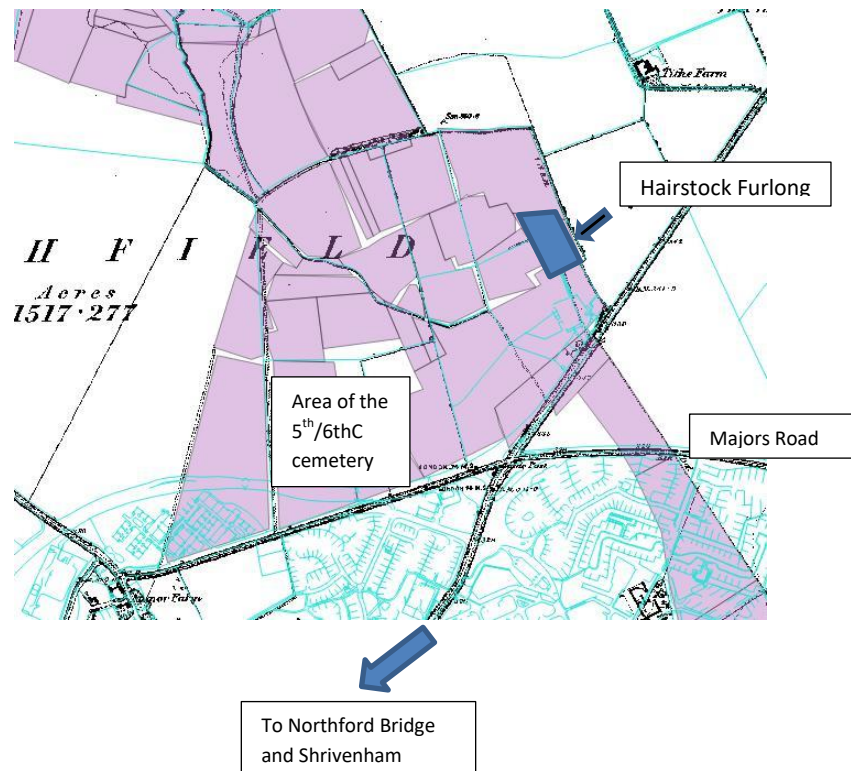
By a process of mapping the old 1756 map onto the modern Ordnance Survey map we can see where the furlongs were located with at least a good approximation, if not completely exactly.



(The purple fields are the 1756 furlongs mapped to the underlying OS map)

This is a process that I have been undertaking. It is ongoing as some furlong boundaries are straightforward to map onto the modern map while others are more complex. The purple elements are those that have been mapped.

If we zoom in to the Eastern boundary, we find Hairstock/Haverstock furlong.



Hairstock/Haverstock furlong was located close to the current main road (A420) to Watchfield and Shrivenham. This road is assumed to be of great antiquity, and is probably the herepath (or army path mentioned in the boundary charter, although the exact line is likely to have migrated somewhat over time as many roads did. The furlong is in the area one would expect a display place for executed criminals; on the estate boundary close to an important route way.

We can see from Hinton Parva that the three elements boundary execution site, usually lie close to each other, but not necessarily together. Given the description in the boundary charter we should probably be looking to the south of the A420 to find the heathen burial ground itself..

So far all of this in relation to Watchfield is speculation but is based on good foundations. If anyone wants to read more about the subject I suggest starting with the book "Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs" by Andrew Reynolds, published by Oxford University Press.