

Barber's Point is a barren and windswept promontory on the River Alde, home now to sheep, grass and wetland birds. It is hard to believe that, 1300 years ago, it was a significant settlement and cemetery along the banks of one of Anglo-Saxon East Anglia's major arteries of travel. To the east is Aldeburgh, to the west are Iken, Snape, Rendlesham and, most famously, Sutton Hoo.

Excavations were first undertaken here in the late nineteenth century by one of the fathers of modern archaeology, Lieutenant General Augustus Henry Lane-Fox Pitt Rivers, who found Roman pottery on the foreshore. This, together with a geophysical survey revealing a rectilinear enclosure, led many to believe that the site was an uncomplicated Roman fortlet. In 2003, thanks to the efforts of Richard Newman and the Aldeburgh and District Local History Society, the first volunteer excavation, led by Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service, was undertaken. Over a ten-year period, subsequent investigations have revealed that the human past of this site, once thought to be uncomplicated, is of greater significance than was previously thought. It shines a light into that most fascinating of transitional periods: the Conversion.

On the final day of this year's dig, the last to be held at Barber's Point, a fire pit containing prehistoric pottery, tentatively dated to the Neolithic period, was discovered, taking the history of this corner of Suffolk back to 3000BC or earlier. Later, in the first and second centuries AD, it was a site of Roman salt production. The Roman greyware and briquetage – the coarse ceramic used to make evaporation pans – that litters the site in a layer about 40cm thick date from this period, as do a bronze brooch and a beautiful bronze dolphin. There is little distinctive Samian ware at Barber's Point, and so it was probably a low-status industrial site, and not a villa or settlement.

It was the unexpected Middle Saxon graveyard that brought the amateurs and professionals back a further three times, and generated much excitement in the local press and the local archaeological community. This year, a total of five further graves of children and young adults, one showing signs possible signs of trepanation, were uncovered, and it is now believed that the boundaries of the settlement and graveyard have been uncovered.

If archaeology is the study of the human past through material remains, then the excavation of graves is, perhaps, the ultimate in archaeology. There is nothing more human or more touching than the moment when a loved one is laid to rest. From a purely scientific point of view, the grave is one of the best examples of a 'sealed context' – a deposit which was covered over almost immediately. Thus, any items contained within it will be in as close to their original positions as possible. Their excavation is a painstaking process, based, like so much of archaeology, on barely perceptible changes in the colour of the soil. As an excavator, as a person, there is something profoundly touching in uncovering the bones of somebody's ancestor, in finding for the first time in 1300 years a human being as they were laid out by their friends and relatives.

Radiocarbon dating of graves from previous excavations has suggested a date of 650-715 for the cemetery, a period whose significance in the conversion of East Anglia can barely be understated. All the graves were aligned east-west, and contained no or few grave goods, indicating probable Christian burials. There were no warriors at Barber's Point, no shields, swords and spears. Grave goods change in the Middle Saxon period, as the coming of Christianity changed, albeit slowly, the society it encountered. The age of the great warriors of the ship burial at Sutton Hoo and its lesser-known cousin, Snape, was coming to an end. The choice of items interred in graves reflects this. Grave goods become less warlike and, it is true, less common, but that is not to say that people gave up

on them entirely. Old habits die hard, and the parents and grandparents of the teenage girl buried with a box of mementos – treasures and precious things collected in childhood, perhaps – had clearly not moved on completely from the ways of their own formative years.

The grave with the ‘box of treasures’ was by far the most intriguing of the features at Barber’s Point. The nails in the casket, placed by the feet of the body, had oxidised, effectively pickling fragments of wood and of the cloth used to make the dead girl’s burial shroud. In the box were a piece of glass, a smooth stone with a hole such as any child might pick up on Aldeburgh beach today, a spindle whorl, some pieces of what seem to be a Roman bridle, and a cowrie shell. The conversion of Britain, then, was not swift or immediate. Historians such as Barbara Yorke and John Blair have pointed out that, to a pantheist, accepting one more deity over all the others would not have presented any great challenge. Even if they accepted fully the Christian God, the early converts’ understanding of their new faith was clearly not as complete as it could have been.

The soil in this part of Suffolk is extremely acidic, and the preservation of bones varies from grave to grave. The last one to be found and excavated this year contained only five or six teeth, while others contained incomplete skeletons. The ‘tooth-grave’, while it contained no grave goods and no body survived, is significant for a different reason: it is the last grave at the cemetery’s southern edge. Beyond lay only a posthole and a boundary ditch. It is tempting to think that the posthole was for a cross at the edge of the cemetery, although this can only ever be a whimsical conjecture.

No man is an island. So, too, no archaeological site exists in total isolation. A few fragments of an Anglo-Saxon claw beaker, which would have been used at pagan feasts, provide an obvious cultural link between Barber’s Point’s heathen past and the great cemetery at Snape, where a similar claw beaker was found.

Perhaps more interestingly, however, are the possible connections with St Botolph. The River Alde was one of the motorways of Anglo-Saxon East Anglia. The site was packed full of oyster shell, reminding us that the river is a source of food, and it is clear that rivers have been routes of trade and exchange for thousands of years. The nearby Deben, for example, was navigable throughout the mediaeval period as far as Debenham where local Saxon monarchs and warlords held court. But rivers had a more sinister aspect: littoral creeks and marshes were inhabited, so the locals believed, by demons. Indeed, much of our East-Anglian folklore is related to watercourses. Black Shuck, the great hellhound, has a name derived from “scucca,” an Anglo-Saxon word for a watercourse. At Burgh, where St Botolph’s relics were taken to lay a demon, there are many tales of the Galley Trot, another great, black dog – “galley” here being related to “gulley.” Even the Grendel, the beast killed by Beowulf, lived in a marsh and has a name derived, ultimately, from another Old English word for a watercourse. It was these legends that may have attracted St Botolph, the great exorcist, to found his minster at Iken, directly across the water from Barber’s Point. The later parish church is clearly visible from the dig site.

The early minsters, as well as providing a wilderness into which the British Isles’ monks, inspired by the Desert Fathers, could retreat, served as missionary outposts. Priests would be sent forth to preach and to establish satellite churches in the local area. Parishes with resident priests were set up later, when the journey from the minster and back again was too great to be undertaken in one day. It seems likely that Barber’s Point was such a site. It is too romantic to say with any degree of certainty that the posthole structure found in the southeastern corner of the excavations, as close to the graves as a

building could possibly be, was an early church, but it is not impossible. Nor is it impossible that St Botolph, the early English monastic who was visited by Bede's own spiritual father, St Ceolfrith, for instruction in the monastic life, had links with this community. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that he founded his monastery in 654. As has been noted earlier, the graves here date from 650-715. We can never know for sure that one of our greatest pre-Schism saints visited Barber's Point, but it is a tantalising prospect. Indeed, given the role played by minsters such as his, and the closeness of this settlement and cemetery to his monastery, it is probable.



Left: a Roman brooch.

Below: the cowrie shell







Top left: a preserved piece of the wooden box. The weave of a fragment of fabric, preserved where it had been pressed against the nails and the box, is visible.

Bottom left: the foot (eastern) end of the grave with the assemblage from the 'treasure box'.

Above: a Roman bridle ring and some iron pieces from the 'treasure box'.



Above: excavation is a painstaking process. The author picks out individual teeth, all that survived in the southernmost grave, with a paperclip.

Below: the skull of a child, aged about 7.





Above: a bronze dolphin, believed to be Roman.

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