

# Chapter 3

## The Early Anglo-Saxon Period: The Beginning of Our Villages

### Introduction: A Misty Period

The Roman Empire retreated from this area in the early 5th century, their exodus from Britain the result of bloody conflicts between the Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon invaders intent on taking this island as their own. The cultural impact of these usurpers can be felt far down the centuries in manifold forms. One of the most long-standing contributions of Anglo-Saxons is found in the way we speak. Old English, the tongue of these newcomers, would eventually evolve into the English language we know today. The names of our five villages; Castor, Ailesworth Sutton, Marholm and Upton all have their roots in the Anglo-Saxon language preserving from time immemorial their original identity as old Anglo-Saxon settlements. Both Castor and Ailsworth are mentioned in early church manuscripts dating from the 8th and 9th Centuries. Castor is referred to as '*Kyneburga castrium*' [1], a memorial to St Kyneburgha, while Ailsworth is mentioned as the home of a curious 9th century woman who was convicted of witchcraft and drowned at London [2]. These scant references in medieval monastic records demonstrate that we are dealing with settlements that were established long before these records were written. Yet the world in which these villages have their origin is shrouded in historical mystery. Historians so often despair at this early period of English history because from the 5th to the 7th century the English landscape is difficult to discuss in detail. Contemporary historical accounts are few and far between while archaeology is difficult to interpret. When we narrow the eye to our own landscape the task becomes all the more the difficult to speak of a "local history", but the present writer is willing to do his best to tell such a story drawing upon all that our ancestors have left behind.

### The First Anglo-Saxons

Historical tradition has it that in the early 5th a British king called Vortigen invited a group of Germanic armies to Britain to aid the Romano-British against growing conflict between themselves and the Picts, a wild warrior people who lived in present-day Scotland. Little did Vortigen know that as post-Roman Britain became unstable the number of these Germanic warriors would increase. Eventually the visiting tribes began making open war with the British, raiding Romano-Celtic controlled areas and defying British war-chiefs [3]. The Celts fought valiantly yet eventually they were driven back by the mighty sway of the Saxon armies. The impact of these Saxon incursions can be seen very early on in these parts. Signs of Anglo-Saxon tenancy have been found at Woodston and Nassington coupled with the discovery of several brooches, suggesting that the Anglo-Saxons had settled in the Nene valley before the 5th century [4].

This process of foreign occupation did by no means happen overnight, it was a slow and chaotic process. During the classical period Britain had been a well-oiled social machine, kept in check by an organised Roman government, able to control trade routes and maintain law and order as well as provide protection for every citizen who lived in accordance with the state. Roman Britain was as much a place of classical culture as any other Roman province, brimming with the cultural traditions of high antiquity imported from the Mediterranean. Even under early Roman rule many Britons adopted the Roman way of life, their language, manner of dress and cultural pursuits with a great deal of enthusiasm. In 500 years of Roman rule the Britons learned to be proud of the Roman traditions which they took as their own. When the Romans abandoned East Anglia in the early 5th century this Roman culture was maintained by the remaining native population in some parts of this region. In our locality archaeology from Lynch and Orton Hall Farm [5] both attest to the fact that as late as the early 5th century Romano-British rather than Anglo-Saxon techniques of farming were being used on the land. This latter-day use of British agricultural methods seems to show that there was not some violent Saxon take-over in this area; rather the evidence seems to suggest that the Anglo-Saxons slowly integrated into a long established native local culture.

In and around Castor village we can see a similar pattern emerge. Researchers have found that the name from which our settlement derives have both classical and Anglo-Saxons. Some early historians connected the name with the Latin '*Castorium*', meaning "camp" while other more recent study has found that the name is derived from the name '*Caester*', the old English word meaning '*walled town*', referring to the village site and not another walled town

nearby, that of Durobrivae [6]. The name's survival and its obvious antiquity are suggestive that there was a smooth transition between Roman settlement and Anglo-Saxon occupation. An examination of remaining Roman buildings excavated in Castor also shows that there was little destruction of Roman walls and similar features; but rather their incorporation into early Saxon dwellings, mostly huts which have been found on the site of the present Cedar Centre near St Kyneburgha's Church [7]. It is likely that when the English first came to the Romano-British settlement, they merely reused the Roman buildings, while adding Anglo-Saxon elements to reinforce those structures which had fallen into disrepair. This practice of salvage is so obvious in the archaeological record that it was remarked upon, even by early historians who lacked the techniques which archaeologists take for granted today. For instance, the Rev Kennet Gibson, the curate at Castor in the 18th century observed;

*'Next to the evidence of the antiquities of Castor, of the proofs of Romans having been here, those of the Saxon type may deserve some notice; because it is a very general and just observation, that the Saxons usually built on Roman foundations; and here at Castor we are sure was a Saxon city' [8].* Although the use of the word 'city' may be rather too grand to describe Anglo-Saxon Castor, this comment by Gibson expresses the notion of stability between eras. We know nothing of the native population after the 5th century. Were there still Romano-British people living in Castor when these early Saxon dwellings were being constructed? We will never know, but the lack of obvious destruction seems to suggest either abandonment by the Britons or a slow infiltration of Saxons into the Romano-British community. Based on previous agricultural evidence the latter theory seems to be the most likely one.

## The Tyrant in the Praetorium

*'They (tyrants) often plunder and terrorise the innocent; they protect and defend the guilty and thieving.....they wage wars civil and unjust, they chase thieves energetically all over the country, but love and even reward thieves that sit with them at table' [9].*

One of the best examples of Saxon reuse in the Castor area is that of the *praetorium* building, part of which extends into the present parish churchyard. Recent archaeology has found evidence of Saxon rubbish pits on the site [10], suggesting that it was occupied in the early 5th century, but by whom it is difficult to know. One possibility is that the Anglo-Saxons, seeing the grandness of the surviving complex, adopted it as a site of early administration from which a local ruler or warlord controlled the territory. The *praetorium's* size and superior construction would have been ideal for occupants who felt themselves elite enough to forgo the dwellings of ordinary Saxons, like a local war-chief. Secondly such individuals could not have failed to recognise its imperial allure and what it represented, a link to the legitimacy of the previous Roman residents. It would therefore seem a logical step for a Saxon with ambition to take it as his own. Such local monarchy seems to have been common in the early 500s in the form of petty rulers. A Welsh monk called Gildas who was writing in Wales around 530 AD attests to this fact, when he describes a Britain full of evil tyrants who lie, cheat and plunder to gain riches [11]. One such tyrant may have once occupied the *praetorium*, which he used as a base to raid the surrounding countryside. Although this is merely conjecture the rubbish pit remains certainly echo an early date for the *praetorium's* reuse whoever lived there, be it a tyrant or a simple squatter. The remains certainly pre-date by at least 150 years any suggestion of a monastic presence which local tradition connects with St Kyneburgha's House of nuns and monks. These archaeological remnants represent the first Saxons to use the ruins after the Roman exodus in the late 4th century.

## The Feast Hall of Caester

*'Then there were again as at first strong words spoken in the hall, the people in gladness, the sound of a victorious folk, until, in a little while, the son of Healfdene wished to seek his evening rest'- From Beowulf*

In AD 600 the Saxon king Ethelfrith defeated the native Britons at Chester. Unfortunately for the Britons this was the way of the future. Saxon society was expanding rapidly, replacing Romano-British culture with its own. The Saxons were beginning to live together in large rural communities based on agriculture and trade. Local artefacts ranging from pots, a cauldron and brooches suggest that by the 6th century our Saxon communities were established and thriving. It is certain that by at least 600 these obvious signs of organisation had fostered political and social bonds and it is at this time that we can trace the beginnings of the kingdom of East Anglia, ruled by a royal dynasty called the Wuffingas.

A 6th century Saxon hanging-bowl unearthed in Castor Parish in 1990 offers us a tantalising glimpse into this period. Although the bowl's significance has been subject to various interpretations there are several inferences, which can be drawn from it. The first is that the bowl was probably a burial object. Although no human remains were found on the site, bowls of a similar type to that found at Castor have been part of Anglo-Saxon pagan burials, the most famous of

which was found at Sutton Hoo. Secondly, we can infer from bowl's decorative design that the vessel belonged to a person of high social status, perhaps an Anglo-Saxon Lord who became prominent in the Castor settlement around this period. What it was used for before it was buried is also subject to some debate, but one likely theory is that the bowl was used as a vessel to hold food at high-feasts. From surviving Anglo-Saxon literature [12] we know that the feast was a pillar of Germanic society. It provided an opportunity for a nobleman to celebrate his military victories and mourn his heroic defeats, recite poetry, play the harp and demonstrate his intellectual skill by speaking in rhymes and riddles, a favourite pastime among the Saxons. Usually at the centre of the hall was a large open fire and set nearest to it, the high table, where the lord of the hall and other highborn Saxons assembled for merry-making. The Castor bowl would probably have sat on the lord's table, a sign of his wealth and power, commissioned by him for feasts or given to him by another nobleman, a token of loyalty.



*Fig 3a. The Castor Hanging Bowl, dated AD 620, found in 1990, Peterborough Museum*

Since the Anglo-Saxons made their halls from wood, there is little in the way of surviving evidence that this feast-hall existed. Yet, in recent years extensive archaeology has found the presence of post-holes on the Cedar Centre site, which suggests that a wooden structure of early Saxon date was once built there, perhaps the hall which once contained the Castor bowl, and later buried with its owner. While it is difficult surmise what this object tells us about Anglo-Saxon Castor society as a whole, it does suggest that Castor, for some at least was a prospering settlement and in the process confirms the fact that by the 6th century the Anglo-Saxon culture had eclipsed that of the Romano-British. The Age of the Anglo-Saxons had finally begun in earnest.

## **Christian Missionaries and Saints**

As well as a period of rapid social growth the 6th century can also be seen as a period of swift consolidation for the Christian church. Before they came in contact with the Christian faith the Saxons had practiced a complex pagan religion which personified the very forces of nature, Freya, goddess of fertility, Wooden, god of thunder and rain, Balder god of the sun. It was a simple pantheistic spirituality, contrasted by the seemingly transcendental and less earthy God of the Gospel. Yet, despite its perceived otherworldliness, Christianity was a force to be reckoned with. Mercia, the Saxon kingdom in which our villages once resided was alive with missionary activity. Both the Irish and Roman churches were immensely proactive, spreading the new religion to the population at large by gaining influence in the highest ranks of Anglo-Saxon society thus evoking little antagonism from the status quo. In this Age of Saints charismatic figures emerge, St Aidan, St Cuthbert, St Chad to name a few. And in this maelstrom of miracle-workers and Christian wonderers a holy woman walks forth from the mists of our history books, her name Kyneburgha, daughter of King Penda of Mercia. Shrouded in legend and mystery, Kyneburgha lived in an era of troubled politics, social fragmentation and faith, yet spent the last years of her royal life, not as a princess of Mercia but as an abbess of a monastic community built on a site which is now devoted to her name-sake, the church of Castor Parish. Behind the name lies a story, which Avril Morris tells in Chapter 4.

### *Benjamin Wood*

I have lived in Castor Parish since birth and have spent many happy years at Hollies Farm. This village holds a special place in my affections and always will. I have always been fascinated by its past and stirred by the stories that I have heard in part my inspiration for writing this chapter. At present I am in my final year of A-Levels and hope to read Philosophy, Theology and Religion at Leeds University in October 2004.

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## Notes

1. CG Dallas, *Durobrivae, A Review of Nene Valley Archaeology*: 1, 1973.
2. D Hill, *Durobrivae, A Review of Nene Valley Archaeology*: 4, 1976.
3. Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of The English People*.
4. J.P Wild, *The Romans In The Nene Valley*.
5. D.F Mackreth, *Orton Hall Farm: A Roman and Early Anglo-Saxon Farmstead*, 1996.
6. Rev K Gibson, *The Fifth Journey Of Antoninus Through Britain*, 1772, in which he discusses the various linguistic origins of the name Castor.
7. C Green, I Green, C Dallas, JP Wild, *Excavations at Castor, Cambridgeshire*, 1957-8 and 1973.
8. *Fifth Journey of Antoninus Through Britain*.
9. Gildas, *On The Ruin of Britain*, 5th century Welsh text. This work is one of the few written sources we can draw on at this early period.
10. G Lucas, *From Roman Villa to Saxo-Norman Village, An Archaeological Evaluation at the Cedars, Castor*, 1998.
11. See C A Synder, *The Age of Tyrants: Britain and the Britons AD400-600*, for a further discussion of the 'Tyrant' in 5th century Britain.
12. Remaining Northern European literature, such as the Norse poem 'The Poetic Edda' and the Anglo-Saxon epic 'Beowulf', allows historians to reconstruct the old English feast-hall.

Thanks to Ben Robinson of Peterborough Museum who brought the feast-hall hypothesis to my attention.

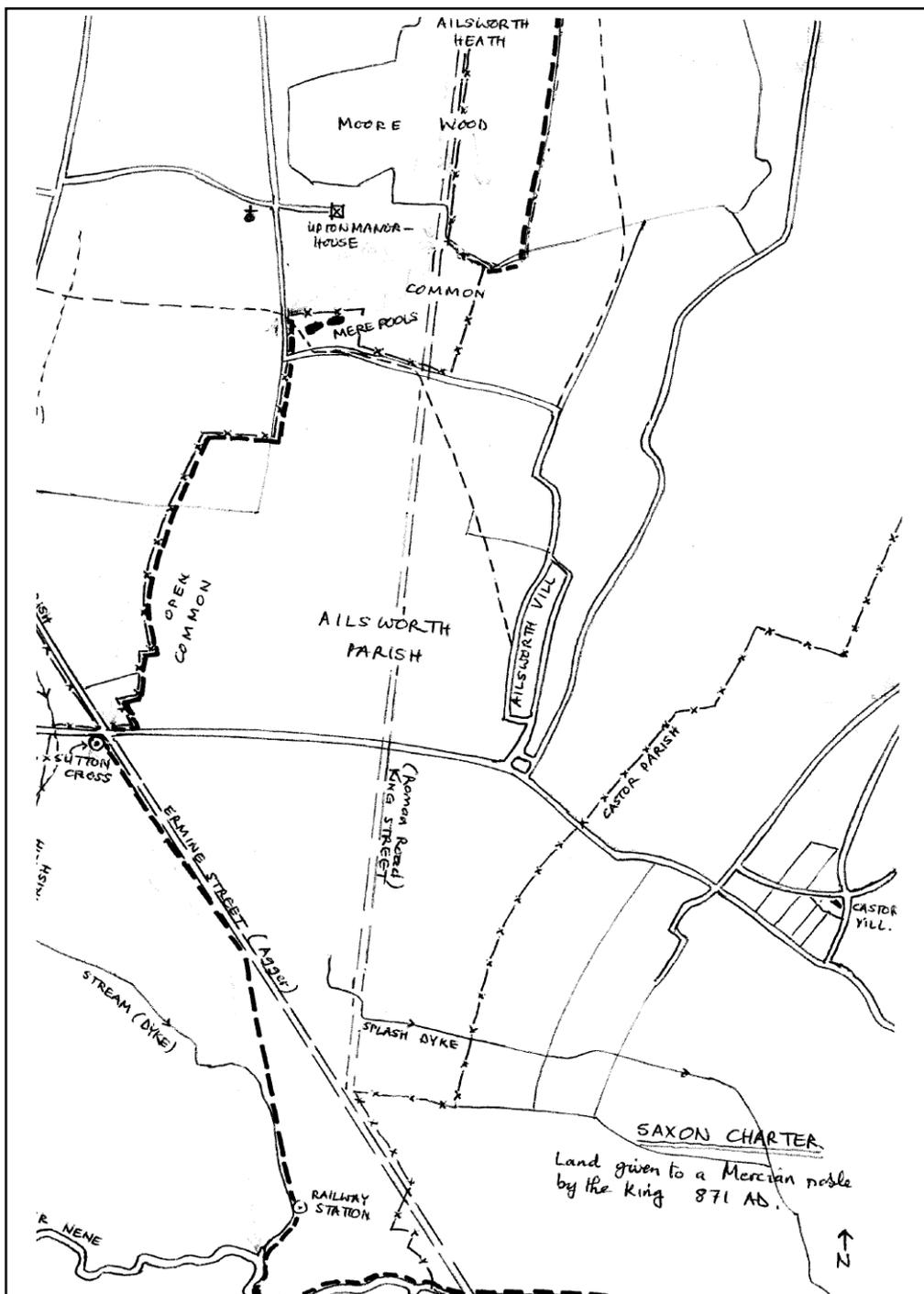


Fig 3b. Sketch map by Richard Harbord showing the boundary of the Saxon Manor of Ailsworth as granted to a Saxon nobleman in AD871.