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# Archaeology and place-names and landscape history: place-name studies and the ‘Lordship and Landscape in East Anglia’ project’

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## Introduction

In this summary paper, we outline the contribution of place-names to the Leverhulme Trust funded research project *Lordship and Landscape in East Anglia AD 400–800* (henceforth *Lordship and Landscape*).[[1]](#endnote-1) *Lordship and Landscape*, headed by Chris Scull (principal investigator) with Tim Pestell and Tom Williamson (co-investigators), was inherently multidisciplinary, bringing together a team of researchers with expertise in archaeology, early medieval history, landscape history and archaeology, numismatics, onomastics and materials science. The multidisciplinary team investigated the emergence of territorial lordship in East Anglia through close investigation of the recently discovered elite settlement at Rendlesham (Suffolk), almost certainly a royal estate, and assessment of other comparable – or potentially comparable – elite sites in East Anglia. This paper focusses on the authors’ collaborative work on landscape history, which made extensive use of place-name evidence.

## Rendlesham: site and survey

Rendlesham has long been known as the site of the *uicus* *regius* ‘royal vill’ where the East Saxon king Swithhelm was baptised in the mid seventh century, with the East Anglian king Æthelwald as his sponsor (Colgrave and Mynors 1969: 284–85). It is usually assumed that the princely burials at Sutton Hoo, only seven kilometres downstream along the River Deben from Rendlesham, were those of members of the East Anglian royal dynasty, the Wuffingas. However, the exact location of the royal vill at Rendlesham was until relatively recently unknown, though a location in the north of the parish had been tentatively suggested from the existence of an oval enclosure and field names containing ‘Hall’ and ‘Woodenhall(s)’ (Bruce-Mitford 1948: 250–51). Some Middle Saxon Ipswich ware had been recovered by field-walking in 1981–82 north of the church of St Gregory the Great, but there were no clear indications of high-status settlement (Newman 1992: 36–38; Newman 2005: 486).

By 2008, however, repeated instances of illegal metal-detecting on an area of land including — but extending beyond — the area field-walked in 1981–82 had aroused the landowner’s suspicion that archaeological material was being stolen. As a result, between 2008 and 2017, a controlled and systematic metal-detector survey and other forms of archaeological investigation were organised and overseen by Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service in the south-west and north-west of the parishes of Rendlesham and Eyke respectively.[[2]](#endnote-2) The metal-detector survey and trial excavations revealed large quantities of metalwork and animal bone typical of elite activities that were concentrated on a plateau overlooking the Deben. Of the nearly 4000 metal-detected finds dating from before AD 1650, 1,128 were identified as Anglo-Saxon and most of these date from the fifth to the early eighth centuries. The survey, and associated archaeological interventions, were followed by three seasons of more extensive excavation, directed by Chris Scull, in 2020–23.

All this has allowed the full extent of the site, its overall spatial organisation and its development over time, to be reconstructed (Scull et al 2016). To the north-east of the present Naunton Hall aerial photography, geophysics and excavation have revealed a dense scatter of pits and traces of numerous *Grubenhäuser* – sunken floored buildings, used mainly for storage and as workshops. Evidence for animal butchery, textile production and other activities was recovered, suggesting a low-status if extensive area of occupation. In addition, fifth- and sixth-century dress accessories and decorated pottery indicate areas of burial, involving both cremations and inhumations. Settlement in the area lying to the south of Naunton Hall took a very different form. From the 570s this developed as a zone of high-status occupation, with large timber halls and abundant evidence for an elite lifestyle in the form of sophisticated dress jewellery, and weapon and harness fittings, much of it of gold and embellished with garnets, and the consumption of cattle, pigs and sheep when often still young and tender. The elite inhabitants enjoyed connections with distant lands; their possessions included brooches from Frankish Gaul, hanging-bowls from western Britain and vessels from Byzantium. There are quantities of Frankish gold coins, as well as English gold shillings and silver ‘sceattas’. There was also extensive evidence of metalworking in bronze, silver and gold. This low promontory, between the Deben to the west and a tributary valley to the east, was enclosed by a substantial palisade. This, clearly, was the residence of the Wuffingas. It remained an important and wealthy place until the second quarter of the eighth century, then declined rapidly in status. Later Saxon occupation in the area surveyed appears humdrum, purely agricultural in character.

What is of particular interest is that the metalwork recovered from the site includes significant amounts of late Roman material, including the latest coinage to reach Britain, and military or official belt fittings. This appears to indicate that there was some kind of official establishment here, suggesting in turn that Rendlesham’s exceptional character in the sixth and seventh centuries owed something to its role as a centre of local or regional authority within the late Roman Empire.

## Rendlesham and the ‘river-and-wold’ model

A major aim of the project was to understand the site at Rendlesham within its wider environmental, topographic and if possible territorial contexts, and to achieve this we adopted aspects of the influential ‘river-and-wold’ model, developed by Everitt and Phythian and Everitt in the 1970s and 1980s (Everitt 1977; Phythian Adams 1987). This takes as its starting point the contrast between soils in the lower parts of river valleys, which are often at least moderately fertile and suitable for use as arable land, and those of the intervening uplands (or *wolds*), often characterised by wide areas of heavy, poorly-draining clays or acid soils poorly suited for arable farming. The model predicts that settlement would be earliest, and most extensive, on the most productive soils in or near valley bottoms, whereas the wold-landscapes of the higher valley sides and interfluves would be occupied by areas of woodland and pasture. And, because upland wolds are agriculturally marginal, they remain sparsely settled for longer and tend to be marginal also to social territories.

Interdisciplinary working by the authors enabled complementary evidence-types to be used to explore the applicability of the river-and-wold model to early medieval territories in East Anglia. Some of this evidence contributed to the identification of zones of non-cultivated land. Woodland recorded in Domesday Book provides an approximation of the distribution of woodland in 1086, though the recording and mapping of woodland by vills means this will be locationally imprecise, especially where vills had rights to detached areas of woodland. However, the modern distributions of ancient woodland (i.e., woodland in existence by 1600 CE), post-medieval heaths and commons, and deer parks likely established before the fourteenth century (from Hoppitt 2020) provided further, spatially precise, indications of the former extent of the upland ‘wolds’, representing as they do their tattered remnants. Place-names referring to woodland and wood-pasture (e.g., OE *lēah* ‘clearing, wood’, ON *skógr* ‘wood’, OE *wudu* ‘wood’), open or uncultivated land (OE *feld*),[[3]](#endnote-3) and heathland (*hǣð* ‘heath, heather’) provide further evidence for the distribution of these areas of agriculturally marginal land.[[4]](#endnote-4) These place-names, mostly recorded for the first time in 1086, may provide information about landscape that predates the evidence of Domesday Book, as names recorded in Domesday Book are likely to be somewhat older than the first records we have of them.

Both place-name and archaeological evidence allows us to establish areas where settlement and other human activities were most extensive. Place-names of types thought to mainly be used before the eighth century (names in ‑*hām* and *-inghahām*) provide an indication of the areas where many early and mid-Saxon settlements were situated.[[5]](#endnote-5) Alongside the place-name evidence, artefactual and physical evidence from excavation or survey also allows us to identify foci of settlement and other activities. The distributions of different types of evidence were compared using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) to reconstruct the historical, spatial distributions of early settlement in East Anglia, and compare these with land-height and soils data.

Multiple strands of evidence indicate that the river-and-wold model’s predictions play out in Rendlesham and the wider region in which it is located. Early medieval artefacts from the project’s survey area were almost all found on soils that were both fertile and workable: loamy Newport 2 soils and sloping (and thus drainable) clay soils of the Burlingham 3 Association. Such soils extend along the valleys of the River Deben and of its tributary the Fynn. Rendlesham and other names in -*hām* ‘homestead, village’ and ‑*ingahām* (group-name forming suffix + *hām*) are similarly found on the light, fertile soils of the river-valleys. In contrast, ancient woodland, deer parks and place-names indicative of woodland and pasture tend to be found on the heavier clay soils on the higher ground north and west of the valleys of the rivers Fynn and Deben and on the acid, sandy soils of the Newport 4 Association to the south and east, which were additionally characterised by large tracts of heathland into the nineteenth century.

Rendlesham was thus centrally situated within a large area of fertile, workable soils in the Deben river-valley forming an arable core, which was surrounded by areas of uncultivated land forming a pastoral periphery. Despite the relatively muted topographic contrasts which characterise this part of East Anglia, areas of wooded ‘wold’ (be it clayey upland or acid heathland), distinct from more intensively exploited river-valley areas, can nevertheless be discerned. It is striking, too, how the boundary of the grouping of five and a half hundreds of Wicklaw (Carlford, Colnes, Loose, Parham, Plomesgate and Wilford) follows the upland, clay wolds for most of its northern and western stretches.[[6]](#endnote-6) The date at which the group of hundreds, already by the time of Domesday a jurisdictional Liberty annexed to the Abbey of Ely, emerged as a territorial unit is unclear, but Warner’s suggestion that this represents a territory associated with Rendlesham is plausible (Warner 1996: 154–55). [FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1: The territory of Rendlesham.

1. – Deer parks recorded before 1300 (after Rosemary Hoppitt). 2. – Ancient woodland. 3. Parish with, or containing Domesday vill with, ‘woodland’ place-name . 4. – Post-medieval commons and heaths.

## Rendlesham in context: sites and territories?

The project investigated a number of other late-sixth/seventh-century sites in East Anglia which are primarily known as concentrations of wealthy metalwork (‘productive sites’) discovered by metal detectorists. It also explored their wider landscape context, using the same approaches as those employed for Rendlesham. Not all of these sites have precisely the same character. While those in the Suffolk parishes of Coddenham (in the valley of the Gipping) and Hoxne (in that of the Waveney), for example, appear to have been aristocratic residences, that lying immediately to the west of the Roman town of *Venta Icenorum* in the Norfolk parish of Caistor St Edmunds seems to have been a trading place controlled by a powerful local family who buried their dead in the cemetery at nearby Harford Farm and whose actual residence was elsewhere, possibly within the walled town itself. All, however, are in ‘core’ river valley locations, in areas of well-drained and reasonably fertile soil, surrounded by drift covered uplands which archaeological evidence indicates were sparsely settled, and which place-names and other evidence suggest were occupied by grazing grounds and woodland. In these cases, as with Rendlesham, the territories controlled by, and sustaining, these elite establishments seem to be fossilised in later patterns of administrative geography – in groups of hundreds whose outer boundaries run through the high ground between drainage basins, often following the precise line of watersheds. That associated with Caistor, for example, appears to have been based on the drainage basin of the River Tas, and to be preserved by the hundreds of Depwade, Humbleyard and Henstead; the divisions between which form T-junctions with outer boundaries which run through clay covered uplands, replete with ancient woods, former deer parks, and greens and commons (FIGURE 2 HERE).

Figure 2: The territory associated with the Anglo-Saxon site at Caistor-by-Norwich.

1. – Hundred boundaries. 2. – Post-medieval commons. 3. – Ancient Woodland. 4. – Deer parks recorded before 1300 – extent known. 5. - Deer parks recorded before 1300 – extent unknown (after Rob Liddiard).

However, topography may not be the only factor that led to the emergence of dominant elite groups at the sites investigated. It may not be coincidental that many of these early ‘central places’, in addition to that at Caistor, lie within a few kilometres of a Roman town; that at Coddenham in the case of Coddenham, Hacheston in the case of Rendlesham, and Scole in the case of Hoxne. Indeed, the names of the two parishes lying on each side of the river Deben between Hacheston and Rendlesham, Wickham (Market) and Campsea (Ash) indicate that these places received Old English names while the Roman heritage of Hacheston was still apparent. Campsea (OE *camp* ‘open land’ + *īg* ‘island’) and Wickham (OE *wīc‑hām*), are examples of types of place-names which incorporate Latin loanwords (OE *camp* < Latin *campus* andOE *wīc* < Latin *uicus*) and are spatially associated with Roman settlements (Gelling 1997, 65–88).[[7]](#endnote-7) While the importance of the areas in question in both the Roman and early medieval periods may reflect geographical factors, there may also have been direct continuity of social and political significance. The sites at Coddenham and Hoxne, like that at Rendlesham, have both produced finds suggestive of some administrative or military presence at the very end of the Roman period. There are hints here, perhaps, that the geography of power in early/middle Saxon East Anglia had its roots in the devolution of authority, in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, from urban centres to the residences of aristocratic families in their immediate hinterlands.

## Beyond landscape: other uses of place-name

The use of place-name evidence in the characterisation of landscape at the regional, East Anglian scale was the main toponymic contribution to the project. However, place-name evidence also contributed to other aspects of the research. Collection and analysis of place-names referring to travel infrastructure (e.g. Wilford (Bridge) ‘willow ford’ < OE *\*wilig* + *ford*) contributed to research into overland and water-borne connectivity in the area around Rendlesham.[[8]](#endnote-8) Minor place-names in Rendlesham and the neighbouring parishes of Campsea Ash were also collected from Tithe Award documentation, seventeenth- to nineteenth century estate maps, and medieval and early modern manorial documents. This line of research was not pursued in detail as there was poor correspondence between medieval and modern names.[[9]](#endnote-9) This meant that few medieval minor names could be localised, limiting our ability to use them to characterise the local landscape in the late medieval period. However, research into field-names nevertheless revealed that the Woodenhall names (discussed above) were recorded in the eighteenth century as Great, Little and Wood Norralds (SRO, HD 427/1). Woodenhalls is thus likely to be a folk-etymological re-shaping of the name Wood Norralds and the suggestion that the name preserves a memory of an earlier hall can be ruled out. Additionally, the survival of a handful of field-names from an extent of 1387 (surviving as a sixteenth-century copy; SRO HB 416/B4/1/30) and a fragment of a fourteenth-century rental (HB 416/B4/3/7) into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries allowed a previously unknown manor centred on Red House Farm in the south of the parish of Rendlesham to be identified.

## Concluding comments

Work by the wider *Lordship and Landscape* team will shortly be published as an open-access monograph *Lordship and Landscape in East Anglia AD 400–800* and on-line catalogue and archive.[[10]](#endnote-10) The project revealed clearly the benefits of inter-disciplinary research. The primary contribution of place-name research was in the definition of zones over which regional, primarily catchment-oriented, territorial lordships were established and, within these, in the identification of areas of early post-Roman settlements. This research built on the work of EPNS scholars over the past 100 years, from existing EPNS publications (Briggs and Kilpatrick 2016; EPNE; PN Nf) and collections of place-name attestations (the Norfolk slip collection) through to the forthcoming Suffolk survey by Keith Briggs. We are indebted to EPNS scholars past and present for the contributions on which *Lordship and Landscape* could build.

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1. *Lordship and Landscape* ran 2017–21 and was funded by the Leverhulme Trust (RPG-2017-172). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The metal detectorists Robert Atfield, Roy Damant, Terrance Marsh and Alan Smith put in 1740 person days of survey work between 2008 and 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The meaning of this element is discussed more fully by Gelling and Cole (2000: 269–78) and Wager (2022: 52–56). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For *Lordship and Landscape*, place-names from Norfolk and Suffolk recorded by the eleventh century were collected from national and regional dictionaries and studies (Arnott 1946; Briggs and Kilpatrick 2016; Ekwall 1960; Mills 2011; Watts 2004; PN Nf), the historical spellings of Norfolk place-names collected by O. K. Schram and Karl Inge Sandred (held by the Institute for Name-Studies, University of Nottingham), and material kindly provided by Keith Briggs from his forthcoming Suffolk place-name survey [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This can only be an approximation as there are other place-name elements common amongst the earliest recorded Old English place-names (particularly topographical elements which were not included because they may have been used after the eighth century too), and because settlements may have moved position locally between their naming and their inclusion on early maps. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The southern and eastern parts of the Wicklaw Hundreds are bounded by the Orwell and the North Sea. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The spatial association between Roman sites and OE *wīc* is only suggested for OE *wīc* in the compound *wīc-hām* and as a qualifier in other place-names (Gelling 1997: 249–50). OE *wīc* is also the qualifier in the name *Wicklaw* from which the Wicklaw Hundreds are named, presumably from an assembly site, and may also have the sense ‘Roman settlement’ in this name. The exact site of this meeting place is not known, but it seems to have been somewhere in the Hacheston or Rendlesham area (Briggs 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This research built upon data collected as part of the Leverhulme Trust funded project *Travel and Communication in Anglo-Saxon England* (RPG-2014-074). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This is probably at least in some measure due to extensive reorganisation of the local landscape by the main local landholders from the eighteenth century. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Online materials will be available from the Archaeology Data Service at <https://doi.org/10.5284/1083483>. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)