

## **Rendlesham Rediscovered**

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*Report by Ellie Mead*

Rendlesham has historically been identified as a potentially significant place because it is mentioned by Bede, writing in the 720's, as a *vicus regius*, a royal settlement, associated with an East Anglian king, Aethelwald and the baptism of the East Saxon Swithelm, in around 660. Suffolk Archaeological Service's work over the last few years has sought to find the evidence on (and in) the ground for this settlement.

The latest archaeological exploration at Rendlesham has been a collaboration between metal detectorists, archaeologists and landowners. The site at Naunton Hall had been investigated in the 1980s in association with the excavations by Martin Carver at Sutton Hoo. A Saxon settlement was confirmed at this time, but in the intervening years the site was subject to looting by 'night hawks': unauthorised metal detectorists. To counter this a systematic survey of the estate was undertaken by members of a local metal detecting group with finds being recorded to Portable Antiquities Scheme standards by the Archaeological Service. Magnetometry was also used prior to excavation in order to examine below plough-soil levels.

Finds distribution from detecting indicated several areas of Roman, two of which so far include a few late Iron Age pieces. A D-shaped enclosure ditch featured on the geophysics and excavation revealed some handmade Iron Age sherds together with 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman pottery. Another area produced a scattered horde of denarii deposited c 170 AD. In the central area a good range of Roman material has been found alongside Anglo Saxon and late Iron Age evidence. North of centre the Roman coin finds show signs of re-use: 10% are pierced and one has a series of punched holes. There is evidence here of the transition period between late Roman and Early Anglo-Saxon.

About 1/3 of the total metal detector finds are Anglo-Saxon in origin; they are located in the centre of the site and extend over 50 hectares. There would appear to be both burial and settlement sites in this area as indicated by dress accessories spanning the 5<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries: in the earlier part of this period these may well have been buried with women as grave goods, whereas later on this ceased to be the case. The evidence of metalworking for a social elite is provided by scrap gold items, partially melted silver coins, unfinished copper-alloy objects and a lead model for casting part of a copper alloy sword fitting. Lower status items such as buckles, pins and bag catches also appear to have been produced on this site.

Evidence of trading is suggested by a find of six Byzantine low value copper coins dating to the late 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century; this is the largest group from an Anglo-Saxon context in England. A great many coins have been found from this period, the earlier being Continental gold coinage (at a time when no coinage was being produced in this country) followed by the earliest English types. 165 silver pennies (sceattas) from the late 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century were found scattered over the central area, as were earlier gold ones. The only English site with more Merovingian gold coins is the group from the purse in the Sutton Hoo ship burial. The Rendlesham site has yielded cut coins, a coin with a make-weight added, possible blanks and ingots: here is evidence that gold was circulating as currency rather than as a gift item and is also an indicator of a high status settlement. This is backed up by finds of gold and garnet jewellery, a sword fitting and a gilded copper alloy harness mount. All this points to Rendlesham being a major centre of luxury trade and manufacture.

Excavation began in October 2013, based on the aforementioned finds and also on magnetometry results, which latter showed two distinct areas: in the north more 'blobby' features and in the south more linear. Both these areas showed signs of agricultural damage below the current plough-soil, mainly due to sub-soiling, which can cause damage to features and also shift finds strati-graphically. In the northern area a group of 3-5 plough-damaged cremation urns were found, together with burnt bone fragments a piece of unburnt glass from a 5<sup>th</sup> century bowl and a burnt glass bead. Another of the 'blobby' features turned out to be an early Anglo-Saxon sunken featured building, containing a large piece of a small-long brooch, 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> century pottery and some clay loom-weights. A further trench revealed a second sunken featured building. Conclusions from this evidence are starting to suggest a large area of settlement in the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, with a cremation/burial area nearby. Coins and other finds of 8<sup>th</sup> century date would indicate that perhaps this then became an area for periodic markets where accidental losses were dropped onto the ground.

Excavation in the southern area across a linear feature revealed huge amounts of animal bone in a midden feature, and also a pair of ditches from the same period, possibly containing a wooden fence or palisade. Finds gave dating evidence for these features to the 7<sup>th</sup> or early 8<sup>th</sup> century. Early assessment of the bone shows that domesticated animals such as cattle, pigs and sheep were being supplemented by hunted animals: deer and hare, and some large bird bones may be those of hawks. Below the midden layer a Roman feature contained late Roman pottery. A final trench was dug in this area in Spring 2014. Metal detecting had produced two 8<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Saxon silver coins but excavation found ditches containing late Saxon Thetford ware or later medieval wares.

In the broader context Rendlesham in early Anglo-Saxon times, based on these findings, appears to have been a major productive site close to a royal residence, as may also have been the case at Coddensham. Ipswich at this time may have been a smaller centre, functioning as a 'gateway community' for foreign traders. From about 680 AD an increase in international trading and the production of English coinage meant that ports like Ipswich appear to have expanded at the expense of the economic function of rural estate centres such as Rendlesham.

Jude Plouviez was unfortunately unable to deliver her lecture herself due to laryngitis, but John Mallinson very kindly stepped into the breach. Jude was however able to answer questions from the floor. The archaeological work here is very much a work in progress and we look forward to future developments and conclusions.