

The Buildings of Anglo-Saxon Ipswich

by Keith Wade ¹

Ipswich is best known as a Middle Saxon emporium,² but *it* was also an important late Saxon town and the excavated evidence *is* no less impressive. Over sixty Anglo-Saxon buildings have been excavated since 1974, most of which are in fact late Saxon.

In terms of our dating abilities there are three main periods of occupation in the town before the Norman Conquest: Early Anglo-Saxon, Middle Saxon and late Saxon, and the latter can be subdivided into three (late ninth century, tenth century and eleventh century).

For each period it is possible to comment on the town's layout and function, types of buildings found, variety of urban landscape and likely use of the buildings.

Direct evidence for the function of excavated buildings is always rare and Ipswich is no exception. Evidence of activities within buildings was not conveniently left behind for future generations to examine. At the end of their useful lives, buildings were cleared of furniture and effects, and during occupation, rubbish was removed to middens. The content of middens and rubbish pits is, of course, a useful clue to activities in nearby buildings but it is rare to be able to match specific buildings with specific rubbish. Inevitably at the crudest level, we end up with a list of functions for the settlement as a whole and a series of buildings in which we assume that activities relating to those functions took place. When sufficient excavation has been undertaken, it might also be possible to identify zones of different activity within the town and then consider possible correlations with building types.

In addition there are some rare examples of direct evidence of function fortuitously provided by the unexpected and premature destruction of some buildings by fire, fortunately a fairly common occurrence in early towns, and Ipswich has some good examples dating to the late Saxon period.

Early Anglo Saxon (fig.1)

The earliest occupation dates to the late sixth and early seventh century and appears to be restricted to about 10 hectares on the north bank of the Orwell centred on the river crossing at what is now Stoke Bridge. The rising heathland north of the occupation area was used as a burial ground and evidence of agricultural field systems has been found to the east. Frankish pottery associated with the occupation, and objects found in the associated cemetery, indicate that there was also an important trading function.

Little is known about the internal layout of the settlement but roads can be postulated connecting the major Roman sites in the area and the fords across the River Orwell. Only limited excavation has been possible in this area but the St Peter's Street site, excavated in 1986/7, produced evidence of two sunken-featured buildings, with continuous individual posts along each side. One had a possible entrance in one corner and a floor area of just over 20 square metres. No obviously larger post holes were

found at the centres of the gable ends to imply "West Stow" type construction but one of the seventh century buildings from the latter site (SFB 003) does have secondary post holes irregularly spaced around the perimeter of the pit and is almost identical in floor area.³

This very limited evidence of buildings in the early Anglo-Saxon nucleus of the town renders any discussion about their use pointless, but it would appear that buildings very similar to those found on what we assume to be a typical rural settlement were used in a proto-urban situation in Ipswich.

Middle Saxon (fig. 2)

During the later seventh and eight centuries the settlement expanded north and probably south of the Orwell to cover some 20 hectares. The cemetery to the north continued in use as did the agricultural fields to the east. Around 800 AD, there appears to have been a deliberate expansion of the town based on a grid iron planned street system, imposed over the seventh-eighth century cemetery and previously unused land to the north, bringing the settlement area to some 50 hectares.

Throughout this period the town functioned as a craft production centre and international port. Craft production included leather, bone, metalworking, and weaving but was overshadowed by large-scale pottery production, which appears to have been concentrated in the north-eastern sector of the town.

Two areas of large scale excavation have produced evidence of buildings. The St Stephen's Lane site, in the centre of the occupation area, produced a different pattern of buildings to the Foundation Street sites on the eastern fringe (fig.3). St Stephen's Lane appears to be densely developed with buildings which abut or even encroach on the street edge. At Foundation Street the buildings lie well apart and are set well away from the street frontage.

There *is* also a difference in activities between the sites. The environmental evidence from Foundation Street suggests agricultural activity at least in part, and there are very low levels of craft production. In contrast, the St Stephen's Lane buildings are associated with intensive craft production including a potter, bronzesmith and bone/antler worker.

The pattern at St Stephen's Lane *is* closely comparable to that found on the Six Dials site in Hamwic.⁴

This raises the question of whether the concept of a 'town centre' already *existed* and whether the buildings abut St Stephen's Lane for commercial reasons - to attract customers for products. If this *is* the case then *it is* a surprisingly early example of characteristically urban landscape.

It also raises the question of whether the inhabitants combined living and craft

production under the same roof or whether any of the buildings had a specialist function? Unfortunately, there is no direct evidence for the function of the buildings as no contemporary occupation layers survived and may never have *existed*. The more unpleasant *activities* were clearly performed *outside*, as witnessed by the pottery kiln to the rear of the buildings and a copper alloy working hearth. At least two late ninth century structures are likely to have been outbuildings *situated* to the rear of the properties. Unfortunately, the identification of boundaries between properties *is* difficult. Some lines of individual post holes undoubtedly represent fences but hedges may have *existed* which have left no trace.

It is, therefore, impossible to judge whether a single household comprised one or more buildings, or indeed whether the inhabitants specialised in single craft *activities*. It seems more *likely* that inhabitants commonly practiced more than one craft at this period and that specialization and the zoning of specialists *is* a later phenomenon, which did not occur until the demand for such products was high enough to ensure stability of income from single occupations. This appears to have occurred first in the pottery industry which is hardly surprising in view of the universal and high demand for its product.

All of the buildings of Middle Saxon date are ground level buildings of individual post hole, or continuous foundation trench construction or a combination of the two. They all have widths of around four metres and lengths of six to eight metres giving floor areas of 24-32 square metres. Their form bears a close resemblance to buildings found on other sites of the period such as Hamwic, Maxey, Brandon and Wicken Bonhunt.⁵ In other words there appears to be little to distinguish urban and rural buildings during this period, despite the different functions of the settlements concerned.

Unfortunately, the evidence for buildings in Ipswich at this period is poor in comparison with other sites but it appears to indicate that those in Ipswich were on average smaller than those from Hamwic and the rural sites and more similar to the early Anglo-Saxon halls at West Stow. Could this imply a relatively low status for these early urban populations? Building size alone is probably not a sufficiently reliable indicator as it might well reflect function rather than status but comparison of material culture between the sites is more decisive. At Brandon, the associated material culture includes styli, and gold and silver objects, implying an aristocratic and/or monastic status.⁶ This is in sharp contrast to the urban material culture of Ipswich, or Hamwic, which has produced virtually no objects in precious metal, other than coins, surely reflecting a lowly social status for these early town dwellers, comparable with the average rural settlement, or at the very least a social status not rewarded with material possessions.

Some similarity of building types between these early urban settlements and their rural hinterlands is hardly unexpected. As the urbanisation process gathered momentum the differences in function between urban and rural would have become more marked and we would expect this to be reflected in a divergence of building types, settlement morphology, and the status of individuals.

Late Saxon (fig.4)

From the mid ninth century to the Norman Conquest Ipswich grew very little, but it remained in the top ten of the most important Anglo-Saxon towns, in terms of most indicators, until the late eleventh century. The town's economy continued to be based on craft production and trade. It had a mint by reign of Edgar (959-975). Local and regional trade dominated the tenth century with international trade picking up again in the eleventh century. It was during this period that Ipswich was overtaken in importance in East Anglia by the growth of Norwich, Thetford and eventually Dunwich, and by the mid twelfth century it had declined to twenty-first position in the national rankings.

The street pattern of late Saxon Ipswich was that inherited from its Middle Saxon predecessor, modified only by the construction of defences in the early tenth century: this caused some street diversions and closures and some settlement became extra mural, including the meeting place, or Thingstead, on the north side of the town.

In contrast to the 9th century townscape, the late Saxon pattern is more uniform with buildings fairly well spaced and normally 10-15 metres back from the street edge. Only two examples of buildings abutting streets have been found, both at the end of the period, i.e. late eleventh or early twelfth century. Evidence of tenement boundaries is again rare but separate landholdings can occasionally be distinguished.

The average size of the Ipswich tenements in 1066 can be deduced to have been 1000 square metres (a quarter of an acre) by simply dividing the 50 hectares of occupation by the 500 or so burgage tenements recorded in the Domesday Book account.

As with the Middle Saxon period we can compare the centre of Ipswich with its eastern fringe (fig. 5). In the tenth century, the eastern fringe is very densely occupied and the central, St Stephen's lane frontage, virtually deserted. Each holding on the eastern fringe consists of groups of buildings but there is little evidence of function to illuminate their relationship. In terms of their size, each building could have supported a separate household but some could well have been outbuildings associated with a principal dwelling.

The smaller and cruder buildings are often interpreted as outbuildings but some may well have housed the poorer inhabitants, perhaps as sub-letting on a tenement by a burgess.

In the eleventh century both areas of the town are less densely occupied and separate holdings of one or two buildings can be postulated on the basis of their spacing.

The evidence for craft activities at this period, while less than for the Middle Saxon period, similarly implies a lack of specialisation or zoning, apart from the pottery industry which concentrated in the Carr Street area. That is not to say that the zoning of some activities had not taken place during this period in areas of the town not yet excavated. The evidence for Winchester, for example, indicates streets devoted to tanning, shoemaking, butchery and shield making at this period.⁷

Fifty three late Saxon buildings have been excavated in Ipswich of which over forty survived as virtually complete ground plans. They are all sunken-featured, a characteristic which reappears in the late ninth century, having been absent in the eighth and early ninth centuries. In some cases the sunken features may represent an under floor space but in most the floor itself was laid on the base of the sunken feature. Some of the latter were probably single-storied structures but the majority were undoubtedly cellars of two-storied buildings.

In floor area the buildings vary in size from about five square metres to thirty four and where it can be argued that they were two-storied, especially the eleventh century examples, the potential floor area rises to over sixty square metres - the size of the average Victorian terraced house in Ipswich. There is also a clearly observable trend for buildings to become larger between the late ninth and eleventh century (fig.6).

The cellared buildings, which appear in towns from the later ninth century, are not found in rural settlements, and represent the first English urban house type - a tradition which continued right up to the Victorian era. They provided storage, workspace and domestic accommodation under one roof with a minimum use of building materials and with the important advantage of increased security from burglary and cool cellars for the storage of organic consumables.

Although some of the cellars are quite big there is a notable absence of large buildings which could have been used as warehouses. At Thetford, Davison's excavations revealed a mixture of cellared buildings and ground level buildings, of post hole construction, one of which was an aisled hall which exceeded 300 square metres in floor area and presumably stands a good chance of being a warehouse.⁸ Clearly, such buildings may exist in Ipswich in areas not yet excavated.

The large number of medium-sized cellared buildings found in Ipswich does imply, however, that it was the commonest building type in the town and that the storage needs of most inhabitants was modest. This raises the question of what exactly most of the inhabitants were doing in the late Saxon town?

Most must have been marketing on a relatively small scale if their cellars are a reflection of the volume of goods being stored at anyone time. Some of the inhabitants were undoubtedly so-called 'contributory burgesses' - men attached to rural manors but who had acquired properties in the town to capitalise on the advantageous trading terms of a burgess, selling surplus from the rural manor and buying goods to provision it.

Unfortunately, the documentary evidence for absentee lords in Ipswich is silent apart from the will of Theodred, Bishop of London, dated 942, in which he left the house which he owned in Ipswich to his sister's son, Osgot.⁹

A house in a borough gave a Lord a place to stay when business or his feudal duty took him to the town. The great men of the shire had to go to the county towns on many occasions throughout the year. Monthly meetings of the shire court came to be held

there, and in times of danger a house behind the town walls was a refuge. The Knights Gilds which sprang up in the towns during this period were probably associations of *cnights*, or servants of great men settled by their lords in a town to look after their interests and provide them with goods.¹⁰ Whether servants and their lords shared the same floorspace on such visits is uncertain but servants could well have been housed in the smaller buildings found on the Ipswich sites or even the cellars of the more substantial buildings.

The discussion raises the interesting question of how the exchange of goods operated in late Saxon towns? Clearly, the open air market was the principal location of exchange but trade deals must have been struck by traders staying as guests in local houses. To what extent shops existed, however, that is direct retailing from houses, is far from certain, and will be difficult to elucidate from the archaeological evidence.

Trading surely wasn't the only attraction of a town house for the rural population. The desire for the social contact and entertainment provided by towns must have been just as strong. Then as it is now, and the evidence of musical instruments and brewing in late Saxon Ipswich strongly supports this view. If so, was the houseparty the normal social event or are there communal buildings awaiting discovery?

The archaeological evidence for occupations is clearly inadequate in that there were undoubtedly many occupations which would be difficult to identify from their inorganic rubbish. The Winton Domesday mentions buildings with specialised uses such as a prison, stalls, shops and storehouses, some of which had been turned into forges. Occupations referred to included priests, beadles, reeves, moneyers, a goldsmith, a shoemaker, a brand-wright, a hosier, a turner and a soap-maker.¹¹

The Domesday Account of Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, is also illuminating in relation to the occupation of its 342 householders even if it is atypical in belonging to the adjacent St Edmunds Abbey.¹² Apart from 34 knights with 22 bordars, and 13 reeves with 5 bordars, there were 30 priests, deacons or clerks, 28 nuns and poor people and 75 who waited upon the Abbot and brethren. These included bakers, ale brewers, tailors, washerwomen, shoemakers, robemakers, cooks, porters and stewards.

An insight into the function of at least some of the Ipswich late Saxon buildings was provided by them burning or being burnt down. A building at St Stephen's Lane, had been destroyed by fire in the late eleventh century along with its two neighbours, preserving in the base of its cellar both the carbonised remains of its structural timbers and the contents of the cellar.

The inventory of contents is as follows:

- a wooden barrel containing oat/barley malt;
- a basket with oat malt;
- 18 bread loaves;

- four complete pottery storage jars and a pottery lamp; a turned wooden vessel;
- over 250 iron objects including door furniture, tools (including chisels and needles), knives, flesh and fish hooks, keys and heckle spikes.

Clearly, the storage function is the most apparent with food and the ingredients for brewing being paramount, but the inhabitants were also, at least occasionally, engaged in fishing, wool combing, sewing and other craft activities which hopefully can be deduced once the tools have been identified.

Another burnt building on Foundation Street contained heaps of cereal remains, nearly all of which were oats, suggesting horse feed. It was, however, a store and not a stable in view of the lack of dung and litter.

Little mention has been made so far of the possible food production activities in the town. The plant remains throughout the period are dominated by cleaned cereals implying that they were imported from a distance. However, the urban plots were certainly large enough for some food production, including the keeping of chickens and pigs as well as vegetable and fruit growing. None of these require associated substantial structures but they do lead to a storage requirement for any surplus.

The uniform late Saxon townscape proposed at Ipswich appears not to be paralleled in the other late Saxon towns where large scale excavation has been possible. The evidence from Thetford shows an interesting contrast between the central southern part of the town¹³ and the western fringe.¹⁴

In the central, southern area straggling sunken-featured buildings were discovered immediately adjacent to a winding street and associated with intensive industrial activity. In contrast the western fringe had a much more ordered appearance and greater diversity of buildings, normally set back from the street edge, as at Ipswich.

At London, cellared buildings set back from the street frontages are common, especially in the eleventh century. Horsman, Milne and Milne see them as fulfilling both a domestic and storage function but in association with surface-laid buildings along the street frontages.¹⁵ However, to quote them, "Regrettably, only negative evidence was recovered for such surface laid buildings directly associated with the cellared structures, in the form of unpitted areas up against the street frontage". This assumption of frontage buildings could well be unwarranted and the Ipswich townscape model of cellared buildings set back from an undeveloped frontage may well apply to a least some areas of eleventh century London. Where there is evidence of surface laid buildings against the London street frontages Horsman, Milne and Milne see them as "standard domestic dwellings" but also suggest that in some cases they "may be interpreted as the shops of merchants or craftsmen". Many of these structures are insubstantial, often with large hearths or ovens and I would suggest that some could well have been bakeries.

The late twelfth century description of London written by William fitz Stephen, as a preface to a biography of Thomas Becket, may have some relevance to such structures, when it refers to the public cookshop, as follows:

Upon the river bank, amid the wine that is sold from ships and wine cellars, daily according to the season, you may find viands, dishes roast, fried and boiled, fish great and small, the coarser food for the poor, the more delicate for the rich, such as venison and birds both big and little. If friends, weary with travel, should of a sudden come to any of the citizens... they hasten to the river bank, and there all things desirable are ready to their hand. ¹⁶

Clearly archaeological evidence alone is insufficient to paint a picture of life in an Anglo-Saxon town but it has the potential of supplying unique evidence about the evolution of townscape, from which other important deductions about the urbanisation process should be possible.

During the Middle Saxon period, at least parts of Ipswich look more characteristically urban than the succeeding later Saxon townscape and the reasons for this are not yet evident.

On present evidence it would appear that the late Saxon townscapes of London, Ipswich and Thetford were different but in view of the small size of the excavated samples it seems more likely that each has provided evidence of the varied townscape common to all three. They all indicate, however, that there is a divergence of house types between town and country evident from the early tenth century and the building types doubtless reflect the different functions of rural and urban settlements as the urbanisation process gathered momentum.

Notes to The Buildings of Anglo-Saxon Ipswich

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11. See note 7.
12. H. C. Darby, An Historical Geography of England before AD 1800 (1963), 217-8.

13. A. Rogerson and C. Dallas, Excavations in Thetford 1948-59 and 1973-80, *East Anglian Archaeology*, 22 (1984).
14. See note 8.
15. V. Horsman, C. Milne and G. Milne, Aspects of Saxo-Norman London: I, Building and Street Development, *London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, Special Papers* 11 (1988), 109.
16. D. M. Stenton, English Society in the Early Middle Ages (1964), 176.

Caption List

- Figure 1: Seventh-eighth century Ipswich
- Figure 2: Early ninth century Ipswich
- Figure 3: St Stephen's Lane (A) and Foundation Street (B) sites in the early ninth century
- Figure 4: Mid-tenth century Ipswich
- Figure 5: St Stephen's Lane (A) and Foundation Street (B) sites in the tenth century
- Figure 6: Floor areas of Ipswich buildings (ninth to eleventh century)

Additional text (transcribed from handwritten notes)

by Keith Wade

Seven burned down buildings have been excavated in Ipswich – one destroyed in the early tenth century and six in the late eleventh century, quite possibly at the same time during a disaster in the 1080s.

They all present the same picture. The lowest parts of the principal oak posts of the structures survive *in situ* and behind them traces of horizontal planking lining the ‘cellar pit’. The floors of the cellar are littered with fallen carbonised timber, dominantly oak planking with a minority of structural timber, which is stratigraphically below the planking.

In examining these carbonised timber assemblages, two factors should be borne in mind:

1. not all timber in the structure stands an equal chance of being carbonized. Only that which first found its way to the cellar floor, before it was fully burnt to ash, and became sealed from the open air by further fallen material would be carbonized. Logically the timber closest to the cellar floor is the most likely timber to be preserved in a carbonized state.
2. buildings do not necessarily burn completely as fires can go out, or be put out, and the unburned timber later salvaged for reuse. This again might produce a bias in the carbonized timber represented.

If the structures were single-storied, the roof would be the first element to burn and it is likely that traces of thatch would have been found on the cellar floors. None was found in any of the many samples taken for detailed environmental analysis (Murphy). The horizontal wall plank cladding would be the next to burn and being on the outside of substantial oak wall posts of 200mm x 200mm recorded in section, are unlikely to fall into the cellar, and would have burnt to ash by the time the wall posts had burnt sufficiently to collapse. Indeed in all the Ipswich examples the bases of wall posts were found *in situ* and still vertical, which also shows that no walls had suffered structural failure and fallen inwards before they burnt. Could the planking be wall cladding in the interior of the building? This is unlikely as no cladding was found against the bases of the wall posts which survived. The size of many of the planks is also significant with widths of up to 40cm common.

The inevitable conclusion must be that the majority of the carbonized planking represents first floors collapsed into the cellars, and that two-storied buildings were common. The exceptions may have been the small sunken-featured buildings but at least one of these (IAS 4601 1075) had a floor sunk 1.9m into the ground and must have been two-storied, especially as access was from above and not by ramped entrance.