

A SEVENTH-CENTURY ‘GREAT HALL COMPLEX’ AT LONG WITTENHAM, OXFORDSHIRE

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Figure 1 The seventh-century building excavated at Long Wittenham (photo: Adam Stanford, Aerial Cam).

The importance of the archaeological site at Long Wittenham (Oxon.), on a gravel terrace overlooking the River Thames, has long been recognised thanks to its two Anglo-Saxon cemeteries excavated in the nineteenth century, one of which contained an exceptional number of well-furnished weapon burials and Frankish imports (Akerman 1860; 1861). In the 1970s, aerial photographic evidence of a series of rectangular cropmarks suggested the presence, immediately to the east of the cemeteries, of a group of large timber buildings. These were interpreted as an Anglo-Saxon ‘great hall complex’ associated with the first post-Roman polity to emerge in this region, the *Gewisse*, who would later come to be known as the West Saxons (Hamerow *et al.* 2014).¹

It recently became possible for the first time to gain access to a field containing one of these rectangular

cropmarks, which appeared to be a large building lying some 200m east of the main group (SU 55089 93789). In September 2016, an excavation led by Prof. Helena Hamerow, Dr Jane Harrison and DPhil student Adam McBride, from the School of Archaeology and Department of Continuing Education, University of Oxford, demonstrated conclusively the presence here of a high status timber building (Fig. 1). The building was constructed with substantial foundation trenches, surviving to a depth of around 1m, and the walls of the building were composed of rectangular planks. Three entrances were identified, in the middle of the long walls and in the middle of one end wall. The walls and the roof of the building may have been supported by external and internal posts. These features are characteristic of Anglo-Saxon great hall complexes, and analogous buildings have been excavated at Sutton Courtenay (Oxon.), approximately 6km upriver from Long Wittenham, as

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well as at Yeavinger (Northumb.), Cowdery's Down (Hants.) and Lyminge (Kent) (Hope-Taylor 1977; Millett and James 1983; Brennan and Hamerow 2016; Thomas 2017).

Great hall complexes have generally been dated to the seventh century, largely on analogy with Yeavinger (*cf.* Hope-Taylor 1977). However, few sites have been closely dated, and there are significant questions about when great hall complexes first emerged and whether they continued to be occupied into the eighth century. In light of the rapid and dramatic changes in the social, political and economic fabric of Anglo-Saxon society that occurred between the late sixth and early eighth centuries, it is critical to pin down the chronology of great hall complexes, which – together with princely burials – provide some of the earliest evidence of Anglo-Saxon kingdom formation.

The Long Wittenham building, like most earth-fast buildings of this period, yielded no datable finds. However, with the help of a grant from the MSRGR, an animal bone recovered from the foundation trench has been radiocarbon dated to between cal AD 608–679 (95.4%) (AMS date provided by the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art, Oxford). This adds significantly not only to our understanding of

the enigmatic site at Long Wittenham, but also to our knowledge of the overall chronology of great hall complexes.

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