

# SYLVA FOUNDATION – HOUSE OF WESSEX PROJECT: A PROJECT CELEBRATING THE ORIGINS OF THE KINGDOM OF THE WEST SAXONS

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## Introduction

The House of Wessex project celebrates a poorly understood period of English history connected with the emergence of the West Saxon kingdom, while engaging people in learning and developing heritage skills. Thanks to an award from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Sylva Foundation has launched an eighteen-month project, running from June 2018 to November 2019. On the same footprint of a large Anglo-Saxon house discovered on the charity's land, dated to the seventh century, we will faithfully reconstruct the building with the help of volunteers and experts, using tools and materials accurate to the period.

## The discovery

In autumn 2016, an excavation by experts from the University of Oxford's School of Archaeology, assisted by volunteers from its Department of Continuing Education, revealed the remains of a large Anglo-Saxon building (Hamerow and McBride, this issue). Its large size (c.12 × 6m) and use of massive foundation trenches – surviving to a depth of 1m, but originally much deeper – set it apart from ordinary houses of this period, reflecting the ostentatious investment of both timber and labour in the construction of this building. Rectangular cropmarks visible in aerial photos indicate that it was one of at least three exceptionally large buildings in the area, the largest of which was probably over 20m in length. Together, these buildings formed what is often called a 'great hall complex'.

The building's age, dimensions, and location all point to its importance for the emerging Kingdom of Wessex, suggesting it may even have been a royal residence. It was probably part of a settlement associated with a leading family of the West Saxons in the seventh century, known as the *Gewisse*, translated as 'The Trustees'.

## The reconstruction

The House of Wessex project will reconstruct the house on the footprint of the original building. The timber frame will be reconstructed with the use of techniques and materials faithful to the era, using traditional heritage tools and skills, thus improving knowledge about early Anglo-Saxon construction techniques, timber technology, and related social factors.

The new building (Fig. 1) will measure 11.49m × 5.81m. The building will be reconstructed with timber supplied by Blenheim Estates, and constructed using earth-fast construction techniques. Its frame will be constructed from green oak, with walls consisting of vertical planks with wattle and daub, while the roof will be thatched with straw.

The process of reconstruction will shed new light on the availability of local resources to build such complexes, with timber – probably oak from a nearby woodland – as the most highly valuable resource. The project has particular importance for the Sylva Foundation, as the building it will sit at the centre of a new community woodland at the Sylva Wood Centre, a hub supporting innovation and enterprise in home-grown wood.

## Learning

The House of Wessex will be constructed with the help of volunteers, supported by leading experts in timber framing and construction, an archaeological woodwork specialist and other archaeological specialists, and members of a Living History society. A key feature of the project will be providing courses for the public to learn Anglo-Saxon building techniques such as cleaving, hewing, making hurdles, mixing and applying daub, and thatching, while also developing further skills in interpreting and recording heritage from this era. We will hold several open days to engage people in the construction process and living history.

The reconstructed building will become the home for a Living History society, the international award-winning Wulfheodenas, whose members are passionate about developing everyone's understanding about this period. By creating a more permanent working environment, it presents an opportunity to show entire processes, *e.g.* all stages in Anglo-Saxon textile production from fleece to fabric, or turning ores into finished metal objects, or turning clay into ceramic vessels. This programme of activities will continue after the project has finished, providing a superb legacy for the reconstructed building.

The educational delivery will involve Dorchester Abbey and local historical societies, promoting the events and providing volunteers for Open Days. We will also work with local schools and adult education institutes to deliver a wide range of exciting opportunities to support more learning about the Anglo-Saxons.

Finally, a new 'Kingdom of Wessex' trail will be created connecting the new building with the two nearby Anglo-Saxon sites at Sutton Courtney and Dorchester-on-Thames. This six-mile walking trail will enable

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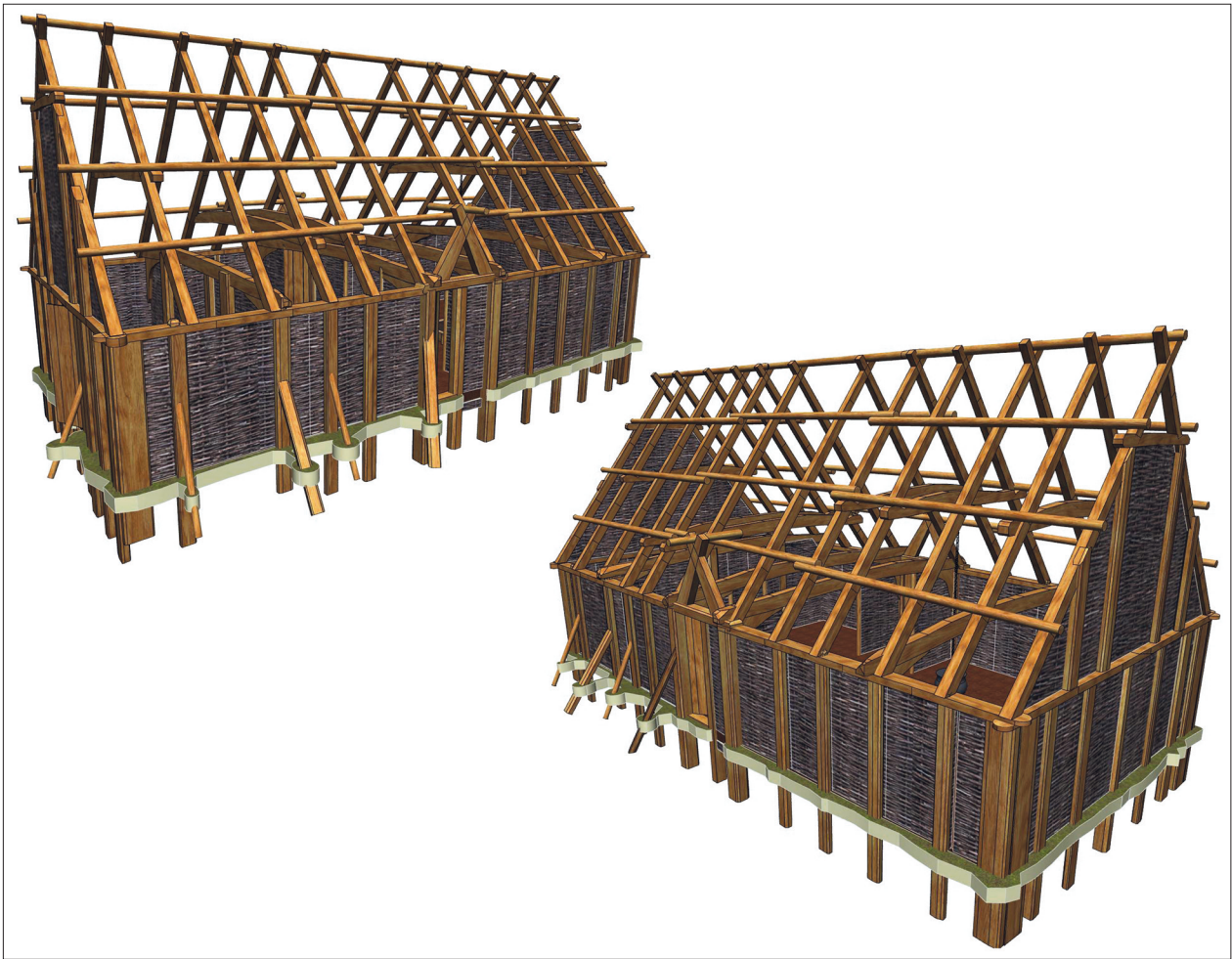


Figure 1 Architect's drawing of the proposed House of Wessex. © The Oak Frame Carpentry Co Ltd.

people to follow in the footsteps of the Anglo-Saxons. The Wulfheodenas will be involved in the formal opening of the trail, with members walking in costume, and providing Anglo-Saxon food en route. This will firmly embed the House of Wessex within its wider landscape setting.

#### **Acknowledgements**

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Courtenay Local History Society; and Long Wittenham Local History Society.

#### **Further information**

Sylva Foundation is an environmental charity working across Britain to help forests thrive – for people and for nature. We operate under four main programmes: Science, Education, Forestry and Wood. The organisation was founded in 2009 by chartered foresters passionate about the role of woodland in our society. We work to influence, educate and support people who work with trees and who care for them now and in the future. A webpage for the House of Wessex project can be found at: [www.sylva.org.uk/wessex](http://www.sylva.org.uk/wessex).