

Saxon Remains on Puddlehill, Dunstable

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With a note on the animal remains by Eric Higgs

PUDDLEHILL is the name of a high crest of chalk down running eastward from Watling Street, in the parish of Houghton Regis, a mile north of Dunstable. Half a mile to the west of Watling Street, on the same ridge, lies Maiden Bower, a large circular earthwork extensively used in Neolithic and Iron Age times and conceivably as a religious centre throughout the Roman period. The quarrying of the Associated Portland Cement Company is removing the whole of Puddlehill, to the level of the surrounding valley, and, since 1951, the Manshead Archaeological Society of Dunstable has undertaken rescue excavations, with the help and co-operation of the Company.

On top of the hill lay a succession of farmsteads, dating from the beginning of the Iron Age, about the fifth or sixth century before Christ, through the Belgic and the Roman periods, ending with an Anglo-Saxon settlement. The Iron Age and Roman sites will be described on another occasion; the Anglo-Saxon discoveries consist of a dwelling house and two separate burial grounds.

BURIAL GROUND I

Grave 1

The earliest burial (pl IV) was of a tall warrior interred with his weapons in a shallow grave 6 ft long, cut through an earlier Romano-British ditch and orientated north-south with the head to the south. The heels were pressed against one end of the grave, the head bent forward against the other end, the spine slightly twisted. Even thus compressed, the skeleton was fully six feet long.

On the left shoulder lay an iron shield boss, with four iron rivets, evidently used to secure leather straps to the back of a wooden, hidebound shield which had surrounded the boss. The rivets on the rim of the boss had remnants of wood fibres adhering to them. Behind the boss was a bar of iron, a shield grip. Between the strap rivets was a small iron buckle, 1 in. in diameter, evidently securing the strap which enabled the shield to be carried on the shoulder when not in use.

At the waist hung an iron ring, and just below it a small iron knife. To the left of the head was the socket of a spearhead, containing wood fibres, whose blade had been broken off in antiquity and was not found in the grave. Just above the left ear was a long clean cut in the skull, the bone below it folded inwards. The heavy blow which caused this injury must certainly have been fatal.

The shield boss on the shoulder lay so near the edge of the grave, that the shield around must have overlapped the edge to lie partly over the natural chalk. It is probable, therefore, that the burial was covered by a low grave mound.

Grave 2

A few feet to the east another shallow grave had been dug into an earlier Romano-British ditch. A later cobbled road¹ had been laid over the end of the grave, and the skull was crushed into the cobbling. The skeleton had also been crushed, presumably by the traffic on the road. Before burial, the left leg had been roughly amputated above the knee, the leg placed separately in the grave before the body, which partly covered it. In the grave was a coin of Gratian (375-383 A.D.)

Graves 3-7

A number of graves were destroyed by quarrying; at least five separate burials are recorded. Within a few yards of No 1, parts of two burials which remained exposed in the quarry face were excavated. In one of them a portion of a bone comb, reinforced with bone strips held in place by iron rivets lay beneath the right shoulder blade. The other grave was dug deeper, and partially through No 1; its rounded end had removed the right shoulder and ribs of the warrior. Possibly the existence of the low mound above his grave had induced later generations to bury their dead in ground already known to hold the dead.

All the burials were orientated east-west, with the heads at the west end of the grave; the bone comb presumably belonged to a woman.

Grave 8

200 yards to the north-east a young person lay on the left side in a shallow grave. The bones were only 7 in below the surface and few of them survived the plough. One small blue bead, like those at Marina Drive, was found under the chin. This grave was orientated north-south with the head to the south.

BURIAL GROUND 2

Grave 1

Burial in a shallow grave 12 in deep x 6 ft 0 in long, lying on the left side with head to the north, with the knees drawn up and hands to the face. There were no grave goods. The teeth were very worn and decayed and some of the back molars had been extracted during life, the bone having partially healed.

¹On the surface of the road were several horseshoe nails; it may have been the coach road in use before the road improvements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; but it was certainly not the Roman Watling Street.

Grave 2

Burial partially destroyed by quarrying, lying face downwards with head to the north. The right arm was at right angles to the body and the left arm by the side. At waist was a small iron knife with tang pointing downwards and an iron belt buckle nearby. By the left hand there was another small knife and two small pointed iron spikes, probably the remains of a purse clip. $1\frac{1}{2}$ in away from this was a large red bead decorated with white, yellow and blue inlay, perhaps a decoration for the purse. Across the chest was a collar of beads secured at either shoulder by two large saucer brooches.¹ These saucer brooches were $2\frac{1}{8}$ in in diameter and $\frac{2}{5}$ in deep. They were of bronze, gilded and decorated with a medley of geometric pattern. At the back of each of them was a bronze catch plate, and a mass of rust, presumably the remains of disintegrated iron pins.

The brooches and beads had apparently been backed by leather. This was seen as a brown stain extending $1\frac{1}{2}$ in around the brooches and some of it survived beneath them where it had become impregnated with the iron oxide from the catch pins. There was also the impression on the back of the brooches of leather fibres.

The beads were found lying as illustrated in the photograph pl. IV b. There were four lines, and by their even distribution, they had been secured either individually to a material backing, or in two continuous strings. In all there were eighty beads; forty-nine of amber and the remainder of either glass or paste, most of the latter being inlaid in various colours. Beneath the beads there was another iron pin $2\frac{1}{8}$ in long with a ring head. This could have been used to secure the backing material of the beads to the woman's clothing, or as a cloak pin.

Grave 3

Grave length 6 ft 0 in long x 2 ft 0 in wide x 12 in deep. The skeleton was lying on its back with its head bent backwards to the north. The head had apparently been supported on a pillow at the time of burial. The right arm was by the side and the left arm bent across the vertebrae. The left leg was bent across the right which outstretched. The foot of this grave had been destroyed by quarrying. The leg bones of this skeleton were swollen by disease.

No grave goods were found.

Grave 4

Grave partially destroyed by quarrying. The skeleton was lying with head to the south. Femurs and lower limbs only remaining of this skeleton.

No grave goods were found.

¹The saucer brooches of Burial Ground 2 can be dated to the late sixth century, and are paralleled in the Aylesbury area at Stone.

Graves 1, 2 and 3 were in a line east-west approximately 20 ft 0 in apart. Grave No. 4 was 12 ft 0 in to the north, and perhaps indicates another row of graves yet to be discovered. All of these graves had been cut into a natural geological water course which at the time of burial showed as a depression on the hillside. Since the date of the opening of the cemetery ploughing on the hill had overlaid this water course with 2 ft of soil deposit containing Romano-British sherds. This deposit has made the discovery of further graves in this area very difficult, and although trial cuts have been taken in the immediate area without success, there may be other graves nearby awaiting discovery.

THE HOUSE

Fifty yards from Burial Ground 2 was a low mound of earth and in an adjoining field, which is under cultivation and cannot be excavated at present, lie two parallel rows of similar mounds flanking a trackway that leads to the crest of the hill. The mound therefore may be one of a series of small dwellings together constituting a village.

Beneath the mound lay a small cottage or hut (plan and section, fig 1). The chalk had been dug out to a depth of about 14 in to form an oblong floor, whose remaining straight side was 18 ft long; quarrying had removed the further side (probably no more than a third of the total), leaving rounded ends 7 ft 6 in wide. The whole was covered with a mound of 14 in of soil; since the normal depth of soil above the chalk is about 6–8 in, this may be the remains of a turf roof, carried on some sort of hurdling.

The sunken floor recalls the Saxon huts excavated in the village at Sutton Courtenay¹, Waterbeach², and Bourton-on-the-Water³. At Sutton Courtenay and Waterbeach, however, no postholes were observed outside the floor, but at Puddlehill, a massive posthole with a diameter of nearly 2 ft was found 4 ft 6 in out from the squared end of the hut, evidently a main support for the ridge pole. Dug obliquely into the chalk along the side of the floor were four large postholes, the remains of its side supports. The outline of the walls was preserved by the remaining postholes, and by narrow gulleys with a wider puddling of chalk on either side, evidently formed by the dripping of rain water from the roof. These features, coming to a point at one end and squared at the other, give the whole construction the shape of a boat with the ridgepole as a 'keel' and the side supports as 'ribs' (plan and attempted reconstruction fig 1).

At the western end of the hut, a number of very small pieces of clay were found, two of which held the impression of wattling. In the centre of the floor,

¹*Archaeologia* 73, 1924, 147ff; 76, 1927, 59ff; 92; 1947, 79ff.

²*Proc. Cambridge Antiq. Soc.* 33, 133ff.

³*Ant. J.* 12, 1932, 288.

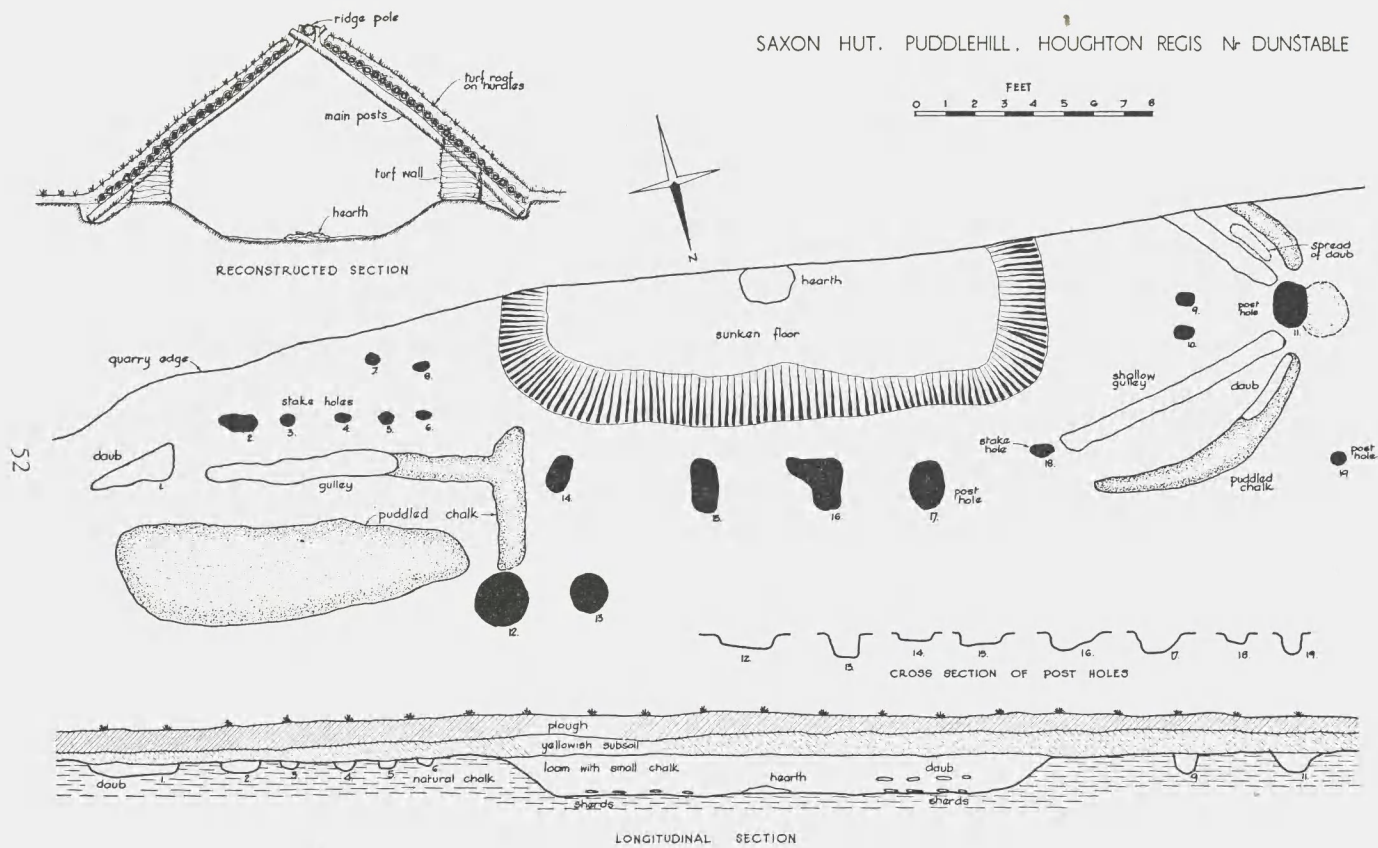


Fig 1. Plan and section of Saxon Hut at Puddlehill, Dunstable.

an area about 2 ft 0 in across, consisted of burnt chalk, a little ash and charcoal of hazel, hawthorn, oak and poplar or willow¹. This suggests an open hearth. No door was found between the surviving postholes; the doorway was therefore presumably in the south side, quarried away before excavation began.

Loam and small chalk, the debris of roof and walls, covered the floor. Beneath it, lying on the floor, were a number of small objects and a number of animal bones, sheep, cattle, pig and fowl. (See appendix page 55). Trodden into the floor was a coin of Constantine, together with a few sherds of Roman pottery, including the base of a Castor ware vessel, and with them a quantity of sherds of undecorated rough hand-made pots (fig 2), evidently Anglo-Saxon, but not always easy to distinguish from the Iron Age wares made a thousand years earlier, and discovered in quantity on the earlier farmsteads a few hundred yards up the slope. Together with the pottery was a small amber bead, very like those discovered in the Marina Drive cemetery, and a number of pins of bone and bronze (pl V). The long flat bone pin is not uncommon in Pagan Saxon cemeteries, and is closely paralleled at Kempston, Faversham etc. The small bone pins, both with a slight thickening above the point, are beautifully fashioned; such pins are found on Roman and post-Roman sites, but many of the Roman pins are much more coarsely worked, as, for example, one or two examples in the Verulamium Museum at St. Albans. Considerably closer to the Puddlehill pins are two from Frisia², probably of the fifth century or early sixth century, though both are somewhat longer, with less pronounced swelling, and not quite so elegant. The bronze pins are of Roman or Saxon date.

The dwelling is clearly Saxon; it may or may not form part of a small nucleated village, and may or may not be the home of the people buried in the adjacent cemeteries. Within the Saxon period, its date lies somewhere in the fifth to seventh centuries. The comb in the cemetery, and the fact that one grave at least cut out the grave of the warrior, suggests that one cemetery at least is more likely to belong to the middle or late sixth or seventh centuries than to the first generation of immigrants.

ISOLATED FIND

On the surface near the warrior burial a small Anglo-Saxon disc brooch was found; it is almost exactly paralleled on a slightly larger scale from the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Luton (*Ant. J. VIII*, p. 177 ff.) and a few similar brooches have been found in other Saxon cemeteries.

¹The charcoal samples from the hearth in the hut were identified by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, as "Charcoal derived from hazel (*Corylus sp.*), hawthorn (*Crataegus sp.*), oak (*Quercus sp.*) and poplar or willow (*Populus sp.* or *Salix sp.*)

²P.C.J.A. Boeles, *Friesland tot de elfde Eeuwe*, ed 2, 1951, pl. li, 7 and 8.

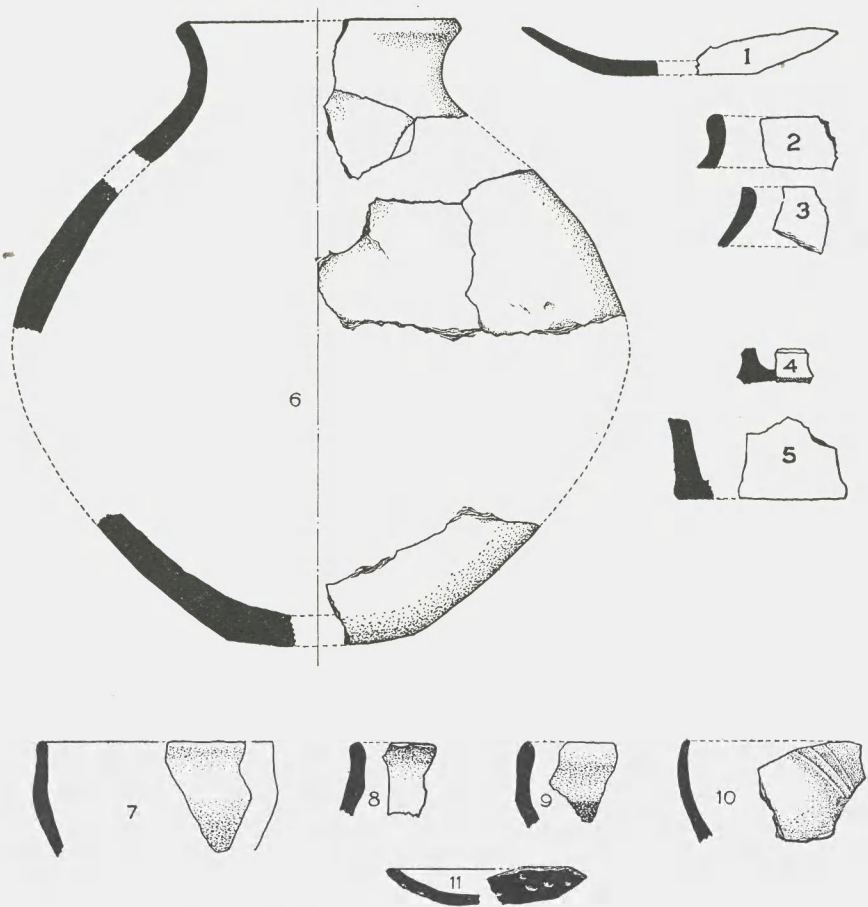


Fig 2. Anglo-Saxon Pottery from Puddlehill and Totternhoe.

1-6 from earth floor of hut at Puddlehill.

1. Base of hand-made jar, sandy paste, fired grey.
2. Rim of hand-made jar, grey paste.
3. Rim of lightly burnished soft black ware.
4. Base of Castor ware. (Roman)
5. Base of jar, dark grey paste with crushed shell. Outside biscuit colour.
6. Hand-made jar of grey paste with light scatter of shell grits. Lightly burnished on outside, fired brownish-grey.
- 7-11. from the Roman Villa at Totternhoe, all hand-made and well fired.
7. 8. 9. Rims of small jars.
10. Fragment of body of rounded pot decorated with curvilinear pattern impressed before firing.
11. Sherd of rounded base with the body of pot decorated with dimples.

ANIMAL REMAINS FROM THE SAXON HUT

ERIC HIGGS

Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge

THE animal bones from this site show that the favourite diet seems to have been sheep, then cattle, then pig, and lastly birds. None of the animals are old, all being of an age prime for eating.

SHEEP

The animals represented are clearly much smaller than the Dorset Horn type of moderately sized lowland sheep of today and indeed somewhat smaller than the Welsh mountain sheep. The following table, measurements in millimetres, is sufficient to show this:

	Length of Maxilla M ₃ , M ₂ , M ₁	Width of Condyle of Mandible	Length of Axis	Length of Prox End of Femur	Max. Dia. Prox End of Metatarsal	Breadth Prox End of Metacarpal	Radius Width of Prox End	
Saxon	9	41	20	53	40	20	22	25
Welsh Mountain				41				30
Dorset Horn	14	48	26	67	54	23	26	38

The head, axial skeleton, fore and hind limbs are all represented so there appears to have been no selection of joints. As even the feet are represented, the absence of horn cones is noticeable. There is no evidence that the sheep were horned. Such evidence as can be gathered from bone shafts is that the sheep were of an unimproved type. There is no evidence for disease.

The sheep when killed were all on the young side. There cannot have been fewer than three sheep but there may have been more. One sheep must have been in fact, a lamb 3 months old, one about 10 months old, and one about 18 months old.

There is no evidence for a clearly defined butchering technique although all the long bones, except immature ones, appear to have been broken in antiquity.

CATTLE

The cattle are probably somewhat smaller than the modern shorthorn. At least two are represented, one an animal about 6 months old at death, and one a large adult.

BIRD BONES

Some evidence for domestic fowl, small, about pheasant-size. One large bird (one bone) unidentified.

SHEEP

- Broken mandible *Ovis aries* 3 months old.
- Broken mandible *Ovis aries* 1 year 6 months old.
- Broken mandible *Ovis aries* 10 months old.
- Broken mandible *Ovis aries* 9 months old.

Broken mandible *Ovis aries* 9-12 months old.
Broken mandible *Ovis aries* 9 months old.
Broken mandible *Ovis aries* 1 year 8 months old.

Teeth M² right hand side not erupted *Ovis aries* (smaller than modern Dorset Horn Ewe).
M² right hand side not erupted *Ovis aries* (width 14 mm for Dorset Horn - 9 mm for this specimen).
M² left hand side *Ovis aries* (smaller than Dorset).
M² right *Ovis aries* - length 10 mm (15 mm for Dorset Horn).
Incisor - broken *Ovis aries*.
I¹ Left - slightly worn *Ovis aries* (smaller than Dorset Horn).
I¹ Right - slightly worn *Ovis aries* (smaller than Dorset Horn).
I² Right - slight worn - *Ovis aries* (smaller than Dorset Horn).
M² - slight worn *Ovis aries* - length 10 mm (15 mm for Dorset Horn).
10 fragments of molar

Broken maxilla left P¹ not erupted, M¹ heavily worn, M² heavily worn, M¹ moderately worn, M² slightly, C 9-12 months old *Ovis aries*.
Broken maxilla right M³ just erupting, M² and M¹ - 1½ to 2 years old *Ovis aries*.
Measuring these three teeth dental length 41 mm (Dorset Horn 48 mm).
Fragment of left mandible M³ not erupted *Ovis aries*.
Unerupted right molar probably M² *Ovis aries*.
Fragment of mandible *Ovis aries* measurement of condyle 20 mm.
Fragment of mandible *Ovis aries* measurement of condyle 26 mm of Dorset Horn.
1 fragment sternum - sheep.
2 fragments humerus - sheep.
Astragalus - *Ovis aries* - very small.
Axis - *Ovis aries* - length 53 mm (Dorset Horn 67 mm).
15 sheep vertebrae and 4 fragments.
Broken femur proximal end - maximum length 40 mm - 54 mm for Dorset Horn - 41 mm for Welsh Mountain Sheep.
2 scapulae glenoid cavity only - small - probably sheep.
7 fragments of scapulae - probably sheep.
13 fragments of ribs, probably sheep.
2 femur heads - young animal - probably sheep.
Proximal epiphyses metatarsal - sheep - 20 mm max. diameter - Dorset Horn 23 mm.
Proximal epiphyses metacarpal - sheep - 22 mm in breadth - Dorset Horn 26 mm.
(The shaft of this is also present and is typical of the slender unimproved breeds).
Proximal epiphyses metacarpal (broken) sheep 19 mm - 26 mm for Dorset Horn (max. breadth).
Proximal epiphyses metacarpal (broken) sheep?
Radius sheep - young animal - both epiphyses detached.
Radius sheep - young animal.
Radius - proximal end - sheep - 25 mm max. width - 30 mm Welsh Sheep, modern. - 38 mm Dorset Horn, modern.
1 fragment distal end tibia - sheep.
Phalanges - 5 proximal - 1 medial - sheep.
1 distal end of femur - sheep - epiphysis detached. Young animal.
1 distal end of femur - sheep - epiphysis detached. Young animal.
1 patella - sheep?

1 tarsal - sheep.

4 carpals - sheep.

CATTLE

1 mandible *Bos taurus* - 6 months old.

1 fragment molar *Bos*.

1 broken molar - deciduous - *Bos*.

1 upper molar - deciduous - *Bos*.

1 upper molar *Bos* - large.

1 astragalus 59 mm maximum length, width 43 mm - 70 mm maximum length of modern short-horn, width 48 mm.

1 fragment of pelvis - acetabulum - max. diameter 57 mm - shorthorn 59 mm.

17 fragments of ribs - *Bos*.

3 spines - *Bos*.

1 terminal phalanx - *Bos*.

1 medial phalanx - *Bos*.

PIG *Sus scrofa*

1 fragment of pig scapula - small adult.

1 fragment of frontal bone and orbit - pig.

1 fragment distal epiphyses metapodial - pig - young animal.

2 pig phalanges.