

BURIALS IN AYLESBURY AND THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE TOWN

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Discoveries of skeletal remains within the town of Aylesbury are listed and it is suggested that one group may represent the graveyard of an 'old minster'. The sources available for the early history of the town are briefly discussed.

Over the past hundred years human skeletal remains have been discovered at a number of locations in Aylesbury outside the limits of the existing churchyard of St. Mary's. Their findspots, culled from a variety of sources, are shown in Fig. 1, which also gives the location of non-conformist cemeteries now disused or built over. Records of the discoveries are generally poor and in many cases the number of bodies found is also unclear. Table 1 summarises the available information, giving a County Museum reference number for each discovery.

As can be seen from the accompanying map (Fig. 1), there are four distinct groups:

- (i) A single find near the Royal Bucks Hospital
- (ii) A group near Walton Street
- (iii) A single find in Rickfords Hill
- (iv) A large group in the core area of the old town.

The first find was a single skeleton discovered intact in an elm coffin, and may be an example of the crossroads burial tradition of certain categories of people, such as suicides or persons executed nearby. The second group – those by Walton Street – were discovered at the rear of what was then Lucas' shop and on an adjacent property. A piece of red deer antler perforated at one end apparently accompanied one of these burials. No satisfactory explanation can be provided for this group. The third find could be from the cemetery of Aylesbury's Friarage. The siting of the Friarage and its associated buildings has been discussed by Little (1942) and more recently by Hanley (1976), the latter suggesting that the cemetery may have lain north of the church, whose location has been reasonably well established (personal communication).

The fourth, the town centre group, is more problematic. In several instances they occur beneath roadways and under buildings. Forty-seven at least are known and this excludes the 'barrow loads' found in George Street while laying a sewer trench, and the 'large quantity' found 'regularly interred' in a garden adjacent to the same road some time before 1885. It is natural to seek to associate these burials with minor medieval ecclesiastical establishments within the town. Aylesbury, however, so far as is known, had only one church, St. Mary's, (although unrecorded proprietary churches cannot be completely ruled out) and no chapels are recorded. The only other candidate appears to be the Hospital of St. John founded during the reign of Henry I (*VCH* III, 4).



Fig. 1. Burials discovered in Aylesbury, plotted on an Ordnance Survey map of 1884. Multiple burials ●; single or unknown number ○. Known burial grounds shaded.

Table 1 – Discoveries of human skeletons in Aylesbury

Number	Modern Provenance	Date Found	Miscellaneous	Ref. No.
1	Roundabout, Royal Bucks Hospital.	c. 1960	In coffin	4699
3+	6, Church Street.	1962	—	0290
1	10, Church Street.	1950's - 1960's	Cranium only.	4177
1+?	5 - 6 Parsons Fee.	1960's	In service trench.	0257
'a large quantity'	George Street.	pre-1885	In garden, regularly interred.	2172
'barrow loads'	George Street.	1950's - 1960's	Found whilst laying service trench in road.	2172 (2)
1+?	Pebble Lane.	pre-1885	Uncertain whether in road or adjacent property.	2097
2	8, Church Street.	1861	Probably, W-E orientated.	0451
5?	Castle Close.	mid 1960's	—	0450
4	12, Church Street.	1976	Skeletal report available.	0473
1	Church Street.	1977	In street outside No. 12. Skeletal report available.	1776
8 - 10	10, Walton Street.	1925 + 1931	One with antler 'pick', Pick at BCM Acc. 208.32.	1825
1	Granville Street Evangelical Church.	1964	—	0278
1+	Elect. sub-station Pebble Lane.	1960's	—	4703
1	2, St. Mary's Square.	1960's	—	4700
'Several'	County Museum.	1933 - 1934	During works associated with construction of muniment room.	4728
71	Bourbon Street/ Rickfords Hill junction.	c. 1962	In roadway.	4732
13	Victoria Club, Kingsbury.	1980	One probably articulated, the remainder previously disturbed. Whilst extending club.	4785

Tradition suggests this lay at the top of Church Street (Gibbs 1885, 102) which might explain some of the burials in this area. Aylesbury's second hospital lay on the outskirts of the town well away from the centre. This fails then to account for a substantial number of burials and other possibilities may be considered.

The occurrence of burials beneath roads and under buildings in the core of the town shows that at the time of their deposition there was a considerable amount of open space available. No grave goods are reported to have been recovered with any of them and this probably reflects the true state of affairs since those discovered since the early 1960's have generally been subject to some kind of archaeological surveillance. Grave-goodless cemeteries are fairly common in late fourth – early fifth century contexts (for a recent summary see Clarke 1979, 371) but they are invariably associated with Roman settlement, often urban, of which there is no trace in Aylesbury. The succeeding two or three centuries are dominated either by the rite of accompanied burial or by cremation, and examples of both types and also of mixed cemeteries are present in Buckinghamshire. The latest of this group which fall in the eighth century have been discussed by several writers including Dickinson (1973). From the later seventh century, cemeteries with burials unaccompanied by grave goods can again be expected and this would seem to be the most profitable area to consider.

The three late Saxon elements of minster, mint and possible defence at Aylesbury were briefly discussed by the writer in 1974, but it is worth reviewing the evidence for the early history of the town in a little more detail. Firstly the putative defence. The earliest form of the place name Aylesbury contains the element *byrig* normally considered to be indicative of prehistoric earthworks (Blair 1977, 277). Waugh, *et. al.* (1974, 405), link the discovery of Iron Age pottery within the town with the name and suggest the existence of a hillfort. It is entirely reasonable to presume the pre-existence of such a work utilised by 'Aegel' but it is unlikely that it was the ditch of this feature which was discovered in 1972 (*op. cit.*). Better knowledge of Buckinghamshire's Saxon pottery now enables us to be more confident than previously that one large sherd from this ditch was from an early – middle Saxon vessel. The Silver Street – Temple Street line which was suggested in 1974 to be axial to the late Saxon settlement, crossing the ditch at right-angles, has since been shown by excavations at Walton to have probably been in existence as a routeway at least by the tenth century. On the negative side, however, the hypothetical northern line of a defence has been disproved by a machine cut through the bank in the grounds of the Prebendal, which showed it to be post-Tudor.

The second element of the Saxon town is the mint. Silver pennies of the following eight moneyers are at present known from the Aylesbury mint.

Aethelred II (978 - 1016) : Aelfgar, Leostan, Aethelwine, Aelfwerd, Eadric, Eadwerd
Harold II (1066) : Leofwine, Wulfred

These names show that although scarcely wealthy, the town had a significant role to play in the local late Saxon economy, although surprisingly no burgage tenure is recorded at the time of Domesday.

The third element is the 'minster'. The Domesday record of churches in Buckinghamshire is woefully inadequate since only four are mentioned, and these do not include

five churches with demonstrably Saxon fabric (Taylor and Taylor, 1965 and 1968). Even in counties where the record is superficially reasonable, listing a hundred or more, it can often be shown by utilising other sources that very many were not recorded (Sawyer 1978, 246). The church at Aylesbury, linked with Stoke (Mandeville), was held at Domesday by Remigius, Bishop of Lincoln, Aylesbury itself being held by the King. The senior character of the church is clearly demonstrated by the entry:

‘From the 8 Hundreds which lie around Aylesbury each sokeman having 1 hide or more renders 1 load of grain to this church. Besides this also 1 acre of grain or 4 pence used to be contributed by each sokeman to the church, but after the coming of King William this payment was not made’.

(VCH I, 233)

Several attempts have been made to map the Buckinghamshire hundreds (most recently by Darby and Campbell, 1962, and Morris, 1978) and it is clear that at a minimal view, Aylesbury’s influence extended over almost half of the county. Its central role was noted many years ago by Stenton (1936). Documentary references to Aylesbury before Domesday are few. The place name appears, of course, in the *Chronicle* entry of 571 but not again until 917 when the Danish army was raiding ‘between Bernwood Forest and Aylesbury’ (Whitelock 1930, 23 - 25). After that the only glimmer of light comes from a will of c. 968 - 971, when *Aegelsbyrig* was held by Aelfheah, Ealdorman of Hampshire, and he bequeathed Aylesbury to King Edgar (Whitelock 1930, 23 - 25). It was to remain in royal hands for some time. Of a church there is no direct mention until the Domesday entry, but the name of St. Osyth, which survives as a feast day in 1239, is clearly to be associated with it (Hohler, 1966 and Rollason, 1978). Recently slight evidence of a church structure preceding the present one has been uncovered during internal renovation of the existing building. (Durham, 1978).

This discussion may seem far removed from the discovery of skeletons initially referred to, but by a process of elimination it has already been shown that it is the middle – late Saxon phase to which most of the burials are likely to belong. The process of establishing churches in the Saxon period, apart from major churches, is remarkably little understood although there have in recent years been considerable advances in the study of the structures, both above and below ground. It is fairly clear that the main policy adopted by St. Augustine on his arrival in 597 and that of his successors was to convert kings and sub-kings and their families, and then to establish bases from which to convert the populace at large. Central Buckinghamshire may have fallen within the orbit of Birinus who was given Dorchester to be his see by Cynegils of Wessex in 635, or of Wilfred operating from Leicester a few decades later. The diocesan framework was not static during this period but was closely linked with the fortunes of kingdoms. The process of conversion and the establishment of diocese has been discussed by Stenton (1936), Dudley *et al.* (1962) and Hart (1977), amongst others. Although the survival of Aylesbury’s name as a settlement pre-dating this activity may be an accident of history, nonetheless it is reasonable to presume that existing settlements, whether held by kings or lesser men, would have attracted the

attention of missionaries. Traditionally, much early missionary activity was out of doors and focussed around a preaching cross. This not only enabled more people to be reached than could be accommodated in the available buildings, but also reassured the pagan Anglo-Saxons who believed themselves more susceptible to Christian sorcery indoors. This phase would soon pass, given the vagaries of the climate, and some kind of a building be established. The burials would soon follow, attracted away from traditional sites. This represented a further break with tradition, since where relationships can be established between early Saxon cemeteries and their settlements, for example at West Stow, Suffolk and locally at Walton, it is apparent that cemeteries were sited at a respectful distance from the settlement and certainly not mingled in cheek by jowl with housing as they were in subsequent Christian practice.

Early – middle Anglo-Saxon settlements of which we now have quite a few plans, were rarely formally laid out and in a settlement like Aylesbury there would certainly have been space to insert both church and cemetery within the precincts. Moreover cemeteries generate their own relentless pressure. Since Aylesbury was serving a far larger area than its own local population, there would have been constant need to extend, since it was not until later, with the encirclement of cemeteries by stone walls, that the practice of multiple burial on the same patch took hold. Eventually, of course, containment would have taken place, but not perhaps until the late Saxon period when Aylesbury seems to have been taking on urban functions, would housing need to encroach.

This is, of course, a theoretical model which modern excavation of the next group of skeletons to appear, and some radiocarbon determinations, might resolve, but as a postscript it might be worth considering the possible status of a church in Aylesbury. The different levels of Anglo-Saxon churches have been discussed by, among others, Stenton (1947), Godfrey (1962, 315) and Deanesley (1964, 309). Basically four levels were distinguishable, the head minster – also the seat of a bishop; the ordinary minster – also known as ‘old’ minsters; lesser churches with graveyards; and ‘field’ churches without. The second tier often maintained its right to tithe well into the middle ages despite the growth of daughter churches, and this seems to fit best the case of Aylesbury. We have no knowledge of the church’s founder or its foundation date but a fairly early date in the middle Saxon period may be presumed.

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