

# A High-Status Anglo-Saxon Building at Bishop's Court, near Dorchester-on-Thames: A Reinterpretation of a Rescue-Era Excavation

In 1957–8, an earthfast timber building was excavated in advance of gravel extraction at Bishop's Court, Oxfordshire, approximately 500 metres west of Dorchester-on-Thames (Fig. 1). In the published excavation report, this building was suggested to be Iron Age or Romano-British, but the high-status seventh-century buildings excavated more recently at Cowdery's Down (Hants.), Lyminge (Kent) and Yeavinger (Northumb.) provide more convincing parallels. Moreover, the wider area around Abingdon and Dorchester-on-Thames is generally considered to have been the early royal heartland of the West Saxon kingdom, and the documented seventh-century royal and episcopal activity at Dorchester-on-Thames provides a plausible setting for a seventh-century high-status building at Bishop's Court.

As with many parts of the upper Thames valley, the area around Dorchester-on-Thames has seen extensive gravel quarrying, which has been equal parts destructive, formative and invaluable for the recovery of archaeological remains and for the development of the archaeological discipline. Unfortunately, the areas north and west of Dorchester-on-Thames were largely quarried away during the mid twentieth century, at a time when Anglo-Saxon settlement archaeology was in its infancy, and the recording and excavation of these areas were carried out under salvage conditions at best.<sup>1</sup>

The earthfast building at Bishop's Court was located at the edge of a quarry pit.<sup>2</sup> The overburden had been machine-stripped during the quarrying operation, and the majority of the building had already been quarried away. Nevertheless, the south-west corner of the building, the majority of the south wall and a probable south entrance were excavated to a good standard, recovering a high degree of structural detail (Fig. 2).

The published report is terse and unclear, but the illustrations and the limited description are suggestive of an Anglo-Saxon post-in-trench building, of a type typically found on seventh-century high-status sites – the so-called great hall complexes at Cowdery's Down (Hants.),<sup>3</sup> Lyminge (Kent),<sup>4</sup> and Yeavinger (Northumb.),<sup>5</sup> among others – and this is consistent with the documented seventh-century royal and episcopal activity at Dorchester-on-Thames.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Prof. Mark Robinson reports that one of the landowners at Bishop's Court was so hostile to archaeologists that he and David Miles had to masquerade as geologists in order to investigate the archaeological deposits on that particular parcel of land: M. Robinson, 'Investigations of Palaeoenvironments in the Upper Thames Valley, Oxfordshire', University of London Ph.D. thesis (1981), pp. 111–12. The author would like to thank Prof. Mark Robinson, Prof. David Hinton, David Miles and Trevor Rowley for providing further details about this excavation.

<sup>2</sup> HER, PRN 4437.02; J. May, 'Romano-British and Saxon Sites near Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire', *Oxonienisia*, 42 (1977), pp. 57–9. The exact location of this site is unknown; May, 'Romano-British and Saxon Sites', fig.1 indicates a location around SU 5716 9436, but the scale in this figure is incorrect, leaving some uncertainty.

<sup>3</sup> M. Millett and S. James, 'Excavations at Cowdery's Down, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 1978–81', *The Archaeological Journal*, 140 (1983), pp. 151–279.

<sup>4</sup> G. Thomas, 'Monasteries and Places of Power in pre-Viking England: Trajectories, Relationships and Interactions', in G. Thomas and A. Knox (ed.), *Early Medieval Monasticism in the North Sea Zone*, ASSAH, 20 (2017), pp. 97–116.

<sup>5</sup> B. Hope-Taylor, *Yeavinger: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria* (1977).

<sup>6</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, Book III, Chapter 7.

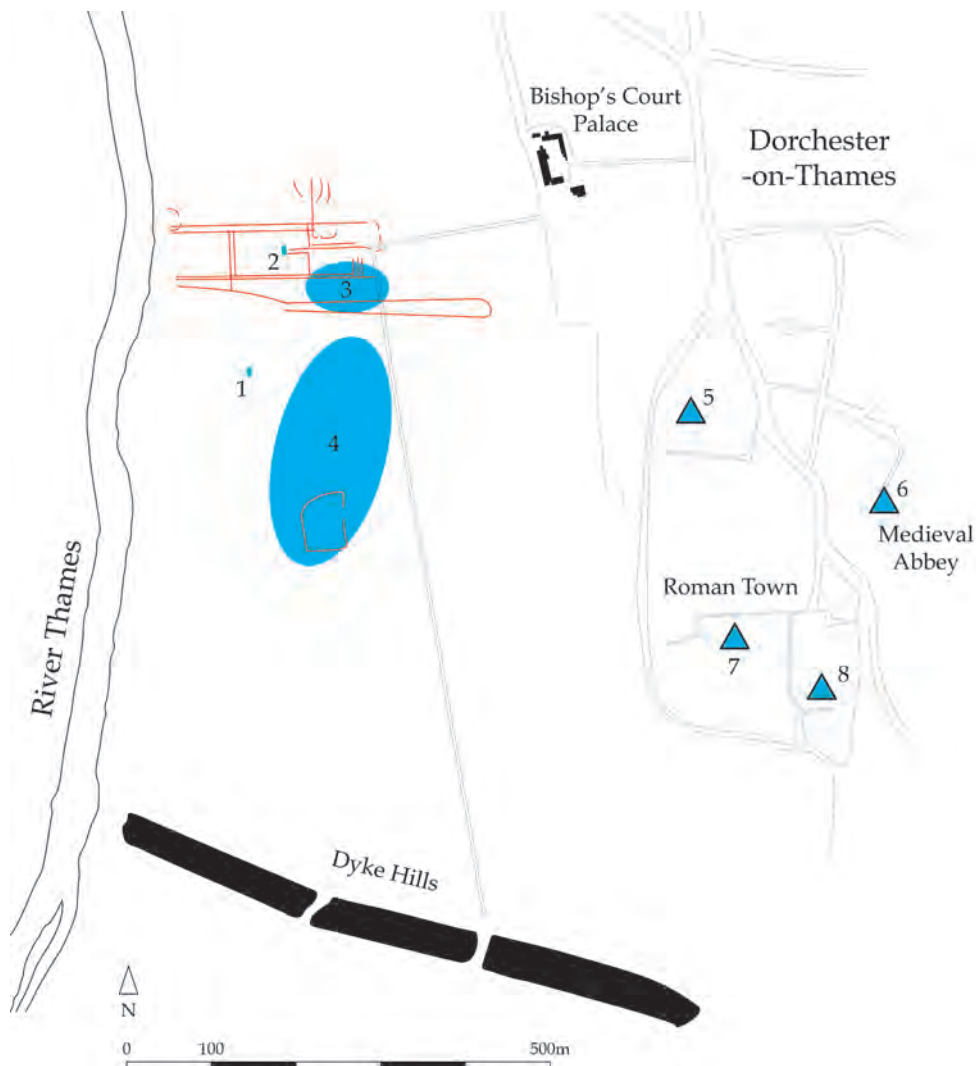


Fig. 1. The Anglo-Saxon sites at Bishop's Court and Dorchester-on-Thames, showing Anglo-Saxon sites in blue and cropmarks in red. Note: 1. the earthfast building excavated at Bishop's Court; 2. a possible 30-metre-long building identified in aerial photographs (May, 'Romano-British and Saxon Sites', pp. 44–5); 3. a seventh-century cemetery, an Anglo-Saxon refuse dump, hearth and two possible sunken-feature buildings (May, 'Romano-British and Saxon Sites', pp. 50–4, fig. 6); 4. cropmarks of several sunken-feature buildings, one of which was excavated in 1973–4 (Benson and Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley*, p. 68); 5. three sunken-feature buildings, six timber-framed buildings and three ninth-century stone buildings (Rowley and Brown in *Oxoniensia*, 46 (1981)); 6. one sunken-feature building and an eighth-century post-in-trench building (Keevill in *Oxoniensia*, 68 (2003)); 7. two sunken-feature buildings and at least one post-in-trench building (Frere in *The Archaeological Journal*, 119 (1962) and 141 (1984); University of Oxford excavation forthcoming); 8. two sunken-feature buildings (Bradley in *Oxoniensia*, 43 (1978)).

## Bishop's Court

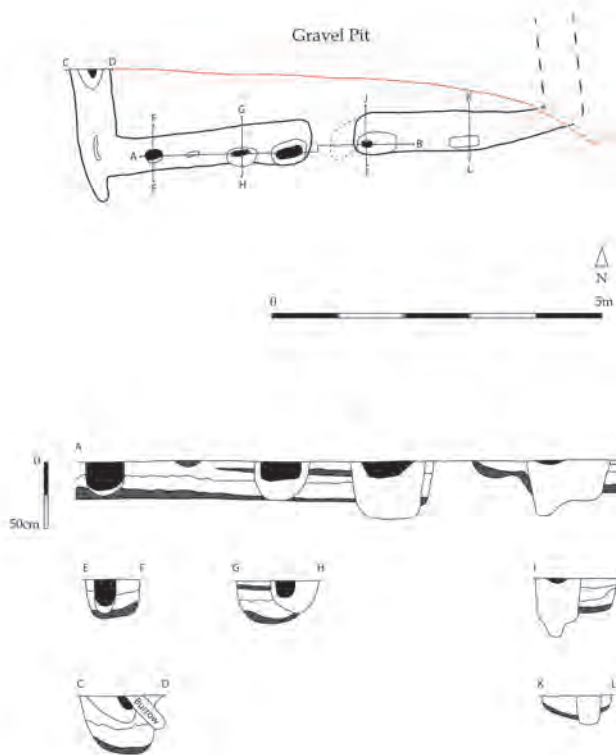


Fig. 2. The Bishop's Court building, in plan and in section. In section, black denotes dark soil with charcoal, and grey denotes dark sandy soil (redrawn from May, 'Romano-British and Saxon Sites', fig. 7).

### STRUCTURAL EVIDENCE

The published report identifies two superimposed structures: an earlier sleeper-beam building, constructed with continuous foundation trenches, and a later post-built building, founded in individual postholes.<sup>7</sup> However, the brief description of these features leaves much to be desired, and certain details appear to be contradictory.

Firstly, it is unclear what evidence there was for sleeper-beams. The primary fill of the foundation trenches appears to have been darker, but the fourth fill in Section A–B and Section G–H was also darker, and given the variability of the Thames river gravels, an irregular layer of darker soil is not, in itself, sufficient evidence to suggest a horizontal timber. There may have been more concrete evidence for sleeper-beams, but the published report gives no other details, and it must be considered whether the sleeper-beams were an assumption on

<sup>7</sup> May, 'Romano-British and Saxon Sites', pp. 57–9.

the excavator's part, based on the foundation trenches – other forms of foundation-trench construction, like the Anglo-Saxon post-in-trench method, were not well known at the time.

According to the excavation report, the Phase I building was demolished, 'the timbers... removed, and the trenches partly filled'.<sup>8</sup> Once again, it is unclear what evidence there was for this, but presumably, this interpretation is based on the absence of vertical wall posts associated with the Phase I building, suggesting their removal.

The Phase II building produced considerably more structural evidence. The excavators identified 'a series of rectangular posts about 12 in. by 5 in. in cross section, with presumably wattle and daub in between',<sup>9</sup> and this would appear to describe a typical post-built building, founded in individual postholes. However, the excavation report then states that 'impressions of slots caused by thinner timbers and wattles were found between some of the postholes',<sup>10</sup> and this appears to contradict the published illustrations and the published interpretation of both the Phase I and Phase II buildings.

The 'impressions of slots caused by thinner timbers and wattles' seems to suggest that these structural elements were founded in separate postholes, in between the Phase II wall planks, but the published illustrations give no indication of such postholes. Instead, it seems likely that these 'impressions of slots caused by thinner timbers and wattles' refer to the ghosts of structural elements within the Phase I foundation trench, but if this were the case, these structural elements must have been part of the Phase I building. However, the excavation report associates these structural elements with the Phase II wall planks. This suggests two possibilities: the 'thinner timbers and wattles' were misattributed and are in fact part of the Phase I building, which was replaced by a typical post-built building, founded in individual postholes, *or* all of these elements – the Phase I foundation trench, the Phase II wall planks and the 'thinner timbers and wattles' – are actually part of a single post-in-trench building, in which the wall planks and the thinner timbers/wattles were both constructed within a continuous foundation trench (cf. the post-in-trench wall type of Cowdery's Down Building C9 in Fig. 3, below).

## DATE

The published excavation report implies that this building was Iron Age or Romano-British, based on two small sherds of handmade Iron-Age pottery found in the Phase I foundation trench.<sup>11</sup> However, rectangular earthfast timber buildings are rare in Iron Age Britain and relatively rare in Roman Britain,<sup>12</sup> and if the building were Roman, one would expect considerably more material culture.

In contrast, earthfast buildings are characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon period, and post-in-trench buildings, constructed using rectangular planks with thinner timbers or wattle-and-daub screens set in between each plank, are especially characteristic of seventh-century high-status Anglo-Saxon sites. Cowdery's Down (Hants.),<sup>13</sup> Cowage Farm (Wilts.),<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. It is also worth noting that it is especially difficult to distinguish between Iron-Age pottery and early Anglo-Saxon pottery in the upper Thames valley, and it is by no means certain that these sherds were Iron Age rather than Anglo-Saxon.

<sup>12</sup> R. Ulrich, *Roman Woodworking* (2007), pp. 72–8.

<sup>13</sup> Buildings C9, C10, C11, C13 and C14 in Millett and James, 'Excavations at Cowdery's Down', pp. 212–5, 218–22, 233.

<sup>14</sup> Structures A and B in J. Hinchliffe, 'An Early Medieval Settlement at Cowage Farm, Foxley, near Malmesbury', *The Archaeological Journal*, 143 (1986), pp. 241–7.

Dover (Kent),<sup>15</sup> Eynsford (Kent),<sup>16</sup> Long Wittenham (Oxon.),<sup>17</sup> Lyminge (Kent),<sup>18</sup> Thirlings (Northumb.),<sup>19</sup> and Yeavinger (Northumb.)<sup>20</sup> have all produced similar post-in-trench wall types (Fig. 3). Moreover, these high-status post-in-trench buildings typically produce very little material culture, and it is not unusual for one of these buildings to produce nothing more than a few residual sherds of Iron-Age or Romano-British pottery.<sup>21</sup>

This does not rule out a later Anglo-Saxon date for the building – post-in-trench wall types were used throughout the Anglo-Saxon period – but there is an especially strong association between seventh-century high-status sites and the particular post-in-trench wall type used in the Bishop's Court building, and given the documented importance of Dorchester-on-Thames during the seventh century, a seventh-century date appears most likely for this building.

The published excavation report does not consider an Anglo-Saxon date for the building, probably because this style of high-status Anglo-Saxon architecture had only recently been discovered at Yeavinger,<sup>22</sup> and was not widely known at the time.

## DIMENSIONS

Only a small portion of the building was salvaged, but the typical dimensions of other seventh-century high-status buildings can give some indication of the original dimensions of the Bishop's Court building.

None of the building's walls survived intact, but a probable entrance was identified in the south wall, and the entrances of seventh-century high-status buildings were typically located in the middle of each wall.<sup>23</sup> If this were the case at Bishop's Court, it would make the south wall approximately seven metres long (Fig. 3).

Moreover, seventh-century high-status buildings were typically laid out on a two-square plan,<sup>24</sup> which would make the full length of the Bishop's Court building approximately seven metres or fourteen metres, depending on whether the south wall was an end wall or a long wall (Fig. 3). Seven metres would be unusually small for a high-status seventh-century building, but fourteen metres is within the range of other seventh-century high-status sites.

## CONTEXT AND STATUS

The architectural style of the Bishop's Court building bears strong similarities with the elite style of the seventh-century great hall complexes, and the documented royal and episcopal activity at Dorchester-on-Thames provides a plausible context for a high-status seventh-century building at Bishop's Court.

However, high-status seventh-century buildings are generally not found in isolation; instead, these buildings are usually part of a great hall complex, which typically consists of several high-status buildings arranged in a formalised layout. Unfortunately, the entire area around the Bishop's Court building has been destroyed by gravel quarrying, and only a few

<sup>15</sup> Structure S14 in B. Philp, *The Discovery and Excavation of Anglo-Saxon Dover* (2003), pp. 58–64.

<sup>16</sup> The 'Saxon Palace' in B. Philp, *Discoveries and Excavations across Kent, 1970–2014*, (2014), pp. 120–6.

<sup>17</sup> Structure 4100, excavated by the author in 2016; publication forthcoming.

<sup>18</sup> Halls B and C in Thomas, 'Monasteries and Places of Power', pp. 107–8.

<sup>19</sup> Building L in C. O'Brien and R. Miket, 'The Early Medieval Settlement of Thirlings, Northumberland', *Durham Archaeological Journal*, 7 (1991), pp. 67–9.

<sup>20</sup> Buildings A1, A2, A3, A4, B, C2, C3, C4, D1, D2, D4 and D5 in Hope-Taylor, *Yeavinger*, pp. 36, 46–118.

<sup>21</sup> The seventh-century building recently excavated by the author at Long Wittenham (Oxon.) produced eight sherds of Roman pottery, one sherd of Iron-Age or early Saxon pottery and no other diagnostic artefacts. Nevertheless, a seventh-century date has been confirmed by radiocarbon dating.

<sup>22</sup> Hope-Taylor, *Yeavinger*.

<sup>23</sup> S. James et al., 'An Early Medieval Building Tradition', *The Archaeological Journal*, 141 (1984), pp. 186–8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

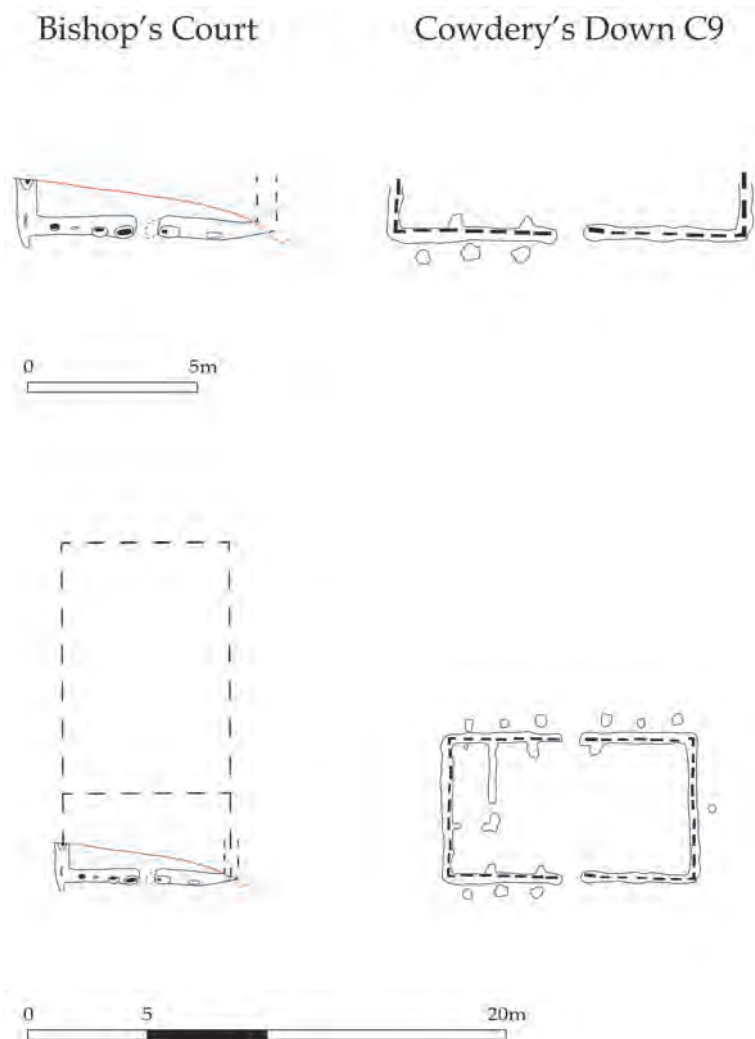


Fig. 3. The Bishop's Court building compared with Building C9 from the great hall complex at Cowdery's Down (Hants.). The description of the Phase II wall type at Bishop's Court, with wattle-and-daub screens placed in between each wall plank, closely matches the C9 wall type at Cowdery's Down (redrawn from May, 'Romano-British and Saxon Sites', fig. 7 and Millet and James, 'Excavations at Cowdery's Down', fig. 40).

features were properly investigated. As such, there is no direct evidence for other high-status buildings at Bishop's Court. However, a unique anthropomorphic lock recovered from the upper fills of a Roman ditch at Bishop's Court probably comes from a high-status seventh-century milieu,<sup>25</sup> and a possible 30-metre-long post-in-trench building was also identified in aerial photographs roughly 150 metres north of the Bishop's Court building, but it was quarried away before it could be investigated, and it is just as likely to be a Roman feature

<sup>25</sup> May, 'Romano-British and Saxon Sites', pp. 73–5; S. Hawkes, 'The Early Anglo-Saxon Period', in G. Briggs et al. (eds.), *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (1986), p. 88.

(see No. 2 in Fig.1).<sup>26</sup> A small seventh-century cemetery,<sup>27</sup> an Anglo-Saxon refuse dump and a probable Anglo-Saxon hearth were also excavated in this area (No. 3 in Fig. 1),<sup>28</sup> and two other sub-rectangular features excavated in this area may have been sunken-feature buildings, but they did not produce diagnostic Anglo-Saxon material culture.<sup>29</sup> Several possible sunken-feature buildings have also been identified from aerial photographs in the immediate vicinity of the excavated earthfast building (No. 4 in Fig. 1),<sup>30</sup> and one of these sunken-feature buildings was excavated in 1973–4 but never published.<sup>31</sup>

There is thus considerable evidence for Anglo-Saxon activity in the Bishop's Court area, but the exact nature of this activity is unclear. The post-in-trench building excavated at Bishop's Court is strongly suggestive of a high-status site, and the anthropomorphic locket recovered from Bishop's Court is also suggestive of high-status activity, but it is unclear whether this is indicative of a more extensive high-status complex – similar to the great hall complexes at Cowdery's Down, Lyminge and Yeavinger – at Bishop's Court. The documented royal and episcopal activity at Dorchester-on-Thames is typically associated with the former Roman town and the later medieval abbey, which lie 500 to 700 metres east of the Bishop's Court building, but the high-status activity at Dorchester-on-Thames was probably much more extensive and complex than is currently understood, and Bishop's Court, the Roman town and the abbey may have all been part of a single extensive and multi-focal complex.

ADAM MCBRIDE

<sup>26</sup> May, 'Romano-British and Saxon Sites', pp. 44–5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. pp. 52–3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> May, 'Romano-British and Saxon Sites', pp. 51, 54, fig. 6.

<sup>30</sup> D. Benson and D. Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley: An Archaeological Survey of the River Gravels* (1974), p. 68.

<sup>31</sup> HER, PRN D8540; Benson and Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley*, p. 68. Prof. Mark Robinson reports that two or three Anglo-Saxon wells were also excavated at the same time, see Robinson, 'Investigations of Palaeoenvironments', pp. 111–12.