

Coincidences can be quite alarming. Ten days ago, I was asked by Isobel Murray, a student on work placement with the Museum, if I knew anything about a “Saxon pot” found close to Samuel Lucas School in Hitchin. I replied that I didn’t and that it sounded rather unlikely: Saxon pots are notoriously rare in Hertfordshire.

Nevertheless, I did a quick search of [Heritage Gateway](#), a website that gives access to Historic Environment Records across England. It brought up [this record](#), describing a “*Roman or early medieval pot, Gaping Lane, Hitchin*”. “Early medieval” is a term that many archaeologists and historians now prefer for the period from around 400 to 900, replacing the old term “Saxon” or “Anglo-Saxon” with its assumptions about the ethnic origin of people, which may not be correct. These are all better than the horrible term “Dark Ages”, which implies that everything between the collapse of Roman rule in Britain and the Norman Conquest is unknown and unknowable.



A late sixth-century jar from Gosmore (not the pot from Gaping Lane)

Early medieval Hitchin

Early medieval material is rare in Hertfordshire. Unusually, there is some from Baldock that shows that the old Roman town struggled on into the sixth century. Its inhabitants were descendants of Romano-Britons, not Anglo-Saxons, which is why the term “early medieval” is so much more appropriate. There are finds from a few other sites, including Blackhorse Road in Letchworth Garden City, Therfield Heath and, significantly, Hitchin.



Excavating an early medieval burial in Queen

Here, excavations in 2001 uncovered what were clearly Christian burials off Queen Street. There had been stories circulating for years about the discovery of skeletons in this area, which were always said to be burials from the [Great Plague of 1665](#) (or, even less plausibly, from the fourteenth-century [Black Death](#)). The excavators thought that they were Christian Anglo-Saxons, buried between the seventh and tenth centuries. As a result, the new development on the site was named Saxon Court.

When the radiocarbon dates came back, they were surprising. They put the burials between the fourth and sixth centuries. In other words, they were contemporary with the very late (‘sub-Roman’) finds from Baldock. No Anglo-Saxons were Christian before

Street during 2001

St Augustine's mission in 597, so these people had to be Britons (again, another reason to use the term "early medieval"!).

In a way, this ought not to have been surprising. The placename Hitchin derives from *Hicce*, a name found in a seventh-century document known as *Tribal Hidage*, which lists all the kingdoms in England south of the River Humber. At this time, many of them were small and that of the *Hicce* was among the smallest, with only 300 families due to pay tax. But *Hicce* is not an Old English (Anglo-Saxon) name: it only makes sense as a Celtic word, **sicco*-, meaning 'dry', probably a reference to the River Hiz. In other words, the *Hicce* people were Britons.

Back to the Gaping Lane pot

All of this background makes it very unlikely that anyone would have found an "Anglo-Saxon" pot in Gaping Lane. To make matters worse, the Heritage Gateway record describes the vessel as "*a small globular pot, a mica-dusted feeding bottle of the late 1st or early 2nd cent AD, from a garden in Gaping Lane*". It also gives an Accession Number for the vessel, Hitchin Museum 6. Turning to Idealist, Hitchin Museum's old database, we read "*Small mica-coated globular vessel. "If genuinely local could be evidence of local Roman pottery industry" Farrar, A.H. Partly blackened, handle missing.*" I do not know who A H Farrar was.

I therefore assumed that we were dealing with a Roman vessel. This seemed to be confirmed by Heritage Gateway, which speculated that it was the same pot as [this one](#), although I was worried that the size of the two vessels did not tally and the second one was also accessioned to Hitchin Museum, this time as number 7. They did not sound to me to be the same thing at all. Even so, I guessed that the pot from Gaping Lane would have been Roman.

The pot itself

An unusual pot from Gaping Lane, Hitchin

Then, on Friday of last week, I was looking through boxes in the Bulk Store at the Museums Resource Centre at Burymead Road, Hitchin. This is where environmentally stable archaeological finds from across the district are stored and houses ceramics, stone and bone. In one box, I found a small hand-made pot with a number 6 prominently written in Indian Ink on one side and thought to myself that it looked odd but had forgotten the details of the Gaping Lane pot. Coming back into the office, it suddenly struck me that this was indeed the Gaping Lane pot. I got it out from the box and found that it was even stranger than I had first appreciated. It is basically a thumb pot, hand made but shaped into a round-bottomed globular cup with a vertical rim. It originally had a handle that ran from the rim almost to be base, but this had broken off before the vessel was thrown away. It isn't [mica dusted](#), which is a Romano-British technique for making pots sparkle as if they are made from bronze. Instead, the pot is covered in a slip that has particles of mica in it, but they are much more sparse than in true mica dusting. The lower part of the handle has a tiny hole in the middle, which shows that it was made by rolling up a thin sheet of clay to make a cylinder before applying it to the cup: this is why someone thought it might have been a feeding bottle. The hole does not go through to the inside of the cup, so it can't have been used for feeding.

The most interesting aspect of the cup is that there are similar "Anglo-Saxon" vessels from the East Midlands and East Anglia that date from the end of the fifth and beginning of the sixth centuries. But the fabric of the pot (the clay type, the mix of material added to it and the way the pot has been fired) is not Anglo-Saxon. Instead, it looks like the fifth- and sixth-century pottery found in small quantities at Baldock. In other words, we have a pot made using indigenous sub-Romano-British techniques but copying a form used by Anglo-Saxon settlers.

The implications

This pot brings us right into the transformation of Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England. Instead of the old school-book view of Anglo-Saxon invaders slaughtering most of the Britons and driving the remnants into Wales, we can see that something more subtle and a good deal more interesting was going on. During the fifth century, the Britons of North Hertfordshire were clinging on to Roman ways of doing things. Perhaps this was partly because this is what they had done for centuries but also perhaps partly because being seen as "Roman" remained a good way of showing your status. By 500, though, they had stopped doing this. As the Anglo-Saxon settlers became powerful landowners and then politically



dominant, so your status depended on being seen to be English (which is the word the settlers used to describe themselves). The Gaping Lane pot shows this very transition: the *Hicce*, a people who kept their British name but who became English, perhaps without even noticing.

The lesson of this story is to go back to the original data every time: while there may be authorities describing objects in our collections, these authorities may be mistaken. They had less knowledge about the past than we do today, so in the words of [Bernard of Chartres](#), “*we are like dwarves on the shoulders of giants, so that we can see more than them*”. Some day, people will no doubt criticise my conclusions because they have seen even more. I have Isobel to thank for bringing this pot to my attention.

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