

## Ramblings Through History

### Odd pots and foreigners: Baldock's 'missing' centuries

#### Part 1

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#### Introduction

As part of this year's Baldock Festival, I gave a talk with this intriguing or even provocative title. It is well known that after the final sputtering out of ancient Baldock, some time around AD 550, there is no trace of a settlement until the Knights Templar founded their New Town in the 1140s. People have occasionally made the suggestion that there was a hamlet here, perhaps even with its own church, which the Templars expanded to make their town. I hope to show why this wasn't the case.

#### Odd pots (part 1)

The Odd Pots of my title refer to the unusual ceramics we find in the centuries after the collapse of Roman rule in the early fifth century. The residents of Baldock – at that time already a place in decline, like modern Detroit – seem not to have been as affected by this as they were by the economic and political changes going on around them. The manufacturing industries and the trade networks that

supported them collapsed catastrophically around this time.

This was partly a result of an interruption to the supply of small change in 406, although it was restored after 412, so that cannot be the entire answer. Instead, the official removal of the Roman army in 411 removed the basis for the imperial economy in Britain, which was based entirely around supplying the garrison of Britain and the bureaucracy that supported it. Of course, the Victorian idea that 'the legions went home' is completely wrong: Britain was the soldiers' home and their ancestors had lived here for a century or more. Instead, central government stopped sending the soldiers' (and bureaucrats') pay in the form of silver coins; they became a militia, which through the fifth century, developed into the war bands that we learn sustained the rulers of western and northern Britain precisely where the Roman troops had been stationed.

With their established customer base gone, the mass-production industries were unable to continue. To an archaeologist, the pottery industry is the most visible and it has long been recognised that the major fourth-century suppliers, whose products were distributed across whole provinces, did not last long after 400. At Baldock, we can see how a local supplier, at Much Hadham, began to copy the products that had previously been arriving from



*A matching pair of early 5th century pots from a grave at California in Baldock*

Oxfordshire. Their earliest copies were good but sometimes miniature versions of fourth-century forms but as time went on, their copies became increasingly eccentric.

New design features, such as handled cups with pedestal feet, began to appear, showing that the industry was still capable of innovation; within a few decades, though, the potters were no longer using first moulds to make standardised vessels and then they stopped using fast wheels, making pots by hand and finishing them on a turntable. They become increasingly wobbly and odd looking as time passes; the things that do remain the same are the clays, the sand temper used to strengthen the clay and the use of kilns to fire the pots to a hard finish.

### Foreigners (part 1)

Back in the 1960s, schoolchildren were taught that British history consists of waves of invaders: people of continental origin who migrated *en masse* to Britain, bring innovations with them. Those of us who are old enough will remember Hengist and Horsa, the brothers who settled in Kent and from whose time onwards, hordes of Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain. Slaughtering the unfortunate and unwarlike Britons they encountered, these early

Saxons established their new kingdoms by wiping out all traces of former Roman civilisation.

As we've already seen, this just doesn't work in Baldock. Nor does it work for the surrounding countryside, where pots derived from Roman originals and made using Roman technology were still being made through the fifth century. We lack the cremation cemeteries with remains deposited in jars derived from fourth-century Germanic types that are found in places like Dunstable, Sandy and Cambridge, all former Romano-British 'small towns' like Baldock.

These cremation cemeteries are the best way we have of identifying the settlers. Once upon a time, archaeologists were happy to identify Saxons on the basis of distinctive metalwork, especially brooches. Although such finds were often considered rare in Hertfordshire, one of the great successes of the Portable Antiquities Scheme has been to increase their numbers; there is a concentration in Clothall, for instance.

Does this make their owners Saxons? Probably not, as these were the only brooches available to a resident of late fifth-century Hertfordshire: they no more make the owners Saxon than my ownership of denim jeans makes me American. The cremations in Germanic style urns, on the other hand, are very distinctive as a burial type and contrast with the plain inhumations of this date found in Hertfordshire. Our unaccompanied burials seem to be of Britons, not Saxons. Even when we do get accompanied burials – such as one excavated by William Ransom on Pegsdon Heath in the 19th century – they contain objects that are far from conclusively Saxon.

*A pot from a 6th century warrior burial at Pegsdon Heath copying a style from 500 years earlier.*



## Odd pots (part 2)

In the decades around 500, we begin to see a different sort of Odd Pot. Instead of taking their inspiration from fourth-century Roman forms, they are types associated with Saxon settlers, found in places such as Norfolk where there is no doubt about the presence. What makes these pots odd, though, is that they are not made in the same way as genuinely Saxon pots. Instead, they are hard fired in a kiln – the Saxons tended to fire their pots in clamps, like covered bonfires – using a clay that is tempered with sand, whereas Saxon pots are tempered with chaff or other plant material. In other words, the technology used to make them is Roman.

What are the implications of this? I believe it means that the makers of such vessels were the poorly-trained descendants of the Odd Potters of the early fifth century. They were using techniques whose origins have to be sought in Roman industries, not the craft production of north Germany and Scandinavia. But the models they were copying no longer look back to past Roman forms but to contemporary forms made by their Saxon neighbours. In other words, there has been a shift in taste and fashion away from a world dominated by the Mediterranean world towards one that is decidedly Germanic.

This probably means a more fundamental shift in attitudes. Throughout the fifth century, the Britons of the Baldock area had been thinking of themselves as Romans, using pots that reminded them of those their grandparents and more distant ancestors had used. Then, around 500, they stopped doing this and turned their attention towards the Saxons who were becoming politically dominant across England. By this time, Roman rule was not even a memory and they were abandoning any thought of hanging on to the old ways



*A Saxon cup from Hitchin, made using Roman potting techniques.*

and were beginning to adopt the tastes and styles of those whose ancestors had come from northern Europe. In effect, they were becoming Saxon despite their British ancestry.

During the sixth century, we begin to see accompanied burials, such as the lady buried near Wandon End in King's Walden, whose grave was discovered more than a hundred years ago. Although we do not have accurate records of the discovery, the finds reported include a girdle hanger, a pair of brooches and a pair of tweezers, typical of sixth-century Saxon burials. From the end of the same century, a small cemetery found at Blackhorse Road in Letchworth Garden City included people buried with a scramasax (a Saxon knife) and a spearhead (in this case, it was embedded in their upper chest and was obviously the cause of death). As well as using Saxon style pottery, these people were being buried as Saxons, whatever their ethnic origins.

## Foreigners (part 2)

As local people adopted the styles and, presumably, language of the settlers, a curious thing happened: they began to refer to those who continued to regard themselves as Britons as *wealas* (literally 'foreigners' and the source of the Modern English word Welsh). Thus Walsworth, to the east of Hitchin, is the 'ford by the foreigners' farm'; the Waldens to the south of the town are the 'valley of the foreigners'.

But contrast this with some names to the east of Baldock. Cumberlow Green in Rushden is the 'burial mound of the *Cumbra*' and Cumberton Bottom in Barley is the 'valley of the *Cumbra*'. In both names, *Cumbra* is an Early Medieval Brittonic word meaning 'fellow countrymen', which survives as *Cymry*, the Modern Welsh word for Welsh people. Here, east of Baldock, people who identified themselves as Britons were not foreigners: they were the local population. There seems to be a very different history of attitudes to indigenous people versus Saxon settlers.

Hitchin was the *caput* ('head place') of a people first named as the *Hicce* in the seventh-century document known as Tribal Hidage; the town name derives from *Hiccum*, meaning 'among the *Hicce*'. Their territory included Walsworth and the Waldens, so their leaders presumably regarded the populations of these settlements as 'foreigners'. Yet the name *Hicce* makes no sense at all in Old English, being a Brittonic word, *\*sicco* ('dry'), probably a reference to the weak flow of the River Hiz, which still bears the name.

What we are seeing is no longer an ethnic division but a social one: the English-speaking rulers of the *Hicce* looked down on the Britons in their land as an underclass. We can see this in the seventh

-century laws of Ine (King of Wessex 689-716). The compensation payable for crimes committed against a Welshman was exactly half that payable for crimes against an Englishman. It was clearly worthwhile for families to 'become' English, by speaking the language, giving their children English names and conforming to all aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture. On the other hand, the villagers living to the east of Baldock continued to think of themselves as Britons even as their language was becoming Old English. They lived outside the territory of the *Hicce* and it appears that their rulers regarded them as equals. At the moment, it is impossible to answer the question of which territory the long-forgotten town of Baldock lay within.

So, half way through the 'missing centuries' in Baldock's history, we have seen the town fade slowly into abandonment as its inhabitants used increasingly odd types of pottery. A few settlers have arrived, but their main impact has been to introduce still odder pots and to corner the market in metalwork. Their language has become dominant and most local people have come to think that they are descended from the fifth-century settlers. Baldock remains empty farmland, caught between the emerging English statelet of the *Hicce* and the more loosely knit communities living in the hills to the east.

To be continued...

*Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews*

## JUST BE A CHILD

A representative from the 'Just be a Child' charity gave a talk to the Baldock Rotary Club which demonstrated that from one person's vision, drive and humanity so much could be achieved from such modest beginnings.

It started with a visit to an under privileged village in Africa where