

Ramblings Through History

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

Part 2

Keith J Fitzpatrick-Matthews (Archaeology and Outreach Officer, NHDC)

Recapping

In the first part of my story, the old Roman market town of Baldock had been abandoned by about AD 550 and, in the century beforehand, a few settlers had arrived from northern Europe. The Britons called them Saxons, as do modern archaeologists, but they called themselves English. As the newcomers intermarried with the locals, so their language and customs came to dominate. The Britons became English without really noticing.

Foreigners (part 3)

The emerging kingdoms of England were dealt a sudden and unexpected shock when the next foreigners attacked the monastery at Lindisfarne in 793. This latest group of would-be invaders are today unusually known as Vikings, from an Old Norse word thought to mean 'people who voyage by rowing in relay'. They are even more difficult to recognise from archaeological remains than the Saxons, almost four hundred years earlier. Their place-names are distinctive, though, with the ending *-by* (meaning 'enclosed farm') being the equivalent of the Old English *-tun*.

They continued to raid over the next century until, some time between 878 and 890, Alfred the Great made a treaty with their leader Guthrum to split England. The boundary ran along the River Lea to its source at Limbury then north to Bedford. North Hertfordshire would fall within Guthrum's territory, but there are no



A Viking style scabbard chape (the strengthening part at the bottom end), from Ashwell.

Danish place-names in the area, which might suggest that they did not settle locally.

Where this becomes confusing is when we look at the only Hertfordshire place-name to record their presence: *Daneis* Hundred (later *Dacorum*). This Hundred lies on the wrong side of the River Lea, so

what might have been going on? The historian David Dumville has suggested that we have misunderstood Alfred's treaty with Guthrum and that the border left the English in control of the land to its north-east. Although the Danes controlled south-west Hertfordshire, there was no settlement.

Whatever the political reality, the fight back by the English began early in the next century, by which time the Danes were in control of most of eastern England. It was Alfred's son Edward the Elder who led the reconquest of this area, while his sister Æthelflæd led the armies of the West Midlands. The pair established a network of fortified towns known as *burhs*, the most important of which are named in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. At the same time, they fortified other towns. A massive ditch discovered at Hitchin in 2004 shows that this was a town that had been fortified at this time. The presence of burgesses in Ashwell at the time Domesday Book was compiled in 1086 suggests that this was another fortified place.

Odd pots (part 3)

Although this was politically a confused time, it was a period of economic growth. For the first time since the end of Roman

rule, mass-produced and high quality pottery started being made again. Unlike the odd pots of the fifth to seventh centuries, these new products were made in standardised forms by professional potters. The early types, like those made in Ipswich, circulated only among the aristocrats, but by the time Hitchin was fortified, probably in 911 or 912, the producers in St Neots and the surrounding area were supplying even small, remote communities like Caldecote, north of Baldock.

The main oddity of these new pots was a technical innovation: the sagging base. Cooking pots with flat bases can suffer thermal shock when placed on the fire, so that the entire base shears off. The sagging base spreads the heat more efficiently, reducing the likelihood of breakage. New forms of pottery were also made for the first time, including cisterns, large pots to hold water for people to wash their hands at table: it's a modern myth that medieval people lived in abject squalor and did not care about personal hygiene. Important improvements around this time included firing pots at a much higher temperature, making them stronger, and using glazes, which made them water-tight.

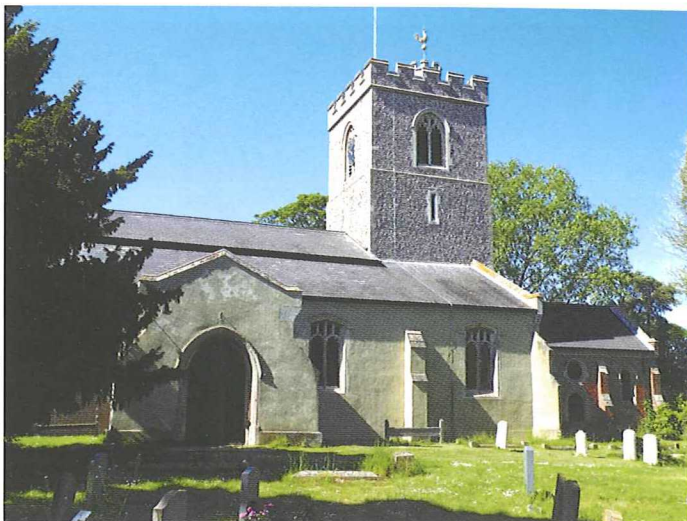
Territorial organisation was also changing, as the English kingdom, established by 927, became more centralised and bureaucratic from the reign of Æthelstan onwards. The old statelets like the kingdom of the *Hicce* had been absorbed into ever larger units and small-scale organisation fell between the church and the king. Churches were organised around minsters, large establishments with a staff consisting of more than a single priest; minsters were responsible for providing religious services to people over



A mass-produced tenth-century pot from Caldecote.

a wide area, similar in size to a modern rural deanery. Hitchin had a minster church and Ashwell probably had the same status.

Secular government was arranged around shires (literally 'sheared-off' parts of kingdoms) and hundreds. Hitchin lay at the centre of a half hundred (the original other half had probably been cut off when the boundary with Bedfordshire was created) and Ashwell was



Holy Trinity Church, Weston: was this a minster church?

the main town of another. Baldock lay at the northern tip of Broadwater Hundred, with its centre near Knebworth. We can see from this that there was a virtually parallel system of ecclesiastical and secular administration, a situation that continued until the Dissolution in the 1540s.

Foreigners (part 4)

The final foreigners to impact on our story were the Normans. They were actually Vikings who had settled in northern France, learned the language and adopted the culture of their new homeland. Their hold on England after the conquest of 1066 was helped by the efficient bureaucracy that already existed here; Domesday Book, which was compiled in 1085-6 to help the new rulers calculate how much *Danegeld* (a tax to pay off invaders) they could raise in the event of another Viking invasion, could not have been created without the Hundred Courts at the heart of English secular administration.

Notoriously, Baldock is not mentioned in Domesday Book. As we know that the

Knights Templar's new town of the 1140s was carved out of what had previously been part of the manor of Weston, it has long been believed that this is why it does not appear. There have been suggestions, though, that the second priest listed at Weston may have worked at a church that was the precursor of St Mary's and that there was already a settlement here. To support this, it has been pointed out that in 1066, it was assessed as being able to contribute £30 in *Danegeld*, which was a large sum.

This doesn't seem likely. The tax assessment and population of Weston are similar to Pirton, where recent fieldwork by Carenza Lewis and the North Hertfordshire Archaeological Society has shown that the eleventh-century community of that manor lived in several different small settlements. This is known as a polyfocal settlement pattern, which can be seen today in the area to the south-west of Hitchin, where numerous hamlets bear names ending in Green or End. Weston still has this sort of pattern. So why was there a second priest in 1086? The answer probably lies in ecclesiastical organisation. Most Hundreds

had two minster churches; in Broadwater, we know that Welwyn had this status. It looks as if Weston may have been the other minster church in the Hundred.

The biggest innovation of the new Norman rulers was the introduction of the castle: without castles, archaeologists would be unable to detect the Norman conquest. They were built both during the early years of the conquest, when rebellions were still possible against the foreign rulers, and during the so-called Anarchy, the Civil War between King Stephen, who was effectively a usurper, and Matilda, Henry I's recognised heir. The Anarchy blighted most of Stephen's reign, but it was during this period *'when God and all his angels slept'* in the words of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, that Baldock was founded.

Our local castles are not located in the towns: Baldock does not have one, nor do Hitchin or Ashwell. Instead, they are located in places such as Great Wymondley, Pirton and Anstey, small places that were never towns but are nevertheless strategic sites close to important communications routes. They all seem to belong to the Anarchy. There is little reason to believe that they developed into the centres of powerful lordships as they seem to have been abandoned once the civil war was over.

The archaeology of medieval Baldock is very poorly known, partly because the present street frontages retain historic properties that are Listed and have not been redeveloped in recent decades. This is where documents are really helpful, as they show that people were living and working in the town. So long as planning legislation continues to protect listed buildings, it is unlikely that we will see any major new developments in the town centre that might reveal its medieval fabric.

Missing centuries?

We have journeyed over more than seven centuries from the end of Roman rule in Britain to the High Middle Ages. Our story has rarely mentioned Baldock, for good reasons. No finds that can be dated to between 550 and 1150 have been made either on the site of the old Roman town or on the slightly different site of the medieval town. There are no layers of soil, no foundations, nor pits or ditches, not even a single posthole that belongs to this period. This is a clear sign that people were not there to make them.

More than this, Baldock was not just a ghost town, but somewhere quite peripheral to the new political and social geography of the area. In 400, it had been the main town in a territory covering much the same sort of area as North Hertfordshire (plus Stevenage and south-east Bedfordshire). As new people settled and new leaders established themselves in places such as Hitchin, so the focus shifted. Old Baldock was on the edge of the parish of Weston, which probably came into existence some time between 900 and 1100. Weston lay at the northern apex of a Hundred, driving a Wedge between Odsey to the east and Hitchin to the west.

This empty area of farmland lay at an important crossroads in one of the wealthiest parts of medieval England and one of the most agriculturally productive. It was therefore a place of considerable potential. All it needed was an entrepreneurial group to take advantage of these features and, in the 1140s, the Knights Templar created their new Baghdad in the hope that it would become a rival to the largest market in the known world.

That, as they say, is another story.

Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews