

Everyday Life in Anglo-Saxon Canterbury

c. AD 650

(Coloured reconstruction and Fig. 2)

The reconstruction reflects the focus of extensive excavation in the centre of modern Canterbury and it gives us a particular view of society. The evidence tells us something about the Anglo-Saxon 'man in the street' around the middle of the 7th century. This is one of the great advantages of Archaeology. It helps us to find out about the ordinary people of the past, whose lifestyle might otherwise be overlooked.

We find evidence of more widespread building within the town walls at this time. We find evidence of Anglo-Saxon homes and workshops together with more domestic artefacts, like pottery and jewellery which can be dated to this period.

This area in itself gives no real indication of the status and wealth held by the kingdom of Kent at this time or the influence of the Church. For these aspects we need to look at the works of ancient historians such as Bede together with the archaeological evidence of the early churches and the rich Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in Kent, for example at Sarre and at Buckland, near Dover.

Two striking differences between the scenes in the Roman and Anglo-Saxon reconstructions are that: a) The town was much more densely occupied in Roman times and b) The building styles are very different.

Both cultures exploited local raw materials but the uses to which they put them were very different. The Romans brought their own knowledge of building technologies when they came to this country. They used construction methods and materials which were familiar to them in order to duplicate all the urban amenities to which they were accustomed.

By contrast, the Anglo-Saxons who followed in the late 5th and 6th centuries were for the most part rural people, coming from small 'villages'. So in their turn, these new immigrants wanted to build an environment which suited their lifestyle. There was no place in the Anglo-Saxon culture for the grand civic buildings of Roman society. They had no use for Roman building techniques which were totally alien to them.

It is these striking cultural changes which make our history so interesting and we try to imagine the human behaviour behind them.

Beware of interpretations – simple does not necessarily mean primitive!

It would be easy to compare the buildings we see in the Anglo-Saxon reconstruction with the buildings in the Roman image and conclude that the Anglo-Saxons were 'primitive' peoples (in the sense of inferior). But we have only to look

at their intricately worked jewellery to see that this is the product of a society familiar with sophisticated technologies and far from primitive (Fig. 13 silver clasp and p. 39). Their lifestyle was simply different to that of the Romans.

We can find other evidence of a civilized society in early Anglo-Saxon times, from documentary sources. The Laws of Ethelbert (written around AD 603), demonstrate a clear regard for law and order in Anglo-Saxon Kent. Categories of crime and the penalty to be paid by the offender are distinctly set down. Hair seems to have been an important feature in early Anglo-Saxon law and order... Here are a few examples of Ethelbert's Laws:

- '33. If hair-pulling occur, 50 sceattas (pennies) (are to be paid) as compensation'
- '73. If a freewoman, with long hair, (a feature of a free woman) commits any misconduct, she is to pay 30 shillings compensation'
- '86. If one servant kills another without cause, he is to pay the full value'
- '87. If a servant's eye or foot is destroyed, the full value is to be paid for him'

We tend to think glibly of the Romans bringing civilization ('good' things) to their conquered nations. By contrast, the Anglo-Saxons have often been described as barbaric. But when we think of Roman citizens regularly enjoying the slaughter of humans and animals in the amphitheatre, we have to question such simplistic labelling.

Re-settlement in the Old Roman Town

By the 7th century, more people had moved into the heart of the old Roman town, building within its ruins. While these new Anglo-Saxon developers didn't renovate the Roman ruins, they sometimes built up against surviving masonry walls (bottom right, against Roman baths) and respected the boundaries of walls still standing. Sometimes they even re-used Roman floors, building new clay walls around them.

You can see in the centre of the Anglo-Saxon image the old Roman theatre. Excavation has shown us that this massive structure was still standing right up to the 11th century, although in a ruinous state. It may well have served as a land mark well beyond Roman times. Now Anglo-Saxon dwellings were built over Roman streets and remains of Roman buildings which (because of the build up of soil during the intervening centuries) were no longer visible to the Anglo-Saxon builder.

If we look at the street pattern in Anglo-Saxon Canterbury it has changed substantially from Roman times. By now, many of the Roman streets had become overgrown and broken up through lack of maintenance. It is likely that many were no longer visible and they were superceded by a different pattern of Anglo-Saxon ones.

Anglo-Saxon Homes and Workshops

Archaeologists and historians sometimes use the term 'sunken' hut or 'grub' hut when talking about Anglo-Saxon houses and workshops. 'Sunken' because the floors were sometimes cut below ground level so you stepped down when going inside. The name 'grub' comes from 'grubenhauus', a Germanic term for a building dug out lower than ground level.

In modern usage the word 'hut' tends to conjure up images of garden sheds or a Scout Hut and indeed the Anglo-Saxon buildings were as varied in size, some being very substantial. But it is a disparaging term and one which we should perhaps drop.

A typical house or workshop was rectangular, built with timber upright posts at each corner and others spaced along the sides depending on the overall size, location of doorways and so on. In between these main structural posts walls were constructed, made of wattle (panels of interwoven wooden sticks) and covered with daub (raw clay) which was smoothed to give an even finish. Some walls were built with horizontal planks (Fig. 14). Roofs were made of thatch laid over a timber frame. The floors were typically simple clay surfaces. So much flammable material must have been a considerable fire risk which can be a bonus to archaeologists, as we shall see when we look at the evidence!

In the reconstruction image, we can see that the Anglo-Saxons sometimes built in groups. The group centre left was found beneath the garden area of No. 16 Watling Street. The building you can see on the left of this group of 5 was built inside the ruins of a Roman town house and re-used its mosaic floor. The group of 7 in the centre foreground was found beneath the present main walkway through the Marlowe Shopping Arcade. The buildings bottom right clustering around the ruins of the Roman Public Baths were also beneath the site of the Marlowe Arcade. Many of the dwellings would have been used as workshops for cottage industries like spinning, weaving, bone and metalworking while others were family homes. Some no doubt combined the two functions.

What evidence have we found?

Over thirty dwellings spanning the 7th to 8th centuries have been found in the centre of the town. They are dated by the artefacts found in association with them (for example pottery, jewellery and sometimes coins) or, in the absence of these, by comparing them with other buildings of the same style which are already dated by some means.

You will have noticed that a typical dwelling has a good proportion of organic material in its construction. Because organic material will decompose in soil conditions where oxygen, warmth and moisture are present, all that we usually find of the original structure is the ground plan marked out by circles or squares of stained soil (decomposed wood) where the load-bearing posts once stood. In between these we find smaller stake holes where the wattle or planks were built

in (Fig. 14). Sometimes we find small pieces (sherds) of scrap pottery and stones when we dig out the dark soil from the holes. These were used as packing to make the posts more stable. We may also find in the rubble lying round and about, chunks of the daub walls with impressions of the wattle stakes still visible.

If the daub and clay floors are blackened we may make an interpretation that the building was deliberately or accidentally burnt down. On occasions, archaeologists have been lucky enough to find fragments of charred wood which have survived the fire. This is because when organic material is charred (that is not completely destroyed by burning), it becomes carbonised and this helps to retain its structure.

We often find evidence of a structure being re-built, where maybe a dilapidated one has been razed to the ground and replaced by a new one, on the same site. This may appear in the ground as a rather confusing pattern of superimposed post and stake holes!

'Negative' evidence

You may ask, 'How do you know that ordinary people didn't use tile and stone?' The answer is that we would expect to find these materials (if only as rubble) in the excavation area – but we don't. So to archaeologists it is often the absence of material evidence which is of significance.

Experimental Archaeology in Suffolk

In the 1970's an Anglo-Saxon village was excavated at West Stow, near Bury-St-Edmund's. The entire site was subsequently reconstructed, re-building houses and workshops. Visitors can now see and take part in many activities which recreate the lifestyle of the Anglo-Saxons including spinning and weaving, pottery manufacture and woodworking. Ring the Education Officer at the West Stow Centre for more information: 01284 728718.

Experimental Archaeology at Leire, Denmark

Archaeologists have reconstructed an entire Viking village (similar technologies in many ways to the Anglo-Saxons here) where they research domestic and working lifestyles. They make and fire pottery, cook, dye, spin and weave, breed livestock and so on. Evidence suggests that in larger buildings, the family lived in one part while their animals were housed in another (perhaps in bad weather or at night), all under one roof. This project was still operating in 1997 and was open to visitors.

Anglo-Saxon Crafts and Technology

Evidence for Spinning and Weaving

Judging by the frequency of the objects that we find, spinning and weaving must have been commonplace. Typical finds are spindle whorls made of clay or stone which were fixed to the end of a spindle to give tension to the spinning process. It is very rare to find a spindle. Most of them were probably made of wood and have therefore not survived.

We also find large, roughly formed loom weights made of fired clay. They are often called 'doughnut' weights because of their shape. Each has a central hole and a row of them could be suspended along the bottom of the loom, hanging from vertical threads, again to provide tension (Fig. 14). It is not uncommon to find a group of loom weights together as we did inside one of the dwellings from beneath the present Marlowe Arcade. Sometimes they are found fire-blackened in a neat row. We can imagine that the weaving workshop somehow caught fire, the wooden loom going up in smoke leaving the clay weights lying where they fell to the ground, the only remaining evidence of the event. In the museum at the Roman Painted House in Dover you can see for yourself how this has happened. A row of charred loomweights have been carefully excavated from the site of a nearby Anglo-Saxon dwelling and reconstructed in a display case.

Evidence for Boneworking and Metalworking (Figs. 13 and 14)

Much of our evidence for types of metalworking comes from the grave goods of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in Kent. In the 1950's and again in 1994, archaeologists excavated in total nearly 400 graves at the Buckland cemetery on the outskirts of Dover. To date, this is the largest Anglo-Saxon cemetery excavated in the whole of Gt. Britain. The artefacts show us that the Anglo-Saxons used gold, silver, iron and copper alloys for making weapons, tools and jewellery. By comparing artefacts found in this country with similar ones found on continental sites specialists can say that some were probably brought into this country as traded goods. Others were made locally. Specialists think that Anglo-Saxon craftsmen in Kent started making jewellery as early as the 6th century. Certainly on sites in the area of Christ Church College (Fig. 3, outside reconstruction image) there is much evidence of iron working later in the Anglo-Saxon period. It is possible that both iron smelting and iron smithing were carried out here, making tools and so on for local inhabitants in the town and St Augustine's Abbey which was literally next door.

Bone and antler combs, sometimes elaborately decorated, are another feature of Anglo-Saxon craftsmanship. They may have been used for combing both human hair and animal fleeces. Animal bone and antler were common materials (and therefore would have been cheap) and were used for making all manner of

domestic and personal items from Roman times right up to the Victorian era. Many of the everyday common objects like pins, needles and some of the weaving tools would have been made locally.

Evidence for Pottery manufacture

Again by comparing pottery found locally with that known to have been made on the continent, we can say that the Anglo-Saxons imported some of their pottery. But they would also have made a good deal here as the raw materials of clay and wood were readily available to them. Compared to the masses of pottery found from the Roman period however, the quantities of Anglo-Saxon pottery are relatively small. This tells us something about the relative populations around to use the vessels. Also it is likely that the Anglo-Saxons used other materials such as wood for their platters, dishes and so on, which are now lost to us due to decomposition in the soil.

Typical Anglo-Saxon pottery is hand-made and black or grey due to the carbonising atmosphere of the kiln. Some of it is elaborately decorated using stamps of different designs. Again (as also in Roman times) most of the stamps must have been in wood as we do not find examples in more durable materials such as fired clay. But we know the potters used stamps because we can see the evidence in the decorated pottery.

During the 7th and 8th centuries a very distinctive type of pottery was being used around Canterbury. Cups and jars were being made with, what appears to be, chopped up straw added to the body of the clay. Archaeologists call the organic material 'chaff' as it is more likely that the potters used this waste product rather than laboriously cutting up lengths of straw! In the firing process much of the chaff is burnt out leaving small voids although some may remain, carbonised. The pottery looks fragile but is actually quite strong. Pottery specialists think that adding chaff to the clay actually helps the pottery to fire successfully as moisture can escape through the voids that are left (Fig. 13, top left).

As yet we have found no evidence for Anglo-Saxon kilns locally. The soft 'soapy' feel of a lot of the pottery suggests firing at relatively low temperatures which would be expected from a simple 'bonfire' kiln using wood and turves to cover the vessels. Such materials need leave no trace in the ground.

Experimental Archaeology: Pottery Manufacture

Dutch archaeologists have suggested that the Anglo-Saxon potters may well have added dung to the raw clay. This makes sense as an animal eating hay for example conveniently breaks down the material into minute fragments during its digestion. I tried making pottery using donkey dung, which was reasonably successful, but you do have to let it dry out first and you need a lot!

Other forms of occupation

Farming and fishing would also have been part of the Anglo-Saxon rural lifestyle. The area in the reconstruction which was once the Roman temple precinct (top right), was probably now used as farmland. Other areas have also been interpreted as open land, where we have found nothing much except soil build up. Where we have excavated outside the centre (to the south in Castle Street and to the north in The Borough, Northgate) again evidence suggests that either these areas were not occupied at all at this time or they were used for farming.

There is an element of artistic licence in the depiction of a market area with canopied stalls (bottom right of Roman theatre). Groups of holes for wooden posts have been found, which may well have been supports for stalls. Anglo-Saxon craftsmen and grocers would certainly have needed places to sell their wares.