

# HILLFORTS AND CHURCHES: A COINCIDENCE OF LOCATIONS?

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*This note explores the distinctive location of several medieval churches within late prehistoric hillforts in Buckinghamshire and considers some possible explanatory models. It is suggested that the most likely explanation is that the churches were founded next to early medieval seigneurial settlements, usually as private chapels. This conclusion raises further interesting questions about early medieval Buckinghamshire and the long-term significance of some hillfort sites.*

Medieval churches sited within prehistoric earthworks are known elsewhere in England but are hardly commonplace, making the recognition of four, or perhaps five, examples in Buckinghamshire worthy of special consideration. Another candidate can also be identified just across the county boundary at Whittlebury in Northamptonshire.

At Cholesbury and West Wycombe, churches of early thirteenth century date, each dedicated to St. Lawrence, lie within the extant ramparts of Iron Age hillforts. Small-scale archaeological investigations at Cholesbury dated the hillfort to the Middle Iron Age and found small quantities of Late Iron Age, early Roman and medieval pottery (Kimball, 1933). Although no medieval structures were recognised in the 1932 excavation, a recent geophysical survey has detected what may be the remains of a stone building, putatively a medieval manor (Gover, 2001). West Wycombe Church was associated with a tithing of West Wycombe manor named 'Haveryngdon' in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Page, 1925, 135–140). The church now stands isolated on the hilltop but it is not clear whether it was always alone or originally associated with a small settlement. Recent small-scale investigations have as yet found no evidence of medieval occupation. Dedications to St. Lawrence have been interpreted as indicating early foundations with Romano-British roots (Reed, 1979, 62) but in Kent they are seen as late foundations and such an interpretation would now be preferred in Buckinghamshire where St. Lawrence dedications are typically associated with small parishes recorded as of low value in 1291 (Keith Bailey, pers comm). The remote Chiltern locations of both

Cholesbury and West Wycombe might be thought consistent with late parish formation, but that would not in itself explain the positioning of churches within what must surely have been recognised 'places' in the landscape.

The cases of Aylesbury and Taplow are more illuminating due to the availability of significant archaeological evidence and, in the former case, some early historical documentation. Domesday Book tells us that Aylesbury was a royal manor with an associated minster church and market. The twelfth century *Life of St. Osyth* attributes the foundation of a *monasterium* at Aylesbury to St. Osyth's aunt which, if accepted as historical fact, would date the church's foundation to sometime shortly after 650 (Bailey, 1989). Investigations within the town centre have shown that the hilltop, occupied by St. Mary's Church and the royal manor of Kingsbury, lay within the ramparts of a hillfort built and occupied during the Middle Iron Age (Farley, forthcoming). The hillfort was apparently abandoned during the late Iron Age and Roman periods, only to be re-occupied in the post-Roman period. There is also the well-known reference in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* to the capture of Aylesbury from the Britons in 571, although the validity of this has been challenged (Blair, 1994, 27). The archaeology at the Prebendal site indicated that the hillfort ditch was partially recut and silting up during the Middle Saxon period (Farley, forthcoming), but it is not clear whether this Saxon ditch encompassed the whole hillfort or just the area around the church. Within the hillfort, burials have been found over a wide area to the southwest of St. Mary's Church and radiocarbon dated to

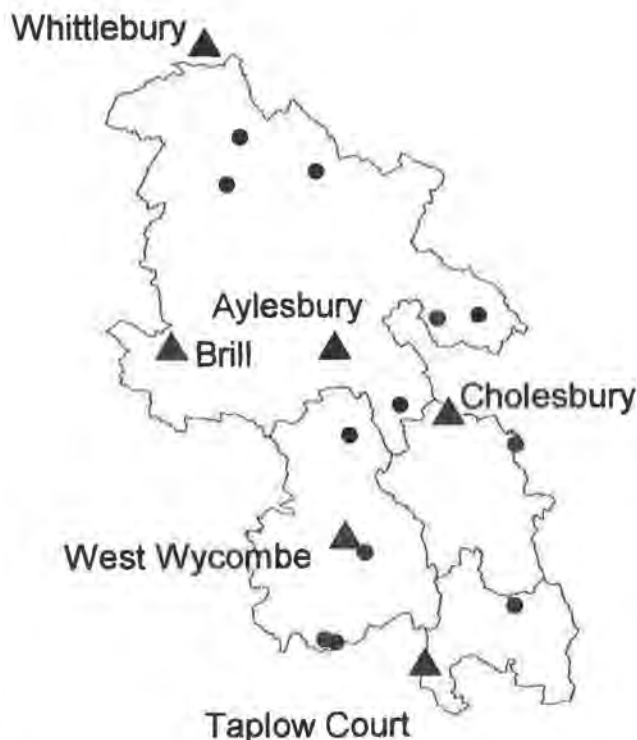


FIGURE 1 Hillforts and churches; ▲ sites discussed; ● other prehistoric enclosures.

between the late eighth and early tenth centuries. They are interpreted as a large Middle Saxon cemetery associated with a minster church (Farley, 1979; Allen and Dalwood, 1983). Although the earliest extant fabric of St. Mary's church dates to the thirteenth century, small-scale excavation within the church has found traces of substantial earlier footings (Durham, 1978).

Taplow has held a special significance in British archaeology ever since the discovery of a rich seventh-century Anglo-Saxon barrow burial in the late nineteenth century. Recent investigations have shed further light on the long history of human activity on this prominent chalk spur overlooking the Thames. The site of St. Nicholas Church, which was demolished in the mid-nineteenth century, has been rediscovered next to the Saxon barrow and both church and barrow have been found to lie at the southern end of a large Iron Age hillfort. Analysis of the church's distinctive plan form, revealed by parch marks and geophysical survey, indicates possible eighth or ninth century origins as

a 'lesser' stone church with porticus (Stocker and Went, 1995; Ward, 1997). The longevity and intensity of occupation on the hilltop is further reinforced by the large quantities of pottery ranging from Early Bronze Age to Early Saxon date discovered in small-scale trial excavations just outside the churchyard (Fairclough, 2001). Most compelling, however, was the discovery in 1999 of the ramparts and ditches of a major hillfort in an open-area excavation on the north side of Taplow Court. The hillfort appears to have had at least three major phases of defence in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age at the end of which the rampart was fired and collapsed into the final phase ditch. Nevertheless, the hillfort remained visible as an earthwork into the Saxon period as its upper fills contained Saxon pottery and a mid-late seventh century double-spiral headed pin. A burial and timber structure found during the excavation may also be of Saxon date. It seems likely that, at least in its latest phase, the hillfort enclosed the southern end of the spur later to be occupied by the barrow and church.

(Allen and Lamdin-Whymark, 2000). Although there is no contemporary documentary evidence to accompany the archaeology, it is worth noting in passing that there is a local legend of Saint Birinius conducting baptism at the nearby Bapsey Pond in the late seventh century.

Brill, the last of the five Buckinghamshire sites considered here, is also the most problematic for it is by no means certain that All Saints Church lies within a prehistoric earthwork at all. Immediately to the north of the church lies a substantial, but as yet undated, rampart which has been variously interpreted as belonging to a hillfort, a medieval royal hunting lodge or a fortification of the English Civil War. The case for a hillfort is based on the discovery of Iron Age pottery combined with the topography of the site and scale of the surviving rampart (Farley, 1989). The earliest fabric of All Saints dates to the twelfth century but, as the chapel probably served the royal hunting lodge founded by Edward the Confessor, it seems likely that it too had late Saxon origins. Until the sixteenth century All Saints was a dependent chapel of St. Mary's at Oakley. However, the evidence of services rendered to Brill by surrounding villages in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has been taken to indicate the existence of a *caput* of a multiple estate here during the Saxon period, perhaps with its origins in the Iron Age (Reed, 1979, 74–6).

Whittlebury lies just two kilometers north of the county boundary, in the centre of what was the medieval Forest of Whittlewood. St. Mary's Church, a chapelry dependent upon the royal manor of Greens Norton, occupies a prominent spur slightly detached from the modern village on its northwest side and lies within an earthwork enclosure from which has been recovered Iron Age, Saxon and medieval pottery. The derivation of the placename, the *burh* of *Witela*, suggests origins as a defended place occupied by a Saxon nobleman - an important enough place for Athelstan to hold a council in 930. (Jones and Page, 2001; 2002 and pers comm).

Clearly we are far from a full understanding of any of these sites but it is worth considering possible explanations for the positions of these churches, if only as a guide to future research. In *Churches in the Landscape*, Richard Morris discussed two simple contrasting models of the relationship between churches and pre-Christian religious sites to which he applies the terms *sectional* and *regenerative*, while also acknowl-

edging that in reality more complex and multifaceted explanations may be necessary. In the former view, pre-Christian sites are abandoned and any later re-use for Christian purposes would be purely coincidental. The latter 'regenerative' hypothesis would allow that some cult sites remained in use over long periods while adapting to changing circumstances (Morris, 1989, 57). It is widely accepted that many Iron Age hillforts acted as ritual centres as well as being settlements, defended places, food stores and places of exchange and that in some places this religious function continued into the Roman period with the construction of temples within the abandoned ramparts (Cunliffe, 1991, 510–514). If this regenerative process continued it seems not unreasonable to suggest that it could lead, in the late Roman or post-Roman periods, to the Christianisation of these local cult centres and the construction of churches within hillforts. Intriguingly, Pope Gregory specifically commended the procedure of converting the sites of shrines into churches to Augustine's mission in a letter sent in AD 601 (Morris, 1989, 70, citing Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*). Actual evidence for Iron Age ritual activities is provided by the unusual, and to modern eyes gruesome, treatment of human remains found at Aylesbury (Farley, forthcoming). Also, some hillforts occupy sites of earlier ritual significance, as for example the Bronze Age barrows on Ivinghoe Beacon and possibly alongside the Saxon barrow at Taplow (Fairclough, 2000). Nevertheless, a difficulty with the regenerative hypothesis in Buckinghamshire is the shortage of evidence for late Iron Age occupation in hillforts or of a continuity of cult practice through the Roman period, which ought to be more visible if it involved the construction of stone shrines and deposition of votive offerings. Of the sites considered here, only Taplow has evidence for continuity of cult practice across the pagan Saxon-Christian transition with both church and pagan barrow situated alongside the site of a medieval manor, for which earlier origins might be postulated. Taplow Court appears to have been intensively occupied since at least the Bronze Age and has produced significant evidence for Roman occupation, although the focus seems to have temporarily shifted eastward to just outside the main hillfort gateway. At West Wycombe a possible Romano-British ritual focus is suggested by metal-detecting

finds from the aptly named Moneybury Hill which lies across a valley to the west of the hillfort, while a late Roman Christian cemetery has been excavated in the valley below the fort. The Romano-British focus at Aylesbury also shifted away from the hillfort to a nucleated settlement on Akeman Street at Fleet Marston.

Morris briefly discusses a few examples of churches situated within prehistoric or Roman earthwork enclosures, seeing them as having been founded next to now-disappeared pre-Conquest seigneurial settlements – Aylesbury and Cholesbury are mentioned in this context (*ibid.*, 272). While closer to the ‘sectional’ model outlined above this approach begs the question of when, and in what circumstances, a seigneurial site might be founded inside a hillfort. If such a seigneurial site were to have been founded prior to the end of the seventh century, then it is possible that the church replaced an earlier pagan shrine, as has been suggested for the Northumbrian royal palace at Yeavering. The reoccupation of hillforts is known to have occurred in the sub-Roman period, typically in the West Country at sites such as South Cadbury (Somerset), but examples are also known nearer to hand, for example at Irthlingborough and Rainsborough in Northamptonshire. In Yorkshire, the Late Bronze Age ringfort at Thwing was found to have been reoccupied in the eighth century by a hall, cemetery and possible wooden chapel (*ibid.*, 74–75). Re-use could also occur in the late Saxon period as at Old Sarum (Wiltshire) and again at South Cadbury, in both cases involving the construction of a church. Three of the five Buckinghamshire sites considered here, Aylesbury, Taplow and Brill, are known to have lain adjacent to seigneurial sites. St. Nicholas’ Church at Taplow lay alongside the medieval manor of Taplow Court while St. Mary’s, Aylesbury and All Saints, Brill were respectively next to the royal manor at Kingsbury and Edward the Confessor’s hunting lodge. No such associations can be proved at Cholesbury or West Wycombe, but there is equally no reason to rule out the existence of an early manor that was later abandoned or moved elsewhere for convenience. Indeed, geophysical evidence from Cholesbury and earthworks within West Wycombe hillfort could each be indicative of such a site. This hypothesis at least has the merit of being testable and based upon the widely recognised medieval phenomenon of the church-manor core, usually

found where the parish church originated as a private chapel attached to a lord’s residence.

Against the above argument, it might be pointed out that if St. Mary’s, Aylesbury was really founded in the late seventh century then this was at a time when we are told the royal vill of Frithuwold was situated at nearby Quarrendon (Everson, 2001, 10). We might then have to envisage the minster as primary, with the royal manor later moving adjacent to it. This leads to another model that would have early minsters or monasteries being deliberately founded within pre-existing earthworks, either to deliberately reference the past or simply in order to make use of a convenient enclosure as a monastic *vallum*. There are certainly cases of early monasteries being deliberately sited within hillforts, for example Breedon-on-the-Hill, Leicestershire (Morris, 1989, 132) and Hanbury, Worcestershire (Dyer, 1991), while Blair has shown how a general Saxon practice of referencing the past was continued across the pagan–Christian transition (Blair, 1994). In such cases the ecclesiastical role of the site would presumably be primary.

## CONCLUSION

The locations of Saxon and medieval churches were carefully selected to be appropriate to their use. As most medieval rural parish churches probably originated as private chapels appurtenant to a lord’s residence, it is suggested that the most common proximate cause for churches being located inside prehistoric earthworks is that these sites were already occupied by seigneurial residences. One is inevitably tempted to speculate on the origins of such residences: they are certainly likely to be pre-Conquest and, on the evidence of Taplow, could be seventh century or earlier.

It is not readily apparent why Buckinghamshire should have an apparent concentration of such sites. None are known in the neighbouring counties of Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Oxfordshire while the only candidate in Northamptonshire lies close to the county boundary. One possibility is that, with the exception of Aylesbury, they lie in areas of dispersed settlement and woodland in the Chilterns, Bernwood and Whittlewood, places that were perhaps less susceptible to settlement shift in the Late Saxon period. Another model would be to draw attention to potential British roots in the concept of a pre-Saxon multiple estate centred on



Brill and the supposed 'British enclave' which is thought to have survived as an independent unit in the Chilterns into the late sixth century and may be reflected in the *Chilternsaetna* recorded in the late seventh or early eighth century Tribal Hidage (Hepple and Doggett, 1992, 51–69). Whilst admittedly very tentative, the relatively late survival of British control might have allowed the establishment and continuity of seignorial sites inside hillforts in a manner reminiscent of the West Country.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that a single explanation is necessarily appropriate to all cases. The documentary evidence suggests that the minster church at Aylesbury could well have been established by a grant of land similar to those made in the latter half of the seventh century to found the monasteries at Breedon-on-the-Hill and Hanbury. Other locations, of which Taplow is our strongest candidate, may be genuine examples of 'regenerative' cult sites where practices have been reinvented generation upon generation for millennia. If this were the case then the recent construction of a Buddhist chanting hall at Taplow Court represents a fascinating modern contribution to this intriguing place.

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