

# A CHECKLIST FOR IDENTIFYING EARLY MEDIEVAL MEETING-PLACES

Stuart Brookes and John Baker, Sept 2011

## ***How do I find an early medieval meeting-place?***

Many early medieval meeting-places can be located and mapped with some precision. In some cases the meeting-place has never been lost, and its existence is recorded in local histories and traditions, or other written sources. The name of the hundred can sometimes provide information regarding its location: hills, trees, rivers, barrows, standing stones, fords, bridges and crossroads are all described by meeting-place names, and these may be positively identified in the landscape.

This guide is designed to help you identify the location of the early medieval meeting-places in your area. It should be used in conjunction with other resources on the *Landscapes of Governance* webpage (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/assembly>), and in consultation with the LoG team wherever necessary.

## ***What is my hundred?***

The commonest early medieval meeting-places that we know about were those of the 'shire' and its sub-division: the 'hundred' (named 'wapentakes' in some parts of the country). In England and Wales a hundred was the division of a shire for administrative, military and judicial purposes under the common law. Domesday Book tells us that much of England was already subdivided into geographic administrative shire and hundred districts by 1086, but in the far north of England and Wales, these districts may be later creations.

These administrative territories can be reconstructed from evidence in Domesday Book and other sources. Domesday Book lists individual villas grouped into hundreds, so if these settlements can be located the approximate limits of the hundred can be reconstructed. Unfortunately, Domesday Book does not describe or map the boundaries of estates or hundreds themselves, so we are often reliant on later territorial divisions, such as parish and estate boundaries, to help draw up a map of the hundredal geography.

As part of the Alecto Domesday survey published in 1992, F.R. Thorn collated all of the evidence for hundreds recorded in Domesday Book, supplemented with estate records and parish boundaries, to draw up a map of England's hundreds in the late eleventh century. The LoG project has digitised these maps and combined them with more accurate hundred maps drawn up in the nineteenth century, to create a map of the administrative subdivisions of England at the time of William I. Individual shire (county) maps can be found on the LoG webpages.

## ***Where is the place from which my hundred takes its name?***

Within each hundred there was a meeting-place where during the Anglo-Saxon period the men of the hundred discussed local issues, and judicial trials were enacted. The role of the hundred court was described in the Doms (laws) of King Edgar (943–75).

The name of the hundred was normally that of its meeting-place. The hundred names have been discussed by Anderson (the full volumes of which can be read on the *LoG* website at:

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/assembly/ElectronicAnderson>). For a large part of England, detailed place-name surveys are available, bringing together a large amount of local material. The most authoritative of these have been published over the last eighty years by the English Place-Name Society (EPNS).

In these books there is often an attempt to identify the individual parish and settlement from which the hundred is named.

### Example 1: (Sturminster) Newton hd (Dorset)

Recorded as *Neuuentone hundred* in 1084, the hundred is called after the abbot of Glastonbury's manor of Newton (now in Sturminster Newton) in Dorset. 'Nyewetone at Stoure' is first documented in 968, and fairs were granted there in 1218–9 and in 1226–7 and there were market grants in 1274–5 and in 1278.



In some cases this evidence can be quite precise.

### Example 2: Farrington hd (Dorset)

Recorded as *Ferendone hundred* in 1084, and therefore named from Farrington, this hundred was later in the 13th century amalgamated with part of *Gelingeham* hundred, and became known as Redlane hd.

Anton Fägersten in his *Place-Names of Dorset* notes (p3): 'The name of Redlane Hundred long survived as the name of the small hamlet of Redlane'. In the Rev. John Hutchins' *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset* (1st ed. Vol. 2 p328) Redlane is 'situated about half a mile south-west from Todber'; and indeed the lane at this location is still known as such today.



**NOTE:** The evidence from place-names volumes has often already been collated by the *LoG* team, and can be gained by contacting: [s.brookes@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:s.brookes@ucl.ac.uk).

## ***Do minor names provide evidence for meeting-places?***

In some cases the location of the meeting-place can be narrowed down by examining minor place-names such as field-names. These are not always comprehensively recorded in popular county volumes, or early county surveys. If your county suffers in this way, you may find treatment of local field-names in other EPNS publications, such as the *Journal of the English Place-Name Society* (see for example see recent work by Jean Cameron and others on Nottinghamshire) or the various EPNS Supplementary series, or in the pages of the journal *Nomina*. Alternatively, you may wish to undertake your own investigation into field-names by looking at early parish documents such as tithe and estate maps.

The name of the hundred may be retained as an individual feature, a barrow or tree or stone perhaps. In other cases minor names may record stones, crosses, gallows, a hundred- or court-field. These may be recorded in modern English; in other cases they might record these functions in names derived from Old English or Old Norse terms, such as as *(ge)mōt* (which means 'meeting' or 'assembly', and may be retained as the modern place-name element Mot-, Mod- or Mut-, as in Modbury, Motlow, Mutlow, Motstow), *þing* (also 'assembly', and retained in names like Thingoe, Thingwall, and Thinghou), or *spell* ('speech', found in Spelthorne and Spelhoe)

### **Example 3: Gore hd (Middlesex)**

The meeting-place of Gore hd is not retained in any major names in Middlesex, but the Hovenden Maps of 1597 (Part map = All Souls College, Oxford. Hovenden Portfolio II No. 10 (by permission of The Warden and Fellows of All Souls College, Oxford)) show Gore fields and Gore Lane towards the top left of the map. Gore comes from Old English *gāra* 'triangular piece of land'. Perhaps significantly, there is a triangular piece of land, shown as wooded, directly north (i.e. right) of Gore Field, which could be the Gore where the hundred met.

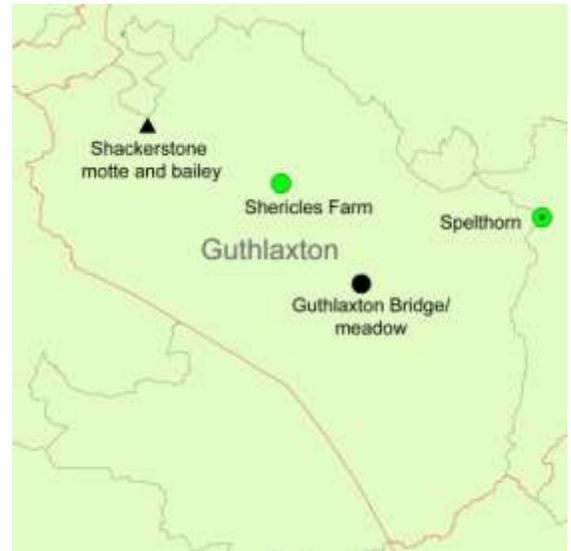


Sometimes minor names can reveal the location of other meeting-places in a hundred which may not be associated with the hundred court. These instances are potentially very interesting as they might reveal chronological changes in the development of local administration, or the distribution of administrative functions across different sites.

#### **Example 4: Guthlaxton wap (Leicestershire)**

Guthlaxton wapentake is recorded as *Gutlacistan*, *Gutlagistan* in Domesday Book. The name of the wapentake survives in Guthlaxton Bridge, Guthlaxton Gap and Guthlaxton meadows, recorded in the First Edition OS map of Cosby parish.

Minor place-names in Guthlaxton wapentake may document further early medieval meeting-places. *Shericles Farm* in Peckleton parish is first recorded in 1553, and may derive from the OE *scīr* ('an administrative district') and *āc* ('oak'). The field-name *Spelthorn* in Oadby parish, recorded in a thirteenth-century charter, meanwhile, appears to derive from the Old English *spell* ('speech') and *þorn* ('thorn'). Both could indicate the presence of further early medieval meeting-places in the wapentake.



Early written sources may also document meeting-places. For example the spurious early 11<sup>th</sup>-century charter of King Æthelred (S 907) records in its bounds a place called 'spelbeorhge' ('speech-hill'), lying to the north of Ring Hill Camp, near Littlebury in Essex.

#### ***Can folklore and antiquarian surveys help to identify meeting-places?***

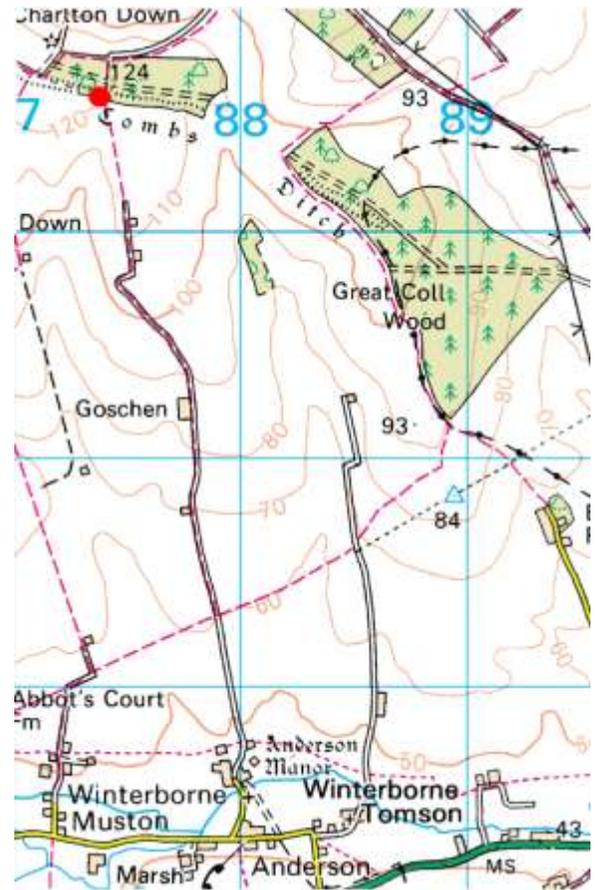
Yes – eighteenth-century county surveys such as Hutchins' *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset* (first published in 1741), Hasted's *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent* (of 1788–99), or Nichols' *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester* (1795–1815), contain a range of evidence that can help to identify meeting-places. Often they record the location of courts, ancient trees, and other relevant details, as they were in the early modern period; perhaps preserving some older memory of local administration.

#### **Example 5: Combs Ditch (Dorset)**

Combsditch hundred is recorded as *Concredie (sic) hundret* in 1084, and takes its name from the large earthwork known as Combs Ditch in Dorset. Hutchins (1st ed. 1 p51) records that this was where 'the courts are or were formerly kept' but as the ditch is some 3km long this does not substantially narrow down the location of the meeting-place.

Luckily Edwin Guest, 'On the "Belgic ditches" and the probable date of Stonehenge', *Antiq. J.* 8 (1851, p149) records that 'My guide... has for years "cried the Courts" at the bank [Coombs Ditch], and, therefore, may be considered as familiar with all the circumstances connected with it. After proclamations duly made on this ancient earth-work, the courts are held in the valley at an old manor house, which lies some two miles from the bank'. Marianne Dacombe, *Dorset Up Along & Down Along* (1935, p32): 'Up until the year 1905 or 1906 Court Leet was held at Winterborne Anderson Manor, on or near St. Martin's Day, Nov. 11<sup>th</sup>. A crier used to go up to Coombs Ditch near Goschen, and to Bloxworth crossroads, and cry "Oyez, oyez, oyez; this is to declare that a court leet will be held at Anderson Manor this day at 12 o'clock noon"'.

Winterborne Anderson manor, Goschen and Bloxworth crossroad are all to the south of Coombs Ditch. A footpath leading north from Anderson manor leads through Goschen and intersects with Coombs Ditch close to the junction of three parish boundaries. This is the most likely location along the Ditch to match the descriptions above.



### ***Ancient trees, gods, playing fields and fairs***

Early medieval meeting-places sometimes attract a range of other folkloric associations which may relate to their original functions. In local tradition, ancient trees are often regarded as central places in the community, and indeed many Domesday hundreds are named after trees, such as: Appletree (Derbyshire); Cullifordtree (Dorset); Becontree; and Winstree (both in Essex). The reasons for this association may be pragmatic – trees might be easily recognisable topographical markers particularly in featureless landscapes – or even symbolic – 'world trees' feature in many Scandinavian and Germanic societies as the places in which the spirits of the dead reside. Oak, birch, apple, and ash trees feature particularly prominently in mythology.

#### **Example 6: Branton hd (Devon)**

Branton hundred is named from a royal manor of Branton; first recorded in a doubtful charter of 854. The hundred name gives no further clues as to the location of the meeting-place, however, until 1935 at the cross-roads in the centre of the village stood the 'Cross Tree'. This tree is recorded as the site of open air gatherings and public pronouncements through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.



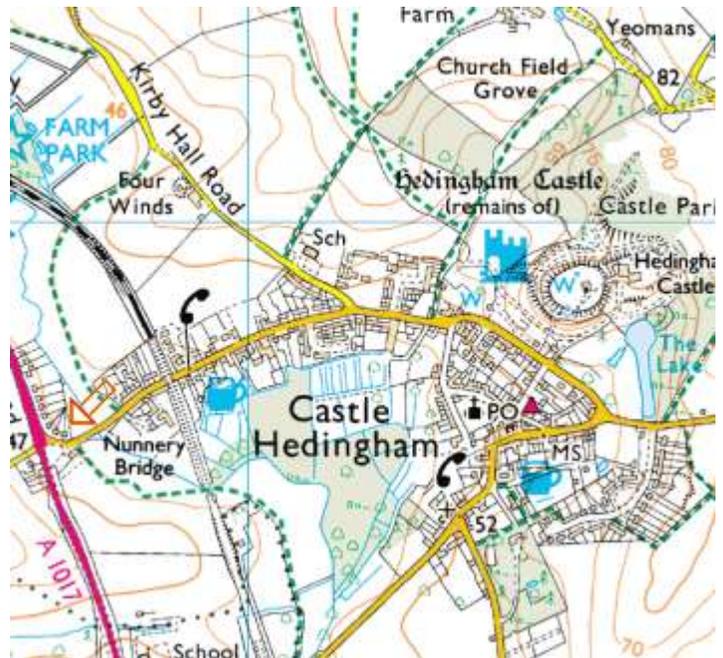
**NOTE: The evidence for ancient trees is currently being collected by the project: Ancient Tree Hunt. Their online resource: <http://www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk/discoveries/TreeSearch.htm> allows you to search for trees local to you and in close proximity, for example, to a bridlepath or a village green.**

The relationship with ancestral beings (supernatural or real) is also invoked by some hundred names and local tradition. Thunderlow and Thurstable hundreds in Essex take their names from Thunor's hill/mound and Thunor's post respectively, after the heathen god, whilst Easwrithe meeting-place in Sussex may mean 'thicket of the gods'. Topographical features thought to resemble giant heads of Men (Manshead hundred in Bedfordshire, the Manshead meeting-place of Selkley hundred in Wiltshire) may similarly reflect mythological associations with giants under the earth; an association which may also find expression in local traditions linking meeting-places with giant lithic furniture (Crockern Tor, Devonshire).

Regular meetings for judicial and administrative purposes in some cases gave rise to other types of communal activity such as marketing and sports. Fairs are documented on the site of early medieval meeting-places, such as at Hinckford in Essex; whilst an association with horse racing is suggested by the meeting-places at Spelhonger Coppice (Gloucestershire) on the site of the original Cheltenham Ride, and Staploe balk field – which commemorates the name of the hundred of Staploe (Cambridgeshire) – beside Newmarket race-course.

#### **Example 7: Hinckford hd (Essex)**

The hundred name Hinckford refers to a ford through the Colne near the site of the nunnery at Castle Hedingham, close to which important roads meet and cross almost at the centre of the hundred. Immediately to the west of the ford, at the junction of Nunnery Street with the main Braintree to Haverhill road is a raised piece of ground known as Crouch Green or Crouch Fair Green, which looks as though it might once have been a moot-mound. In a 16th-century survey it is called Musloe or Mustoe Green, perhaps a corruption of Mutlow or Mutslow, OE (ge)mot + stow, 'assembly place'. A market is recorded at Castle Hedingham in Nov 1254, held by Hugh de Ver, earl of Oxford, but regular fairs are not recorded until 1587, when they were held on 23 Apr, 3 May, and 6 Dec – most probably at Crouch Fair Green.



**NOTE: The list of medieval markets and fairs has been collated by the Centre for Metropolitan History at: <http://www.history.ac.uk/cmh/gaz/gazweb2.html>**

## ***What is the association between meeting-places and administrative boundaries?***

In some cases there is a spatial relationship between meeting-places and the administrative territories to which they belong. Meeting-places may lie central to the hundred, or sit on – or close to – the boundary of the hundred, shire, parishes, or estates. In *Signposts to the Past* Margaret Gelling argued that many hundred meeting-places are located in 'a sort of 'no-man's-land', as far away as possible from the settlements of the community it served and on the boundary between two or more estates...' (p.210). In the example of Guthlaxton wap presented above (Example 4) both *Spelthorn* and a possible moot mound at Shackerstone, are located on the boundaries between neighbouring wapentakes.



### **Example 8: Wetherley hd (Cambridgeshire)**

In some cases the course of parish boundaries may help to identify the location of a meeting-place. The location of Wetherley hundred meeting-place in Cambridgeshire is unknown, but the odd junction of Orwell, Little Eversden, Harlton and Barrington parishes, may suggest that it was somewhere in the vicinity of May Pole Farm.

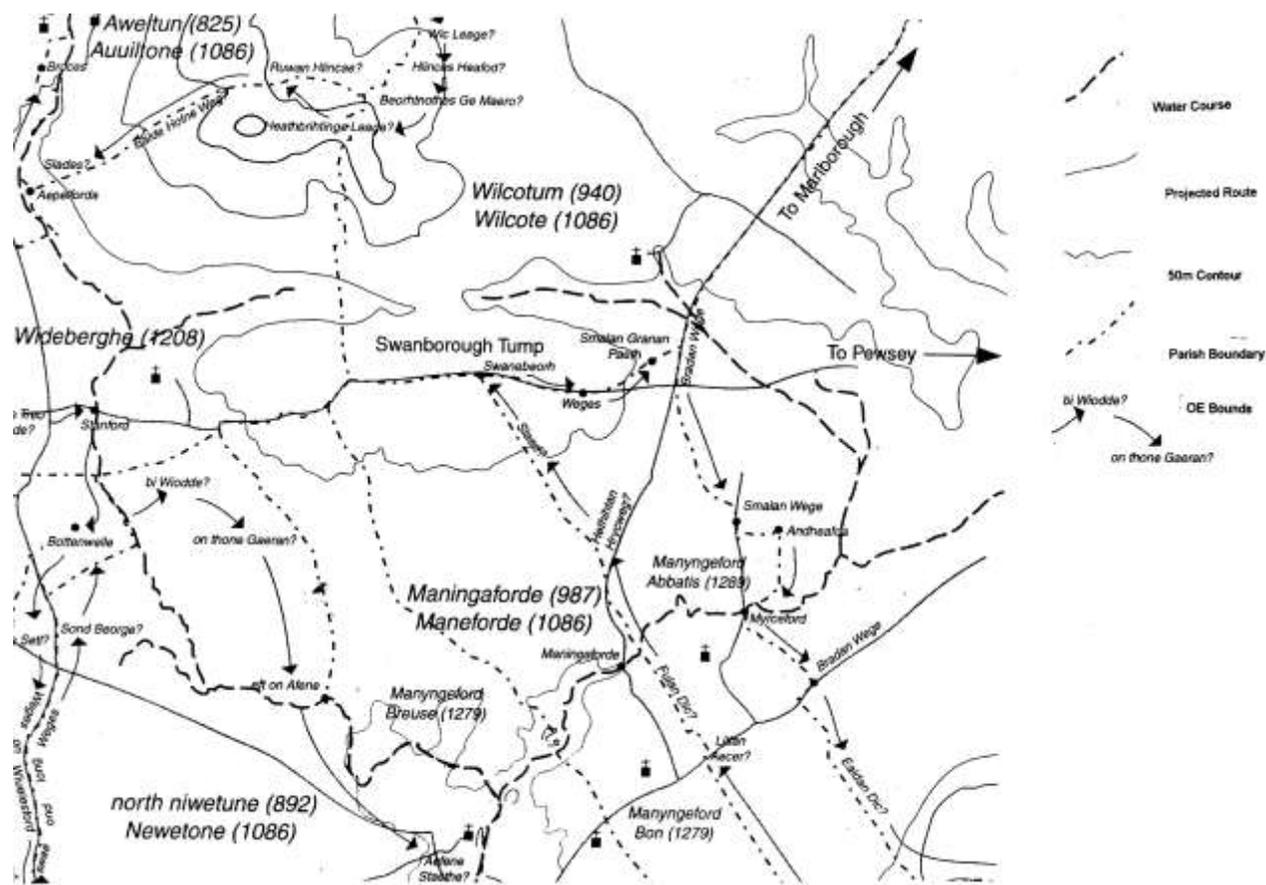
## ***How did people come to meeting-places?***

Access from the main routes of communications appears to have been one of the principal criteria underlying the location of meeting-places. Crossroads, road-side stones, fords and bridges routinely feature in hundred names and their probable meeting-places. Audrey Meaney's (1997) study of meeting-places in the Cambridgeshire region suggested that the meeting-places of the hundreds of Odsey, Thriplow, Whittlesford and Lackford were all located beside the Icknield Way; whilst similar work by Aliko Pantos (2002) on the Anglo-Saxon meeting-places of central England similarly found many associations with Roman roads, port-ways and 'prehistoric' trackways.

### **Example 9: Swanborough hd (Wiltshire)**

The hundred of Swanborough (OE swān 'herdsman', or perhaps 'young man, warrior' + beorg), takes its name from a low earthen mound, listed by Grinsell as a Bronze Age bowl barrow. The mound is likely to be the "Swanabeorh" of a charter of AD 987 and the meeting-place of the hundred. The topographical position of the mound, on level ground, is felt to be untypical of a prehistoric barrow, implying that it may have been constructed as moot or meeting-place during the medieval period.

Swanborough Tump lies in an area which is well-attested in Anglo-Saxon charters. Alex Langlands and Sarah Semple have used these written sources to map the routes and estate boundaries of the Swanborough area. These demonstrate the centrality of the meeting-place to a large number of ancient routeways criss-crossing the region.



Using these same criteria various meeting-places are often to be associated with fords, crossroads, and natural breaks in slope, which were key places in the road network.

### ***What sorts of archaeological evidence should we look out for?***

Many meeting-places are named after stones, bridges, and barrows. These are sometimes annotated on OS maps, or in archaeological gazetteers such as the National Monuments Record, Sites and Monuments Record, or Historic Environment Record (accessible through the Archaeology Data Service archsearch resource <http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archsearch/>, PastScape <http://www.pastscape.org.uk/>, and Heritage Gateway <http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/>). These archaeological phenomena can be used to support the identifications of particular meeting-places. Several monuments are of particular relevance:

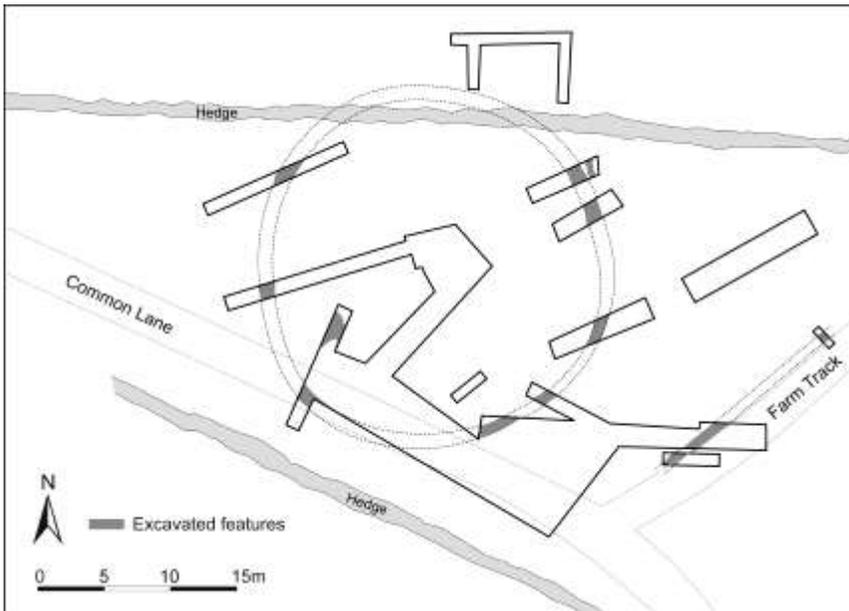
#### **Mounds**

Only a dozen or so English assembly sites have been investigated through detailed archaeological survey and excavation, but these have demonstrated the importance of mounds of prehistoric and medieval date.

#### **Example 10: Secklow hd (Buckinghamshire)**

Excavations in 1977–78 at a mound now behind the public library in Milton Keynes city centre have provided good evidence for a ‘moot mound’. In Domesday Book the area of Milton Keynes belonged to the Buckinghamshire hundred of Secklow – the meeting place of which was known to 18th century antiquaries as the tumulus of Selly Hill. Excavation revealed a flattened mound of around 25m diameter, encircled by a ditch about 1m across. The mound had probably once stood at least 2m high, but there was no evidence of it ever having been used to mark a grave.

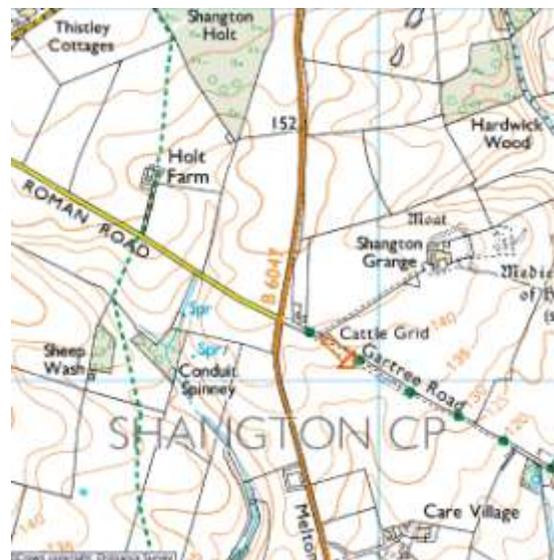
The Secklow evidence suggests that some meeting mounds were artificially created, perhaps built in the 10th or 11th centuries. Analyses of the territorial arrangement of many hundreds, particularly in the Midlands, suggests that during this period West Saxon kings implemented a range of administrative reforms, often rationalising and simplifying the organisation of earlier, less regular groupings. The Secklow mound may be physical evidence of this development.



### Example 11: Gartree wap (Leicestershire)

The name of the wapentake is preserved in that of a place called Gartree Bush. This appears as *Gartrey Hyll* on a map of 1596 and as the *Courte Bush* on one of 1637. This place is recorded by J. Nichols in his *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester* (4 vols, London, 1795-1815) as having been the meeting-place of the wapentake from at least 1458 until around 1750.

However, a royal council is recorded in charters as having taken places in 749 and ?775-7 (S 92, S 109) in Gartree wap at the different site of Gumley. John Blair has recently argued that this meeting-place may be identified with a large flat-topped mound just to the south-west of Gumley village.



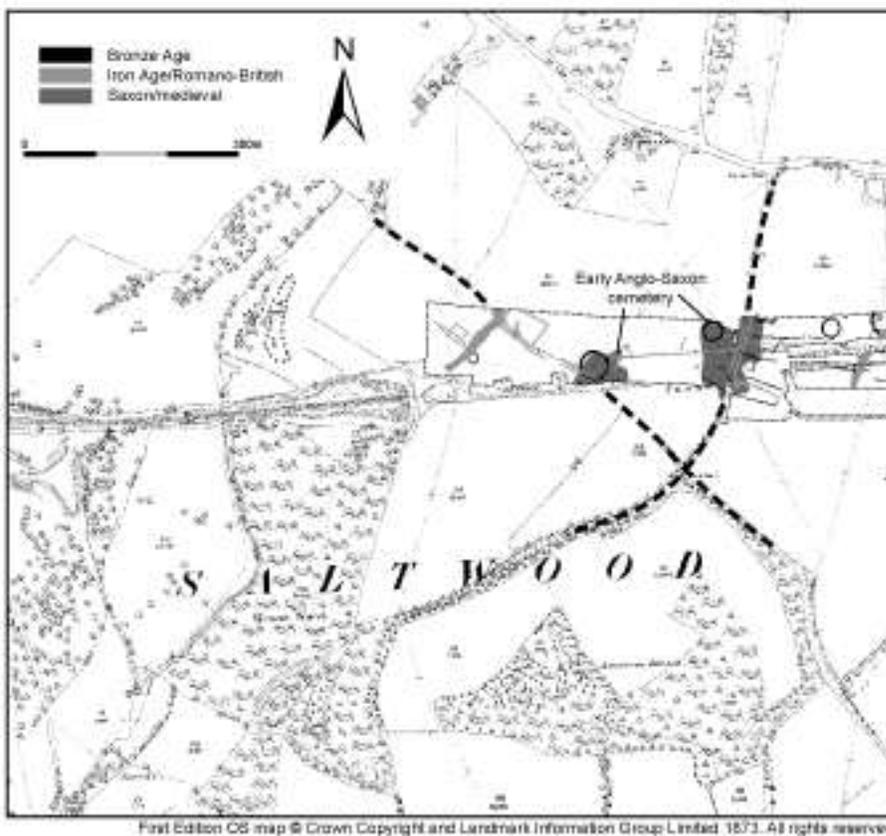
### Cemeteries, Shrines, and Temples

Guy Halsall has argued that Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries were important symbolic and ritual central places for communities in the post-Roman period that in some cases may have continued as administrative central places after their use as places of burial had ended. A similar continuity of symbolic functions might also explain the close

association of some hundred meeting-places and sites suggested on archaeological and toponymic grounds to be Roman temples or former pagan shrines. Place-names including the elements *weoh*, *wih* 'idol' – as in Wye hundred, Kent – or 'shrine' and *hearg* 'heathen temple' may indicate such continuities.

### Example 12: Heane hd (Kent)

Recent excavations in advance of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link at Saltwood, near Folkestone (Kent), have revealed important evidence for a meeting place. In the late fifth to seventh centuries some 219 pagan Anglo-Saxons were buried across four plots, three of them focussed on a bronze Bronze age Age barrow, either side of an iron Iron age Age trackway. Some four centuries later the site was recorded as the meeting place of the local Domesday hundred, Heane (Heane Wood Barn still stands less than 250m to the south-west), consisting of the medieval parishes of Saltwood and Postling. Very probably, therefore, this coincidence records the transition from a pagan-period cemetery space used by at least four communities, to a hundred meeting place which continued as a centre of local administration until at least 1279.



Given some of the judicial functions of meeting-places one archaeological correlate we might expect to find is the association with Late Anglo-Saxon execution burials and medieval gallows. Archaeological evidence for execution burials has recently been collated by Andrew Reynolds, who has shown that such sites were separate from, but in the viewshed of, meeting-places – and the same appears also to have been the case with regards to gallows sites.

### Example 13: Handley hd (Dorset)

The hundred of Handley (Hanglege hundret 1084 Geld Roll, Hundr'm de Hanlegh' 1244 Ass) is coextensive with and named from the Abbot of Shaftesbury's manor of Handley. Handley derives from the OE *hēah* (wk obl *hēan*) + *lēah* '(place at) the high wood', but the location of the meeting-place is unknown. 1km to the east of Handley on Handley

Down is the massive neolithic long barrow of Wor Barrow. There is no documentary evidence to suggest that Wor Barrow was a place-of execution. However, the name may be a corruption of OE wearg beorg (criminals barrow). The barrow lies a few metres within the Hundred of Handley and next to its boundary with the Hundred of Cranborne to the east. The site is immediately adjacent to the Old Sarum-Dorchester Roman Road. The mound was excavated by Lt. Gen. Pitt Rivers in 1893-94 with execution burials found cut into the silted-up quarry ditches at either end of the barrow and into the ditch.



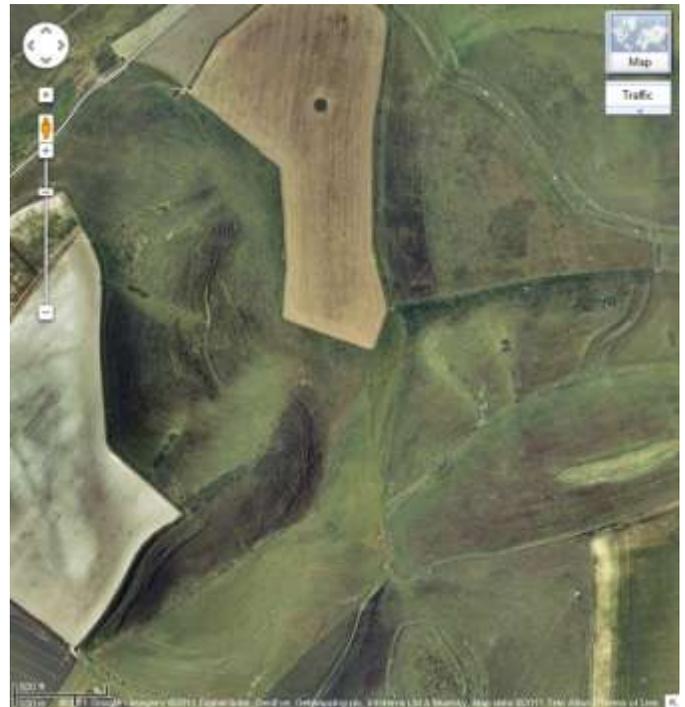
### Coins and markets

Apart from being places where legal and administrative functions were carried out, meeting-places were also often sites of fairs and trading (such as the example of Hinckford above). Archaeologically, the signature for these activities might be reflected in patterns of casual coin losses. The Portable Antiquities Scheme and Early Medieval Coin Corpus are important resources for plotting the pattern of single coin finds.

#### Example 14: Tan Hill, Wiltshire

Medieval fairs were held at Tan Hill at least by 1499. Andrew Reynolds (2002, 254) has argued that the original name for Tan Hill – Charlborough (or *ceorls* + *beorg* (freeman's barrow)) – should be seen in association with Swanborough ('barrow of the peasants') 2km to the south, and perhaps marks the early meeting-place for the Domesday hundred of Studfold.

The PAS records a number of finds from close by Tan Hill including a fragment of Medieval penny of Edward I or II, two Jetton, and other items of metalwork.

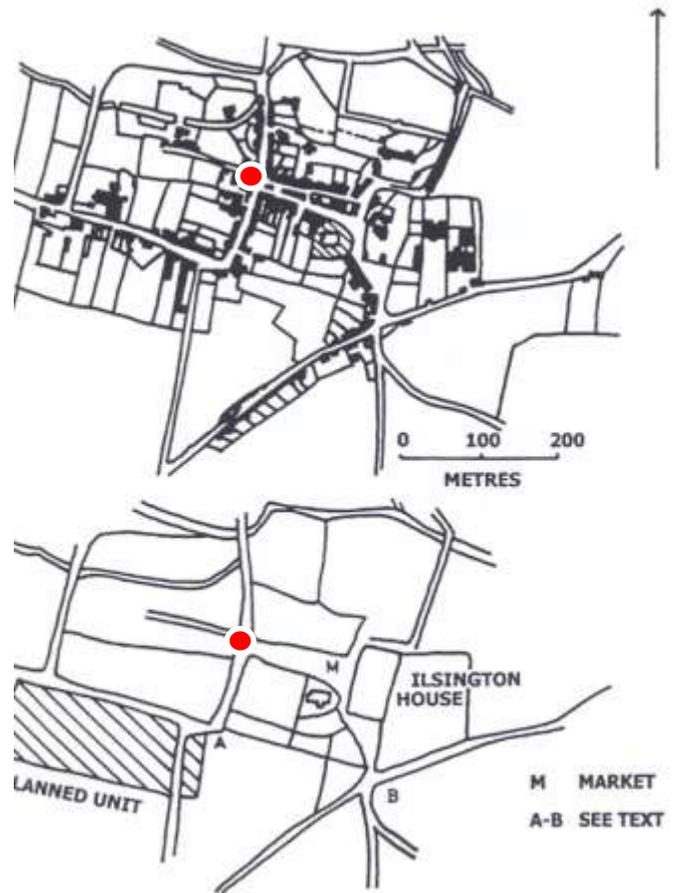


### Standing stones and carved stones

In urban contexts the presence of carved stone sculpture may provide indications of an early medieval high cross or market cross.

### Example 15: Puddletown hd (Dorset)

Charters attest to assemblies being held at Pydelan in the 10th century. Puddletown is located 4mi along a Roman road to the east of Dorchester. Its DB entry reveals it to have been an important comital manor in the hands of Harold Godwinson (Lavelle 2001, 141). Given the occurrence of assemblies here, it can be suggested that Puddletown was a royal manor of some importance in the late tenth century (ibid.). It certainly seems to have been part of the royal demesne and is considered by Hall to be a possible minster (2000, 17). A cross-arm fragment of 9th/10th century date was taken from an old house – known as Styles' House – when it was demolished, and moved to the church of St Mary in 1911 (Cramp 2006, 108). Styles' House and Styles Lane are located ca 100m west of the church close to the crossing of the River Piddle, outside – what planform analysis of the modern village suggests – what was once the minster enclosure. A cross at this site could indicate the location of an early market place, or assembly site.



(Plan and interpretation of Puddltown's planform, by Hall 2000, 62, showing the location of Styles' House in red)

For more information about researching your hundred meeting-place, contact: Dr Stuart Brookes, [s.brookes@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:s.brookes@ucl.ac.uk) or Dr John Baker [John.Baker@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:John.Baker@nottingham.ac.uk)