



Rendlesham Revealed

The Heart of a Kingdom AD 400-800

Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following individuals:

Roy Damant, Rob Atfield, Terry Marsh and Alan Smith, the volunteer metal detector users whose painstaking systematic survey over 15 years revealed the true character and extent of the site.

Sir Michael and Lady Bunbury, for their support and generous co-operation in allowing the archaeological investigations to take place on their land.

Philip and Carolyn Westrope and the team at Westrope Farming for their patience and help co-ordinating access to the land.

Professor Christopher Scull, principal academic advisor, for his tireless work on all aspects of the project and site.

Jude Plouviez, formerly of Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service, who co-ordinated the early investigations and has been an invaluable source of advice and support throughout.

We are also extremely grateful to all the volunteers, photographers, researchers and the many local and national partners who have given their support and expertise over the years to make this project a success.

The **Sutton Hoo Society** is funding this booklet, which is being produced as part of the ***Rendlesham Revealed*** community archaeology project supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, thanks to National Lottery Players.

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Printed 2023. ISBN 978-1-3999-5221-7

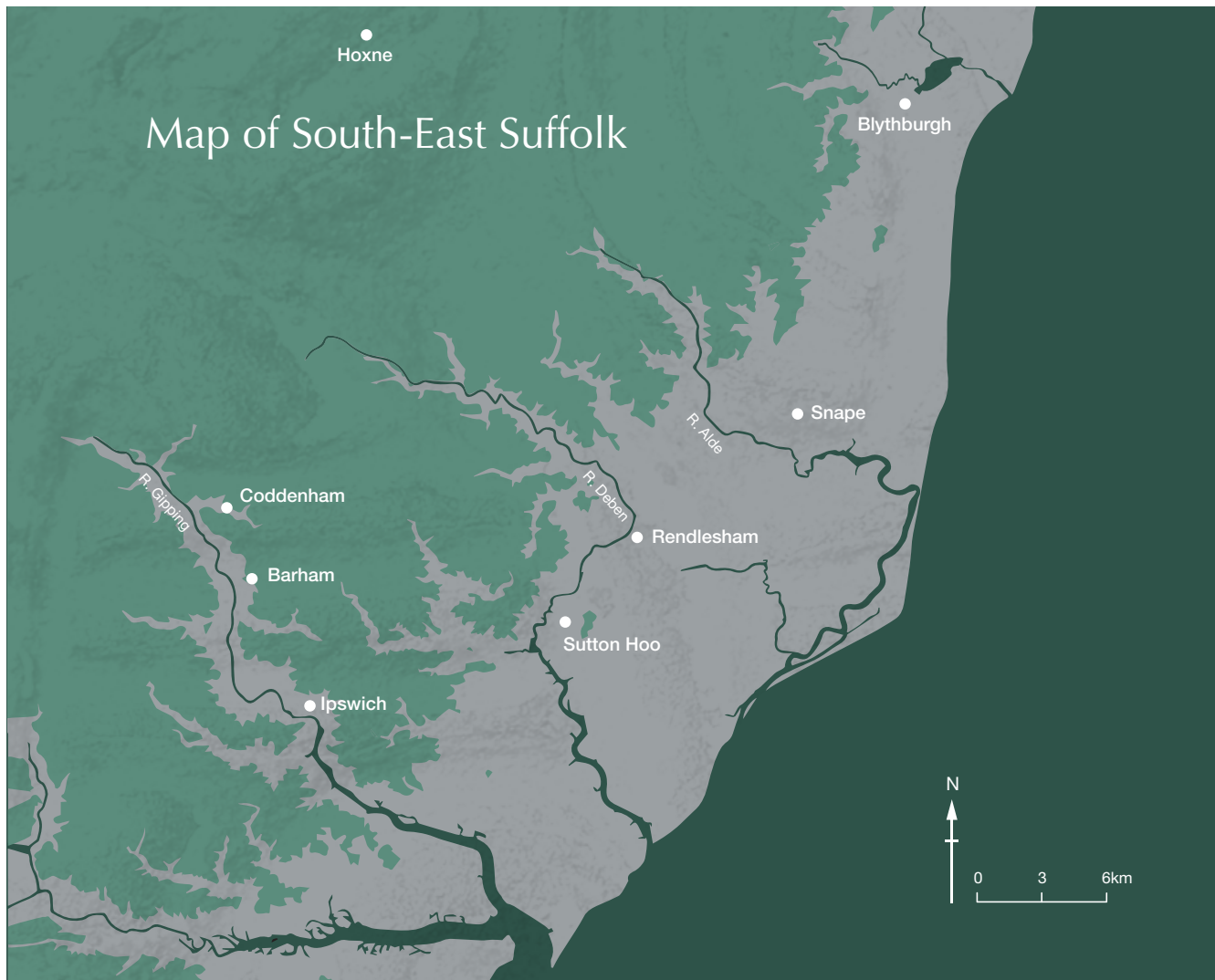
Written by Faye Minter, with contributions from Alice De Leo, Professor Christopher Scull and Jude Plouviez.

Photographs © Suffolk County Council

The objects featured in this book are part of the Ipswich Museum collection. Front and back cover image: Copper-alloy gilt horse harness fitting, with garnet and shell centre inlay. Diam. 5.3cm

Rendlesham

Rendlesham lies in south-east Suffolk, on the east side of the river Deben, 7km north-east of the town of Woodbridge. In the 7th century south-east Suffolk was the power-centre of the East Anglian Kingdom, which covered modern day Norfolk and Suffolk. Here archaeologists have discovered the princely burial grounds at Snape and Sutton Hoo, the international trading port at Ipswich and the long-lost royal settlement at Rendlesham.



Rediscovering Rendlesham

The Venerable Bede, a monk writing in the early 8th century AD, records in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* that Rendlesham was the East Anglian royal settlement (*vicus regius*) where Aethelwold, king of the East Angles, stood sponsor at the baptism of Swithelm, king of the East Saxons, sometime between 655 and 663.

There has been long-standing antiquarian and historical interest in Rendlesham, which intensified after the discovery of the Sutton Hoo ship burial by Basil Brown in 1939. However, the exact location of this royal settlement eluded historians and archaeologists until recently.

In 2007, Sir Michael Bunbury reported illegal metal detecting on his land. Suffolk County Council's Archaeological Service was consulted and, with the landowners' agreement, co-ordinated a pilot project to understand what was being stolen.



This included systematic metal detecting by four skilled and responsible metal detector users. It quickly became apparent from their discoveries that a site of great wealth and importance had been found.

Between 2009 and 2014 all known records were reviewed and an intensive archaeological survey was co-ordinated to identify the size and character of the settlement. This included a comprehensive metal detector survey, geophysical and aerial surveys, and trial excavation. For more information about responsible metal detecting visit www.finds.org.uk

The four metal detector users, without whom this site would not have been discovered

Extract from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written in the 8th century
© The British Library Board (Cotton MS Tiberius CII f.81v)

LATIN

Successit autem Sigbercto in regnum Suidhelm, filius Sexbaldi, qui baptizatus est ab ipso Cedde in provincia Orientalium Anglorum, in uico regio qui dicitur Rendlaesham, id est mansio Rendili; suscepitque eum ascendentem de fonte sancto Aediluald rex ipsius gentis Orientalium Anglorum, frater Anna regis eorundem.

TRANSLATION

Swithelm, the son of Seaxbald, was successor to Sigeberht. He was baptized by Cedd in East Anglia, in the royal village called Rendlesham, that is, the residence of Rendil. King Aethelwold of East Anglia, the brother of King Anna, the previous king of the East Angles, was his sponsor.

Bede, *HE* iii 22 (ed Colgrave and Mynors)

... aucto iudate pnotatatur diceat
Inquit: quia noluerit contine
adomo poidit adammata illuipai
in ppa domo moju habet; Sed nedo
dimyx quataly mony unu nelegioy.
n polim talan culpany dilaqut.
sed tpa mairu auy auqut. Quia m
imyu obcauyam pietatay qua p p ob
pauantam mandatonu xpi condit;
Successit h' sigbercto in regnum
suidhelm filius sexbaldi: qui baptiza
tus ab ipso cedde. in pno uincia ori
entalium anglorum. in uico regio
qui dicitur rendlaesham for mansio
rendil. Suscepitque eum ascendentem
de fonte scto aediluald rex ipsius gentis
orientalium anglorum. frater anna regis
eorundem.
xxii Rendlaesham
Solebat hridan uindit cum apud
orientalq; paxong; antepatay offi
cio puzitum. Sepulchrum suam
for noidan hymbroium pno uinci
am xhontandi quata pempate;
quoniam cum aediluald filius orualdi
regis qui indigionu partib: regni
habebat unum regem antepatay

Metal detector survey

The metal detector users recovered over 100,000 objects at Rendlesham. Most are modern debris, but 5,000 date from the Neolithic period to the 17th century AD, including high-status metalwork that can only come from an important Anglo-Saxon settlement.

An area of 172 hectares was systematically metal-detected, with each object individually bagged and its find-spot plotted. This allowed the density and distribution of the objects to be mapped on a geographical information system. This showed that activity of the 5th to 8th centuries AD was concentrated within an area of 50 hectares.

Each object was identified, catalogued, photographed and illustrated by the Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service's Finds Recording Team who are part of the national Portable Antiquities Scheme.

The objects from this metal detector survey were acquired by Ipswich Museum for display and future research.

Aerial photograph of the systematic metal detector survey at Rendlesham

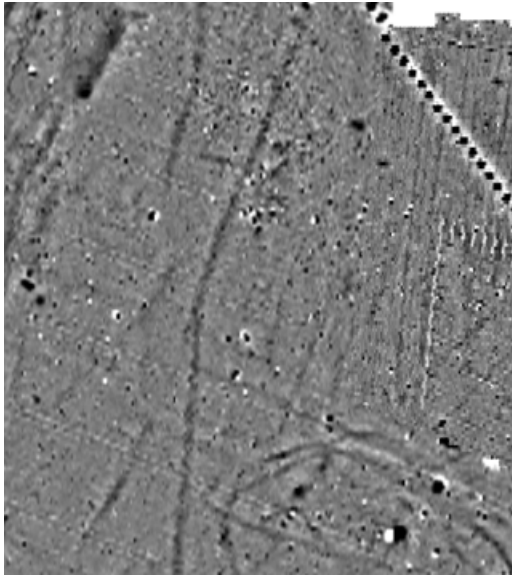
© Historic England Archive (taken by Damien Grady)



Geophysical survey

Geophysical survey identified buried archaeological settlement features, such as pits and ditches, in the same area as the main concentration of 5th to 8th century metalwork. Aerial photographs were examined for cropmarks and these were mapped as part of the National Mapping Programme, funded by Historic England.

These two survey techniques complemented each other, and when the results were combined, they showed a palimpsest of past human activity. In particular, the aerial photography revealed the foundations of a possible large timber hall within a complex of boundaries and enclosures, in an area where the metal detector survey recovered many high-status objects of the 6th and 7th centuries.



Geophysical survey results and features transcribed from the aerial photography showing the footprint of the hall

Archaeological excavation and analysis

Archaeological trenches were excavated to test the survey results and to give an insight into the character, date and preservation of the buried archaeology across the site. Several seasons of excavations took place in 2013–2014 and 2021–2023.



The survey results, the full assemblage of metal-detected objects and the 2013–2014 excavation results were analysed by specialists as part of the project *Lordship and Landscape in East Anglia CE 400–800*, funded by The Leverhulme Trust. This research confirmed that there was continual human occupation and activity at Rendlesham from late prehistory up to the modern day with a particularly large, rich and important settlement active during the 5th to 8th centuries.

Building on this work, investigations continued through the community archaeology project *Rendlesham Revealed: Anglo-Saxon Life in South-East Suffolk*. Funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, and working in close partnership with local and national organisations, the four-year project (2022–2024) includes a programme of archaeological fieldwork comprising geophysical survey, fieldwalking, palaeoenvironmental survey and excavation.

More than 400 volunteers from the local community have contributed to the fieldwork. Participants from Suffolk Family Carers and Suffolk Mind, and pupils from the local Rendlesham, Eyke and Wickham Market primary schools, have worked alongside volunteers from the wider public and the Suffolk Archaeological Field Group.

Community excavation in 2022 confirmed the presence of the timber hall previously identified by aerial survey, revealing the foundations of an elaborate building measuring 23m long and 10m wide.

The evidence gathered and analysed over the last 15 years identifies Rendlesham as the most extensive and materially wealthy settlement of its time known in England, and we can now be sure that it is the site of the royal centre mentioned by Bede in the 8th century.

Left:

Excavations at Rendlesham in 2022. In the right-hand trench is a large ditch that enclosed the royal complex, and within it the foundations of the large timber hall. There would have been several other halls nearby. In the left-hand trench is an area where rubbish from food preparation and feasting was buried. St Gregory's Church can be seen in the background.

Photo by Jim Pullen

Community excavation

A community of local volunteers, landowners, farmers, professionals and expert academics have worked together over 15 years to reveal the story of Rendlesham in the 5th to 8th centuries.





Rendlesham Before Sutton Hoo

AD 400–570

A settlement was established at Rendlesham in the 5th century and grew to cover 18 hectares (the area of 30 football pitches). The settlement was made up of many family farmsteads, with timber dwelling houses and huts used as workshops.

The people grew wheat and barley, and kept cattle, sheep and pigs. They buried their dead in a cemetery adjacent to the settlement.

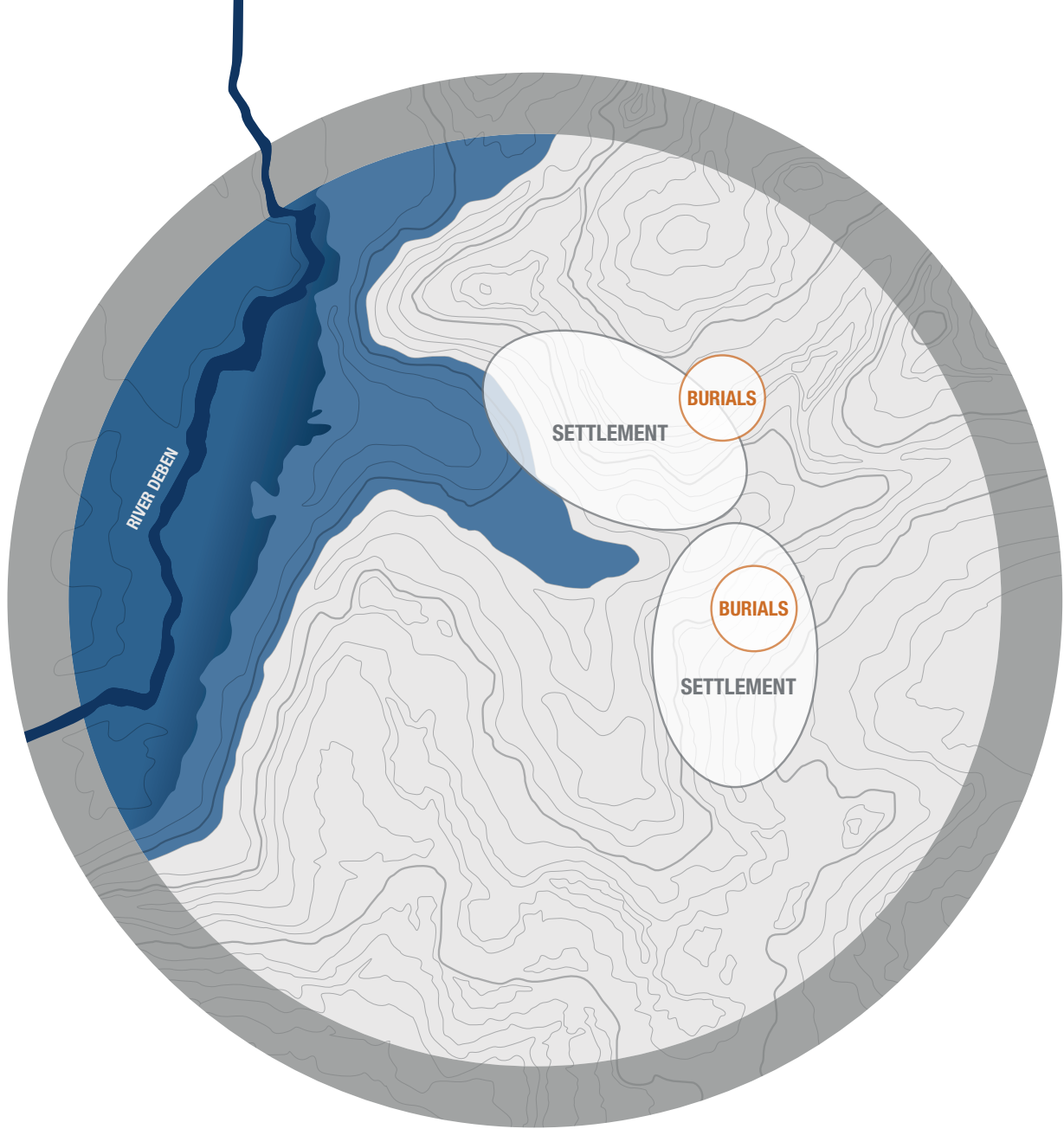
People of wealth and influence were among those living here in the 5th century. The discovery of unusual silver belt and sword fittings suggest the presence of a warrior elite with Southern Scandinavian connections.

Brooches from modern-day France and Germany may indicate trade or marriage connections with families on the Continent.

By the later 5th century, some of the objects originally from the Continent were being copied and made locally in England. Early examples of these have been found and were probably made at Rendlesham.

Between c. 525 and 575 Continental gold coinage began to circulate at Rendlesham, representing some of the earliest post-Roman currency in England.

At this time, the social and trading networks of the elite residents begin to shift away from the North Sea and towards Kent, France, and the Mediterranean world.



Areas of settlement and burial overlooked a tributary of the River Deben



Gold pendant (D-bracteate) with stylised animal motif. Diam. 2.2cm

Circular pendants (called bracteates), made of impressed gold sheet originated in the 5th century in southern Scandinavia as imitations of imperial Roman medallions and gold coins. They were then widely used and distributed around the North Sea coastal territories.



Horse and rider brooch. L. 2.3cm

This rare silver-gilt horse and rider brooch dates to the middle or later 5th century, with parallels in France and the Netherlands.

Royal Rendlesham

AD 570–720

In the late 6th century, a royal complex, covering c.6 hectares, was built on the promontory above the River Deben, near to the existing settlement. For the next 150 years Rendlesham was a royal centre, and is the most extensive and richest settlement of its time known in England.

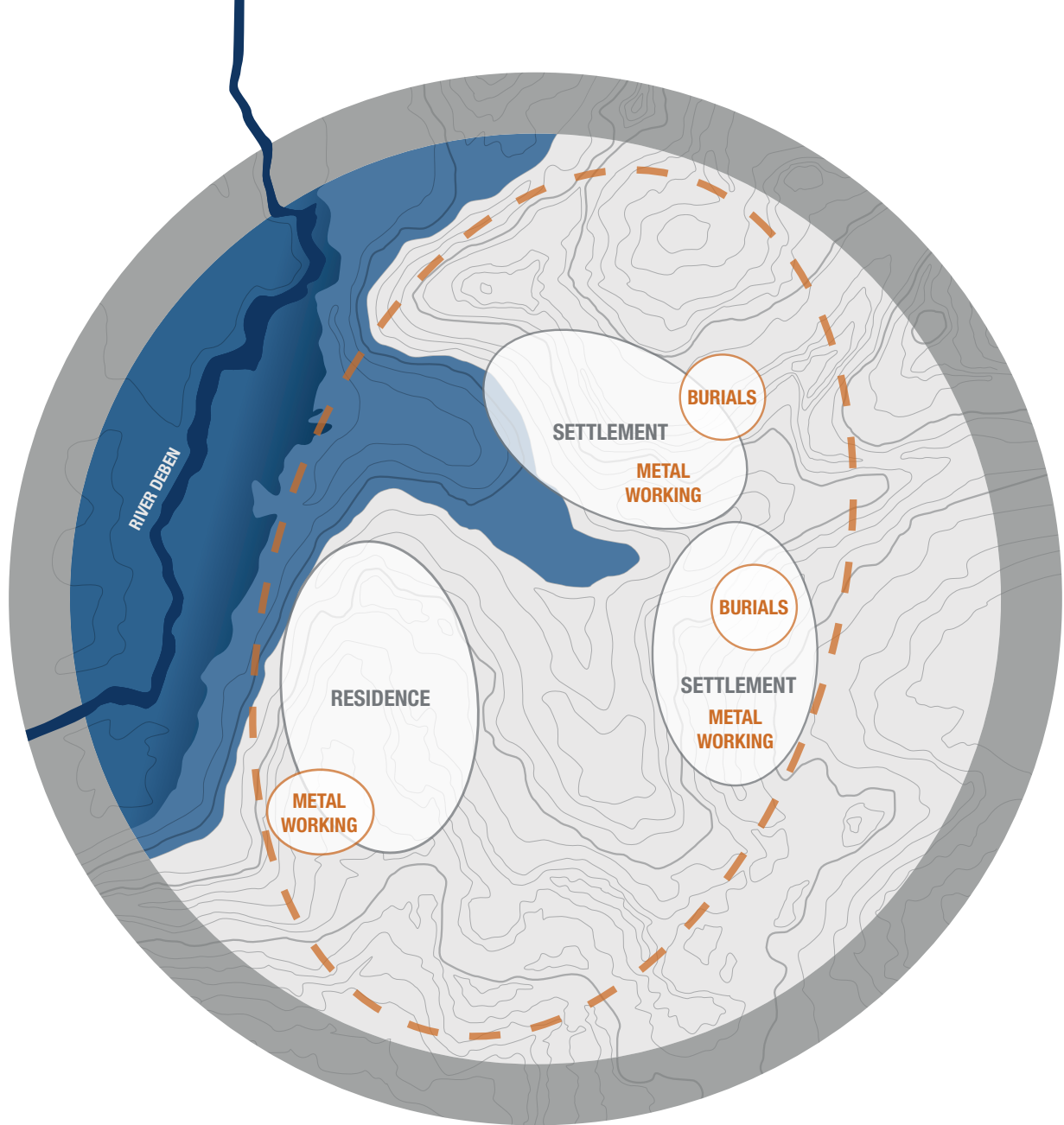
It is here that the first kings of the East Angles, accompanied by their household and warriors, would have administered justice, received tribute and diplomatic envoys, feasted their followers, and distributed gifts and favours.

The royal residence was supported by a wider local population, with perhaps 100–200 people living permanently at Rendlesham. This number would have greatly increased when the kings and their followers were in residence.

Palaeoenvironmental research shows that the River Deben was not navigable by large vessels above the head of the estuary, 4 kilometres downstream of Rendlesham. Visitors to Rendlesham, and traders with their goods, would have arrived on foot or horseback.

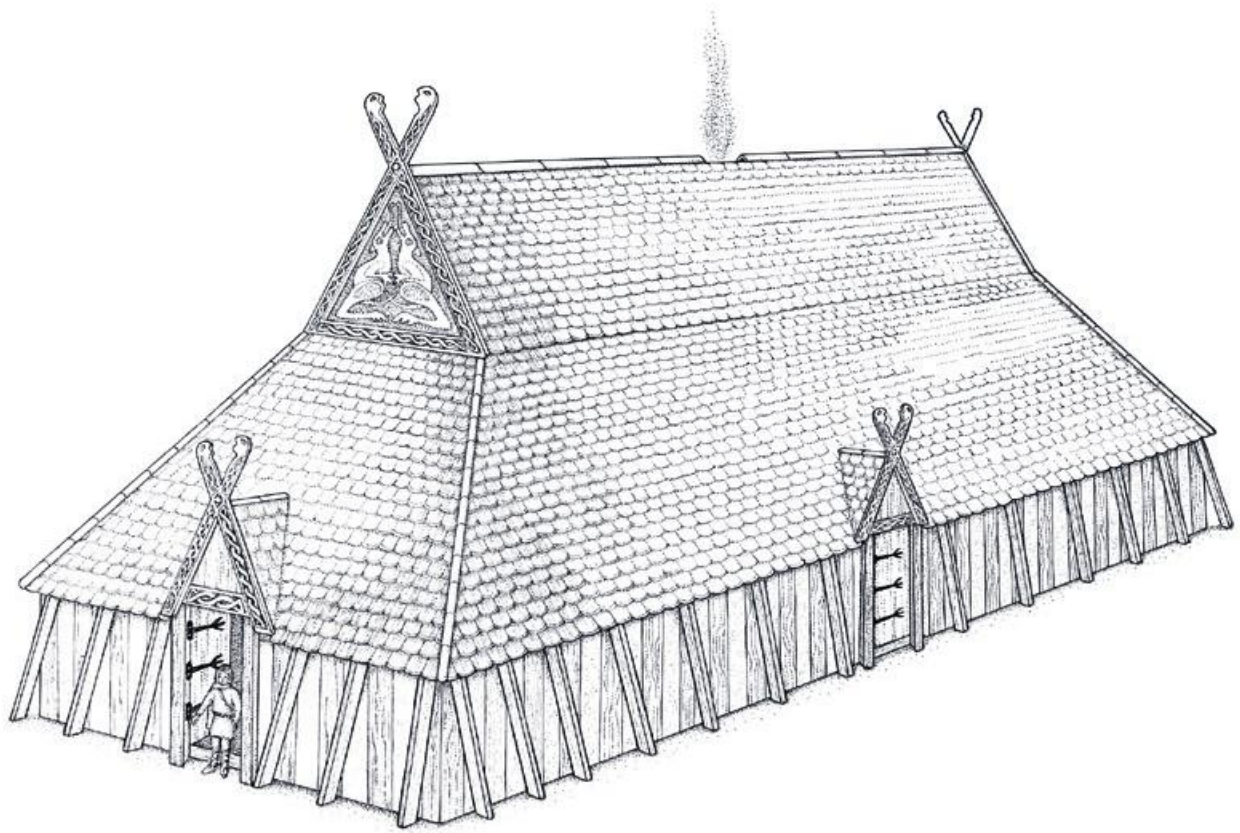
The East Anglian kingdom was made up of several constituent regions, which the kings travelled between. Rendlesham was the centre of one of these regions. There were other contemporary royal centres at Coddensham and Hoxne in Suffolk, and probably at Caistor-by-Norwich in Norfolk.

The princely burial grounds at Sutton Hoo and Snape served the kingly family who ruled at Rendlesham. Another elite burial is known from east Suffolk at Carlton Colville, and there is a tradition that Blythburgh, which may have been another royal centre, was the burial place of King Anna who was killed in 653/4.



The settlement now covered an area of about 50 hectares (equivalent to the size of 70 football pitches) and a royal complex was built on the promontory covering an area of 6 hectares.





Above:
Reconstruction of the hall at Rendlesham, based on the archaeological remains
excavated in 2022
Illustration by Donna Wreathall

Left:
The footprint of the hall at Rendlesham after excavation in 2022
Photo by Jim Pullen



Pyramid mount made of gold and with garnet sheet inlay over a silver core. H. 1.5cm

Pyramid mounts were attached to the suspension straps of a sword scabbard. This example from Rendlesham is unusual because the filigree is applied over a slab garnet.



Merovingian gold coin, adapted for use as a pendant c.580-700. Diam. 1.2cm

International trade and a centre of crafts

As a royal and administrative centre, Rendlesham was a wealthy place. It became a centre of international trade, with fairs and markets, and other rulers sent diplomatic gifts to the king.

Rendlesham played a crucial role in encouraging the use of coinage as money across south-east Suffolk. In the late 6th to mid-7th centuries gold coins from the Continent were used. From the mid-7th century, the first English gold coins were struck – some have been found at Rendlesham and may have been minted there. In the later 7th century, high value gold coins were replaced by lower value silver pennies and, as elsewhere in England at this time, there was a dramatic increase in the number of coins in circulation. This marks the wide acceptance of coinage and the use of coins in more everyday transactions.

Evidence of metalworking in both precious metal and bronze suggests that objects were being made at Rendlesham for all levels of society. Other crafts were also taking place such as the working of antler and bone, spinning and weaving and the production of pottery.



Early English gold shilling, c.630–660. Diam. 1.1cm



Early silver penny, c.710–760. Diam. 1.2cm



Byzantine coin, Follis of Justin II c.575-576, minted at Constantinople. Diam. 3cm

Copper coins and weights from Byzantium (Constantinople) suggest that merchants from the eastern Mediterranean visited Rendlesham. Weights were used with fine balances to check the weight of gold coins.



Byzantine coin weight engraved with the letter N which is a Byzantine denomination mark. L. 1.3cm



Copper-alloy mount fragment L. 2.7cm
from Rendlesham.

Several metal objects have been found at Rendlesham with decoration featuring a Y-shaped groove on the birds' beaks. Other objects with the same detail have also been found in eastern England, including the belt buckle from the great ship burial at Sutton Hoo, as well as on some of the objects in the Staffordshire Hoard, such as the great cross.

This may support the case for this Y-shaped groove being a 'signature' of East Anglian metalworking and perhaps a trait of an individual craftsman or workshop.



Balance beam fragment L. 2.7cm
from Rendlesham.

Rendlesham after Royalty

AD 720–800

In the second quarter of the 8th century the settlement underwent a dramatic change. The royal residence was abandoned, the area of the settlement and the intensity of activity contracted, and it was no longer a major centre of coin use or international contacts.

Between c.710 and 730 the number of coins found at Rendlesham decreases, at a time when elsewhere in England coin use is increasing.

By this time royal power was no longer expressed through central places with monumental great hall complexes like 7th-century Rendlesham. Instead, their power was exercised through a network of smaller rural estate centres, and through urban and religious (Christian) foundations.

International trade was increasingly controlled at a few coastal ports. Inland settlements focused on the rural economy and Rendlesham became a typical rural site.

The change at Rendlesham coincided with the expansion of the town and port at Ipswich and an upsurge in coin use there. Ipswich became a centre of international trade and craft production, thriving during the Danish (Viking) occupation in the late 9th century. It remained in the top ten most important towns in England until the Norman conquest.



Rare silver hammered penny c. 796-798, struck for Eadwald, King of East Anglia. Diam. 1.9cm

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ISBN 978-1-3999-5221-7



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