Reviewed Article:

The Weald & Downland Living Museum's Saxon Hall

Persistent Identifier: https://exarc.net/ark:/88735/10589

EXARC Journal Issue 2021/3 | **Publication Date:** 2021-08-26

Author(s): Lucy Hockley [1] ✉

[1] Weald & Downland Living Museum, Town Lane, Singleton, Chichester, West Sussex PO18 0EU, United Kingdom.

In the early days of the Weald & Downland Open Air Museum, from September 1970, there was a Saxon building on the site, which was one of only two archaeological reconstructions at the museum. This original sunken-floor Saxon building is no longer standing but, after several years in the planning, a new project saw the construction in 2015 of another Saxon building, the Saxon Hall from Steyning. The building was formally opened by the VIPs from a local school in October 2016. This article considers the development of over five years; charts the

training and construction phases of the building and how plans for its interpretation have evolved, including most recently during the COVID restrictions.

> “A good deal of thought has always been given to the location of buildings within the museum site, as the landscape and vistas are considered as a vital part of the context. The collection spans around 1,000 years of history, and certain areas of museum land are for agricultural use only. This means the location of the Saxon Hall was not a straightforward decision, but agreement was reached as research and training progressed.

The Weald & Downland Living Museum in West Sussex, UK, and its name refers to the geographical features of the Downs and the Weald of our regional landscape. In the surrounding area you can see flint, timber, sand pits and the iron working of the Weald. This landscape is vital in having shaped the built heritage that now can be seen at the museum, which includes over 50 structures carefully recorded, dismantled and re-erected at the site. All had no future on their original location, and in some notable instances had already been moved once and were again at imminent risk of demolition. It is often said that the founders of the Weald & Downland Living Museum, as it is now known, did not set out to start a museum. Rather, as educators and individuals who were involved in understanding vernacular architecture, they sought to save what was being rapidly lost. This background to the open-air museum, of which much more can be read in various publications (Zeuner, 2010) and on the museum website, is important to appreciate when putting the two current archaeological reconstructions at the museum into a context. The Saxon Hall from Steyning is one of these, and the other is the Medieval Cottage from Hangleton (See Figure 1).

On the poster advertising the first opening weekends of the museum in 1970 (See Figure 2), the original Saxon building is featured as one of six exhibits (See Figure 3). It was described as a weaver’s hut, based on excavations at Old Erringham Farm, near Shoreham and at Bishopstone, near Seaford. Regular weaving demonstrations took place, and many years later these demonstrations are still remembered by returning visitors. There was also the outline of a third archaeological site, to create the footprint of a Saxon hall from Chalton, in East Hampshire. This was from a village deserted in the ninth century. It was often referred to as the ‘dragon’s teeth’ as there were only short upright timbers indicating the location of the post holes in a full-size layout of the building with the intention never to build the full structure. A museum archaeology committee existed to oversee the work and there were discussions about undertaking similar projects, but the museum’s primary focus remained on the substantial risk to the built heritage all around the museum. This was the main mission of the museum, as well as others founded in England at a similar time, such as Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings, Beamish and the Museum of East Anglian Life. The Weald & Downland Living Museum is close to the original site where

Butser Ancient Farm was also being developed following the Council of British Archaeology initiative, and links between the two organisations existed. The museum's original Saxon building sparked the imagination of many people, with a replica made in a school grounds at Pound Hill Middle School in 1972.

After some substantial discussion and investigation, it was in 2015 that the 'new' Saxon building, the Saxon Hall from Steyning, began to take shape on the museum site. This was based on Building A from the 1988-89 excavation of a late Anglo-Saxon settlement at Market Field, Steyning, West Sussex. This excavation took place at the time of a new housing development. The date of the original building, its status and location, as well as the significant existing research made this building the most relevant of a number of options for the museum to choose for the next archaeological reconstruction. An article describes the excavation (Gardiner, 1993), and the museum team were in touch with Dr Gardiner at the outset of the project, as well as a small team of archaeologists who advised both on carpentry techniques and other relevant regional finds to inform decisions about the structure. Finds from the excavation are held in Worthing Museum, so not only were we able to read the report but we were also able view the original items thanks to their curatorial team. Some other key points about the Steyning site were the evidence of a 10th century enclosure, with two buildings of the same size and associated pits. Pottery recovered from the pits suggested activity on site from the 9th century, but the 10th century was the main period of activity.

There were three types of pits, for wells, disposal of rubbish and cess. A gold ring bearing the name of the owner was discovered in a rubbish pit. Analysis by the local museum service who hold the finds has shown it was made from primary gold into recycled material.

Carbonised samples from the sealed context suggest plants included cereals, flax and vetch. A similar enclosing ditch and entrance way can be found at the Late Saxon site of Little Paxton, Hunts and at the royal palace at Cheddar, Somerset (Gardiner, 1993).

The Weald & Downland Living Museum has always shown the process of different activities, not just a finished product, so in the summer of 2014 visitors would have also witnessed the hours of discussion in the woodyard about timber conversion and the training with experimental archaeologist Richard Darrah in Saxon cleaving techniques (See Figure 4).

Thus, the preparation of the wood for the frame began. The other archaeologist who was closely involved in advising at this stage of the project was Dr Damian Goodburn, with many years of experience in examining pre-Norman timberworks and in carrying out experimental practical archaeology (See Figure 5). He had been either personally involved or had a good knowledge of several significant excavations in the Wealden and Thames basin, both on wet and dry sites, which provided a wealth of material for interpretation. Even standing buildings are open to significant differences of opinion and those opinions may change over time, in light of further research, so discussions had to take account of the best evidence of the time

and, as with all exhibits and indeed history in general, the museum team makes an effort to talk about the limits of knowledge and levels of probability. Although much later in the era than other archaeological sites, some visits, including West Stow Anglo-Saxon village and Sutton Hoo, were useful for their context.

A good deal of thought has always been given to the location of buildings within the museum site, as the landscape and vistas are considered as a vital part of the context. The collection spans around 1,000 years of history, and certain areas of museum land are for agricultural use only. This means the location of the Saxon Hall was not a straightforward decision, but agreement was reached as research and training progressed. Planning permission is also required for each and every building on the site since the museum is located in the South Downs National Park, which is one of the most recent national parks in the UK. It is thought that the museum's long track record of excellence in education and as a responsible visitor attraction may have helped to secure the necessary planning permission.

It is perhaps interesting to note that the museum sits on the edge of the village of Singleton, and this name is said to be derived from the Anglo-Saxon word 'sengel' which means 'burnt clearing'. The village parish church was a 'hundreal' church, i.e., the central church of a Saxon administrative grouping of churches, and it is still possible to see evidence of the church architecture from the Saxon era in doorways, the nave and other features. Due to the close proximity of the coast, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records many raids in the area (Dumville and Keynes, 1983), and the late Saxon period is a fascinating period for the museum to compare and contrast with later periods from construction to legal framework, language, religious belief, farming etc. (Armstrong, 1995). We also generally use the term Saxon, rather than Anglo-Saxon, given the different settlement patterns across the country. Also, in the period between the construction of the first and second Saxon building at the museum, continued research has helped us to better understand life at this time. This includes the role of women and their place in society (Fell, 1986), the daily lives of children (Crawford, 1999) as well as agricultural developments and rural settlements (Hamerow, 2012).

The museum team utilised the training from and discussions with experts to hew and cleave the timber needed for this earth fast building. The Steyning excavation revealed a building 4.4m wide by 8.9m long with detailed post-hole information. In late 2014, the museum sent out a list of timber required to a few local sources and around 40 sweet chestnut logs came from a private estate in nearby Fittleworth, where they had been extracted by horse logging. Sweet chestnut was one of the possible woods identified, as it is a durable wood that normally splits well. In the woodland Joe Thompson, the Carpenter associated with the museum who would be leading the construction work, selected timber specifically for posts, rafters or collars. Then on site he cut them to length and labelled the ends. Julian Bell, Museum Curator and a skilled hewer (See Figure 6), worked the timber between November 2014 and April 2015. This entailed using a felling axe to cut notches and remove most of the

waste wood, then a side axe to complete the finished surface. Oak boards for the doors came from a local National Trust estate and were similarly treated. Nick and Pete, members of the museum site team, drew the short straw of digging the post holes into the chalky ground, following the excavation plan closely.

Tree wrighting of the Saxon era is quite different from the carpentry of our later historic buildings. During a two-and-a-half-week period beginning on 23 June 2015, under the supervision of Carpenter Joe Thompson, a team of three and five volunteers worked daily on the frame (See Figure 7). Sixteen individuals took part in this stage and all had attended at least one of the timber framing courses at the museum run by Joe, which had enabled them to demonstrate sufficient skills and express an interest in taking part in the upcoming project. A time lapse video of the construction process is online (Weald & Downland Living Museum, 2015). In 950AD, the tools used would be a hatchet, mallet, auger and string line, also the set of tools used in construction (See Figure 8). Rather than a tape measure, the team used a long piece of wood to check the building width and other lengths, as well as working by eye. Saws were not used in this type of construction at this time. The era has evidence of a range of fastenings, including treenails. Unlike the later buildings at the museum, joints were cut as the work progressed. The joints are known as a 'tap lock' joint in the main part of the frame, with scarfs and cup joints on the rafters. Several of the later buildings at the museum are also earth fast buildings, i.e., with timber posts that go straight into the ground, such as the Windlesham Carpenter's shop and the posts of the Sheffield Park Saw pit. However, the horizontal timber sole plate was gradually adopted from the late 12th century and from this time timber framing, or 'box frames' as frames at the museum are classified, were widely known in this country.

The walls of the Saxon Hall are of wattle and daub (See Figure 9). Horizontal boards were briefly considered for one end of the building, but there was insufficient evidence of these boards being used. Wattlework existing from archaeological sites contained a wider range of possible species than would normally be used today (Goodburn, 2015). Local coppice worker and craftsperson Rosie Rendell provided the hazel for the double sails (uprights) and horizontal wattle. All the work was done *in situ*, using treenails to secure the hazel into the frame to ensure it did not dry and subsequently move away from the frame. Four different daub mixes were trialled on the wattle by Joe Thompson and team, with the chosen mix including loam, ox dung and barley straw. Following a lime burn on site, the building was lime washed.

Thatching was undertaken by local Master Thatcher Chris Tomkins, with Andy Pickering and Daryl Mallows, using material grown and threshed in the museum in late September and early October 2015 (see Figure 10). On top of the rafters are hurdles, with a layer of turf under the thatch as found in excavations of water-logged sites from the Thames basin area (Goodburn, 2015). These sites were also the evidence base for the triangular 'wind eyes' that

are cut into some of the posts (See Figure 11). They were found in Uxbridge and date to c.800AD to 900AD. It is thought that the word window could be a corruption of 'wind eye' and they do let in some light and air to the structure but symbolism beyond that is open to debate. Another feature that was clearly recorded in the excavation report by archaeologist Mark Gardiner (1993) is the two posts align at a 45˚ angle to the others.

Some furniture including low benches and bed space were built into the building, making use of the lower height space under the eaves. Throughout the preparation and construction process the team chatted to visitors, and other members of our staff and volunteer body, to share the process. We also had many different educational and visitor programmes, from one day adult learning courses, regular school workshops to historic life weekends focussing on Anglo- Saxon society.

For the formal opening day on Friday 14 October 2016, local pupils came to cut the ribbon (See Figure 12). We then had a special day of talks and demonstrations on the Saturday, and since then have repeated weekends when we gather experts to talk about both the construction of this hall and all aspects of Saxon life. One particularly important element to bring to life is that of language, so we have been pleased to have Stephen Pollington, a long-time associate of the museum and expert in Old English, to give readings and talks in the hall on the period and language (See Figure 13). Readings of Beowulf, particularly from the recent Seamus Heaney translation (2007), have proved extremely popular. Also, well-known passages, often of Bede's work (Colgrave and Mynors, 1969), are vital when putting this late Saxon era building into the context of this long period of history (Fleming, 2011).

This year, as we begin to take slow steps out of lockdown, we are planning first to construct a Saxon bread oven outside, then when frosts are over to lime wash the building and install a loom to again demonstrate the slightly larger-scale weaving of this era. The Saxon Hall has helped the museum to engage visitors once more in its 1,000 years of history by bringing in comparisons and appreciating elements of continuity as well as change. For schools, this is often a walk between activities in different areas of the museum and taking part in the hands-on activities offered by open-air museums that put history into a memorable context. A varied and continuously evolving programme of activity has been developed around this building, from new topics on our popular 'Historic Life Weekends' when we focus on adults and children outside any formal programme, to the structured school workshops and fun family activity weeks. Outside of the museum, there are longer-term research projects underway, on draft animals, agriculture and everyday life, that we will continue to be involved in and follow, so our understanding of this era evolves with new research. Most recently, training for staff and volunteers (via Zoom) delivered updates on the fascinating research of the 'Feeding Anglo-Saxon England' project, given by the Principal Investigator, Professor Helena Hamerow. (Feedsax, 2021).

As the building that represents the earliest point in the museum, the Saxon Hall forms a starting point for, as well as a useful comparison with, later eras. The initial focus of the museum, the urgent rescue efforts for buildings at imminent risk of demolition, has reduced over the decades as vernacular architecture is more likely to be appreciated, its importance recognised and therefore less often at risk. This has allowed the museum to focus on a variety of conservation projects in the existing collection, take timing to repair structures and erect them on site. Programmes of activity provide the means for people of all ages and backgrounds to better understand regional vernacular architecture, social history and traditional rural trades and crafts, with the Steyning Saxon Hall making an important contribution to this process.

Keywords (re)construction
archaeological open-air museum
woodworking

Country United Kingdom

Bibliography

Armstrong, R., 1995. *A History of Sussex.* Chichester: Phillimore

Colgrave, B. and Mynors, R. eds., 1969. *Bede: Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Crawford, S., 1999. *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing.

Dumville, D, and Keynes, S. eds., 1983. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition.* Cambridge: D.S.Brewer.

Fell, C., 1986. *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

FeedSax, 2021. *Feeding Anglo-Saxon England. The Bioarchaeology of an Agricultural Revolution.* Available at: < https://feedsax.arch.ox.ac.uk/index.html > [accessed: 5 April 2021]

Fleming, R., 2011. *Britain after Rome. The Fall and Rise 400 to 1070*. London: Penguin

Gardiner, M., 1993. The Excavation of a late Anglo-Saxon settlement at Market Field, Steyning, 1988-89. *Sussex Archaeological Collections*. 131, pp.21-67

Goodburn, D., 2015. Notes on Saxon Wattlework. (Personal communication, 5 October 2015)
Heaney, S (tr.)., 2007. *Beowulf* (Bilingual Edition). London: Faber and Faber

Hamerow, H., 2012. *Rural Settlements and Society in Anglo-Saxon England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Weald & Downland Living Museum, 2015. Timelapse filming of construction of the Saxon building. Available at: < https://youtu.be/6fJxNpD4K2k > [Accessed: 5 April 2021]

Zeuner, D. ed., 2010. *Building History. Weald & Downland Open Air Museum. 1970-2010 – the first forty years*. Singleton: Weald & Downland Living Museum

Corresponding Author

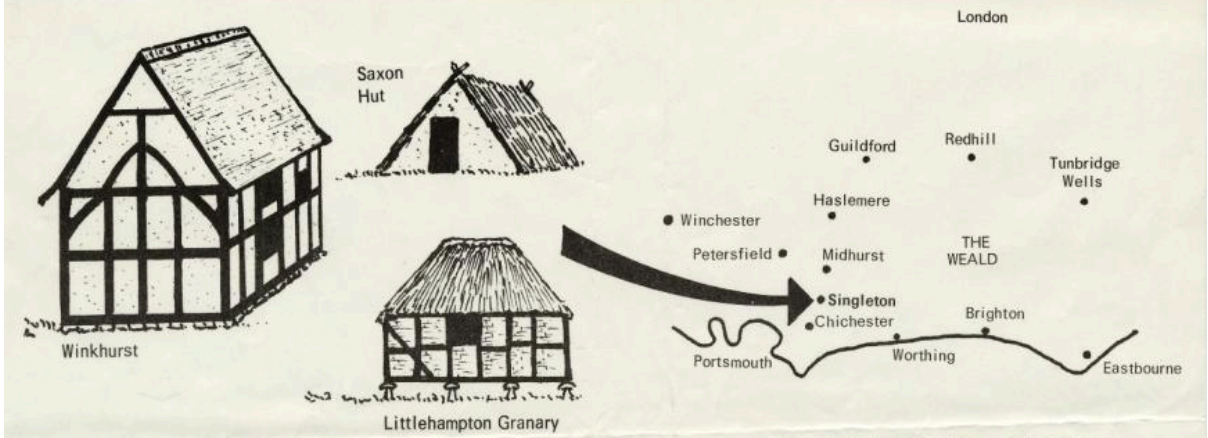
Lucy Hockley
Weald & Downland Living Museum
Town Lane, Singleton, Chichester
West Sussex PO18 0EU
United Kingdom
E-mail Contact

Gallery Image

FIG 1. PHOTOGRAPH OF THE MEDIEVAL COTTAGE FROM HANGLETON, AT THE WEALD & DOWNLAND LIVING MUSEUM. COPYRIGHTS BY WDLM

Weald and Downland Open Air Museum

Singleton nr. Chichester



OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

TO SEE

WORK IN PROGRESS

on SATURDAYS & SUNDAYS

from 5th SEPTEMBER

until 11th OCTOBER

ADMISSION:-

ADULTS, 4/- 11 - 6 pm.

STUDENT GROUPS (by arrangement) 2/-

CHILDREN UNDER 14, 1/-

FREE CAR PARK **PICNIC AREAS**

Mitchell & Co. (Printers) Ltd., Arundel.

FIG 2. POSTER FOR MUSEUM OPENING WEEKENDS IN 1970. COPYRIGHTS BY WDLM

FIG 3. PHOTOGRAPH OF THE ORIGINAL SAXON BUILDING, AT THE WEALD & DOWNLAND LIVING MUSEUM. COPYRIGHTS BY WDLM

FIG 4. PHOTOGRAPH OF TRAINING DAY WITH RICHARD DARRAH. COPYRIGHTS BY WDLM

FIG 5. PHOTOGRAPH OF DR DAMIAN GOODBURN DOING A TREEWRIGHTING DEMONSTRATION. COPYRIGHTS BY WDLM

FIG 6. PHOTOGRAPH OF JULIAN BELL HEWING TIMBER. COPYRIGHTS BY WDLM

FIG 7. PHOTOGRAPH OF JOE THOMPSON AND SOME OF THE TEAM OF VOLUNTEER TREEWRIGHTS. PHOTO BY LOUISE ADAMS FOR WDLM

FIG 8. PHOTOGRAPH OF SOME OF THE TOOLS USED ON THE FRAME. PHOTO BY LOUISE ADAMS FOR WDLM

FIG 9. PHOTOGRAPH OF WALLS OF THE SAXON HALL. COPYRIGHTS BY WDLM

FIG 10. PHOTOGRAPH OF THATCHING OF THE SAXON HALL. COPYRIGHTS BY WDLM

FIG 11. PHOTOGRAPH OF WIND EYES OF THE SAXON HALL. COPYRIGHTS BY WDLM

FIG 12. PHOTOGRAPH OF OPENING DAY. PHOTO BY LOUISE ADAMS FOR WDLM

FIG 13. PHOTOGRAPH OF STEPHEN POLLINGTON DURING A READING IN OLD ENGLISH. PHOTO BY LOUISE ADAMS FOR WDLM