

After receiving a legacy from a late member, the Lower Test Valley Archaeological Study Group (LTVAS) decided to undertake a three-year project to look into Anglo-Saxon history and archaeology of the Romsey area. They approached the University of Winchester and were offered support from Alex Langlands, then a student completing his PhD. Alex set them in the right direction, but shortly afterwards he went on to join the University of Swansea and to continue occasional TV appearances in history- and archaeology-based programmes. The project, however, has now been running for six years, with advice and help from staff at Winchester University and local professional archaeologists.

The Charters are legal documents detailing the grant of a parcel of land or estate, normally by the King or important noble, given to a person or ecclesiastic group, for instance in Romsey, the Royal Abbey/Nunnery. Most of the text was in Latin, with boundary descriptions in Old English (Saxon) providing evidence for the borders. The Charters also included a list of witnesses but was not signed. Copies of the charters are available in print for Michelmersh, Slackstead, Ampfield, Nursling and Romsey and an attempt was made to refer to the originals or facsimiles as well. They mostly date to the 10th century, although Nursling was earlier. The group also examined Charters for some local areas with common boundaries, including Chilcomb which surrounds Winchester.

Resources used to research the charter boundaries include evidence from old maps, documents and place names, and field survey. In researching old maps it appears that many Parish borders on 18th century copies kept roughly to the original charter boundaries, such as Nursling (Nutshalling). The identification of landscape features was assisted by the use of a LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) survey carried out by the Environment Agency originally for the purpose of flood defence, which provides 3D modelling of topography, for instance ridges and valleys. Mary gave several examples showing how the LTVAS team were able to identify boundary markers, and they found it might be necessary to check where named locations took the definite article (e.g. 'the pebble heap' describing a heap of pebbles, or "Pebble Heap" as a place name). Locations mentioned within the Charters were on the edge of an estate, not in the middle.

The Charter boundary points would name features such as trees (e.g. 'the old oak'), rivers/brooks, footpaths, roads and place names used in Saxon times. Looking at the Michelmersh Charter, the boundary starts and finishes at the River Test, so Awbridge (west of the river) was not included at that time. In some cases five or six location points might be known, and logical guesses were made on points between these, and then checked on early Ordnance Survey maps which showed older names. In the 1930s a man named Grundy did some research on the Charters and one location marked as "populfinige" was translated by him as referring to a poplar tree. LTVAS members retranslated this as "pebble heap" and when they walked the boundary in this area there was a small hill and on mounting it, they found round pebbles all over the surface, indicating this was possibly the point referred to - now known as Popley Hill.

Route ways were frequently mentioned, which could be "street", "path", "lane", "herepath" (from "here" = army, a military route) or "horseway". In the Romsey Charter a boundary is described to run 'first up along the street', often taken to mean a Roman road, but it could refer to any built way. This might indicate the built up causeway road north out of Romsey (passing the former 'Water World'), standing above the surrounding land which floods regularly. Fields on the eastern side of this road are still known as "street mead". Another name is "Stemns Path" referring to the southern

part of the Romsey boundary and the northern part of Nursling boundary. “Stemn” means an obligation to do a task, possibly indicating that the people in the area were obliged to keep up the repair of this road, perhaps for military purposes. The LiDAR landscape survey shows the route goes along a ridge marked as ‘the ancient Winchester Road’, which runs near Toot Hill – “toot” in Saxon means lookout so being a raised area, it could have been used for that purpose. In Saxon times it is thought that the Nursling area included Rownhams. Landscape features such as ‘Leas’ refer to clearings in woods, or to the wood itself. ‘Wood pasture’ would have had individual large trees, smaller trees, and scrub surrounded by grass.

The image illustrates the boundary at Ampfield (then known as Ticcensfeld), a small estate. The LiDAR survey shows the valleys and the Bishop’s Bank or Boundary which runs behind the woods almost parallel with the Straight Mile into Romsey (the land adjoining belonged to the Bishop of Winchester). It can still be seen in some areas, especially along Jermyns Lane and through Hilliers Gardens. A map of 1588 shows this boundary bank as the “Haga”.



The Ampfield boundary Haga also includes the location of a “holding stowe” or slaughtering place, which suggests that it was used as a game enclosure. On the northern boundary the name “Seaxes Sceath” indicates a pond with a spring now known as Woolley Green Pond. This name could also mean a sword or knife, suggesting it may have been a pond used for ritual deposition of metal weapons. In the Slackstead Charter the northern boundary shows “baere ealdon cwealmstowe” ie killing or execution place (not far from Farley Mount). It is at the junction of three parish boundaries, on a Roman road, and also close to a Bronze Age barrow known as ‘Robin Hood's Butt’, a type of site commonly chosen for executions.

In the Romsey Charter, the "Old Test" is named as part of the boundary, which suggests that the main channel of the Test ran further west in early Saxon times. The River Blackwater joins the Test here and was part of this boundary at the time of the original Charter. As an aside, Mary mentioned that the Millbrook Charter has Lordswood on its boundary: there is no evidence at present that a ‘lord’ had ever lived at Lordswood, but an area on one old map gives the name as “Thunres Lea”, meaning Thors Wood, a name which may have become ‘bastardised’ over the centuries.

The lecture was very well attended by SAS members and visitors, and gave rise to lots of questions from the floor and discussion afterwards. Many thanks to Mary and colleagues from LTVAS Group for their painstaking work and fascinating results, which shows what can be achieved by a local community archaeology project. For more information, please see www.ltvas.org.uk.

Thank you also to Mandy Kesby for her detailed notes of the lecture.