

## Introduction

The village of Exning (Fig. 1) in the most westerly part of Suffolk is a small settlement appended to the north-west of the larger town of Newmarket. Despite its modern inferiority to Newmarket, it is understood to have been an important location in the Anglo-Saxon period. It lies close to the Devil's Dyke, an obstruction to the Icknield Way, and it is postulated that it was the site of a royal palace. The suggestion that such a household was present in Anglo-Saxon Exning is derived from statements in the *Liber Eliensis* or 'Book of Ely' that St Æthelthryth, or Etheldreda, the daughter of King Anna, who would become Abbess of Ely, was born here. 'The Book of Ely', states that:

“The blessed and glorious virgin Æthelthryth was born among the East Angles at a well-reputed place called Exning, of the noblest parents, as Bede, the venerable teacher and most truthful writer of history testifies. She was the daughter of Anna, King of the East Angles, born of a mother called Hereswith...”

(Fairweather (trans.) 2005, 15-16).

Anna's seat of power, however, appears to have been in eastern Suffolk, possibly at Rendlesham, and it has been suggested that the presence of a royal seat at Exning is unlikely and that the importance of the settlement at this time is the result of continual elaboration of the story (May 1986, 28). While the high status burials recorded during the excavation here cannot be proven to be members of the East Anglian royal family and do not contradict the suggestion that Anna's centre of power was further to the east, they do demonstrate that a wealthy, and therefore presumably powerful and influential, group of people was active in and around Exning in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It is possible that Exning was one of several royal residences in the East Anglian kingdom at this time or that it was the seat of slightly lower-ranking members of the aristocratic classes.

Much of the population of England in the 5<sup>th</sup> to mid 7<sup>th</sup> centuries were buried in ancestral cemeteries, which often remained in use for over a century, and which were located close or adjacent to settlements. From the mid 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards, however, settlement space and burial space had become more integrated and even began to merge (Hamerow 2010a, 71, 73). The later 7<sup>th</sup> century date assigned to the cemetery therefore suggests that settlement activity may have occurred in very close proximity. However, the cemetery at Exning does not display the aligned inhumations and high proportion of unfurnished burials that Hamerow (2010b, 73) suggests are typical of these later cemeteries. Settlement might, therefore, be considered to have occurred nearby but distinct and separate from the cemetery; this would fit

with the excavated evidence as no structural or other evidence to suggest the presence of settlement activity was recorded during the excavation. No nearby settlement has, so far, been identified in association with the elite cemeteries at Sutton Hoo and Snape. If this is not just an artefact of archaeological retrieval, it might be argued that burial at a distance from their place of residence might have been a mechanism for elite family groups to convey a claim to authority over an extended area (Scull 2019, 132). The carbonised plant remains from the grave fills, which consisted of occasional charred cereal grains and small charcoal fragments, are likely to represent accidental inclusions as re-deposited material or background scatters of carbonised remains. The sparse recovery of carbonised plant remains suggests that the excavated area was peripheral to areas of cereal production and processing during the site's use as a cemetery. Until the late 6<sup>th</sup> century, most Anglo-Saxon settlements tended to be fairly dispersed and to lack obvious boundaries or signs of planning. Towards the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, however, a small number of settlements with a markedly different appearance from those earlier settlements emerged. Central to these new settlements were one or more exceptionally large buildings that can be considered to be the “Great Halls” referred to in Anglo-Saxon literature (Hamerow 2010b, 59-60). An Anglo-Saxon Hall and pottery have been recorded in the core of the village (Suffolk Historic Environment Record EXG052 & EXG0101) and it is possible that this represents the settlement with which the cemetery is associated. The high status of the settlement postulated from historical sources and hinted at by the character of some of the grave assemblages might be considered to suggest, however, that further, and perhaps richer, evidence of settlement should be present within Exning.

King Anna appears to have been a serious threat to the rising power of Penda of Mercia. He was temporarily expelled from East Anglia following a serious attack by the Mercians in c. 650 and a later attack, c. 653-654, resulted in Anna's death (Yorke 1990, 63). Æthelthryth was born around AD 630 (Farmer 2003, 138). She was married initially to Tondbeht, *princeps* of the South Gyrwe, and after his death to Ecgfrith, king of Northumbria. She was much admired by Bede for remaining chaste throughout her 12 years of marriage to Ecgfrith, after which she became a nun at Coldingham under her aunt, Ebbe (AD672), before becoming Abbess of Ely in the following year (Foot 2018, 38). She died at Ely in AD 679 (Attwater 1980, 119).

Despite the historical sources indicating the importance of Exning in the early Anglo-Saxon period, the area has not produced an overwhelming amount of physical evidence

of this date. An Anglo-Saxon Hall and pottery have been recorded in the core of the village (HER EXG052 & EXG0101), while a 6<sup>th</sup> century bronze wrist clasp was recovered to the south of the site (HER EXG029). Medieval settlement at Exning is recorded in the Domesday Book, and an extensive scatter of Saxo-Norman and medieval pottery, floor tile and metalwork (HER EXG051) suggests that occupation may have been distributed quite widely beyond the core of the village.

From late 2012, Archaeological Solutions Ltd (AS) became involved in archaeological investigation of a site at Burwell Road, Exning (Fig. 1) in support of a planning application for residential development at this location. The site lies to the south of properties fronting Burwell Road. Burwell Road leads away from Exning to the west

and the site is therefore positioned just to the west of the main core of the settlement. The site itself comprised an irregularly shaped parcel of land forming part of an arable field of some 6.05ha.

The investigations commenced with a geophysical survey of the proposed development site (Smalley 2012). Geophysics recorded no anomalies that were identified as of ‘probable’ archaeological origin but some anomalies of ‘possible’ archaeological origin were identified. Positive linear and area anomalies were recorded across the survey area, possibly representing pits and ditches, although the possibility remained that they were of natural origin. Amongst the anomalies were two large circular features in the central and eastern part of the site. A large circular anomaly was also recorded in the western part of the site,



**Figure 1. The Site**

which was considered to perhaps relate to an earthwork rather than a ditch. Magnetic ‘spikes’ indicating ferrous objects were also recorded, and it was considered most likely that these were modern debris. Other anomalies included two swathes of magnetic variation, thought to be of geological/pedological origin, close-centred linear anomalies thought to relate to modern ploughing, and linear anomalies on the northern and eastern perimeters of the area, thought to be modern vehicle tracks.

In January 2013, an archaeological trial trench evaluation of the site was conducted (Gorniak 2013). Twenty-nine trenches (c. 1167 linear metres), representing a 3.5% sample of the c. 6ha site, were excavated. The majority of the evaluation trenches contained no archaeological features but some archaeology was recorded in the north-western, north-eastern and central parts of the site. The majority of features contained no archaeological finds and were therefore undated. Two features contained a small number of sherds of 11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> century pottery. This material was, however, abraded and therefore possibly residual; as such the dating of these features was not secure. Each of these features also contained residual Roman pottery. Of the recorded features, most were ditches or gullies although two pits were also recorded. Interpretation of the features was uncertain as the majority were undated and isolated although some spatial relationships between linear features hinted at enclosures or field systems. There was limited correlation of the archaeological features with the geophysical survey data.

On the basis of the site’s potential to contain Roman and medieval archaeology, as suggested by the results of the trial trench evaluation, an open area archaeological excavation was conducted by Archaeological Solutions Ltd during October and November 2014. The work was carried out in accordance with a brief issued by Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service Conservation Team (dated 15<sup>th</sup> August 2014) and a Written Scheme of Investigation produced by AS (dated 15<sup>th</sup> August 2014). The preceding trial trench evaluation (Gorniak 2013) identified archaeological features of medieval date and undated features in the north-eastern and central parts of the site (within Evaluation Trenches 14, 16, 19 and 21). In accordance with the brief issued by SCC AS-CT, archaeological excavation was focussed on area of 0.9ha within this part of the site (Fig. 2). During excavation, this area was extended slightly to the north-west due to the identification of inhumations within, and extending beyond the original limits of, this part of the excavation area.



Figure 2. Phase plan