

LOST FEATURES OF AN ANCIENT LANDSCAPE

by ROBERT STEERWOOD

THE MID-COASTAL AREA of east Suffolk, incorporating the Blything and Plomesgate Hundreds, is particularly rich in place-names of the early medieval period. The settlements of Aldringham, Knodishall and Friston are but a few of the recognised sites possessing Old English nomenclature. Many lesser known examples remain buried in texts, field names, maps and perambulations, as these gradually emerge they serve to offer a fuller understanding of the social and cultural significance of an ancient landscape.

Polsborough Gate

The name 'Polsborough Gate' appears four times in "Cross Roads" itineraries recorded by John Kirby in 1735 (Suffolk Traveller, p 30, 35, 36).

From Blithburgh to Melton

...“At 1m. 4 1/2 f. the right goes to Knodishall, the left to Aldeburgh, leaving a Windmill a little on the right, At 2m. 3 1/2 f. the right goes to Saxmundham, the left to Aldeburgh. At 2m. 5 1/4 f. is Polsborough-Gate; the left goes to Aldeburgh, the right to Benhall; leaving Friston Decoy a little on the left, at 3m. 3 1/4 f. a View to Friston-Hall. At 4m. The left acute backward, over Snape Race-Ground, goes to Aldeburgh. At 4m. 3f. Is Snape Crown Inn.”...

From Woodbridge to Orford

...“Passing along from Melton Village over Wilford Bridge, through Eyke, Tunstall and Snape, to Polsborough-Gate; it being thither, (as mentioned in the road from Blithburgh to Melton) 10m. 5 1/2 f. here take the right hand Way, leading to a Lane called Rushmere-Street, over Haslewood Common, at 3m. 1 1/4 f. from the said Gate, is Aldeburgh Market Cross.”...

From Aldeburgh Market Cross

...“Returning back from Aldeburgh Market Cross, in the last mentioned Road, through Rushmere Street, avoid the left hand Way at the entrance of the Walks leading to Polesborough Gate. At 3m. 1 3/4 f. cross the Road leading from Blithburgh to Melton, leaving Polesborough Gate on the left near a Furlong, passing over Friston Walks,”...

Claude Morley (Morley 1949) makes reference to the above with the interpretation that it indicates an ancient name related to a formerly “conspicuous tumulus”, which he suggests derived its origin from “Pfoles beorth, or god Pfowl’s Barrow”. The association of Polsborough-gate with tumulus or tumuli does seem probable in an area rich in burial mounds of the Bronze Age and Saxon periods.

Notable amongst sites local to this area is the Snape burial ground, lying mid-way between Snape and Friston. It is here that a sizable tumulus containing a ship burial thought to date from the latter half of the 6th century (Filmer-Sankey & Pestell, p.196) swamped an existing Bronze Age mound.

The presence of the ship burial and smaller boat burials may point towards an argument favouring a fertility cult (Filmer-Sankey & Pestell, p. 263) and a god Phol is recorded in the 9th century 'Merseburg Charms', appearing as a minor deity within the Scandinavian fertility cult of the Vanir (Ellis Davidson, 1973 p.p.183, 236¹). However any conclusions drawn can only be speculative at best. The barrow containing the ship burial lay to the east of the site, being the most prominent amongst a group of six barrows in total². Recorded by Francis Francis in 1862 as measuring 85 feet across and 7 to 8 feet high (Bruce-Mitford, p.25) this tumulus would have presented a significant feature in the landscape even at that time. Filmer-Sankey puts forward a hypothesis that during the 6th century the largest barrows may have stood at five meters, could have been visible from the Alde estuary and possibly from the sea (Filmer-Sankey & Pestell, p.p. 1-3).

Kirby's maps do not pictographically represent Polsborough-gate as a specific landmark, which would seem to be an unusual omission. Neither does such a location appear on any other map discovered to date. However a fork in the road is indicated on the route towards Benhall. Initially this would seem to present an unnecessary deviation until the immediate topography and a further local place-name 'Rushmere' is taken into consideration. 'Rushmere Street' running from Hazlewood Common and heading right towards Leiston, meets an area of low ground close to the current Blackheath Corner. It is here that the road forks to the left for Benhall. This fork follows a route to higher ground before petering-out onto the common-land and whins to the south-east of Friston. Crossing these it would be possible to pick up the track 'Sloe Lane' which continues on to Benhall. The point where this route crosses the old road from Snape would have offered a view from which the Snape barrows would be clearly visible and it is this point that Kirby appears to have located as Polsborough Gate.

The name Rushmere has Anglo Saxon origins, O.E. *rýscemara* (Ekwall, p.397) indicating an area of wetland reed-bed. Such an area is not apparent today but may have been a significant landscape feature around the 6th century, when a possibility of higher water levels and lower silt deposition could suggest that the lowland area was much wetter. If the 5 meter contour is traced back as a possible mean water level the topography begins to assume a sympathetic foundation for the area's etymology and land use features (fig. 1). An important feature is presented where the road forks at Rushmere, one route would follow the edge of the mere while the other would briefly ford it before moving on to higher ground and meeting Polsborough-Gate. Such a deviation in the route would have practical implications for the herding of livestock in various weather conditions or at different times of the year.

The place-name element *Pol* attains a new significance as it could be taken to indicate the Anglo-Saxon term for a "wide estuary or land-locked bay of the sea" (Gelling and Cole, p.22)³. The re-considered contour level would certainly offer such a feature and the proximity of the Snape mound within this topography would justify the place-name 'Polsborough' without offering any connection to a named deity. The navigable use of the estuary is also worthy of consideration with regard to the Snape ship burial, as it would appear to have presented the most convenient water-course from which to drag a vessel for subsequent interment.

The 'Gate' element presents something of a conundrum. Kirby offers precise distances which suggest that Polsborough gate occupies a point location in the landscape. However the word 'gate' also has origins that derive from the Old Norse *gata* meaning street (Smith, p.156). Kirby's map shows the old road from Snape connecting Priory Road (also formerly known in-part as Snape Street) to Blackheath Corner via what is now a bridle-way. Also the Snape Tithe (SROI, 1846) records a 'Street Field' en-route. Kirby's inference of a specific landmark might rely upon contemporary interpretations of an older place-name, the original meaning of which may have been lost. In the light of recent studies into Anglo Saxon nomenclature Polsborough-Gate could be taken to mean an

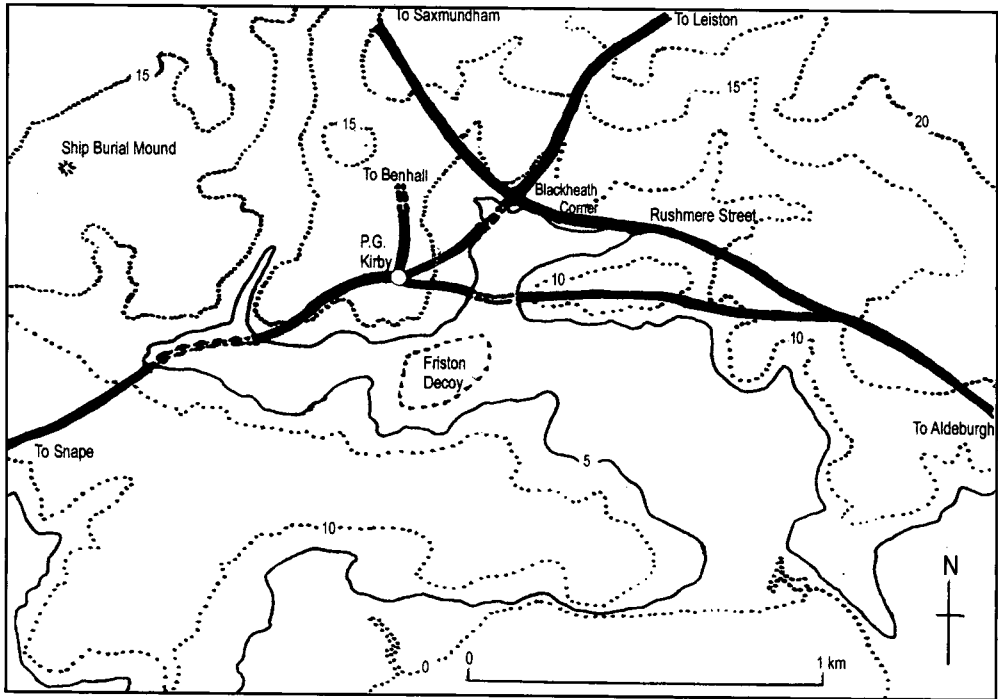


FIG. 138 – Polsborough-Gate area showing 5 meter contour (roads after Kirby 1736).

ancient track leading to, or circumventing a site of tumuli which are located close to and visible from the river estuary.

The route in question would have functioned as the main road towards Aldeburgh prior to the establishment of the current link via Snape Church, the steepness of which would have presented a problem to navigate by horse drawn traffic. Views of the Snape barrows and parts of the estuary would have been attainable along much of the route. Now of only occasional use it is possible that this track traces what was once a more significant *Polsborough-Gata*, and as such formed part of an earlier communication system (Warner, p.51) running north towards Leiston and beyond.

A Harrow at Van's Meadow

'Harrow Lane' borders the former military airfield west of Leiston and runs north-west towards East Green, connecting with Honeypot Lane. It has been considered to be an ancient route having Roman or earlier origins (Warner, p.51). Harrow is a place-name associated with pagan worship, harrow equating with O.E. *hearg*, suggesting a 'heathen shrine' (Gelling, p.158-9). A site of ritual significance may have been established during the Iron Age as the East Green area is currently under consideration as a trading centre of early Roman or pre-conquest date (Steerwood, p.258-60). Celtic markets were seasonal events often associated with a shrine where mutually suspicious tribes could meet amicably to perform religious rites, presumably prior to engaging in trading activities. This type of arrangement continued in some parts of Roman Britain (Rivet, p.126). A prominent site of religious activity would probably have persisted into the medieval period, particularly in an area where early Anglo-Saxon settlement is evident.

The Revd. Suckling transcribes a perambulation of the bounds of Leiston made in 1620 (Suckling, p.429) in which reference is made to a “Harrow at Van’s Meadow” suggesting that some form of meeting place was recognised and may have still functioned within the community at that time, albeit not for religious purposes. The relevant section reads thus:

..“along that lane between Highbones and ground of the demean called the Harrow at Van’s Meadow, excluding the said Van’s Meadow towards the north, and from thence to the east end of Horne’s Grove, and from that point going south-east westward (of) Mr. Guinees ground unto the procession rayles, and from those rayles going northward towards Hangman’s Close,”...

By applying the perambulation itinerary to the 1846 Leiston Parish boundary it is possible to assume an approximate location for the named land-marks (fig. 2). It is notable that this section of the perambulation records the land as being “of the demean”, as it was common practice for church lands to absorb former religious sites in order to discourage the continuation of pagan/non-Christian activities.

The place-names Van’s Meadow and Horne’s Grove are particularly worthy of attention. In modern parlance Van is associated with Dutch personal names, commonly being used as a prefix to a family name. Within such a context Van as a place-name would seem unlikely. Furthermore the area has already been noted as church land rather than being under the ownership of an individual. In this instance Van may be rooted in an ancient pagan name related to the Nordic Vanir deities, perhaps *Vanadis*, one of the many titles of the goddess *Freyja*. Vanadis equates with ‘lady of the Vanir’, Freyja can be interpreted in Old Norse as ‘the lady’ (Sturluson, p.24) and was renowned as a goddess of magic, fertility and sex. The situation regarding Horne’s Grove is likewise, most of the places listed in the perambulation where personal ownership is implied are more specifically titled. The name *Horn* is also associated with Freyja (Sturluson, p.35) and as there are no topological features evident to suggest a horn-shaped piece of land the connection is a possibility⁴.

Van’s Meadow is not featured on any map discovered to date, however a ‘Tyler’s Green’ appears on Hodskinson’s map at the southern end of Harrow Lane (Hodskinson 1783). The perambulation does not mention Tyler’s Green as a landscape feature, even though it is clearly en-route. Van’s Meadow may have occupied much of this southern area as common-land during the seventeenth century and Tyler’s Green might have been applied to a re-named, surviving piece of the common-land following a period of enclosure. Certainly ‘Hangman’s Close’, a probable place of execution (Field, p.97) and the ‘procession rayles’ indicate that the area was a more public space at the time of the perambulation⁵. A Papal decree issued by Innocent VIII in 1488 initiated a concerted attack upon paganism and witchcraft throughout Europe (Murray 1921, p.19). In England this resulted in the oppressive ‘witch trials’ of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, culminating in the eradication of most vestiges of pre-Christian religious practice from the community. Enclosure and new ownership of this area would undoubtedly have offered an ideal opportunity to rid the land of its former pagan and other more sinister associations⁶.

Further evidence of the Harrow place-name is to be found in an estate survey of 1833 (Kerry Mellis) where a field at Church Farm, Theberton is recorded as ‘Harrow Hill’, which lies on the 15m contour⁷. This is some distance from the area in question, although as the land rises to the south a ‘Hill Farm’ and ‘Harrow Farm’ (another Harrow reference) lay within the 20m contour. It is possible that the whole of the upland area was once popularly known as Harrow Hill in respect of a specific land-mark. The general topography presents no tangible evidence of an earthwork feature, however

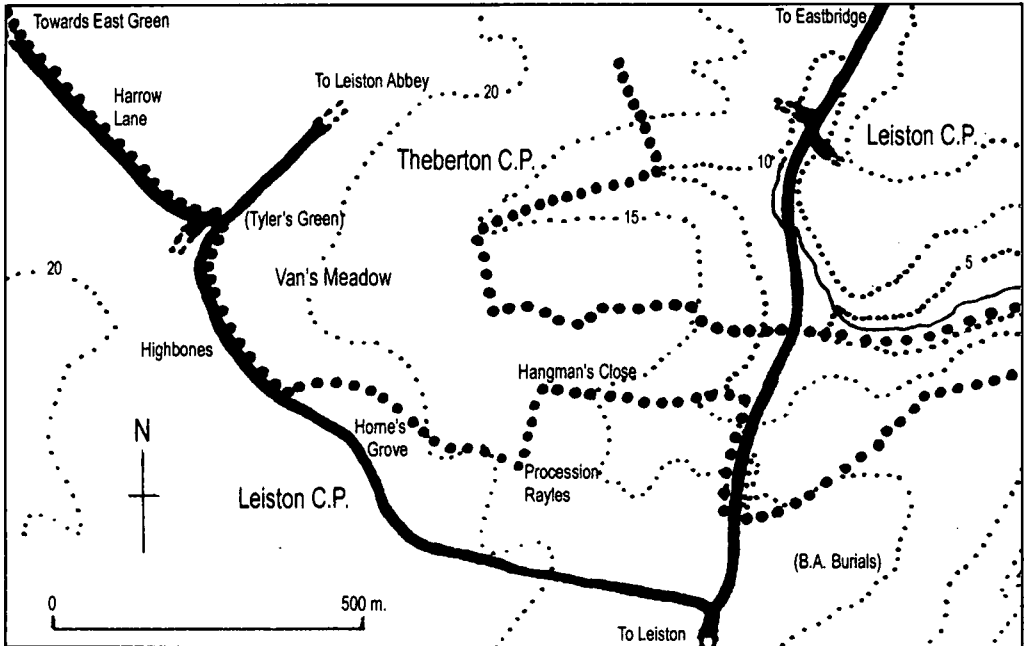


FIG. 139 – Van's Meadow area showing 1846 Leiston Parish boundary (roads after Hodskinson 1783).

the Suffolk County Sites and Monuments Record does show an anomaly in the form of a crop-mark to the north-west of Leiston. The following SMR details are based upon interpretation of an RAF aerial photograph⁸.

...Description: "Unclear crop mark of large circular/sub-square enclosure(?) circa 40m in diameter surrounding a semi-circular/circular 'ring ditch' at about 20m diameter (possibly open to N) which in turn surrounds a central circular dark patch circa 5m in diameter"...

The crop-mark lies in cultivated land 20m above sea level and the location would have overlooked Bronze Age burials lying close to the Sizewell River estuary⁹. It also falls within the suggested Horne's Grove area. The dimensions of the crop-mark are interesting owing to their similarity to Celtic/Romano-British temple sites excavated elsewhere (Cunliffe, p.296), To date field-walking of the crop-mark area has revealed few surface finds¹⁰, although an earlier metal detectorist survey revealed Roman coin approximately 500m to the north-east, indicating a habitation¹¹. It was often the practice for Celtic priests and their servants to live in close proximity to otherwise isolated temples and shrines (Gechter, p.195). Patches of existing ancient woodland have been identified in the vicinity and it is probable that the heavy clay soil of the upland supported dense forest up to and during the early medieval period. If so a sacred site would primarily have existed as a clearing or grove. The place-name evidence strongly suggests the presence of a *hearg* in this area, whether the crop-mark represents a temple site remains subject to further investigation.

In combination with other aspects of archaeological research etymology will continue to play a significant part, much work remains to be carried out and it is important that these remaining names are not lost to antiquity. As further place-names occasionally come to light the rich text of this ancient landscape will slowly begin to reveal itself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to thank John Fairclough for reading and commenting upon numerous drafts of this paper, Colin Pendleton for his assistance with the County Sites and Monuments Record information, and Geoffrey Barker for sharing his metal detector survey findings. All conclusions and opinions rest with the author.

NOTES

¹ The Vanir and Aesir were the two houses of the gods in Valhalla. As a broad interpretation the Aesir represented the heroic gods of war, the Vanir the gods of magic and fertility.

² A further group of nine tumuli have been recorded at Coldfair-Green following an east-west orientation, one of which appeared to be larger than the rest. The excavation report would suggest a Bronze Age barrow and this may have been re-used for Anglo-Saxon burial as at Snape (Hele, p.12). SMR-KND 003 lists a pottery find as Iron Age or Saxon.

³ A 'Pole Hill' is located at TM237443, lying on a 30 meter contour within the Foxhall area of Ipswich. This is the site of two tumuli and is a high-point which overlooks sizeable areas of probable former wetland along the Mill River valley. Another possible example of a named 'Pol' landmark visible from and of the river estuary.

⁴ Alternatively it has been recognised that Christian interpretations of sites of antiquity often elicited the application of a demonic title, particularly if they were associated with paganism (see tumulus 'The Devil's Ring' at O.S. 25¹ LXXVI Suffolk East 1904). 'Old Hornie' is a Devil name (Murray 1931, p.29) and Horne's Grove may be derived from this.

⁵ *Procession wayles*; A communal route, presumably towards a site of execution at Hangman's Close.

⁶ *Highbones*; may suggest some particularly unsavoury connotations. In an eleventh century account from Scandinavia, Adam of Bremen records that the corpses of sacrificial victims were suspended from trees within sacred groves as an offer to the gods. Similar events are thought to have occurred in the wider Viking world (Ellis Davidson 1992 p.336-7). During the later medieval period a rather morbid practice existed of caging the bodies of executed criminals and hanging them to rot in a prominent place, as a deterrent to the wider community. Such grim reminders were often sited beside a road.

⁷ O. S. Explorer 212 (TM437657). An early Bronze Age barrow is recorded within the vicinity, SMR Parish no. THB 003.

⁸ SMR Parish no. LCS 025. Aerial Photograph 69 069 075. Vertical b/w 1969.

⁹ SMR Parish no. LCS 020 (ring ditch?), see also LCS 004, SF2343 (B.A. urns).

¹⁰ A small and widespread deposit of Roman pottery was detected within the wider vicinity which was indicative of a manure scatter from a nearby settlement.

¹¹ Mr. Geoffrey Barker surveyed the area in 1998. In a recent survey of the Friston area Mr. Barker unearthed a figurine considered to be associated with a fertility cult, further indicating the possibility that a Freyja cult was indeed active in this locality (Geake).

REFERENCES

- Bruce-Mitford, R.L.S. 1952. 'The Snape Boat Grave' *Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, XXVI, 2 - 26.
- Cunliffe, B. 1975. *Iron Age Communities in Britain*. London.
- Ekwall, E. 1960. *Dictionary of English Place-names*. Oxford.
- Ellis Davidson, H.R. 1973. *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*. Harmondsworth.
- Ellis Davidson, H. 1992. 'Human Sacrifice in the Late Pagan Period in North Western Europe', in M. Carver (ed.), *The Age of Sutton Hoo*. Woodbridge.
- Field, J. 1989. *English Field Names*. Gloucester.
- Filmer-Sankey, W. & Pestell, T. 2001. 'Snape Anglo-Saxon Cemetery'. EAA 95.
- Geake, H. (forthcoming). *Medieval Archaeology*.
- Gechter, M. 1995. 'Small towns of the Ubii and Cugnerni/Baetasii civitates', in A. E. Brown (ed.), *Roman Small Towns in Eastern England and Beyond*. Oxford.
- Gelling, M. 1978. *Signposts to the Past*. London.
- Gelling, M. & Cole, A. 2000. *The Landscape of Place-names*. Stamford.
- Hele, N. F. 1890. *Notes or Jottings About Aldeburgh Suffolk*. Ipswich.
- Hodgkinson, J. *Map*; 1783. 'The County of Suffolk'. London.
- Kerry Mellis, J. R. 1833. 'Plans of an Estate in Theberton, Middleton, Westleton, Kelsale and Leiston'. (for Revd. C. M. Doughty) SROI, HD79/AD2/8.
- Kirby, J. 1735. *The Suffolk Traveller*. 1st edn., London.
- Kirby, J. *Maps*; 1736. 'Suffolk, South East Quarter', 1737. 'A Correct Map of Suffolk', 1737. 'An Actual Survey of the County of Suffolk', 1766. 'Suffolk, South East Quarter' (Revised).
- Kirby, J. 2004. *John Kirby's Suffolk; His Maps and Roadbooks.*, with an introduction by J. Blatchly, S.R.S. vol. 47, D. Dymond (ed.), Woodbridge.
- Morley, C. 1949. 'Suffolk Names 11952, Friston'. *East Anglian Miscellany*.
- Murray, M. 1921. *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*. Oxford.
- Murray, M. 1931. *The God of the Witches*. London.
- Rivet, A. L. F. 1964. *Town and Country in Roman Britain*. London.
- Smith, A. H. ed. 1956. *English Place-name Elements*. Cambridge.
- Steerwood, R. 2003. 'A Context for Sitomagus', *Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archeol.*, XL, 253-261.
- Sturluson, Snorri. 2005. *The Prose Edda*. J. Byock (trans.) London.
- Suckling, A. 1848. *A History of the Antiquities of Suffolk*. vol. II. London.
- Warner, P. 1996. *The Origins of Suffolk*. Manchester.