

Lenham's origins: 4000 years of human activity.....Tanyard North, Lenham (Liberty View)

by Henny Shotter

The current planning system makes the developer pay for archaeological investigations. This means that fieldwork starts after planning permission is given. The developer who was given



planning permission for a field (Tanyard North) on Old Ashford Road, Lenham was unlucky: the dig which should have lasted a few weeks, lasted 9 months and unearthed 4000 years of human activity on a 1.7 ha site which was phase 1 of the overall development.

A Roman track, properly constructed in layers like a Roman road was uncovered when the Community Centre in the adjoining field was built in the early two thousands. This track continued into the Tanyard Field which had been a very popular spot for metal detectorists; those who walked the

field with permission of the landowner as well as the others, the night hawks, who came out under the cover of darkness and looked for buried treasures illegally. The 'word-by-mouth' popularity of the site made it evident that much was found here: however , we don't have a comprehensive record.

The archaeological investigation for the new development 'Liberty View' was carried out by Thames Valley Archaeological Services (TVAS) and their finds were surprising, even for those who say they were in the know.

Mesolithic period onwards. Several thousands of worked Mesolithic flints were recovered from the 1.7ha site. Finding worked flints in this quantity is extremely unusual for this period as this indicates a prolonged presence and continuation of this activity on one site. Charred hazelnut shells associated with this Mesolithic period await carbon dating. From the later Mesolithic period, fewer struck flints, all oval shaped were aligned east to west across the field.

During the **Bronze Age** , the site was used for burials of cremated remains in urns and un-urned. Two barrow ditches were unearthed, both 'Beaker Burials' , so called because the dead were buried with a beaker. At the centre of the first ring ditch was a beaker and the skeleton of an adult male in a crouched position. Carbon dating of a rib bone showed that the person was alive between 2204-and 2033 BC. Nearby was another beaker burial of a child under the age of 9.

A cluster of six cremation burials were found on the southern edge of the site. They were covered with a spread of material which seems to be burrow material.

Late Iron Age There were three cremation burials which the archaeologists identified as high status burials because they contained eating plates with bones, the remainder of food offerings. Also included in the burial were an iron cauldron and copper-alloy brooches and part of a dog skeleton.

Roman In addition to the track there was a corn dryer with burning in the flue and a stoke pit and a well which was 4m wide and, after excavation 2.5 m deep. At the bottom of the well were many animal bones and a complete set of antlers. Nearby was a large, angled enclosure ditch. The corner slot contained a deposit of cow skulls.

Large quantities of nails and other items made of iron and iron ore were found in the northeast section of the site suggesting that in this area was a metal working area. Remains of a Roman building were also uncovered. However, as this was built over by a later Saxon structure, it could not be further analysed.

Saxon period:



A typical Grubenhaus

A 'Grubenhaus' was found near a barn-like structure which was the most astonishing discovery. It was a possible Saxon hall which measured 37m x 11m and on the south side had a cobbled floor with wheel ruts showing. In order to understand the dimensions, it helps to know that a football field is ca. 68m wide. The hall would then have covered more than half the width of a football pitch, from the touch line to the centre spot.

The postholes found on site form such a building which will, if confirmed, be the largest ever found in England.

In the summary of the report, the author is less cautious with her conclusion. She writes: 'The Saxon phase is presented by a massive post-built hall, whose size alone is suggestive of a royal connection.'

A Royal connection?

The Royal connection takes us to the grave of three Saxons which was discovered in 1948 during restoration work on the building in Lenham which is today the Saxon Warrior Pharmacy. The skeletons were of two men and a woman buried together in one grave. These people in one grave must have died together or within a few days of each other. Of disease? Or were they slain? Were they locals or were they travelers? Not much is known about the find and we will never know for sure. They were buried with care because one of the males was buried with his sword which had a gold inlayⁱⁱⁱ, an extremely precious item in Anglo-Saxon times. The warrior also had a shield with a shield boss and one or two spears. The grave was, without any doubt of very high status.

The royal connection takes us also to one of three Saxon chronicles (S 159)^{iv} from 804 A.D. It says: *Coenwulf, king of Mercia and Cudred, king of Kent grant to Eanbert, their kinsman 20 sulungs of land in sewestralenham with thirteen swine pastures in the Weald.*



We can conclude from this charter that in 804 a settlement called Lenham (spelled like this in the original charter) already existed and that ca. 4800 acres of land to the west of this existing settlement was given to Eanbert, a 'kinsman' which is a term used to describe a blood relative.

We don't know where exactly this place 'Lenham' was and whether it was in the hands of Eanbert or someone else. Lenham is an Anglo-Saxon name and has been interpreted^v as the homestead of a person called 'Leana'.

The burning question for us local historians is whether this possible Saxon Hall was the 'Homestead of Leana'?

Certain is that before the new estate 'Liberty View' was built on the Tanyard Farm site, it had been already occupied by humans for 4000 years.

The task ahead: The summary of the excellent Tanyard report shows the scale of the task ahead

just over 6,600 worked flints were recovered (ca. 30% Mesolithic).

Approximately 10,977 sherds of pottery were collected but only

77 copper alloy coins (a result of metal detecting in the past?)

3235 pieces of metal (mainly of Roman origin)

4585 pieces of ceramic building material weighing 242.5 kg (Roman and Saxon context)

132 kg of iron slag (mainly Roman)

88 pieces of glass (mainly Roman) a.s.o...a.s.o....The list of items to analyse seems endless.

Planning permission was given for the whole site, and the developer has fulfilled the archaeology brief. However, a historic image of March 2025 on Google Earth^{vi} shows a multitude of circular marks on Phase 3 of the site after the soil was stripped back. Considering that round barrows were found on the site, it would be very important for Lenham's historic records to know what these markings are about. We still live in hope that the developer allows a group of trained nonprofessional archaeologists onto the site or that a sponsor can be found for a limited excavation on the remaining field.

ⁱ For my article with images from the Tanyards excavation see: page 54 of the 2026 Spring magazine of Kent Archaeological Society [Spring magazine 2026, page 54](#) , [Kent Archaeological Society](#)
For the complete report see: 'Land at Tanyard Farm, Lenham, Kent ; A Post-Excavation Assessment by Maisie Foster, Thames Valley Archaeological Services LTD March 2023 (not online yet)

ⁱⁱ The report is cautious in the assumption that this is a Saxon Hall, except in the summary

ⁱⁱⁱ We are grateful to Maidstone Museum for sharing the description of the catalogued items with us.

^{iv} S 159 in 'The Electronic Sawyer, Online Catalogue of Anglo-Saxon Charters

^v A.D. Mills Oxford Dictionary of English Place names, Oxford University Press, Oxford New York 1991

^{vi} Thank you to Lesley Feakes for pointing out this image

Image of bones: courtesy of

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bioarchaeology_Laboratory_picture_made_by_me.jpg

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