

OXONIENSIA

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The Association was founded in 1980 to further the study of local history in the County, and in particular to promote links between amateur local historians and academic and professional bodies involved in local history. The Association organizes twice-yearly study days and publishes a regular newsletter and a journal, *Oxfordshire Local History*. Further details at: www.olha.org.uk

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BAR	British Archaeological Reports (Oxford, 1974–)
BAR BS	British Archaeological Reports, British Series
BAR IS	British Archaeological Reports, International Series
BCA	Balliol College Archive
BL	British Library, London
Bodl.	Bodleian Library, Oxford
BRO	Berkshire Record Office
CBM	ceramic building material
ECA	Exeter College Archive
EPNS	English Place-Name Society
EVE	estimated vessel equivalent
Fig./Figs.	figure/figures
f./ff.	folio/folios
FLO	Finds Liaison Officer
HER	Historic Environment Record
IoAO	Institute of Archaeology, Oxford
JMHS	John Moore Heritage Services
KC(A)	Keble College (Archive)
MCA	Merton College Archive
MCR	Merton College Register
<i>MedArch</i>	<i>Medieval Archaeology</i> (London, 1958–)
MOLA	Museum of London Archaeology
MS	manuscript
n.	note
NCA	New College Archive
n.d.	no date
ns	new series
OA	Oxford Archaeology
OBR	Oxfordshire Buildings Record
OD	Ordnance Datum
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> (Oxford, 2004)
OHC	Oxfordshire History Centre
OHS	Oxford Historical Society
ORS	Oxfordshire Record Society
OS	Ordnance Survey
os	old/original series
OU DCE	Oxford University Department for Continuing Education
OUSA	Oxford Union Society Archive
OXCMS	Oxfordshire County Museum Service
PHA	Pusey House Archive
QCA	Queen's College Archive
r.	recto
<i>SMidA</i>	<i>South Midlands Archaeology</i> (Oxford, 1983–) [formerly CBA Group 9 Newsletter]
TNA: PRO	The National Archives, Public Record Office, Kew

TS	typescript
TVAS	Thames Valley Archaeological Services
v.	verso
VCH	<i>Victoria History of the Counties of England</i> (London, 1900–) [<i>Victoria County History</i>]
vol.	volume

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An Early Anglo-Saxon Great Hall at Benson? An Alternative Interpretation of the Excavated Evidence

ADAM McBRIDE

SUMMARY

A case is made for a seventh-century Anglo-Saxon great hall site at Benson in south Oxfordshire. Development-led excavation in 1999 uncovered a rectangular ditched feature at Benson that resembles the great halls at Sutton Courtenay (Oxon.), Yeavinger (Northumb.), Cowdery's Down (Hants.), and Lyminge (Kent). Benson was an important middle Saxon royal holding, and the existence of a seventh-century royal site would not be out of place. However, the profile of the excavated feature is too shallow to support typical Anglo-Saxon construction techniques. The excavators interpreted the feature as an enclosure, but a review of Anglo-Saxon enclosures fails to find an appropriate parallel. Instead, the feature is proposed to be a heavily truncated great hall, and potential parallels are presented from known great hall sites. There is no compelling evidence of truncation though, and the conclusions therefore remain circumstantial.

In 1999, Thames Valley Archaeological Services (TVAS) carried out a small open-area excavation at the former Rivers Night Club in Benson, Oxfordshire (SU 61590 91550).¹ In addition to revealing important Neolithic and late Bronze-Age/early Iron-Age settlement features, this excavation provided a unique archaeological glimpse of early Anglo-Saxon Benson. This article is intended to call attention to one of the 'enclosures' uncovered in the excavation, proffering a possible reinterpretation of this feature as an Anglo-Saxon great hall, a form of monumental architecture found on high-status sites in the seventh century. The possibility of a great hall site at Benson is of sufficient importance to warrant reconsideration of the evidence.

The early history of Benson is obscure, but there is sufficient documentary evidence to suggest the existence of a large royal vill from at least the eighth century.² In Domesday Book (1086), Benson was assessed as the most valuable royal manor in Oxfordshire, and in addition to being the centre of its own hundred, Benson had been granted jurisdiction over the neighbouring Chiltern hundreds of Pyrton, Lewknor, Langtree and Binfield. These four and a half hundreds may be a relic of an extensive early territorial unit, loosely controlled by the royal vill at Benson. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that King Offa of Mercia captured Benson from Wessex in AD 779.³ A royal charter of Abingdon abbey was witnessed at Benson in AD 726–37, and though this is a forgery, it probably drew on contemporary records – using a known royal vill as the setting for a fake grant makes a great deal more sense than risking inventing superfluous details.⁴ The picture seems to be that Benson was a vital control point

¹ J. Pine and S. Ford, 'Excavation of Neolithic, Late Bronze Age, Early Iron Age and Early Saxon Features at St. Helen's Avenue, Benson, Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, 68 (2003), pp. 131–78.

² J. Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (1994); S. Mileson and S. Brookes, 'A Multi-Phase Anglo-Saxon Site in Ewelme', *Oxoniensia*, 79 (2014), p. 4; *VCH Oxon.* 18, p. 8.

³ D. Whitelock (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (1961), p. 33.

⁴ Charter S93 in S. Kelly, *Charters of Abingdon Abbey* (2000), pp. 22–6; Susan Kelly argues that the forger did use contemporary records.

in the upper Thames region, whose importance warranted major confrontations between the Mercian and West Saxon kingdoms.

John Blair has argued that this importance can be extended back into the seventh century, when Benson may have been an early royal centre of the Gewissae, the progenitors of the West Saxon dynasty.⁵ The Gewissae emerged from a powerbase in the Dorchester-on-Thames area that included important seventh-century sites at Abingdon, Sutton Courtenay, Long Wittenham and Dorchester-on-Thames.⁶ Benson is well within this orbit, and the Domesday extent of Benson's holdings, almost surrounding the seventh-century bishopric at Dorchester-on-Thames, may indicate that the bishopric was initially created from part of an extensive royal territory centred on Benson. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Benson is one of the four *tūnas* captured in AD 571 by Cuthwulf, brother of Ceawlin, the first semi-historical Gewissan king; taken literally, this reference is entirely unreliable, but it may still preserve a social memory that Benson was an important centre of the early Gewissan kings.⁷

The 1999 TVAS excavation is the only excavation of Anglo-Saxon settlement features at Benson, and it is therefore of critical importance not only to understanding the early history of Benson, but also the early history of the West Saxon kingdom. The Anglo-Saxon features included three sunken-feature buildings, several small pits and/or postholes and two enclosures (Fig. 1). One of the enclosures – enclosure 1006 – bears a strong resemblance in plan to the early Anglo-Saxon great halls uncovered at Sutton Courtenay (Oxon., previously Berks.), Yeavinger (Northumb.), Cowdery's Down (Hants.) and, most recently, Lyminge (Kent).⁸ The Benson 'enclosure' is approximately 10 metres wide and at least 20 metres long, with the west end extending beyond the edges of the excavation. The Sutton Courtenay great hall is 11 by 31 metres, the Yeavinger great hall is 11 by 25 metres, the Cowdery's Down great hall is 9 by 22 metres, and the Lyminge great hall 9.5 by 23 metres. The dimensions of the Benson 'enclosure' are thus clearly within the typical parameters of an early Anglo-Saxon great hall, and it is especially worth recognizing that the width of these buildings appears to be consistently between 9 and 11 metres, which accords well with the width of the Benson feature. The plan of the Benson excavation also shows several shallow pit features abutting enclosure 1006;⁹ in their placement, these features resemble the external raking posts that are characteristic of Anglo-Saxon great halls, and in one feature there is even some hint of the raking profile seen at Yeavinger (Fig. 2). The radiocarbon date of AD 545–659 (AD 601–648 at 1s), obtained from one of the sunken-feature buildings, is also consistent with the accepted floruit of the great hall sites.

The great hall sites at Sutton Courtenay, Yeavinger, Cowdery's Down and Lyminge exhibit highly structured layouts, including aligned and perpendicularly oriented buildings. Two other linear features at Benson share the same orientation scheme as the possible hall, and they therefore may be related (Fig. 1). Enclosure 1005, which was initially labelled a beam slot on the archived context sheet, was assigned to the Bronze Age, but this dating is based on a paltry assemblage of six sherds in four different fabrics, and the largest sherd is listed in the archived pottery catalogue as 'IA or Saxon'.¹⁰ Enclosure 1005 was cut by enclosure 1006, but the repeated

⁵ Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire*, p. 39; Miles and Brookes, 'A Multi-Phase Anglo-Saxon Site', p. 4.

⁶ S. Hawkes, 'The Early Anglo-Saxon Period', in G. Briggs et al. (eds.), *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (1986), pp. 64–108; Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire*, pp. 37–8; H. Hamerow et al., 'The Origins of Wessex Pilot Project', *Oxoniensia*, 78 (2013), pp. 62–4; Roger Ainslie, personal communication concerning Abingdon.

⁷ Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. 13; Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire*, p. 27.

⁸ B. Hope-Taylor, *Yeavinger: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria* (1977), figs. 13, 15, 17; M. Millett and S. James, 'Excavations at Cowdery's Down, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 1978–81', *The Archaeological Journal*, 140 (1983), fig. 31; G. Thomas and A. Knox, 'Lyminge Excavations 2014', unpublished University of Reading report (2015), fig. 2 <<http://www.lymingearchaeology.org/publications/>>; N. Brennan and H. Hamerow, 'An Anglo-Saxon Great Hall Complex at Sutton Courtenay/Drayton, Oxfordshire: A Royal Centre of Early Wessex?', *The Archaeological Journal*, 172:2 (2015), illustration 10.

⁹ Three of these pit features are dated to the Anglo-Saxon period, while two are undated.

¹⁰ Early Anglo-Saxon and Iron-Age pottery from the upper Thames region can be almost indistinguishable.

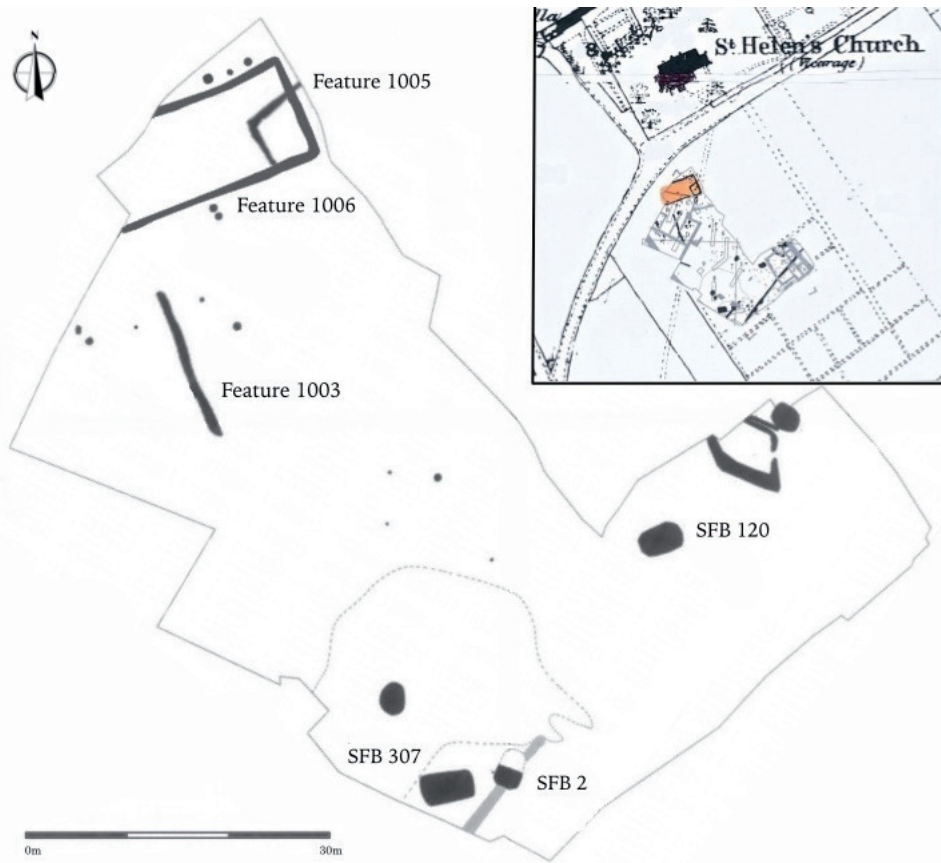


Fig. 1. Anglo-Saxon and possible Anglo-Saxon features at Benson; the inset shows the site in relation to the parish church. Sources: Pine and Ford, 'Early Saxon Features at St. Helen's Avenue, Benson'; J. Blair, personal communication.

rebuilding of halls is attested at several great hall sites, and this sequence would therefore not be out of place.¹¹ Gully 1003 produced no pottery, but it was cut by a feature that produced four sherds of Neolithic pottery.¹² Nevertheless, it is oriented perpendicular to the primary feature in question. These features, along with primary hall feature, all share the same orientation scheme as the current parish church, which might be expected if this church succeeded an earlier Anglo-Saxon church (Fig. 1 inset).¹³ The overall orientation scheme governing the features and the church is not east–west, but it is roughly in line with the gravel spur on which Benson is located, so it may be coincidental.

The excavators have pointed out that the material culture from the site was rather modest, unbecoming of a royal site.¹⁴ This is not, however, uncommon of great hall sites. The extensive

¹¹ Hope-Taylor, *Yeavinger*, pp. 158–68; Millett and James, 'Cowdery's Down', pp. 192–7; G. Thomas and A. Knox, 'Lyminge Excavations 2013', unpublished University of Reading report (2014), pp. 6–8.

¹² This relationship is not beyond question: the archived context sheets show that the main point of intersection between 1003 and the Neolithic feature 1004 was unclear, and the section drawings do not show an overlap between the two features.

¹³ The author is grateful to John Blair for bringing the orientation of the parish church to his attention.

¹⁴ Pine and Ford, 'Early Saxon Features at St. Helen's Avenue, Benson', p. 178.

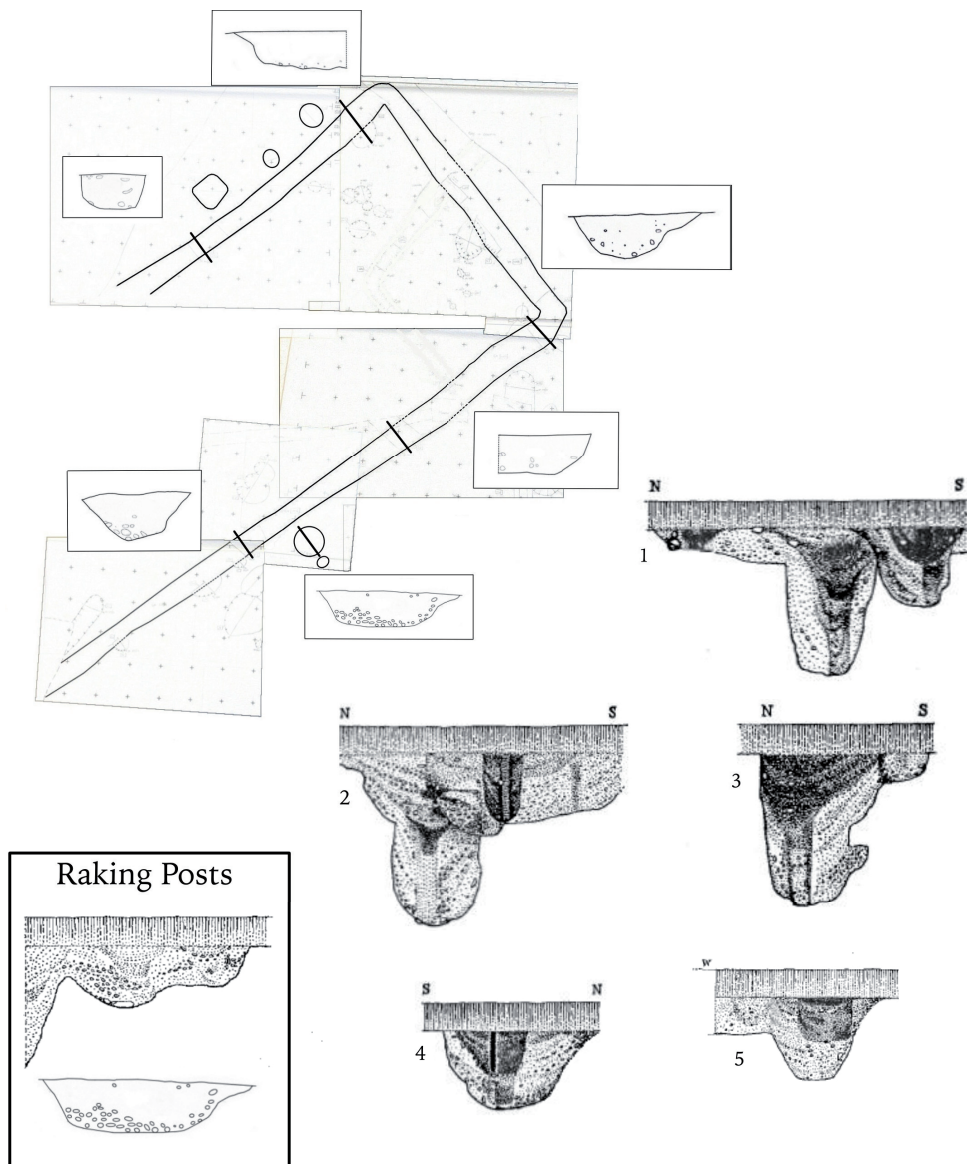


Fig. 2. The Benson great hall plan and section drawings (top left and bottom of inset), compared with the Yeavinger sections (bottom right and top of inset); Yeavinger sections 4 and 5 are not unlike the Benson sections, while Yeavinger sections 1, 2 and 3 might resemble Benson if heavily truncated. Sources: Hope-Taylor, *Yeavinger*; Benson archive.

and thorough excavation of Yeavinger produced only one debased gold coin, one silver-inlaid buckle and one fragment of gold wire.¹⁵ Excavations at other sites, like Cowdery's Down and Cowage Farm (Wilts.), have failed to recover any high-status objects whatsoever. The excavated assemblage from two sunken-feature buildings at Cowdery's Down – pottery, one

¹⁵ Hope-Taylor, *Yeavinger*, pp. 182–3, 185–6; M. Welch, 'The Dating and Significance of the Inlaid Buckle Loop from Yeavinger, Northumberland', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 3 (1984), pp. 77–8.

folded iron sheet, two nail fragments, and a quernstone fragment – provides an especially pertinent comparison.¹⁶

The predominant reason, though, for interpreting feature 1006 as an enclosure was the shallow, irregular profile (Fig. 2) – averaging 30 centimetres in depth – which was believed to be unlike that of a typical Anglo-Saxon foundation trench, let alone the more regular and considerably more substantial foundation trenches of the great halls. Moreover, no structural evidence was recovered from the feature, nor was there any clear break in the feature that could be interpreted as a doorway.

Some of these attributes are clearly in contrast to the site of Yeavering, where extensive structural detail was recovered from massive, carefully constructed foundation trenches, up to two metres deep, with flat bases and vertical sides (Fig. 2).¹⁷ However, other great hall sites provide closer parallels to Benson. Structural detail is not always readily apparent: at Sutton Courtenay, a single posthole was identified from the great hall, only because it was cut into the bottom of the foundation trench. If the section had been shifted slightly left or right, or if the post had not extended below the bottom of the trench, it may have been entirely missed.¹⁸ Similarly, the methodology section of the Yeavering publication makes clear that the identification of structural detail during that excavation was exceedingly difficult, and it was only achieved through exceptional attention to detail and an abundance of time.¹⁹ Furthermore, while the Benson enclosure did not reveal *in situ* structural evidence, it did produce one fragment of daub/fired clay, which is known to have been used in the superstructure of great halls at Yeavering, Sutton Courtenay, Cowdery's Down and Lyminge.²⁰ The absence at Benson of any break in the foundation trench for doorways is also paralleled by buildings at Yeavering, Sutton Courtenay, Cowdery's Down and Lyminge.²¹ Even the massive foundation ditches typical of great halls are not always preserved to the extraordinary depth observed at Yeavering. The largest hall at Cowdery's Down had been truncated to an average depth of 40–50 centimetres, while some of the medium-sized halls are closer to 30 centimetres. The second largest hall at Lyminge had been truncated to an average depth of 25 centimetres, and parts of the largest hall only survived to a depth of 5 centimetres.²² Furthermore, the profile of great hall foundation trenches is not as consistent as has been generally assumed; Fig. 2 shows the variety of foundation trench forms at Yeavering, many of which might resemble Benson if heavily truncated.

Benson does not show definite evidence of truncation, but like Lyminge, it is located on the downslope to a watercourse, and this area of Benson has been ploughed for

¹⁶ Millett and James, 'Cowdery's Down', pp. 217–8, 225–7, 250–4; J. Hinchliffe, 'An Early Medieval Settlement at Cowage Farm, Foxley, near Malmesbury', *The Archaeological Journal*, 143 (1986), pp. 247–9; several high-status dress accessories have been recovered from Sutton Courtenay using metal-detecting, but these are believed to come from a cemetery and outside of these, the combined excavations and metal-detecting have only resulted in the recovery of a few droplets of gold and a few fragments of gold and silver sheet, H. Hamerow et al., 'Anglo-Saxon and Earlier Settlement near Drayton Road, Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire', *The Archaeological Journal*, 164 (2007), pp. 170–83; 'Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire: Archaeological Excavation and Assessment of Results', unpublished Wessex Archaeology report (2010), pp. 17–18; The incredible assemblage from Lyminge contrasts dramatically with these other sites, but this site is exceptional for its later history, its location in Kent, and possibly its depositional patterns.

¹⁷ Hope-Taylor, *Yeavering*, pp. 36, 61.

¹⁸ Brennan and Hamerow, 'An Anglo-Saxon Great Hall Complex at Sutton Courtenay/Drayton', pp. 11–12.

¹⁹ Hope-Taylor, *Yeavering*, pp. 29–30.

²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 97–8; Millett and James, 'Cowdery's Down', fig. 62; Brennan and Hamerow, 'An Anglo-Saxon Great Hall Complex at Sutton Courtenay/Drayton', pp. 13–14; G. Thomas and A. Knox, 'Lyminge Excavations 2012', unpublished University of Reading report (2013), p. 11.

²¹ Hope-Taylor, *Yeavering*, figs. 15, 17; Millett and James, 'Cowdery's Down', p. 216; Hamerow et al., 'Anglo-Saxon and Earlier Settlement near Drayton Road, Sutton Courtenay', p. 163; Thomas and Knox, 'Lyminge Excavations 2013', pp. 6–8.

²² Millett and James, 'Cowdery's Down', fig. 47; Thomas and Knox, 'Lyminge Excavations 2012', p. 10 and 'Lyminge Excavations 2013', p. 10.

centuries, only being developed in the early twentieth century. The Benson sunken-feature buildings do not appear heavily truncated, being 24, 38 and 38 centimetres deep, but at Lyminge a sunken-feature building adjacent to one of the truncated halls survived to a depth of 62 centimetres.²³ It is therefore possible that the Benson feature is significantly truncated, though concrete evidence of this is lacking.

There are undoubtedly problems with identifying the Benson feature as a building, but it does not sit comfortably among Anglo-Saxon enclosures either. Free-standing Anglo-Saxon enclosures tend to be much larger, enclosing entire household units.²⁴ Subdivisions of enclosure systems and droveways are closer to the dimensions of the Benson feature, but these subdivisions are inevitably attached to larger enclosure networks, and droveways, by virtue of their function, never form a three-sided enclosed space, like that apparent at Benson. Furthermore, these types of enclosures are often repeatedly recut, for which there is no evidence at Benson, and Anglo-Saxon enclosures are generally at least somewhat irregular in form, contrasting with the highly regular rectangular feature at Benson.

There is a small body of evidence for possible free-standing animal pens, and these are where the Benson enclosure finds the best parallels among enclosures.²⁵ At West Stow (Suffolk), a 9 by 24 metre hollow was identified as a possible animal pen. However, while the dimensions are very similar to the Benson feature, the West Stow feature was a hollow area, not a ditched enclosure, and the form of the hollow was highly irregular, nothing approaching the sharp rectangular form of the Benson feature.²⁶ A three-sided fenced enclosure at Catholme (Staffs.) provides a better parallel to Benson.²⁷ The excavators interpreted this structure as an animal pen, arguing that it and several other structures ‘may have been buildings but they lack sufficient of the characteristic features to be categorized as such’. The differences are not made explicit, but the pens appear less regular than the buildings and it seems probable that they were of more flimsy construction. However, this is where they differ from the Benson feature: on plan, the Benson feature is regular enough to be considered a building, but it has no structural evidence. Furthermore, in its surviving form the Benson feature could not support the typical Anglo-Saxon construction techniques.²⁸ Either the feature must be heavily truncated, in which case it would most resemble a great hall, or it must have been left open as a gully, in which case the fenced animal pen at Catholme is not an apt parallel.

An open ditched enclosure has been identified as an animal pen at the middle Saxon high-status site at Brandon (Suffolk).²⁹ However, this feature is not a fully free-standing enclosure; it is incorporated into the larger enclosure network, sharing one wall with a large enclosure ditch. Moreover, it is not as regular in plan as the Benson feature, and at 3 by 4.5 metres, it is only a fraction of the size of the Benson enclosure.

²³ Pine and Ford, ‘Early Saxon Features at St. Helen’s Avenue, Benson’, pp. 141–4; Thomas and Knox, ‘Lyminge Excavations 2012’, p. 7.

²⁴ For a discussion of Anglo-Saxon enclosure forms: A. Reynolds, ‘Boundaries and Settlements in Later Sixth to Eleventh-Century England’, *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 12 (2003), pp. 110–15; Thirlings is an exception, with numerous small enclosures surrounding buildings, but these are larger and of a different form from the Benson enclosure: C. O’Brien and R. Miket, ‘The Early Medieval Settlement of Thirlings, Northumberland’, *Durham Archaeological Journal*, 7 (1991), fig. 2.

²⁵ H. Hamerow, *Rural Settlements and Society in Anglo-Saxon England* (2012), p. 71.

²⁶ Hollow 1 in S. West, *West Stow, Suffolk: The Prehistoric and Romano-British Occupations* (1986), pp. 53–4, and fig. 7.

²⁷ F3 in S. Losco-Bradley et al., *Catholme: An Anglo-Saxon Settlement on the Trent Gravels in Staffordshire* (2002), p. 29 and fig. 3.97.

²⁸ John Blair has raised the issue of alternative construction methods, like sleeper beams or log construction, which would be very difficult to identify archaeologically. This is an important point to keep in mind, but by its very nature impossible to prove at Benson: J. Blair, ‘The British Culture of Anglo-Saxon Settlement’, H.M. Chadwick Memorial Lecture, 24 (2013).

²⁹ Feature 5003 in A. Tester et al., *Staunch Meadow, Brandon, Suffolk: A High Status Middle Saxon Settlement on the Fen Edge* (2014), pp. 45–7.

The best parallel to the Benson feature is a highly regular 5 by 9.5 metre ditched enclosure at Gamlingay (Cambs.).³⁰ However, this feature, with its flat base, near vertical sides, and several possible postholes, actually looks very much like a truncated building, and it is not clear why this possibility was not raised in the publication.³¹ If all the associated features belong to the same structure, the form would be unusual, but it is actually paralleled by building AS43 at Catholme.³²

Free-standing open-ditched enclosures of the approximate size and shape of Benson are thus almost unknown on Anglo-Saxon sites. In its current form, however, the Benson feature does not bear the typical profile of a building foundation trench; its large width and shallow depth could not have supported the typical Anglo-Saxon construction techniques, and while truncation of the feature is possible, it cannot be proven with any certainty. The evidence is therefore frustratingly ambiguous. The exact nature of the Benson feature is unlikely to be resolved without further excavation, but the circumstantial evidence and the lack of open-ditched enclosure parallels at other sites demands that the possibility of a previously unrecognized great hall site at Benson should be at least considered.

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³⁰ The 'Animal Pen/Corral', in J. Murray and T. McDonald, 'Excavations at Station Road, Gamlingay, Cambridgeshire', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 13 (2005), p. 196, fig. 32, and appendix B vii.

³¹ Hamerow, *Rural Settlement*, p. 81.

³² Losco-Bradley et al., *Catholme*, pp. 69–71, fig. 3.58.