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Stowford: an early medieval hundred meeting place

by Stuart Brookes¹ and Alexander Langlands²

In the summer of 2015 archaeological excavation sought to examine the location of an early medieval hundred meeting place ('moot') in southern Wiltshire. The investigation was planned in the context of recent work to characterise hundred meeting places and to explore the survival of local Roman roads into the medieval period (Baker and Brookes 2015; Langlands forthcoming a; Brookes *et al.* forthcoming). Stowford provided an opportunity to bring these different concerns together.

The site lies 2km west of Broad Chalke and 200m southwest of the hamlet of Fifield Bavant in the extreme east of Ebbesbourne Wake parish. Excavations centred on NGR SU 016 248 in fields immediately south of the River Ebbles which flows west to east from Ebbesbourne Wake to Broad Chalke before joining the River Avon at Bodenham. The valley floor is generally flat at around 92m above Ordnance Datum but rises sharply to the south and to the north of the Ebbles. The underlying solid geology is Lewes Nodular Chalk Formation overlain by Alluvium and Head Deposits (Geology Digimap, accessed Feb 2017). Funding for the fieldwork was generously provided by the Leverhulme Trust as part of the UCL project 'Travel and Communication in Anglo-Saxon England', and was carried out by a team

from UCL, Swansea University and the University of Nottingham.

Background

Typically, hundreds in Domesday Book were named after the place that served as meeting-point for the district; in a minority of cases they are named after their most important manor (Pantos 2002; Baker and Brookes 2015). The hundred of Stowford is first recorded in the 1084 Geld Roll as *Hund' Stanforde, de Stafort* and *Staford*, derived from the Old English *stān* (stone) and *ford* (Anderson 1939, 144–5; Gover, Mawer and Stenton 1939, 199, 207). It was still known as Stowford hundred as late as 1434, but in assize rolls as early as 1249 was also recorded as *Hundr' de Chelke* (Chalke), evidently after (Broad) Chalke, the important manor and possible eighth-/ninth-century minster (Pitt 2001, 43–6; Cramp 2006, 208–9). When hundreds bear two names, this may reflect appurtenance to a central manor on the one hand, and provide evidence for the location of the original meeting-place on the other (Anderson 1934, xxix–xxxi). The likelihood that Chalke was the main centre of the hundred thereby strengthens the

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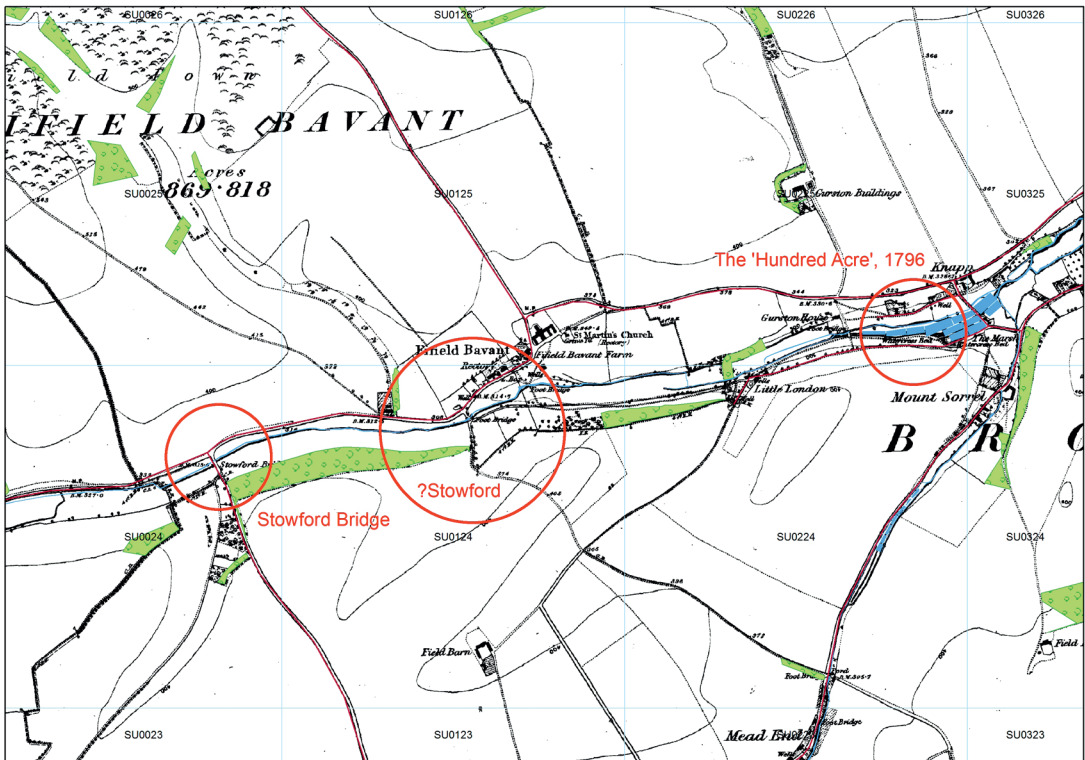


Fig. 1 Roads in environs of Fifield Bavant. The location of the putative crossing of the River Ebble at Fifield Bavant is suggested by the orientation of the main east-west valley route

identification of the meeting-place with Stowford.

The place-name is preserved in present-day Stowford Bridge, 1km west of Fifield Bavant, at the point where a spur road leading north-northwest from Bowerchalke crosses the River Ebble to meet the main route running east-west along the valley bottom. Given its relationship to other routes crossing this landscape, the spur road is likely to be a recent deviation related to the construction of Stowford Bridge, and the more probable location of the original ford is $\frac{3}{4}$ km to the east nearer Fifield Bavant at the crossing of the Ebble by the convergence of a footpath, a bridleway with the main valley road (Figure 1).

Comparison with other meeting places strengthens this interpretation. From their wide-ranging analysis of hundred meeting places Baker and Brookes (2015) argued that accessibility was one of the defining characteristics of such sites, with many meeting places located at nodal points in the transport network. Some sense of this is gained from the names given to hundreds, which furnish us with a substantial corpus of the types of topographical

attributes commonly selected to distinguish places. *Ford* is fairly common (relative to all place-names), occurring in around 4% of hundred-names (Pantos 2002, 68), but this proportion doubles when hundreds that share their names with those of their principal manors are excluded.

Stowford's accessibility is emphasised when we consider its location relative to the hundred territory and its constituent parts. The extents of the hundred are broadly equivalent to a grant of 100 hides at *Cheolcum* made by Eadwig to the nuns of Wilton in 955 (Sawyer 1968, cat. no. 582). Bounds of this charter circumnavigate the entire upper reaches of the Ebble Valley as well as an outlying parcel of meadowland at Semley to the northwest (Langlands forthcoming b). Stowford lies quite central to this territory, certainly more so than the vill of Broad Chalke which is close to its eastern limits. Importantly, the charter also has appended surveys of smaller parcels of land within Chalke at Berwick St John and Alvediston that belonged to Shaftesbury and Ringwood, not Wilton. The putative valley road links both these smaller estates and the

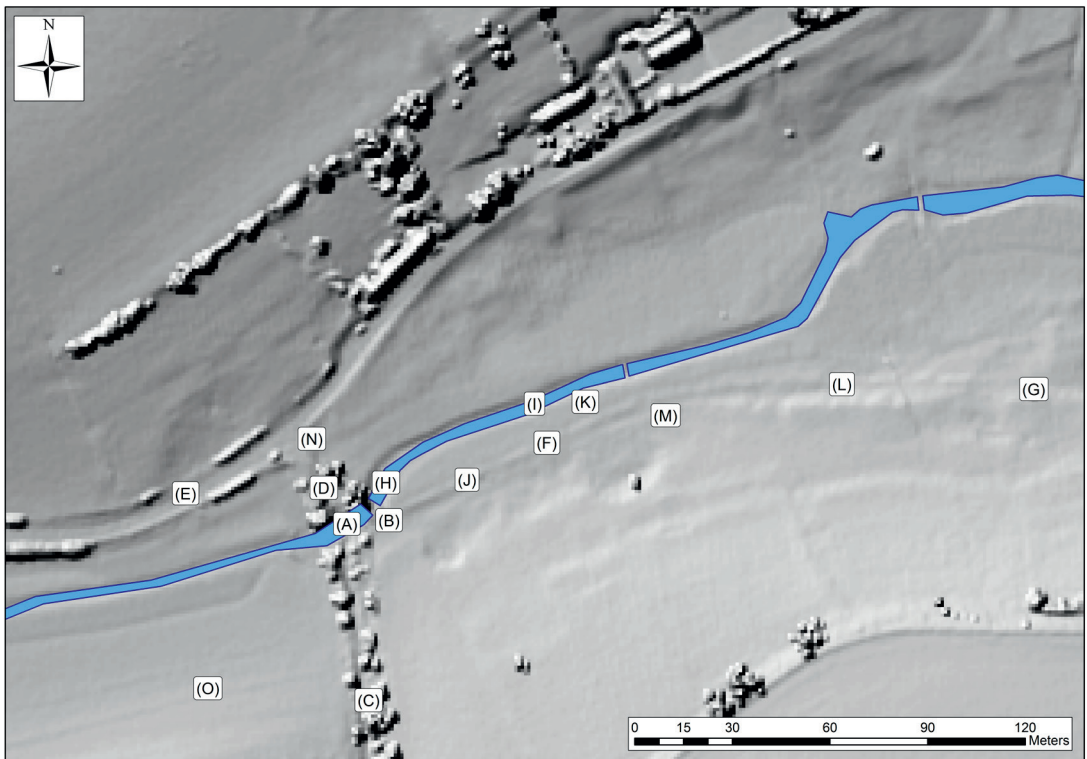


Fig. 2 LiDAR survey data of Stowford. Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0

detached lands at Semley with Broad Chalke, with Stowford lying between them.

Meeting places are also commonly associated with administrative boundaries (Gelling 1978, 209–14; Pantos 2004; Baker and Brookes 2017). Although Stowford is central to the hundred it lies very close to the parish boundary between Ebbesbourne Wake and Broad Chalke; indeed, Fifield Bavant with Stowford lie in a salient of the former projecting into Broad Chalke parish such as to suggest some form of unusual status. Further support for this idea is the name Fifield, a Domesday vill, which is derived from ‘five hides’ (Gover, Mawer and Stenton 1939, 207). Five-hide units are often named as the size of small estates of freemen, or the equivalent of a knight’s fee, carved out of larger holdings (Round 1895, 293). Though the precise extents of this estate are unknown, it is quite possible that Stowford lies on the bounds between it and the wider hundred.

Certainly, there is some suggestion of a re-organisation of the administrative structure in this part of southern Wiltshire in the tenth century, as is illustrated by a number of charters granting between

80 and 100 hide tracts of land (Sawyer 1968, cat. nos. 540, 582, 630; Langlands forthcoming b). Unusually, we have in this case a putative date for the creation of the hundred, with Stowford as its meeting place established *de novo* around the same time. Excavation work sought to clarify the topography of the location and examine how it may have served as a convenient and notable place at which to meet and carry out the duties of the hundred court.

Results

The existing ford is much overgrown with vegetation, clear evidence of high levels of alluvial deposition (A). A footbridge with concrete under-pinning supports large slabs of limestone crossing at an angle to the ford (B). A relatively deep cut hollow leading down to the ford from the south (C) forms part of a long-distance route that can be traced northwest to Tisbury and southeast to Fordingbridge over a distance of 25km. To the immediate north of the

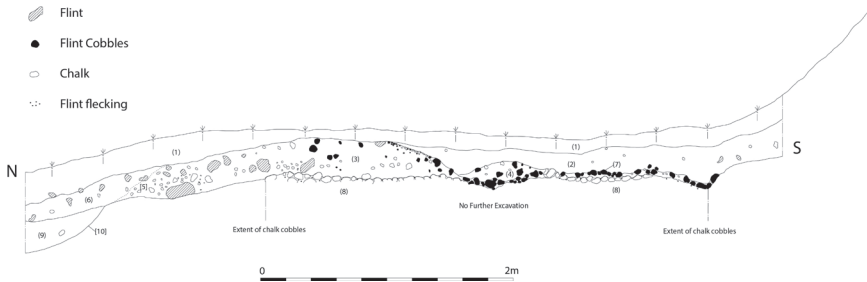


Fig. 3 West-Facing Section through (L). Key to Section: 1) Topsoil. Heavily worm-sorted. Dark brown-grey; 2) Sub-soil. Brown-grey silty loam. Occasional inclusions of natural angular flint and chalk nodules/gravel; 3) Brown-grey silty loam containing inclusions of varying sizes. Small angular flint flecks, chalk pea grit to gravel, chalk 'cobbles', chalk nodules, large angular flints, flint cobbles. Interpreted as upcast bank (?modern) – perhaps related to section of barbed wire recovered from the topsoil. Large angular flints in this deposit may represent dislodged curb stones; 4) Area of mixed inclusions: flint 'cobbles' and flecks, chalk gravel in more friable fill than that in fill (2); 5) Possible extent of upcast of (?modern) bank but must allow for soil creep into (6); 6) Grey-brown loam creeping in to top of ditch, occasional inclusions as in (2); 7) Flint cobbled surface surviving best in the trench as a whole between 1m and 1.8m from south. Comprising purposely worked cobbled flints 30mm x 30mm to 70mm x 70mm. Larger examples rare. Metallurgy evident in the form of a purple staining to exposed surface – affording positive identification of cobbles elsewhere in the section; 8) Chalk cobbles. 30mm x 30mm to 120mm x 120mm. Rounded and tightly bonded with white grey silty clay and including flint flecking suggesting processing of flint cobbles in advance of bedding; 9) Fill of [10]. Light brown silty loam. Chalk flecking to grit. Occasional chalk gravel. Containing sherds of medieval pottery; 10) Cut of ditch/scarp. Thought too deep to represent line of natural slope

ford is a short raised causeway (D) that may have led to the footbridge precursor to (B). The current road through the valley (E) runs parallel to the north of the stream. To the south of the stream, coming from the east and running with the valley, is a footpath which is marked by a small bank (F) as it approaches the ford but further east is constituted as a cut roadway that can be observed continuing east to the village of Broad Chalke (G). Scatters of flint and limestone fragments were observed at (H) and scatters of flints at (I).

Test pits were cut at (J), (K) and (L). (J) revealed a bank of up-cast loam, capped with gravel and overlain by alluvial deposits. This is interpreted as a raised walkway providing pedestrian access to the footbridge at (B). A section was cut at (L) to examine the relationship of this bank/walkway with the cut roadway heading east. The section (Figure 2) suggested that the bank had been cut into an existing roadway comprising worked flint cobbles overlaying a layer of prepared chalk cobbles. That this roadway was not recovered in (J) suggests that it deviated from the bank at the angle marked (M). Test section (K) was undertaken to explore the continuation of the roadway on a straight course across the stream. It was abandoned at a depth of 0.75m having exposed largely homogenous loam – indicating the extent of alluvial deposition in this location. It is thought, however, on the basis that the scatter of flint rubble

at (I) is on a continuation of the line of the roadway, and in line with the gated entrance to the paddock to the north of the stream (N), that this roadway was constructed as a part of the valley road and that this place was the best location in the valley to cross the stream to avoid the steep cliffs on the south side (O).

Within the roadway cart ruts were observed at a distance of 1.6–1.8m apart. Small flecks of flint, uniformly mixed into the sub-stratum of chalk cobbles suggest that (at least some of) the preparation of the flints was undertaken at the point of surface construction. Where the flint cobble surface had not been disturbed by the later bank, it survived in relatively good condition. Similar flint cobbles, although not *in situ*, were observed at (C). Abraded pottery, spot-dated to the twelfth/thirteenth centuries was recovered from the upper fills of (Figure 2, (9)) itself overlain by the cut/slump of the bank ([5]/(6)). At its southern edge, the roadway was overlain with deposits which themselves were overlain with hill-washed overburden from a platform—part of a series of platforms forming a deserted site—believed to date from the medieval period (Historic England Archive ref. no. 922500; NMR Monument no. 1001998).

Good building stone is in short supply in many of the Chalk downland areas of southern England and the working hypothesis for this archaeological work was that stone fords recorded as early as the

eleventh century may have had their origins in the Roman period. The large limestone slabs re-used in the current footbridge were almost certainly imported, as were the fragments observed at (H); material believed to have been scoured from the stream bed by the increased flow rate caused by the bounding of the stream in this location. A further limestone block was observed bounding the scatter at (I) on its western extent on the southern bank. No firm dating evidence was recovered for any of the observed structures, however, recent metal-detecting finds in the region suggest a strong and wealthy Romano-British presence in the valley. Within the vicinity of this crossing place, an extensive Iron Age and Romano-British farmstead has been recorded on the downland to the northeast (Clay 1924). During recent renovation work on the chapel of St Martins, Fifield Bavant, a Romano-British brooch was recovered from a small soakaway pit and Romano-British building stone appears to have been reused in the chapel construction (Carter and Corney, 2010). There arises, therefore, the distinct possibility that this ford was constructed in the Romano-British period to facilitate the crossing of the Ebbles and that it was sufficiently renowned and in working condition in the early medieval period to have been selected as a meeting place.

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