

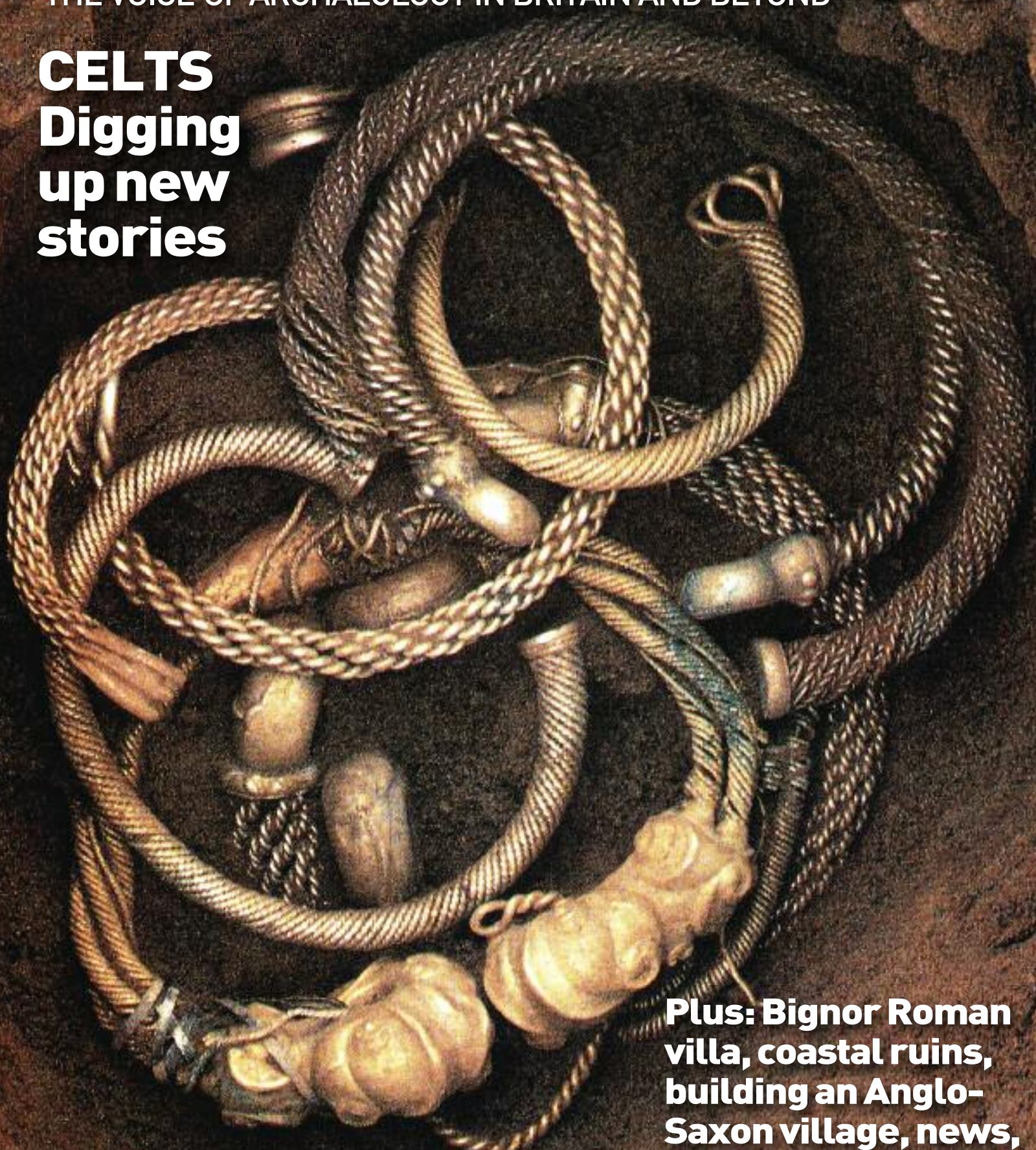
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From hollow to house: 50 years of discovery at West Stow



Major excavation began at West Stow, Suffolk, half a century ago, resulting in not just one of the most explored Anglo-Saxon villages, but also a unique archaeological experiment. Richard Hoggett reviews a project that continues to thrive

It is 50 years since the beginning of a major archaeological campaign at West Stow. Over the course of eight seasons, what remains one of the most extensively excavated early Anglo-Saxon settlements in the country was revealed. The excavations revolutionised our understanding of the design and construction of timber buildings of that time, seriously

Top: The hollow of a two-post structure after excavation, looking north; it contained two ox skulls and a cat's skeleton, and Roman and Anglo-Saxon refuse (SFB 57, scale 6ft/c 2m)

Above: The first reconstruction, closed to the public but still standing after more than 40 years; many excavated Anglo-Saxon buildings had been dismantled before they reached this stage of decay



questioning the then prevailing view of Anglo-Saxons as unsophisticated people who lived in holes in the ground.

Once the excavations had finished, the unique opportunity arose to put these new interpretations to the test. An exercise in experimental archaeology that began in 1973 still continues: to date ten Anglo-Saxon buildings have been reconstructed on the site. The half century anniversary is a fitting time to review the original excavations, and consider what we have learned from the reconstructions.

The site lies 10km north of Bury St Edmunds, on a low sandy knoll of approximately 2ha in the bottom of north-west Suffolk's Lark valley. Flowing westwards into the Fens, the Lark has long been the focus of intensive occupation: prehistoric remains litter the valley, and Icklingham, only 2km to the west, was the site of a small Roman town. The archaeological significance of West

Above: Many of the buildings at West Stow are sited over their excavated counterparts; each has unique features – the original Anglo-Saxon settlement is likely to have been more homogenous



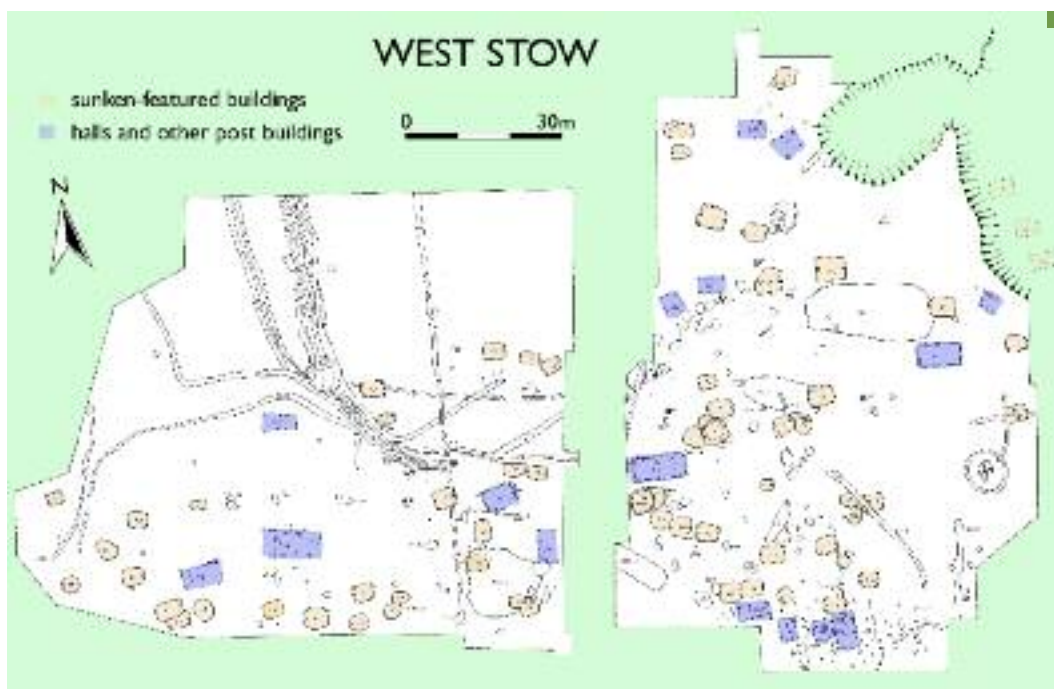
Right: The original reconstructed buildings, the first house on the left and the sunken house on the right

Stow was first recognised in 1849, when an inhumation cemetery of early Anglo-Saxon date (AD410–700) was discovered nearby. Yet evidence for early Anglo-Saxon settlement was not recognised until nearly a century later.

Credit for that belongs to renowned Suffolk archaeologist Basil Brown, who had discovered and begun the excavation of the Sutton Hoo ship burial. Fresh from that experience, he had excavated a pair of Romano-British kilns at West Stow in 1940. While re-excavating these kilns with Stanley West in 1947, Brown noted early Anglo-Saxon artefacts and features in a sandpit then being dug into the north-eastern edge of the knoll.

West later brought the site to the attention of Vera Evison, an Anglo-Saxon specialist, who excavated on the knoll for five seasons between 1957 and 1961 under the auspices of the Ministry of Works. Her work confirmed that substantial early Anglo-Saxon deposits survived, and led to the main excavation campaign under West's direction between 1965 and 1972.

Left: Anglo-Saxon features revealed 1965–72. There are several sub-phases – only two or three halls were occupied at once, each with a group of ancillary SFBs; hachures to north-east mark the sandpit where Basil Brown first identified remains in 1947



The site is best known for the early Anglo-Saxon settlement. However, the excavation also revealed the knoll to be densely packed with prehistoric and Roman features. Several scatters of mesolithic flint-working waste were identified, as was a late neolithic inhumation surrounded by an enclosing ditch associated with 47 cremation burials. There was also an iron age settlement on the knoll, comprising a series of enclosures, roundhouses and numerous pits. These were superseded by a cluster of five Romano-British pottery kilns, two of which had first brought Brown and West to the site.

Right: From 1965–72 a core team of supervisors and labourers was supplemented by local and university volunteers

Below: Stanley West (in blue shirt) discusses a feature at the excavations he directed; he first dug at West Stow in the 1940s with Basil Brown



Above: Posthole foundations of Hall 1, looking west; gaps show doorways to east and south (scale 6ft/c 2m)

A busy community

The early Anglo-Saxon settlement lasted from about 420 until the early 600s, when the villagers abandoned the site. The excavation revealed two main types of building: rectangular timber halls, represented by rows of postholes, and “sunken-featured buildings” (SFBs), comprising sub-rectangular hollows with one or more postholes at either

Right: Burnt remains of a sunken-floored building, with loom weights lying on planks, looking east; such discoveries showed that SFBs had timber walls and suspended floors (SFB 15, scale 6ft/c 2m)

end. The seven identified halls measured 8–15m long, each being about half as wide as it was long; most had a southern door and a central hearth. One hall was subdivided at one end, suggesting it may have been more important than the others or performed a different function.

The hollows of 68 SFBs were excavated, typically some 4m long by 3m wide. Seemingly built in clusters around the halls, they fell into two main types. One had a single post at either end, presumably supporting a ridge-beam. The other had three posts at each end, with the four corner posts providing extra roof support. The hollows were mostly filled with rubbish, accumulated during the building’s life or, as seems more likely, deposited after dismantling.

The halls have been interpreted as communal buildings, each the focal point of an extended family group. Satellite groups of SFBs are thought to

have had a range of ancillary functions, such as dwellings, workshops and store rooms. Artefacts from the SFB fills allow the buildings to be phased into a sequence spanning 200 years. This shows that there were only two or three family groups of this kind in residence at any one time.

Although confined to the knoll, the settlement appears to have moved around the hilltop as halls and SFBs rotted, were dismantled and replaced. During the final phase of occupation, around AD600–650, at least one of the family groups seems to have drifted away from the knoll to join a new focus of settlement elsewhere. This is most likely to have been to the east, where the medieval village and parish church of West Stow developed.

A vast array of artefacts and ecofacts were recovered during the excavations, enabling a great deal to be said about the settlement’s economy and environment. Wheat, barley and rye



were all cultivated, the crops being supplemented by wild fruit, nuts and edible plants. Over 175,000 pieces of animal bone were collected, indicating the farming of large numbers of sheep, cattle and pigs, as well as wildfowling, fishing and hunting deer.

The strong emphasis on sheep rearing matches the many excavated loom weights, spinning and weaving tools, suggesting that textile production was one of the specialist skills practised on the site, with surplus cloth being traded out. Other crafts in evidence were bone- and antler-working, especially in the form of combs, and pottery making, with a clay heap and decorative stamping tools surviving, along with the pots themselves. The other major skill in evidence, of course, was the high level of woodworking and carpentry required to construct and maintain the settlement's numerous timber buildings.

The great rebuilding

The excavations are only half the story. What happened next, once the digging was over, confirmed West Stow's status as one of the most important Anglo-Saxon sites in the country. It is now best known as a tourist attraction and educational centre. Behind the reconstructed Anglo-Saxon village, however, is a vast and ongoing exercise in experimental archaeology, with different interpretations and building techniques being tried and tested and the results constantly being compared to the original archaeological record.

*Right: The original sunken house (front, 1974), the first house (left, 1973) and the Kimberley Rew house (right, 1974). The latter, the first attempt at a two-post SFB, was dismantled in 1987. Rew later had a successful musical career, including writing *Walking on Sunshine and Love Shine a Light**



STANLEY/WEST STOW ARCHIVE, WEST STOW ARCHIVE

In terms of the buildings' appearance, the rectangular halls are not too difficult to reconstruct, with vertical posts defining walls and supporting roofs. Reconstructing the superstructure of the sunken-featured buildings, however, has always been much harder. SFBs have been recognised across much of early Anglo-Saxon England, but the exact nature of their construction and appearance has been debated – without resolution – for the best part of a century. There are no modern counterparts.

Until the West Stow excavations, the prevailing interpretation of the SFB imagined a tent-like thatched roof set over a hollow in which the occupants worked and dwelt. West Stow, which

provided one of the largest excavated samples of SFBs, caused West to challenge this orthodoxy, and brought a new dimension to such reconstructions. Two of the West Stow SFBs had burnt down (unlike the vast majority of the buildings, which had been dismantled). As a result, traces of planked floors and timber walls survived, suggesting a much more complex, albeit conventional-looking building than had previously been supposed. Rather than a place in which to live, it seems that the hollows offered ventilation or insulation to floors raised from the ground, and a space beneath that could perhaps be used for storage.

When the excavations ended West was keen to test his new hypotheses. Meanwhile a group of Cambridge students had formulated a desire to reconstruct an Anglo-Saxon building. The two parties met, the West Stow Environmental Archaeology Group was formed, and work began on the first reconstruction in 1973. This was a six-post SFB built to test West's ideas, with timber walls and a plank floor suspended over the hollow. It was made using only tools, materials and techniques that would have been available to the Anglo-Saxons.

Crucially, it worked. This first house is still standing, although it is no longer accessible to the public for safety reasons. Its design has gone on to underpin many of the reconstructions which have been built since, each experimenting with more sophisticated approaches to timber joints, thatching, planking and pegging.

Below: A devastating fire destroyed one of the buildings in 2005, presenting the opportunity to excavate the remains and compare them to excavated Anglo-Saxon examples



Continuing the experiment, a second SFB was reconstructed in 1974. This followed the traditional sunken-floored interpretation, with a view to comparing and contrasting it to the raised-floored version. One problem which was immediately apparent with this interpretation was the speed with which the hollow filled as a result of the sandy soils into which it was dug. This contrasts starkly with the clearly defined hollows recovered during the excavations, which were sufficiently intact at the end of a building's use to have a second life as rubbish pits. This is one of many ways in which the sunken-house design does not match the excavated evidence, indicating that the reconstruction is flawed.

To date, ten reconstructions have been built at West Stow: five variations on West's version of the SFB, two halls, one workshop, the original sunken house and the new sunken house (of which more below). In that time, only three buildings have been deconstructed, thus completing their experimental lifecycle. One of the SFBs built in 1974 became structurally unstable and was dismantled in 1987. One of the halls, built over a number of years in the late 1970s, also became unsound and was dismantled in 1999. And in one extreme case an SFB, built in the mid 1990s, burnt down in 2005. Although not planned, the accident was turned to positive use when the remains were excavated to see how they compared to the burnt SFBs found during the original excavations. It also allowed many different archaeological techniques to be calibrated, given that the design, layout and contents of the building immediately before the fire were known.

A new sunken house

Like the first house, the original sunken house is still standing, although time has taken its toll and in recent years it has developed a significant and increasing lean towards its eastern end as its timber frame has racked. A wooden prop was inserted to support the eastern gable a few years ago, but as the building's 40th year passed the decision was taken that the structure had reached the end of its practical life. It was time for the next phase of the experiment to begin – recording and dismantling. This approach is very much in keeping with the

Right: West Stow Environmental Archaeology Group members at work in 1973 on the first reconstruction of a sunken-featured building, the "first house"; it has three posts at each end of the hollow



Right: Making the roof. Reconstructed roofs are supported by the principal timbers; plank walls, which are not load bearing, are inserted later



Below: Long-straw thatch completes the first reconstruction





archaeological evidence, which suggests that the original buildings were dismantled rather than allowed to decay in situ, with all useable parts presumably being recycled, leaving just the hollow to be backfilled with domestic rubbish.

As the 50th anniversary approached, it was thought fitting to construct a new version of the sunken house adjacent to the existing structure. Visitors to the site this summer can experience the juxtaposition of the old and the new as a strong visual reminder of the ongoing nature of the West Stow experiment.

Initially some eyebrows were raised at the prospect of the anniversary build being a replacement of what we widely consider to be an inaccurate reconstruction. All good experiments must be repeatable, however, and we consider it important to continue to test the design as rigorously as we can.

Above: The original sunken house (behind, 1974) with the new version complete with “stuff-thatched” roof and timber capping; the roof uses no wooden spars, of which no archaeological trace has yet been found

Below: Details of stuff-thatched roof on the new sunken house, made of gorse and straw, under construction in 2015

One particular criticism levelled at the original sunken house was that it had been badly built because it wasn't widely believed in by its constructors. This was emphatically not the case, but in order to allay any suspicion the construction of the new sunken house has been informed by all of the lessons learned during the last 40 years. We are confident that the structure is as good as we can make it.

But we are not simply reproducing the old design. During this new build we have taken the opportunity to try an innovative approach to thatching the roof which we are confident has not been used on any previous historical reconstructions. Early in 2015 master thatcher Alan Jones and his team produced a “stuff-thatched” roof, which has a base coat of gorse into which straw has been pushed to create a top coat. The gorse's thorns grip the straw

tightly, resulting in a sturdy and secure roof, yet one which is suitably low-tech.

The timber roof-cap which sits atop the new house and effectively weights the ridge down is also a radical departure, albeit one with European parallels. The net result is a thatched roof which has been completed without the use of wooden spars to peg it home. This is something we were keen to achieve, because the more traditional thatched ridges completed on the site have each required several hundred spars, yet to date no definite examples have been positively identified in the Anglo-Saxon archaeological record. The experiment continues, and only time will tell how valid these methods are. Here's to the next 50 years!

The West Stow team would like to hear from anyone with photographs of the excavations or memories of having visited. Please contact lance.alexander@westsuffolk.gov.uk. To mark the double anniversary of the beginning of the main excavation campaign in 1965 and the publication of the first monographs in 1985, the Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service has made PDFs of the reports freely available via the Suffolk Heritage Explorer website: <https://heritage.suffolk.gov.uk/west-stow>. Richard Hoggett is senior archaeological officer with the Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service, and archaeological consultant to the West Stow Anglo-Saxon Village Trust ■

