

## Anglo Saxon Charters

Of the Saxon period we have both written evidence and artefacts that have been unearthed concerning Watchfield. The artefacts came from the excavations carried out in 1983 when work on the By-pass uncovered early Anglo-Saxon burials. (Grid Ref: SU2493 9075). Excavations revealed at least 30 graves, many of which contained grave goods and dated the site to the 5th and 6th centuries. It was an important discovery of people living there directly after the Roman occupation. A report of the excavations stated that; *'The quality and quantity of the grave goods suggest that this was a wealthy and important community.'* Further excavations in 1989 identified 17 additional graves including a double burial of a female with a young infant. The evidence strongly suggested that many more burials are there. But where were these people living? I suspect that the answer to this question will also reveal the origin of the village that we know today.



*The Triangle. The field so shaped after the A420 By-pass cut through it. The cut revealed numerous Saxon burials and later excavations also uncovered evidence of habitation from the middle Stone-Age right through to the middle Iron-Age.*

The written evidence comes from three Anglo Saxon Charters. The earliest in which Watchfield is mentioned, is contained in Charter S93 (the S is a Sawyer number given to the charters by Peter Sawyer who studied and indexed them). S93 is dated 727AD in which Aethelbald, monarch of Britain, confirmed early land grants to St Mary's at Abingdon and grants the Abbey 27 hides or cassati at Wacenesfel. (A hide was a measurement of land that would support one family and varied in size from 60 to 120 old acres, or 15 to 30 modern acres).

A second mention appears in Charter S183, when Coenwulf, King of the Mercians, granted to the monastery at Abingdon, privileges for its estates. Included in the lengthy list of places is Waechenesfeld. It is dated 821AD.

Although the boundary of the parish was most probably established much earlier, it's not until the Saxon period that we get a firm description. Charter S413 informs us that on 20 June in the year 931AD, King Athelstan granted to one of his Ministers called Aelfric, 20 hides, or cassati, of land at Waeclesfeld. This is a truly amazing document as the charter includes a description of the boundary, which is written in Anglo Saxon English. It's remarkably detailed and the modern Parish boundary follows it exactly. Such an ancient boundary deserves further explanation, so let us go on an aerial tour. It starts in the southeast of the parish near Bower Copse. (Grid Ref: SU9035 2605).

*Ærest on ðone stan æt þam hæðenan byrgelsan.*

First the stone at the heathen burial place.



If we accept that wherever possible flowing water has been adhered to as a boundary marker, then this starting point would be in the vicinity of Bower Copse, about where the modern boundary turns southwest. When the military houses of Bower Green were built some 40 years ago, no human remains were unearthed. Recently more houses have been built in that area and nothing has been uncovered. A burial ground was discovered during the construction of the By-pass as mentioned above, but this is some distance to the north and there would be no practical route for the boundary to follow from there. Therefore, it would be logical to conclude that somewhere near Bower Copse lies a burial ground as yet to be discovered. It has been suggested by some historians that a '*heathen burial place*' to the Saxons, meant a place of execution and subsequent burial. The Boundary starts in the lighter coloured clump of trees by the houses. As Bower Brook it heads away at the top of the picture along the line of the trees. Little Wellington Wood is on the right.

*þanne ut on prilleces hæsseccas ufewealde*

To the outer part of the tufts of coarse grass of the point



*As a small stream called Bower Brook, it passes this side of the military academy buildings, into a wooded area by the firing ranges.*

*þonne on cocbroc*

Then on to the wild bird stream.



*Above. Around the point where Bower Brook meets Tuckmill Brook, just south of where the old A420 crosses Northford Bridge. Top left.*

**Andlang streames þæt on mylenbroc**

And along the stream to the mill stream.



*Shown more clearly with lying snow, the brook and boundary passes between the sewage plant and the houses.*

***þonne andlang streames***

Then along the stream.



*After passing the site of Tuckmill (Centre) the stream becomes known as Pennyhook's Brook.*

*þæt on lentan*

Then on to the Lenta



*The stream meanders acutely past Pennyhook's Farm (left) before joining the River Cole, anciently called the Lenta, just south of West Mill (right).*

*þonne andlang streames þæt on mæropol*

Then along the stream to the boundary pool.



*As the River Cole, the boundary passes Fresden Manor House and the deserted medieval village of Fresden, shown faintly, where the cows are grazing.*



*The Boundary Pool. This is where the River Cole swings to the north-west and Watchfield boundary turns to the south-east, which at this point is a stream running into the Cole. The stream course shown above and to the right in the photo is a modern cut.*

*þonne of þæm pole on bean broc*

Then from there on to the bean stream.

*ðonne andlang streames on headdan mere*

Thence along the stream to the headland pool.



Somewhere in the region of the area here today known as Waterloo, (in the lower part of picture) was the Bean Stream. The triangle of trees is known on OS maps as Vinthill Withy Bed. It's a low-lying area with the stream running past it and most likely was a small pool or reservoir.

*þonne of ðam mere on þan lace þær þa brocas twisliad*

Then from the pool to where the stream forks.

Just after passing Vinthill Withy Bed the boundary and stream does indeed fork; one stream heads in a straight line upwards and becomes the parish boundary of Coleshill, whilst the other bows and turns right to head along the ploughed field continuing as Watchfield boundary up and over the hill.

*þanne of þæm twislan on mær beorh*

To the turn at the boundary hill at the stone pile (Maer Beorh).



The boundary climbs the hill quite steeply until it reaches the top where the hedge, emerging from the left in picture above, meets the field. It turns to the west for about 300 yards.

As the text implies, a tumulus or stone pile, a 'Maer Beorh', would have stood somewhere in the vicinity, perhaps in middle of picture below. Some of the marks showing through the ripening crops may be indicative of the Maer Beorh. The boundary proceeds south-east and heads to modern day Southdown Farm. It then follows the line of the hedge in the upper part of picture and passes to the left of the farm to reach the road, referred to as the 'Army Path' and the 'Stone'. The small dog-leg in the boundary near the farm, marks the location of 'Anger Cottage', mentioned on OS maps, now demolished.



**þanne of ðæm beorge on þone herepað**

To the stone on the army path.

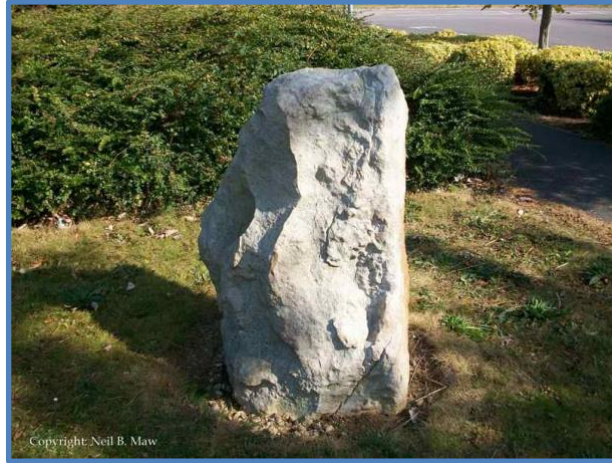
*þonne andlang herepaþes seofan andfiftig gyrda*

Then along the army path for 57 yards.



The modern boundary does indeed run along the main road (Army Path) for about this distance before it heads off into the field to the right.





At the end of that ditch, just over the modern road to Longcott, the stone shown in the picture above was found and can be seen today on the right, just inside the turning to Barrington Avenue

*ðonne andlang furh on ðone stan beorh*

Thence along the furrow to the stone hill

Another tantalising clue as to what must have been here. The boundary crosses the field and also crosses the road that leads into the military housing estate and heads on down towards Bower Copse. At this point we have travelled full circle around the entire parish, as the next description brings us back to where we started and that elusive 'heathen burial place'.

*þonne of þæm stan beorge on ðone hæpænan byrgels eft to þam stane*

Then from the stone hill back again to the stone at the heathen burial place.