

“Saxon Southampton”

Talk by Andy Skinner, December 2025

Our final talk of 2025 was a Zoom event by Andy Skinner on Saxon Southampton. Andy pointed out that in the case of Southampton the term “Saxon” rather than “Anglo-Saxon” is employed. The Saxon period is divided into three main timespans:

410-650 AD	Early Saxon – Departure of Romans, arrival of settlers
650-850 AD	Middle Saxon – Gradual conversion to Christianity, creation of kingdoms
850-1066 AD	Late Saxon – Viking Age, establishment of a united England

There is not a lot of evidence for Southampton in early Saxon times, the town coming to prominence in the middle period and during that time (731 AD), Bede, living many miles away in Jarrow, wrote about the double tides of the Solent. It is not clear what tribe controlled the area although many historians believe the Jutes were in control.

Saxon Southampton, known as “Hamwic”, was differently sited from the earlier Roman and later medieval settlements and was in the area around the current St Mary’s Church. The town is not always recorded as “Hamwic” and from around 850 AD it is sometimes referred to as “Hamton”. It is not known if this was a distinct part of the town or just another name for the whole.

The general location of the Saxon town covered the area of the modern football stadium and extended to the river and the current parks to the west, where archaeologists have found evidence of a boundary ditch. The area, along with the rest of the city, suffered heavy bombing during World War 2, enabling archaeological work to take place during the post-war period.

During construction work for St Mary’s Stadium some 40 graves from about 650-720 AD (early mid-Saxon) were uncovered. These were pagan burials, some being buried with weapons. The grave of a young woman aged between 16 and 20 was discovered with an impressive array of grave goods, including a gold and garnet pendant, similar in style to some found in Jutish Kent. There has been a church on the site of St Mary’s for many centuries and a church is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086. Legend tells us that the church was founded by St Birinus in c 634 AD.

The area around Six Dials, now a road junction, provided archaeologists with a lot of evidence for Saxon occupation. King Ine of Wessex (c 670-726 AD) was a peaceful monarch who converted to Christianity and his kingdom became wealthy. Archaeology has shown street plans and clear evidence of occupation and consolidated trading networks in Southampton. Pottery from the Baltic and Germany and shells from the North Sea have been found in the area. In return we were mainly exporting cloth. The volume of Saxon coins found in the area suggests the existence of a local mint; this has never been found.

The eighth century saw the beginning of Viking raids and evidence of burning suggests the town was subject to severe attacks, leading to some of the population moving away. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that Ealdorman Wulfheard fought against 33 Viking ships’ companies at Southampton in 840 AD and won a victory. Later that century, Southampton became one of Alfred the Great’s “burghs” (fortified towns), although no traces of the defences have been found.

During the later Saxon period there is evidence of settlement in what is now called “Old Southampton” and Viking raids began again and continued up to the Norman invasion in 1066, which brought the long period of Saxon Southampton to an end.

This was another excellent and enlightening talk by Andy Skinner and we look forward to hearing more from him in the future.



Elaborate mid 7th century brooch found on the site of St Mary's stadium, Southampton

Alan Sandford

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