

Saxon Farnham

AD 410 - 1066

Early Saxon settlement at Firgrove

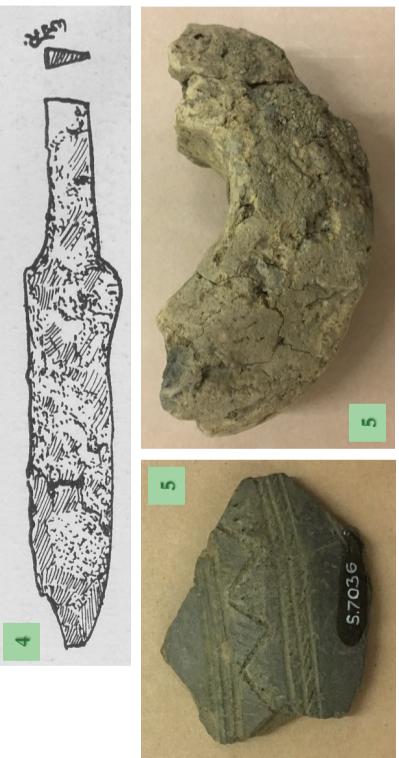
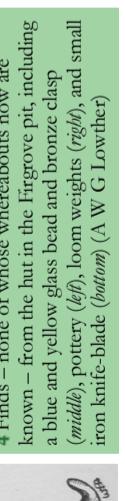
Only one site in Farnham is known to be of Early Saxon date – the Firgrove pit between the River Wey and Farnham station – which was uncovered during gravel-digging in 1924. A low-lying site close to the river, this area is presumed to be the general location of early Saxon settlement in Farnham, possibly spreading-out to where St Andrew's church is now.

Although no plans were ever drawn as record, several Saxon-type huts or sunken featured buildings – known as *grubenhäuser* – were discovered. One, which was photographed while being excavated, suggests a width of about four metres and a floor with curved sides about half a meter lower than the ground surface. These huts were generally used as dwellings and for domestic activities such as weaving – which we know from loom weights commonly found within – and other finds such as pottery date them to the 6th or 7th century.

2 The only photographic record – or record at all – of one of the Saxon huts being excavated on the face of the gravel pit (Photo by E Borelli)



3 Reconstruction of *grubenhäuser* at West Stow, Suffolk (Photo by D Graham)



St Andrew's Church and Saxon core

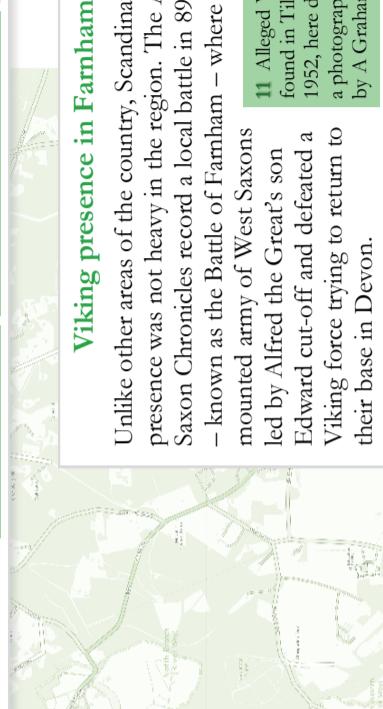
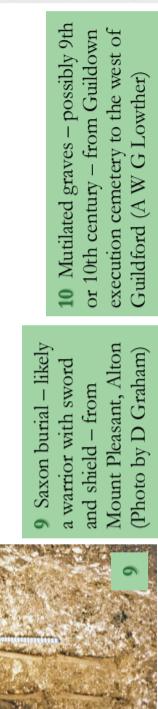
During development work on the nave of St Andrew's Church which took place in 2002-3, the footings and mortared floor of what is probably the pre-12th century church were found. Little can be said about its size or plan from the small sections which were revealed, other than it was slightly smaller than the Norman 12th century church which replaced it.

Although a church is known to be in Farnham by the 7th century, these early foundations are likely 10th or 11th century in date, suggesting an even earlier timber predecessor. Whether the first Saxon church was at the same location is not known – though it would likely have been in this area rather than in the modern town centre, dominating the highest ground by the best crossing point of the Wey – as no Saxon artefacts have yet been found to provide further evidence.

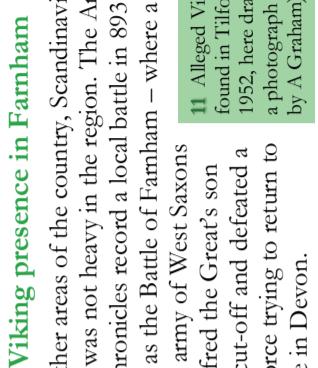


Saxon burials and cemeteries

Although no Saxon cemeteries – or even burials – have yet been uncovered in Farnham, other nearby Saxon cemeteries are known, including at Alton, Basingstoke and Guildford.



8 Route north from Longbridge which turns sharply west onto Downing Street and – via Lower Church Lane – leads to St Andrew's (Map by D Graham)
9 Saxon burial – likely a warrior with sword and shield – and from Mount Pleasant, Alton (Photo by D Graham)
10 Mutilated graves – possibly 9th or 10th century – from Guildford execution cemetery to the west of Guildford (A W G Lowther)



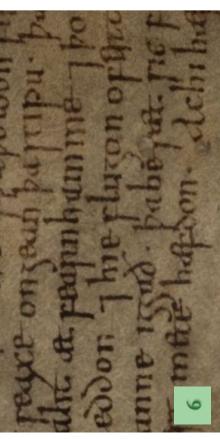
Viking presence in Farnham

Unlike other areas of the country, Scandinavian presence was not heavy in the region. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles record a local battle in 893 however – known as the Battle of Farnham – where a mounted army of West Saxons led by Alfred the Great's son Edward cut-off and defeated a Viking force trying to return to their base in Devon.

The Domesday Book of 1086

records that Saxon Farnham had 36 villagers and 11 small-holders with 29 ploughs, 6 mills, 35 acres of meadow and woodland for 150 pigs. Although local mills – such as Weydon and Bourne – are reputed to be of Domesday origins, there is no trace of their original foundations or date.

12 Map plan of the development of Farnham, showing how the likely area of Saxon settlement was separate from the later Norman planned town which grew between the castle and the Borough (D Graham)

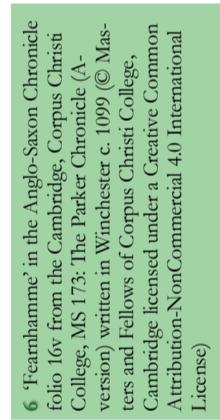


Farnham in the early charters

The name 'Farnham' is Saxon in origin, likely meaning 'enclosure or enclosed place in the bracken or fern'. Historically, the town is well-documented, with the earliest surviving reference (to *Fernham*) a charter of AD 685-688 in which Cadwalla of Wessex gives 60 hides of land to two or three monks for the building of a 'monasterium' – minster or 'mother' church – in the area.

From at least 801, the manor of Farnham was in the possession of the bishops of Winchester. Another charter of 801-805 states that Bishop Ealdmund exchanged land in return for two nights' entertainment and lodging and a render of ten jars of honey, which implies that – in addition to local honey production – there was a building in the area where an important entourage could stay.

6 'Fearnhamme' in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle folio 16v from the Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 173; The Parker Chronicle (A-version) written in Winchester c. 1099 (© Masters and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License)



We know very little else about Saxon Farnham before the time of the Norman Conquest, although pottery of late Saxon and Saxon-Norman date was also found during development work along the Borough – including at the Bush Hotel and Borelli Yard – suggesting that the late Saxon settlement extended at least this far.

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