

# Anglo-Saxon Bury

## An Early Medieval Port?

Located in the picturesque Arun Valley, the small village of Bury may have a hidden past as an Anglo-Saxon port. Initially, this seems rather far-fetched considering Bury's current inland position in Sussex (Fig.1.), but one must consider that the coastline and river courses were significantly different in the 10th and 11th centuries. Not only were the coastal estuaries far more accessible, but river channels were wider and more liable to flooding (Robinson, *An Historical Atlas of Sussex*). River access to Bury via the River Arun was far from impossible in Anglo-Saxon Sussex. Indeed, this argument follows on from what Ann Best maintained in her article on Romano-British Waterways (*SPP* 139, Aug 2016); that these watercourses were commonly utilised.



A photograph of the old ferry at Bury taken c.1902, which illustrates the proximity of the village to the river.  
Photo: © www.gravelroots.net

the possessor of thirteen estates in Sussex, the core of which were around Lewes and Eastbourne. Indeed, apart from Bury and the

Weald; this area was significantly forested and rather inaccessible during the period (Brandon, *The South Saxons*). However, its status as a Hundred meeting place must surely be of some influence to its royal proprietorship. A Hundred was a measure of land and an area served by the Hundred Court. This assembled on a monthly basis from the tenth century onwards, according to the Hundred Ordinance. James Campbell has argued that there was a deliberate tenth-century policy of 'extending the weight of royal government to the countryside' through this Hundred system (Campbell, *The Anglo-Saxons*), which is a likely reason for the royal ownership.

However, though the status of Bury might well be a result of its political importance as a Hundred site, its function as a port may also have influenced both this and its royal tenure under Godgifu. The hardest evidence for such a function again lies with Bury's Domesday entry. Though in royal hands before the conquest, Bury's

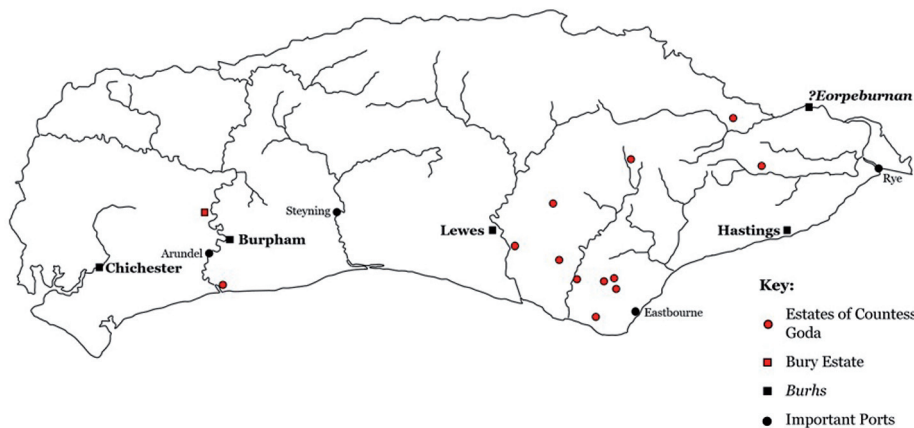


Fig.1. Map showing location of the village of Bury (red square) in the Arun Valley.

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Though only first recorded in Domesday (1086) as Berie, the village actually has origins as an important royal estate prior to the Norman Conquest (1066). Domesday Book is again the source for this, recording Bury's proprietor as Godgifu, daughter of Æthelred the Unready (d.1016) and sister to Edward the Confessor (d.1066). Before the Conquest, Godgifu was

small estate of Littlehampton to the south of the Arun Valley, all of Godgifu's Sussex lands were in this area to the east. This would imply that the Bury estate was significantly self-sufficient and thus, very profitable; probably why it was in royal hands. This commercial significance is hard to explain though, considering Bury's relatively remote position in the



Domesday entry places it under the ownership of the Norman Abbey of Fécamp in 1086. Considering that Godgifu arguably had a better claim to the English Crown than William of Normandy (later William I), and being the sister in-law to Harold Godwinson, it is likely that the transferral of Bury to Fécamp was swift to avoid resistance. Regardless of the timing though, the bestowment of Bury to Fécamp particularly expresses the nature of the estate's external links. Fécamp had been granted estates both at Rye and Steyning before the Conquest because they were important ports during this period. For English based lands to be useful and profitable to the Norman abbey, links to the continent would have been essential and the bestowment of Bury suggests that it was at least a basic port or landing site for ships in the pre-Norman period.

*International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*). This particular boat (Amberley III) has been radiocarbon-dated to the mid seventh century; thus, by the tenth and eleventh centuries the scale of operations may have expanded to include larger, international trading ships. The retreating shoreline since the last glacial period (c.15,000 years ago) meant that the function of Bury as a harbour has long since gone, and was probably diminishing even in the tenth and eleventh centuries. However, the emergence of Arundel as an important port (particularly in the Norman period) would have also significantly diminished Bury's importance. A similar case has been made by Mark Gardiner for the demise of Eastbourne in East Sussex, losing prominence to neighbouring Pevensey under Robert of Mortain (Gardiner, *An Historical Atlas of Sussex*).

that this land was worth protecting. Burpham was one of the thirty-three burh fortifications listed in the Burghal Hidage, a tenth-century list/account of the West Saxon state fortifications. Only placed in locations of strategic and pragmatic value, these forts helped to protect the borders and internal lands of Wessex (and later England) from foreign threats, particularly Vikings. Specifically, many burhs were used to prevent invaders from travelling upriver; Burpham is a prime example of one of these, especially considering its lack in economic function (Sutermeister, *Sussex Archaeological Collections*). It was clearly not chosen to become an urban centre like the other Sussex burhs, such as Lewes or Chichester, but simply to protect the river traffic and local area. For this reason, and its location upriver from Arundel but downriver from the Arun Valley estates, Burpham seems perfectly suited to protect the fairly significant economic centre at Bury. Bury's Old English place-name element of *byrig* meaning '(place by) fort or stronghold' (Mills, *A Dictionary of British Place Names*), also implies that there might have been a strong relationship between itself and Burpham. This is also interesting considering that neighbouring Watersfield was a market in the medieval period. Perhaps then, this area in the Arun Valley was far more commercial than first presumed given their location in the Sussex Weald.

This article is based on research for a Masters degree. Anyone who would like to know more on the subject is welcome to contact me personally.

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An aerial view of Bury village taken in 1949, with the river Arun in the bottom right hand corner.

Indeed, evidence for such a function is clear from even before the late Saxon period, with a number of ancient log-boats found in the area; the nearest being across the river in Amberley (McGrail & Switsur, *The*

The civil defence of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom is also another useful indicator for the importance of Bury. In particular, the establishment of the burh fortification at Burpham suggests

