



From Bear Skins to Beer Making

Evidence of life in Stanstead Abbots through the ages

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Stanstead Abbots (or Abbotts)

- Stanstead Abbots is a place with a curious history
 - The main entry in Domesday Book implies it was a market town
 - Today it is a village
- There are competing ideas about its origins
 - Was it always focused around High Street and Roydon Road?
 - Was the early settlement on the hill around St James's Church?
- Is there any information about the place before the Middle Ages?
 - I will look at the sources of information about the archaeology

Archaeology v history

- ▶ Local history is often about the deeds of interesting characters
 - ▶ Lords of the manor, vicars, eccentrics, farmers and so on
- ▶ Buildings and monuments also figure in the story
 - ▶ Especially churches, great houses and earthworks
- ▶ But there is more to the past than this
 - ▶ A vast swathe of time before local records survive
 - ▶ Much of it is “prehistoric”: there are no written records





What archaeology is best at

- ▶ Where records don't exist, the physical remains of the past can help
 - ▶ This is the province of archaeology
- ▶ It's a specialised study that can seem full of strange jargon
 - ▶ It is often off-putting to the local historian
 - ▶ It can be difficult to know where to find reliable information
- ▶ Objects are just one of the things we use to understand the past
 - ▶ We also look at buildings, "sites" and landscapes
 - ▶ We try to integrate results with any documents that may exist

Deep time and the *longue durée*

- ▶ Archaeologists often think in terms of centuries or millennia
 - ▶ Especially for very remote periods
 - ▶ Human technology goes back almost 3 million years in Africa
 - ▶ Even for the recent past, it's easier to think in terms of decades
- ▶ The *Annaliste* school of history
 - ▶ Divided historical time into three types
 - ▶ *Évenements* – events such as battles
 - ▶ *Conjonctures* – short-term trends
 - ▶ The *longue durée* – long-term cycles
 - ▶ It's a useful way of thinking like an archaeologist





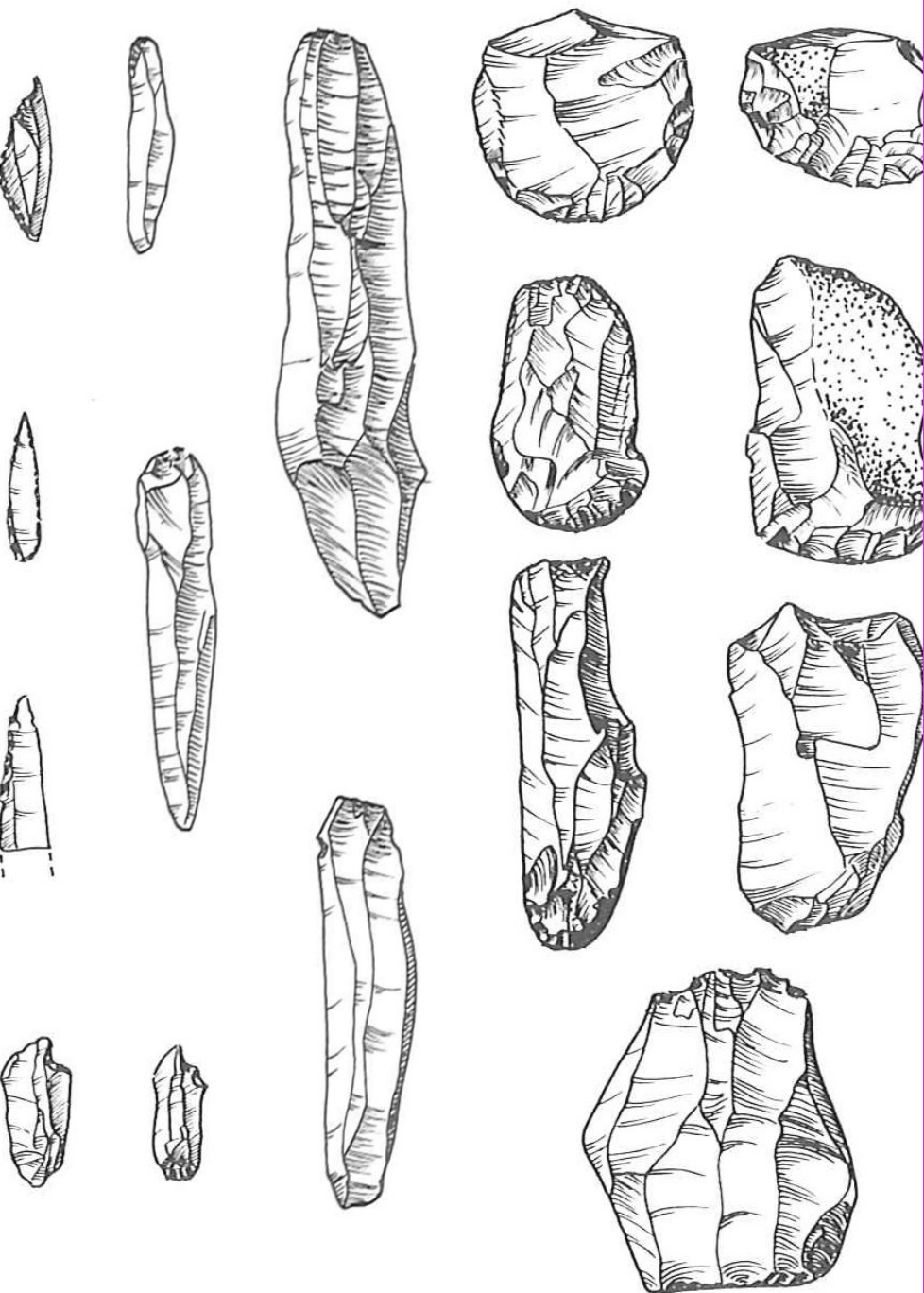
The very distant past

- ▶ The Pleistocene
 - ▶ Usually thought of as 'the Ice Age'
 - ▶ But it's actually a lot more complex
- ▶ A time of rapid climate change
 - ▶ Periods of rapid warming and cooling
 - ▶ With long phases of warm or cold climate in between
- ▶ At the start, Stanstead was in the valley of the proto-Thames
 - ▶ It flowed through the Vale of St Albans east to Colchester
 - ▶ Pushed south during the Anglian Glaciation 475,000-424,000 years ago
 - ▶ Deposits of Taplow and Westmill gravels in the former river bed

The Palaeolithic

- ▶ This is the human aspect of the Pleistocene
 - ▶ Hominins (a different species from ourselves) visited Britain
 - ▶ Following herds of big game animals
 - ▶ First attested over 800,000 years ago
 - ▶ Much of the evidence comes from gravel extraction
- ▶ There is nothing from Stanstead itself
 - ▶ Finds at Great Amwell in the 19th century
 - ▶ By Worthington G Smith
 - ▶ Consisting of “good flakes and a few examples of a better class”
 - ▶ We don't know where they are now



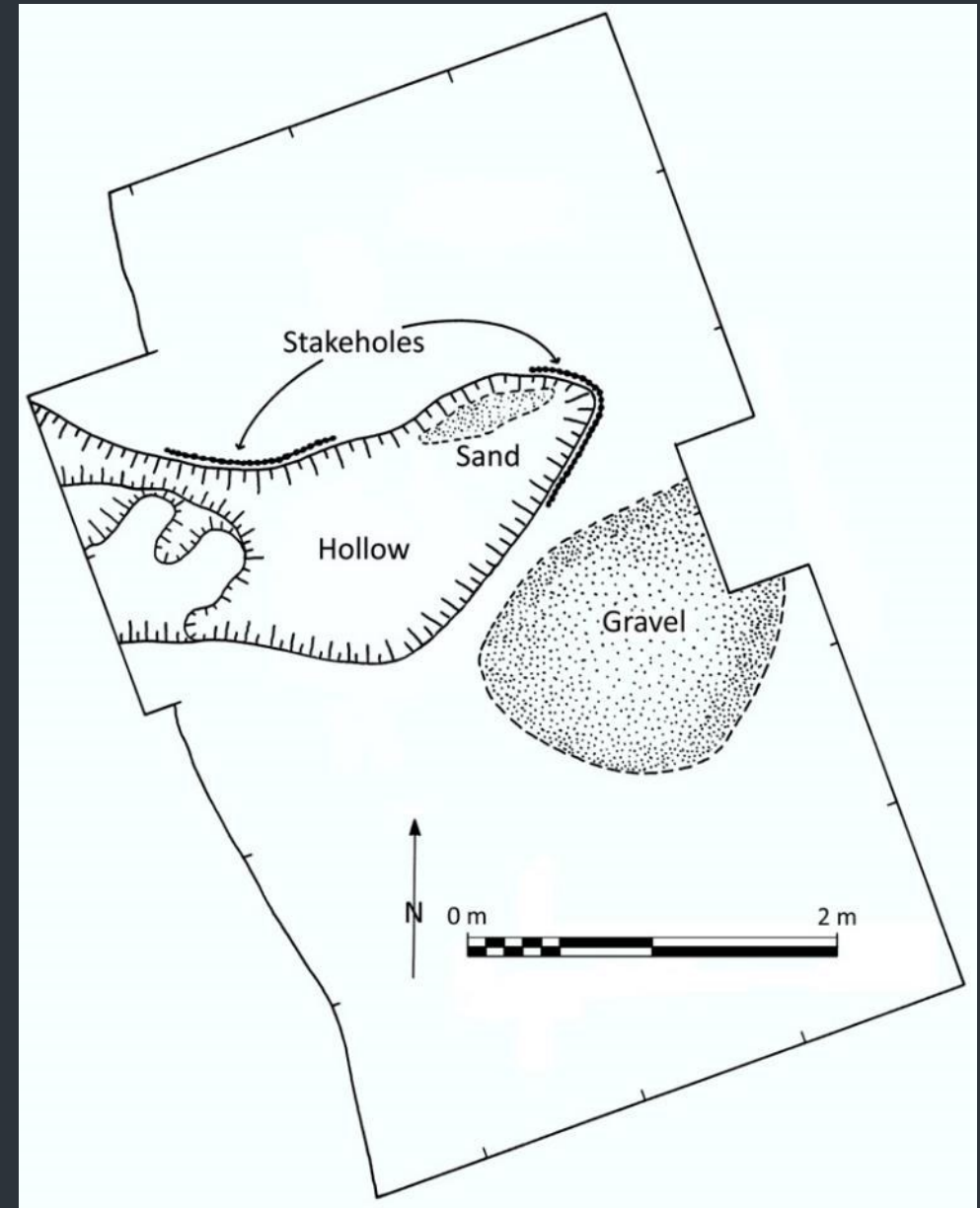


After the ice

- ▶ The depth of the last glaciation (the Devensian) was about 18,000 BC
 - ▶ After which there was slow warming for about 6,000 years
 - ▶ Then it suddenly got warmer
 - ▶ People returned to Britain
 - ▶ Then a cold snap about 11,000 BC
- ▶ Permanent settlers arrived before 10,000 BC
 - ▶ The Mesolithic
 - ▶ Hunter gatherers
 - ▶ Before 6150 BC, part of Europe
 - ▶ The Storegga Slide and Lake Agassiz
 - ▶ Britain separated from the continent

A Mesolithic site

- Site discovered in 1971 while building a swimming pool at Roydon Road
 - Emergency excavation by E Herts Archaeological Society
- Site sealed under garden deposits (0.4 m thick), waterlogged clay (0.84 m thick) and peat (0.12 m thick)
 - Hollow in the underlying sand with a pile of gravel to its east
 - Edge of the hollow defined by stakes
- 1316 flints and 2 utilized pebbles found
 - Evidence for flint tool production
- The hollow looks like part of a shelter or house
 - Later Mesolithic in date, judging by the tool forms
 - Confirmed by radiocarbon dating of the peat at Cappell Lane





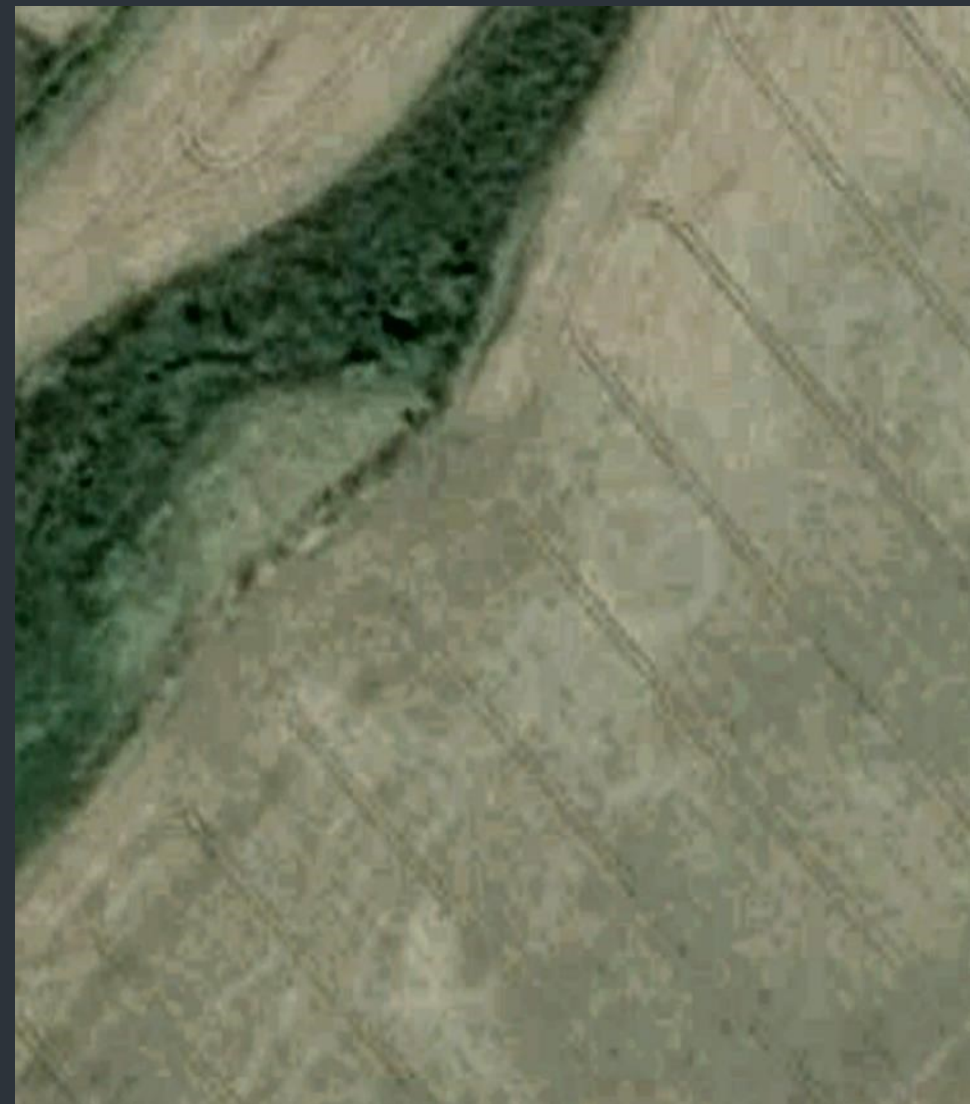
The advent of farming

- Domesticated animals and crops arrived during the 5th millennium BC
 - By 4000, there was a Neolithic economy
 - Farming, pottery, monuments
 - But a long period of transition between two competing ways of life
- Site at Rye Meads (in Broxbourne, but never mind)
 - Found in 1987 during quarrying
 - Activity on a gravel ridge, associated with peat
 - Similar to the material overlying the Roydon Road site
 - So later



The third millennium BC

- ▶ A group of ring ditches in the north of the parish
 - ▶ Between Little Briggens and Halfway House farms
 - ▶ On higher ground overlooking the river valleys
 - ▶ A typical location
 - ▶ This is roughly the southern limit of their distribution in Hertfordshire
- ▶ Usually sited between settlements and fields
 - ▶ We rarely know where the occupation sites were
 - ▶ But there is occupation east of Moat Wood, towards Hunsdon





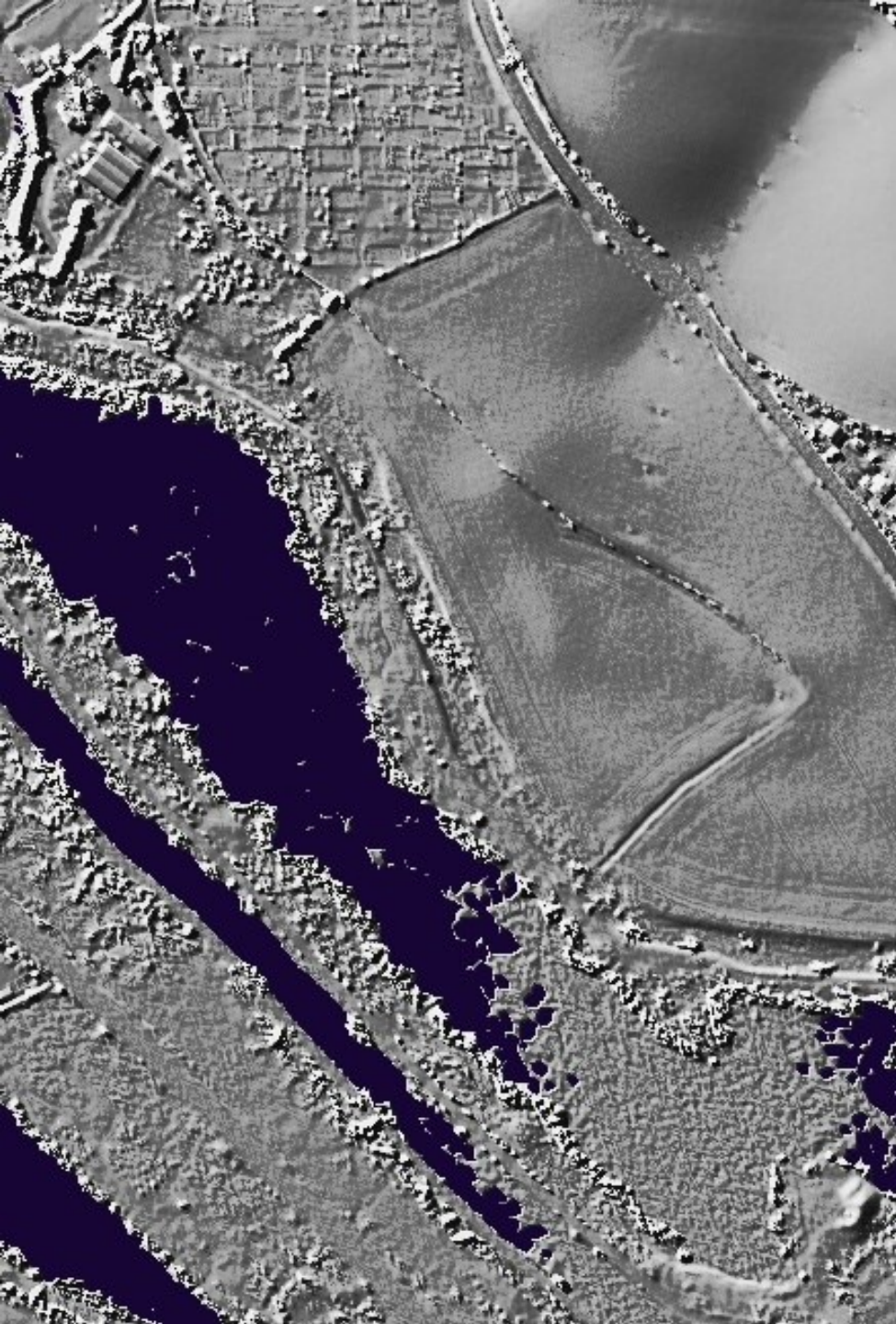
Metalwork and warfare

- Development of bronze technology based on weapons
 - Axes, daggers, dirks, swords and spears
 - The rise of a warrior class
 - These were the people buried in barrows
- No metalwork is known from the parish
 - Although a spearhead was found in Stanstead St Margarets in 1858
- This is the period when farming became universal
 - We may have evidence for ancient fields from aerial photography
 - Although these features are difficult to date without excavation

An environmental crisis

- ▶ Late in the second millennium BC, the climate took a turn for the worse
 - ▶ It may be linked with an eruption of Mount Hekla about 1157 BC
 - ▶ Or it may have started earlier
- ▶ People living in upland areas like the Pennines could no longer farm
 - ▶ Increased rainfall washed away thin soils
 - ▶ So they abandoned these areas, creating a refugee crisis
- ▶ This is the time when hilltop enclosures were first constructed
 - ▶ Was it the refugees or the locals who built them?





The empty Iron Age

- ▶ The Iron Age is difficult to spot in southern Hertfordshire
 - ▶ An enclosure east of Briggens Farm may belong to this period
 - ▶ But it is small and does not compare well with enclosures to the north
 - ▶ Widbury Hill in Ware is a possible hillfort
 - ▶ But only two sides survive quarrying
- ▶ The north of the county was densely settled
 - ▶ There is a distinctive fine ware pottery in that area (Chinnor/Wandlebury type)

Julius Caesar

- ▶ Britain famously enters history in 55 BC
 - ▶ We have Caesar's own account and other contemporary documents
- ▶ In his second campaign, in 54 BC, he describes fighting north of the Thames
 - ▶ A king called Cassiuellaunus
 - ▶ Who had an *oppidum*
- ▶ Where did Caesar cross the Thames?
 - ▶ Not necessarily at London: it could have been downstream
 - ▶ There is an apparently ancient crossing between Greenwich and the Isle of Dogs
 - ▶ So Caesar may have travelled up the Lea valley
 - ▶ Without finding camps, we will never know





The aftermath of Rome

- ▶ South-east Britain was left to pay “tribute”
 - ▶ And Rome meddled in local politics
 - ▶ Kings in the south-east issued coins based on Roman models
 - ▶ There is one from south-east of St James's
 - ▶ In Hertfordshire, a number of town like places developed
 - ▶ Baldock, Braughing, *Verulamion* and Cow Roast
 - ▶ These seem to have been political or trading centres
- ▶ The local population was adopting Roman ways of doing things
 - ▶ So when the invasion of AD 43 happened, we escaped being garrisoned
 - ▶ It was caused by the accession of king not approved by Rome
 - ▶ The local leaders seem to have capitulated straight away

Roman prosperity

- ▶ Scatter of Roman finds around St James's church, to its south and at The Bury
 - ▶ Coins, weights, pottery, tile
 - ▶ Cremation burials found in the churchyard during grave digging
 - ▶ Roman brick reused in the church tower
- ▶ Roman finds south of St Andrew's Church
 - ▶ Cremation burial found in 1971
- ▶ Hunsdon Road may be Roman in origin
 - ▶ Linking a ford or bridge at Stanstead with the 'small town' at Bishops Stortford
 - ▶ Perhaps there was a small settlement at the river crossing in Stanstead





After the lights went out

- ▶ Contrary to popular belief, the Legions didn't "go home" in 410
 - ▶ Britain was home
 - ▶ They stopped being paid
- ▶ The early fifth century saw economic crisis across western Europe
 - ▶ Bronze coins stopped being minted in 406
 - ▶ Production resumed in the early 410s
 - ▶ Manufacturing industries collapsed
 - ▶ And became small-scale local suppliers
- ▶ Roman Britain struggles on for thirty years or so
 - ▶ With a dwindling money supply and failing infrastructure

Where are the Saxons?

- ▶ Anglo-Saxon material is rare in Hertfordshire
 - ▶ There is nothing from Stanstead Abbots that needs to be earlier than about 550
 - ▶ This is typical of the county
- ▶ There seems to have been a survival of the Romano-British population
 - ▶ Who become invisible as they lack durable manufactured goods
 - ▶ So perhaps the community by the river crossing survived there after 400
 - ▶ Though there are no Roman coins from the parish later than the 370s
 - ▶ And a “Saxon” brooch could have been worn by anyone
 - ▶ It was fashionable and it was the only type available



Kingdoms and bishoprics

- By 600, kingdoms had been established across England
 - Medieval dioceses seem to preserve their boundaries
 - Stanstead Abbots was in the See of London, the Kingdom of Essex
- Christianity was adopted by the East Saxons in the early seventh century
 - But this doesn't mean that everyone converted
 - And the residual Romano-British population was already Christian
- A scatter of 6th-8th century metalwork around St James's includes *sceattas*
 - Might this have been the focus of the early community?





The 'stone place'

- It was during this period that the name Stanstead would have been coined
 - Old English *Stān stede* means 'stone place'
 - This presumably refers to a Roman structure in the area
 - Where was it?
 - At St James's or at the river crossing?
 - Could it even be a stone bridge?
- Other names
 - Easneye is probably from the old name of the Ash, *Isenea*
 - Rye House is from Middle English *atter eye*, 'at the island'
 - Domesday manor of *Eia*

A market?

- ▶ Domesday Book records seven burgesses in *Stanestede*
 - ▶ This indicates a possible market as they paid additional dues to the Lord
 - ▶ It disappeared soon after as there are no further references to burgesses
- ▶ Where would the market have been?
 - ▶ Properties on High Street and Roydon Road have medieval boundaries
 - ▶ With the angle being the location of the mill
- ▶ Why here?
 - ▶ Suggests that this was long the location of the settlement
 - ▶ Convenient site by the river for barge transport from London





Domesday archaeology

- ▶ A site in Chapelfields has archaeology contemporary with Domesday Book
 - ▶ Features include pits, postholes and a probable half-cellar
 - ▶ Ceramics include St Neots and Sandy Wares (9th-12th centuries)
- ▶ Appears to be storage for commercial rather than domestic activity
 - ▶ Confirming the location of the conquest period market place
- ▶ Good evidence for earlier use of the same site
 - ▶ The building is typical of earlier types (6th-8th centuries)
 - ▶ There is reused Roman brick and tile as well as residual pottery

Medieval manors

- ▶ The principal landowner in 1086 was Ranulf, brother of Ilger
 - ▶ Previously separate estates, the larger given to Ranulf as a dowry
 - ▶ Subsequently acquired by the Clares, then the Earls of Pembroke
- ▶ Half conveyed to Henry II to release it from a mortgage debt
 - ▶ The king then granted it to Waltham Abbey
 - ▶ And the other half leased to it at £12 *per annum*
- ▶ Monastic manor houses often sited away from the settlement
 - ▶ Stanstead Bury is a typical example
 - ▶ Which makes St James's a proprietary church





Industry and infrastructure

- ▶ The River Lea was a key to the economy of the town
 - ▶ Dredging and widening the river took place between 1420 and 1432
 - ▶ Navigation Act passed in 1571
 - ▶ The 'New River' cut from Amwell 1609-13
- ▶ London was a major market for beer
 - ▶ Hertfordshire was an important supplier of malted barley from the 1540s
 - ▶ First reference in Stanstead Abbots is in 1663
 - ▶ By the early 19th century it was the dominant local industry
 - ▶ Inns were also significant from at least the 16th century

Understanding communities

- ▶ Archaeology is about understanding how communities operate and change
 - ▶ Rather than individuals, who are the province of historians
- ▶ We can observe two communities in Roman Stanstead Abbots
 - ▶ There is the community around the Chapelfields area
 - ▶ Another around Stanstead Bury
- ▶ The community at Stanstead Bury has good early medieval evidence
 - ▶ Brooches and coins
 - ▶ But it ends before 900
 - ▶ When it becomes a manorial site
- ▶ The community in the valley bottom also has early medieval evidence
 - ▶ Which continues into the High Middle Ages





Long-term trends

- ▶ Looking at the even *plus longue durée*
 - ▶ There is a pattern from the Mesolithic onwards
- ▶ Early activity in the river valley
 - ▶ Perhaps because of the wildlife resources and raw materials there
- ▶ Followed by a shift onto the higher ground during the Bronze Age
 - ▶ Possibly even a little before
 - ▶ And extending through the Iron Age into the Roman period
- ▶ Renewed interest in the river valley in the Roman period
 - ▶ Probably relating to the importance of river travel
 - ▶ And perhaps a bridge across the River Lea

Archaeology *is* local history

- ▶ You can't use a single discovery to extrapolate wildly
 - ▶ A Mesolithic axehead does not mean the community has existed for more than 6000 years
 - ▶ A Roman coin is not necessarily evidence for a villa, the Roman army or a town
- ▶ Prehistory is not a mysterious period about which we can know nothing
 - ▶ Lumping half a million years before the Roman Conquest into a single homogeneous morass of incomprehensible data
 - ▶ Populating it with waves of invaders
- ▶ Believing that a lack of data means nothing was happening
 - ▶ Or, worse, that something mysterious was going on
 - ▶ Popular conspiracies and Bad Archaeology

