A SAXON ANGLE ON THE “BRITISH” WEALA-TUN

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I wrote much of the following note as part of an essay on the origins and use of Old English *tun* in place-names, which I drew upon for my presentation to the Surrey Archaeological Society’s Medieval Studies Forum meeting on Saxon Surrey in March 2009. The paper slipped through the cracks, and the subject matter from my mind, until Richard Savage discovered it languishing in the Forum email inbox and encouraged me to look at it again with a view to disseminating it via its Newsletter. In the intervening period I was fortunate to attend the final Sense of Place in Anglo-Saxon England seminar at the University of Nottingham, where Della Hooke floated much the same idea - to a mostly positive reception from other leading scholars - in relation to the West Midlands as I shall seek to do in the following paragraphs for Surrey. Nevertheless, I have not sought to update my argument in light of what Hooke postulated. Just as I was motivated to research this topic after reading notes authored by Graham Gower and Gavin Smith (Gower 2007; Smith 2008), so I leave it for others to take up the challenge of offering further proof of its key tenets (or evidence to the contrary) should they so wish.

Among those who attended the Medieval Studies Forum’s Saxon Surrey meeting, I doubt I was the only one to be left with the impression that, historically and archaeologically-speaking, the area of the historic county was a relatively unimportant place for much of the period in question. Yet this need not always be the case. In his opening presentation David Bird provided an excellent overview of Surrey’s often nationally-significant evidence for the Roman-Saxon transition, one apparent aspect of which is the unusually high number of “British” place-names in the north-eastern part of the historic county, which has also yielded the vast majority of its earliest Saxon inhumation cemeteries. Place-names specialists have tended to cast their net wider than the area containing most of these early cemeteries, more for reasons of adding to the population of relevant names than to extend their coincidence with the funerary archaeology (e.g. Gelling 1993, 51 & 56 n. 4). The resultant diffuse archipelago of names includes some partly or wholly formed from non-Germanic words (all being Brittonic, with the exception of the possibly ‘Ancient’ first half of the name Caterham: Coates & Breeze 2000, 336 & 389), and others which contain Old English elements either derived from Latin words (e.g. Addiscombe, whose suffix is Old English *camp* from Latin *campus*) or from terms that could pertain to those of non-Saxon ethnicity.

I had intended to finish my own presentation to the Forum by examining the possible examples of the last of the above sub-types which also contain the Old English element *tun*; Wallington and the two Waltons. There are no known forms in actual Old English (all the earliest occurrences being written in Medieval Latin), which prevents absolute certainty on their original derivation, but two, and very possibly all three, most likely derive from Old English *weala-tun*, the prefix being the genitive plural of *wealh*, the West Saxon/Kentish dialectic form of Old English *wahh*. The significance of *w(e)alh* in place-names has been a vexed question for decades. The element is best known for its most commonly attested connotation, “British” or “Welsh”, one that is usually extended to explain its frequent utilisation in place-names (Cameron 1980 is the seminal national...
study, to which the county-level analyses in Bird 2004 and Smith 2005 owe substantial debts, as does the interpretation of the Waltons offered by Poulton 1987, 217). But there has never been unanimity on the matter, since every now and again some appraisals of the place-name evidence have preferred its other main attested sense, “slave” (Smith 1956, 242 and Faith 1997, 60-61 being two prominent examples). At present the balance of published opinion seems to remain in favour of the former interpretation, but when a linguist as respected as Richard Coates suggests recurrent weala-compounds like Walton may imply ‘homogenous slave communities’ (Coates 2008, 190), it seems opportune to undertake a reconsideration of their meaning and moreover to seek to correlate this with the character of both the settlements and their inhabitants.

Kenneth Cameron’s still-influential analysis drew considerable inspiration from earlier work by Margaret Faull, who undertook a thorough investigation of the semantic development of the word wealh as attested in Anglo-Saxon written sources. She concluded that its earliest use was almost always to connote Britons or a general sense of something British, whereas by the late ninth century its predominant sense - particularly in areas like Surrey in which the West Saxon dialect predominated - had become “slave” (Faull 1975). Whilst acknowledging this shift in meaning, Cameron did not attempt to connect the rough chronology established by Faull with developments in settlement patterns identified by archaeology (admittedly the most significant advances have been made in the years since the publication of his study). Instead he approached his evaluation of the weala-tunas and related w(e)alh-names in terms of how early they might be, and to this end an overview of known Roman-period archaeology from their environs was appended to his article (Todd 1980). Disappointingly, the evidence cited in it rarely belongs to the very late-/post-Roman period, as would be expected were such place-names to indeed represent locations of Romano-British continuity. In contrast to this highly localised approach, David Pelteret has suggested Surrey’s weala-names should be seen in a later, regional context, in that being so close to London (or strictly speaking Lundenwic) they may identify places inhabited by foreign settlers and traders, following the third most commonly attested sense of the term (Pelteret 1995, 319-20).

I believe that the weala-tunas of Surrey can be best understood if they are appraised in terms of early medieval rather than Romano-British archaeology, and furthermore at a level between the local and the regional, in particular that of the multiple estate model. Certainly Walton is a name used in depictions of it (e.g. Reynolds 1999, 81 Fig. 27; Roberts & Wrathmell 2002, 15 Fig. 1.7), yet - with two exceptions (Jones 1976 & Hooke 1997) - there has been a curious failure to seek to explain the significance of this in terms of its pattern of land division and “extensive lordship”. It has been argued that weala-tunas were settlements occupied by Britons because the name bears comparison with ones of explicitly ethnic meaning, most frequently the Normantons indicative of Norse settlers (Faull 1975, 33; also Smith 1956, 197). But even taken together, ethnic tun-names are comfortably outnumbered by those place-names derived from Old English ceorla-tun (most commonly surviving as Charlton). There are approximately 100 ceorla-tunas on record; curiously none of these are in Surrey, but there were five on the Godwins’ large Singleton estate in Sussex alone (Faith 1997, 150). A recent analysis has shown ceorl was a term used in the Anglo-Saxon period to identify persons of a
range of different social status - one occasional meaning was “slave” - but importantly it had no prior ethnic connotation (Parsons 2004, ‘ceorl’).

If the first element of weala-tun compounds inferred the social status of the inhabitants rather than their ethnicity, they would bear comparison with a sizeable group of tun-names which identify the person or persons who lived in and/or owned the settlements in terms of their status, not their name. Moreover, none of the thirty or more examples of a weala-tun place-name in England occurs on reliable record before the tenth century (see Cameron 1980, 41, 44-46). Explaining this in terms of their lowly status, as a number of authors have done (e.g. Faull 1975, 33-34), cuts both ways, since slaves were arguably even more inconsequential than Britons. All the same, slavery was a feature of Anglo-Saxon society, most immediately apparent through Domesday Book entries, but possible female slaves’ skeletons have been found interred alongside those of their masters in the early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries at Farthing Down and Mitcham (Wilson 1992, 83; for recent alternative interpretations see Reynolds 2009, 66-67 & 71 respectively). Arguably the best piece of direct documentary evidence about late Anglo-Saxon slavery comes in the form of a leaf from a lost administrative book of the monastery at Ely, dating from *circa* 980x1000 (Sawyer [S] 1481e). What is more, it contains five instances of the place-name pealadene (modern-day Walden in Hertfordshire), more than any of the seven places named in it other than the estate centre, Hatfield (the slaves’ names recorded in the document are Germanic rather than Celtic or Scandinavian in origin: see Wood 1986, 152-55). To my mind this is no coincidence.

So what of Surrey's weala-tunas? That Walton on the Hill is of this derivation remains open to question; the absence of a medial -e- in many of the early forms of the name - i.e. being written in Domesday Book as Walton(e) rather than Waleton(e) as should result from the prefix w(e)ala - has meant it is more often suggested to translate as “wall tuni” (recently by Watts 2004, 649, and Smith 2005, 105; cf. the more open-minded discussion by Bird 2004, 172-73). This might suit a fortified high-status centre but there is no contemporary or later evidence for Walton ever having possessed such importance. Indeed, if its mid to late-Anglo-Saxon topographical context is examined, it seems to have been of relatively little consequence locally since it fails to appear either in reliable or supposed pre-Conquest muniments or later alongside Leatherhead and Kingswood as an outlier of the royal manor at Ewell (Blair 1991, 27; cf. S 420 & 1181 - the latter gives Ewell with Cuddington as a combined holding of 30 hides). While this might at first be seen to infer the former existence of a vast royal estate coterminous with Copthorne Hundred, it may be more credible to conceive of the latter being formed in the late Anglo-Saxon period from two extensive landholdings centred on Ewell and Leatherhead, since the latter appears as a royal property in its own right in King Alfred’s will at the end of the ninth century (S 1507). A likely division between these two units is the substantial linear earthwork known as Nutshambles (Nail 1965), which would place Walton not on the same side as Brittonic-named Leatherhead (Coates 1980), but on that of Ewell. Walton may have been remote from the estate centre but it was close enough to service the significantly-monikered Kingswood, doubtless an important extra-Wealden woodland resource that may very well have been exploited for grazing purposes as well.
Walton-on-Thames was once a substantial estate which had been divided into two manors by 1066 (the place-name is consistently rendered as Waletone by the Domesday scribe), but unlike most neighbouring pre-Conquest estates it fails to appear in any of the charters (reliable or otherwise) from the Chertsey minster archive. This absence is telling. The unfortunately ill-documented discovery of Saxon barrow burials close to Walton Bridge led Rob Poulton to comment how, ‘If the place-name is any guide, Walton…should not have a Saxon cemetery’, particularly a high-status one that implies wider Saxon territorial control (Poulton 1987, 220 n. 10). Their juxtaposition might be explicable if, on the other hand, the place-name identified a later servile settlement. But to which central place would it have been subordinate? The nature of the medieval parish boundaries within Elmbridge Hundred - and in particular the use of the River Mole in this way for the majority of its course through the Hundred - recommends Walton to have been a weala-tun associated with Molesey, first named in the Chertsey endowment charter of the early 670s (S 1165; this corrects Briggs 2008a, 19, which connected it to Getinges, the other place hereabouts named in the charter). West Molesey was by the late medieval period a chapelry of Walton, but a suspect Chertsey charter (S 752, purporting to date from 967) makes mention of how King Eadwig controversially gave Molesey (apparently then-undivided) to Old Minster, Winchester, a gift later rescinded by his successor and brother, Edgar. Given the brevity of Eadwig’s reign (955-59), it seems probable that this reference had a basis in fact, and attests to Molesey (said in both S 752 & 1181 to be a twenty-hide holding) having been in royal hands in the mid-tenth century. Subsequent unrecorded transactions seem to have severed the bulk of Molesey’s lands from its eponymous centre, leading to the development of a new estate centred on Walton, whose previous lowly nature must surely explain its pre-Conquest documentary obscurity better than an argument based on ethnic grounds.

Wallington is the only one of Surrey’s three potential weala-tunas to appear in a source earlier than Domesday Book, of the period 1076x84 (as Waletona: PNS 1934, 55). Claims that it was an early territorial focus rest largely on its appearance in Domesday Book as a royal manor in an eponymous hundred (Blair 1991, 20; Smith 2005, 99), although the latter characteristic was probably a result of Wallington lying at its approximate topographical centre (it is worth noting there was a Charlton Hundred in east Berkshire). Certain pieces of archaeological evidence at first sight seem to support the notion of the early inhabitants of Wallington having had a distinctive British identity, only to falter under closer scrutiny. A belt buckle and plate found during excavations at London Road and ascribed a ‘Late Roman/Early Saxon’ date was probably brought from elsewhere, perhaps from the early Saxon cemeteries at nearby Beddington (Howe 2004, 219, 227). Clive Orton thought the partly-excavated occupation site at Burleigh Avenue was the “Welsh” settlement remembered by the place-name (a contention based largely upon a palaeomagnetic dating of 630-760: Orton 1980, 81), yet it produced no distinctively non-Saxon artefacts. Wallington barely developed a parochial identity of its own, instead being dominated by neighbouring Beddington, mentioned in three tenth-century documents as the titular centre of a seventy-hide estate. One of the earliest of these (S 1444) records the presence of seven theowae - slaves - on the estate. Theow outlived w(e)alh and the more specific esne as the foremost Old English term for slave (Pelteret 1995, 41-42), although it has so far not been identified in place-names. However, given
the context, it may not be asking too much of the evidence to suppose that the seven 
slaves lived in a servile hamlet at Wallington.

If Carshalton does represent the Aweltune in King Alfred’s will (S 1507), perhaps 
equivalent to the royal vill of Freoricburna named in three pre-861 charters (the earliest - 
S 144 - being a Mercian document from the reign of Offa: see Briggs 2008b), then Wall-
ington may have arisen as a settlement of slaves appurtenant to the royal estate centre. 
A lack of appropriate surviving written evidence prevents knowing when exactly wealh 
came to primarily mean “slave” in areas under West Saxon control (see Faull 1975, 35), 
but if it had done so by the mid-ninth century, the existence of subordinate weala-tunas 
becomes rather more explicable. Over the county boundary at Old Windsor an exca-
vated early ninth-century masonry building has been suggested to have formed part of a 
royal ‘palace’ (the terminology used by Astill 1984, 79; Blair 2005, 278, posits it may 
have formed part of a minster complex). Close by was a field called Walton (known from 
1212: Gelling 1973, 31) that could credibly be seen to represent the site of a weala-tun 
associated with the high-status centre. John Blair has noted how documentary evidence 
points to the development of more stable centres of West Saxon royal power from the 
830s onwards (Blair 2005, 325), exemplified by Kingston upon Thames, which had two 
weala-names in its vicinity (Wakeford 1975, but see below). Such developments may 
have heralded a new approach to estate organisation in the kingdom manifested in part 
by subordinate place-names like weala-tun.

Ultimately in Surrey, as elsewhere, place-names containing forms of wealh seem to 
have had a range of derivations. So for example one of the earliest on record, wealas 
huthel/wealeshuthe (a boundary mark in the Thorpe area mentioned in S 1165 & 353 re-
spectively), derives from a rare related personal name, Wealh (Cameron 1980, 9). The 
lost name Waleport near Kingston could mean something along the lines of “Romano-
British market” (Wakeford 1975, 253-54; Bird 2004, 66-67 & 173; Smith 1956, 242 [for 
use of weala as a gloss for “Roman”]), although there are potential discrepancies in the 
dating of its constituent elements (see Sawyer 1981, 158-59, for argument that Old Eng-
ish port acquired a mercantile significance no earlier than the tenth century [and possi-
ble instances of Latin porta, “gate”, in place-names]). One should probably not read too 
much into Gildas’ oft-repeated sixth-century description of enslavement by the Anglo-
Saxons as the fate of many Britons, yet undoubtedly many (perhaps most) slaves were 
of British ethnicity, and consequently it is hard to escape that this must surely have been 
a significant implication of w(e)alh when used in place-names or written records. There 
can be little question the term pertained to those in the lowest social echelons, but in 
terms of its foremost meaning in the place-name lexicon, many have chosen to sit on 
the fence by describing w(e)ala-names as locations of Brittonic-speaking populations 
(e.g. Draper 2006, 52-53). Although this is not necessarily incorrect, when it comes to 
the aforementioned Surrey weala-tunas there can be some confidence in the view that 
the root word wealh first and foremost signified the unfree status of the inhabitants, 
rather than their ethnicity or the language they spoke. Certainly the notion that such 
place-names attest to loci of Romano-British cultural continuity deep into the Anglo-
Saxon period would seem here to be almost entirely without justification.
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