

People, Landscape and Economy in the Anglo-Saxon Fenland by Dr Susan Oosthuizen
(Univ. Cambridge) Sat. 3rd February 2018. 2.15pm at the Town Close Auditorium, Castle Museum, Norwich.

The main theme of Dr Oosthuizen's talk was that much of our knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon fenland is based on widely-held generalisations for which there is little or no evidence. The traditional view was that after the Roman period there was no continuity with the past; the Fenland (from the Wash and King's Lynn south to Cambridge, west to Peterborough and east to Brandon) was deserted, abandoned, unmanaged. Since the fenland was a rich environment before and after 1086, Dr Oosthuizen had re-opened the assessment of the post-Roman history of the area by asking four main questions: Was the fen basin abandoned or populated after 400? If occupied, were communities Romano-British or Anglo-Saxon? Were they living in conditions of anarchy or in stable political units? How did they make a living? Her approach is to start from the beginning and see where it takes you.

Pollen analysis and other evidence shows that the fen basin was settled and utilised from prehistory (like the Bronze Age Flag Fen and Must Farm digs) into the Roman period. Archaeological data revealed since 1996 demonstrates the region was fully settled throughout the Anglo-Saxon period; a reappraisal of Domesday data together with other documentary evidence shows that by 1086 fenland was as well, if not more densely, populated as anywhere else in England with a population density of around 16 DB tenants per ten square miles in the northern fenland and 14 DB tenants per ten square miles in the southern fenland. The region was thus well-populated from the Romano-Britain into the Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods, with no sign of abandonment after 400.

As to the origins of the occupants, DNA evidence is inconclusive. Few archaeologists now assume that every burial with Anglo-Saxon grave goods was necessarily an 'Anglo-Saxon'; most were almost certainly of local origin. Place names are a difficult source since Bede suggests that most people spoke two or even three languages: it is hard to be sure that the language of a place-name indicates cultural identity. The number and distribution of place-names in fenland does not show divided communities: 13 fenland place-names have Old English roots but many more are British Celtic, and both are distributed across the region with no sign of clustering of one language or another. They appear to have been long-established communities among whom newcomers were assimilated.

Dr Oosthuizen has been able to correlate early post-Roman territories (preserved in clusters of rights of common) with polities mentioned in the C7th Tribal Hidage. They show a mosaic of traditional communities with living in well-established territorial units, naming themselves from their local landscape rather than in terms of their cultural origin.

This was a dynamic landscape, a rich but fragile environment whose ecology differed from place to place depending on water levels and drainage. A wide range of products was exploited across the peat wetlands of the fen basin under rights of common. Of these, farming of dairy cattle was most important. The rich meadows on which they grazed needed careful land and animal management by the commoners. They also needed extensive and deliberate control of water to maintain the quality of the grass, and commoners collectively dug and maintained an extensive hierarchy of canals (called lodes), catchwaters, the ditches, sluices and pipes.

The Anglo-Saxon fenland was continuously occupied by communities whose ancestry reached into prehistory; there is no sign that they were divided between Romano-Britons and Anglo-Saxons; and the territories in which they lived were sufficiently stable to persist from the fifth into the seventeenth centuries. Peasant communities made a living from the careful management of fen resources in which rights of common played a central role. Access to rights of common underpinned status, rights of property, livelihoods and territories in Anglo-Saxon and medieval fenland communities, and persisted into the C17th.

Sophie Cabot thanked Dr Oosthuizen for a very interesting talk which overturned many previous assumptions about Anglo-Saxon Fenland. The audience was one of the largest ever to listen to an NNAS lecture (142 people with over third non-members) who then asked a number of questions and afterwards several took the opportunity to speak to her personally.

THE ANGLO-SAXON FENLAND by Susan Oosthuizen. Windgather Press £29.95.

Edmund Perry, Hon, General Secretary, NNAS