



Singleton, Sussex

Senzeltun

Weald and Downland Open Air Museum

Reconstruction of a Saxon weaver's hut

Grid ref SU 8?? 1??

Location

Near Goodwood racecourse

Notes

This was only a tentative reconstruction, made to see how long such huts would last. Owing to experiments carried out at WEST STOW, Suffolk (q.v.), the style of re-construction here demonstrated has been discredited. These structures are now thought to have been 'hall' type buildings with a raised floor over the pit. The reconstruction has therefore not been maintained, and has fallen into disrepair. There is now little or nothing left of it.

MD, 1998

The Saxon Weavers Hut

Very little is known for certain about the construction of the smaller Anglo-Saxon house, hut or workshop. This is not surprising as the remains found in archaeological excavations are meagre, yet they do reflect a type of structure common to Saxon England in general and one which persisted from the C5 throughout the Saxon period. Similar remains are found in NW Europe, in those lands from whence came the Saxons, and this demonstrates that the invaders or settlers introduced their building traditions into this country.

The structure with which we are here concerned is the small sunken hut, generally a roughly rectangular depression in the ground, about 2' deep and with a large posthole excavated into the subsoil in the centre of each of the two shorter, or gable, ends. Sometimes there are smaller postholes along the longer sides, either dug into the lower floor, or else outside the depression at the main ground level. The latter type of post-holes have been found at Bourton-on-the-Water and at Puddlehill near Dunstable, and they slope inwards, suggesting that poles or rafters were fixed into them, the upper ends meeting on a ridge-pole. This member would be carried length-wise along the hut and supported by two substantial upright posts at the gable ends. Long huts might have one or more intermediate posts to help carry the ridgepole.

Excavations in various parts of England reveal that as well as numerous sunken huts there were larger buildings, not sunk into the ground, and which were constructed utilising large wooden posts at intervals. It seems probable that these larger buildings or halls, were used for living purposes and that the smaller, sunken huts are more likely to be workshops, e.g. for weaving, pottery marking, etc. Heaths and food refuse are occasionally found in the sunken huts, so it is possible that some of them could have been for living purposes. Such sunken huts would have been short-lived.

Two such huts have been excavated in Sussex during recent years, one at Bishopstone near Seaford (excavated by Mr. D. Thomson in 1968) and the other at Old Erringham Farm, near Shoreham-by-Sea (excavated by Mr. E. W. Holden in 1964), both on chalk downland. The former dates from the early part and the latter for the later part of the Saxon period. The hut of which we have here ventured to make a tentative reconstruction is based on a combination of the plans of these two huts. Whereas Bishopstone had a central hearth with finds suggesting domestic activities rather than industry, the hut at Old Erringham possessed no hearth, but there were two groups of fired clay loom weights, totalling over 70 in all, suggesting that there were two looms and that this was a specialised weaving hut. As one end of the Old Erringham hut had been removed by quarrying the exact size is not known, but it may be inferred to have been about 16' long by 10' or 11' wide, while the Bishopstone hut was only 12' by 9'. The Old Erringham hut revealed one gable-end posthole and three smaller postholes along the centre line, which probably contained smaller posts supporting the ridge-pole. The Old Erringham hut has also some smaller postholes and a possible entrance on the N side (but the hollow way could be a later path made after the hut had collapsed and the hollow silted up). Furthermore, the N side of the Old Erringham hut is not typical of grubenhaus (the German name of sunken huts, from gruben, to dig) as there is a gentle slope and not nearly vertical edge to the sunken part. The construction there is unknown, so for the purpose of this experiment the more usual type of depression, as at Bishopstone, has been adopted. To avoid

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congestion within the hut, only one supporting post to the ridge has been inserted, instead of three as at Old Erringham.

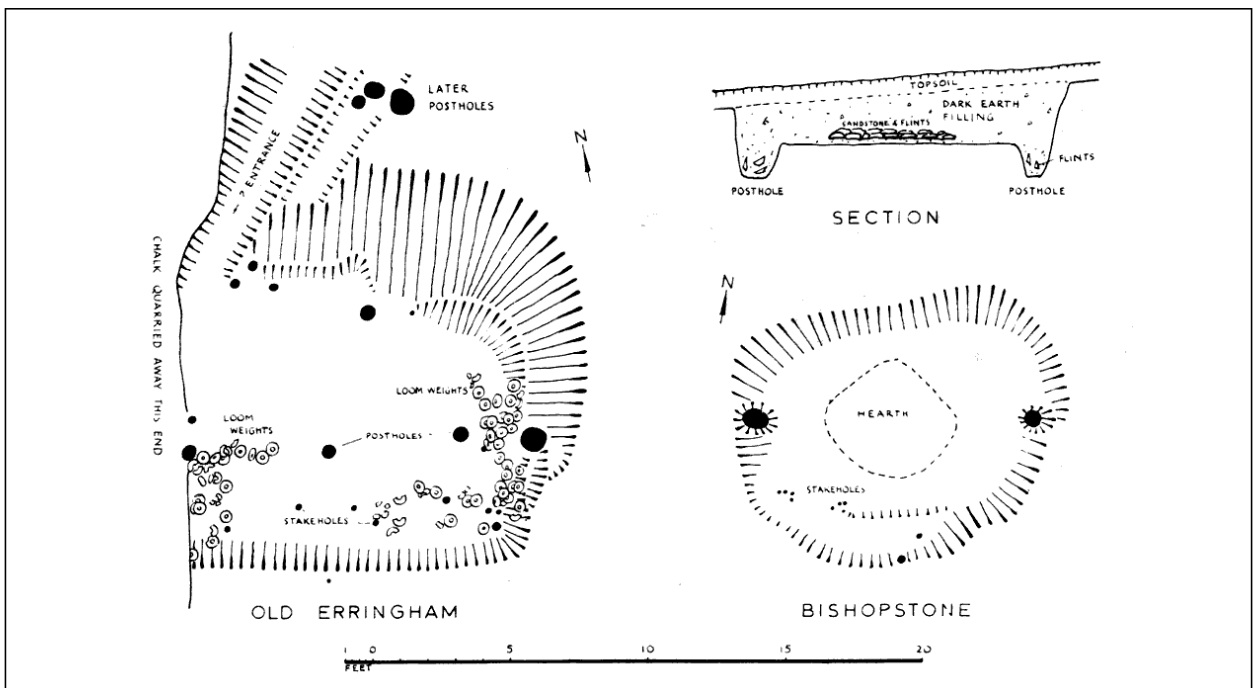
As there were no postholes surrounding the Sussex huts at the outside ground level, sloping rafters would have had their bases let into the topsoil, and the chalk rubble and flints seen along the south side of the Old Erringham hut suggest that the bottoms of the rafters were packed around with this material possibly faced with turf. A hut found at Thetford is considered to have had sand packing around the rafter feet, revetted with turves. The method of filling the triangular gable-ends can only be postulated. They may be straight, but they were seen to be in a curved line at Bourton-on-the-Water. A quantity of burnt clay 'daub' near the E end of the Old Erringham hut suggested a possible filling of wattles smeared over with clay. Some support for the use of wattle and daub somewhere in a hut came from Medmerry Farm, Selsey, when sunken huts were discovered on the sea shore nearly 40 years ago. Much burnt daub showing wattle impressions was recorded. There must have been access through a doorway, which is generally (for ease of construction) assumed to be in one end, though side entrances cannot be ruled out. We have provided a doorway at each end. (This is partially to facilitate circulation, but it is possible that both gable ends were in part open, with perhaps a removable skin or other covering when

the weather made this desirable. This would have been the simplest way to solve the problems of adequate lighting.

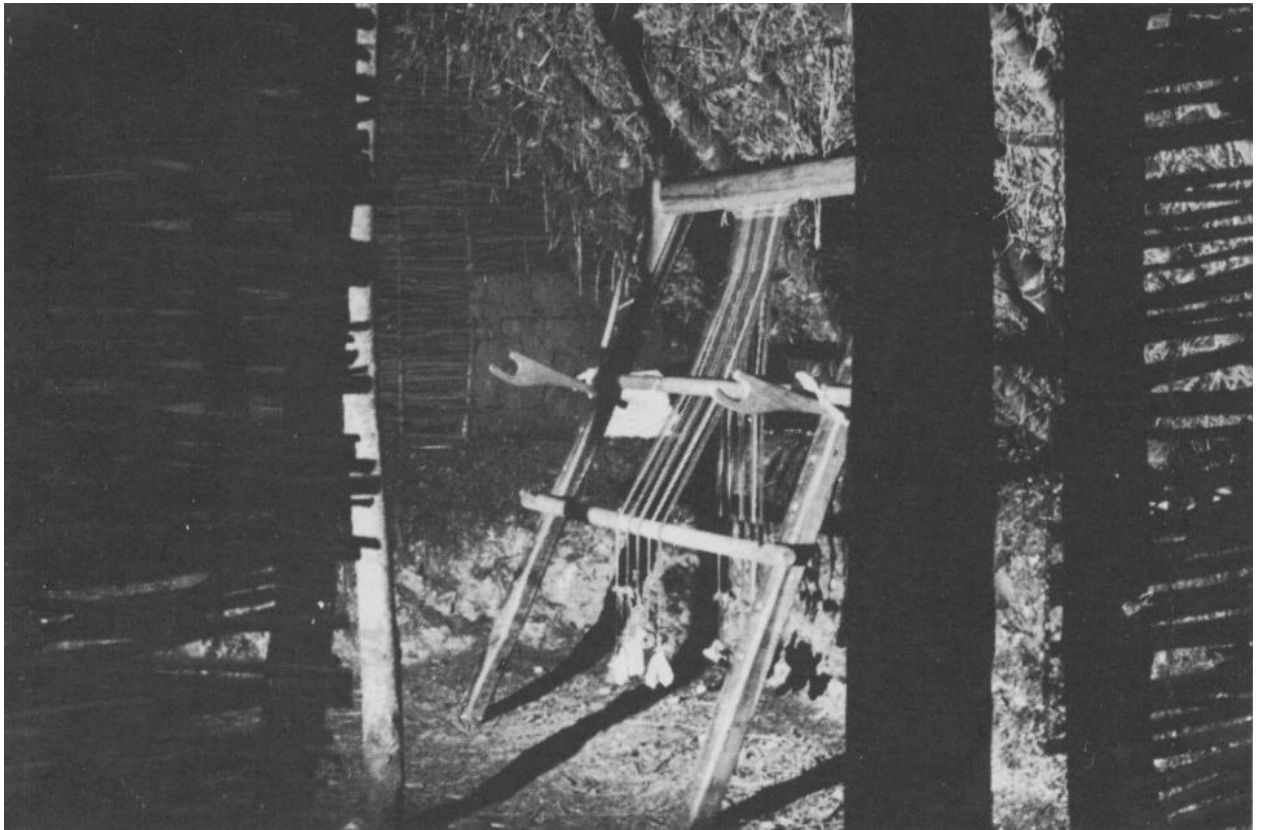
The object of such huts having the floor sunk below ground level seems to be to provide headroom, but two weaving sheds excavated at West Stow, Suffolk, had wooden floors, plank walls, and thatched roofs, and we may be doing the Saxons an injustice in making our experimental reconstruction in the simplest way possible. It is, however, certain that there was no raised floor in the Bishopstone hut, and unlikely at Old Erringham where some of the loom weights lay in straight lines on the chalk bottom and a piece of bone, possibly used for weaving, was inserted into a cut hole in the chalk.

We do not know for certain that the timbering was uncarpentered, the walls and floor unlined, or what was the quality of the thatching. The pitch of the roof is conjectural. Other larger Saxon houses and farms were being built at the time when these grubenahuser were fairly general, and we know from the art of the period that the Saxons were capable of high quality craftsmanship. Can we be so sure that their huts and cottages were so lacking in good workmanship?

Ed. J. R. Armstrong: Weald and Downland Open Air Museum: pub Phillimore, Shepwyke Hall, Chichester, Sussex, 1971.



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Church of St John the Evangelist

Church fabric

Grid refSU 878 130

Tower

AD 950-1000

Fisher

Lower stage of WT - period C

Taylor

See also *Current Archaeology*
Nos 21 & 42 (letter).

