‘Dark Age’ Shillington

The people who lived in this area were the Succii. Archaeological test pits excavated around Shillington, like the one in Church St in the picture, have failed to find any pottery made within 500 years of the Roman’s departure. People must have eaten and drunk from wooden or leather containers which have not survived. There were still craftsmen around and some made brooches in the 5th or 6th century that have been found near Shillington.

Farmers no longer had to produce surplus food for the Romans. They abandoned land and woodland took over. The climate became slightly cooler and wetter. Volcanic eruptions in Iceland began in 536 and for ten years, a veil of dust in the atmosphere weakened the sun’s rays and made it exceptionally cold. Crops failed, livestock died and famine and disease followed.

Searching for pottery in Vicarage Close

It’s likely that many people died and the remainder struggled to survive the pollution and shortage of food. When the raids on East Anglia resumed, Saxons moved further inland and settled down to farm. Farmers were known as ceorls and the leaders who emerged from their ranks were thegns.

Scyttel’s people

Saxon culture and customs spread and they added new words to the language, calling people from around Hitchin the Hicce. The earliest written version of Shillington is Scytlingedune or the hill of the Scyttelingas- the people of Scyttel. He was probably a Saxon thegn here in the 600s or 700s.

Scyttelingas territory?

Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews of North Herts Museum has proposed that the Scyttelingas occupied the section of Hicce territory shown in yellow on the map, which names Shillington as Sethlindone and other places as the Domesday Book records them in 1086.

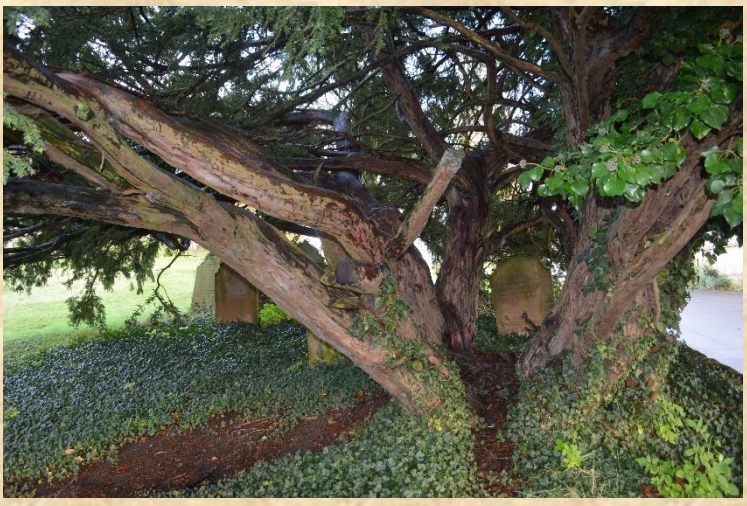
A 13th century account claims that Offa, King of Mercia between 757 and 796, fought off his rival, Beonred, in battles at Pirton, Pegsdon and Offley. This area became part of the Mercian kingdom.

The devil may have the best tunes…

… but the church acquired the best sites. Britain had flirted with Christianity towards the end of the Roman occupation and it was adopted more enthusiastically after the late 500s.

The earliest churches were minsters (churches with monastic communities attached to them) and there was one in Hitchin. Churches often occupied sites that local people already used for ceremonies.

The ancient spreading yew tree in the churchyard may have been growing on Shillington's prominent hilltop before the first church was built there.



Ancient yew tree in All Saints' churchyard

Christianity took over the Celtic festivals. Yule and Ostara became Christmas and Easter.

Here come the Danes

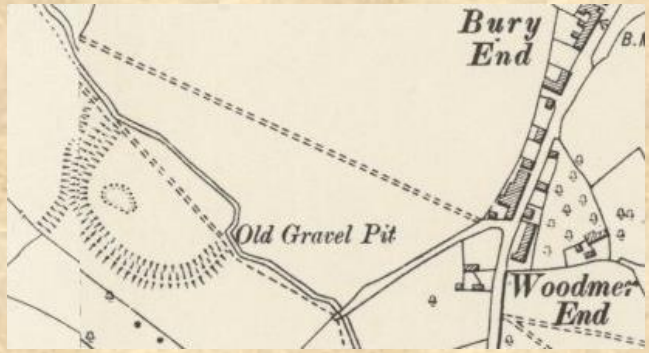
After 789, Danes raided Britain and began to take over territory. When Alfred the Great became king, he conceded that the Danes were here to stay and made a treaty with them called the Danelaw. This allowed them to rule over much of eastern England from Yorkshire to London as depicted in the map. Shillington was just inside this Danish territory.

Also on the Danelaw frontier was Bedford which changed hands several times before fighting ended in 1010. It was one of the first towns to be established in the area and the centre of a new administrative area- Bedfordshire.

Despite the upheaval that the Danes caused, the population and overall prosperity of this part of England were increasing.

An enigma

Some historians have linked the Danes to Church Pannell, a large oval earthwork in fields between Shillington and Gravenhurst. They claim that it's where a Danish garrison set up camp to defend the territory they gained.



It measures up to 160m across and stands 3 or 4 metres above surrounding land. A stretch of the brook and a bank and ditch encircle it.

The surrounding area (shown in the photograph below) was drained in 1978 and ploughed for a few years but is now grassland. The realignment and maintenance of the brook has also damaged the site. A small excavation long ago revealed little and other origins have been suggested. It remains an enigma for now.

Shillington, Pegsdon and Higham Gobions become parishes

The feudal system of thegns and ceorls evolved to become the manorial system at some point.

Thegns became lords of the manor and their land often became a parish. The ceorls were now called villeins. They had the right to farm land in the lord's fields and paid him a tithe or one tenth of their produce each year. Bordars or cottars worked for the others and lived in homes with a small garden where they could grow food for their families. Slaves worked for others and had no rights at all.

Shillington Manor and Ramsey Abbey

Shillington appears in written records for the first time in about 920 when Stephen is the priest, indicating that there was a church here then.

The earliest mention of Shillington Manor made around 950 shows that the lord of the manor was Ailwin, Duke of East Anglia. He died between 1016 and 1034 and left Shillington Manor to St Benedict's Abbey in Ramsey.

The Abbey records contain a clue about the location of the manor house: Looking out from the entrance of the hall courtyard, almost all of the territory is revealed as visible lying underneath. It must have been on high ground, perhaps where Shillington Bury is today.

Shillington Bury in the 1950s

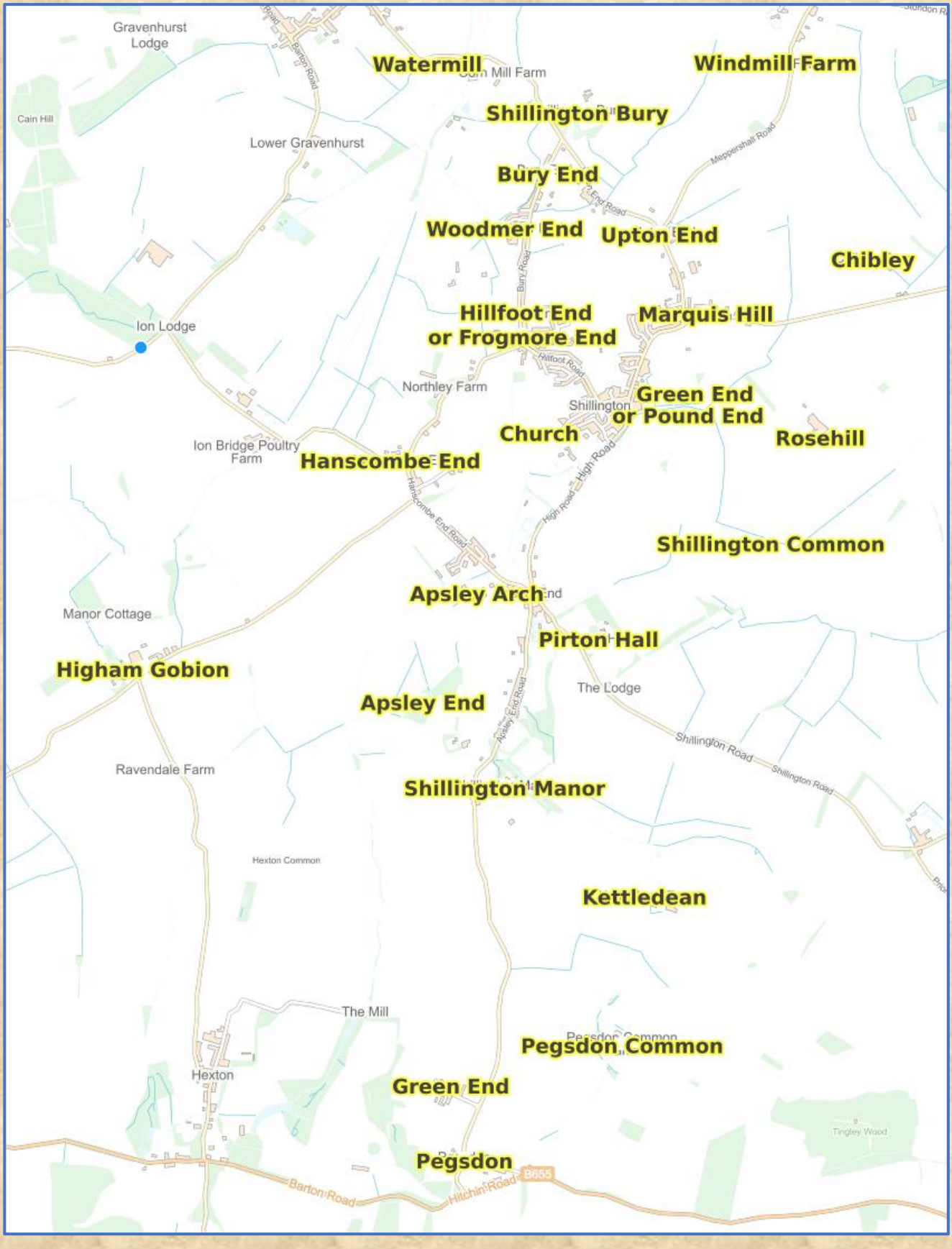
The rise of the village and beginning of the Ends

When country people moved away from their small, separate, family-based farmsteads to live close to one other, they created villages such as Shillington, Pegsdon and Higham Gobion.

We can't be sure when this occurred but it was before the end of the 900s when late Saxon pottery was made. It has appeared in Shillington test pits in the area visible in this 1936 photo taken from the church tower.

Pottery evidence also proves that several families were living in Upton End at this time.

The map below shows the location of the different ‘ends’ and settlements.



New ploughs

The Lord of the Manor may have ordered his tenants to move when heavier mouldboard ploughs were introduced. They were more efficient at turning the soil but clumsy to turn around.

Amalgamating small fields to make larger ones required fewer turns. Farmers could also mobilise more effectively when they lived near one another and were more likely to complete the work while the soil conditions were most favourable.

The open fields

Farmers had one or more strips of land in the large or open fields but co-operated with each other to carry out the work. They ploughed each strip in such a way that soil was moved towards the middle of the strip, leaving a low furrow on each side where heavy rainfall drained away. In time, the open fields developed a distinct corrugated appearance, referred to as 'ridge and furrow'. Modern ploughing has levelled out much of it in but it survives in some places. You can see it from the footpath off High Rd in Shillington that heads for Pirton, in the meadow opposite Moorhen Farm and in fields behind Higham Gobion church.

The picture shows how snow used to accumulate in the furrows at Homes Pasture in Shillington before the surface was levelled to create extra football pitches.