Research Department Report Series 60/2006

## Smythes Corner (Shrublands Quarry), Coddenham, Suffolk The Examination and Reconstruction of an Anglo-Saxon Bed Burial

Jacqui Watson

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ISSN 1749-8775

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## Summary

During the excavation of this Anglo-Saxon cemetery in 1999, grave 308 was recognised to be that of a bed burial within a chambered grave. There are well over a hundred fragments of metalwork associated with this grave, and most have mineral preserved organic remains which have been recorded and where possible identified. This report sets out to identify which pieces of ironwork were part of the bed structure, and use the organic material preserved on them to produce a reconstruction of the original wooden bedstead. The remaining metalwork has been interpreted as belonging to a grave cover, which has also been reconstructed on the basis of the mineral preserved wood on the various fittings. The analysis of all the metalwork concludes that the bed had been dismantled to place it within the wooden chamber, and the report includes many illustrations to support how the grave was laid out, and how the bed might have looked when in use.

## Keywords

Iron Mineral Preserved Organic Early Medieval

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# The examination and reconstruction of an Anglo-Saxon bed burial from Smythes Corner (Shrublands Quarry), Coddenham, Suffolk.

Jacqui Watson

## Contents

Introduction	2
Evidence preserved on individual groups of ironwork	4
<ol> <li>Headboard stays</li> <li>Headboard</li> <li>Side rails</li> <li>Eyelets or loop-headed spikes</li> <li>Lines of large rivets across the grave</li> <li>Structural metalwork</li> </ol>	4 6 10 14 18 24
Discussion	25
Acknowledgements	
References	

## Introduction

During the excavation at Smythes Corner, Coddenham in October 1999, grave 308 was recognised to be that of a bed burial within a chamber, but due to the conditions on site the metalwork was recovered as large fragments or in groups. Two soil blocks containing metalwork and organic materials were also removed, one at neck/chest area containing jewellery, and the other a possible purse placed on the right thigh. This report just relates to the bed and chamber construction, the other personal items are included with the report on the organic material (Watson, 2006).

The soil on the iron bed furniture appears to be a loamy clay, which has dried as a hard heavy deposit on the metalwork. Removal of this deposit has been a labour intensive task and revealed little organic material for study. Where possible the fragments were repaired with cellulose nitrate adhesive (HMG), but much of the iron remains in fragments with their relative positions only being made known by the alignment of the wood grain preserved on them.

There are well over a hundred fragments of ironwork associated with this grave (fig.1), and not all are part of the bed itself. The bed fittings include the headboard stays, and the decorative metalwork on the headboard and sides; the eyelets and large rivets on close examination appear to be related to the chamber which contained the burial.

Based on the grave plan, the bed in grave 308 seems to be about 1.9m in length, but the width remains uncertain as the bed has been dismantled before placing in the grave, although it must have been at least 0.6m to accommodate the headboard. The depth of the sides is not obvious, but is presumed to be around 0.3m like the bed from Edix Hill, Barrington (Malim and Hines, 1998). The headboard has to be over 0.5m in both height and width to incorporate the decorative iron circles.

Two lines of rivets at the head and feet of the skeleton indicate the presence of a large wooden structure that ran the length of the grave. It seems to be made up of five or six boards joined together with a curved or barrel-shaped section, and this may have been a cover for the whole grave or one that just extends over the burial.

The bed, chamber lining and cover have all been made from ash (*Fraxinus* sp.). This species is commonly found in the wood and charcoal remains for nearby sites in Suffolk, where it had been used for structures and fuel (Murphy, 2001), and therefore its usage for all the woodwork represented in this grave is not unexpected. Ash has also been used for the construction of other beds, for example Swallowcliffe Down, Wiltshire (Speake, 1989) and Barrington, Cambridgeshire, where the natural springiness of ash timber was thought to be one of the reasons it was chosen.



Figure 1. Grave plan of burial 308 (Suffolk C.C).

## Evidence preserved on the individual groups of ironwork

## 1. Headboard stays

The iron headboard stays are used to attach the sides to the headboard. Only one of the two headboard stays remains intact (1081a, figs. 2 & 3), the other is broken into three pieces (1107, 1075, 1101) found some distance from each other. This adds to the impression that the bed was dismantled, or even broken, to go in the grave.

The curved part is twisted, with one terminal n-shaped to fit over the side of the bed, and the other flat to be attached to the headboard. Both the n-shaped terminals show that the curved part of the bar leans inwards. The wood grain preserved on the headboard stay, 1081, indicates that thje headboard itself was originally reclining at an angle of 100° in relation to the sides of the bed (fig.3). Possibly the main function of the headboard stay was to support the headboard at this angle. The bracket end of these stays indicates that the headboard was originally 25mm thick.



Figure 2. Position of headboard stay in grave (photo Suffolk C.C).



Figure 3. Headboard stay (1081a); side view illustrating that the headboard is positioned at an angle of 100° from the horizontal, and the relative position of cleat (1081b).

1081 a. The eastside headboard stay, complete with attachments for side rail and headboard. This piece is heavily encrusted with clay and stones and is still linked with a cleat that attached 2 sections of the headboard.

b. The cleat has a twisted section that would have been on the outside of the headboard, and the distance between the two plates is c. 25mm.

c. Large rivet aligned at approx  $90^{\circ}$  and across the cleat (b). This rivet originally belonged with the cover and is discussed and illustrated with the other large rivets in section 5.

1107 From the west side, this bracket fragment connected the headboard to the side of bed, and the distance between the bracket sides is approx. 25mm – the thickness of the headboard.

- 1075 Fragment of iron plate that attached the headboard stay to the headboard.
- 1101 Fragment of west headboard stay, the n-shaped bracket that was attached to the side of the bed.

#### 2. Headboard

The headboard was originally a wooden panel on which the iron strips were probably mounted as two concentric circles with bars between them. The iron circles appear to have been made from a flat piece of iron just over 1mm thick, and the outer circle is approx. 0.5m in diameter.

The ironwork from this area of the grave has suffered a great deal of damage, some of it at the post-excavation stage, but it is also clear from the edges covered in re-deposited clay and calcite (calcium carbonate) that a number of the breakages must have happened at the time of burial or soon after. As a result most of the strips were not in their original positions at the time of excavation (figs. 4 & 5), and their interpretation as being arranged simply in two concentric circles is by no means certain. Part of the outer circle may in fact be more of a wave shape, possibly following the outline of the headboard. On the inner circle there is clear evidence that it was not a complete circle, as there are two nailed terminals which appear to be intentional (fig. 6).

There are possibly 12 diamond-headed studs, the positions of only a few of which have been recorded so it is not possible to interpret their function, but they might have been part of an overall design or pattern.



Figure 4. Headboard metalwork (Suffolk C.C)



Figure 5. Headboard metalwork in position in the grave (photo Suffolk C.C).



Figure 6. How the ironwork might have been mounted on the wooden headboard.

The wood grain was recorded where it remained on the ironwork, and it appears that the iron was attached to a large board made up of at least three pieces of wood. The ironwork that could be pieced together using the site drawings and aligning the wood grain is illustrated in figure 6. This gives a very basic and simplified view of how the headboard might have appeared. All the ironwork on this side is undecorated with a flat surface, whereas in the case of the cleats the twisted parts are intended to be visible from the back. Also very little of this metalwork was being used to hold the sections of the headboard together, so they must have been integral to its decoration even if no other evidence remains to suggest what this might have been.

1066	Fragments of the inner circle, which has an inner diameter of 220mm and the ring is approx. 16mm wide. One section may have leather between the wood and iron. Broken nails on the inner ring are 10.5mm and 10.8mm in length.
1064, 1073, 1077, 1070	Sections of the outer ring. The internal diameter of this ring is 392mm, and is approx. 16mm wide. On this ring are three nails with shanks 10.9mm, 13.9mm, and 15.0mm in length. This gives the minimum thickness of the headboard at this point.
Studs	One of the diamond-headed studs has a minimum shank length of 21.3mm. At least one of these is mounted on TLS.
1084	Two diamond-shaped studs in different sizes, with broken shanks. The larger stud was attached to TLS.
1087	Four diamond-shaped studs, two shanks c.21mm long, probably represent two rivets. Two of the heads were attached to TLS, one to a RLS, and one was uncertain. One of the nail shanks had wood with an oblique TLS, and could have joined either pair.
1067*	One plate of small cleat with TLS preserved near broken rivet, length of shank 12.4mm. (fig.7)
1068	Two halves of a broken cleat with a minimum depth between the two plates of 19mm. Originally attached to TLS, changing to RLS – but could still be the same piece of wood. Broken side attached to oblique TLS. Small fragment of a diamond-shaped stud. (fig.7)
1075*	Cleat, that may have been positioned between the concentric rings. The distance between the two plates is 23.8mm. One side is a twisted bar and the other a flat plate, making this the opposite pair to 1081b positioned near the headboard stay.
	Associated with a fragment of the headboard stay.
1076	Possible small cleat from between the rings. One fragment was originally attached to TLS ash, with the grain across the width of the strip.
4000*	Freezewards of closet, showing on success plan to be presidented between the

1080\* Fragments of cleat, shown on grave plan to be positioned between the inner and outer rings. Attached to RLS, and its likely position from the preserved wood grain is shown on headboard drawing (fig.6).

1086\* One plate of a possible cleat, shown on the grave section to be positioned between the two circles. Attached to TLS at one end, and the wood at the other end is RLS with the grain in a different alignment. Although no join is visible, it seems likely that this cleat was in position over the join between two boards that formed the headboard. (fig.7)

1087	Possible diamond-headed stud.	P263

1088Possible diamond-headed stud.P263



Figure 7. Grain detail on small brackets (drawn 1:1).

## 3. Side Rails

There are four side rails which appear to run the length of the bed on both sides, and are presumed to be the top and bottom of each side. The rails were attached to the wooden sides by rivets. There seem to be 18 rivets on each side, and if the number associated with the upper and lower rails is slightly confused, this could indicate that 9 rivets are associated with each rail and possibly spaced at approximately 200mm intervals.



Figure 8. Site photo with the position of skeleton in relation to the side rails (photo. Suffolk C.C).



Figure 9. Grave plan of skeleton and the bed fittings.

#### Right side rail A

#### With 8 possible rivets used to attach the iron rail to the side of the bed

- 1092 Iron strip with wood preserved on one side and textile on the other. Associated with two rivets and an eyelet.
- 1144 Long iron strip with three rivets. Originally attached to TLS ash. Textile on other side.
  - + 2 rivets in a separate bag, c.28mm long.
- 1145 Lower part of rail with rivet.

#### Right side rail B

- With 10 possible rivets used to attach the iron rail to the side of the bed
- Long iron strip associated with 4 rivets. One has a tapering shank 26-28mm long. Wood is preserved on one side with textile on the other. Strip originally attached to TLS.
  + 2 more rivets 8 rivets in total In a separate bag are what appears to be a piece iron strip fused onto a large piece of flint with textile. Wood is crushed between the flint and iron, and textile is preserved on top.
- 1135 Not found and it is possible that the pieces may have become amalgamated with 1093.
- 1158 orFragment of iron strip, probably part of the rail, with degraded textile on one side1135and just powdery corrosion on other.
- 1172 Fragments of rail and 2 broken rivets with small patches of mineral preserved wood – were originally attached to TLS ash, and rivets give a minimum depth of wood as c.28mm. On one of the rivet-heads are the remains of a few mineral preserved threads.

On the other side to the wood are some fragments of mineral preserved textile, but too damaged to make out weave.

#### Left side rail C

With 6 rivets used to attach the rail to the side of the bed

1094 Iron strip with 3 rivets. Mineral preserved wood on one side indicates that the strip was originally attached to RLS. The rivets show that this edge was tapered, and 19-22mm thick.

\*Associated with a small fitting which appears to have some type of plaited cord wrapped round it.

1154 Fragments of iron rail + one rivet. Wood is preserved on one side and textile on the other.

The rail was originally attached to RLS.

There appear to be several layers of textile, possibly a 2/2 twill, overlain in some places lines of 'plied' thread across the width of the rail – maybe a fringe.

- 1156 Fragment of rail with mineral preserved wood on one side and textile on the other.
- 1157 Rivet in fragments, probably from the side rail. The head was originally mounted on RLS.

#### Left side rail D

#### Possibly 12 rivets used to attach the rail to the side of the bed

- 1085 Wood preserved on one side and textile preserved on the other. There are 3 large rivets that attach the strap to the wooden side of the bed. The head is tapered so that the depth of wood is 23mm on one side and 30mm on the other.
- 1096 Small group of fragments that could have originally been part of either strip.
- 1132 Iron strip associated with 1 rivet. The rivet is badly damaged, but shank is c.20-26mm long. Strip originally attached to RLS.
  + 3 rivets in another bag, one at least is 34.6mm long and smallest 27mm. Second bag contains 2 of the shorter rivets.
- 1150 Small fragment of iron rail with a complete rivet, shank c.24mm. long, the rail was originally attached to an oblique TLS.

Also with 2, possibly 3 eyelets, in fragments.

- 1161 Diamond-headed stud with fragments of mineral preserved textile on head, but in a very poor condition. Rail originally attached to oblique TLS.
- 1166 Round-headed rivet head, probably from the side rail.
- 1167 Broken rivet from side rail.

## 4. Eyelets or loop-headed spikes

Several of these eyelets or loop-headed spikes, were originally mounted on wood that was initially presumed to be the sides of the bed, but they are in fact located around the bed perimeter (fig. 10). There are around sixteen eyelets amongst the fragments of ironwork, but only the positions of twelve are recorded on the grave plan. On the south side, at least, they appear to be arranged in three pairs, with two eyelets at the head end and one below the feet. So it has been assumed that the remaining eyelets mirror those in position, to give three pairs on each side and two eyelets at each end.

All the eyelets appear to have been hammered into wood without the ends being turned over, and the eyelets could easily have been put into the wooden sides of the chamber when the wooden lining was in position in the grave. They appear to have been fixed onto boards with a tangential surface (TLS), with the loops aligned with the grain – this means that if the loops were placed in a horizontal position, the planks they were attached to would have been placed horizontally within the grave not vertically.

Only three of the loops have any organic remains preserved on them, probably a strip of leather (fig. 11). Also the triangular shaped heads make them more appropriate for use with leather strapping, approximately 15-20mm wide, rather than cords or ropes.

The function of these eyelets isn't clear except to say that they were not used to support a feather mattress as has been suggested in other bed burials. The bed from Swallowcliffe Down, Wilts has fourteen evelets fixed in the sides of the bed, and most of these have the remains of cords in the loops. In this case the eyelets were thought to have been used to suspend a wooden lattice-work panel to the sides of the bed and hold a mattress. In the case of one of the beds from Barrington (grave 18), eleven eyelets are also attached to the bed structure, and in this instance positioned with the eyes upright on the sides and on the headboard. The remains of leather straps were found in the loops, and these may have been used to either support a mattress or hold the body firmly in place while lowering into the grave cut. Neither of these suggestions work for this bed as the eyelets are separate to the main bed structure; maybe they were used to facilitate lowering the bed sections into the grave. Or equally they could have been used to suspend items from the walls of the chamber like the Prittlewell burial (Blair et al, 2004) but which have perished leaving no evidence.



Figure 10. Position of the eyelets (blue) in relation to bed structure

1074*	Eyelet found among the metalwork at headboard. Little mineral preserved organic material is preserved, wood with TLS on spike and possible traces of leather on inside of loop (fig. 11).	P264
1084*	Small eyelet associated with a large rivet and small studs.	
	Eyelet with possible strip of leather c.17mm wide and c.1.5mm thick, in the flattened top of the loop (fig. 11).	
1085*	Eyelet found with pieces of side rail. Possible traces of leather in loop, but very indistinct. No wood remains on the spikes (fig. 11).	
1092*	Put into TLS, of a diffuse porous wood, and the depth of wood preserved is 28mm (fig. 11).	
1105	Small eyelet with triangular loop, possibly even 2 broken ones.	P263
1106	Large eyelet from centre bottom of grave. No organic material preserved on the loop or shank (fig. 11).	P264
1146*	Eyelet put through TLS, probably ash. Terminals are broken, but it had been put in a piece of wood at least 32mm thick. No other organic material was preserved on the loop (fig. 11).	P264
	Second eyelet with the same mineral preserved wood and no organic material through loop.	
1147	Eyelet on upper right side rail (1144) and next to 1148. No preserved organic material, but has long spikes so could have been mounted in a piece of wood over 30mm thick.	P264
1148*	Eyelet with a possible min. depth of wood as 25mm (fig. 11). A smaller eyelet than 1147, but with folded over terminals. Wood on shank TLS.	
1150	Two or even three eyelets in fragments. The most complete has no organic material preserved. The bottom of the spike is turned over indicating that this eyelet could have been put through a piece of wood c.30mm.	
1153	Small triangular-headed eyelet associated with a broken rivet with diamond-shaped head.	
1189 U/S	One eyelet and a possible second. No organic material is preserved on either, but the most complete could have been attached to a piece of wood c.23 mm in depth.	



Figure 11. Organic material present on the eyelets, drawn 1:1.

## 5. Lines of large rivets across the grave



Figure 12. Plan of large rivets and brackets (black) in relation to other metalwork.

These rivets are arranged in two lines at either end of the grave across its width, and they appear to have been used to secure loose wooden tongues joining shaped boards together. There are 8 rivets at the head end and 8 at the footside (fig. 12). If a pair of rivets indicates the join between two boards, 8 rivets would suggest that this curved structure was made from 5 boards held together with loose tenons, (fig.13) – although the internal curvature is probably exaggerated because of the corrosion of the rivet-head. It would seem reasonable to assume that both sets are the two ends of the same structure, and that they possibly represent either a curved grave cover or a canopy to the bed. The carpentry represented here resembles that identified on a group of silver-headed rivets preserving chunks of wood from the Royal Grave at Taplow, Bucks and these are on display in the British Museum (fig. 14).

Also most of these rivets have one head that is diamond-shaped and the other circular. Where complete it would appear that diamond heads were arranged on the concave, presumably inner surface of this structure.

The grain alignment of the tenons indicates that small pieces of wood were used rather than one long piece of wood the length of the cover.



Figure 13. A cross-section through part of the wooden cover based on the wood remains preserved on the large iron rivets.



Figure 14. Similar loose-tenon construction from Taplow, Essex.

## Rivets from West end of Grave

- 1081c\* Large rivet associated with the headboard stay and the decorated cleat on the headboard. One terminal has a diamond shaped head and the other is round. The length of the shank is 61mm (fig. 15).
- 1082\* Shank is 65mm long, with traces of mineral preserved wood with the grain across the shank (fig. 15).
- 1084 The rivet is in many fragments, but has both diamond and round shaped heads and a shank of c.60mm. Under the round head is a sliver of wood with TS next to the head, while the rest of the preserved wood has a TLS – probably this represents a small wedge of wood used to fill the space in a pre-drilled hole. Both pieces of wood are possibly ash.

Associated with two diamond-headed studs and loop-headed spike.

- 1091 Several nail or rivet shanks with mineral preserved wood the group probably represents two large rivets. Two of the shanks have evidence for loose tenons c.13 –15mm thick.
- 1098 Round-headed stud with a broken shank, so unclear if this belongs with bottom side rail or part of large rivet from roof/canopy. Head attached to RLS.
- 1099\* Shank 56-60mm long, with traces of mineral preserved wood (fig. 15).
- 1102 Rivet with shank 59-62mm long and round-shaped head.

Associated with a fragment of tapering iron strip, oblique TLS ash on one side and a few threads of textile on the other. The strip is narrower than either the side rails or decorative ironwork on the headboard. Group found in copper alloy bowl.



Figure 15. Wood preserved on some rivets from west end of grave.

## Rivets from East end of grave

1133 or Complete rivet with both round and diamond shaped heads. The length of the shank is between 58-63mm, and the preserved wood has a TLS.

There may be evidence for the remains of a loose tenon preserved on the shank. The depth of this is c.10mm (fig. 16).

- 1134 Length of shank 65mm, but not enough wood preserved to know if it originally had a loose tenon.
- 1149<sup>\*</sup> Complete rivet with round and diamond- shaped heads, and the length of shank U/S c.61mm. Originally attached to RLS. Possible evidence for loose tenon (fig. 16).
- 1159 Round-headed rivet with broken shank, 22mm long. Originally attached to a piece of wood with RLS. Little wood preserved on shank.
- 1160\* Diamond-headed rivet, the other side broken. The minimum length of the shank is 53mm (fig.16).
- 1162 Length of shank is 65mm.
- 1163\* Nail with round shaped head and possible remains of loose tenon c.12.5mm wide (fig.16).
- 1168 Round-headed end of large rivet.
- 1169?\* Broken rivet, only round-headed rivet and part of shank remains, c. 51mm in length. Possible trace of loose tenon at the lower end, with an oblique TLS visible.
- 1170 Very fragmentary rivet, which appears to have two diamond-shaped heads. One

of the heads has mineral preserved textile, but little more than a few threads. The same head was attached to TLS, and the wood was probably ash.

1171 Length of shank possibly 60mm. One side has a diamond head and the other is circular.



Figure 16. Wood preserved on rivets from east end of grave.

## 6. Structural metalwork

These two large brackets, 1137 and 1107, are positioned on top of the skeleton at the waist (see fig. 12) and are not part of the bed structure. Two similar brackets were found in grave 157 of this cemetery and were probably used to attach pieces of wood to the grave cover to carry and manoeuvre the heavy cover into position, either across the whole grave or just covering the body – see section on grave structures in the organic report (Watson, 2006). Figure 17 illustrates the potential shape of this cover, with the associated fittings and how it might have related to the body.



Figure 17. Possible relationship between the cover and brackets positioned over the body.

- 1137 Large folded piece of iron sheet of uncertain use. The grave plan indicates that it was found on top of the skeleton's right arm, so it may have been attached to the grave cover.
- 1138 Joins with 1107
- 1107 Large folded piece of iron sheet of uncertain use. The grave plan indicates that it was found on top of the skeleton's left arm, so it may have been attached to the grave cover.

## Discussion

After examining all the iron fragments for organic remains and checking their relative depth within the grave cut it has become clear that the only way the sides could have been placed in these positions was if the bed had been dismantled for the burial, as suggested by Richard Darrah (pers.com.) – in this way the sides of the bed would be on display with the body placed centrally on top, see figure 18.



Figure 18. Reconstruction of the grave with the dismantled bed, eyelets attached to chamber walls, and grave cover partially in position (drawing *C. Evans*).



Figure 19. The assembled bed, based in part on the reconstruction of the bed from Shudy Camps (Lethbridge, 1936).

Figure 19 shows how the bed might have looked when assembled, using tusked-tenon joints for the sides as these can easily be dismantled and reassembled when required (as used on Viking furniture including beds, Anon, 2005).

There is no evidence for a mattress, but textile remains were found on the iron rails near the skeleton which suggests some sort of textile covering. The body was simply dressed, with the only metal dress fastenings being the buckles and strap-ends present on her shoes. Personal items including an antler comb, copper alloy bowl, pouch of jewellery and a purse were arranged on and around the body. The burial was then covered with a curved wooden structure that might have extended the full width of the chamber or just been restricted to the bed area, or even just the body. The levels of the large brackets, 1137 and 1138/ 1107, seem to suggest that they were mounted on top of this structure, possibly to attached poles that could be used to manoeuvre the cover into position.

The limited amount of wood preserved on the ironwork means that only the simplest construction can be put forward for this bed, and one has to bear in mind that the original may have been highly decorated with intricate carving or even painted, but if this were the case no evidence survives. In manuscripts of a later date (Hoffman, 1983), beds are depicted with carved sides and drapery which gives some idea as to how this bed may have looked when in use (figs 20 and 21).

The construction of beds with the headboard fixed at an angle of 100° to the horizontal plane of the bed, appears to be a common feature of the Anglo-Saxon beds found in England, for example the two beds from Barrington, Cambs (Malim & Hines, 1998), and Swallowcliffe Down, Wiltshire (Speake, 1989). Speake also notes that the Scandinavian examples also have beds with the headboards in the same position, but without the support of an iron headboard stay. The Coddenham bed, along with the other examples from England are unlike the construction of the cot-like furnishings in the Merovingian graves from Oberflact, South Germany (Paulsen, 1992), where the sides have been made from lathe-turned spindles with no associated metalwork.



Figure 20. Medieval bed illustrated in The Icelandic sketch book AM 673, fourteenth to fifteenth century (after Hoffman, 1983).



Figure 21 Medieval bed on the Altar frontal from the church of Årdal, c.1300 (after Hoffman, 1983)

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the help given by Richard Darrah in our joint discussions over the bed construction especially his expertise on working wood and the recognition that the bed must have been dismantled before placing in the grave. Figures 9, 10 and 12 were produced by John Vallender from the original grave plan by Suffolk C.C., and Chris Evans translated my notes and sketches on the grave reconstruction into the watercolour used for the front cover of this report.

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