

The Mysterious Burial at Sutton Hoo – was it King Raedwald?

Haywards Heath & District Probus Club



Introduction

Sutton Hoo near Woodbridge, in Suffolk, England, is the site of two early medieval cemeteries dating from the 6th to 7th centuries. Archaeologists have been excavating the area since 1939. The interment of a ship at Sutton Hoo is regarded as the most impressive medieval grave to be discovered in Europe. The excavation - often referred to as *the Great Ship Burial* - took place in 1939 on the eve of hostilities in World War II.

Picture Credit: "File:Original Sutton Hoo Helmet.jpg" is licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)



Sometime around 1,400 years ago, a great ship was hauled up from the East Anglian coast to Sutton Hoo, the site of an Anglo-Saxon burial ground. Here, the ship became the last resting place of a king or a great warrior. This unknown figure was buried with his vast treasure and lay undisturbed until the site was excavated in the 20th century.

The Excavation

In 1939, widow Edith Pretty, a landowner at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, asked amateur archaeologist Basil Brown to investigate the largest of several Anglo-Saxon burial mounds on her property. Beneath a mound was found the imprint of a 27m-long (88ft) ship. At its centre was a ruined burial chamber jam-packed with treasures: silverware, gold jewellery, a lavish feasting set, and, most famously, an ornate iron helmet mask (see left). The burial, dating to the early AD 600s, clearly commemorated a leading figure of East Anglia, the local Anglo-Saxon kingdom. It may even have belonged to a king.¹

Amateur archaeologist Basil Brown famously made the discovery of a lifetime back in 1939, when he brushed away the Suffolk soil and

revealed the richest intact early medieval grave in Europe. More than a grave, it was a spectacular funerary monument on an epic scale: a longship, some 88 feet long with a burial chamber full of dazzling riches. As Basil and a team of archaeologists dug deeper, they unearthed fine feasting vessels, deluxe hanging bowls, silverware from distant Byzantium, luxurious textiles, gold dress accessories set with Sri Lankan garnets, a lyre, and the iconic helmet with human mask.

The archaeologists and the landowner Edith Pretty were dumbfounded. What had been found was clearly the grave of a person of importance – someone meant to be remembered. But who was it that had been buried, and why? And what can the Sutton Hoo excavation tell us about Anglo-Saxon society? Archaeologists and historians have been guessing ever since the site was uncovered.

¹ Source: British Museum, [HERE](#).

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The most likely theory would seem to name the deceased as King Raedwald, an Anglo-Saxon leader and the son of Tytila of East Anglia and a member of the Wuffingas dynasty, who were the first kings of the East Angles. After triumphing over Northumberland, he fell out with his people after erecting an altar for Jesus Christ alongside one for the 'old gods'.

The National Trust say² that although it took some time to understand what the finds were and what they meant, the discovery would later prove to be an Anglo-Saxon royal burial of incomparable richness. The finds would revolutionise the understanding of early England. The ship burial has prompted comparisons with the world of the Old English poem *Beowulf*³. The poem is partly set in Götaland in southern Sweden, which has archaeological parallels to some of the finds from Sutton Hoo.⁴

The Treasures

National Trust⁵ provides an illuminating insight into what was found: The objects in the burial chamber were designed to signal power on earth and in the hereafter. Each object tells a story and reveals something about the person they accompanied into the afterlife. Together they form powerful poetry, likely the burial of a king:

- Weaponry such as a pattern welded sword suggests a great war leader;
- A Lyre evokes a musician and poet;
- The exquisite gold and garnet craftsmanship on many items represent a patron of the arts;
- Objects like the drinking horns speak of a generous host;
- Items such as the shield are thought to have been diplomatic gifts from Scandinavia and speak of someone both well respected and highly connected;
- The shoulder clasps modelled on those worn by Roman emperors tell us of someone who borrowed from different cultures and power bases to assert their own authority.

Most iconic among the treasures is undoubtedly the Sutton Hoo helmet (see page 1). Highly corroded and broken into more than one hundred fragments when the burial chamber collapsed, the helmet took many years of work to reconstruct by the British Museum conservation team.

Sutton Hoo

Sutton Hoo, which lies along the banks of the tidal estuary of the River Deben, lends its name to the small Suffolk village of Sutton and its parish. On the opposite bank is the small harbour town of Woodbridge, which stands about seven miles from the North Sea. It formed a path of entry into East Anglia during the period that followed the end of Roman imperial rule in the 5th century.⁶ Following the withdrawal of the Romans from southern Britain after 410, Germanic tribes such as the Angles and Saxons began to settle in the southeastern part of the island. East Anglia is regarded by many scholars as a region in which this settlement was early and dense; the area's name derives from that of the Angles.

Over time, the remnants of the pre-existing Brittonic population adopted the culture of the Romans. During this period, southern Britain became divided into several small independent kingdoms. Several pagan cemeteries from the kingdom of the East Angles have been found, most notably at **Spong Hill** and **Snape**, where a large number of cremations and inhumations were found. When the Sutton Hoo cemetery was in use, the River Deben would have formed part of a busy trading and transportation network. Settlements grew up along the river, most of which would have been small farmsteads, although it seems likely that there was a larger administrative centre as well, where the local aristocracy held court. Archaeologists have speculated that such a centre may have existed at **Rendlesham**, **Melton**, **Bromeswell** or Sutton Hoo itself. It has been suggested that the burial mounds used by wealthier families were later appropriated as sites for early churches. In such cases, the burial mounds would have been destroyed before the churches were constructed.⁷

² Source: National Trust, [HERE](#).

³ See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beowulf>

⁴ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sutton_Hoo

⁵ Source: National Trust, [HERE](#).

⁶ Source: West, Stanley E. (1998). *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology: Sutton Hoo and Other Discoveries* (PDF). *East Anglian Archaeology* (Report).

Ipswich: Suffolk County Council. ISBN 0-86-055-24-62.

⁷ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sutton_Hoo

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The Cemeteries

Sutton Hoo is the site of two early medieval cemeteries dating from the 6th to 7th centuries near Woodbridge, in Suffolk, England. The cemeteries are close to the River Deben estuary and other archaeological sites. They appear on Edith Pretty's land as a group of approximately 20 earthen mounds that rise slightly above the horizon of the hill-spur when viewed from the opposite bank. The newer burial ground is situated on a second hill-spur about 500 metres (1,600 ft) upstream of the first. It was discovered and partially explored in 2000 during preliminary work on constructing an Exhibition Hall for tourists. This site also has burials, but the tops of their mounds had been obliterated by later agricultural activity. The nearby visitor centre contains original artefacts, replicas of finds and a reconstruction of the ship burial chamber. The site is in the care of the National Trust.⁸

The Book

The story of what was found at Sutton Hoo was captured by John Preston in his **historical novel** *The Dig*, first published in May 2007. The book's dust jacket describes it as "*a brilliantly realised account of the most famous archaeological dig in Britain in modern times*". The book is available on Amazon **HERE**.

The Summer of 1937

The events start in the summer of 1937, at a town fete in Woodbridge in Suffolk. A local woman, a widow named Edith Pretty, got chatting with a local historian named Vincent Redstone. The conversation turned to her property, Sutton Hoo, a short distance away. Specifically, she mentioned some '*interesting looking mounds on the estate.*' Might they conceal something more than mere earth, Mrs Pretty wondered? One thing led to another.

Redstone contacted his colleagues about Sutton Hoo, and a self-taught Suffolk amateur archaeologist and astronomer called Basil Brown was eventually commissioned to start delving into the estate.

The Ship and its Treasures

The interment of a ship at Sutton Hoo represents the most impressive medieval grave discovered in Europe. Inside the burial mound was the imprint of a decayed ship and a central chamber filled with treasures. The burial, one of the richest Germanic burials found in Europe, contained a ship fully equipped for the life hereafter (but with no body). It threw light on the wealth and contacts of early Anglo-Saxon kings. The discovery was unusual because ship burial was rare in England.



Picture Credit: "Woodbridge 01-07-2004" by Karen Roe is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

The largest Anglo-Saxon ship burial ever discovered contained artefacts of a quality and quantity never seen before. The collection of 263 objects included weapons, silver cutlery, gold buckles, coins, and a distinctive full-face helmet, of a kind never before recovered in Britain. Examining the artefacts, they concluded that the settlement was not Viking, as was first assumed, but Anglo-Saxon. The Sutton Hoo longship, now one of Britain's most significant archaeological treasures, is being carefully recreated and brought back to life in a Suffolk shed after being buried 1,400 years ago.

On 10th November 2021, BBC reported that the first two finished pieces of a replica of the ship had been joined together. The reconstruction of the burial ship excavated in 1939 is being built in a

shed beside the River Deben in Woodbridge, Suffolk. Tim Kirk, who is leading the £1m project, said the building of the replica ship was "one big experiment". Treasures unearthed there have been described as one of the "*greatest archaeological discoveries of all time*".⁹

⁸ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sutton_Hoo

⁹ Source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-suffolk-59236347>

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The Film



Picture Credit: Screen clip from the film (The Dig).

The Dig is a 2021 British drama film directed by Simon Stone, based on John Preston's 2007 novel: in 1939, archaeologist Basil Brown (Ralph Fiennes) arrives in Woodbridge, Suffolk, at the behest of landowner Edith Pretty (Carey Mulligan). With the help of his apprentices Peggy (Lily James) and Stuart (Johnny Flynn), Brown searches the property for any significant finds until he stumbles upon the remains of a Viking burial site.

News of their find soon led to scholars from The British Museum, led by Charles Phillips (Ken Stott), trying to take over the site. Brown's discovery challenges the conceptions of British history to their very core, making significant strides in the field of archaeology in the process.

Some of the geographical context shots were filmed on the Suffolk coast near the burial site at Sutton Hoo, but most of the film was made in Shackleton, Surrey.

The BAFTA-nominated film, shown on Netflix on 30th January 2021, is well worth watching but to view it, you need to subscribe to that service. A trailer (see a screenshot above) is available at:

<https://youtu.be/JZQz0rkNajo>

Basil Brown's decision to take the job offered by Edith Pretty not only would change his life but also radically alter and deepen the understanding scholars had of the early Anglo-Saxon period in England following the collapse of Roman rule.

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