



In the summer of 1939, as World War Two loomed bleakly on the horizon, a discovery was made beneath the earth in a quiet corner of Suffolk on the east coast of England.

Archaeologists painstakingly brushed away layers of sandy soil to reveal the shape of a ship beneath a mound, and in the centre of the ship they found a burial chamber full of the most extraordinary treasures.

Although it took some time to understand what these finds were, and what they meant, the discovery would prove to be an Anglo-Saxon royal burial of incomparable richness and it would revolutionise our understanding of early England.

## The Treasures

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.

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 whereas 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, whereas 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. Together they form a potent piece of power poetry, likely the burial of a king

## The Helmet

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

Today, it is arguably the face of the Anglo-Saxon period.



## North European origins

The helmet demonstrates influence from earlier Roman cavalry helmets and also from Swedish helmets of a similar era to the Sutton Hoo burial. The connection with Sweden and Scandinavia can be seen in a number of other items, including the Sutton Hoo shield and the drinking horns. It reminds us that East Anglia was the western shore of a Germanic culture that spread around the North Sea.

The replica helmet at Sutton Hoo features the kind of exquisite detail that would have been seen in the real thing. The helmet can be interpreted as war gear, as a status symbol, as a clue to some of the beliefs of the Anglo-Saxons and as a triumph of craftsmanship.

## Travellers and traders

The people buried at Sutton Hoo were not only closely connected to their Scandinavian neighbours, but clearly engaged in travel and trade across huge distances. Garnets that decorate many of the treasures most likely originated in Sri Lanka and there were also items from the Byzantine Empire, from Egypt and from all across Europe.

## The new faith

The dating of the coins help us locate the burial to around the year AD625, a time of political and religious change across England. Some of the silver bowls found in the chamber display cross-shaped decoration, possibly suggesting a Christian origin and a pair of silver spoons bear the names 'Saulos' and 'Paulos', which would appear to be a reference to the Christian story of the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus.

The burial of a great man in a ship, surround by his regalia, is clearly a pre-Christian ritual - burial practices would change enormously after the conversion to Christianity. The arguably Christian imagery on the treasures tells a different story and it would appear that the burial at Sutton Hoo took place at a crucial time of fundamental change in early England, from belief in the old gods to a new faith.



*Replica Anglo-Saxon coins at Sutton Hoo*

## The man on the inside

Between 1965-1971, archaeologists returned to Sutton Hoo to try and answer some key questions posed by the 1939 excavation and subsequent analysis. One of which was the mystery of the missing body in the Great Ship Burial .

It was solved by chemical analysis of the sand below the burial chamber, which showed high phosphate levels. This established that a body had decomposed there, so the mound was not a cenotaph (commemorative empty tomb) as had been previously suggested. Certainly the acidic nature of the region's soil would explain why timbers and human remains alike had dissolved over time.

We will never know for certain who was buried in the Great Ship Burial , but the leading theory is that it was King Rædwald of East Anglia, as someone important enough to have warranted such a burial and who died at around this time. Rædwald was part of the ruling Wuffing dynasty who claimed descent from Woden; the Germanic god who sacrificed his left eye for knowledge.

## The significance of Sutton Hoo

Sutton Hoo provides one of the richest sources of archaeological evidence for this period of the history of England's development.

The discovery in 1939 changed our understanding of the some of the first chapters of English history and a time seen as backwards was illuminated as cultured and sophisticated.

This story of discovery didn't end in 1939 though, as our knowledge and understanding of the Anglo-Saxons of Sutton Hoo and their world is still changing and expanding. Some 1400 years ago, a community came together to haul a ship from the river within which they buried their king along with treasured possessions for his final journey. It was a public spectacle intended to be remembered for all time.

Today, visit Sutton Hoo to walk in the footsteps of our ancestors, and feel the atmosphere of a site on the border between worlds.