

# SAXON

## THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SUTTON HOO SOCIETY

Dear Member,

It is hard to believe that Sunday, June 3rd 1984, the day the Sutton Hoo Society was founded, is just over four months ago. For some of us, outside Martin Carver's team of experts, it has also been the Summer of Sutton Hoo.

Regular meetings of the Executive Committee have been held and the foundations have been laid, we hope, of an active and constructive society. A constitution has been drawn up and charitable status applied for; members have been signed up and issued with cards; three thousand visitors have been shown over the site; a myriad of other jobs have been completed including the detailed planning for visitors in 1985. Much work remains to be done and I do hope you will want to be actively involved. Nearly 30 members have indicated a willingness to act as site guides next year, for example.

"Site guides", the very phrase sends a chill of fear up the spine as memories flood back of experiences this Summer! Blazing sun, torrential rain, dust storms, wailing babies, reluctant children, playful dogs, and that most dreaded of phenomena the "alternative" guide! Through all the hazards one factor has emerged - the genuine and immense enthusiasm of the visitors and we hope they come back next year. The gasps as one unveiled "Horace" for public gaze are a potent memory!

"My heart lifts as I see another tour commence", said our Director, and we were glad to be relieving the professional archaeologists of a time consuming duty and allowing them to get on with the job. John Warburton's feat of 5 one-hour tours in a single session (Ferry Day) may not be surpassed!

Profits from the guided tours this season have allowed us to purchase a tastefully designed sales-point (would you believe - shed?) for next season and souvenirs have been ordered. From this source will come the funds to allow us to assist the team in as many ways as we can in the years ahead.

I hope you enjoy our first newsletter, prepared by Executive Committee members Mark Mitchels and Malcolm Miles. Thank you for your support. We look forward to seeing you on site next season.

Mike Weaver  
Hon. Secretary  
Sutton Hoo Society

### MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY'S REPORT

Our first year has certainly got off to an excellent start with 150 members so far. We hope to be contacting those of you who have kindly volunteered assistance and, in this respect, I would here like to thank our very first member, Miss Eva Martin of Ipswich, for her stalwart efforts in helping me circularise what, at times, seemed like the entire population of Great Britain!

Next season we hope to arrange at least one special Site Day for members only conducted by the Project Director, Martin Carver, followed by tea at a local historic house - more details later.

Martin Carver has also said he may be able to arrange a private tour of the Sutton Hoo treasures at the British Museum so if anyone is interested perhaps they would let me know (address below).

Finally, just let me say "SPREAD THE WORD"...the more members we have, the better the Society will be able to function!

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The 1984 season at Sutton Hoo was not only one of the most exciting I have undertaken (writes Martin Carver), it was also very unusual. Instead of the large flat excavation, or sectioned barrow, that many visitors were expecting, they were shown cuttings 100m long stretching across and away from the site and into the fields. In them were traces of neolithic, bronze age and Iron age houses and ditches, and to the east, three human burials which were probably Anglo-Saxon. What has this to do with ship burials? What does it mean? What exactly were we up to?

All archaeology is exploration, and it is in discovery and understanding that its value and excitement lie. The first visitors to the Amazon, or the moon, know feelings no more intense than they who uncover a village or cemetery that has been buried more than 1,000 years. But it is not enough to go there; one must come back with an image, a compendium of detailed observations and an understanding of what happened there. For the archaeologist is observing not only the natural world but events which took place in it - the decay and destruction of settlements caused by emigration, invasion, famine, plague or economic regeneration, or changes in burial practice caused by religion and fashion. Two additional factors make archaeological excavation that much more difficult than a trip to the moon: first, the expedition can never be repeated; what the archaeologist sees is all that will ever be known; and second, the hidden land he is exploring is decaying, slowly but surely, year by year to the point of invisibility.

Imagine then the fine balance of planning and inspiration, of responsibility and courage that goes into a campaign of exploration at a site such as Sutton Hoo.

Here we have a group of about 14 sandy burial-mounds at least four of which have been investigated.

One revealed, on the eve of the 1939 war, a marvellous collection of objects placed in the centre of an oak clinker-built rowing boat 26m long. It was hailed as a King's ship and a King's treasure, dating from the beginning of the 7th century, from one of the first Kingdoms to be formed - East Anglia. It is hardly surprising that many historians look upon Sutton Hoo as page 1 of the story of England. The problem is that no-one quite knows what to write on this page. Who else is buried at Sutton Hoo? How many other Sutton Hoo's are there? Where and how did these people live? Is it from the fields of East Anglia, the sandlings of Suffolk or the parish of Sutton that such wealth could be drawn in the 7th century? Were they worshipping Woden or Christ - or did it not matter much to them? How did it happen that the people who built the largest boat yet discovered between the Roman and the Norman conquest, were beaten by the Vikings? There is a great deal to know about this, the darkest and most influential period in our history. How much of it is in reach of archaeology?

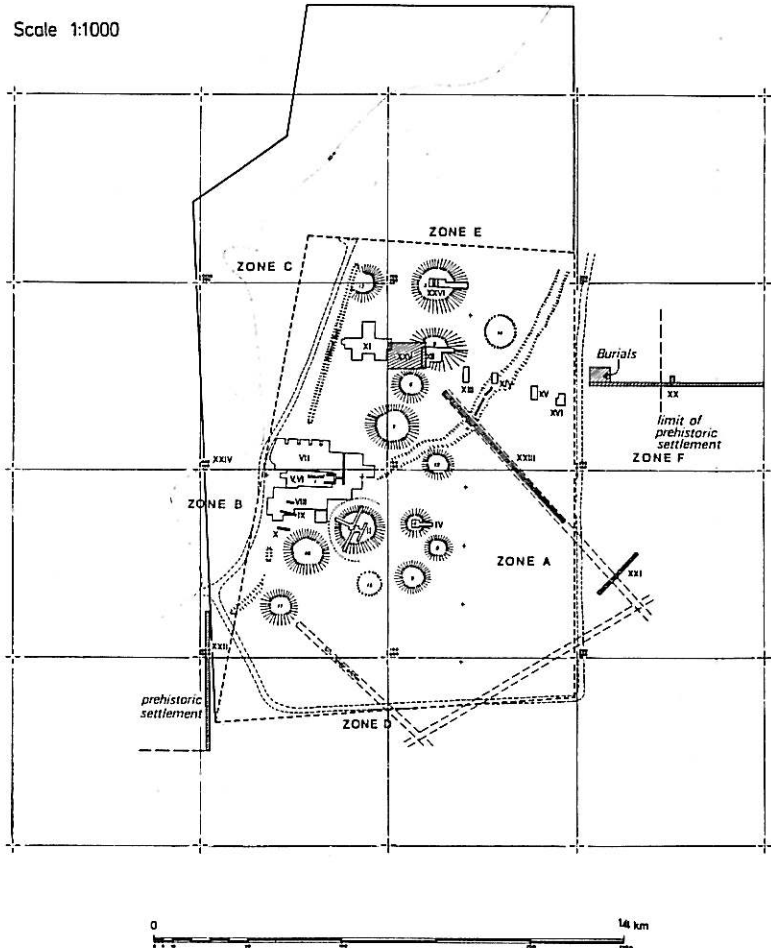


Fig.1 Plan of the Sutton Hoo site showing investigations in 1984.

There is no doubt that we will be able to say, one day, how many people and of what degree were buried at Sutton Hoo. We can map the whole cemetery - and we can map the settlements that lie beneath it. We can describe the changing environment from oak forest to pasture to heath and finally to arable. We can map the ancient landscape of the Deben valley and we can determine the intricate geography of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of East Anglia.

We can explore its links with Sweden, with Merovingian France, with Rome and with Byzantium. We can put flesh, clothes and even a spirit on the people of this heroic age. And our ambition is no less than this.

That is why we have started to explore the precious evidence at Sutton Hoo in the way we have. Nothing must be done in a hurry. Nothing must be missed.

Nothing is too trivial to record. Human bodies may have decayed to the point at which they have all but vanished; if we do now know how to see them, then we must invent a way of doing so. There is not a single detail of boats, burials, houses, drains, paths or plant life that must escape us.

At the same time, we live in a world of limited resources and limited technology. Sutton Hoo must be the most thorough investigation ever conducted but it can go no further than our late 20th century capabilities allow. For this reason Sutton Hoo has also become a laboratory for new techniques and it is these, as much as the new discoveries, that the archaeological world will be watching. The first set of these techniques provide the principle information needed to plan a detailed excavation where resources are not unlimited: how large is the site? Of what underground features is it composed? How well are they preserved? How can we best understand them? All the reconnaissance so far undertaken was dedicated to these ends: - the field-walking which showed how far the underlying prehistoric settlements spread into the neighbouring fields; the grass-mark survey which showed how many holes had already been dug into the central area by the army, by rabbits and by treasure-hunters; the geophysical surveys: resistivity, magnetometry, and radar, which have begun to detect the cuts for Anglo-Saxon graves and prehistoric ditches themselves.

To validate these results, and to examine conditions underground, we needed to investigate the subsoil at first hand, with the maximum economy. Thus the long trenches to east and south, the re-excavation of a war-time anti-glider ditch, the narrow cutting in the woods, and the re-entry into Mound 2 emptying a small part of the trench cut in 1938 by Basil Brown.



Fig 2 Sand-form of an Anglo-Saxon burial about to be recorded by photogrammetry by Gillian Hutchinson (left) of the National Maritime Museum. Members of BBC Camera crew (right) record the work (Ph. M. Sharp).

As a result of this work, we now know that the Anglo-Saxon cemetery in which the great ship burial lay is at least 4ha in extent, twice as big as was previously thought and that it includes an

extraordinary variety of burial practice: bodies lying North-South, bodies lying with their feet to the East, bodies face down with their feet to the West, bodies with horses in barrows, cremations in urns, cremations in barrows, bodies in boats in barrows. Every burial so far discovered at Sutton Hoo is different and this augurs well for a full and surprising picture of a people at the interface between paganism and christianity. We also know that the prehistoric settlement underneath this prestigious cemetery was very long-lived, dating back to the neolithic period. It seems possible that this was no coincidence; the people of the Deben Valley favoured this spot, perhaps as a crossing point of the Deben, for 3,000 years and that memory may well have endured among them when the time came for the earliest English to establish their memorials. We also know a great deal more about how the intricate palimpsest of Sutton Hoo might be successfully dug. We have seen how the traces of settlement and cemeteries currently survive under the plough, under the turf and under the trees. We have begun to learn how individual buried Anglo-Saxons can be defined in detail, although only minute fragments of bone survive. Every day in the summer of 1984 we learnt something new about the site and how we could understand it better. And this education will continue, because Sutton Hoo deserves the best that can be done, and, of course, we have scarcely begun.



Fig.3 Night photography to record the surface undulations of the turf (Ph. E. Morgan).

## WOODBIDGE FERRY

The Woodbridge Ferry was an ancient institution which we all took for granted. George Skinner always seemed to be ferrying someone across the river. There had, of course, been a bitter battle to keep the ferry running but business had dropped off so that even before World War II the ferryman no longer paid for the privilege to operate it. After World War II when Frank Knights ran it the ferry was still just about viable. It then ran every day from 7.00 a.m. - 9.00 p.m., sometimes later on Saturday nights when the men came across to the pubs. The only time the ferry closed was on Christmas Day afternoon.

By the 1950's local government was losing money operating the ferry and wanted to close it. The Pelly's brought a High Court action which forced the Woodbridge Town Council to maintain a service. They paid George Skinner, an elderly bargeman, to provide some kind of service which lasted until 1968. Even after this Frank Knights then kept a kind of ferry open until about 1974 when the Suffolk Coastal District Council got an Act of Parliament to allow them to stop the ferry.

A bit of local tradition had vanished and there was frequent talk on the quayside about re-opening a ferry, but buses and cars had killed the need for such a service. Then in 1984 came Martin Carver's initiative to make the Sutton Hoo site more interesting to view, by coming across the river and walking up the public footpath.

Faced with the challenge of restarting the ferry I organised a trial free ferry on September 9th. This was made possible by Andy Seedhouse very generously lending his boats and his men giving up their time to operate them. Also from the Sutton Hoo Ferry & Replica Committee, Dick Robinson and his family weighed in enthusiastically and Eric Metcalf was a tower of patience helping the ferry to come in. The previous weekend we had cleared the footpath along the Ferry Cliff but in the event many of the people took various routes.

On September 9th we found the ferry very easy to operate on the flood tide (with the water rising), but decidedly tricky on the ebb tide. Later Frank Knights told me that the low water ebb had always been "a lot of fun and games".

In the event we put across 104 people but had to turn some away because time and tide were running out. About two-thirds of these lived in Woodbridge and district and the other third were actually in Suffolk on holiday. Most of the people who had crossed the ferry and walked up to the Sutton Hoo site to have a guided tour returned absolutely delighted. This was not just a visit to another historical site, but a complete experience.

The local press were very kind to us and we received good coverage. As a result of this a Woodbridge resident came forward and offered to finance the restarting of the ferry for it to be run as an amenity for Woodbridge.

The plan is to run a ferry service every other weekend next summer when the tide is flooding (rising). Also at other times when there is a demand for crossing the river. The Suffolk Coastal District Council have given us the right to operate the ferry and use the old route. There are still many difficulties to overcome. For instance, we are going to have to find volunteer ferrymen and we need the boat fitted out. Working parties will be needed to repair the landing hard on the Sutton side. The Suffolk Coastal District Council have said that they will repair the Woodbridge hard.

Robert Simper.

