



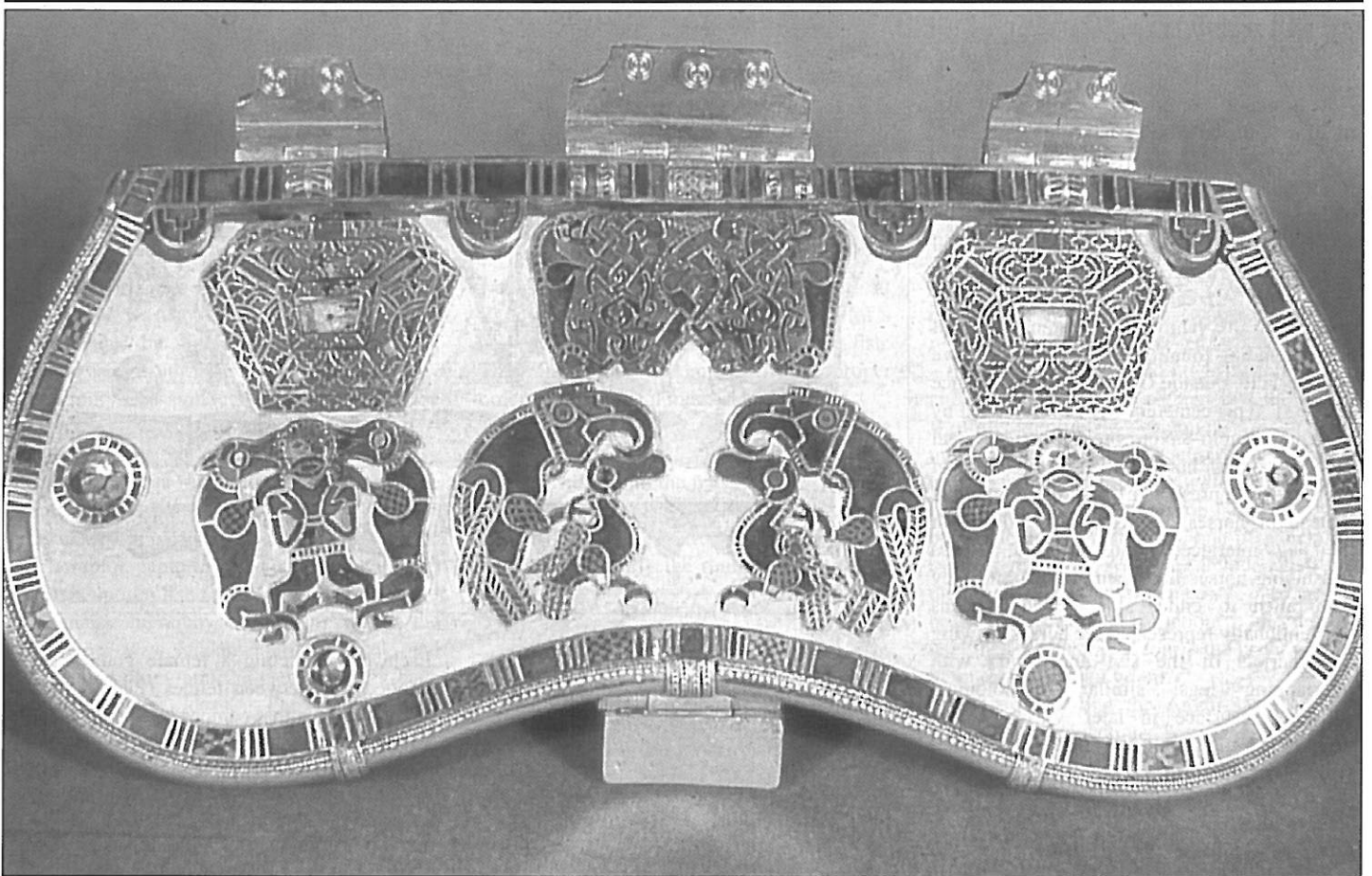
The Newsletter of the Sutton Hoo Society

SAXON

President: The Earl of Cranbrook

No. 41 / 2004

Reading the Sutton Hoo Purse Lid by Dr. Noël Adams



The purse lid from Sutton Hoo Mound 1 is one of the most remarkable creations of the early medieval period (Plate 1). We recognise it as an expensive and prized item of personal gear, yet the meaning of its cloisonné plaques remains enigmatic. If we examine not only the sources of the individual images, but also their syntax, we can begin to see possible ways of 'reading' the visual symbolism of the purse lid.

The figural mounts on the lid illustrate the range and nature of early medieval responses to the classical Mediterranean world. There can be no question that Byzantine prototypes exist for the man-between-beasts and raptor and prey plaques. The first motif has its roots in the ancient Near East, but was revived by the Christian Church to symbolise the triumph of saints

over the bestial world (Plate 2). Christian representations on a wide range of portable minor arts presumably inspired early medieval variations on the theme. Some of these preserved explicit Christian connotations, but others were overtly pagan or even simply decorative. In contrast, the motif of a raptor taking a duck was uncommon in the classical world, where an eagle seizing a fish was the standard combination. Roman period wagon fittings from Germany were cast with eagles flanked by ducks, but an Early Byzantine mosaic depicting falconry provides the best contemporary model. Mosaics with hunting themes have been found in fifth and sixth-century villas in Greece and North Africa and raise the intriguing possibility of a more direct link between high-status Anglo-

Above: Plate 1: Purse lid Sutton Hoo Mound 1

Photo: The British Museum

Saxons and their Mediterranean contemporaries.

Whether the purse lid images were adopted directly or indirectly, the transformation of the original models is significant. The man between beast plaques are a far cry from any Christian imagery, which generally depicted the animals head down and the humans with their arms outstretched. The postures of both the Sutton Hoo canines and humans can be paralleled in both Iron Age and Norse imagery in Scandinavia, and thus reflect the sensibilities of northern Europe. Likewise, whatever their classical source, the Sutton



Above: Plate 2: Pilgrim flask, 450-550 AD, BM P&E 1875,10-12,16,

Photo: Author

Hoo jeweller confidently transformed the raptors with bold Germanic Style II bird heads.

It could be suggested that the paired horse plaques in the upper centre of the purse lid represent yet another reworking of classical iconography within a Germanic artistic repertoire. An early version of this motif appears on the vandykes of a stamped metal bucket binding found in a sixth-century grave at Giberville, outside Caen in northern France (Plate 3). This cemetery was characterised by a strong Anglo-Saxon presence. Actual seventh-century horse burials found east of the Rhine present a carefully arranged tableau of horses lying on their sides with their legs interlaced, almost as if the harness of running horses had been slashed and they had fallen to either side. The Romans conventionally represented the horses drawing the chariots of the sun and moon with overlapping legs; similar mythological concepts resurface in later Viking period mythology, together with images of horses with interlaced legs.

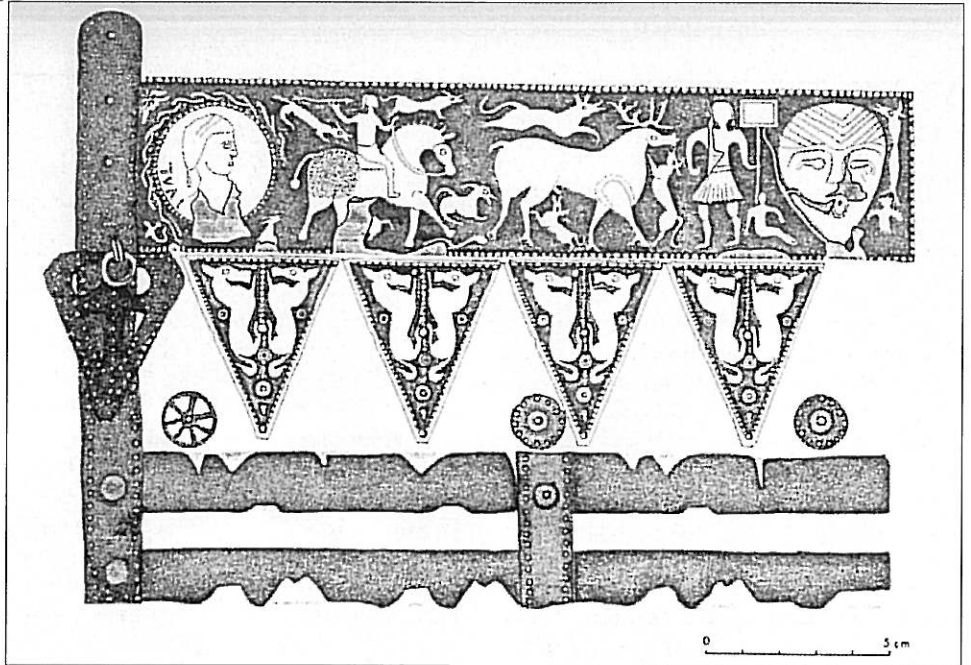
The figural plaques can be 'read' as individual emblems, but can they be associated? Given the Germanic fascination with multiple layers of meaning it would not be surprising if both the plaques themselves and their combinations could be interpreted in different ways. Of course any connections we make between the plaques must be speculative, but further consideration of each set of plaques reveals how complementary strands of meaning link the plaques like the fine threads woven into a tissue.

The man-between-beasts plaques are unlikely to be Christian, but in contrast to their closer continental parallels, they do not

represent a man in contest with animals. A Vendel die from Torslunda, Öland, Sweden depicts a man stabbing bears (Plate 4) and *phalerae* from Eschwege-Niederhonne in Germany show running men gripped by men in animal skins, both of which may allude to battle or initiation rituals. On the Sutton Hoo plaques the canines wrap their tails and legs around the man's limbs. He does not fight them off, but places his hands on his shoulders as if to touch their paws. A display of friendly or protective forces seems to be represented, as on another *phalera* from

Below: Plate 3: Giberville bucket

Photo: Author



Below: Plate 4: Helmet die, Vendel period, Öland, Sweden, late sixth century AD

Photo: The Museum of National Antiquities, Stockholm

Eschwege depicting a female goddess with knotted hair between felines (Plate 5). It is not impossible that canines had some specific cultural or tribal significance. Anglo-Saxon personal names incorporated 'wolf' as a suffix or prefix and of course some scholars have read the East Anglian tribal name Wuffinga as 'little wolves'.

But are these plaques the central focus of the lid at all? The enlarged scale and central placement of the eagle and duck plaques seem to highlight a clear theme – that of hunting. From this perspective the outer plaques could represent hounds eagerly greeting their master, the raptor and prey symbolise falconry and the horses are the hunter's swift steeds. Seventh-century pagan burials in Scandinavia demonstrate that formalised hunting was increasingly a feature of the wealthy Germanic lifestyle. The ship burial at Vendel III in Sweden (ca 650 AD) included horses, dogs, a gyrfalcon, an eagle owl, a crane, a goose and a duck. Similarly the animals sacrificed on a funeral pyre at Rickeby in Uppland, Sweden were identified as a horse, four dogs, and twelve birds, including an eagle owl, a sparrow hawk, a goshawk and two peregrine falcons.

Compelling as this interpretation may be,





Left: Plate 5: Harness mounts, Eschweigen-Niederhone Grave 17, Staatlich Museen Kassel

Photo: Ute Brunzel

diurnal and nocturnal time. As fallen pairs they may allude to death (the inevitable outcome of the contest between predator and prey represented immediately below) but also renewal and rebirth.

But, as the *Beowulf* poet reminds us, the natural order of life as depicted in different ways by the figural plaques is fragile and finely balanced. When the dragon threatens the rule of the king, 'grown grey in the guardianship of the land', the symbols of the great hall – the harp, the hawk and the horse – are absent. Here the emblems of the hunt are simultaneously metaphors for pleasure and fellowship, order and honour. In this world view, maintaining balance is the obligation of kingship. If we assume the man in Mound 1 was royal, then the combination of the images on the purse lid could be seen to be consonant with the leadership and authority of the just king, at once master of the hunt and custodian of order within his kingdom. What better decoration for a purse whose contents represented another of the leader's key roles – the gift-giver of gold to his loyal followers and kin? It is in this context that the non-figural geometric plaques may be understood. Each depicts an oblique view of a three-dimensional object with a hexagonal base and a flat rectangular top. This too can be 'read' in different ways, one of which is as the lid of a box, with the catch depicted as the larger cell on the perimeter. Could these be a reference to the function of the purse itself as a container of coin – the privy purse of an early royal kingdom?

It is likely that the Anglo-Saxons saw further interconnections between the purse lid plaques which remain hidden to us. We can only recognise the possibilities of multi-level readings of the cloisonné images while admiring the depth and sophistication of the Anglo-Saxon mind.

Dr. Noël Adams is a Special Assistant for the Department of Prehistory and Europe at The British Museum.

it is important to remember that the man in Mound 1 was not buried as a royal hunter surrounded by the trophies and animals of the chase. Rather he was accompanied by weaponry and symbols of authority like the standard and sceptre. The central plaques can be seen as literal depictions of falconry, but on another level they encapsulate the natural order of the animal world. A Byzantine implement depicts a similar theme – a raptor capturing a duck which in turn stands upon a fish (Plate 6). The concept of an innate hierarchy of animals within the elements was fundamental to Greek and Roman zoology and the Germans may have shared similar ideas. For example, the triumph of the predator over its prey as witnessed in the natural world could be aligned with the expectations of the victor in battle, hence the use of the image of an eagle hunting a fish on Ostrogothic helmets and Anglo-Saxon shields. A recent study has demonstrated that hunting in early medieval Europe was to a large degree inseparable from warfare, with the same weapons and skills used both for sport and battle.

What then of the man-between-beasts plaques? Unlike the natural predator and prey, they depict man locked in partnership with the animal world. The plaques advocate neither defence nor defeat, but equilibrium with the forces of nature. The alternative to this balanced relationship is described in the dark tales and myths of later Germanic and Norse poetry. At special moments of initiation or battle, men don wolf skins and assume the nature of animals. But only the god Odin, the great shape-shifter, lives in harmony with his wolf companions. Otherwise they must be chained. In the early Norse poem *Völuspá*, after the wolves escape their bonds and the

world of the old gods is destroyed at Ragnarök, the first image of the rebirth of a new world is that of an eagle hunting fish. This marks the restoration of the proper order of life in the universe.

If a broader cosmology underpins the hunting metaphors, we can see further threads woven into the upper row of plaques. The two pairs of horses, if connected to myths about the chariots of the sun and moon, may signify the running sequence of

Below: Plate 6: Knot or hoof pick, Byzantine period, Asfar Collection no. 3073

Photo: Author



The First Sutton Hoo Anglo-Saxon Festival

4 July 2004



Left: Edwin and Joyce Gifford's 'Sæ Wylfing'

Below: Damien Goodburn demonstrating his woodworking skills

Photos: Trish Mulholland

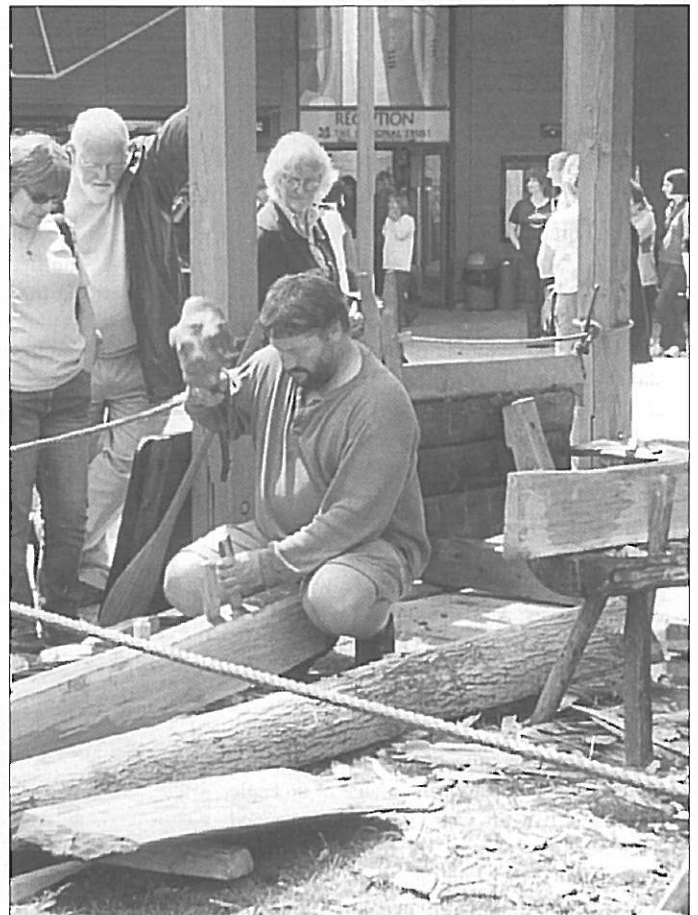
A great deal of planning had gone into the day, and a lot of people were relying on the kindness of the elements to make it go well. Nevertheless, in spite of the rain, the success was considerable, with an attendance of over 1,400 visitors, as well as guests, stallholders and participants.

There was something for all ages, tastes, and dimensions of interest in the Anglo-Saxon heritage. Many of us were thrilled that Edwin and Joyce Gifford had brought 'Sæ Wylfing', the working scale model of the Mound 1 burial ship, once more to Sutton Hoo. When we told Edwin how much we

'Well, if we choose the beginning of July, we can at least be reasonably sure of decent weather'. These words, spoken at a planning meeting of the Sutton Hoo Society's committee, looked like haunting us for the whole day of 4 July, as we contemplated the rain driving across Sutton Heath and drenching our Anglo-Saxon Festival.

Below: Damien Goodburn

Photo: Trish Mulholland



appreciated his trouble, he replied that it had been very much worth while, especially for the chance to sail her on the Deben, which he had taken very early that morning! As well as his ship, King Rædwald was to be seen in person – or rather, in no less that four persons who variously represented the archking or Bretwalda.

Specialist re-enactment groups made the seventh century culture come alive very vividly. Our friends from the Anglo Saxon village at West Stow demonstrated weaving techniques, re-enactment group Ynglingas presented scenes of living history, with wood carving, embroidery, food preparation, armoury displays and combat skills, also shown very convincingly by Ancient Battle



On this page: Members of the Ynglingas re-enactment group.

Photos: Michael Argent and Trish Mulholland



Crafts. The Anglo-Saxon warriors and archers heroically turned out for battle throughout the day and were much appreciated by the visitors. Damian Goodburn's demonstration of woodwork was particularly relevant, as with his adze he gave a masterly display of how wood was shaped for medieval ships. In the North Field (now re-named Garden Field) Hollesley Bay Falconry Team entertained visitors throughout the day.

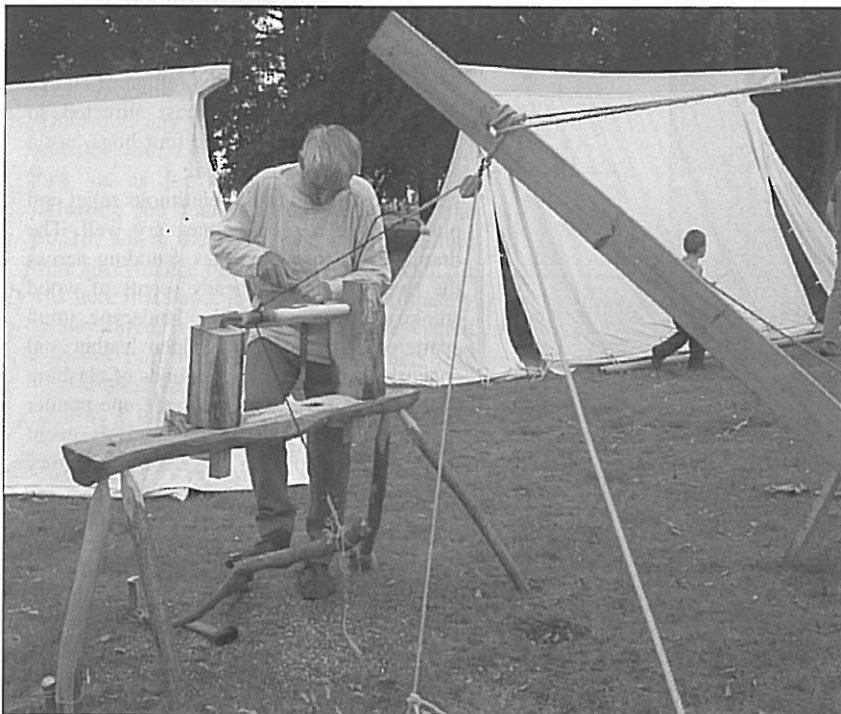
In the Squash Court display stands from Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service and the Portable Antiquities Scheme, manned by Faye Minter attracted a good deal of interest. The Creeting Churches Project and David Cummings (detector finds) gave the tangible historical context, while all went ahead to the gentle strains of the Early Music Consort which floated across the courtyard throughout the day. Anglo-Saxon Books and Creekside Publishing offered a generous array of books for sale and Suffolk Coastal Council Tourism distributed their leaflets. Our own society member's stand was kept busy all day. From time to time – as the rain permitted – the merriment of the Danegeld



Morris Group livened up the proceedings outside the Visitor Centre's reception entrance.

Among so many varied events, perhaps the most popular for the Sutton Hoo enthusiasts were the presentations by Rosemary MacVie and by Sam Newton. Rosemary appeared in Peppy Barlow's one-person play, *Mrs Pretty in Private*, (commissioned by the Sutton Hoo Society) playing Mrs Pretty as, in an imaginary conversation with her beloved husband Frank (who had died in 1934), she told the story of the 1939 excavation. Rosemary was (apart from lacking several inches in height) an utterly convincing Mrs Pretty. It was very moving to eavesdrop upon her thoughts as she took tea in her own sitting room in Tranmer House.

Moving in a different way was Sam Newton's detailed and passionate interpretation of the *Beowulf* poem. This started in Tranmer House, but culminated in a tour of the burial mounds, with history, background and associated literature, all presented in Sam's inimitable way. His customary great *tour de force* – the representation of Rædwald supine on top of



Mound I went ahead undaunted by the downpour from the Gods!

The children were not neglected. Our resident story-teller, Tony Green, made the past come to life to the wide-eyed amazement of his audience, with his magic sword, spear and arrows. Nancy Waterfall (National Trust Learning and Community Officer at Sutton Hoo) and Jane Wright, (Sutton Hoo Society committee member and educational liaison officer) both cramped but cheerful in spite of having been forced by the weather into the corner of a marquee, provided a variety of activities for youngsters. The main attraction was making Anglo-Saxon medallions from clay, but the recognition of artefacts and paper and pencil activities also proved popular.



*Above and left: Ynglingas Anglo-Saxon re-enactors
Below: Rosemary MacVie as Mrs Pretty*

Photos: Michael Argent and Trish Mulholland



Below: Matthew enjoying the children's activities

Photo: Trish Mulholland



Which event was the star of the show? I wouldn't dare to say, but as the rain beat down, the beer tent was the refuge of choice for many, and the hog roast attracted so many customers that of the four hogs, not a scrap of crackling remained.

All in all, and to our enormous relief and pleasure, the day had gone very well. The dramatic storm laden skies scudding across the river Deben, the heady scents of wood smoke wafting across the landscape, mud spattered individuals in sodden leather and sheepskin, and the distant sounds of clashing swords in the battle arena, made one ponder on the question that might not this event draw forth a picture of seventh century Sutton Hoo better than anything else we have to offer?

Would we do it again? See *Events Dairy*

Robert Julian Allen

Hadrian's Wall Walk 1 – 6 June 2004



Left: Whole group...ready for action

Photo: Author

During the (fairly) short summer this year six members of staff from the Sutton Hoo Estate plus three friends walked the Hadrian's Wall Path from Segedunum Fort in Wallsend to Bowness-on-Solway, a distance of 84 miles. The walk was completed to aid future projects at Sutton Hoo (hopefully towards building a replica of the great ship) and they expect to have raised over £1000 in sponsorship from the walk and have been promised £750 in matched funding from Barclays Bank.

The group taking part consisted of Gill Kimmerling, the writer of this article, with Alison, Annie, Robert, Tim, Dominic, Karen, Mark, John our driver, and Janet Caswell a volunteer with the Leeds National Trust, who joined us for four days.

We were fortunate to be able to use the National trust mini bus, which was driven with great skill and fortitude by John Wiffen, another member of staff at Sutton Hoo.

Day one began with walking in the rain past the Swan Hunter shipyard in Newcastle, following the course of the river as far as Heddon-on-the-Wall, with only the occasional glimpse of any wall. Mark became our first casualty with a very painful foot. Day two took us as far as Acomb Youth Hostel, following the course of the wall along the B6318, where the wall ditch and the vallum were in evidence but still very little wall. It was here that Janet joined us. Unfortunately on day three, it rained again, but we visited Chesters Fort near Chollerford, which was very impressive. Here we lost Alison to some very large blisters – two down, seven to go! By midday we were climbing onto Sewingshields Crag where the scenery would have been breathtaking if were not for the driving rain. We battled ever-onwards and upwards over Kennel Crag, Housesteads Crag, Hotbank Crag and finally, very wearily, down Steel Rigg. At least here you follow the wall all the way and it is a marvellous sight. We thought we had lost

Tim over one of the crags, but he eventually appeared out of the mist.

By day four Mark had sufficiently recovered to rejoin us but Alison decided just to do half a day, and at last the weather improved sufficiently and we were able to enjoy wonderful views climbing over the remaining crags before dropping for lunch by Thirlwall Castle. We had a quick look around Birdoswald Roman Fort before continuing through pastures full of cows and sheep. Karen became our next casualty with painful blisters, the rest of us carrying on to Walton. Come day five and Karen opted to stay with the mini bus. The rest of the group had a lovely gentle walk through fertile pastures to Carlisle where we followed the course of the river and were hardly aware of the busy city. The day ended at Burgh by Sands leaving

only eight miles for the last day. We stayed the night at a very good guesthouse in Carlisle – quite different from the Youth Hostels, although these had been very good and excellent value – and had an early celebration meal at the local golf club.

On Sunday, day six and for the first time since day one everyone was fit to complete the walk. We followed the very straight course of the wall by the Solway Firth with Scotland on the other side and ended up at Bowness-on-Solway by lunch, tired and footsore but with a great sense of achievement.

We had some great experiences – dormitories in the Youth Hostels rather like St Trinians with much giggling, (especially Annie!) We were awed by the vastness of the wall, its forts, and mile-castles; and enjoyed the great variety of landscapes across the country, but were particularly inspired by working together as a team, especially when the going was tough.

I'd like to express our thanks to Kate Sussams, our boss at Sutton Hoo for letting us have time off together and for all the reception team who had to work extra hard while we were away.

Alison summed it up in a text message she sent while resting at home with swollen feet and bad blisters, 'Would go through it all again, one of the best weeks of life spent with some very special people'. I think we all felt like that.

Gill Kimmerling

Below: On Hadrian's Wall, slightly bedraggled and footsore.

Photo: Author





DIARY

Sutton Hoo Society AGM

The Annual General Meeting will be held on Friday 11 February 2005 7.30 pm at Tranmer House, Sutton Hoo

Agenda

Apologies

Minutes of the last AGM

Reports and Accounts

Constitution

Election of Committee

After the formal meeting Dr. Tom Williamson from the University of East Anglia will give a talk

Spring Lecture

The society's 2005 Spring Lecture will be held on Wednesday 9 March 2005 7.30pm at Tranmer House, Sutton Hoo. Dr. Ian Blair, senior archaeologist, Museum of London, will present 'The Prittlewell Prince: the discovery of a rich Anglo-Saxon burial in Essex'

Tickets on the door. Seating is limited so it is advisable to reserve. Please phone Mike Argent on 01394 747716

Society members free, non-members £3.00

Sutton Hoo Society Guides

Once again we are appealing for new burial ground tour guides. If you, or someone you know, might be interested please contact any member of the committee.

Sutton Hoo Opening Times 2005

January 1st until 19 March Saturday, Sunday and bank holiday Mondays only (except for 14 -18 February school half-term week, open every day)

New season open daily from Saturday 19 March 11am to 5pm until 2 October

If you are planning a visit to Sutton Hoo during the winter months, it's a good idea to check these opening times apply - ring 01394 389700

Sutton Hoo Events 2005

Sunday 9 January

New Year Guided Walk around Sutton Hoo Estate

Sunday 23 Jan & Saturday 12 March

Volunteer opportunities at Sutton Hoo

Friday 28 January

Creating Anglo-Saxon Treasures

Sunday 30 January

Landscape Conservation at Sutton Hoo

Saturday 5 February

Chocolate Heaven

Saturday 12 February

Historic Field Systems of East Anglia

Sunday 13 February

Guided Walk around Sutton Hoo Estate

Saturday 12 February

Valentine's Dinner

Monday 14 - Friday 18 February

Children's Half Term activities

Saturday 19 February

Behind the Scenes at Sutton Hoo

Saturday 27 February

Beowulf and the Anglo-Saxons

Saturday 5 March

Birds of Sutton Hoo

Sunday 6 March

Mothering Sunday lunch

Admission

Adult £4.00 Child £2.00 Group rate £3.50

For ALL information about site opening and visiting please contact the National Trust and NOT the Society:

National Trust Sutton Hoo:

Tel: 01394 389700

Fax: 01394 389702

Email: asoksx@smtp.ntrust.org.uk

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Who's Who — Sutton Hoo Society Committee Members

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Membership Secretary: Jane Wright Minutes Secretary: Brenda Brown Guiding Secretary: Stewart Salmond Publications: Robert Allen
Duncan Allen Sue Banyard Alison Booth Nigel Maslin
Trish Mulholland-Middleton Angus Wainwright Jane Wright

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or visit: <http://www.stedmundsbury.gov.uk/weststow.htm>

St. Edmundsbury
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Retirement

We bid farewell to Jenny Cant who has recently moved to North Lincolnshire and retired as Membership Secretary. Jenny took over the role in 2000 and since then has done a tremendous amount of work, including the collating of information for input onto a data base, a mammoth task. As a stalwart member of the committee and a society guide, Jenny will be greatly missed. She will continue to be involved with the society and will always be welcome at Sutton Hoo. We would like to thank her for her support, and wish her well in her new home.

Forthcoming Event

**TWO DAY
ANGLO-SAXON FESTIVAL
23 AND 24 JULY 2005
AT SUTTON HOO**

organized by

The Sutton Hoo Society
and The National Trust

Don't miss it - details later

KEEP THE WEEKEND FREE!

Obituary

We are sad to report the death of Daphne Hiskett, who, for many years was a faithful supporter and member of the society. She regularly attended society events and made an annual donation of postage stamps to help the committee carry out its increasing mail listings, her enthusiasm will be greatly missed. Our thoughts go to her family.