

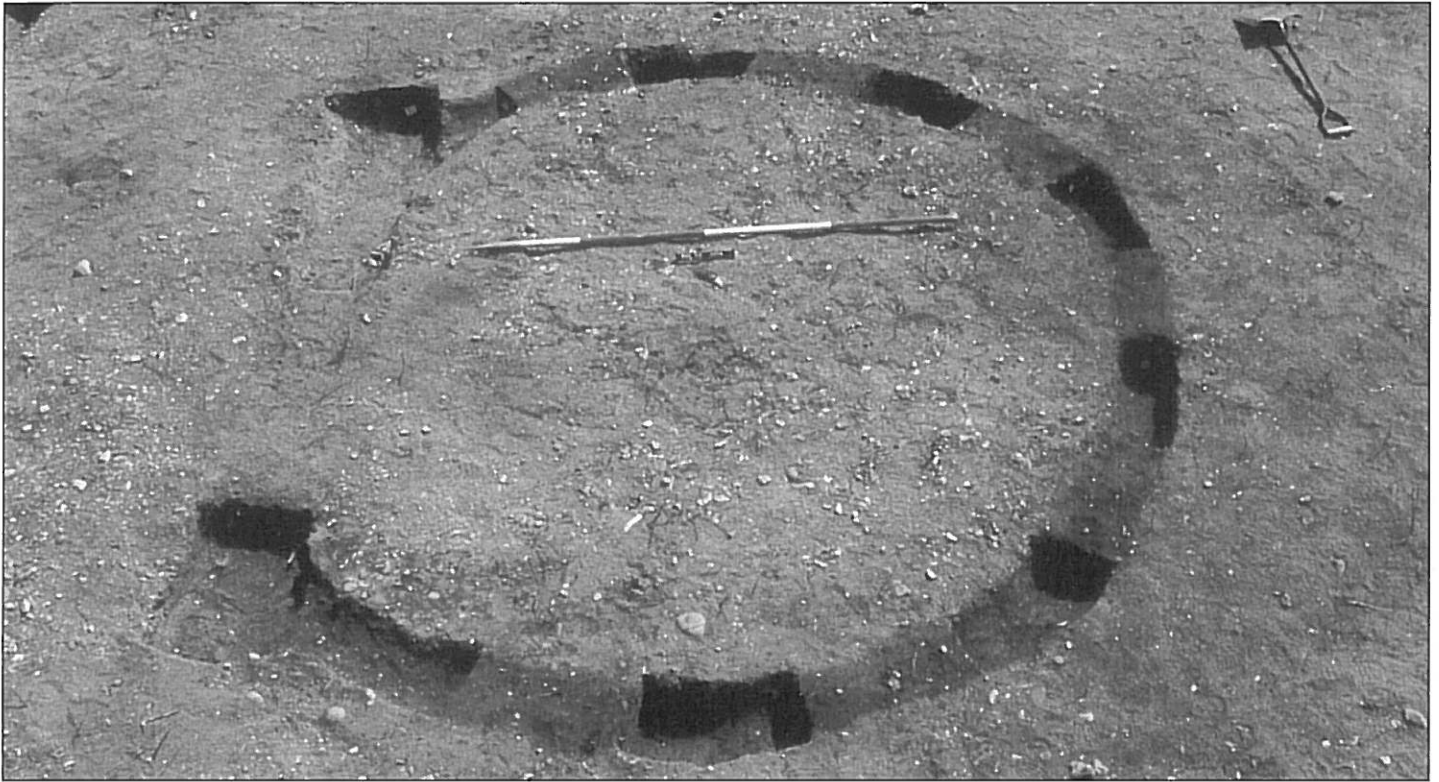


The Newsletter of the Sutton Hoo Society

SAXON

President: The Earl of Cranbrook

No. 33 / 2000



One of the eight Anglo-Saxon ring ditches, partially excavated. (Photograph: Suffolk County Council)

A second Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Sutton Hoo by Christopher Topham-Smith

During April to July 2000 archaeological excavation in advance of the new National Trust visitor centre at Tranmer House (formerly Sutton Hoo House) led to the discovery of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery, barely 500 metres north of the famous Sutton Hoo ship-burial and barrow cemetery. The new cemetery consisted of nineteen inhumations and seventeen cremations (associated with eight ring ditches); another ring ditch and cremation were tentatively dated to the Bronze Age, while a complicated network of eleven linear ditches was also prehistoric in origin.

The site is positioned roughly north-west of the coach-house in the grounds of Tranmer House, close to the 'North Field' (a spur of ground overlooking the River Deben and topographically very similar to the site of the main Sutton Hoo cemetery). While the high potential of this area for both Anglo-Saxon and prehistoric activity has long been recognised, previous archaeological evaluation failed to identify features other than

ditches forming an Iron Age field-system (see **SAXON** 26 and 32). Even in the absence of a specific objective, the scale of the planned development (several thousand square metres) in this sensitive location required rather more than the usual archaeological monitoring of groundworks. As a result, soil-stripping was carried out and supervised by the Archaeological Field Team of Suffolk County Council, followed by the methodical excavation and detailed recording of all features.

The excavation

The area to be developed was littered with semi-derelict outbuildings and the vestiges of substantial planting; particularly unhelpful were dozens of large tree-stumps marking the position of overgrown coniferous hedges. During the first six weeks on site almost no features were encountered other than modern pits for tree-planting and refuse-disposal.

While several ditches later turned out to form part of the prehistoric field-system, artefact finds from the eastern half of the site consisted of only a few sherds of prehistoric pottery, mostly recovered from modern features.

The Anglo-Saxon cemetery

On 12 May the first of eight Anglo-Saxon ring-ditches was identified, and the existence of an Early Anglo-Saxon mixed rite cemetery gradually became clear.

The ring-ditches

The Anglo-Saxon ring-ditches and cremations were found slightly above the interface between subsoil and natural, indicating partial survival of an earlier subsoil. In a funerary context ring-ditches are usually circular trenches dug to provide material for barrows (artificial marker mounds, as in the main cemetery), although at Tranmer House the

mounds themselves had long disappeared due to centuries of ploughing and erosion.

The diameter of the ring-ditches varied between approximately two and four metres, but the actual ditches were rarely wider than 30cm and often displayed near-vertical sides: this unusual profile is more typical of slots dug to hold some kind of structure, but no sign of posts or beams was found within their fills. At least three of the ring-ditches contained a fill of dark reddish-brown sand, with a significant presence of burnt bone, and it is not unreasonable to speculate that the ditches may have been backfilled with pyre material not long after their creation.

Cremations

It is likely that cremations originally existed at the centre of all eight Anglo-Saxon ring-ditches, although only four have survived. There is no evidence for secondary cremations within the ring-ditches, even though the prehistoric barrow was the focus for a later ring-ditch, three cremations and a grave. This practice has been identified at other sites in East Anglia, and it has been suggested that pre-existing mounds influenced the siting of several Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in Suffolk (notably Snape).

In total, seventeen cremations appear to date from the Anglo-Saxon period, of which at least seven had been deposited within urns. Of particular interest was a tight cluster of five cremations towards the north-western corner of the site. The focus of this group was a small oval pit containing a bronze hanging-bowl and a stamp-decorated cremation urn; this urn and three of the four 'satellite' cremations also contained fragments of at least one other bronze vessel. The association of cremations and bronze vessels again shows parallels with the main Sutton Hoo site (and also Snape), while the 'Bromeswell Bucket' (see SAXON 32) could well have originated from a similar deposit.

Also of relevance to the cremation practice was the discovery of a small rectangular pit, containing broken pottery and burnt bone in a grey sand matrix. This unusual feature might represent the deposition of pyre material, or a disturbed cremation.

Burials

Most of the nineteen inhumation graves became visible only after remaining subsoil was totally removed during a second and third cleaning of the site. The burials appear to be scattered randomly across the area, with no obvious concern for 'planning', although two prehistoric features (the barrow and a large ditch bisecting the site) may have formed a focus for some graves. The orientation of graves was predominantly East-West, excepting three burials aligned North-South on the eastern observed edge of the cemetery.

The vertical sides of coffins were visible as mid grey-brown sand in eight graves; in one

Right: The bronze hanging bowl (the rim just appearing in the excavation) as first found beside an emptied cremation-urn

(Photographs: Suffolk County Council)



of these both the lid (heavily charred planks) and bottom were visible. Some degree of body-staining was seen in most burials, and distinct 'sand-bodies' (mostly supine and extended or slightly flexed) survived in several instances. In at least two burials teeth and bone fragments had been preserved in proximity to corroded metal.

Study of the grave-goods has not yet begun in earnest, but every burial was furnished with at least one object. Thirteen graves contained weapons (typically a spear and shield, although two swords were found), and can justifiably be identified as male; four burials contained brooches or bead assemblages, suggesting a female incumbent. Two smaller graves, of which one included an iron spear-head, may have held the bodies of children or adolescents.



Above: Inhumation with necklace of beads in situ.

Importance

Various factors make the Tranmer House site extremely important.

Previous evaluation had been unable to locate the cemetery; while unstratified finds such as the 'Bromeswell Bucket' indicated a chronological link with the main Sutton Hoo cemetery, there was no explanation for their presence in the 'North Field' area. The layout of the Tranmer House cemetery and recent metal-detector finds (including fragments of

two 6th-century bronze brooches and possible evidence for further cremations) suggest that burials and inhumations continue along the southern flank of the spur, and probably further into the 'North Field'.

While work has yet to start on the analysis of grave-goods and the phasing of burials, preliminary indications suggest a 6th or 7th century date for the majority of graves. The existence of a cemetery contemporary with (and possibly preceding) the main burial-ground must cast into question previous interpretation of the latter site: Sutton Hoo no longer represents the creation of a dynastic burial-ground in an area previously devoid of funerary activity, but a particular phase in an established ritual landscape.

Sutton Hoo now has two cemeteries, both only partially excavated. One consisted of a monumental burial-ground distinguished by enormous barrows, two ship-burials and rich treasures; the other is what might be termed a more traditional 'folk-cemetery'. The site displays characteristics common to Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in the East Anglian region, in particular the balance between unfurnished cremations and modestly furnished inhumations (both seriously 'under-represented' at the main site). However certain unusual aspects of the principal cemetery, such as primary cremations within ring ditches and bronze hanging-bowls, are also found at Tranmer House.

While the artefactual wealth of grave-goods in no way compares to finds from the main cemetery, the presence of some material (in particular the bronze hanging-bowl, two swords and several silver shield-mounts) and the 'Bromeswell Bucket' does point toward burials of relatively high standing. Who is buried in the Tranmer House cemetery, and what distinguishes them from the occupants of the main site?

In every case one question insinuates itself into all aspects of analysis: what was the relationship between the two cemeteries?

Hopefully this will soon become more clear, as continued study of this new burial-ground casts new light on the most renowned of all Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and on Anglo-Saxon archaeology in general.

Christopher Topham-Smith has worked with the Field Team of Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service for almost two years, and directed the Anglo-Saxon cemetery excavations at Coddenham and Sutton Hoo.

You can hear more of the excavation, the new cemetery and its interpretation when Christopher Topham-Smith addresses the AGM on 23rd February (see back page).

A 'Byzantine' Guard at Sutton Hoo?

The following is an edited version a letter sent by Dr Paul Ashbee to the Eastern Daily Press newspaper in response to the newspaper report of the new cemetery at Trammer House.

As the cemetery is adjacent to the royal barrow cemetery it is manifest that they are likely to be interments of members of a royal bodyguard, presumably Redwald's, rather than 'free warrior farmers' as is claimed.

An aspect of the Saxons in Kent and East Anglia, and in their Germanic homeland was the way in which they looked to the twilight of Rome and emergent, prestigious, Byzantium. This principle is graphically illustrated by the Sutton Hoo royal burial,

(with its objects) from distant Byzantine sources. Surrounded by such exotic utensils and equipment, which must betoken more than mere trade, it would seem likely that this semi-pagan 7th-century Anglo-Saxon court in some measure emulated eastern Mediterranean imperial usages. Indeed Redwald's court would have been aware of the tradition, going back to the first century AD, that the Roman Imperial bodyguard should be composed of Germans. The Byzantine *corpore custodes*, bare-headed young men armed with spear and shield, continued this custom. Such sophistication may not have obtained at Sutton Hoo, but the proximity of this cemetery, with its shield and spear burials is unlikely to be fortuitous and such a dimension of a patently royal establishment is much more likely.

This recent excavation underlines the inherent possibility that further installations, and even burials, may survive in attenuated form beneath ploughland, and may be in dire danger of progressive destruction. Also, and to the east of the barrows, are the flattened remains of an extensive earthwork system bulldozed in the 1960s. In the circumstances it is imperative that endeavours be made to locate and examine the ancillary and supportive installations of the Sutton Hoo royal site because totalitarian agriculture will leave little for future generations.

Between 1964 and 1970 Paul Ashbee was part of the team excavating on the Sutton Hoo site examining the remaining parts of the barrow and boat which were excavated originally in 1939.

SOCIETY REPORTS

Membership

Membership is currently 374; of which 226 are ordinary members, 107 life members, 34 family members and 7 student members. Of them 19 are overseas members from a total of ten countries. The Conference generated 30 new members.

Visiting

3000 people visited Sutton Hoo on 120 public and 30 booked tours; this was 500 less than last year, but the loss in admission was partially offset by a £500 increase in sales. Visits included two of the staff from the Ladby Ship Museum in Denmark and school parties from The Abbey School Woodbridge, Sandlings, Bedfield and Harleston in Suffolk, Harston in Cambridgeshire, Rickmansworth, Dagenham, Picardy and Baden-Wurttemberg.

Right: Sutton Hoo Society guides plus a party from the Coming Research Centre at Adastral Park, Martlesham Heath, Corning Science & Technology HQ (New York, US) and Corning UK Ltd being shown the recent excavation this summer by Angus Wainwright of the National Trust



(Photograph: Rosemary Hoppitt)

Web Site

The web site continues to provide information both for potential visitors and for education. The majority of requests come from the USA, where high school students studying the Anglo-Saxons, are clearly encouraged to use the internet for research. Sad that our own History National Curriculum virtually excludes the Anglo-Saxons and the beginnings

of the English nation from secondary schools. *(Editor).*

An email from Canada proved to be an exciting contact. Jeremy Gilbert wrote to tell us that his Uncle Will in Vancouver was the owner of an 8mm ciné film of the 1939 excavations at Sutton Hoo taken by his grandfather, who was Charles Phillips' brother. The footage has now been transcribed onto video tape, and we wait with excitement to view it

SOCIETY EVENTS

Conference 2000

Our second conference 'North Sea Communities: evidence for Dark Age Trade and Communication' was held in October at BT Adastral Park near Ipswich. Over 200 delegates attended and enjoyed the combined academic force of Angela Care Evans who chaired the conference, and speakers John Davies, (Chief Curator Norfolk Museums), Valerie Fenwick (Editor of The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology), John Hines (Cardiff University), Edward James (Reading

University) and Keith Wade (Suffolk County Archaeologist). Feedback overall was very positive and the event was a great success.

Résumés of the lectures will be included in the summer edition of SAXON.

LOST PROPERTY: an umbrella was left behind after the conference – please contact the Society if you think it is yours. We also still have a cushion from 1998.

Right: Conference speakers with the Society Chairman (left) and President (second from the right). (Photograph: Peter Rooley)



SPRING LECTURE

The Spring Lecture will take place on **Wednesday 21 March at 7.30pm** in St John's Hall, St John's Street, Woodbridge. **Dr Helen Geake**, will speak on the subject of **Costume and Politics in the 7th and early 8th centuries AD**.

2001 SEASON

The Sutton Hoo site will open on **Saturday 14 April** (Easter Saturday) and will continue to be open on weekend and Bank Holiday Monday afternoons until **30 September 2001**. Guided tours begin at 2pm and 3pm. Entrance charges remain at £2 for adults and £1 for under 18s, children under 10 and Sutton Hoo Society members are free. Booked tours for organised parties can be made, by arrangement, throughout the year – contact the Visits and Guiding secretary (address below).

ANNOUNCEMENTS

MOUND 17 APPEAL

The appeal for funding towards the replicas of the sword, shield and spear from the Mound 17 burial has so far raised £660. The Committee wishes to thank all who have donated. We shall be keeping you up to date with developments on this, and the other contributions that we shall be making towards the exhibition. If you haven't contributed and wish to do so, then send your cheque to **The Honorary Treasurer, The Sutton Hoo Society, 3 Helion's Road, Steeple Bumpstead, Haverhill, Suffolk CB9 7DU**.

FREE TO GOOD HOME

At the end of the guiding season in 2001 the **large exhibition hut**, which has had various uses in its time on the site will be removed. It is coming to the end of its natural life, but if there is anyone out there who might want to give it a new lease of life then please get in touch. You will have to dismantle and remove it at your own cost and own risk, with permission from and in line with the development timetable laid down by Haymills, the site contractor.

Contact Addresses

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 Stewart Salmond, Visits and Guiding Secretary, Tailor's House, Bawdsey, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3AJ
 Email: chairman@suttonhoo.org Web site: <http://www.suttonhoo.org>
 Sutton Hoo Research Project, Dept. of Archaeology, University of York, The King's Manor, York YO1 2EP
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Who's Who — Sutton Hoo Society Committee Members

Chairman: Rosemary Hoppitt Hon. Secretary: Sue Banyard Hon. Treasurer: Peter Rooley Research Director: Martin Carver
 Membership Secretary: Jenny Cant Visits & Guiding Secretary: Stewart Salmond Publicity: Lindsay Lee
 Publications: Rosemary Hoppitt
 Jenny Glazebrook Nigel Maslin Trish Mulholland-Middleton Pearl Simper Robert Simper Angus Wainwright

CREDITS

Saxon: Editor: Rosemary Hoppitt Sub-editor: Jenny Glazebrook Original Design: Nigel MacBeth

APPEALS

GUIDES

We need to maintain and expand our corps of guides and helpers. If you think you can tell the Sutton Hoo story with enthusiasm and interest to the wide variety of visitors we receive, or sell tickets, books etc., then we would like to hear from you. Get in touch with Stewart Salmond, Visits and Guiding Secretary, for more details (address below).

CONGRATULATIONS

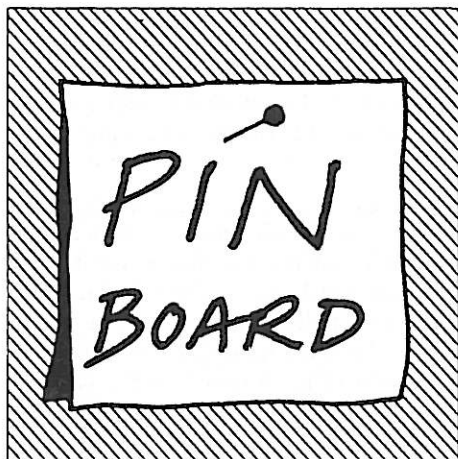
We are delighted to be able to congratulate Helen Geake and Angus Wainwright on their marriage this summer. Helen worked at Sutton Hoo with Martin Carver's team (see **SAXON 17**) and now works for Suffolk County Council's Archaeological Services.



Angus is a Society Committee member and the National Trust's Regional Archaeologist. We wish them every happiness.

OBITUARY

A much-loved member of the excavation team at Sutton Hoo in the 1980s died recently. Gracie, Nigel Macbeth's dog spent long hours at Sutton Hoo while Nigel was photographing the progress of the excavations. Here she is as a one-year old on the Derbyshire moors.



DIARY

SUTTON HOO SOCIETY AGM

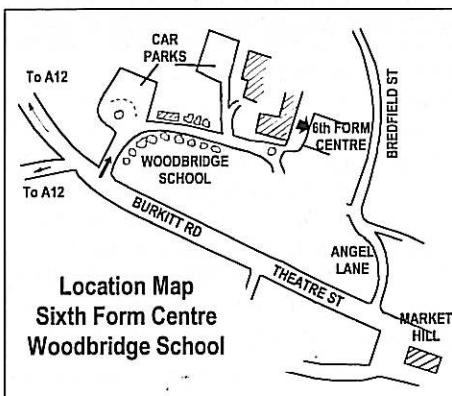
The **Annual General Meeting** will be held on **Friday 23 February 2001** in the **Sixth Form Centre, Woodbridge School** at **7.30pm**.

Agenda

- Apologies
- Minutes of the last AGM
- Reports and Accounts
- Appointment of Independent Examiners
- Election of Committee

Please send committee nominations in advance to The Hon Secretary, Flat 2, Old Rectory Court, Melton Woodbridge IP12 1NL.

The business meeting will be followed by a talk by **Christopher Topham-Smith** who will update us on the details and interpretation of the **Second Sutton Hoo Cemetery**.



Location Map
Sixth Form Centre
Woodbridge School