

# My Favourite History Place

## Sutton Hoo: A Secret Uncovered, A Mystery Unsolved



Sutton Hoo is a sandy heathland overlooking the estuary of the River Deben in Suffolk. In Old English a 'hoo' is a promontory, 'sutton' is southern, and 'tun' is a settlement. Historians have known for years that the fields were farmed in the Iron Age, but what, if anything, lay beneath a cluster of grassy mounds remained a secret for at least 1,300 years.

Mrs Edith Pretty who owned the Estate in the 1930's lived at Tranmer House. She was interested in archaeology and was also a spiritualist. One evening she looked out of her drawing-room window and vowed ghostly warriors were standing on the mounds. Ipswich Museum agreed to send an archaeologist to start excavations in the summer of 1938.

Basil Brown uncovered a few cremation mounds and another which showed traces of a ship and a few belongings but evidently the rest had been looted. At Mrs Pretty's suggestion, Brown turned to the largest mound, where slowly the impression of a sailing ship was revealed, its shape clearly outlined by rusty iron ship-rivets. Digging deeper Brown discovered a burial chamber in which there was no skeleton, which presumably had disintegrated in the acid soil, but the empty coffin was surrounded by possessions, apparently undisturbed.

The task of extricating the finds was entrusted to a team of experts from the British Museum led by Charles Phillips. As weapons, armour, utensils, gold ornaments inlaid with garnets came to light, Charles Phillips was stunned – all he could say was 'godfathers!' In a little over a week, only days before the outbreak of World War Two, the finds, ranging from about 40 gold ornaments to bits of hand-woven cloth, had been recorded, photographed, and packed ready to be sent to London where they were stored for safety in the Underground. Meanwhile a Suffolk jury decreed the treasures were not treasure trove but the property of Mrs Pretty who generously gave them to the British Museum for permanent display. After she died in 1942 the Estate was run by the Annie Tranmer Trust until 1988 when the trustees donated it to the National Trust.

On my first visit soon after the site was opened to the public I had to leave my car by the roadside and walk quite a long way to a small reception building. There was nothing to stop me actually climbing on the mounds – an awesome experience!

By the time I went back to Sutton Hoo in 2012 I found everything had changed. Our coach drove up to the car park from which a path had been constructed for visitors to walk to the mounds and survey them from a viewing point. I spent most of my time in two buildings constructed in Scandinavian style, in keeping with the environment. One is the Reception, shop and restaurant where I enjoyed lunch. The other was an Exhibition Hall.

Here was a comprehensive display of photographs, a few original finds, and models including a reconstruction of the burial chamber. Even more impressive was an array of replicas from the Treasure – in pride of place the painstakingly crafted ceremonial helmet. I admired, among many



items, the jewelled image of an eagle on the shield, massive gold buckle decorated with serpents, purse lid with gold plaque inlaid with garnets and millefiore glass and one of a pair of shoulder-clasps decorated in the same way – the original worth over £40,000 in today's money.

Before leaving I looked briefly into Basil Brown's hut before visiting the delightful Edwardian Tranmer House.

Finally, for whose burial was a 27 metre sea-going vessel dragged up from the River Deben? Chief contender is Raedwald, a powerful Anglo-Saxon king of East Anglia. In support of his claim are utensils inscribed in Greek 'Saulos' and 'Paulos.' Raedwald became a Christian when visiting King Ethelbert in Kent although he reverted to paganism on his return. Also he died about 625AD and Frankish coins in the grave date from this time.

'The King in the Car Park' was identified without doubt as Richard III by DNA tests not possible at Sutton Hoo. We shall never know with any certainty whether Raedwald was 'The King of the Ghost Ship.' We do know for certain, however, that the discovery of the richest burial chamber ever found in this country contributed enormously to our knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon way of life.

*Rosemary Hunter is a former history teacher and a long-standing member of the HA. Since her retirement in 1982 she has been a volunteer with the National Trust.*

If you would like to tell us about your history place in a future edition of *The Historian*, in about 700 words, please email: [alf.wilkinson@history.org.uk](mailto:alf.wilkinson@history.org.uk)

# Lady Brilliana Harley in ten tweets

Summarising an event or person using ten statements of only 140 characters (including spaces!). Compiled by Paula Kitching



-  Brilliana Harley b.1598 at the English garrison at Brill, NL. Her father 1st Viscount of Conway & of Killultagh was lieutenant-governor.
-  In July 1623 she became the third wife of Sir Robert Harley, of Brampton Bryan, Herefordshire. The couple had 3 sons and 4 daughters.
-  Literate, c. 375 letters written to her husband & to her eldest son survive, revealing her domestic life & her role in local politics.
-  She was devoutly Puritan. Sir Robert was an MP & her letters to him show she supported plans to completely reform the church.
-  A staunch Parliamentarian; in the summer of 1642 she tried to buy arms on Parliament's behalf and had 50 soldiers defending her home.
-  Herefordshire was royalist during the Civil War. March 1643 she received a formal demand to surrender Brampton Bryan Castle. She refused.
-  The royalists besieged the castle for 7 weeks. Throughout she conducted negotiations by letter, parley, and a petition to the king.
-  She noted '*I have the law of nature, of reason, and of the land on my side and you none to take it from me*'. The royalists left, she won.
-  Respected by her soldiers. She ordered them to attack a royalist camp 4 miles away & their captain wrote '*her equal I never yet saw*'.
-  The siege damaged her health. Just before she died 29 Oct 1643, wrote '*in this worke I have not thought my life deare, neather shall I*'.

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