

Howard Carter examining the innermost coffin of Tutankhamun

# Significant anniversaries:

## the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb

Kate Rigby

*At last have made wonderful discovery in Valley; a magnificent tomb with seals intact; re-covered same for your arrival; congratulation.*

When Howard Carter sent these words via telegram to his friend and patron Sir George Herbert, 5th Earl of Carnarvon on 6 November 1922, he had yet to fully appreciate the significance of his discovery. After spending more than a decade excavating the Valley of the Kings, it had already been decided that this was to be his last season looking for Egyptian antiquities, and there was no particular indication that this last section might conceal something special. Little did he know that the steps discovered just two days previously would lead to the first intact royal tomb of ancient Egypt: the tomb of Tutankhamun.



The unbroken seal on Tutankhamun's tomb

### Opening the tomb

Following the initial discovery of a sealed tomb, digging was temporarily suspended until the Earl of Carnarvon could travel to Luxor. Digging resumed by 23 November, whereupon it was discovered that the seal was inscribed with the name of Tutankhamun. Over the next few days, Carter and his team were able to breach the antechamber,



## Who was Tutankhamun?

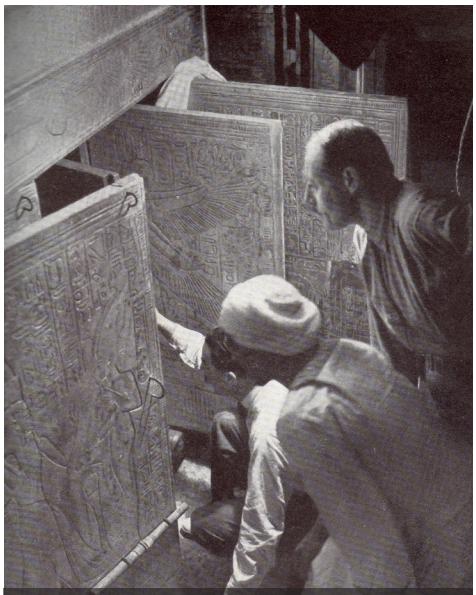
The pharaoh Tutankhamun ruled during the Eighteenth Dynasty, during the prosperous age of the New Kingdom (c.1332–1323 BC). Tutankhamun took the throne at the age of eight or nine and soon married his half-sister Ankhesenamun, with whom he had two stillborn daughters. Born with several deformities and plagued with bouts of malaria, Tutankhamun died before the age of twenty. Despite this short reign, Tutankhamun had a significant impact on his realm, reviving the religious order that had been left in chaos under his father's rule.

revealing the sealed door of the burial chamber itself.

Accessing the final resting place of Tutankhamun was a complex and exhausting process. Damage from centuries of flash flooding in the valley above had led to warped wood and decaying textiles. There was evidence that at least parts of the antechamber had been accessed by ancient graverobbers. Many of the objects were covered in a pink stain and black fungus, requiring the assistance of specialist chemists, botanists and other expert conservators. Archaeological photographer Harry Burton was called upon to catalogue objects and capture items in situ; Alan Gardner was needed to translate hieroglyphics and Essie Newbury attempted to preserve the remaining textiles. Unearthing the secrets of Tutankhamun required a team.

## A cursed chamber?

By the new year, the antechamber had been cleared and the burial chamber could be formally opened on 16 February. This was met with international excitement, reflecting the growing 'Tutmania' that had seen tourists flock to Luxor. Fascination with Tutankhamun only increased further when Sir George Herbert died of septicaemia in April, sparking rumours that he had been struck down by the curse of the pharaoh. Despite *The Lancet* publicly concluding that his death was nothing more than an infection, further deaths were soon attributed to the imagined curse on Tutankhamun's tomb, only furthering the frenzy around the discovery.



Howard Carter (kneeling), an Egyptian workman, and Arthur Callender at doors of burial shrines in Pharaoh Tutankhamun's tomb



## Exploring evidence – Source 1

This photo, taken by archaeological photographer Harry Burton, depicts an unnamed Egyptian boy modelling one of the artefacts found in Tutankhamen's tomb. Although several people have claimed to be the boy in this picture, no one knows for certain who he is. How did he become involved in the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb? This could be an excellent starting point for children.



**Questions to explore:**

- Who was he and why was he involved in the excavation?
- Why wasn't his name recorded?
- How many children were involved in uncovering Tutankhamun?
- What is the artefact he is wearing?
- How similar is this boy to Tutankhamun? How has life changed?

## Why does it matter?

Artefacts retrieved from the burial chamber, particularly Tutankhamun's golden death-mask, have become iconic archetypes of ancient Egyptian culture. It took ten years to catalogue the 5,398 items found within the tomb, which included thrones, musical instruments, wine and even a dagger made from meteorite rock. Over the following decades, many of these findings have been displayed around the world, including the remains of Tutankhamun himself. Not only did this discovery provide further information for Egyptologists, but arguably it also changed public perceptions of archaeology. Without a doubt, Howard Carter and his team discovered one of the most recognised archaeological sites of all time.

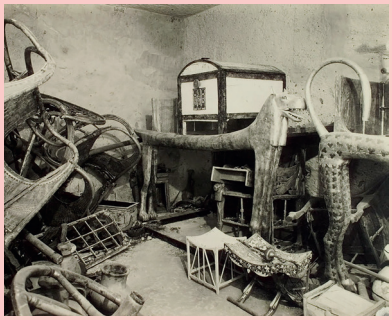
## Reinterpreting the past

One hundred years after the discovery of Tutankhamun's burial place, new narratives of the events leading to its discovery are finally emerging. While Howard Carter will forever be celebrated for his archaeological talents, there is increasing recognition of the significance of the many Egyptians who worked tirelessly to unearth the tomb itself. More than 50 local workmen, as well as dozens of children, were involved in the excavation, with several stories claiming that it was a young Egyptian boy who discovered that first step.

Only four Egyptian foremen were acknowledged by Carter in his books – Ahmed Gerigar, Gad Hassan, Hussein Abu Awad and Hussein Ahmed Said. The names of all other Egyptian workers remain unknown, their achievements recorded only in contemporary photographs of the excavation. More recently, museums have sought to champion these lost voices through new displays, including the current 'Excavating the Archive' exhibition in the Bodleian Libraries.

**Kate Rigby** is an associate lecturer in primary history, geography and professional studies at the University of Cambridge and a member of the *Primary History* editorial board.

## Exploring evidence – Source 2



This photo depicts some of the many items found within the tomb of Tutankhamun. Often we are presented with images of golden funeral masks and highly decorated sarcophagi – but what else was buried in the tomb? Does this image reflect what you thought might have been seen within the tomb?

**Questions to explore:**

- What might have been buried with Tutankhamun?
- Why do you think so many different items were included?
- Do you think these items are in their original places, or might they have been moved before Howard Carter's discovery?
- How well do you think the artefacts survived?

## Exploring evidence – Source 3



Here we can see Howard Carter in the tomb, looking at the sarcophagi of Tutankhamun. We often associate ancient Egypt with mummification – but were all people mummified? Was everyone buried in a pyramid? It is important that children recognise that Tutankhamun was not buried in a pyramid. Exploring the lives of ordinary Egyptians can provide a real contrast to that of the pharaohs.

**Questions to explore:**

- What is the process of mummification? Why did it happen?
- Who was mummified?
- Why were pharaohs buried in pyramids?
- How did the building of pyramids change over time?
- Were rich and poor treated the same in ancient Egypt?

## Resources

The Egyptian Museum in Cairo – Egyptian history in one place (egyptianmuseumcairo.com).

The Griffith Institute – at the heart of Egyptology at the University of Oxford.

Tutankhamun: Excavating the Archive. Exhibition at the Bodleian Libraries. (www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/about/media/tutankhamun)

KS2 History: Ancient Egypt. Hussein – The Water Boy – BBC Teach.