

THE  
BRITISH  
MUSEUM

# Anglo-Saxons: Sutton Hoo



Helmet from the ship-burial at Sutton Hoo  
Suffolk, England  
700 AD

Visit resource for teachers  
Key Stage 2

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## **Before your visit**

## Background information

The Sutton Hoo burial consists of a wooden long boat covered by a large mound of soil. At the centre of the ship was a wooden burial chamber hung with textiles. In it a dead person lay surrounded by possessions: weapons, armour, gold coins, gold and garnet fittings, silver vessels, silver-mounted drinking horns and clothes (linen undershirts, shoes, a woollen cloak and a fur trimmed cap). All these objects were chosen to reflect the person's high rank in life and would be considered to play a role in the person's afterlife.

No body was found, but soil analyses suggest that a body was placed in the burial chamber and totally decayed in the acid soil. The identity of the buried person is not known.

Following excavation in the 1930s it was believed that the burial belonged to a member of the East Anglian ruling dynasty and four kings were considered as possible candidates: Raedwald (AD 590-625/6) king of East Anglia and overlord of the English kingdoms from AD 616, Eorpwald (died 627/8) and co-regents Sigebert and Ecric, who both died in AD 637. Following more recent excavation, findings indicated that Sutton Hoo is a cemetery used for the burial of East Anglian aristocrats and is now referred to as a princely, rather than royal, burial ground.

The ship burial mound was first excavated in 1939 when the objects now held by the British Museum were recovered and presented to the Museum by the landowner Mrs Edith Pretty. Further excavations on this mound and other areas of the Sutton Hoo cemetery area have taken place since, giving a fuller picture of human activity on the site over time.

Sutton Hoo is now owned and managed by the National Trust. Further details about visiting the site and useful learning resources can be found at [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-vh/w-visits/w-findaplace/w-suttonhoo](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-vh/w-visits/w-findaplace/w-suttonhoo)

## Sutton Hoo excavation time line

c.3000 BC – c. AD 550	Prehistoric land-use on the current site of the Sutton Hoo cemetery
6 <sup>th</sup> Century AD	Early burials on the site (800m north of the cemetery) containing the graves of people from a local settlement.
c. AD 590	Foundation of the barrow cemetery; first graves in this area of the site.
c. AD 620- 30	Mound 1 ship burial; Mound 2 chamber burial.
c. AD 700	Abandonment of cemetery
7 <sup>th</sup> -11 <sup>th</sup> centuries	Judicial executions with burial of criminals in and near to the cemetery
16 <sup>th</sup> - 17 <sup>th</sup> centuries	Large pits dug into the centre of mounds including a pit dug into Mound 1 which just missed the burial deposit.
Mid 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Mound digging including the digging of a trench into Mound 1 in 1860
1938	June-August: Suffolk archaeologist Basil Brown opens 3 mounds at Sutton Hoo
1939	May/June: Basil Brown begins to excavate Mound 1 and finds remains of a large ship and an undisturbed burial chamber. July/August: a small team excavates the contents of the burial chamber. September: the Science Museum records the ship, war breaks out in Europe (Sutton Hoo used as a military training ground for duration of war) and excavation on Mound 1 ends. Objects given to British Museum by the landowner Mrs Edith Pretty.
1943-83	Comprehensive study of ship-burial and Mound 1 findings at British Museum. Further fieldwork from 1965 leads to the excavation of the first sand-bodies and the recording of traces of the underlying Prehistoric landscape. Publication of findings leading to an interpretation of Sutton Hoo as the burial ground of the early kings of Anglo-Saxon East Anglia.
1983-92	The Sutton Hoo Excavation Research Project excavates a one hectare area of the cemetery. Prehistoric landscape revealed with mounds placed in association with it. Two groups of sand-bodies, one near mound 5 and one on the eastern edge of the cemetery (associated perhaps with a gallows), excavated and interpreted as judicial killings dating from the 8th to 11th centuries.
1992-2001	Data from fieldwork analysed at the University of York and the British Museum
2000	Excavations by the National Trust beneath the area of a new visitor centre 800m north of the cemetery reveal a 6 <sup>th</sup> century burial ground which appears to have been for the graves of people from a local settlement preceding the 7 <sup>th</sup> century burial ground.
2005	Publication of 1983-92 fieldwork findings leading to the interpretation of Sutton Hoo by Martin Carver as a princely burial-ground which acted as a short-lived monument expressing the identity of East Anglian aristocrats, their aspiration to kingship and their resistance to continental Christianity.

## Resources

### British Museum websites

#### Explore

Explore is an online database of over 5000 objects from the Museum's collections. To investigate Anglo-Saxon objects use the Explore option on the homepage  
[www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)

#### Ancient Civilizations website [www.ancientcivilizations.co.uk](http://www.ancientcivilizations.co.uk)

This is an interactive learning and information website with text, images and maps relating to a range of civilizations across the world and through time. The site contains information on Anglo-Saxon Britain and the ship burial at Sutton Hoo. To find the burial, choose the Religion theme and move the timeline selector to between AD 400 and AD 1050, then choose Anglo-Saxon Britain.

### Books

#### For adults

Carver, Martin, *Sutton Hoo: burial ground of kings?* British Museum Press, 2000

Carver, Martin, *Sutton Hoo: a seventh-century princely burial ground and its context*, British Museum Press, 2005

Marzinzik, Sonja, *The Sutton Hoo Helmet*, British Museum Press, 2007

## Gallery information

Room 41 is the gallery which displays material from the early medieval period in Europe. It contains objects from the end of Roman Britain (circa 410 AD) into the early and later Anglo-Saxon periods. There is a small amount of Viking material on display. It should be noted that the gallery also displays objects from the same period from other areas of Europe including material from the Byzantine Empire (the continuation of the Roman Empire in the east). Objects are displayed in themed cases such as personal adornment and early Christian art. Many of the objects are from burial contexts (one of the richest recovered sources of Anglo-Saxon material). The Taplow Burial in gallery 41 is the second richest (after Sutton Hoo) Anglo-Saxon burial assemblage on display in the Museum.

## What is it like to visit this gallery?

Room 41 is a medium-sized gallery which contains a large number of wall cases and freestanding cases. It has doorways on two sides giving access to the Roman Britain gallery and the Modern European galleries. This means that there can be quite a high level of through traffic across the middle and one corner of the gallery. The material from Sutton Hoo is displayed in one bay of the gallery where there is a high concentration of cases to study whilst other material from Anglo-Saxon England is dispersed across the rest of the gallery in individual cases (often in small neighbouring groups). Students and adult helpers will need to have clear directions concerning the cases to be used for their study and it should be noted that adult tour groups in the Sutton Hoo bay can make the area very crowded at times.

## Case Numbers

Please note that case numbers are usually small, white and high up on the glass.

## Preliminary activities

### General introductory activities

- Locate key geographical locations associated with this period – such as Germany, Denmark, the counties of East Anglia - on a map.
- Read extracts from the epic poem Beowulf – particularly passages relating to burial and feasting.
- Look at Anglo-Saxon objects on Explore.

### Activities to support gallery activities

- Investigate the Sutton Hoo ship burial using our online reconstruction on the ancient civilizations website. To find the burial, choose the Religion theme and move the timeline selector to between AD 400 and AD 1050, then choose Anglo-Saxon Britain.
- Discuss the job titles for different craft workers – what would you call somebody who worked with gold, wood or iron? What skills are needed to work with different natural materials?
- Follow the Explore online tour – Who was buried at Sutton Hoo?
- Take two pencil cases and compare the contents. What is the same, which items are different? Do objects always look exactly the same even if they serve the same function? Are some things in one pencil case but not the other?

## **During your visit**

## Gallery activities: introduction for teachers

The gallery activities are a set of activity sheets which can be used by students working in Room 41. The sheets can be used as stand-alone activities or you may wish to develop work around particular sheets as suggested in the before and after sections of this resource.

Where case numbers are indicated on a sheet, these are usually to be found marked in white numbers high up on the glass of that particular case.

- You are welcome to select the activities which are most appropriate for the focus of your visit and adapt sheets to meet the needs of your students.
- Each activity is designed to support the students in looking at, and thinking about, objects on display in the gallery.
- Individual activity sheets may be undertaken by single students, in pairs or as a small group.
- Where space is provided for recording this may be undertaken by the student or an adult helper as is most appropriate for the students involved.
- Familiarise the students and accompanying adults with the chosen activity sheets at school before the day of the visit. Make sure students and adults know what they are to do and are familiar with the vocabulary used on the sheets or which they may encounter in the gallery.

## **Gallery activities: briefings for adult helpers**

### **Gallery activity: Excavation**

- The ship burial at Sutton Hoo was excavated during the summer of 1939. The mound was carefully dug out and the objects in the burial chamber lifted.
- This activity encourages students to empathise with the archaeologists on the dig.

### **Gallery activity: Anglo-Saxon crafts**

- Anglo-Saxon craft workers used a wide range of materials. Some materials were sourced locally whilst others were traded over extensive distances.
- This activity encourages students to look for objects which act as evidence for different craft skills employed in Anglo-Saxon times.

### **Gallery activity: Grave goods**

- Objects which are placed alongside the body in a burial are called grave goods.
- This activity encourages students to think about the original position of some of the grave goods in the ship burial at Sutton Hoo.

### **Gallery activity: Burying a noble**

- Objects placed in burial are known as grave goods. Those in the Sutton Hoo ship-burial may not all be the actual possessions of the buried person but may be chosen to impart particular meaning to funeral attendees and the person's heirs.
- This activity encourages the students to think about why particular objects were placed in the Sutton Hoo ship burial.

### **Gallery activity: Sutton Hoo and Taplow burials**

- The Anglo-Saxon burial displayed in case 40 was excavated from a burial mound in Taplow churchyard, Buckinghamshire, in 1883. Many of the objects reflect those found at Sutton Hoo.
- This activity encourages the students to observe similarities between this burial and that found at Sutton Hoo, particularly in terms of general burial customs followed within the Anglo-Saxon social elite.

## Excavation

This photograph shows the excavation of the ship burial at Sutton Hoo with Edith Pretty and her friends watching the archaeologists working.



- Discuss what is happening in the photograph and look at the other photographs in this section of the gallery.
- Now look at the objects on display. What would it have been like to excavate them? Would they be hard to see in the soil, would they be difficult to lift up?
- Archaeologists use drawing to record objects because a drawing can show more detail than a photograph. Make a detailed drawing of one object below.

- When you have finished, discuss what object you think would have been most exciting to excavate (find and dig up).

## Anglo-Saxon crafts

Anglo-Saxon craft workers worked with a wide range of natural materials.

- Look at the objects on display in the Sutton Hoo cases and record an object which provides evidence for working with each of the materials listed below.

**wool**

**gold**

**iron**

**wood**

**semi-precious stones**

- When you have finished, discuss what skills a craft worker would need to use when working with each of these raw materials.



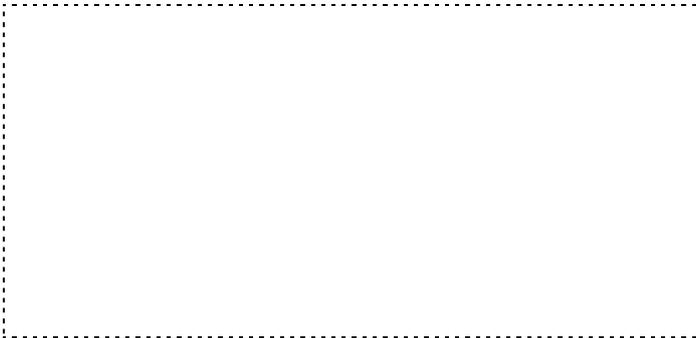
## Burying a noble

An Anglo-Saxon funeral was an important opportunity for social display.

- Record an object which provides evidence for each of the statements below.



Objects were placed in the burial which indicate wealth.



Objects were placed in the burial which indicate the strength and skills of a warrior.



Objects were placed in the burial which indicate the ability be a leader.



Objects were placed in the burial which indicate the role of feasting and entertainment.

- When you have finished, choose another object on display and discuss why you think it was placed in the burial.

## Sutton Hoo and Taplow burials

Find the objects from the Taplow burial in case 40.

- Below are some objects from the Sutton Hoo burial. Find a similar object from the Taplow burial and draw it in the box next to the Sutton Hoo example.

Sutton Hoo	Taplow
 <p data-bbox="197 674 256 712">lyre</p>	
 <p data-bbox="181 954 363 992">belt buckle</p>	
 <p data-bbox="181 1196 400 1234">drinking horn</p>	
 <p data-bbox="181 1520 261 1559">bowl</p>	
 <p data-bbox="181 1821 448 1859">shoulder-clasps</p>	

- When you have finished, discuss the similarities and differences (size, style, shape) between some of the Sutton Hoo and Taplow objects.

## **After your visit**

## Follow-up activities: introduction

Follow-up activities encourage students to reflect on the work undertaken in the Museum during their visit.

- Some of the activities draw directly on the information gathered at the Museum while others encourage the students to draw on personal experience or undertake additional research in the classroom.
- Each activity includes a suggestion for classroom work and also an outcome which may be in the form of a written piece, drama presentation or artwork.
- You may also wish to look at some of the activities available on the ancient Egypt learning website ([www.ancientegypt.co.uk](http://www.ancientegypt.co.uk)) which relate to your visit.

## Follow-up activity: Excavation

Curriculum links: history, literacy, drama

- Print out copies of the photograph showing the excavation of Mound 1 in progress during the summer of 1939. You can find this photograph at the end of this pack. Discuss what is happening in the photograph.
- Ask students to imagine that they are one of the people in the photograph. What was that person's role in the excavation, how would they have been feeling?
- Ask the students to record and present their thoughts as a written piece or a dramatic interpretation (individually or in a small group).

## Follow-up activity: Anglo-Saxon crafts

Curriculum links: history, art and design, citizenship

- Ask the students to think about the skills and processes which are needed to produce a piece of craftwork. Set a simple making task and after the students have completed it ask them to record the information needed for somebody else to complete the same task. What equipment, raw materials and skills will be needed and in what order does one have to do things?
- Ask the students to reflect on the skills and processes which they use in their own learning, and consider the skills used by people nowadays in various jobs.

## Follow-up activity: Grave goods

Curriculum links: history, RE, citizenship

- Revise with the students the concept of grave-goods, the opportunity for social display during a funeral and remind them of the possible layout of the burial chamber in the Sutton Hoo ship burial.
- Print out copies of the Sutton Hoo objects from Explore on the Museum website and divide the students into small groups, each with a set of printouts.
- Ask the students to discuss where they would place each object, or group of objects, in relation to the body as if they were arranging the layout of the burial chamber. Ask them to think about the function and status of each object and what the person would want the objects to reflect about them in the afterlife.
- Ask each group to present its thoughts via a reconstruction with one student lying down and the images of the objects placed appropriately. Other students could comment on where and why they have placed objects.

## Follow-up activity: Burying a noble

Curriculum links: history, RE

- Make a chart of the evidence found to support each of the burial statements. The objects which the students think best represent a particular statement can be drawn from their gallery findings and through further investigation on Explore in the classroom. Discuss with the students the fact that this is their interpretation of the role of the objects and that archaeologists do not always know exactly what the role of an object might have been. Encourage students to include vocabulary such 'I think' to indicate personal opinion.
- Discuss the chart thinking about which objects illustrate which statements, whether an object can represent more than one statement, do all the objects representing one particular statement have to be similar.
- Extend the discussion by thinking about objects which are used nowadays to represent statements about wealth, power or personal skills.

## Follow-up activity: Sutton Hoo and Taplow burials

Curriculum links: history

- Using the completed gallery sheet, discuss the similarities and differences between the objects placed in the Sutton Hoo and the Taplow burials.
- Why do you think it is useful for archaeologists to find other examples of a particular process (such as burial) for a particular period?
- Undertake a web search for examples of other Anglo-Saxon burials which have been excavated in England. What type of burials were they – single or cemetery? What objects were found? Some good examples to start with would be Sutton Hoo, Taplow, Prittlewell, Whitehall Farm.



This photograph, taken during the summer of 1939, shows the excavation of objects from the burial chamber section of Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo. While the archaeologists work carefully at the bottom of the ship's outline imprinted on the surrounding sand, Mrs Edith Pretty and friends observe from the bank above.