

The world of Sutton Hoo

Members and Supporters trail



Contemporary cultures

The Sutton Hoo collection is one of the jewels of the British Museum. These finds transformed the way we thought about the Anglo-Saxons – from a primitive early culture to highly skilled people with global connections.

This trail takes you on a journey through the 6th and 7th centuries AD. It explores some of the Sutton Hoo treasures as well as other contemporary objects from civilisations around the world.

We invite you to rediscover the permanent collection through our exclusive Members and Supporters Museum trail – and to learn more about some of the collection's fascinating objects.

Objects in focus

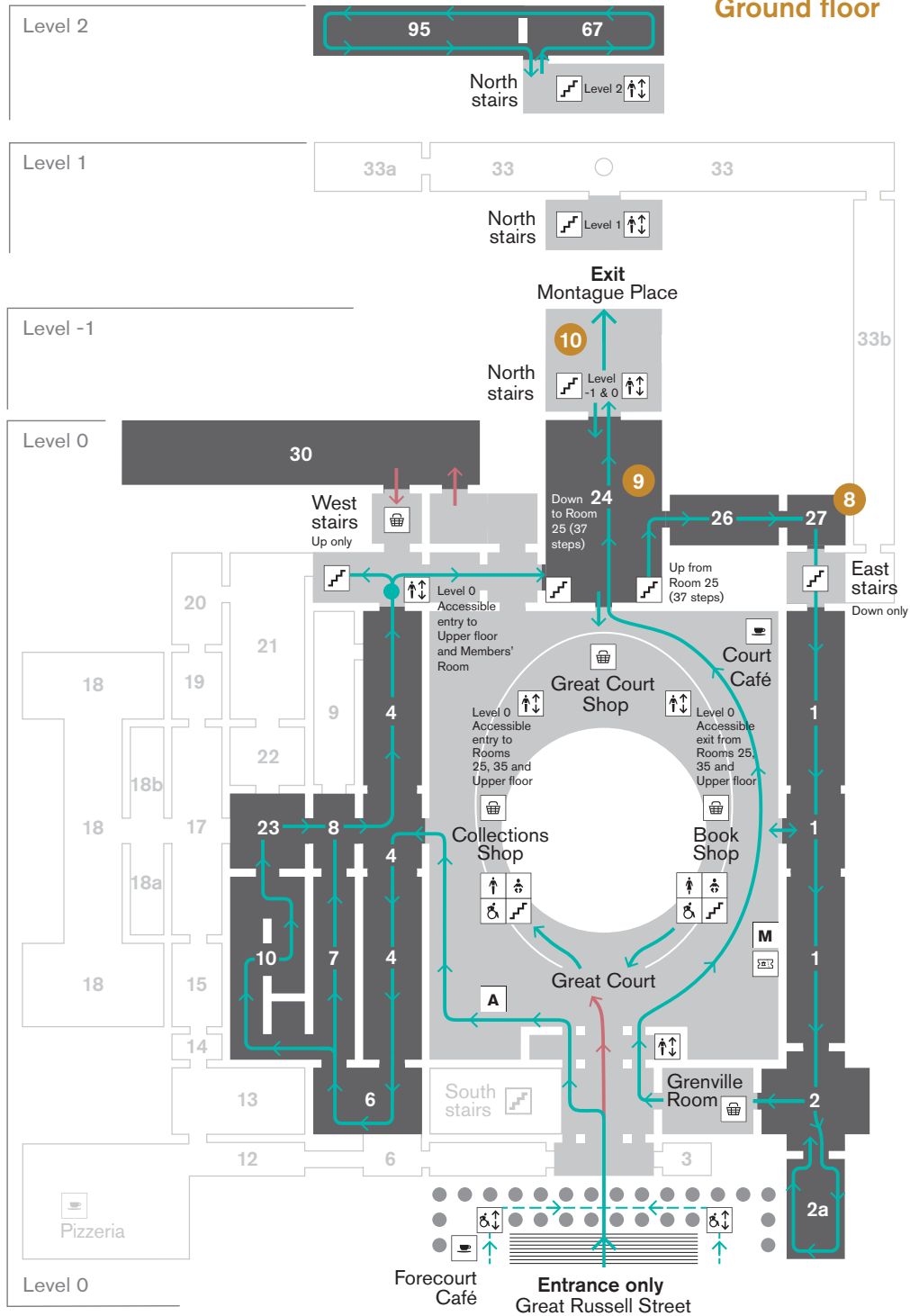
Our new suggested route through the Museum is designed for you to enjoy the Sutton Hoo objects within their wider context. The route should take approximately 60 minutes. You can find details of all the objects on this trail – and millions more – at britishmuseum.org/collection

Start this trail in Room 41. To get there from the Great Court, walk up the staircase on the left side of the Round Reading Room up to Level 3 (there is also priority lift access). Cross the bridge and turn left into Room 56, walk to the end of the sequence of galleries and turn left when you enter Room 59. Then follow the one-way route to Room 41.

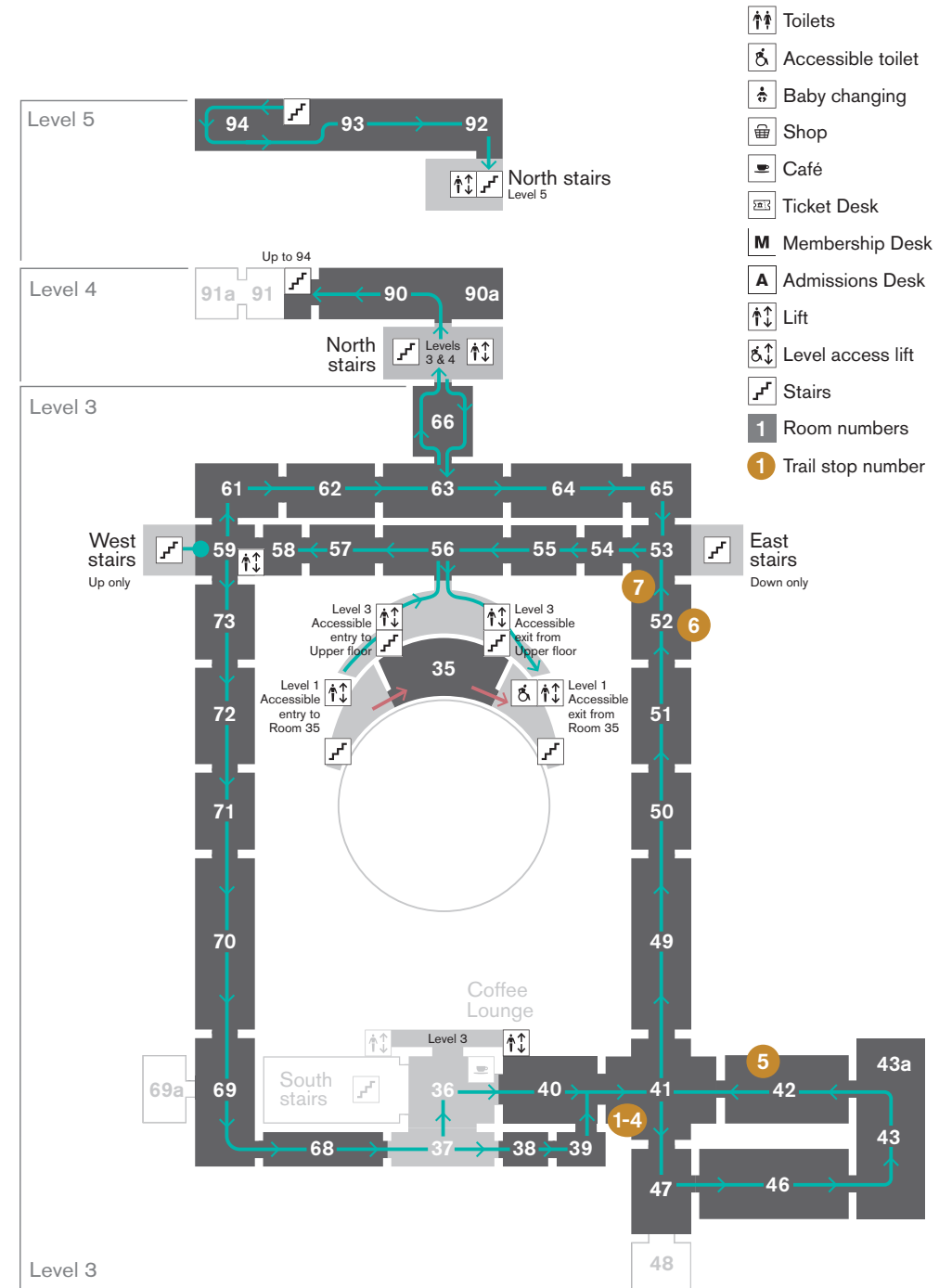
Photo by Phil Sayer.



Ground floor



Upper floor



- Toilets
- Accessible toilet
- Baby changing
- Shop
- Café
- Ticket Desk
- Membership Desk
- Admissions Desk
- Lift
- Level access lift
- Stairs
- Room numbers
- Trail stop number

Explore the wonders of Sutton Hoo

Sutton Hoo represents the most impressive early medieval grave to be discovered in Europe.

Inside the burial mound was the imprint of a decayed ship and a central chamber filled with treasures. As a team of archaeologists, led by Basil Brown, dug deeper, they unearthed objects of breath-taking artistry. Not only is the burial remarkable for the majesty of its content and its monumental scale, but it rewrote historical understanding of the so-called 'Dark Ages'. 'This single burial in a pretty corner of Suffolk embodied a society of remarkable artistic achievement, complex belief systems and far-reaching international connections, not to mention immense personal power and wealth', says Dr Sue Brunning, Curator of Early Medieval European Collections.

The excavations took place on the land of Edith Pretty who, in an incredible act of generosity, donated all of the finds to the British Museum in 1939, where they are now on permanent display in *The Sir Paul and Lady Ruddock Gallery of Sutton Hoo and Europe* (Room 41).

Gold bracelet, found in Egypt. About AD 600.

One half of a gold shoulder clasp, found at Sutton Hoo. Late 6th to early 7th century AD.

Frankish coins, France, about AD 605–615.



Gold bracelet

Room 41

This gold bracelet was discovered in Egypt and originates from the Early Byzantine period, about AD 600. It has a deeply intricate design consisting of peacocks and swans, all surrounded by scrolls and bands of open-work lozenges. In the centre, there is a bust of the Virgin Mary in relief with her hands raised. It was donated to the British Museum by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks in 1897, who greatly enriched the Museum's holdings through careful acquisition and the donation of his own vast and valuable collections.



Gold shoulder clasp

Room 41

Made around AD 560–70 to AD 610, this is one half of a gold shoulder clasp. Inlaid with garnet believed to have come from Sri Lanka or India, these clasps are feats of astonishing craftsmanship. They may have been modelled on military prototypes, used to fasten armour in the Roman and Byzantine worlds. The weight and the rows of loops on the back of the clasps suggest that they were attached to a thick garment made of wool or padded linen.



Gold coins

Room 41

The purse found among the burial goods at Sutton Hoo contained 37 gold coins, three coin-shaped blanks and two small gold ingots. Each coin came from a different mint in Francia, across the English Channel. The lack of duplication suggests that they were not withdrawn from active circulation but were taken from a treasure store. Along with the blanks and bullion, they make up the total required to pay the 40 oarsmen and helmsman of the burial ship. The coins cannot be dated precisely but seem to have been deposited between AD 610 and 635. They are the only large deposit of coins from the Anglo-Saxon period before the introduction of an English coinage. These coins are crucial to understanding the burial at Sutton Hoo, as they provide strong clues about when the ship and its contents were buried.



The Sutton Hoo Anastasius Dish

Room 41

This large silver platter was made in Constantinople, modern day Istanbul. Control stamps on the back of the dish confirm its place of origin. These stamps, similar to modern hallmarks, were applied by official Byzantine manufacturers. They belonged to the Roman emperor Anastasius I (AD 491–518) and therefore, after its discovery, it became known as the Anastasius Dish. The date of these stamps show that the platter was already up to 100 years old when it was buried at Sutton Hoo. It is likely to have been passed from hand to hand as a gift from rulers at the highest level, eventually finding its way to Sutton Hoo.

The Sutton Hoo Anastasius Dish, Turkey, AD 491–518.



Donkey-shaped flask

Room 42: The Islamic world

This donkey-shaped cage flask is made from opaque glass. It was crafted in Syria and was created during the Umayyad dynasty which ruled from AD 661–750. British Museum scientists found that black tarry lumps in the Sutton Hoo burial were actually pieces of bitumen that had originated in Syria. Originally thought to be tar used for waterproofing boats, it is now believed that these lumps of bitumen were exotic grave goods originating from a far-reaching Anglo-Saxon trade network.

Donkey-shaped flask, Syria, 7th–8th century AD.



Iron and copper alloy helmet

Room 52: Ancient Iran

This helmet was excavated in Nineveh, Iraq and dates from the 6th or 7th century AD in the period of the Sasanian dynasty – the longest-lived Iranian dynasty that ruled an empire stretching from eastern Syria to Central Asia. It is made from a pair of iron shells which would have originally been covered in decorated cloth, riveted onto a frame of copper alloy bands. The materials indicate that certain individuals, ranks or units may have been distinguished by their helmets. Despite its decorative appearance, the thickness of the metal suggests that it also held a practical protective purpose for a Sasanian soldier.

Iron and copper alloy helmet, found in Iraq, 6th–7th century AD.



Gold armlet

Room 52: Ancient Iran

This gold armlet dates from 5th–4th century BC and originates from the expansive Achaemenid Empire, established by Cyrus II of Persia. It forms part of the Oxus Treasure, the most important collection of gold and silver to have survived from the Achaemenid period. The armlet is similar to objects brought as tribute on reliefs at the Persian centre of Persepolis. Armlets were considered gifts of honour at the Persian court. The ends are in the form of winged monsters with griffin heads. The bodies of the monsters were originally inlaid with coloured stones, including lazulite, although no trace of these survive.

Gold armlet, found in Tajikistan. 5th–4th century BC.



Ceremonial ballgame mould

Room 27: Mexico

This is a carved stone belt in the form of a toad, made during AD 300–1200. It was used to mould the protective leather belts worn by players during a Mesoamerican ballgame. This ballgame was a team sport that required players to keep the ball in the air using only their hips. The leather belts were worn to cushion the impact of the heavy rubber ball. The outcome of a match could be crucial. Not only might it resolve conflicts over land and politics but occasionally, the losers would be sacrificed to the gods. The ball court itself was a symbolic entrance to the Underworld, represented by the toad which lived at the threshold.

Greenstone yoke mould, found in Mexico. AD 300–1200.



Lime flask

Room 24: Living and Dying

This is a lime flask (poporo) of a seated woman, used during ritual coca chewing. It was made in 500 BC – AD 700 during the Early Quimbaya period in Cauca Valley, Colombia. She is naked but adorned with a metal helmet and extensive jewellery. Unusually for a woman, she is seated on a ritual stool indicative of her high status. She holds spiral volutes in either hand which may allude to sprigs of sprouting vegetation which could have been carried or presented as part of seasonal fertility rites. The flask is made from tumbaga, an alloy composed mostly of gold and copper and was formed by lost-wax casting. Quimbaya goldsmiths used this technique to produce spectacular hollow objects, like this lime flask, which are some of the most technically complex objects found in the Americas.

Lime flask, found in Colombia.
500 BC – AD 700.

Figure of Amitābha Buddha,
China, AD 585.

Photo by Phil Sayer.



Figure of Amitābha Buddha

North stairs

Standing almost eight metres high, this is a white marble figure of Amitābha Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Light. After achieving the reunification of much of China by AD 581, the two emperors of the Sui dynasty (AD 581–618), both devout Buddhists, made Buddhism a state religion. According to the inscription on the base, it was dedicated to the Chongguang Temple 崇光寺 in Hancui village 韓崔村 in AD 585. Both the temple and the village can no longer be identified, but it is thought that the location was south-west of Baoding 保定 in Hebei province, a region known for its white marble sculptures. The statue also has traces of pigments which suggests it was once covered with gilding and colours.



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Front: The Sutton Hoo Helmet, England, late 6th to early 7th century AD.

Gold belt buckle, found at Sutton Hoo. Early 7th century AD.



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