

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Whose Hoo?

A Review and Critique of: “Sutton Hoo”, Sutton Hoo National Trust Visitor Centre, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk

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Growing up just outside Ipswich in the 1960s and 70s, meant that Sutton Hoo, which was then being re-excavated, was a regular place for my family to visit. Sutton Hoo therefore figured largely in my childhood and this very personal link must be admitted to at the beginning of this review. Later, I joined the British Museum, and as a museum assistant I was privileged to see the objects from Sutton Hoo almost every day. It is therefore from a position of intimate acquaintance, rather than expert knowledge that I offer, in the first half of this article, a subjective review of the new National Trust exhibition and visitor centre. In the second half, a wider objective critique of the political economy of this National Trust project will attempt to explain why, 63 years after the discovery of the famous Mound One ship-burial, a new £5 million visitor centre was constructed at the site, and why it took the form it did.

The national and international significance of the archaeological material from Sutton Hoo cannot be under-estimated. Until recently, the famous ship-burial and the finds from Mound One, took pride of place in the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities at the British Museum. The British Museum gave over an entire gallery to its display and last year, in a BBC television programme, the material from Sutton Hoo was declared the museum’s “greatest treasure” (BBC 2 Hidden History 1st August 2003 *f.*). The Sutton Hoo Society attracted the great and the good of the county. The Society enjoyed the patronage of HRH Duke of Edinburgh, thus securing its pre-eminent social position. School children were bussed in to visit the site, and in the early 1990s the site became part of the national curriculum. The Sutton Hoo Research Trust inherited the mantle of Basil Brown, the site’s original excavator, and since then the Trust has enjoyed the exclusive right to excavate there. Since the discovery of the Mound One ship-burial in 1939, Sutton Hoo has become an essential and evocative symbol of English nationalism. It represents the earliest evidence of an English monarchy, it emphasises England’s naval and martial traditions, and, finally, it is officially the most fabulous collection of treasure ever found in England.

In 1997 the site was offered to the National Trust, which formally took control of the Tranmer Estate in 1998. The National Trust identified the site as a national priority, and in less than four years had established a £5 million project supported by a grant of £3.6 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The new National Trust project was always keenly anticipated, not least because it would replace the temporary wooden hut that for many years had provided limited exhibition space as well as a shelter from the elements for the public.

On 13th March 2002 a brand new, purpose built, visitor centre was opened by the Noble poet laureate and Beowulf translator Seamus Heaney. The new visitor centre, some 500m north of the burial ground, consists of two large timber buildings designed by architects van Heyningen & Haward. One is the new exhibition hall, and the other is a larger support building that includes the toilets, sales point and restaurant. The visitor centre is served by two large car parks accessed by a new road. In addition, the Edwardian Tranmer house has been converted, with some rooms becoming an educational conference centre and the old coach house becoming a residence for the warden.

The burial ground is approached from the visitor centre via a newly laid footpath. Another separate sign-posted walk takes visitors down to the river Deben. The burial ground is surrounded by an outer wire fence, which delineates the archaeology from the surrounding agricultural land and protects the site from rabbits. Inside this fenced area is another low rope barrier; this runs in a semi-circle around the barrows of the burial ground and prevents visitors from actually walking on the earthworks, unless one pays for an official guided tour, which offers privileged access. Immediately east of Mound One is a raised timber and metal viewing platform augmented with two information panels that afford visitors an overview of this earthwork. It is just possible to see the river Deben through the trees, although the slope from which the ships were presumably dragged to the burial ground remains covered by trees and scrub.

First impressions of the new visitor centre are good, as there are considerably more visitors to the site, and obviously the facilities are very much improved. It is a classic National Trust site with its distinctive corporate style, large numbers of casual staff and populist approach. The exhibition space, designed by Chris Hudson, is dominated by a life-size recreation of the burial chamber from the famous Mound One ship-burial. It is certainly child-friendly with large colourful images, simple, punchy text, audio-recordings, a video presentation and even the opportunity for children to dress up as Anglo-Saxons. Superficially, therefore, it would appear that this is a major improvement on the previous facilities, which lacked even a public toilet.

However, when one gets away from the paraphernalia of the warden's house, education centre, bookshop, toilets, car parks and restaurant, one is presented with a rather modest exhibition that consists of two distinct and contrasting parts. The first consists of the National Trust interpretative section – this dominates 90% of the exhibition space – the second is a smaller treasury area, in which the majority of objects from a number of public museums are displayed. The contrast between the two sections could not be greater; the interpretative section is brash and frankly shallow, while the smaller, British Museum designed section, is sober, scholarly and informative, indeed it looks for all the world like a British Museum exhibition, which is exactly what it is. This section contains the majority of the genuine archaeology, as opposed to the replicas that dominate the National Trust exhibition. What is sad is that it is incomplete; the majority of material from Mound One is not present simply because the security of the new National Trust visitor centre is inadequate for such a collection. This suggests considerable poetic license for the claim made by Seamus Heaney (in Kennedy 2002) that “The hoard is laid bare”, when the fact is that the vast majority of the material from Mound One

is not, nor ever can be, displayed at Sutton Hoo. The vulnerability of these new, large, rural exhibition centres was dramatically demonstrated at the West Stow Country Park and Anglo-Saxon Village site in 2002, when thieves made off with the safe containing not just the coins from the site and an Anglo-Saxon brooch, but possibly more importantly, the original excavation notes (Bury Free Press 2002). For security reasons the collection cannot be displayed at Sutton Hoo in its entirety, and it is therefore for sound practical reasons, rather than some conspiracy theory, that Britain has large, public, urban museums with 24-hour security. Moreover, the British Museum may be visited via public transport from almost anywhere in the United Kingdom, whilst the new visitor centre at Sutton Hoo, lying northeast of Ipswich can realistically only be accessed by a private vehicle. As a result, it is for a combination of security and commercial reasons that the new visitor centre is only open to the public from April to September.

The contrast between the two parts of the exhibition is not immediately obvious. On entering the exhibition hall, tickets are checked and one is directed to wait for a short film. Personally, I hate being directed around exhibitions; I find it particularly condescending and restrictive. What follows is an expensive pop-video style film that is highly impressionistic, surprisingly uninformative and which suggests that Anglo-Saxon England was entirely populated by extremely old, photogenic men and attractive women. At a more scholarly level the commentary includes a number of 'Anglo-Saxon' poems, but no attempt is made to distinguish between the genuine poems and the 20th century Anglo-Saxon style poetry also used in the presentation. Clearly the history is a secondary consideration compared to the entertainment or artistic value of the film.

Following this introduction the visitor is directed clockwise around the exhibition hall. The main exhibition hall has large information panels ranged around the outer wall. These are interspersed with large colour photographs, some of which are of the actual objects from Mound One, although not captioned, while others are in the moody and artistic photographic style favoured by the Sunday colour supplements. The information panels are fronted by small exhibition cases containing finds or reproductions of material from the site. The relationship between the text of the information panels and the objects displayed in the smaller cases is ambiguous.

The information panels are dominated by large, bold and colourful images painted by Kelvin Wilson, but like the video presentation, the text imparts surprisingly little real information. It does, however, demonstrate the perennial problem in any museum exhibition: the conflict between the designer's minimalist conventions and the enthusiasm of curators to show off all the material that is available. In this case the designer has won by a knockout in the first round. The general lack of information is demonstrated even in the first group of information panels. These cover the pre-excavation history of the site and the discovery of the ship-burial by Basil Brown along with its subsequent excavation. The controversies and different opinions concerning the ship-burial are studiously avoided throughout the entire exhibition. This seriously distorts both the real and very human history of the excavation at Sutton Hoo. Instead the National Trust offers a 'sexed-down' version of history, where the archaeological interpretation is seamless, immutable and safe.

The lack of solid information is a constant problem in the exhibition, which, while suitable for children is rather over-simplistic for adults. Much of the text is Anglo-Saxon poetry, but this is again impressionistic rather than informative, and little of the poetry is contemporaneous with the seventh century ship-burial; another fact left unclear. Few public museums could afford to commit so much space to so little information, and while I am certainly keen to encourage a child's enthusiasm for the past, exhibitions should be multi-layered so as to inform an adult as well as a younger audience.

A further minor irritant is that the texts of the smaller cases are wrapped around the case in such a manner that they continue on more than one face, making it awkward to read when the room is crowded. More seriously, none of the archaeological material has museum accession numbers included with the text, which means that should a visitor wish to find out more about a particular object there is no means of doing so.

In addition, it is not immediately clear in the National Trust section of the exhibition which of the objects are genuine and which are reproductions. It is a further shame that the very advantages offered by these really excellent replicas are not exploited. The public are afforded no chance to handle any of the weapons for example: instead, they are all placed in the tableau of the burial chamber.

It is this tableau that forms the central and dominant feature of the exhibition and purports to show a life-size reconstruction of the central burial chamber of Mound One. Here lies the most controversial aspect of the exhibition as it shows a body, while no conclusive proof for the presence of a body has been established. The argument over the presence or absence of a body at Sutton Hoo has raged since the discovery of the ship-burial. There is evidence of metal-work believed to be coffin fittings, as well as the positioning of the belt set and shoulder clasps within the grave that are clearly taken to suggest a body. This, at least, has been used to justify the inclusion in the reconstruction of a clear plastic manikin representing the graves incumbent. However no evidence of a body has been found in Mound One, even though body shadows have been identified elsewhere at Sutton Hoo (Carver 1998: 137-153).

This is then a controversial interpretation of the evidence. Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England was an extraordinarily dangerous profession, and a violent death at the hands of internal political rivals or at the hands of other Anglo-Saxon kings was extremely common, as was the ritual mutilation of the slain. It is highly possible, then, that no body existed. Traditionally, this lack of clear evidence for a body has led to great caution being exercised in the interpretation of the burial chamber layout. The new exhibition, barely noting this controversy, boldly goes ahead and inserts the see-through corpse under a large, lurid, yellow blanket. At this point any pretence of scholarship vanishes in favour of entertainment value, and even then the archaeological evidence is strained to the very limit in order to justify it.

Lastly, the placement and location of the objects surrounding the body are presented as factual rather than interpretative. In short, it says this is how it is, rather than, this is how the evidence is currently interpreted and this is how this interpretation has altered

over time. The fact that the objects were placed in a burial chamber that had subsequently collapsed should have led to an explicit and oft repeated caveat; that archaeology is not an exact science.

The National Trust exhibition treats as hard fact an interpretative message that led one cynical companion to dub it "Carver-world". This is profoundly unfair, since although Professor Carver was a member of the advisory panel and the influence of his work is apparent on the information panels, it is clear that the central and dominating display of the burial chamber bears little relationship to his or anyone else's previous published interpretations of the site. This may be a result of the advisory panel's committee structure with the inherent problems of consensus or, more likely, because the National Trust's commercial need to provide the public with a fully dressed body overrides the more honest but less sexy answer: that it is impossible to determine the presence of a corpse with any certainty. The earlier interpretation of the site as a cenotaph is mentioned in the guide but not on the information panels, and the possibility that a burial chamber still exists, unexcavated beneath the ship, as in the case for Mound Two, is not even mentioned. Indeed the complete lack of an overt public endorsement from Professor Carver rather suggests to me that the site's principal living archaeologist is not entirely happy with the way in which his lifetime's work is being presented.

It is further surprising that the National Trust exhibition centre does not include a full-size model of the ship from Mound One, as originally envisaged by the Sutton Hoo Research Trust's management scheme in 1992 (Carver 1993: 39-41). A press release by the National Trust at the opening of the exhibition promised that, rather than a land-based replica, £300 000 would be spent on a sea-going replica (Kennedy 2002), even though an excellent half-scale vessel has already been constructed and is regularly sailed by Edwin and Joyce Gifford. As yet, however, there is no evidence that the proposed National Trust vessel is presently under construction as promised. The original plan, for a full-scale, land-based replica, would be far more accessible for the public; although how it could actually fit into the exhibition hall remains a mystery.

Despite the criticism already outlined, it is the lack of historical context that fundamentally undermines the educational content of the National Trust exhibition at Sutton Hoo. For example: the Sutton Hoo ship-burial is not contrasted or compared with the earlier ship-burials from nearby Snape. Similarly the 50km of linear earthworks in western East Anglia, which were constructed at least 100 years prior to the Sutton Hoo ship-burial, are only mentioned in passing on the very last panel. Without this regional historical context for East Anglia in the fifth and sixth centuries the exhibition is incomplete and skewed by its concentration on the seventh century ship-burial. An example of this lack of historical context is further demonstrated by the persistent use of the term 'Anglo-Saxon' throughout the exhibition without ever making it clear that this was a term completely unknown to the very people buried at Sutton Hoo. The provision of an historical context was possibly the role envisaged for the British Museum's exhibition, planned as a rolling programme of five different exhibitions. However with only 10% of the available exhibition space given over to the British Museum's display, an adequate contextualisation of Sutton Hoo can hardly be managed.

This section of the review has been wholly subjective; the fact that I am an archaeologist and a former member of staff at the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities of the British Museum, rather than a designer, could explain away my objections as mere prejudice. In order to balance this impression, it is necessary to shift from the subjective to the objective, and there is little more objective in life than hard cash and political reality. It is my intention, therefore, to widen my review of the National Trust's Sutton Hoo exhibition from an aesthetic point of view towards a brief economic and political critique.

In a BBC News On Line report dated Wednesday 13th March 2002, Kate Sussams, the National Trust Property Manager for Sutton Hoo, claimed that: "The centre provides great value for money" (BBC 2002). This claim is highly questionable; the real attractions at Sutton Hoo are the archaeological finds, and all of these have been lent by public museums with free access. The overwhelming majority of the treasures are from the British Museum, where they have been professionally conserved, stored, curated and displayed at the taxpayers' expense for the last 50 years. This requires us to ask the question: Where in all of this does the real public interest lie?

Sussam's claim about "value for money" must be set against other rather uncomfortable facts; the total amount of money spent by the Sutton Hoo Research Trust from 1965 to 1993 was £902 749.90 (Carver 1993) compared with the total amount spent on the Sutton Hoo exhibition of some £5 million; of which £3.6 million came from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Further, as already noted, not all the £5 million was spent on the actual heritage but also went towards commercial and support facilities. It would be very interesting to establish precisely how much of the £3.6 million in Heritage Lottery Funds were spent on the exhibition and how much subsidised the National Trust's commercial and tertiary activities.

A visit to Sutton Hoo in 2003 costs £4.00, an increase of 14% from the cost of a visit in 2002, and there are no concessions for students. In the winter of 2002, visiting the site when the exhibition centre was closed still cost £2.50, when prior to 1997 visitors and locals could go, unofficially, to visit the burial ground for free. It should also be noted that there is no public transport to the site and, although the nearest railway station is at Melton, there is no all weather, sign-posted and push-chair friendly footpath provided to access the site. This effectively makes the £2.50 winter parking fee an effective entrance charge.

In addition, in contrast to the large amount of funds available to the National Trust, the Sutton Hoo Research Trust has had to survive for years on a shoestring budget, or on the dubious largess of television companies. Public lottery funds have been lavished on subsidising the packaging and commercial exploitation of the site by its present landowners, the National Trust. At this point it should be noted that 95% of the British population are not National Trust members, that the National Trust are Britain's biggest landowners, and that the National Trust enjoyed a budget of over £303 million in 2002/3 (National Trust 2002/03: 30). Further, the National Trust enjoys significant and very serious commercial advantages when seeking funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

For example, to apply for up to £1 million in funding requires 10% to be found by the applicant, this rises to 25% if the bid is over £1 million. This means that even public bodies such as Suffolk County Council's Archaeology Service or the Norfolk County Council's Museums Service, let alone the Sutton Hoo Research Trust, are unable to access the larger grants for archaeological projects and exhibitions, simply because the initial capital investment is well beyond their financial resources. By contrast, the National Trust has no such problem raising the necessary capital. As a result, the National Trust is rapidly becoming a cultural juggernaut soaking up funding on an increasingly large scale to the disadvantage of other local groups and organisations. For example, in 2001/2 it received £11 million in direct grants, which increased to £29 million in the period 2002/3 (National Trust 2002/03: 30).

In its defence, the National Trust would argue that the exhibition has widened public access. However prior to 1997, many of those who visited Sutton Hoo did so unofficially, especially local people and certainly my own and other local families. Therefore no one actually knows the true number of visitors to Sutton Hoo prior to 1997, except those that were part of the guided tours around the site organised by the Sutton Hoo Research Trust. Indeed the development of Sutton Hoo has removed an important element from the site: its desolate isolation. This reminded the visitor that the site was a cemetery on the very edge of habitation, especially on a bleak autumnal day with a gale blowing in from the North Sea. I fear such a magical atmosphere has now been lost forever and made more unedifying by the ugly, unnecessary and intrusive observation platform.

The unofficial visits prior to 1997 challenge the claim made by Shorthose Russell Ltd., the National Trust's public relations firm, that only 4000 people a year visited the site prior to 1997. This claim is disingenuous, since 202 569 people visited Sutton Hoo in 2002/3, making it the eighth highest visitor numbers for any National Trust site (National Trust 2002/03: 64). During the same period, in excess of 4.5 million people visited the British Museum. It is therefore simply untrue to claim an improvement of access. The archaeological material found at the site, not the exhibition hall or a restaurant, are the real treasures of Sutton Hoo and its history. Even as an earthworks enthusiast I have to accept the reality of this fact.

Further serious issues hang over the National Trust's Sutton Hoo project. For example, the failure to preserve the northern section of the burial ground following its discovery during a pre-construction controlled soil strip conducted by the Suffolk County Council Archaeology Service between 1998-2000 (Baillie 2001). This is partially a failure by the statutory authority English Heritage to extend the scheduled area to include the rare ring-ditched cremation that was discovered. Questions also need to be asked as to why permission was given for a new exhibition hall, over this important burial and why English Heritage did not insist on a full excavation of the remainder of the site prior to its development. Furthermore, English Heritage have a lot of explaining to do about how the National Trust managed to get scheduled monument consent for the pointless viewing platform within the scheduled area.

However, in the final analysis, it is the dumbing-down of heritage with its history-lite approach to the past, demonstrated so amply by the National Trust exhibition and the growing inequality of access that is so objectionable. The past was once a collective experience, but it is rapidly becoming a commercial one, to the detriment of the public, a common sense of a shared history and the archaeology of the British Isles.

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