At its heart, the Sutton Hoo story tells the tale of a magnificent Anglo-Saxon ship burial and the archaeologists that discovered it many centuries later, just months before the outbreak of the Second World War. Other people’s stories are also woven through this landscape, as from the earliest hunter gatherers and prehistoric farmers right through to present day visitors, people have left their mark.

Discover more in this short guide to this layered landscape.
A Brief Sutton Hoo Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Middle to Late Neolithic (3,000-2,500 BC):</td>
<td>Scattered settlement with periodic occupation. Forest clearance.</td>
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<td>Early Bronze Age (2,000-1,600 BC):</td>
<td>Permanent settlement. Substantial field boundaries. Forest clearance and arable agriculture.</td>
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<td>Late Bronze Age (1,000-700 BC):</td>
<td>Fenced cattle enclosures, mound burial under car park c.1,100 BC.</td>
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<td>Middle to Late Iron Age (400 BC-43 AD):</td>
<td>Field-systems and drove ways. Arable and pastoral farming.</td>
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<td>Roman (43-410 AD):</td>
<td>Small settlement near Garden Field and field systems adapting Iron Age landscape. Cultivation continues in the Scheduled Monument area.</td>
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<td>6th Century (500-600 AD):</td>
<td>Burials in Garden Field and under the carpark at Sutton Hoo c.550-590. Mound burials begin on the Scheduled Monument c.590.</td>
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<td>7th Century (600-700 AD):</td>
<td>c.600-630 the two ship burials take place, Mounds 1 and 2. The last pagan burials at Sutton Hoo (Mound 14 and Burial 56) c.650.</td>
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<td>8th-11th Centuries:</td>
<td>Judicial executions and burials of criminals are carried out within and near to the Royal Burial Ground.</td>
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<td>Medieval:</td>
<td>c.13th century mounds were pasture. Later Middle Ages levelling by ploughing of mounds, field boundary cut through Mound 1.</td>
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<td>c.1600:</td>
<td>Robber pits were dug into the centre of many of the mounds and most of the grave goods were removed.</td>
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<td>1800s:</td>
<td>Ploughing of slopes and at some stages of burial mounds. 1860–antiquarian excavations of the Royal Burial Ground undertaken but no records made.</td>
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<td>May–August 1939:</td>
<td>Mound 1 is excavated; archaeologists discover the remains of a 27m long Anglo-Saxon ship burial with undisturbed burial chamber.</td>
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<td>1939-1946:</td>
<td>Sutton Hoo estate used as a military training ground. Anti-glider ditches are cut through the Royal Burial Ground.</td>
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<td>1965-1971:</td>
<td>A team from the British Museum re-excavate Mound 1.</td>
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<td>1983-1992:</td>
<td>Sutton Hoo Research Trust excavates one hectare of the Royal Burial Ground. ‘Sand bodies’ are excavated and interpreted as judicial killings dating from the 8th–11th C. The un–robbed burial of a warrior and his horse (Mound 17) is excavated.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000:</td>
<td>Pre-construction excavations beneath the High Hall exhibition and the Shop and Cafe buildings reveal a 6th century burial ground–potentially the parents and grandparents of those buried at the Royal Burial Ground.</td>
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The Great Ship Burial or The King’s Mound

Following the discoveries made the previous summer, Basil Brown returned to Sutton Hoo in 1939 and landowner Edith Pretty decided he should begin by excavating Mound 1, the largest of the burial mounds. No-one could quite have expected what was to follow however, as one of the greatest archaeological discoveries of all time was made on the eve of the Second World War.

Over that summer, archaeologists uncovered the fossil of a 27m long Anglo-Saxon ship peppered with rusty iron rivets, its timbers long since having rotted away due to the acidity of the soil. Despite robbing attempts having been made, at the centre of the ship was an undisturbed burial chamber and a total of 263 finds (many luxury items of exquisite craftsmanship made from gold, silver and other precious materials) were recovered. Some of the objects looked almost the same as the day that they were buried some 1,300 years earlier whilst others such as the iconic Sutton Hoo helmet, which had corroded and smashed into hundreds of pieces when the burial chamber collapsed, required piecing back together. In a great act of generosity, Edith Pretty donated the finds to the nation, care of the British Museum.

Due to the acidity of the soil, no body was discovered but the arrangement of grave goods and phosphate deposits indicated that this wasn’t a cenotaph. This cemetery has been interpreted as a royal burial ground for the Anglo-Saxon East Anglian ruling dynasty and whilst we will never know for certain, Rædwald has emerged as a likely candidate for this particular burial which is a potent piece of power poetry.

This discovery truly revolutionised our understanding of the Anglo-Saxons. You can learn much more about this burial and its discovery by visiting Sutton Hoo.
The Other Ship Burial

Mound 2 was the second burial mound that Basil Brown excavated in the summer of 1938. The first objects that were discovered were some pieces of iron, which Basil Brown identified as the remnants of ship rivets. There are only three known Anglo-Saxon ship burials in England; both Mounds 1 and 2 at Sutton Hoo, and one nearby at Snape suggesting a very localised practice.

More rivets followed and Basil found what he thought to be the shape of a boat, as well as a robber trench. A large oval pit had been dug in the late sixteenth century and the majority of the finds removed, before later ploughing had reduced the height of the mound. In 1860 a local newspaper reported that 'two bushels of iron screw-bolts' were found in an excavation at Sutton, possibly recovered from Mound 2.

Despite being robbed, fragments of finds found in 1938 tell us that this was a high status burial, broadly comparable in both date and status to Mound 1. Examples include pieces of blue glass from a jar (the only excavated grave in the cemetery to contain glass), the tip of a sword blade and evidence for at least one drinking horn.

Re-excavated between 1984-1988, the extent of the ship was determined to be much larger than originally first thought; a ship up to 24m long that had been rolled over a lavishly furnished burial chamber with a mound approximately 3-4m high constructed over the top. New technology such as chemical mapping revealed more about the burial and further finds were discovered, such as another gilt roundel and also a pair of roller-skates from Robert Pretty in 1938. As Mound 2 is the only burial mound to have a ring ditch (quarried to originally build the mound) calculations were made to re-build the mound to its anticipated original height in 1992. It is thought to originally have taken at least ten man-weeks (ten men working ten hour days for six or seven weeks) so a considerable effort to build such a memorial marker on the landscape.

Mound 3 was the first to be fully excavated by Basil Brown in the summer of 1938. Archaeologists found the remains of a 'wooden tray', upon which there were cremated remains from a human and a horse. Bagged together, we are now unable to say whether the cremated remains were originally separated, and some may have originally been placed in a decorated pot. There are various theories as to what the 'wooden tray' was; the end of a wooden bier (a stand on which a body or coffin is laid before burial), a trough, tree-trunk coffin or section of a dugout boat have all been suggested. Basil also re-excavated the 'robber shaft' that was originally dug c.1600. Some of the finds appear to have originally been placed on the funeral pyre, whilst others were later placed on or beside the bier. Finds included a carved limestone plaque of a winged figure possibly from Alexandria (now lost), the bronze lid of a ewer possibly from Nubia and an iron axe-head from a throwing axe or francisca.

Also part of the 1938 excavation season, Mound 4 had virtually been ransacked. This happened either via a central shaft during the sixteenth to seventeenth century campaign or along a trench dug from the east during the nineteenth century campaign, or perhaps both. Piecing together the fragments of evidence that remained, it appears to have been a cremation of a man, a woman and some animals to include a horse. The cremated remains were placed in a bronze bowl and either the bowl covered with textiles or the remains wrapped in textiles. The surviving fragments indicate textiles of good quality and some bear strong resemblance to the goose-down pillow from the Great Ship Burial, although the fragments of feather analysed here were from an adult bird. A solitary gaming counter was also discovered as well as a scrap of iron slag.
Mound 5

The Founder’s Mound

Thought to have been the earliest of all the early seventh century burial mounds, the individual buried in Mound 5 appears to have suffered a violent death; the skull has at least nine blade injuries. The body was cremated with animals (potentially cattle or horses) and the remains then wrapped in cloth and placed in a bronze bowl. The bowl was then placed in a pit and other objects added to include a piece of an ivory box with a sliding lid, silver vessel-mounts, a pair of iron shears, two bone combs and fragments of at least twelve bone gaming pieces. Like many of the other mounds, this mound was heavily ransacked by grave robbers at least twice and so little unfortunately now remains.

Mound 6

This individual was cremated with a number of animals, possibly a horse or cattle, sheep and pig. The remains were then wrapped in cloth and placed in a bronze bowl that was buried in the ground. Unfortunately as with so many of the mounds, this mound was robbed but in the disturbed area of the mound north of the robber trench, a singular strap ornament from a sword suspension system was found. If associated with this grave, the presence of this strap-mount implies that the grave once held a sword and likely other sword fittings. Other finds included bone gaming pieces (seemingly identical to those from Mound 5), pieces of bone facing from potentially two combs and a box, and very small fragments from possibly either a rod or wand.

Mound 7

Through robbing, this grave was very fragmentary but like Mounds 5 and 6 it was a cremation where the remains were wrapped or covered in textiles, placed in a copper-alloy bowl and then buried. The cremated bone was predominantly animal, fragments identified from horse, cattle, sheep or goat, pig and red deer. Finds included a glass bead (potentially from a sword), bone gaming counters and an iron knife. Investigated by nineteenth century antiquarians, archaeologists in 1989 found the well worn line that their wheel-barrows of spoil had traversed as well as a flight of steps.

What about mounds 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15 and 16?

Mounds 8-13 and 15 haven’t been excavated, and Mound 16 was originally thought to have been a burial mound but this is now in doubt. Archaeological investigation is all about learning the most, whilst causing the least amount of damage, and excavation is ultimately a destructive process. The last century has seen several archaeological excavations of Sutton Hoo’s burial mounds. Time is now needed to allow for the development of new techniques and future research to be driven by new ideas and questions. There are other areas of the Sutton Hoo site we know less about, which may focus future research, and as you have read many of Sutton Hoo’s burial mounds have been robbed. We are also utilising new technology and non invasive techniques e.g. geophysics, to see what they can reveal to us.

Mound 18

Almost completely destroyed by both robbing and ploughing, only traces of a burial in Mound 18 were left for archaeologists to discover. Mound 18 is thought to have been a human cremation where the cremated remains were wrapped in textile and placed in a copper-alloy bowl. Only part of a composite bone comb survives from the grave goods.
Mound 14

The Queen’s Mound

Almost completely destroyed by grave robbers, this is the only excavated burial mound that could be readily identified as that of a woman. The grave robbers appear to have been interrupted in their efforts by a rain-storm, as the soil filling the shaft they had dug was very fine and silty peppered with small fragments of former riches which had seemingly slipped away from prying hands into the sandy soil below.

This high-status woman seems to have lain on a bearer (a bed or a coffin); 87 iron tacks were found which are thought to have upholstered this wooden furniture. The bearer was placed within a timber-lined burial chamber, which was then covered by a mound approximately 14m in diameter.

Grave goods included a châtelaine (a set of chains and fittings worn suspended from a belt), a silver framed leather pouch, a silver bowl, at least one silver-mounted wooden drinking cup, possibly a casket, silver dress fittings and embroidered and tablet woven textiles.

The textiles were found in a crumpled condition, suggesting they were worn for burial. This woman seems to have worn two sleeved gowns (one inside the other), both made from linen and with worked ornamental cuffs. The mannequin of The Queen in the High Hall exhibition at Sutton Hoo gives an indication of how this woman may have been dressed. The remains of a brooch pin were found in the Mound 14 grave, suggesting that some form of brooch was worn, but the brooch on the mannequin is a replica of one found at nearby Sutton.

Thought to date from around the middle of the seventh century, Mound 14 is thought sequentially to be the last of the high-status burials at Sutton Hoo.

A copper-alloy diamond-shaped pendant from the châtelaine.

Mound 17

The Horseman’s Mound

Barely discernible as a mound in the 20th century and excavated in 1991, Mound 17 is the only other excavated burial mound apart from Mound 1 to not have been successfully robbed and found intact.

Grave robbers had attempted to rob this burial mound, but they had dug in the centre of the burial mound in-between two graves. One grave was the burial of a man aged about 25 years old, the other grave was his horse, about five years old and fourteen hands high who was sacrificed and buried alongside his owner.

Laid to rest in an oak tree trunk coffin, this man of high social standing was buried with grave goods befitting of a warrior; a simple pattern welded sword, shield and two spears. As well as garnets found set into the cloisonné work of the pyramidal sword mounts and the scabbard buckle, a collection of uncut garnets were found possibly originally from the warrior’s leather purse or pouch. Were they good luck tokens? This man was also buried with a miniature feasting kit including a copper-alloy cauldron, wooden tub, a pot and small bowl for drinking as well as some lamb chops placed in a bag. Perhaps a picnic for his journey to the afterlife. Fragments of sphagnum moss and couch grass were found beneath the lamb chops. A bone comb appears to have been dropped or placed on the tree trunk coffin-lid at the last minute as it was found standing almost vertically. Perhaps one of the mourners suddenly remembered that this warrior was without his comb and it was a reminder to keep clean and presentable in the journey and adventures to follow.

Also buried was the horse’s ornate bridle made of gilded copper-alloy axe-shaped pendants and fittings, decorated with animal interlace and human masks. The original objects from this burial are on display in the High Hall exhibition at Sutton Hoo, on long term loan from the British Museum.

Copper-alloy, garnet and ivory curved scabbard buckle.

Gilded copper-alloy roundel with associated axe-shaped pendant.
Second World War anti-glider ditches

Following the outbreak of the Second World War, a network of anti-glider ditches were dug across the country on open areas of land, which were potentially vulnerable to invasions by enemy gliders. The Royal Burial Ground was also briefly requisitioned as a training ground and tanks were driven over the burial mounds—thankfully a stop was put to this.

Execution graves

Excavations during the 1980s revealed burials that sharply contrasted with the pagan burial mounds raised for Anglo-Saxon royal dead centuries earlier.

Thirty-nine graves were carefully uncovered in two distinctive groups. These deviant burials are thought to date from between the eighth to the eleventh centuries. The acid soil had dissolved the bodies and bones of these individuals, but sand fossils were left behind. A permanent record of some of these sand bodies was made by making latex moulds from which a cast could be produced.

Each grave revealed a body in a position uncomfortable, distorted or grotesque. Some had been beheaded, some buried sharing the same grave, some buried face down and some in a position suggesting that their wrists or ankles had been bound. These were not peaceful burials, they were victims of execution. Four post holes arranged in a rectangular shape are thought to potentially have held the posts of the gallows which some of these individuals fell victim to. We shall never know each person’s story but the dating would suggest that perhaps these people opposed and fell foul of a new regime; East Anglia’s kings were largely Christian at this time.

In the late medieval period, Mound I was reduced in height by ploughing and the west end of the burial mound (the stern side) was truncated as field boundaries were also established. In the sixteenth or seventeenth century, robbers dug through what they believed to be the centre of the mound but missed the burial chamber by a couple of metres, possibly thanks to this ploughing. In the early nineteenth century, the mound was again ploughed leaving a lynchets or bank running along the western edge.

Other Anglo-Saxon burials

It hasn’t been possible to explore all of the stories and people connected to this landscape in this guide, but here are some others. Buried in a coffin less than 1.2m long originally covered by a small mound, Burial 12 (lying near Mound 5) was the grave of an Anglo-Saxon child of no more than seven years old who was accompanied by a miniature spear. Nearby Burials 15 and 16 have been interpreted as the graves of a teenage boy and girl respectively. The former appears to have been buried on a section of a boat or dugout and equipped with an iron knife and a leather belt with bronze buckle inlaid with a garnet. The latter appears to have been lain upon a box-bed with grave goods including a châtelaine with three latch-lifters, a small knife and leather pouch, as well as a hair tie with a white bead.

We hope you enjoyed reading this guide and learning more about Sutton Hoo. For more information and details of how to visit please visit our website.

nationaltrust.org.uk/suttonhoo