

## East Anglia

**Angus Wainwright**

REGIONAL ARCHAEOLOGIST

SUFFOLK

### Sutton Hoo:

#### Summoning up spirits A/S

To create an exhibition on an archaeological site is to perform the role of a medium interpreting the garbled whisperings of the spirit world for an expectant audience. To what extent does one make coherent messages from the partially preserved acts of people in the past in an attempt to make them real to people today? To what extent does one retain the ambivalence inherent in these messages and allow one's audience to interpret them according to their twenty-first-century experiences? One also acts as a conduit between other worlds. In the academic world there are many opinions about a site like Sutton Hoo, whether focused on detail such as the origin and purpose of individual objects or the generalities such as the significance of the site in the history of Europe. An exhibition must be like a tourist guide to this complex and changing world, but a guide for a visit of only half an hour. Here the choice is between following in the footsteps of a single explorer, delving into the back streets and by-ways of only one town, or presenting just the pretty bits of the whole country.

*Artist, K. Wilson, and Archaeologist, A. Wainwright, discuss one of the illustrations for the Sutton Hoo Exhibition.*

THE NATIONAL TRUST



*An artist's conception of the burial in Mound Two at Sutton Hoo.*

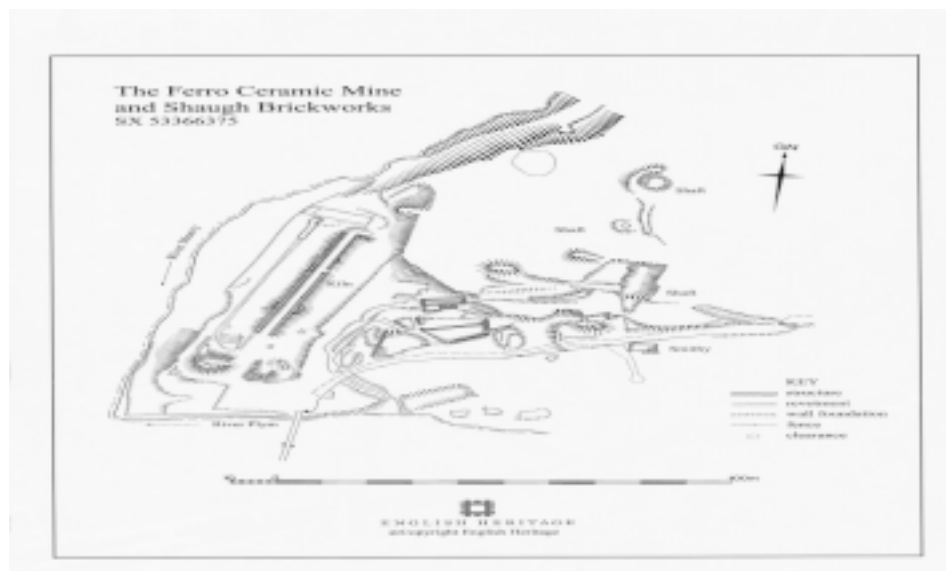
KELVIN WILSON

Our exhibition uses reconstructions of many objects. Conjecture will always play a part in their making, whether within a small range of possibilities in the case of well-preserved and well-researched objects like the familiar helmet, or within a much wider range of possibilities in the case of very badly preserved objects such as the textiles. We also made the decision to use reconstruction drawings throughout the display. The intention of these is to convey much of what is contained in the text non-verbally, and to show many of the objects in use rather than in a modern museum context. The reconstruction drawing is an under-rated tool in the exploration of our understanding of the past. More often than not these illustrations are only used to adorn the cover of a report, or in 'popular' books. Archaeologists are quite happy to conjecture in writing, but less happy to see these conjectures



*Blacksmith, C. Blytheman, surrounded by replica objects from Sutton Hoo.*

THE NATIONAL TRUST



made real by an artist. This caution is perhaps well founded – a good illustration is extremely persuasive. Old visualisations of the past can be very difficult to dislodge, even when new information becomes available. If properly used a reconstruction drawing can be another way of representing information, allowing the reader to understand and review the conclusions of the writer.

Our brief to the artist was to try to make the Anglo-Saxons come alive. Our text discusses such things as the rites of burial and the role of kings in society. In these sorts of discussions it is all too easy to forget that we are dealing with real people. In each illustration is a situation chosen to illustrate a particular theme of the exhibition. These situations were clarified in discussion with the artist. They may be thought of as stills from a

film; sometimes we recognise the stars but are not clear what they are doing, and in others we may not know the characters but the meaning of the action is clear. Sometimes what we know about Sutton Hoo and Anglo-Saxon society has enabled us to be quite clear about what is happening; in a scene where the evidence is less clear we have deliberately introduced a number of possible interpretations. The clothes and accoutrements of the characters have engendered most debate. In discussions with experts in the field we have tried to come up with solutions which fit the evidence for the period. However, our ideas are just one amongst many possibilities and I hope that we might spark off some debate about seventh-century costume. It is also important that the faces and carriage of the figures should be correct - what we know from archaeology and history helps us even with this.

The artist having brilliantly realised these worlds, it is important that the visitor should have some understanding of the small collection of clues that went towards their creation. This is done through presenting some of the illustrations next to the fragments of evidence we have used as our source. The whole process demands constant discussion with the artist and frequent checking at every stage of production, all the time having a care to allow the artist to express his own imagination and flair within the constraints of the available evidence.

As reported briefly in the last Review (*Annual Archaeological Review No 8, 1999-2000*) excavations carried out by the Archaeological Field Team of Suffolk County Council in advance of the construction of the visitor facilities at Sutton Hoo revealed part of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery. This cemetery is situated on a bluff or *hoo*, 500 metres north of the barrow cemetery. The exposed part of the cemetery was composed of nineteen inhumations and seventeen cremations probably dating from the sixth to early seventh centuries. An unusual feature of eight of the cremations was a surrounding small ring-ditch or slot and one of them was also accompanied by a hanging-bowl. Thirteen of the inhumations contained weapons, at least one having a shield adorned with appliqué. The discovery of such fine objects in this cemetery and the earlier discovery of an Eastern Mediterranean bucket nearby would tend to suggest an unusually high proportion of high status burials although in no way approaching the status of the barrow cemetery.

#### OTHER PROJECTS

##### **(Cambridgeshire)**

###### **Wimpole – continuing survey & analysis**

Archaeological survey of remaining medieval settlement area, English Heritage.

Excavation to confirm form of early eighteenth-century summerhouses and details of walled garden structures, Cambridge Archaeological Field Group.

Building recording of remaining eighteenth-century features at The Gothic Folly, English Heritage.

##### **(Essex)**

###### **Bourne Mill**

Photogrammetric survey of this fine seventeenth-century, Dutch-style fishing lodge. The lodge was converted into a corn-mill hence the name.

Survey by PCA Geomatics .

###### **Hatfield Forest**

Continuing archaeological survey of whole estate, English Heritage.

##### **(Norfolk)**

###### **Blickling**

Excavation at a possible medieval manor site to confirm identification and monitor plough damage, Norfolk Archaeological Unit. Survey of associated earthworks.

###### **Oxburgh**

Commencement of major analytical survey of this important late medieval house, English Heritage.

##### **(Suffolk)**

###### **Ickworth Park**

Continuing archaeological survey of whole estate, English Heritage.

###### **Melford Hall**

Commencement of major analytical survey of this Tudor/Jacobean house, Historic Building Surveys.