



*A View looking across the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Sutton Hoo.*

JOE CORNISH/NTPL

## East Anglia

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### **Sutton Hoo - The visitors arrive!**

A/S 

In March 2002, after a moving ceremony presided over by the poet Seamus Heaney, the National Trust opened the visitor centre at Sutton Hoo. Four years after the Trust was given the site, the doors were opened to the visitors and the moment came to see what the public thought of our efforts (see Annual Archaeological Review nos 6-9). It is difficult to describe how moving this event was. Four years of effort in trying to make a difficult subject accessible to the average visitor, with at the same time a constant,



*Seamus Heaney and Kate Sussoms holding a reconstruction of the Anglo-Saxon helmet, at the opening of the Visitor Centre, March 2002.*

A. WAINWRIGHT/NT

gnawing doubt as to whether anybody would turn up; perhaps we, who were working on the project, were the only people interested? Well, it looks like this worry was unfounded, as it seems that visitor numbers for the year may reach 200,000, putting the site in the top division of National Trust attractions.

Until we have the results of our visitor survey, it will be difficult to be certain how successful we are being in our prime objectives of firstly making the scholarship on the site accessible to the public and secondly doing some much-needed public relations work for the unloved Anglo-Saxons. So far, informal reaction seems to be generally good. What is most encouraging is that, despite what some critics of the project said, visitors are coming in such numbers, showing that there is a thirst for knowledge of archaeology and the distant past. It is also clear that well-designed and carefully written traditional exhibitions, telling interesting and intellectually challenging stories, can still bring in the visitors. Conventional wisdom told us that few visitors would spend more than half an hour in the exhibition and that they would read very little of the text. It is a tribute to the effort that went into the definition of the themes and subjects before the writing began, as well as to the skills of the writer and designer, that the visitors are drawn into the text and follow it to the end. Many visitors spend more than two hours there.

The temporary loan of objects from the great ship-grave under Mound One has been a great draw. No photograph can ever capture the exquisite quality and glamour of these objects when seen in the flesh. Through a concordat with the British Museum we are now developing a programme of temporary thematic exhibitions, to display objects from Sutton Hoo and elsewhere. Perhaps this will establish a precedent

to be followed on other sites whose artefacts form part of national collections. These exhibitions give us the scope to delve into some subjects in greater depth, and enable the specialist curators to explain the latest scholarship to a wide audience. In this way we hope that the exhibition will contribute both to the public understanding of the period and also to ongoing academic debate.

It is clear that there is a thirst for knowledge about the Anglo-Saxon period, which the exhibition is fostering, as sales of books on Anglo-Saxon themes are selling in large quantities in our shop. In fact the shop sells more books than any other in the National Trust East Anglia region. The guidebook is also a best seller. This phenomenon indicates that there is a potential for developing other ways of interpreting the period for visitors in the future. Our joint aim with our partners at West Stow Anglo-Saxon Village of making East Anglia the place to come to understand the Anglo-Saxon period may yet be achieved, although we will have to monitor the degree to which the two sites compete for visitors.

The management of the site has always been a worry. The nature of the sandy soil meant that we have had to restrict access to avoid erosion. At the moment only groups on guided tours can enter. This decision has paid off, as even with these restrictions in place, the turf is only just withstanding the footfalls. If we had allowed free access at the beginning we would eventually have had to impose a restriction midway through the season which would have resulted in widespread protest. The potential disappointment of the visitors owing to the lack of access is allayed by interpretation that explains the potential erosion problem, and appeals to their newly gained appreciation of the importance of the site. A very successful



Visitors at the new exhibition building at Sutton Hoo.

A. WAINWRIGHT/NT



The first visitors view the exhibition centre at Sutton Hoo.

A. WAINWRIGHT/NT

programme of guided tours also helps in this respect. The tours are run by a dedicated team of volunteers drawn from members of the Sutton Hoo Society. The Society is primarily made up of local enthusiasts who developed a good deal of expertise over the years before the National Trust came on the scene.

A future challenge for the site will be to keep the visitors coming, using new and more adventurous forms of interpretation while

maintaining the academic credentials, which have been so carefully built into the main exhibition. Perhaps one day more archaeological research will take place in the environs of the cemetery, transforming our vision of the place, and meaning that our painstakingly created exhibition will have to be demolished and rewritten. However, at the moment it is all we can do to deal with the pleasant problem of too many visitors.

OTHER PROJECTS

(CAMBRIDGESHIRE)

**Wimpole**

Excavation of early and mid eighteenth-century garden features, to confirm the details shown on various contemporary garden proposal plans. Cambridge Archaeological Field Group.

(ESSEX)

**Hatfield Forest**

Continuing archaeological survey of whole estate. English Heritage.

(NORFOLK)

**Blickling**

Further excavations of Medieval Manor site. Possible building locations identified as fish ponds. Community project. Norfolk Archaeological Unit.

**Oxburgh**

Continuation of major building survey. English Heritage.

(SUFFOLK)

**Ickworth**

Continuing archaeological survey of whole estate. English Heritage.

Survey of eighteenth-century gentry house in advance of conversion to new use. Adam Menuge.

**Melford Hall**

Continuation of major building survey. English Heritage.

**Sutton Hoo**

Foreshore survey, part of major coastal zone survey. Suffolk Archaeological Unit.