

The world-famous Sutton Hoo helmet.



AUDIENCE WITH A KING

Ian Lloyd has been to Suffolk to marvel at the lavish lifestyle of Raedwald, King of East Anglia, whose last resting place is at Sutton Hoo.



The King's magnificent belt buckle.

It was the summer of 1937, and recently widowed Edith Pretty was deep in thought. From her rambling Edwardian home, she looked out over wooded slopes and heathland that rolled down to the River Deben in the distance.

Edith was aware of a presence on her estate. She was a deep believer in spiritualism and the afterlife, and knew her land included a cluster of ancient burial mounds, covered in bracken and gorse.

Could the mounds hold a secret?

The museum in Ipswich agreed to send local archaeologist Basil Brown to excavate the site.

What Brown and his team eventually discovered at Sutton Hoo would prove to be one of the most amazing finds of all time.

Edith's estate is tucked away in deepest Suffolk, a few miles east of Ipswich and not far from the coast. Today the National Trust cares for it, and it has a new visitor centre.

After a Treasure Trove inquest in August, 1939, the treasures of Sutton Hoo were legally handed over to Mrs Pretty, who generously left them to the nation on the understanding they would be exhibited in Suffolk.

For years this request was ignored, as the finds remained on loan to the British Museum.

THE new visitor centre means that a rotating exhibition of the treasures can be seen, and for the first time a few can return home, to the part of East Anglia where they lay undisturbed around the body of their owner for thirteen centuries.

It's over twenty years since I first became aware of Sutton Hoo. If you ever read any Anglo-Saxon history, you'll find any book on the subject will illustrate the Sutton Hoo finds.

I just had to go there.

The exhibitions were changing over the week I went, unfortunately, so things were a bit thin on the treasure front, but there's a permanent display as well as a film about the site.

This is where we meet the owner of those marvellous goods for the first time. Like Mrs Pretty, he believed in the afterlife, and was buried with everything he might need there.

We see him now, lying surrounded by swords, shields, helmet, furs, even a chess board!

The latest thinking is that this man was not merely a great lord, but a king — and we even know



King Raedwald's goods.

his name; Raedwald, King of East Anglia.

I was keen to join a tour party to see the actual burial site, which has been excavated several times since Basil Brown started things off. The mounds are now more like dents in the ground!

I was pleasantly surprised by the number of visitors, about twenty in my group alone, and covering all ages.

And this on a day when the easterly wind was making its presence felt. The word hoo comes from the Anglo-Saxon haugh, meaning a high place, especially a hillside like the one we were about to see, so no wonder it was a tad chilly.

Our guide, one of the volunteers from the Sutton Hoo Society, was Jen, and she started with a warning.

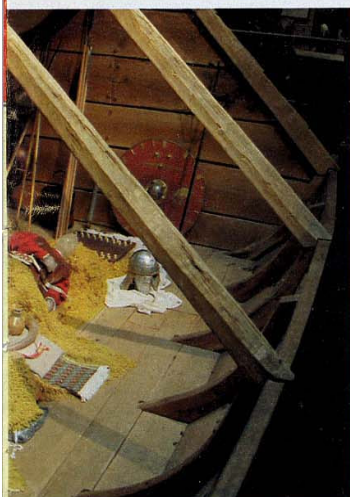
"I'm afraid the rabbits have gone on excavating long after the archaeologists stopped, so do be careful where you walk!"

We weren't about to plummet twenty feet because of a few houseproud bunnies.

"Work began on the site in the



On the vi



ready for the afterlife.

summer of 1938," Jen told us, "when Basil Brown opened three of the mounds. Sadly, all had been looted centuries ago, but Mound Two still contained iron rivets, which suggested there must have been a boat buried there.

"In those days there were still pagan burials, and a pagan would need his boat to sail into the afterlife, though Christianity was becoming widespread, too.

"And we know these graves must have been of important people, since only chieftains were buried with their treasure around them in their boat."

"Where's the boat, then?" one of the children in the group wanted to know.

"Well, it was completely buried, so only the mound would have been visible. But the sandy soil here is acidic, so the boat and anyone lying in it would completely disintegrate over time."

What would have been left?

"Markings in the soil where people or possessions would have lain."

These indentations were still



ing platform.

intact, so a fibreglass cast could be taken of the grave during one of the later excavations.

We were shown a cast, lying in what they call a box tomb.

"I can't see him. Where is he?" a frustrated little voice asked, so Mum took the children back to the visitor centre and missed the best bit.

That's undoubtedly Mound One, where Basil found more rivets. This time he realised they lay in a pattern, so he guessed, rightly, that they must still be in the place they would have been when the ship was buried.

The wood had long gone, but by careful digging he managed to unearth the ghost of the ship in the soil. A cast could be made, and for the first time historians could see for themselves how an Anglo-Saxon boat was put together.

"Not that this was a new one," Jen reckoned. "The way the rivets lay at one point suggested that this particular boat had been patched up on one side."

So did the King want his favourite boat to carry him onward, or was his family simply the saving type?

There were signs that robbers had tried to find this treasure trove, too, but Basil, egged on by Mrs Pretty, followed her favourite medium's advice and kept digging.

Painstakingly, Basil and his excavators uncovered the long catalogue of goods the King needed in his next life.

There's an intricately worked gold belt buckle, weighing a pound, and still ready for use. There are weapons, and silver



Basil Brown leads the original dig.

bowls. Fragments of his superbly decorated helmet survive, as well as his shield, and drinking cups.

There's a cauldron to brew up something to put in the cups, and a lyre for musical accompaniment in the Great Hall — every luxury a royal would need!

Back in 1939, Mrs Pretty realised security was essential, and the police stood guard. Experts from the British Museum were also on hand to advise.

With war imminent, they decided to store the artefacts with much else from the Museum down in the London Underground for the duration. It all survived intact, to prove our Dark Age ancestors were far from savages — they possessed the highest skills in art and craft.

After the tour I walked round the estate, and at the wooden platform where you can look down on the mounds, I made a discovery.

Apart from the dents in the landscape made by the excavations, I was intrigued by a long, straight ditch, quite clearly visible.

This, I found, was comparatively recent — an anti-glider invasion precaution from 1940!

Back to the visitor centre and the twenty-first century. In the

restaurant, you can eat on an Anglo-Saxon theme, if you wish, but I settled for a less romantic egg baguette.

Before the visitor centre was built, the council took the chance to do a dig — and found another cemetery, even earlier than Raedwald's.

Apart from that, though, some of the mounds here remain deliberately unexplored. With new techniques constantly arising, it's been decided to leave something for future generations to discover at Sutton Hoo.

Who knows what they'll find?

The End.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?
Sutton Hoo is signposted on the A1152, north of Woodbridge in Suffolk, and is open daily from March to September from 10 to 5 — hours and days vary in low season. The cost to adults is £4, children £2, and if you arrive by bike or on foot, there's a reduction. Group bookings of more than 15 cost £3.50 per head, and National Trust members who show their cards get in free. Tel. 01394 389700 for further information.



Gateway to the visitor centre.