



The Unearthing Of Sutton Hoo

The year was 1939. Britain was facing the threat of war. The drone of spitfire engines filled the air. However, in one small corner of Suffolk, all eyes were on the ground. Here, on the sprawling estate called Sutton Hoo, an amazing discovery had been made. It was a find that would help historians understand Anglo-Saxon life, beliefs and traditions.

The dig was started by the landowner, Edith Pretty. She had a long interest in archaeology. She had visited other sites such as the pyramids in Egypt, and Pompeii – the city once buried under volcanic ash. She was curious about the burial mounds on her property. She employed a local archaeologist Basil Brown to investigate.

The team had already made some impressive finds in the year running up to 1939. They found iron axe heads, parts of weapons, plaques and fragments of pottery. However, the best was yet to come. It was the estate gardener who first found something unusual. It was part of a ship. This was especially strange since Sutton Hoo was uphill from the river. The team carefully scraped the earth away. Gradually, the imprint of an entire ship was revealed. There were also shining gold treasures and precious artefacts.

Edith Pretty called in more experts. They were astounded by what they saw. The size and contents suggested that this had to have been the burial of someone special. Ship burials were only given to important people. The large ship would have been dragged up the hill and then buried in a trench. A chamber was placed inside for the coffin and all the treasures. The objects within seemed to suggest power. There was an intricate helmet and impressive weapons for example. They were decorated with gemstones from as far away as modern-day Turkey and Sri Lanka. They hinted at wealth and connection.

Was this a king perhaps? Coins inside allowed the burial to be dated to the 7th century. Historians have suggested that this could be the final resting place of King Raedwald of East Anglia. Whether it is indeed Raedwald, the discoveries at Sutton Hoo are hugely important. They have helped fill the gaps in our understanding of the Anglo-Saxons. Previously, the era had been called 'the Dark Ages'. People thought that the Anglo-Saxons were a backwards people. Sutton Hoo cast a light on these so-called Dark Ages. It showed



that the Anglo-Saxons were skilled craftspeople and artists. It proved that they were connected through trade with the rest of the world. It revealed the wealth and power of the leaders.

Finally, it showed how beliefs were spreading and changing. The burial is similar to those of the pagan religion that the Anglo-Saxons brought from Germany. However, there are also Christian symbols. It shows how England was on the cusp of its Christian conversion in the 7th century. All this paints a picture of a complex and sophisticated culture.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. What impression does the word sprawling give about the Sutton Hoo estate?
2. Which word means small parts or pieces of something?
3. Only an imprint of the ship was found. What does this mean?
4. What is the name for a man-made object from the past like the ones that were found at Sutton Hoo?
5. What phrase in the final paragraph tells us that England was changing?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

E

How did the writer try to engage the reader at the start of the text?

R

Who first found the boat?

I

What evidence is there that Edith Petty and Basil Brush knew this was an important find?

R

Where were the gemstones from?

S

What made archaeologists think that the burial might be of King Raedwald?