

HERITAGE CIRCLE

David Phelan, Sutton Hoo and its Treasures

David Phelan gave an interesting talk to the July meeting of the Heritage Circle when he explained how Sutton Hoo, near Woodbridge, was excavated and described the treasures found there.

Sutton Hoo was part of the estate of a wealthy widow, Edith Pretty, who encouraged Ipswich Museum to investigate the 18 mounds which were created by the Anglo-Saxons for the burial or cremation of important people. Basil Brown, who lived in Rickinghall, led the excavation in 1939. He was a very talented man who was largely self-educated.

When the excavation began there was little expectation of making significant finds as most sites have been robbed of their treasures in past centuries. However, Mound 1 was different. A medieval field boundary wall had been built across the burial chamber and had protected it from theft. Basil Brown initially found iron ship rivets and eventually uncovered an 88ft Saxon ship which was the burial place of Raedwald, King of the Angles who died c.625CE. The ship's timbers had rotted away but their shape was maintained by very hard sand. There was a burial chamber which was 12ft high in the middle of the ship which contained many treasures. At first, there was no sign of a body. It was thought that the ship was a cenotaph, a place of adoration. However, when the levels of phosphate were found, the excavators identified where the body had lain. Over time the body had been decomposed by the highly acidic soil.

The Anglo-Saxons had arrived in England after 410CE when the Roman legions had been recalled to defend the Empire against the attacks of German tribes. This period of history used to be called The Dark Ages but is now known more accurately as the Age of Migration. They were attracted to East Anglia by its fertile land, its temperate climate, and its good system of rivers. There were lots of opportunities for these tribesmen from Northern Germany to build a new life after they had made the perilous journey across the North Sea in their small ships. They were not a warlike people. They were farmers and craftsmen who traded with their neighbours in Europe.

The Anglo-Saxons believed in an after life and so when an important person died their family placed objects in their grave which they would need in the next world. Raedwald was a very important king. He ruled East Anglia but was regarded as a king above other kings, a Bretwalda. This suggests that he was very wealthy and the treasures found in his burial chamber reflect this high status. The treasures are now on show in the British Museum. The centrepiece is a magnificent helmet which was reconstructed from many fragments. There was a ceremonial shield decorated with gold, silver and garnets. Other items included a shoulder clasp, a sword belt and silver bowls. They are all very intricate and beautiful. The workmanship is exquisite. Some of these objects are likely to have been made locally as a recent excavation of Raedwald's palace at Rendlesham has found evidence of a metal workshop. Others, like the bowls, have been brought to site from Constantinople, possibly as gift when Raedwald converted to Christianity.

David Phelan emphasized the importance of Sutton Hoo as an archaeological site. It is the most magnificent treasure find in Britain. It shows the mix of influences upon Saxon society in the 7th Century CE. Aspects of Roman culture are discernible, as well as pagan and Christian influences. It indicates the extensive trading links with Europe and the Mediterranean. For example, the garnets used for decoration came from Sri Lanka. Similarly, the period was not a 'Dark Age' as there was extensive cultural exchange with other parts of the world.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 28 August when Barbara McElroy will give a talk entitled *The Story of a Suffolk Bevan Boy*. New members and visitors are very welcome. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website,

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