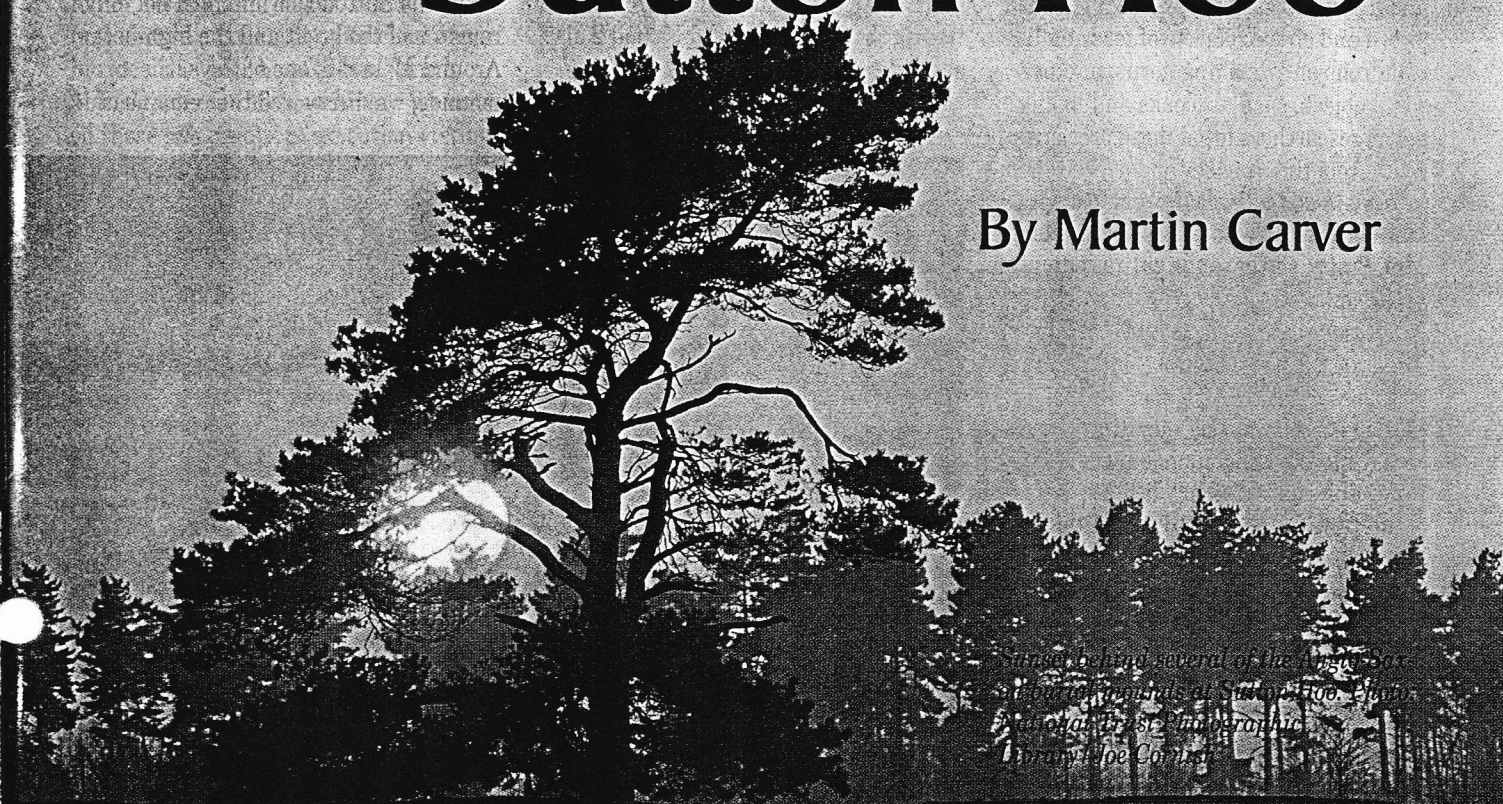


# The Discovery at Sutton Hoo

By Martin Carver



In 1938, Mrs. Edith Pretty lived in a large white Edwardian mansion overlooking the River Deben at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, on the east coast of England. Her husband had recently died, and she had sought consolation in the consultation of a medium. Some say it was her interest in the occult, and others her interest in archaeology, that led to the investigation of a little group of humps and bumps that she could see outside her window further along the river bank. Her archaeologist, Basil Brown, set to work with a will, trenching three of the mounds in the first season. Each one proved to have been already dug out, but he could tell from the scraps that survived that they had been the sites of An-

glo-Saxon burials of the 7th century.

The following year, Edith Pretty asked Basil to open the largest of the mounds, the famous "Mound 1." With the assistance of the gamekeeper and a gardener from the estate, Brown dug a long trench running from east to west. Within a few days the little team had found some rusty iron bolts, which Basil happily recognized as examples of rivets used to hold together the planking of ancient ships. They soon began to recognize traces of the ship itself: black dust where oak planks had once been and rusty orange lumps where the rivets lay in position. Working methodically and carefully with trowel and brush and widening the trench as they went, they revealed the

outline of a ship 27 metres long. At its centre lay a dark rectangle—the remains of a collapsed wooden burial chamber.

The summer of 1939 was not an ideal moment for a major scientific excavation. War threatened to erupt, and the hastily assembled team of archaeologists awaiting their call-up included some of the great names of the following decades: Stuart Piggott, later professor at Edinburgh; Peggy Guido, curator of Devezes Museum; and W.F. Grimes, professor at the Institute of Archaeology in London. Their director was Charles Phillips, fellow of Selwyn College, Cambridge. Together with Basil Brown, this team excavated from the chamber, in an astonishing ten days, 267 objects of gold,

silver, bronze, iron, textile, feathers, and fur. The finds included objects of great value such as a solid gold buckle; objects of exceptional beauty like polychrome jewellery and shoulder-clasps of gold inset with red garnets and worked into patterns of interlaced animals; objects of ritual significance like a mysterious whetstone with images of human faces and a stag; objects of war like a jewelled sword and shield; objects of feasting like cauldrons and drinking horns; and personal objects such as cloaks and linens.

The researchers lifted these precious relics from the chamber and packed them into boxes and tobacco tins padded with moss. Although by law they belonged to Mrs. Pretty, she gave the entire contents of the "million-pound grave" to the British Museum. The objects had scarcely arrived there when war broke out, and they were moved, along with many of the British Museum's most important possessions, into the London underground for protection against enemy bombs.

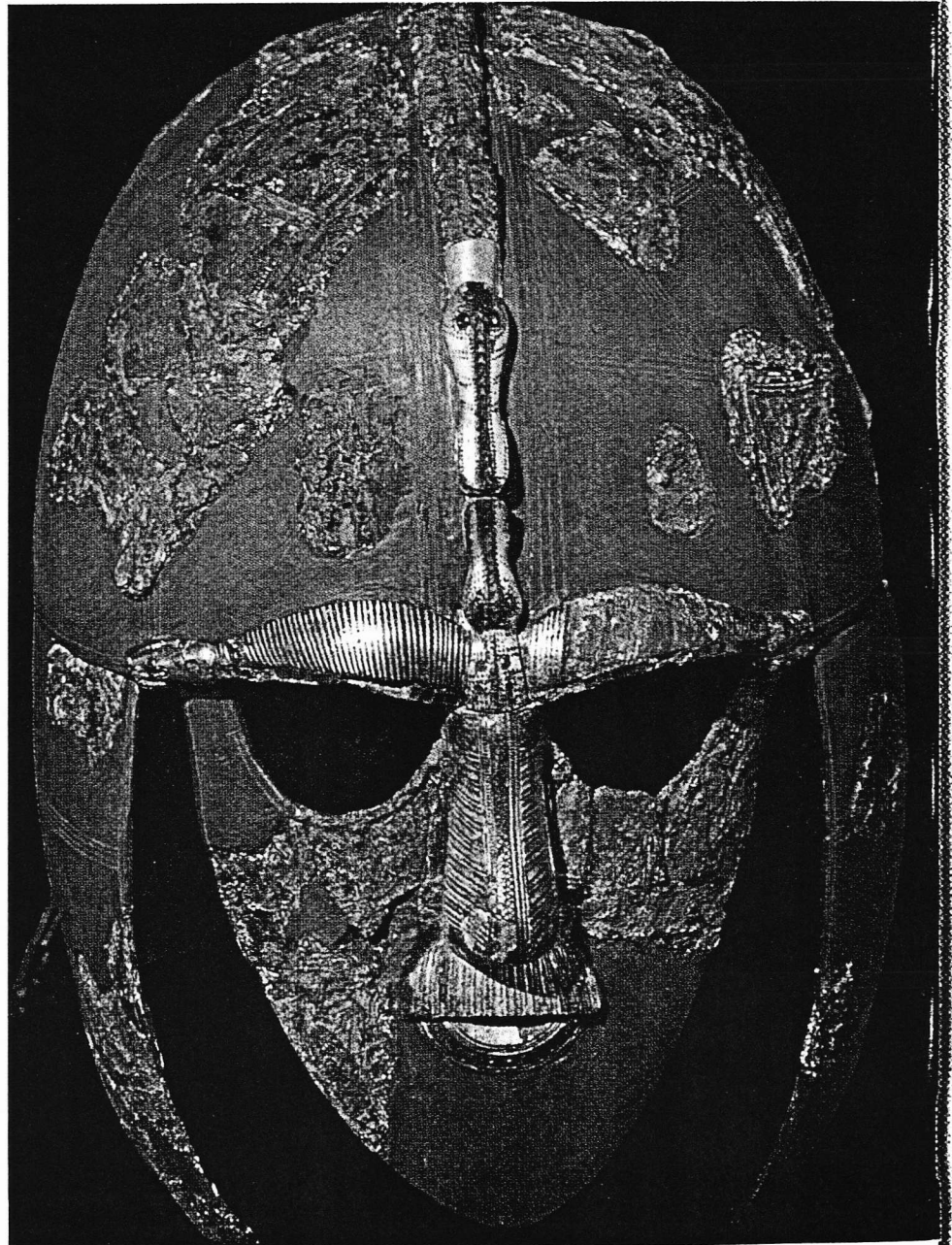
After the war, Rupert Bruce-Mitford completed the excavation of Mound 1 and explored the site's prehistory. A third campaign began in 1983, under my own direction, with the aim of mapping the cemetery and placing the ship-burial in its cultural and historical context. We opened a great cruciform transect which exposed seven burial mounds and nearly a hectare of open ground between them. Most of the mounds proved to have been opened before, but one, Mound 17, remained intact. It contained the burial of a young man in a coffin with his sword, spears, shield, cauldron, and haversack. Just to the west of the coffin lay a pile of small metal fittings from a horse's bridle. Although the previously disturbed graves yielded less exciting finds, enough evidence remained to put together the story of each mound and of the cemetery as a whole. The cemetery was extremely rich, and used for burial for an astonishingly short space of time, containing only about 20 furnished graves in all. The earliest mounds, measuring about 10 to 15 metres across, held cremations. The ashes, lying in bronze bowls, sat alongside playing pieces and cremated animals. Later

graves contained a young man buried with his horse, a woman buried in an underground chamber, and three children or adolescents. They were buried with simple objects: a spear, a knife, and a chatelaine.

The most lavish graves took the form of ship burials, of which we have found two. In addition to the magnificent Mound 1, built over a ship placed underground in a trench, the much-damaged Mound 2 also showed traces of a major ship burial. Here the ship had been dragged over the

top of a chamber dug deep underground. Although later robbers had thoroughly plundered this chamber, it had originally been very rich, containing a sword, a shield, a silver-mounted box, and a blue glass jar among many other items. The two ship burials seem to have been the latest, and with them the burials of dignitaries at Sutton Hoo probably ended.

But the Sutton Hoo site held not only remains of the great and the high-born. Around Mound 5, one of the earliest mounds, we discovered the remains of



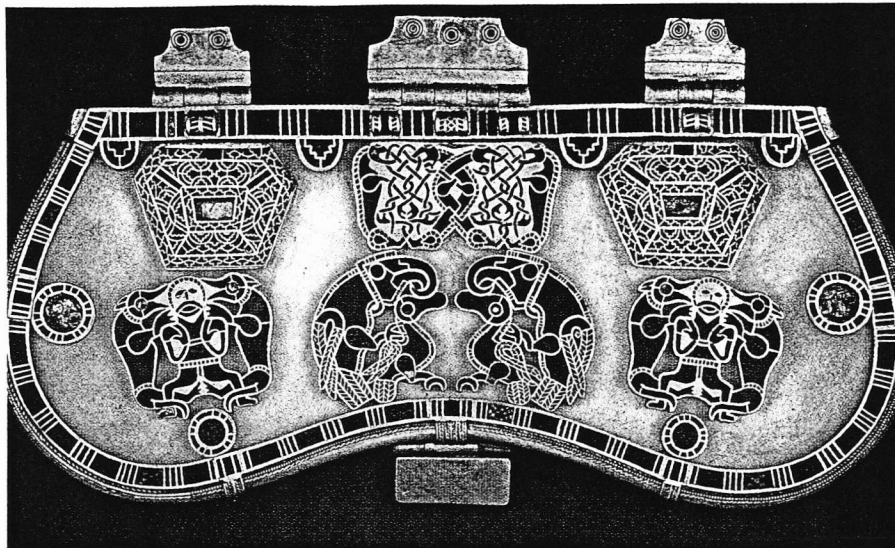


16 individuals, some of whom showed clear evidence of having been decapitated or hanged. One hundred metres due east, another group of 22 individuals surrounded post-sockets which must have belonged to a wooden gallows. The bodies bore similar indications of a violent end. Some were buried kneeling while others lay face down, with their hands behind their backs. A few had broken necks, and still others had been buried with their heads cut off and placed on their chests or knees. We dated these two groups of execution victims from the 7th to the 11th century.

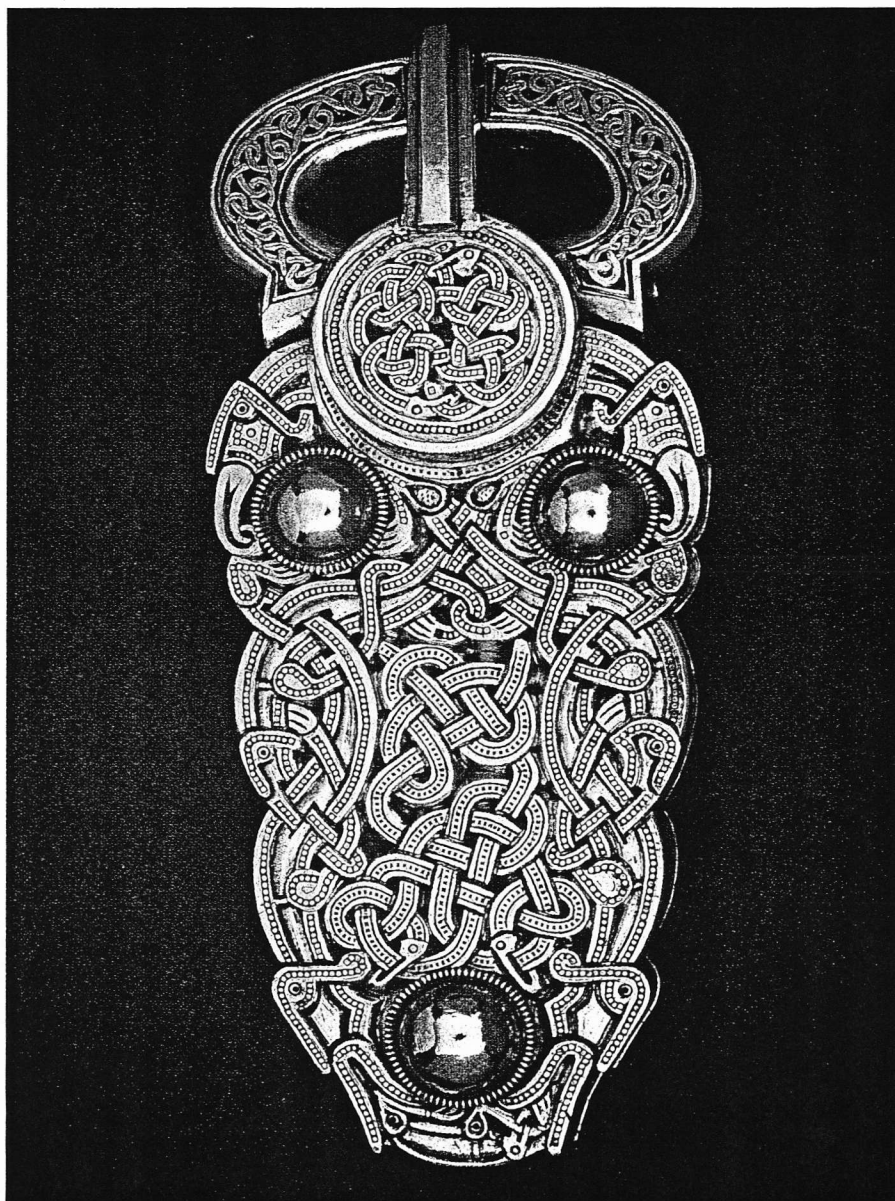
The full story of Sutton Hoo can never be known. From the perspective of the late 20th century, the interpretation that best fits the evidence is that a wealthy East Anglian family established the cemetery in the late 6th century. This family encouraged the formation of a strong pagan kingdom to counter the political pressure coming from Christian France and Kent. In deliberate imitation of pagan Scandinavia, the first burials to be celebrated were of warriors whose cremated remains were placed in bronze bowls under circular mounds. Other members of the family were buried more conventionally, for the age, in coffins or chambers. The warriors went to eternity equipped for hunting, feasting, and recreation, and it may be that several of them claimed kingship over the East Anglian people. We can't be certain that the kings of East Anglia were buried at Sutton Hoo; but some may have been.

The climax came with the great ship burials, the most obviously pagan burials known from Anglo-Saxon England. Their strong imagery speaks of a heroic warrior cult, the protective power of animal art, and belief in an afterlife of hunting and feasting. But the graves also held many imported objects and icons of British, Frankish, and Byzantine origins. These people seem to have been

*Left: A reconstruction of the helmet found in Mound 1. Top right: A gold-and-glass nurse lid. Bottom right: A gold belt buckle belonging to the man buried in Mound 1.*



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## ENGLAND AT THE CROSSROADS

England in the 7th century lay at a watershed, facing one of the most important moments in its history. The Romans had left, and the pagan tribes then inhabiting the east coast of Britain lived in dispersed hamlets and farmsteads and buried their dead in large folk cemeteries. They traded with their friends and relations in Scandinavia, who shared their pagan lifestyles and beliefs. Across the Channel in France and Italy, incoming Germanic chieftains, the Franks, and the Lombards had also heralded a sea change from the days of Roman rule; but within these countries, as well as in Ireland and the west coast of Britain, there arose a strong political movement for a reborn Roman Christian power block.

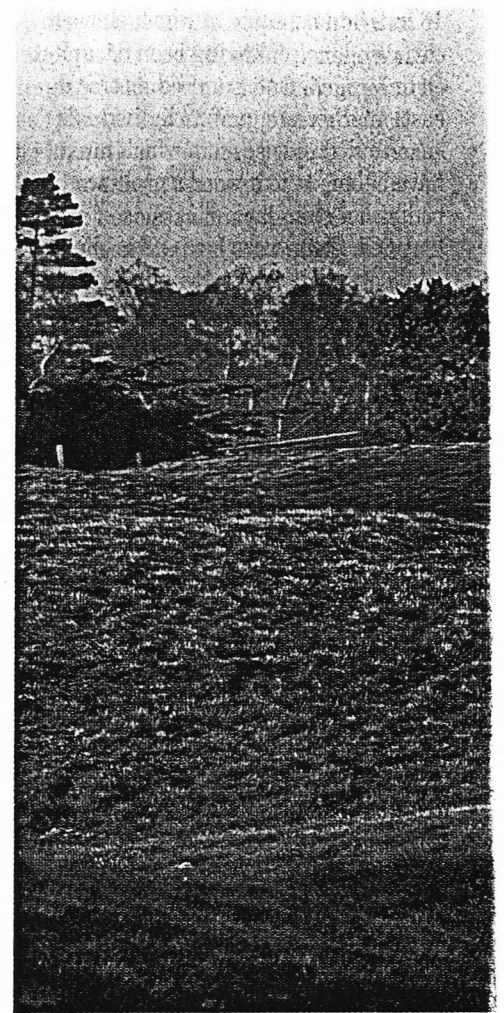
Sandwiched between Christian France, Christian Britain, and pagan Scandinavia, the Anglo-Saxons of East Anglia found themselves in a dilemma. Which of these worlds did they belong to? Each represented a different way of living, not only differences in thought. The pagan way resulted in a landscape of dispersed farms and forts, freely interconnected by water. The Christian way drew people together around churches in villages and towns, where trade was limited to a few designated places so it could be taxed. The choice between pagan and Christian lifestyles was of fundamental significance to the people who made it.

The Christian takeover of England began first through the marriage bed and then through missionary zeal. In the late 6th century, the Anglo-Saxon King Ethelbert of Kent

married a Christian Frankish princess, Bertha. Then, in AD 597, Pope Gregory sent St. Augustine from Rome to Ethelbert's court. Ethelbert's embrace of Christianity put pressure on his neighbour to the north, Raedwald, king of East Anglia. Raedwald's predecessors, Weahha and Wuffa, had kept a foot in both political camps by claiming descent from both Woden and Caesar, the Norse and the imperial gods. With Christianity on the march, Raedwald probably anticipated that East Anglia could no longer stay neutral. He went south to Kent, the Venerable Bede tells us, and there became a Christian. But on return home his wife "and certain perverse advisors" persuaded him to recant. In a final vain attempt to hedge his bets, Raedwald put up altars to Christ as well as Woden in his temple. In the end, fate decided the issue for him. Raedwald died in AD 624 or 625; and within a decade East Anglia had become a member of the Christian alliance. (Raedwald himself may have been the one interred in Sutton Hoo's Mound 1.)

The Christian writers who recorded these events portrayed the pagan leaders as reactionary and backward and the triumph of Christianity as inevitable. The illiterate pagans, unable to record their own histories, must tell us of their ideals and perceptions of the world in a different way: in the form of the treasures they gathered and placed in graves such as those at Sutton Hoo.

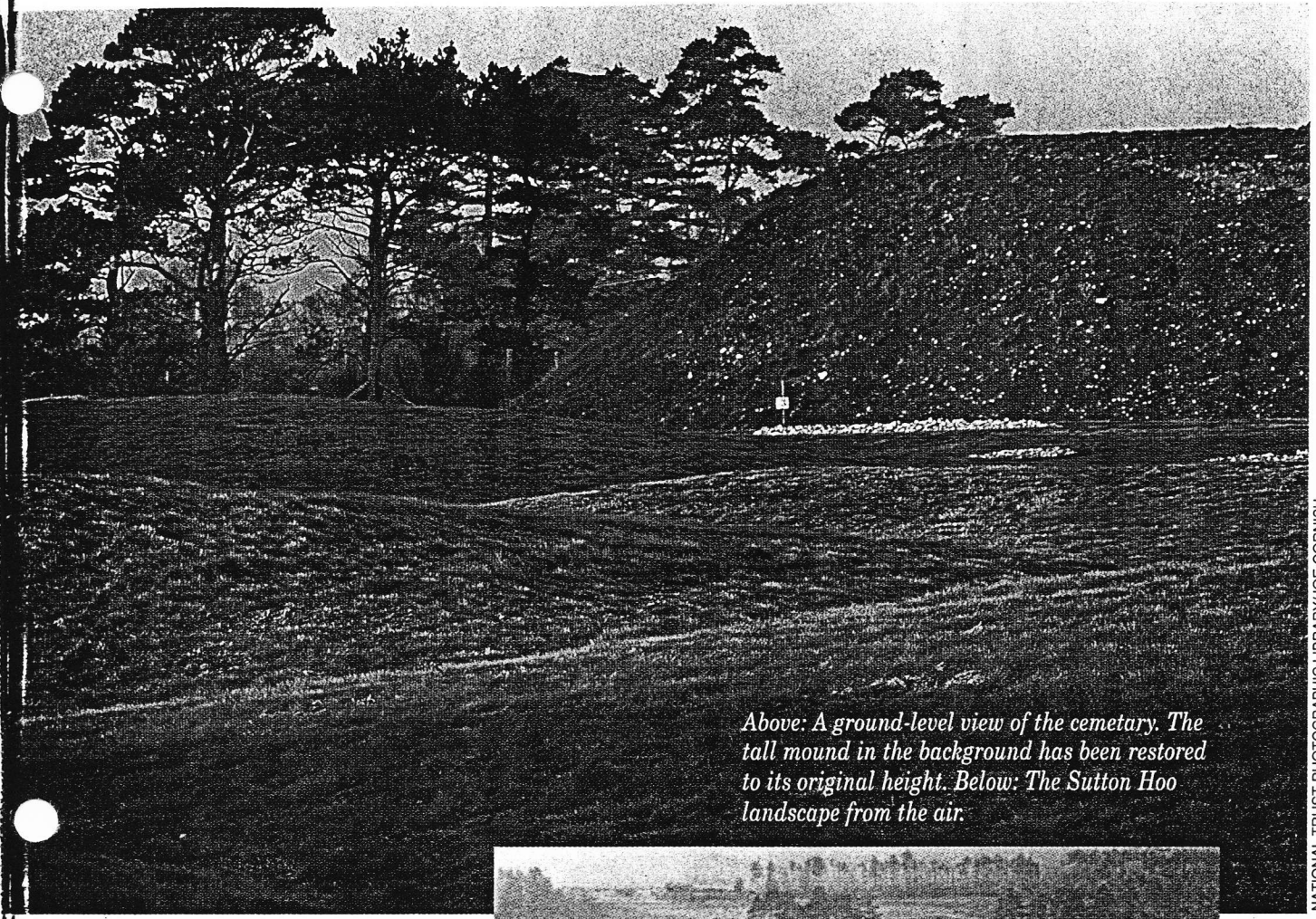
*Shoulder-clasps of gold with garnet and glass insets, from the Mound 1 burial.*



intent on establishing their own brand of kingship—pagan, maritime, and independent of the Christian power block. These burials sent a diplomatic message to all who saw them: "Fear our strength, admire our riches and our culture, and respect our autonomy."

But within a decade the argument had been lost. The last pagan kings were buried, and their "theatre of death" no longer affirmed the future of a pagan people. But the Christian kings that followed inherited two traditions associated with Sutton Hoo. The artists who had made the shoulder-clasps, or their student apprentices, soon turned to developing the beautiful ornamentation of Anglo-Saxon Christendom. Descendants of the lively animals that had protected sword and purse soon reappeared on the illuminated pages of Christian sacred books, such as the Book of Durrow and





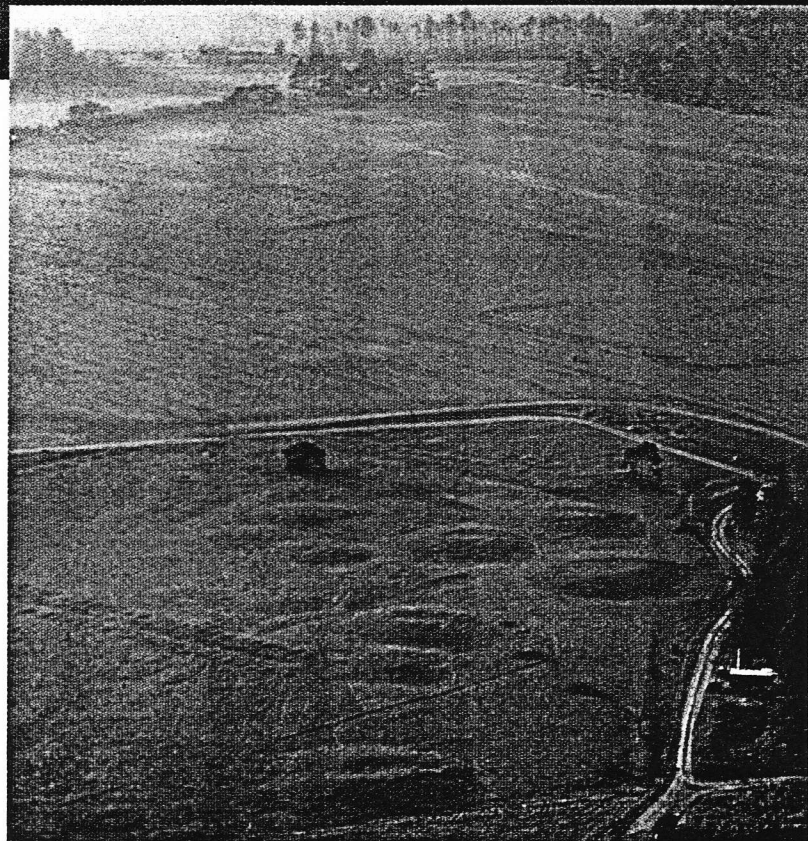
*Above: A ground-level view of the cemetery. The tall mound in the background has been restored to its original height. Below: The Sutton Hoo landscape from the air.*

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the Lindisfarne Gospels, made at the end of the 7th century.

A second, grimmer tradition carried on after the Saxons converted to Christianity was the gallows, which became the instrument of a new, inflexible authority. The gallows remained at Sutton Hoo, the old royal burial ground, until the end of the Anglo-Saxon period when it was transferred a short distance upstream to the new bridge at Wilford; there it remained for the next 700 years.

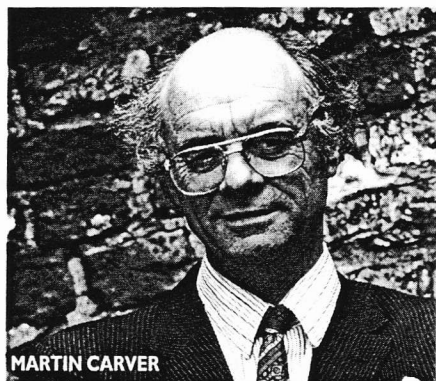
Sutton Hoo now constitutes a splendid monument of well-kept grassy mounds beside the river Deben deep in the Suffolk countryside. The National Trust recently acquired the site and plans to create a discreet visitor centre nearby. Here visitors will be able to breathe deep of those perilous times experienced by the early English people and enshrined by them in this very special place. **B**



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## CONTRIBUTORS

**MARTIN CARVER** is Professor of Archaeology at the University of York, Britain. For the last 15 years he has been excavating and studying the famous Anglo-Saxon burial ground of Sutton Hoo in Suffolk. His results appear in



MARTIN CARVER

*Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?* and *Sutton Hoo: An Early Medieval Cemetery and its Context*, both published by the British Museum Press. Carver has recently started a new project at Portmahomack in Easter Ross, Scotland, where he believes he has found the site of a Pictish monastery of the 7th-9th centuries.

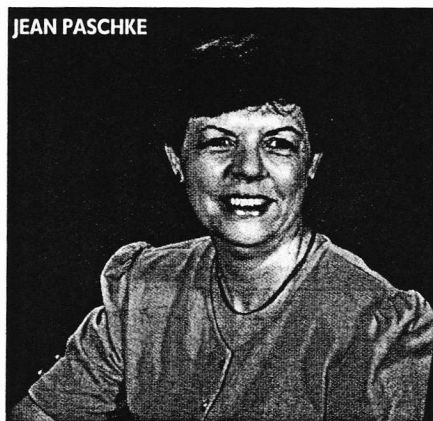
**DAN FALK** is a freelance writer and broadcaster living in Toronto, Canada. He specializes in science stories but is also branching out into travel writing. His credits include the *Independent* (U.K.), the *Globe and Mail* (Canada), and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.



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**BARBARA ROISMAN-COOPER**, a Los Angeles-based researcher and writer, recently completed her 41st holiday in the U.K. Previously a film-studies instructor, she hosted more than 75 profession-



JEAN PASCHKE

al filmmakers in her classes. She has an extensive archive of cinematic memorabilia and is partial to silent film. A devotee of Sherlock Holmes, she collects film and theatrical material related to the Victorian-era detective. Barbara graduated from UCLA, has taken courses in film at London's Royal College of Art, and has studied the history of the detective novel at Brasnose College, Oxford University. She lives in Encino, California, with her husband, Martin.

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