

Beowulf and the 1,000-Year-Old Body: My Walk Through Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, England

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rests, lifeless and broken.*

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7:30 a.m.

Dr. Heffernan clears his throat as he takes his position in our bus’s walkway. With an “Alright now, everybody,” he begins telling the eleven of us—ten students and a teacher’s assistant—vague details about our three upcoming destinations: [Ely Cathedral](#), where the famous St. Etheldreda built a monastery; [Bury St. Edmunds](#), the monastic ruins where the Magna Carta was once signed; and [Sutton Hoo](#), a place he enthusiastically labels The Greatest Place in England.

Dr. Heffernan is an English professor at the University of Tennessee who specializes in Old and Middle English, but from July to early August every year, he’s leading a study abroad program at his alma mater, the University of Cambridge. He’s taught the Honors in Cambridge session several times, but he never loses his excitement for it. Each year, field trips and lectures change, but he keeps one thing constant: a field trip to the ancient burial grounds of Sutton Hoo.

On the bus, he goes into some detail about the history of Ely Cathedral and Bury St. Edmunds, briefly describing the architecture and religious context of each before quickly bringing Sutton Hoo back into the conversation.

The bus we sit in is small, but still too large for everyone, so we spread out, all trying to get a window seat to rest our heads. We begin with a short ride east toward Ely, which is as the edge of Cambridgeshire. We stare out the window, looking at Cambridge's bicyclers and ornate buildings as they pass by in speedy brown blurs. Soon, all we see are flat, beige fields, highways and roundabouts, and the odd patch of trees.

"Sutton Hoo is a treat," Dr. Heffernan says, again and again, changing the last word ever-so-often to "wonderful," "marvelous," and even "magnificent." Telling us any other details would ruin the surprise, the magic, the beauty—so he keeps them locked away.

In the middle of his excited gesticulation and gushing, a student cuts him off: "Hey, where'd you get that hat?"

"Croatia," Dr. Heffernan replies, taking off his white ballcap with CROATIA embroidered in rainbow colors across the front.

"You *do* know England's playing Croatia this week, right?"

Dr. Heffernan turns the cap upside-down on his head, the bill now forming an upwards *u*-shape, and attempts to revisit his speech. But now, everyone is chattering, placing predictions on the highly-anticipated World Cup match, and Dr. Heffernan's Sutton Hoo enthusiasm fades out in the background.

2:00 p.m.

When my classmates and I step off the bus and walk onto Sutton Hoo's gravel parking lot, the first thing I notice are the life-sized model of a Viking ship and, just past it, a half-dead field of patchy yellow grass and small, weathered hills. After turning to follow Dr. Heffernan, I see the bluish-grey building with a large, rust-colored *Beowulf* helmet suspended over the entrance. It's so large the entrance looks puny.



Beowulf helmet displayed in front of the museum

The first thing I *feel* is the stifling heat—it's been almost 90 degrees Fahrenheit for weeks, making this summer England's hottest and driest in forty-something years. After the heat, I mostly feel disappointment. After visiting Ely Cathedral, one of the most stunning pieces of architecture I've ever seen, Sutton Hoo seems dull and uninteresting.

Dr. Heffernan tells us to wait as he waltzes into a building next to the one with the *Beowulf* helmet, and we stand in a huddle in the middle of the parking lot. Another student leans in close and whispers, "What *is* this place?"

As we wait for Dr. Heffernan to return, Kendra, my teacher's assistant, steps beside me to check on me—as she and Dr. Heffernan do every day, whether it be in an e-mail or in person, and I know why they do it. So far, I've been *that* student on the trip. I can't eat more than a few pieces of bread without feeling nauseous, and I can't sleep when I'm supposed to. In the fifteen days we've been in England, I've vomited almost every day (panic attacks), gone to the emergency room

at 2:00 a.m. for chest pains (just a panic attack, as it turns out), and had a therapy session with Dr. Heffernan's wife (for said panic attacks).

It's our first excursion since London—the field trip that led me to the emergency room a week ago. Now, we're an hour-and-a-half away from my dorm; naturally (and thankfully), they want to keep an eye on me.

Today, feels different though. When Kendra asks me how I've felt today, I can say *alright* and mean it. This trip has none of the hustle and bustle of London's Underground and overcrowded bridges; instead, it's been peaceful. The cathedral tour excited me, and the drive from Ely to Woodbridge, Suffolk for Sutton Hoo left me somewhat relaxed. When we stopped at ASDA, a super grocery store, for lunch earlier, however, I still could only eat half of my side of cold pasta. I can't shake the feeling that the afternoon will end in another vomit-spewing panic attack.



Due to a drought, the usual green grasses of Sutton Hoo are brown.

Despite feeling better than I had in weeks, I'm admittedly not too interested in the actual site—the shady trees a few hundred yards in the distance seem far more comfortable and inviting than the dying field. An hour ago, we stood on top of a cathedral, overlooking Ely, a city older than America. Now we stand in a dry field that Dr. Heffernan self-proclaimed the most important historical site in England.

It's just a vast piece of land on the outskirts of Suffolk, England. It isn't can't see back home in Tennessee, I think. It isn't until the tour guides

began to show us what had been hidden under those unassuming mounds of dirt that my interest is piqued, and I become enamored by the rich stories Sutton Hoo has to offer.

2:15 p.m.

Our bus driver got our itinerary confused; we were supposed to go to Ely, then Bury St. Edmunds, *then* Sutton Hoo last. The bus driver drove in the wrong direction after Ely, and Dr. Heffernan hadn't noticed until we were almost here. Dr. Heffernan goes into the welcome center to ask or beg for a short-notice reschedule, so we stand outside the museum—which is actually the building with the *Beowulf* helmet—while we wait.

After about fifteen minutes or so of waiting, Dr. Heffernan apparently convinces the employees to let us in. He exits the welcome center with a handful of tickets, grinning like a child even though he visits Sutton Hoo every single year. Now, we wait for the tour guides to get ready, so in the meantime, we enter the museum.

Inside, there are broken, rusted pieces of jewelry, weaponry, and statues of Anglo-Saxons. In the back room, we see fake, shiny replicas of swords and shields, all models of what Anglo-Saxon weapons are believed to have once looked like. I enter a dark room in the back, and a film is playing. On the screen, a man wearing traditional Anglo-Saxon attire walks through an unplowed field, speaking in Old English. Confused and short for time, I soon leave the small theatre and meet my classmates at the door.

We exit, and two guides—whose names I forget—come to greet Dr. Heffernan by name. The male tour guide greets us in his natural Suffolk English accent and, upon hearing several of us came from Tennessee, trades his for a comical, overenunciated Southern accent.

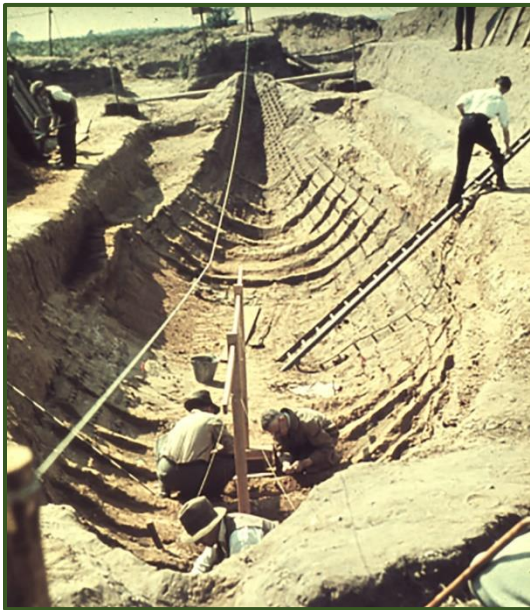
“Are *y’all* enjoying England so far,” he asks. “Is it this hot where *y’all* are from?”

After a few minutes of banter, he says apologetically, “I’m just messing with you. I know Tennesseans don’t actually say *y’all*,” and we had to laugh because, well, yes, we *do*, far more often than we admit.

He is a historian, and the female guide—who wears a charcoal grey wool sweater despite the blistering heat—is a volunteering archeologist. Most days, they delve into the mounds and uncover buried stories; on others, they share history with tourists.

After chatting for a bit, they guide us through the gravel and onto a thin path covered in loose dirt. It leads us to the outskirts of the site, where there is a pair of benches underneath a shady tree. There, we *finally* learn about the rich history of Sutton Hoo.

3:00 p.m.



Sutton Hoo's first excavation in 1939 (British Museum)

In 1939, I’m told, landowner Edith Pretty’s employees found several old, rusted metal pieces in the field behind her home. After this finding, she reached out to acclaimed archaeologist Basil Brown in hopes he would unveil hidden treasures. Her home, he discovered, was on the ruins of one of the most phenomenal historic discoveries to date. Underneath one of the largest mounds, they found the remnants of a Viking ship, dating between 600 and 700 AD. Acidic minerals in the soil had eaten at the wood, however, so

all that remained were detailed imprints of the ship, cemented into the ground like a calcified fossil. A series of [excavations](#) followed and are still taking place today.

When the male guide first begins relaying the history, I'm not yet completely taken. Soon, however, he begins talking in-depth about the archeological digs, and his storytelling has an entrancing eerie tone. I begin inching forward in my seat, gripped by the history and the theatrical feeling of it all. He gesticulates, paces from bench to bench, makes eye contact, and pauses for dramatic effect as we sit and stare. Looking to my left, I notice Dr. Hefferman has his right hand cupped over his ear, with his body bent forward and his mouth just barely hanging open. Occasionally, he makes quiet *ooli's* and *aali's* while furrowing his brows.

The guide keeps pausing his story to point behind him at the mounds that have undergone serious digs and explorations. When the ship's imprint was discovered, news outlets, academics, and the public were both captivated by and confused with its origins. It began a frenzy of new studies and revelations, and vital pieces of England's history were slowly unraveled. As historians flocked the site, the world soon gained a greater understanding of the nation's origins, of the peoples who invaded the land, and the evolution of English language. During their seemingly endless explorations, they found elaborate handmade jewelry, weapons, belt buckles, pieces of smaller boats, and *even* one of the most newsworthy artifacts ever found in English history: a helmet, once intricately decorated and coated in warrior's bronze, now dull from over 1,000 years under earth.

Although many of its features are badly weathered, the helmet still has clear outlines of a nose, lips, eyebrows, two



The helmet is now kept in the British Museum (British Museum).

cutouts for eyes, and the remnants of a dragon motif in the center of the forehead. The helmet, which is widely believed to have once belonged to an Anglo-Saxon king, is often found on modern copies of *Beowulf* and seen as a restored version in the film adaptation. When he mentions *Beowulf*, I immediately remember the helmet hanging above the bluish-grey building out front and wonder why I didn't make any connection before.

In the epic poem, after Beowulf is killed in battle, his men cremate him, and they bring the gold he won from battling the dragon into a barrow, or a mound. The discovery of the helmet proved the importance of *Beowulf* by giving evidence that those burial rituals were practiced by real Anglo-Saxon kings. As the guides keep talking, I think about the history books, historical reenactments, and photographs I studied in high school that all pictured some rendition of the helmet. The discoveries at Sutton Hoo, I realize, have altered the ways in which we picture English History and its people.

As I'm standing to the side thinking, the guides descend into a deeper discussion about *Beowulf*, and I jump in, joining Dr. Heffernan with quiet *Oh, my's* and childlike questioning.



Mound 2, the largest and most recognizable in Sutton Hoo

3:30 p.m.

Soon, the female guide leaves her place near the tree trunk, get us got back onto our feet, and leads us single-file along a thin path designated for tourists. They first take us to Mound 2, which once held the body of an Anglo-Saxon soldier. His casket was a small wooden boat; in it, they found metal

broaches and buckles. Because of a restoration project, Mound 2 is the only one true to size, which is due to a reconstruction project. In Mound 1, they found the same type of burial, complete with swords and other weapons. This burial, I learn, is a practice believed to symbolize honor, high class, and loyalty. It was difficult to tell what other treasures had been buried alongside these men, however, because the mounds had been victim to a series of alleged robberies hundreds of years ago. Upon hearing this, I grow somewhat upset that I'll never know what other important stories and pieces had been taken from the burial.

Soon, we come across Mound 17, a crowd favorite and the one of the most memorable of them all. Standing outside Mound 17, a scrawny stray cat—who the female guide calls Violet—comes up and twirls between my legs. While we pose with her and take turns talking to her, we have no idea we were standing on the chamber where a noble soldier had been buried with his war horse. This, like the man's burial with his sword, was a mark of class and honor. At this mound, it's the female guide's turn to impress us with her storytelling skills. For her take, she relays a memorable experience from one of her own explorations in the dirt.



Violet the stray cat on Mound 17

A couple of years ago, she and her co-explorers dressed in traditional Anglo-Saxon wear: long wool tunics tied with thick ropes around the middle and stone brooches holding the top together. They sifted through the dirt in their costumes well after the sun went down, taking fun photos of themselves sitting by their holes and piles of dirt. In these photos, which she pulls out of

a binder and shows us, there are smudges of white in the background. The smudges are streaked with light, hazy rainbow streaks caught along the edges. They look as if they are moving around each other in the background, with no discernable shape or explanation for existing.

To the left of Mound 17 are smaller, nearly-flattened mounds with seemingly little significance. Thinking the tour had ended with Mound 17, I begin talking to the female tour guide, so I don't notice where the other guide is leading us. It isn't until he asks, "Anybody want to see a dead body?" that I stop talking. I laugh, thinking he's joking—until he pushes back a creaky metal cover, and there the body rests, lifeless and broken.

Lying on the ground is strange, lifeless form that barely resembles a human's skeletal structure. Its head is enlarged, and it looks as if it had eight long, thin limbs rather than four. A few decades after the first excavation, archaeologists discovered almost forty of these "[sand bodies](#)," though the guides only show us this one.

At first, I thought it was one of those models we had seen before, like the Viking ship near the parking lot or the Anglo-Saxon figures in the museum. It isn't until he stoops down beside of it, crouches right below its detached, enlarged head, and says to it, "I'm sorry for this" that several of



"Sand body" of Mound 17 (Moore, 2015)

us realize it actually *is* the remains of an Anglo-Saxon—or part of them, anyway. A few of us leans in to get a better look, and he says to us, "I know he's been dead over a thousand years, but I still feel the need to apologize."

The physical body's skeleton is not *actually* there, the guide explains; the acid sand and minerals had eaten away at the bones over

time, and all that remained of the figures they found were haunting “shadows” etched into the ground. It doesn’t look like it did when they first found the body, as they placed a mold on top of the shadow for exhibition.

Apparently, the body had previously been a young man who had lost a great deal of respect from high authorities; archeologists and historians assume he committed some sort of unpardonable crime—thievery, most likely—and, as punishment, his head was cut off in a public ceremony. Forensic scientists could tell the cause of death by studying the head’s distance from the body and the position in which the body fell. All around us, they say, there are likely others like him, many already found, and some still lying in the dirt. It makes my stomach feel queasy, and a part of me felt like I should turn my head, but I’m too intrigued. I spend the rest of the afternoon wondering what else remained underneath Sutton Hoo’s surface.

10:00 p.m.

Hours later, I’m still reeling over our trip. We drove over to Bury St. Edmunds afterwards, where we walked through its gardens and ran our hands across the obsidian stones nestled in the monastery’s destroyed framework. Like Sutton Hoo and Ely, it had a magical, almost fairytale-like feeling to it, but even while touching those magnificent stones, I can’t get my mind off Sutton Hoo. Finally, I’m not worried about getting sick or lost or injured or stranded.

I sit at my desk and jot down notes in my journal and I realize: on this trip, I hadn’t been consumed by irrational fears. The queasy feeling I’ve been feeling for weeks had disappeared halfway through the day, and I felt hungry.

Before crawling in bed, I grab the cider, sandwich, and fruit I picked up from the Sainsbury's near my dorm yesterday. I settle into bed, grab my phone, and video chat my mother. When I greet her, she says simply, "You look happy today." And I am.

As we talk about my Sutton Hoo, I eat my meal, and for the first time in two weeks, I eat the whole thing.

And keep it down.

ONE YEAR LATER

2019

To this day, I think about Sutton Hoo often—not necessarily about the 1000-year-old body or the alleged haunts, but mostly for all its interesting stories and its immersive atmosphere. I only took a handful of photos of Sutton Hoo, but I revisit them often, imagining that I'm back in England, learning about its history and people. When people ask me about studying abroad, I usually begin with my few fleeting hours at Sutton Hoo. It certainly wasn't the typical tourist destination filled with Instagram-worthy photographs, souvenirs, or awe-inspiring scenery, but it surely left me feeling heavier, in the best sort of way, and it changed the rest of my study abroad experience. Before visiting England, I envisioned visiting London and all its music festivals, packed theatres, and monuments. Sutton Hoo, however, left in me an appreciation for history and exploration, even in the most unassuming places.

Whenever the panic I felt in the first two weeks in Cambridge returns, I pick up my journal from July 2018 and reread about the day that calmed me down. I flip through the pictures another time, then another. And for a few minutes, I'm there again: calm, thoughtful, happy.

Works Cited

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