

# Sutton Hoo

- Interviewer:** Hello and welcome to another history podcast from Ancient Times. Today we have a special guest with us. Tanya Jones is an archaeologist from the Sutton Hoo site in Suffolk. Good morning, Tanya, and welcome to the podcast.
- Tanya Jones:** Good morning.
- Interviewer:** Can I ask you, first of all, to give a brief description of the Sutton Hoo site for our listeners?
- Tanya Jones:** Of course. Sutton Hoo is the site of an Anglo-Saxon ship burial. The imprint of a large ship was discovered beneath a barrow in 1939. It contained a burial chamber filled with precious artefacts.
- Interviewer:** Wow. A ship burial. They must be rare.
- Tanya Jones:** Oh, yes. Ship burials are usually found in Scandinavia, but three have been found in England.
- Interviewer:** Three, you say?
- Tanya Jones:** Yes, but Sutton Hoo is the best example.
- Interviewer:** Why do you say that?
- Tanya Jones:** Because of the number of artefacts that we've recovered and the information that they've given us about life in Britain around AD 600. Some historians call this period the Dark Ages because we know so little about it.
- Interviewer:** Yes, I've heard of that. So, Tanya, if you had to choose, what would be your favourite artefacts from Sutton Hoo?



**Tanya Jones:** Oh, well, that's a difficult question. OK, my first choice would have to be the Sutton Hoo helmet. It's a wonderful object made from pieces of iron covered in metal sheeting. The crest, nose and mouth are gilded, and the eyebrows are inlaid with silver wire. The nose piece is the body of a dragon facing upwards. The moustache is its tail, and the eyebrows are its wings. The crest on top of the helmet is a serpent facing the dragon. These creatures have eyes made of precious stones called garnets.

**Interviewer:** That sounds amazing.

**Tanya Jones:** It certainly is. I also love the belt buckle. This is made of pure gold. The design is very complex and features interlaced serpents, birds and other beasts.

**Interviewer:** Gosh, that must be quite heavy.

**Tanya Jones:** Yes, it is. It weighs around 413 grams.

**Interviewer:** Wow.

**Tanya Jones:** My next choice would be the shoulder clasps. They're made from gold inlaid with garnets and coloured glass. And their wild boar design symbolises strength and courage. And my final choice would have to be the Franks Casket. It's made entirely from whale bone, with each side displaying an intricately carved scene.

**Interviewer:** They sound amazing, Tanya. What do you think all of these objects were used for?

**Tanya Jones:** The belt buckles, shoulder clasps and belt adornments were worn. The Franks Casket and the purse lid were used for storage. The helmet, sword and shield were used in warfare and other items such as the Mediterranean bowls and the Roman ceremonial drinking cup were used for feasting.

**Interviewer:** That's very interesting. Why do you think these particular items were chosen for a burial?

**Tanya Jones:** That's a good question. We believe they were buried so the person who had died could use them in the afterlife.



**Interviewer:** Oh, I see.

**Tanya Jones:** Each item was included for a specific purpose. The ship itself was the transport to the next world. The helmet, shield and sword were for use in battle. The bowls and drinking cup were for eating and drinking. The purse and coins were for payment and the belt buckle, shoulder clasps and belt adornments were included to show the person's power, wealth and importance. In fact, each object helps us to understand that the man in the grave was wealthy and important.

**Interviewer:** Who do you think the man might have been then?

**Tanya Jones:** Well, all the evidence suggests that he was probably a king or even a *bretwalda* who ruled more than one kingdom. Many historians believe it is the grave of King Raedwald of East Anglia, who died around AD 625.

**Interviewer:** Wow. So, Sutton Hoo is the burial site of an Anglo-Saxon king?

**Tanya Jones:** That's right.

**Interviewer:** And the people chose to bury him that way. I wonder what they were thinking at the time.

**Tanya Jones:** Well, we can work out that they greatly respected the king because they wanted to mark his passing in a spectacular way. Hauling a ship out of the river, arranging precious objects and burying it again requires a lot of time and effort, so they must have believed that it was very important to bury their king in this way.

**Interviewer:** Sure. I know that they included the precious items to show the king's status and to help him in the afterlife. But don't you think they were tempted to keep some for themselves?

**Tanya Jones:** That's a good point. But no, I don't. You see, as well as giving the king a spectacular burial, they were also proving that they were a wealthy and successful group who could do without these precious objects. This sent a powerful message to other kingdoms who might be tempted to invade after the king's death.



**Interviewer:** Oh, I see. The Sutton Hoo site tells us so many things, not just about the person who was buried, but about the rest of the group and about Anglo-Saxon society at large.

**Tanya Jones:** Yes, it does. The burial has shown us there was a vast amount of overseas trade at this time because many of the artefacts were from overseas. Anglo-Saxon merchants must have been travelling over vast areas to trade, or foreign merchants were travelling vast distances to trade in Britain.

**Interviewer:** The countries in Europe and Asia were quite well connected then?

**Tanya Jones:** Yes, they must have been very well connected. The artefacts also show that the Anglo-Saxons were converting to Christianity at the time of the burial, as there are a mixture of pagan and Christian objects. For example, the helmet is decorated with mythological scenes, yet the Mediterranean bowls are etched with Christian crosses. On the Franks Casket there are scenes from Roman and German mythology as well as Christianity.

**Interviewer:** Wow, what a confusing mixture.

**Tanya Jones:** The artefacts have helped us to understand more about the mixture of cultures, languages and religions present in Britain around AD 600.

**Interviewer:** Wow. I've really enjoyed our discussion this morning, Tanya, I've learnt so much. It's amazing what you can work out from studying archaeological sites and artefacts, isn't it? Thank you so much for coming in.

**Tanya Jones:** You're very welcome. I've enjoyed it too, and I would encourage your listeners to visit Sutton Hoo soon if they have the opportunity.

**Interviewer:** That sounds like a great idea. Well, thank you for tuning in today, listeners, and be sure to look out for the next edition of Ancient Times.

