

SUTTON HOO 1860

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It is the way of things that chance plays an enormous part in discovery. So it was with the great Anglo-Saxon find at Sutton Hoo – an extraordinary chance that, despite the disturbance of the mound, the burial itself had remained intact for some 1,300 years, and that the early finds were uncovered by someone who recognised their significance.

Chance played its part once more in the history of Sutton Hoo when the task was begun of describing and presenting the story of the Sutton Hoo site for Woodbridge Museum. It was felt that there would be little to add to the work of Dr Rupert Bruce-Mitford and the display would rely heavily on his publications (Bruce-Mitford 1974 and 1975). It came therefore as a surprise when a chance remark revealed the existence of a hitherto unnoticed reference to the site and its earlier excavation. The discovery was made by Mr Hugh Moffat, who whilst going through the *Ipswich Journal* for shipping references, had also been noting down other items that caught his eye. It was in this way that he discovered the reference to the 'Roman Barrows' at Sutton recorded in the *Ipswich Journal* for 24 November 1860 and informed Dr Bruce-Mitford. The extract reads thus:

ROMAN MOUNDS OR BARROWS: It is not known by many that not less than five Roman Barrows, lying close to each other, may be seen on a farm occupied by Mr Barritt, at Sutton, about 500 yards from the banks of the Deben, immediately opposite Woodbridge. One of these mounds was recently opened, when a considerable number (nearly two bushels) of iron screw bolts were found, all of which were sent to the blacksmith to be converted into horse shoes! It is hoped, when leave is granted to open the others, some more important antiquities may be discovered. These barrows were laid down in the Admiralty surveys by Captain Stanley during the stay of the Blazer, when taking the soundings of the above named river some few years since.

On reading through the account it became clear that the Roman Barrows referred to could be no other than those at the Sutton Hoo site. The site is indeed about 500 yards from the banks of the Deben and was on the land of Mr Barritt who farmed about 1,000 acres from Sutton Hoo, or Howe Farm as described by the 1851 and 1861 census. Having obtained and digested the account the next act was to obtain a copy of the survey by Captain Stanley referred to above and compare it with other contemporary maps. That search went via the Suffolk Record Office and the Public Record Office to the Hydrographer of the Navy at Taunton who kindly supplied copies of the section of the chart which included Woodbridge and Sutton Hoo. The chart (Fig. 5; H.D. Survey D7307, 1845) clearly shows the burial mounds. It appears that the mounds shown are 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7 and 8 (numbered according to Bruce-Mitford 1979) and we must assume that it was one of these which was opened. Mounds 5 and 13 were presumably so low in relief that they were missed. It is interesting to compare this with the Ordnance Survey Hill Sketches (1 in to 1 mile) of 1836 which show four mounds, possibly 1, 2, 3 and 7. The 1881 25 in map shows mounds 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10; mounds 1, 2 and 7 appear as the largest (Bruce-Mitford 1975, 37–39). The pattern of the barrows appears to be the same as subsequent Ordnance Survey maps excluding the 1890 map where an extra feature is indicated to the east of mound 1, plus a possible bank(?) to the north of it lying between the footpath and the field boundary (1st edition, Ordnance Survey, 6 in to 1 mile surveyed 1879–80).

It states in the extract above that nearly two bushels of iron bolts were found. This sounds as though the diggers, whoever they were, found clenched nails similar to those later found in mound 1 in 1939. Whether the bolts were previously undisturbed and the excavators were not aware of their

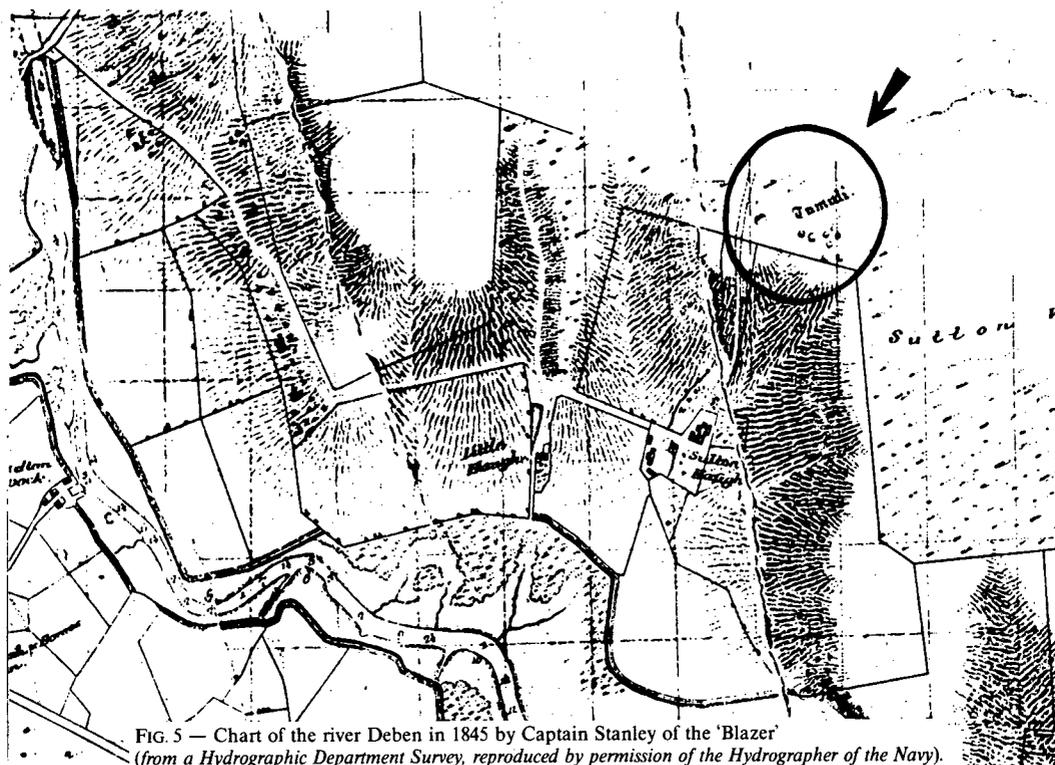


FIG. 5 — Chart of the river Deben in 1845 by Captain Stanley of the 'Blazer'
(from a Hydrographic Department Survey, reproduced by permission of the Hydrographer of the Navy).

significance, or whether they were digging an already disturbed ship burial is not clear. It is tempting to assume that the mound excavated in or around 1860 was mound 2, in which some eighty years later Basil Brown found the remains of a much disturbed boat burial. What else they found in 1860 we do not know, but the account implies that there was little. If the burial had been intact then the finds might have been similar to those found in Mound 1 in 1939.

This reported excavation took place about two years before the opening of the tumulus at the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Snape where bolts were found but recognised to form the outline of a ship (Bruce-Mitford 1974, 114–40). So much has been lost from the Snape site that it is perhaps fortuitous that whoever dug at Sutton Hoo in 1860 did not realise what he had found – otherwise the rest of the site may well have been opened up in a fervour of 19th-century antiquarianism. Also we have perhaps to thank Mr Barritt of Sutton Hoo who did not apparently grant leave to open the other mounds on the land as the writer of the article hoped, thus enabling Brown and Bruce-Mitford to do their more methodical excavations in the 20th century (Bruce-Mitford 1974 and 1975).

References

- Bruce-Mitford, R.L.S., 1952. 'The Snape Boat Grave', *Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, XXVI, 1–26.
 Bruce-Mitford, R.L.S., 1974. *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, 114–40. London.
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Abbreviations for MSS

H.D. Royal Navy Hydrographic Department, Taunton.