

## The Tranmer House Cemetery – Excavations at Sutton Hoo 2000

John Newman

*Sutton Hoo; cemetery; stratified; ring-ditches*

Late in 1986 agricultural work on a field just to the north of Tranmer (ex Sutton Hoo) House disturbed a highly decorated, copper alloy bucket of 'Coptic' or eastern Mediterranean origin (Mango et al, 1989, 295). Most of the bucket, which has been called the 'Bromeswell Bucket' as its findspot lies in this parish just beyond the Sutton parish boundary some 500 metres north of the main barrow cemetery, was recovered from the ploughsoil. A rapid metal detector survey carried out soon after the initial discovery located a scatter of finds indicative of a cemetery of later sixth or early seventh century date. Prior to 1986 the immediate area around the findspot of the Bromeswell Bucket had already been identified as a site of potential importance following the discovery of a scatter of early and middle Saxon pottery sherds during the systematic fieldwalking survey for the Deben Valley study. However, access could not be gained to the site during the late 1980's or early 1990's to carry out any form of trial excavation. Therefore the origin of the scatter of high quality finds, which could be broadly contemporary with the main Sutton Hoo site, remained an enigmatic mystery until the summer of 2000. The opportunity to examine a large area some 60 metres from the findspot of the Bromeswell Bucket arose following the acquisition of the Sutton Hoo Estate by The National Trust. To facilitate visitor access to the barrow cemetery The National Trust proposed an extensive area of car and coach parking north of Tranmer House close to a visitor centre made up of refurbished existing buildings and new build funded by a successful Heritage Lottery Fund bid (see Fig. 1). As an initial stage of archaeological exploration, prior to any development

work starting, geophysical survey and evaluation trenching was undertaken over the new build areas in 1997. This work revealed relatively little of archaeological interest except a few ditches of prehistoric date. The main phase of archaeological work on the development area of circa 8,000 square metres (see Fig. 1) was therefore specified as a controlled soil strip and investigation of any features or deposits by The National Trust. The Field Team within the Archaeological Service at Suffolk County Council carried out this commission during the spring and early summer of 2000 (Newman 2000).

Over the area that had already been trial trenched the evaluation results from 1997 proved to be a true reflection of the features revealed in the controlled soil strip. Ditches of probable Iron Age or early Roman date (a radiocarbon date of AD 262–427 has been obtained from the primary fill of a recut in one of the major ditches) were located in addition to a variety of recent features associated with sheep farming and garden type activities. However in the north-western quarter of the excavation area, which is the nearest part investigated to the Bromeswell Bucket findspot, a number of cremation and inhumation burials of mainly early Anglo-Saxon date was revealed and fully excavated (see Fig. 2). While the excavation area has seen moderately extensive cultivation in recent years, and especially during World War II, leading to the truncation and loss of any buried heath-type soil profiles the ground disturbance was not as severe as that seen under highly mechanised agricultural regimes leading to a good survival of cremations and associated features. In total 19 inhumations and 17 cremations of early Anglo-Saxon



date were investigated with 9 of the latter burials being directly associated with small ring ditches. Another, larger, ring ditch and associated cremation has been tentatively dated as Bronze Age on the basis of a pottery sherd recovered with the cremated bone from a pit in the centre of the ring. A postulated date supported by a radiocarbon result of BC 1427–1315 from charcoal associated with the cremation. In addition the possible Bronze Age cremation and ring ditch was different in character to the ones of definite Anglo-Saxon date as the ring had a much larger diameter and the central cremation pit was also larger and deeper than any of the later ones.

As the figure demonstrates, the area containing the Anglo-Saxon cemetery is moderately large with the burials being scattered at a relatively low density. The excavation also appears to show a clear eastern edge to the cemetery, where some of the burials cluster round the possible Bronze Age ring ditch, and probable northern and southern limits where the graves fade away within the area investigated. However, the cemetery clearly continues beyond the western edge of the excavation and ploughsoil finds, including the Bromeswell

Bucket, indicate a cemetery area that could extend for at least 100 metres across a promontory overlooking the River Deben. A promontory that, topographically, mirrors the landscape setting of the main barrow cemetery to the south.

Within the area investigated a variety of funerary rites, especially amongst the cremations, can be noted at this early stage in the post excavation assessment of the overall results. Cremations were recovered in handmade ceramic urns of classic sixth century type, as un-urned deposits which were presumably buried in some sort of perishable bag or container and, in one notable case, in a copper alloy hanging bowl of Celtic origin. The ring ditches recorded around 9 of the cremations are also of great interest as such survival is rare in England though better known in the Anglo-Saxon homelands of north-central Germany. The ring ditches recorded on the site were all 2.5 to 3.5 metres in diameter making them much smaller than the great majority of known Bronze Age examples and the ditch profiles were relatively shallow with an average depth of 300 mm of definable feature surviving below the mechanically removed topsoil. Cre-

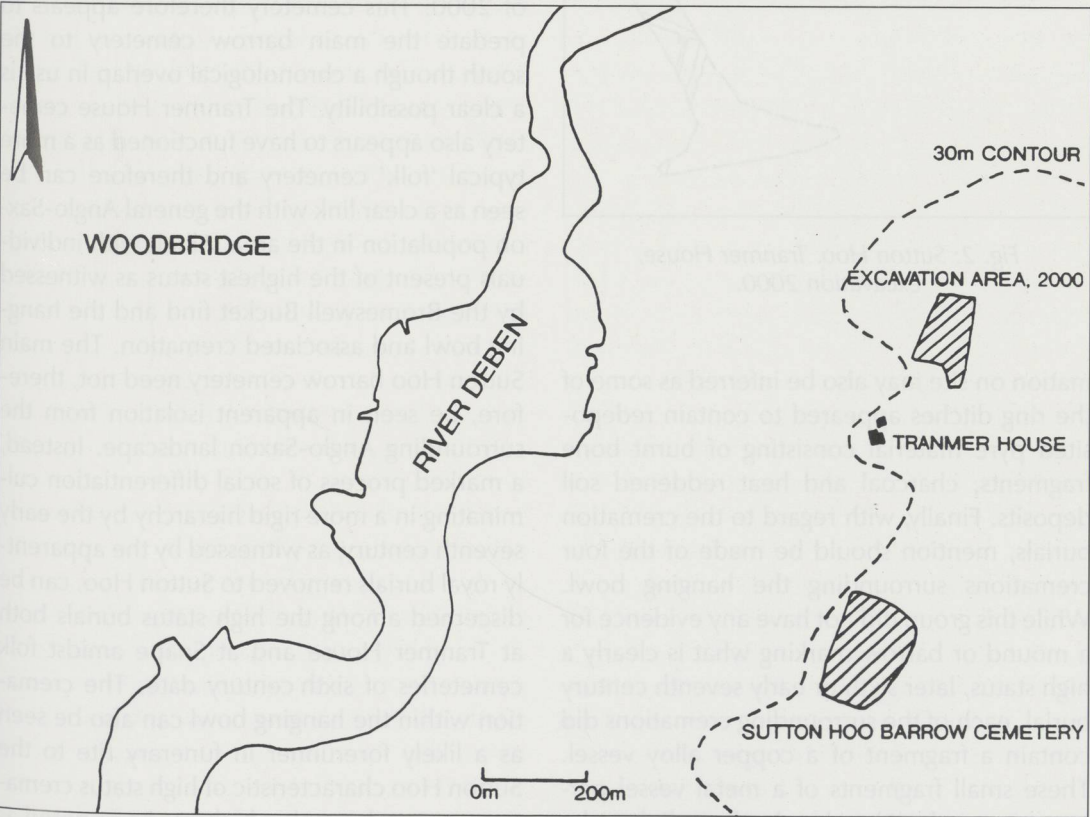


Fig. 1: Sutton Hoo. Excavation area 2000.



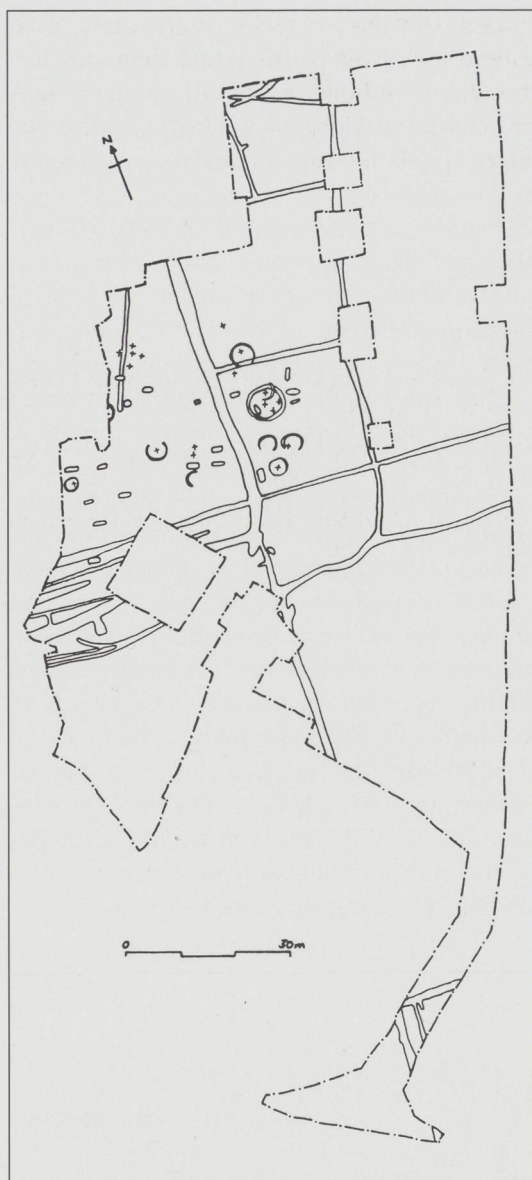


Fig. 2: Sutton Hoo. Tranmer House, excavation 2000.

mation on site may also be inferred as some of the ring ditches appeared to contain redeposited pyre material consisting of burnt bone fragments, charcoal and heat reddened soil deposits. Finally, with regard to the cremation burials, mention should be made of the four cremations surrounding the hanging bowl. While this group did not have any evidence for a mound or barrow marking what is clearly a high status, later sixth or early seventh century burial, each of the surrounding cremations did contain a fragment of a copper alloy vessel. These small fragments of a metal vessel perhaps are a 'token' bowl and a direct link to the central cremation within the hanging bowl.

From the layout of this discrete group of cremations the former presence of a mound, albeit without a ring ditch, may be suggested. The 19 inhumations also demonstrated a range of burial rites typical of early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in East Anglia with furnished and unfurnished graves and virtually no bone survival due to the extremely acidic nature of the sand and gravel derived deposits across the site. However good body stains were recorded in most of the inhumation graves, the great majority of the bodies having been lain in a supine and extended position with a few in a flexed position. Of the furnished graves 13 can be assumed to be of males with typical weapon sets of a spear and usually a shield while two also contained swords and evidence for shield boards ornamented with gilt, copper alloy fittings. Definable female grave goods comprised copper alloy annular brooches and bead necklaces in four inhumations.

Initial dating of the grave goods recovered from the Tranmer House cemetery points to a sixth to early seventh century bracket. Dating that is supported by the recovery of two sixth century brooch fragments from a metal detector survey carried out over the area of the Bromeswell Bucket findspot in the summer of 2000. This cemetery therefore appears to predate the main barrow cemetery to the south though a chronological overlap in use is a clear possibility. The Tranmer House cemetery also appears to have functioned as a more typical 'folk' cemetery and therefore can be seen as a clear link with the general Anglo-Saxon population in the area. Albeit with individuals present of the highest status as witnessed by the Bromeswell Bucket find and the hanging bowl and associated cremation. The main Sutton Hoo barrow cemetery need not, therefore, be seen in apparent isolation from the surrounding Anglo-Saxon landscape. Instead, a marked process of social differentiation culminating in a more rigid hierarchy by the early seventh century, as witnessed by the apparently royal burials removed to Sutton Hoo, can be discerned among the high status burials both at Tranmer House and at Snape amidst folk cemeteries of sixth century date. The cremation within the hanging bowl can also be seen as a likely forerunner in funerary rite to the Sutton Hoo characteristic of high status cremations in metal vessels which has been noted as an overall characteristic of East Anglia derived

from Scandinavia (O'Brien 1999, 117). Finally the cemeteries suggest a funerary landscape overlooking the River Deben. To expect simple, clear limits to Anglo-Saxon cemeteries may be too simplistic. As has been demon-

strated with the Anglo-Saxon cemetery excavations in Eriswell parish at RAF Lakenheath in the west of Suffolk, the cemetery proper may cover a large block of landscape, not all of which is directly used for burial.

## Bibliography

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### Address

John Newman  
Archaeological Service, Suffolk County Council  
St Edmund House, County Hall, IP4 1LZ, UK-Ipswich