



Wednesday 20th May 2026: Meeting 2

Update

Our group now has over 30 members and a well established programme for the rest of the year. Members continue to make good proposals for talks based on their own experience. Today's meeting was attended by 13 members (it would have been more but for transport problems).

Orkneys

Jo-Ann gave a comprehensive talk on her visit to archaeological sites in Orkney in 2022. This included the famous neolithic relics from a time before Stonehenge, including the Ring and Ness of Brodgar, several chambered burial cairns and the villages of Barnhouse and Skara Brae. The latter was perfectly preserved under sand dunes until exposed and then comprehensively excavated. It is the most complete neolithic village in Europe. Jo-Ann also covered the later history of Orkney, including the Romanesque cathedral and palace at Kirkwall, where there is also a good museum. Finally, she described the Churchill barriers, massive sea walls to protect boats built during the Second World War, by Italian prisoners of war, who also built a little Italianate chapel that is now a landmark.

See her presentation here: [\[click on this link\]](#).

Sutton Hoo

I gave a talk on the site in Suffolk that includes the famous ship burial of an East Anglian king, dating from about 624, which was featured in the film 'The Dig.' The king is probably Rædwald, who ruled the kingdom from about 599 to 624, a descendant of the Wulfingas dynasty, who probably originated from Sweden, judging by some of the artefacts and traditions (including ship burials). He became *imperium* or 'over-king' of several other English kingdoms at the time after a series of battles. He was also the first of his line to convert to Christianity, but he hedged his bets by building two temples, to Christianity and his pagan roots, and his family gave him a pagan burial.

The site of Sutton Hoo, deep up an estuary of the River Deben, was a natural harbour and became an important trading place and transport hub for the post Roman world. It had been the site of communities going back to the bronze age and there is evidence of settlements through the Bronze age, Iron age and Roman period before the Angles arrived right after the Roman withdrawal.

Recent investigations reveal an earlier cemetery north of the famous burial mounds, with evidence that the ancestors of Rædwald were buried there. Local landowner Edith Pretty supported early investigation of the mounds and several of them revealed significant finds before Mound I's excavation revealed the shape of the ship burial and the amazing relics there – some of the most magnificent ever found in England.

We looked at images of some of these, which are all on public display at the British Museum. These include the famous helmet, pieced together by BM staff, and thought to be over 100 years old when Rædwald was buried, so already an heirloom. Other artefacts were clearly the regalia of a king, including a garnet-set exquisite gold belt and cloak fastenings. Other items include silver plate from the Byzantine empire and items from as far afield as North Africa, musical instruments

and drinking vessels. Some are royal, some are more domestic – everything needed for the afterlife.

My presentation can be viewed here: [[click this link](#)].

We recommend that members visit the free British Museum gallery where these items are on general display (at least until the end of this year).

More detail available at the British Museum dedicated website: [[click this link](#)].

Recent excavations at the site by Time Team are here: [[click this link](#)]. This is the first of several programmes they made and has a good general introduction to the site.

Over the last two years they have been investigating an earlier burial site adjacent to the main ship burials.

We decided not to do a group visit to the BM collection as it is quite small and likely to be crowded, but members are recommended to make individual visits to see the treasures up close. However, we are instead going to go to the Saxons temporary exhibition in Aylesbury in June (see below). It is also possible to make a day trip visit to the Sutton Hoo site, although this requires a long day trip, at least 9 hours, with about 5 miles walking. I can advise members how to do this if they want. But probably best to do it if you are visiting nearby, by car.

Next month

We have arranged a visit to the Saxons exhibition at the Discover Bucks Museum in Aylesbury. [[link to exhibition site](#)] I will forward details of timing and confirmation of who has applied to go and how to get there in the next few days. There are still a few places left.

Keith Mason
26 May 2026