

Destroy the ‘Sutton Hoo Treasure’!

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This chapter presents a survey and critique of the use of ‘treasure(s)’ to describe the burial assemblage from the Mound 1 ship-burial at Sutton Hoo since its discovery in 1939. I argue that referring to the contents of Mound 1 as ‘treasure(s)’ is not merely misrepresenting, commodifying and sensationalising its funerary context and wider significance. Furthermore, the persistent use of the terms directly relates also to specific, multiple valences which assert and perpetuate a specific interpretation of the grave as a ‘King’s Mound’. Moreover, referring to more than the rare and high-status character of the finds, ‘treasure(s)’ also casts the assemblage’s identity as a ‘national treasure’, legitimising its curation by the British Museum and valorising the benefaction of the landowner who commissioned the 1938 and 1939 excavations: Mrs Edith Pretty. Another key dimension to the use of the term is the assemblage’s perceived relationship with the epic Old English poem Beowulf and the ‘treasures’ it describes. As a label, ‘treasure(s)’ inaccurately and tenaciously sublimates the rich and complex story of the grave, the contexts of the cemetery, locality and region into a simplified simulacrum of early East Anglian/Anglo-Saxon kingship linked to religious conversion and tied to patriotic modern concepts of Englishness. I demonstrate how the use of ‘treasure’ reveals a nexus of Anglo-Saxonist and Germanist ideological readings of the assemblage in academic discourse and popular culture.

Introduction

Treasure: the word carries a seductive and dangerous semantic freight, and never more than now perhaps, since the new Treasure Act 1996 came into force, enabling artefacts with as little as 10% gold or silver content to be enfolded within its generous embrace – not to mention pots and chests and finds of all manner of other more mundane objects that might be associated with finds of precious metal items. (Webster 2000: 49)

‘Treasure’ as a noun refers to ‘wealth or riches stored or accumulated, esp. in the form of precious metals; gold or silver coin; hence in general, money, riches, wealth’ or else figurative versions of the same. It can be used more loosely to refer to a ‘store or stock of anything valuable’ (OED Online 2021). It also carries a more specific archaeological set of uses as Webster describes above. While meanings and uses vary between formal academic and popular contexts, this chapter aims to explore the tenacious and evolving use to describe Mound 1 burial assemblage from Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, England, UK. I argue that the ‘Sutton Hoo Treasure’ and references to its ‘treasure’/‘treasures’ must be henceforth challenged because it perpetuates a constellation of misleading and problematic connotations specific to the use of this famous grave to write the story of Anglo-Saxon origins, royalty, paganism and Christian conversion set in a broader northern European context. The ‘treasure’ label also legitimises the assemblage’s status as gifted to and curated by the British Museum: a ‘national treasure’. Hence, the objection is not with the popular use of the term ‘treasure’ per se to refer to archaeological finds and contexts, but the specific nested associations with this particularly well-known funerary context which should be jettisoned or used only sparingly and cautiously henceforth. The chapter starts its journey in 1939 and ends with the latest iteration of popular guidebooks and heritage interpretation at Sutton Hoo.

Background

The story of the Mound 1 ship-burial at Sutton Hoo has captivated global audiences for more than three quarters of a century. While given a run for its money more recently by some fresh discoveries of hoards and grave finds of broadly comparable dates, most notably the ‘Prittlewell Prince’ (Blackmore *et al.* 2019) and the Staffordshire Hoard (Fern *et al.* 2019), Mound 1 has retained its preeminent status in the visual representation

and popular conceptualisation of the island's early medieval archaeology and it still constitutes the richest burial from this era in terms of both quantity and quality of artefacts uncovered. As such, the burial chamber's exceptional contents of weapons, feasting gear, 'regalia' and other items made from a range of materials and drawn from across northern Europe and beyond, have been widely seen as material evidence for 'pagan' or 'convert Christian'-era East Anglian/Anglo-Saxon kingship. The grave has been widely attributed to King Rædwald of East Anglia. Simultaneously, its 1939 discovery by Basil Brown and investigation by a famous team of excavators is regularly cast a patriotic story of fortune and fortitude culminating in the finds' generous benefaction by landowner Mrs Edith Pretty under the testing circumstances of impending global war.

Set within a broader context of a 'princely' or 'royal' cemetery, part of an evolving landscape from prehistory to the present, Sutton Hoo's story has many actors, stages and props (Carver 1998, 2017). Sutton Hoo has been, for many, a microcosm of the early medieval island of Britain, specifically English origins within Anglo-Saxon kingship and Christian conversion tied to a patriotic story of a discovery: an English 'Tutankhamun', in England's 'Valley of the Kings', poignantly revealed as England's 'darkest hour' approached under threat of German invasion (Carver 1998, 2017; D'Arcens 2021). The site became a fable about not only national origin myths by encapsulating the trinity of themes of Germanic migration, Anglo-Saxon kingdom formation and Christian conversion, but also a story about mortality: life, death and the afterlife (Williams 2019; 2021). Likewise, the finds have harboured a tale about warfare and feasting, about far-flung connections and maritime journeys. The items from Mound 1, especially its iconic helmet, have become pivotal foci in these parables (McCombe 2011; Figure 1).

Both dimensions – early medieval composition and deposition of the grave-goods, and the 20th-century story of its discovery – coalesced in the 2021 Netflix film *The Dig*. Directed by Simon Stone and based on John Preston's novel of the same title, it starred Carey Mulligan and Ralph Fiennes. The film paid modest attention to the artefacts and yet dramatised, romanticised and fetishised the discovery and personalities associated with the Mound 1 'treasure' of 1939 for fresh audiences. It was indeed a rare instance where a real archaeological excavation and archaeologists as historical personages have been portrayed in detail (if not completely fairly and accurately). Thus, the finds, while referred to as the 'treasure' repeatedly in the film, were not centre-stage in any meaningful way; the story instead explored the relationship between the process of archaeological investigation and the characters' relationships with each other, with mortality, identity and nationhood. The film thus revealed Sutton Hoo's enduring and evolving place in present-day conceptions of Englishness and English origins rooted in concepts of 'Anglo-Saxonist' nationalistic and racialised discourse (Bunning 2021; D'Arcens 2021; Pitts *et al.* 2021; Williams 2021).¹

All of these narrative elements were distilled into the emergence of the use of the word 'treasure(s)' to describe the Mound 1 burial assemblage specifically, and the entire ship-burial in less specific terms from 1939 to the present. The National Trust website has posed the question 'Where's the Treasure?'² and British Museum curator Dr Sue Brunning delivered a public lecture following the release of *The Dig* entitled 'Treasures of Sutton Hoo' on 5 May 2021, having previously described the chamber as 'treasure-filled' in the context of discussing the film (Bunning 2021).³ Indeed, in the media, the ship from Mound 1 has been equated repeatedly with 'burial treasures' (BBC News 2019). A BBC News story about Sutton Hoo announcing the opening of the new viewing tower in 2021 stated that the assemblage was the 'burial treasures of King Rædwald - the 7th Century [sic] Anglo-Saxon ruler of East Anglia'; the same story describes how the 'treasures ... included a warrior's iron helmet, a magnificent sword, Byzantine silverware, gold jewellery, a lavish feasting set and a whalebone casket' (the last of which is presumably an error relating to the presence of the Franks Casket in the British Museum) and that 'the treasures are now at the British

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZQz0rkNajo>. For the full set of my blog-posts reviewing and critiquing *The Dig*: <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/category/archaeodeath-on-tv-film-and-video-games/the-dig/>

² <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo/features/the-royal-burial-mounds-at-sutton-hoo>

³ <https://twitter.com/SueBunningBM/status/1384830711388069890>



Figure 1: Encountering the ‘Sutton Hoo treasure’ at the British Museum (in this case by the author in February 2020). ‘Treasure’ is constituted by the artefacts on display, the accompanying text panels and the quotations from the Old English poem *Beowulf* (Photographs: Howard Williams)

Museum’ (BBC News 2021). Similarly, *The Guardian* described the ‘gold and jewelled treasures’ in the context of discussing a new project to conserve, catalogue and digitise the photographs of Barbara Wagstaff and Mercie Lack taken in the summer of 1939 after the ‘uncovering of the treasures’ and their removal to the British Museum (Brown 2021). Most recently of all, the Staffordshire Hoard and Mound 1 assemblage have been considered a pair as the two ‘greatest finds of Anglo-Saxon treasure’, being ‘reunited’ in an exhibition at Sutton Hoo: the ‘two treasures’ showing ‘striking similarities’ with each other (BBC News 2022). So, Mound 1 has continued to be read in close association with a specific use of ‘treasure’ and ‘treasures’ in the media, including a specific connection with both East Anglian kings and the British Museum (Figure 1).

How can we begin to understand this narrative and the specific and repeated use of ‘treasure’ to refer to the wealthiest burial assemblage ever found in British soil? While there have been detailed critiques of the 19th-century origins of Anglo-Saxon burial archaeology (e.g. Lucy 1998, 2000; Williams 2006a & b, 2007a & b; 2008; 2013; see also now Harland 2021: 41–92), there have been far fewer evaluations of the subdiscipline’s 20th- and 21st-century development and the politics and popular intersections of its interpretive frameworks, methods and techniques (but see Lucy 1998, 2000, 2002; Content and Williams 2010; Dickinson 2011). There have been fewer still discussions regarding Anglo-Saxon archaeology’s recent

endeavours in public archaeology and heritage interpretation (Marzinzik 2011; McCombe 2011; Walsh and Williams 2019; Williams 2020a, 2020b). Filmer-Sankey (2007) offered a rare and specific intervention by exploring the shifting perception of Sutton Hoo’s Mound 1 on the European stage. Subsequently, McCombe (2011) explored the ‘supercharged iconicity’ of the Sutton Hoo helmet as a ‘treasure’ of the British Museum and thus the embodiment of early Englishness set against a background of early medieval barbarian migrations and kingdoms (McCombe 2011: 258). A recent chapter by Katherine Cross (2019) has made an invaluable contribution by exploring the complex interaction of academic discourse and museum displays focusing on the British Museum’s early medieval gallery more broadly. A recent thesis by Allfrey (2020) specifically tackled the enmeshing of Sutton Hoo with the poem *Beowulf* in the media and within heritage

contexts, identifying their interplay in telling a story of English origins. However, to date there has been no sustained evaluation of how and why the superlatives 'treasure' and 'treasures' have found sustained favour in relation to the Mound 1 burial assemblage by researchers and heritage practitioners as well as in the media and popular culture (but see Carver 2000).

In order for the first time to sketch the origins and selective deployment of the term 'the Sutton Hoo Treasure', building upon an earlier blog-post (Williams 2015), this chapter reviews the key academic and popular literature about Mound 1 since 1939. I do these in a broadly chronological fashion, but addressing different media and authors section-by-section. Whilst pursuing this review, I have adopted a more neutral term for the contents of the burial chamber within the ship beneath Mound 1: namely the 'Mound 1 assemblage' (following Hinton 2005: 60) or else the 'burial assemblage', 'grave-goods' or 'finds'. By pursuing the troubling and tenacious entanglement of 'treasure(s)' in British early medieval burial archaeology, the academic, heritage and popular interpretations of the Mound 1 ship-burial constitutes a case study of the politics and popular culture of early medieval burial archaeology relating to both the contentious status of museum displays and broader Anglo-Saxonist ideological discourses on nationhood and race (Williams 2020a). Simultaneously, the case study reveals the widespread commodification and valorisation of early medieval grave-goods as 'art' to be extracted, acquired, traded, collected and displayed and thus downplaying their funerary context (Cross 2019; Daubney 2019).

The treasure that never was: initial academic reports

In 1939, and subsequently after the Second World War, the popular press heralded the discovery as 'treasure' and 'relics' and its monetary value was emphasised (Evans 1994; Carver 1998). This was despite the coroner's inquest which declared, despite the absence of skeletal remains, the context to have been a grave where the motive of deposition was not for eventual recovery. Hence, the discovery could not be deemed Treasure Trove under the feudal right of law under which the monarch could claim all gold and silver deliberately buried in the ground with the intention it would be retrieved (see Bland *et al.* 2017). The poem *Beowulf* was alluded to at the inquest on 14 August 1939 and referenced in the *East Anglian Daily Times* of 17 August 1939 (Frank 1992: 48–49). However, how did the archaeologists refer to the unprecedented finds in their writings in the immediate aftermath?

My survey of the key publications shows that while debates persisted regarding the grave's interpretation, the status of the grave-goods as 'treasure' was both stipulated and implied implicitly. The opening line of Kendrick's report in *The British Museum Quarterly* for winter 1939 embraced the status of the finds as treasure despite the coroner ruling it not 'Treasure Trove':

The announcement that the Sutton Hoo Treasure and the associated finds had been presented to the Nation by the owner, Mrs E.M. Pretty, was published on the morning of Wednesday 23 August. It was one of the most magnificent and munificent gifts from a donor during his or her lifetime (Kendrick 1939: 111).

Explicitly, it was described as a treasure in the context of being a prized gift (thus a manifestation of Pretty's generosity) to the British Museum. Subsequently, Kendrick utilised the term when he described the coins as 'amongst the treasure' (Kendrick 1939: 126): it is evident that the term 'treasure' was restricted to characterising Mrs Pretty's 'gift to the nation'. In archaeological terms, Kendrick was far more measured, describing the assemblage as a 'wonderful series of Anglo-Saxon antiquities' and the rich early 7th-century ship-burial itself as simply the 'Sutton Hoo burial' (Kendrick 1939: 122) and the 'Sutton Hoo discovery' (Kendrick 1939: 135). The helmet and great gold buckle are each called 'magnificent' (Kendrick 1940a: 113, 115), yet subsequently Kendrick regarded the Mound 1 artefacts collectively as 'grave-furniture'.

Ernst Kitzinger's (1939) contribution to the original publications revealed his knowledge of far-reaching European late Roman and early medieval hoards when discussing the Mound 1 grave-goods. Hence, he described the late Roman period hoard from Traprain Law as the 'Traprain treasure' (Kitzinger 1939: 120) and also mentions the early Byzantine 'Lampsacus treasure' (Kitzinger 1939: 125). Kitzinger thus calls the Mound 1 artefacts 'the Sutton Hoo treasure' and (significantly) implied the items derived from an 'Anglian treasury', thus explicitly asserting a royal East Anglian connection (Kitzinger 1939: 125). Moreover, it is clear from Kitzinger's account that the Sutton Hoo assemblage fills an 'Anglo-Saxon' gap on a pan-Germanic stage of 'treasures' hitherto not discovered, from the grave of Childeric onwards. From Kitzinger's perspective, rich grave-goods were indeed 'hoards' of a specific kind.⁴

The *Antiquity* editorial also explicitly used the term 'treasure' to articulate its status as a gift by the generous Mrs Pretty: 'Only very rarely is a great Treasure kept intact through the Ages and eventually made known in such a happy way as was the case at Sutton Hoo, in Suffolk...' (Crawford and Austin 1940: 1). This is followed with the explicit legitimisation of the British Museum as its custodians: 'The British Museum is unquestionably the proper home for such a remarkable treasure'. The dig itself was even called a 'treasure-hunt' discovering 'gold and silver worth a fortune' (Crawford and Austin 1940: 2). The items are also portrayed as 'wonderful' and as of 'priceless historic and artistic value' (Crawford and Austin 1940: 3) before asserting that 'the whole treasure' belonged to a king and thus was 'royal' treasure (Crawford and Austin 1940: 4).

All the key interpretative valences were therefore established within the framing of the academic research on the Mound 1 assemblage. The term 'treasure' embodied the unprecedented scale and quality of the artefacts and their international standing in relation to other 'treasures'. The finds were thus heralded for their remarkable survival but also as a 'gift' from the soil itself to Pretty and the excavators and thus onwards to the British Museum. The very manner of its deposition and survival out of the reach of potential tomb-robbers (whose shaft was discovered and shown to have missed the chamber) justified its status as 'treasure': 'For the survival of such a treasure we have to thank the deep burial in sand' (Crawford and Austin 1940: 4).

In stark contrast, Phillips opened his contribution to *Antiquity* by (misleadingly) claiming that the Sutton Hoo assemblage was exceptional in stark contrast to the 'almost universal poverty' of Anglo-Saxon graves (Phillips 1940a: 6). The *Antiquity* texts subsequently followed on from those of the *British Museum Quarterly*. Kendrick did not refer to 'treasure' in any of his contributions (Kendrick 1940a-c) although he was keen to emphasise its broader significance as a Germanic and Scandinavian discovery as much as an English one; he thus called it 'the most magnificent and costly furnitures that has ever been found in a Teutonic tomb' (Kendrick 1940c). The same motivation might be attributed here to the use of the epithet by Kitzinger (1940: 40, 58) whose contribution again describes the 'Sutton Hoo treasure' in comparison with other hoards and thus affording it a comparable pan-Germanic status and identity (e.g. Kitzinger 1940: 58). While Crawford (1940) did not deploy the term, Grimes (1940) concluded his report on the 'salvaging of the treasures of Sutton Hoo'.

Yet it is to Henry Munro Chadwick, building upon his statements at the coroner's inquest, where we find the most loaded evocation of 'treasure'. Chadwick regarded the finds of such scale and quality that it could not have belonged to anyone '... except a king' (Chadwick 1940: 76-77), explicitly citing the epic poem *Beowulf* in order to describe the 'treasures' given to the hero at the Danish court (Chadwick 1940: 77). Therefore, the attribution of the grave to a king is tied firmly to its status as 'treasure', specifically as 'pagan' as well as Germanic in character. Hence, Chadwick asserted its 'heathen splendour', again invoking *Beowulf* (Chadwick 1940: 82). Treasure buried in barrows was called 'heathen gold' in *Beowulf*, he asserted (Chadwick 1940: 84). Chadwick concluded his account with the funeral of Scyld at the beginning

⁴ I owe this insight to Dr Caitlin Green.

of the *Beowulf* poem, utilising his own translation: 'Many jewels and treasures from distant lands had been brought together there...' (see below). More so even than 'Anglo-Saxon', scholars explicitly interpreted the Mound 1 artefacts as a pan-Germanic/Teutonic 'treasure', even at a time of war with Nazi Germany.

By contrast, reporting immediately following the discovery, lead excavator Charles Phillips (1940b) in *The Antiquaries Journal* eschewed the use of 'treasure', referring to the finds as 'the burial deposit', 'the objects', 'grave goods' and 'magnificent objects'. Still, he did use the subheading 'The Main Treasure' to discuss 'the area where the great richness of the objects deposited justifies the view that it was regarded as the centre of interest by the burial party', including the great buckle and the sword (Phillips 1940b: 166).

So, in the immediate reports of the discovery, already we see that while the term 'treasure' was generally avoided by the field archaeologists in detailed technical discussions, it was evoked by archaeologists, an authoritative art-historian (Kitzinger) and an influential historian in particular (Chadwick) to make a series of specific points and connections between the grave and its Germanic, pagan and heroic context as comprising items derived from an East Anglian royal treasury. First, the remarkably high-value nature of the items compared with other 'poor' early medieval graves, but specifically their discovery in a single grave rendered the term 'treasure' evocative, especially given their relatively good preservation and parallels with other rich Late Antique and early medieval precious metalwork hoards. Yet, it is notable that their status as a 'gift' to the British Museum is also explicitly asserted using the term 'treasure', together with the 'Teutonic'/'Germanic' context of funerary ritual explicitly evoked via the *Beowulf* poem, and Scyld's funeral therein specifically, to articulate the idea that Mound 1 assemblage was a 'royal treasure' in the Germanic tradition. Moreover, it is important to note that the absence of a body might have further enhanced the equation of the 'treasure' title, something which might have been avoided had any skeletal remains survived in the soil. The idea of a cenotaph not only facilitated comparisons with other 'treasures' (i.e. hoards), but perhaps also because it chimes with the section of the poem *Beowulf* where the Last Survivor mourns the loss of his people and deposits the treasure which will become guarded by a dragon which Beowulf later combats (even if Scyld Scefing's funeral was influential in thinking about the Mound 1 assemblage, see below). In short, in the immediate aftermath of the discovery, the network of associations of 'pagan'/'early Christian', 'heroic', 'royal', 'Anglo-Saxon' and 'Germanic', and the implicit association with the wider pre-Christian north, were enshrined in the use of 'treasure', as is the connection with the British Museum as recipient of Mrs Pretty's generous 'gift'.

The British Museum's treasure

After the Second World War, it is possible to chart the continuation of this interpretative network even if the term 'treasure' was infrequently deployed. Specifically, the story emerged that the burial assemblage comprised East Anglian royal 'treasures' with Scandinavian rather than Continental contacts (Lindqvist 1948; Carver 2017: 29–55; see also McCombe 2011: 216–223). Maryon (1946: 28) repeatedly calls the finds 'treasures' and the collection as the 'Sutton Hoo ship treasure', while Rupert Bruce-Mitford's first edition British Museum handbook (1947) states that 'It was the richest treasure ever dug from British soil, and one of the most important historical documents yet found in Europe for the migrations of the Teutonic peoples, in which the settlement of England by the Saxons was an episode' (Bruce-Mitford 1947: 11). So, as well as the experts at the British Museum referring to it as 'treasure', the *national value* was made explicit and linked to the soil of the island of Britain. Moreover, this was still contextualised on a European stage, in which Saxon settlement is but one 'episode' in the broader set of migrations by the barbarian Teutons. Like those comments made by Kendrick soon after discovery (above), this statement would not be out of place amidst the most explicit mid-19th-century interpretations of early medieval grave-finds inspired by racial Anglo-Saxonism (Lucy 1998, 2000, 2002; Williams 2007a and b, 2008, 2013; Content and Williams 2010; McCombe 2011).

Having avoided the term ‘treasure’ in the subsequent discussion of the ‘burial deposit’ and the ‘objects’, ‘treasure’ returned when Bruce-Mitford quoted from the translation of *Beowulf* by J.R. Clark Hall, including the lines ‘treasures from far’ and ‘lay on his breast of treasures a-many’ and ‘with less tribal treasures’ pertaining to funeral of Scyld Scefing (although in the quoted sections of that translation the word ‘treasure’ was not deployed in Beowulf’s own cremation and subsequent burial) (Bruce-Mitford 1947: 3940). The poem prompted Bruce-Mitford to use the term for the Sutton Hoo deposit:

These literary accounts make it plain that the Sutton Hoo treasure was not buried in secret. They also make it plain that those who buried the treasures had no intention of recovering them later. It was these two considerations which led the Suffolk jurors in accordance with English law, to find that the gold and silver in the ship were not Treasure Trove (Bruce-Mitford 1947: 41).

Again, Bruce-Mitford asserted that the artefacts were perhaps derived from a ‘treasury’ and thus constituted ‘family or tribal heirlooms’ (Bruce-Mitford 1947: 43). Even though the term ‘treasure’ is avoided in the discussion of the silver and jewellery and in the guide’s conclusion (Bruce-Mitford 1947: 61-62), the label is evoked once more through the citation of the *Beowulf* poem specifically and historical references to Germanic royal treasuries.

Bruce-Mitford’s (1950) commentary in the *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and Natural History* ran to 78 pages without using the word ‘treasure’ other than quoting others. He instead discussed the ‘ship-burial’, the ‘great ship-burial’, the ‘burial deposit’, ‘objects’ and ‘grave-goods’ throughout (e.g. Bruce-Mitford 1950: 72). Yet, despite this consistency, he lapsed into the concept of ‘tribal treasures’, citing *Beowulf* lines 1218–19 (Bruce-Mitford 1950: 4; see Fulk 2010: 166) and once again mentioned the likelihood that these items derived from a ‘royal treasury’ (Bruce-Mitford 1950: 6). Later he refers to the ‘whole of the Sutton Hoo treasure’ in relation to Maryon’s (1946, 1947) interpretations of the items (Bruce-Mitford 1950: 61). So again, we see the enduring allure of ‘treasure’ despite stringent attempts to avoid it in the technical and detailed sections of Bruce-Mitford’s work: the more evocative term revealing itself through connections to royalty and via the *Beowulf* poem specifically.

Bruce-Mitford’s (1968) new edition of his British Museum handbook called the assemblage ‘objects’, ‘grave goods’ and as ‘the burial deposit’ but once again *Beowulf* was cited: ‘on his breast lay countless treasures’ (Bruce-Mitford 1968: 45). Also, he considered Beowulf’s own funeral with the quotation: ‘They bequeathed the gleaming gold, treasure of men’ (Bruce-Mitford 1968: 46). It is once more explicit that the poem *Beowulf* inspired Bruce-Mitford to immediately confirm the assemblage’s status as treasure after pages of moderated prose using the same lines as in the 1947 edition (Bruce-Mitford 1968: 46). ‘Treasure’ is not referred to again for the rest of the handbook; instead, the finds were ‘discoveries’ (Bruce-Mitford 1968: 73) and ‘objects’ (Bruce-Mitford 1968: 75). Yet, in the conclusion, Bruce-Mitford reverted to considering the finds as ‘splendours’ and ‘a fraction of the riches that the royal treasury must have held’ (Bruce-Mitford 1968: 73). Moreover, he observed that the finds were ‘remarkable and splendid gifts’ from Mrs Edith May Pretty (Bruce-Mitford 1968: 75).

In *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, Bruce-Mitford (1974) used ‘treasures’ in the context of *Beowulf* once more: ‘The treasures, if not actually personal to a king, may legitimately be regarded as ‘tribal treasures’ (*þeod-gestreona*, *Beowulf* 1218-19; Fulk 2010) such as were ‘distributed by him from the national treasure-store’ (Bruce-Mitford 1974: 3). He returned to the idea of ‘heirlooms from the royal treasury’ (Bruce-Mitford 1974: 5) and tied this to the argument that the whetstone and iron stand or ‘standard’ constituted ‘regalia’ (Bruce-Mitford 1974: 7–17). The possibility of a Christian burial was never ruled out, describing them in general terms as ‘grave-goods’. This makes clear that ‘treasure’ had no broader significance in discussion early medieval burial archaeology beyond the specific use for the artefacts found in the

Mound 1 ship-burial (Bruce-Mitford 1974: 18). Indeed, he oddly called the finds a 'hoard' when referring to the dating of the coins (Bruce-Mitford 1974: 20). Still, in general, Bruce-Mitford described the find variously as the 'Sutton Hoo burial' (as if there was only one found from the cemetery!), 'ship-burial', 'great ship-barrow' and the 'great ship-burial' (Bruce-Mitford 1974: 33, 52, 56–60).

The monumental publications by Bruce-Mitford (1975: xxxii) regarded the Mound 1 assemblage as 'the greatest single discovery in the history of British archaeology' because of its 'richness and royalty'. Yet, within the context of its storage through the Second World War, he emphasised its close proximity to other 'treasures' acquired from across the world; this allowed Bruce-Mitford an opportunity to celebrate once more the Sutton Hoo finds as 'treasures' of comparable significance and standing. Thus, he stated: 'The treasure spent the war years with the Elgin Marbles ... in a disused appendix of the London Tube system' (Bruce-Mitford 1975: 137). Moreover, Hopkirk's (1975: xxxvii) homage to Edith Pretty described how the bulk of the 'treasure' spent its first night above ground under Edith Pretty's bed. So again, 'treasure' is evoked in the context of its temporary storage, as opposed to its original funerary context of discovery. The discussion of the excavation of the assemblage included the diary entries of Phillips which described artefacts as 'furniture' and otherwise the collective term used was 'burial chamber', the 'burial deposit' and the 'complex of objects' (Bruce-Mitford 1975: 176–227) although the term 'main treasure' is used for the series of gold objects (Bruce-Mitford 1975: 194). Subsequently, the items are called 'grave-goods', 'the finds' and the 'burial deposit' (Bruce-Mitford 1975: 436–486). Later volumes use the same consistent terms (Bruce-Mitford 1978; Bruce-Mitford and Care Evans 1983).

Angela Care Evans composed the successor guidebook publication for the British Museum: *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial*. She follows the formula of calling the artefacts 'magnificent' and regarded the finds to be 'of remarkable wealth and unparalleled artistic quality' (Evans 1994: 9). Part 2 is titled 'the Ship Burial and its Treasures'. Evans called Mound 1 a 'resplendently pagan burial' and asserted that the finds represent 'a range of possessions' and 'the possessions that would have been associated with the body of the dead man'. She emphasised the connection to a single individual: King Rædwald (Evans 1994: 33). Equally, the assemblage was considered to be 'grave goods that accompanied the dead man on his journey to a shadowy Germanic afterlife...' (Evans 1994: 34–35). Later, 'treasure' made an appearance in chapter 10: 'Treasure trove?' only to explain that the 'Sutton Hoo treasure' was 'not treasure trove'. So, the 'treasure' is again Edith Pretty's and subsequently her gift to the British Museum is considered the museum's treasure! Evans then claimed the assemblage was an unusual case as 'the treasure was placed publicly in a grave accompanying a human burial and with no intention of recovery' and repeated that 'treasure as part of a human burial is rare' (Evans 1994: 94). In these popular writings, then, the Mound 1 assemblage holds a seemingly unique status as both 'grave-goods' and 'treasure'.

British Museum curator and expert in Anglo-Saxon art, Leslie Webster (1992), preferred the far more neutral description of 'male princely burial' (Webster 1992: 75) or simply 'Mound One' (Webster 1992: 80). In her 2000 chapter, she identified the conceptual challenges of the term (see above). Nonetheless, she explicitly stated that the Mound 1 regalia, feasting gear, vessels, weapons, and gold and garnet jewellery were 'treasure' (Webster 2000: 50–57). Later, Webster (2011: 271) described Sutton Hoo as one among a series of 'princely graves'. She regarded the Mound 1 assemblage as 'sumptuous' and a 'riot of gold and garnet jewellery and quantities of coins' (Webster 2011: 272). She here restricted the use of 'treasure' to the late Antique and Byzantine silver tableware as 'not only a display of royal treasure and feasting ceremony, but also an expression of *romanitas*' (Webster 2011: 268). Elsewhere, Webster deftly avoided any collective characterisation of the complex burial deposit but still described princely graves as 'lavish displays' and 'ostentatious' (Webster 2013: 63–64).

Yet caution is cast aside in a more recent popular guide by the British Museum's early medieval coin curator Gareth Williams (2011). In *Treasures from Sutton Hoo*, the book by Williams reverted to the

narrative that the ‘treasure’ status of the Mound 1 finds is related to their gifting and curation in the British Museum. The fly leaf stated that they ‘rank among the most splendid treasures in the collection of the British Museum’. The distinction between their status as ‘finds’ during discovery and ‘treasure’ in the British Museum was made explicit (G. Williams 2011: 4). Having subsequently referred to them as ‘grave-goods’ Williams then states: ‘There are two main interpretations of why the treasures were placed in the grave’ (G. Williams 2011: 19) and ‘The treasure was buried within a chamber...’ (G. Williams 2011: 20), and ‘The treasures also included cups, and two great drinking horns....’ (G. Williams 2011: 28).

Approaches to the term ‘treasure’ have clearly fluctuated significantly depending on author and context. In contrast to Gareth Williams, Sonja Marzinzik (2007) avoided the term consistently in her writings (Marzinzik 2007: 10, 51). While referring to the ‘splendour’ being reminiscent of and countering the view that *Beowulf* was a flight of fancy, she eschewed the term despite calling them ‘intricate’ ‘grave goods’ displaying ‘technical virtuosity’ (see also Marzinzik 2013: 104, 106).

In summary, in the British Museum’s conservation, research and both its academic and public-facing publications, the label ‘treasure’ is avoided in many circumstances and in broad terms. However, with the exception of Marzinzik’s writings, the term endured with specific uses throughout the principal reports and guide books, thus serving as an interpretative glue regarding the interpretation of Mound 1 as the East Anglian convert King Rædwald’s grave, and simultaneously legitimising the assemblage in relation to its custodians (McCombe 2011: 207). Moreover, while the helmet emerged through two successive reconstructions as an icon, its significance was always tied to the ‘regalia’ and ‘gear’ of the assemblage from the burial chamber within the ship beneath Mound 1 as both ‘treasure’ and ‘grave-goods’ (cf. McCombe 2011: 218–229; Figure 1).

The world of ‘treasure’

What of the wider context beyond the British Museum’s archaeologists? A comprehensive review of the academic and popular literature and digital media is outside the scope of this chapter. However, it is important to note that syntheses and popular accounts occasionally, but consistently, deploy the ‘t-word’ to refer to the Mound 1 burial assemblage. For example, writing in 1960, David Wilson describes Mound 1 as ‘a monument to a great man: the treasure and paraphernalia found in the grave leave no doubt that this was the memorial of a king’ and ‘the unknown king has left his memorial and we can only admire the riches and glories of these East Anglian kings who numbered among their treasures the finest jewellery produced in Europe at that time, as well as riches imported from the exotic Mediterranean world’ (Wilson 1960: 46). But what of popular syntheses of the 1939 discoveries?

Writing the first popular account of the Mound 1 find pitched at a US audience, Bernice Grohskopf (1970) titled her book: *The Treasure of Sutton Hoo*. In addition, the opening included an unattributed translation from *Beowulf* using the words of the unnamed Last Survivor who deposited the hoard later to be guarded by the dragon: ‘Take these treasures, earth, now that no one/ Living can enjoy them. They were yours, in the beginning’ (*Beowulf*; lines 2247–2248) (the bibliography cites three verse translations and one prose translation, see also Fulk 2010: 234). This selection is revealing and distinctive from the *Beowulf* evocations used to discuss the Mound 1 assemblage hitherto, since the equation is here made not with Scyld Scefing or *Beowulf*’s own funeral following the tradition of Chadwick, but with the act of deposition of ‘treasure’ in the ground for later retrieval: the dragon’s hoard. The treasure guarded by the dragon finds closer evocation with the Mound 1 burial assemblage, not only because of the dragon shield applique but with the idea of a coherent set of regalia and precious items from a royal hall consigned for posterity (as already framed by Maryon 1946: 26). Moreover, the analogy to dragon-guarded treasure legitimised to archaeologists its recovery and the values attributed to it by our society as an intact inheritance of a long dead people (as argued by Carver 2000: 25–26).

Unsurprisingly, the term 'treasure' was ubiquitous in Grohskopf's account, referring to its value 'estimated at more than a million dollars, but the historical value is inestimable' (Grohskopf 1970: 4), linking its status to the 'regalia of a king'. She observed that the 'story of the treasure at Sutton Hoo' (Grohskopf 1970: 5) contrasted with what little remained of the 'treasure' found in the 19th-century excavation of a ship-burial at Snape (Grohskopf 1970: 9). She then correctly described Sutton Hoo Mound 1 as a 'ship-burial' (Grohskopf 1970: 10). When digging the grave, the archaeologists found 'treasure hunters' had got there first but had missed it, this definition distinguishing 'looters' from 'the archaeologists'. They had, however, left 'never knowing that ten feet below them lay the treasure of Sutton Hoo' (Grohskopf 1970: 12). She went on to assert that 'The Sutton Hoo treasure is referred to as an outstanding 'archaeological document' for early English history. The intrinsic value of the splendid 1300-year-old hoard is minor compared with its historical value, for here is the actual regalia of an Anglo-Saxon king—his symbols of sovereignty' (Grohskopf 1970: 19). As well as conflating the grave-goods with the status of 'hoard', *Beowulf* was again quoted in verse (2758-2762), describing the dragon's hoard rather than the funerals of the poem (Grohskopf 1970: 35). She articulated a sense of its preciousness and the precarity of the 'treasure' during its excavation under challenging circumstances (Grohskopf 1970: 36-37). Grohskopf revisited 'treasure' to pose the question of its ownership. Following the 14 August 1939 coroner's inquest determining the finds belonged to Mrs Pretty, her gift to the nation is called 'the treasure' when sent to the British Museum (Grohskopf 1970: 52-53).

Drawing these uses together, Grohskopf regarded the assemblage as 'treasure' during the Early Middle Ages and upon burial, then also as 'treasure' during the process of discovery and excavation. Once more, Grohskopf described the artefacts as 'treasure' when determined legally as not Treasure Trove, during the finds' gifting to the nation, but also through their temporary reburial as it 'sank into obscurity' because of the 'outbreak of World War II' (Grohskopf 1970: 53). Thus, the London Underground became a temporary 'dragon's lair' for the items. Chapter two was called 'The Treasure' and again *Beowulf* and the dragon's treasure are cited (lines 3101-3105; Fulk 2010: 290). Oddly, here she returned to calling them the 'Sutton Hoo finds' (Grohskopf 1970: 59) but insisted upon the idea that 'the treasure represented only a small portion of a royal treasury' (Grohskopf 1970: 59-60). Quotes from *Beowulf* punctuated every item discussed and the term 'treasure' is repeated when the collection as a whole is considered and the grave's status as a royal, pagan 'cenotaph' is asserted (e.g. Grohskopf 1970: 90, 122). Grohskopf claimed that *Beowulf* persuaded the coroner that the assemblage was not Treasure Trove with lines 3165-3168 read from *Beowulf*'s funeral (Fulk 2010: 294; but see Frank 1992 for countering this myth). Specifically for Grohskopf, the dragon's hoard captured her imagination as the analogy for Mound 1, as opposed to the funerals of Scyld Scefing and *Beowulf*, and this is repeatedly projected to her readers.

Grohskopf might be exceptional in her liberal use of the 't-word'. Conversely, it is worth noting that Charles Green's 1963 popular account of Mound 1 managed to navigate all 154 pages without utilising the terms 'treasure' or 'treasures' once. This was clearly a conscious choice neither to misrepresent nor glamorise the finds that, in many regards, spoke for themselves regarding their unique splendour. Green (1963) instead utilised the term 'grave-goods' throughout. So, it is in popular and specifically literary discussions that the 'treasure' status of the Mound 1 assemblage came to the fore, but in contrasting fashions: Grohskopf finds parallel in Williams, while Green mirrors Marzinzik, each poles apart in the deployment of 'treasure'/'treasures' in discussing the exceptional burial assemblage.

There is no space for a broader survey, but I sense that 'treasure' regularly appears in relation to the Mound 1 assemblage across popular syntheses of early medieval history and archaeology since 1939. Finally, it is worth noting that the academic publications about Sutton Hoo themselves were afforded the 'treasure' epithet. Werner (1992: 2) added this dimension by regarding the 'monumental' publications of the Sutton Hoo ship burial by Rupert Bruce-Mitford as a 'treasure trove' for the expert.

Martin Carver's Sutton Hoo

Given his influential fieldwork, Martin Carver successfully reinterpreted Mounds 1–4 and placed them in the context of the wider cemetery. He disseminated his findings through extensive academic and public-facing publications. Therefore, the scope and influential character of his work in shaping perceptions of Sutton Hoo over the last five decades require us to delve into the language he has used in detail.

In general terms, Carver's academic writings have continued the tradition of careful and cautious avoidance of the term 'treasure', even more so than Bruce-Mitford and in a comparable fashion to Wester and Marzinzik. This makes sense, since Carver has pioneered not only in fieldwork but in how archaeologists and the public think about furnished mortuary practices. He called Mound 1 a 'wealthy grave group which is artistically and symbolically outstanding' (Carver 1989: 150). Referring to the monument as the 'great ship-burial', Carver described the 'grave-group' as comprising of 'a range of objects, ceremonial, artistic and utilitarian which constitutes the most remarkable archaeological statement so far made about an Anglo-Saxon' (Carver 1983: 1). Carver (1985: 2-3) also defined the grave as the 'ship and burial chamber'.

In the Preface to the far-reaching edited collection *The Age of Sutton Hoo*, Carver announced that '[t]he archaeological site at Sutton Hoo, famous for its treasure, its buried ships and its early English warrior-kings, occupies a specific place in the public affection – a place at once brave and murky' (Carver 1992a: vii). 'Treasure' did not appear thereafter and had no serious place in the interim report beyond the disparaging reference to early 'treasure-hunters' (Carver 1992b: 346) but for one exception: 'Bruce-Mitford's publication, a monument in its own right, provides not only a means for the world to share the treasure, but a point of departure for new interpretation...' (Carver 1992b: 348). Therefore, as with Werner (1992), treasure was reserved for homages to previous works.

For the final academic publication of his campaign of fieldwork, the inner flyleaf regarded Mound 1's contents as the 'fabulous seventh-century treasure now in the British Museum' (Carver 2005). This was adapted in the abstract to 'the contents' (Carver 2005: xxi), where the 1939 'burial chamber' finds are described as 'spectacular'. However, nowhere in the final report is the word 'treasure' utilised in connection to the burial assemblage (Carver 2005: 177-199, 312-313, 490). Indeed, this careful avoidance of the word is revealed by the fact it only appeared in a quote from Heaney's *Beowulf* in which Scyld Scefing's burial is described as containing 'Far-fetched treasures' where Carver cautioned explicitly against too close and repeated equation between the grave and the poem (Carver 2005: 503).

In subsequent academic publications and popular writings, Carver showed how it is possible to refer to the Sutton Hoo cemetery and the fabulous array of artefacts found in the Mound 1 burial chamber in evocative and detailed terms with only sporadic recourse to the term 'treasure' (Carver 2011: 923). He considered the grave-goods as a 'palimpsest' of allusions to the Roman empire, to Scandinavian heroes, to the island of Britain, to the Northern gods, to the Celtic gods, to Christ, and so forth' (Carver 2011: 926). Whilst, describing the discovery of the Mound 1 grave-goods as a 'veritable feast of golden objects' (Carver 1998: 15; Carver 2017: 17) and the excavations as 'magical' (Carver 1998: 16; 2017: 20), Carver was careful in describing the entirety of the assemblage in popular accounts. He used the word 'treasure' in only the vaguest of terms in the phrase: 'the chamber and its treasures' (Carver 1998: 17; Carver 2017: 20). Indeed, Carver was at pains to describe the full range of items found: 263 objects of gold, garnet, silver, bronze, animal, iron, wood, bone, textiles, feathers and fur' plus a 'ladybird and the crushed remains of a flowering plant' rather than fixate on those items popularly considered 'treasure'. For Carver, the grave contained 'every Dark Age object that had been imagined, and a few that had not, seemed to be represented in this burial' (Carver 1998: 18; Carver 2017: 22). Consequently, it is clear that Carver has maintained steady resistance to utilising incautious and loaded language in many of his academic as well as popular publications.

Having cautiously deployed the term in the excavation report, in select public-facing popular accounts, Carver used 'treasure' in the context of the discovery and the Coroner's inquest (Carver 1998: 21; Carver 2017: 25). Furthermore, Carver (1998: 24; 2017: 28) quoted Wright's translation of Scyld Scefing's funeral in *Beowulf* in which 'treasure' is not used but 'a heap of jewels' is deployed. The concept of 'treasure' was applied to describe the British Museum's custodianship of the assemblage is explicit in Chapter 2's title: 'The British Museum's Treasure' (Carver 1998: 25; Carver 2017: 29, 97). In contrast, when exploring the actual ship-burial itself, Carver uses 'grave goods' (Carver 2017: 135) although later he calls the items 'treasures and gifts' and a 'wonderful assemblage' (Carver 2017: 147). This attitude is enshrined in his own research project's core aim to steer '... Sutton Hoo away from the heroic age of amazing discoveries and startling finds and embarked on a scientific expedition with a new emphasis and new vocabulary' (Carver 2017: 55). So, whether conscious or implicit, Carver makes a clear distinction regarding both the nature of the argument and the intended audience before using the 't-word'.

Carver was not averse to using vivid, even romantic and nationalistic, language in his popular writings. In his concluding chapter of his popular account, he claims '*The Sutton Hoo Story* is the story of a piece of England' (Carver 2017: 174), and the Sutton Hoo burial grounds 'have together given us a dazzling sequence of life and death during the years that the English created kingdoms and became Christian' (Carver 2017: 205). The burial rites reveal a 'new heroic age' of a 'jubilant belligerence of a young aristocracy' (Carver 2017: 181), comparing the occupant of Mound 17 to 'Siegfried' (giving a flavour of Germanic legendary hero-figures). About Mound 1, Carver noted the rite as 'ship-burial' (Carver 2017: 182-183) as demonstrating a pagan investment and cultic practices deployed in the 'theatre of the dead' (Carver 2017: 184-187). Carver (2017: 195) claimed that the association of Rædwald with Mound 1 is 'by broad consent'. At the very last gasp, Carver evoked 'treasure':

The pre-Christian age of Sutton Hoo was already an international one, and its protagonists beside the Deben did not dwell in a benighted periphery. But their legacy – mounds filled with treasure – is hard to grasp as it is huge. Staying silent until reawakened by the spade, they are easily lost to history (Carver 2017: 199-200).

Here, Carver valorised the Anglo-Saxons and the archaeological investigation of them in equal measure, with treasure as the glue. Similarly, he subsequently calls the Oseberg mound full of 'marvellous treasure in a ship, certainly the property of a woman' (Carver 2017: 202). Yet Carver (2011: 923) was not fixated on the 't-word', and frequently used the grave structure itself as the frame of reference for the assemblage, calling the 'Mound 1 chamber', full of poetic allusions to the 'pagan, maritime and autonomous' identities of a local warrior elite via the selection of grave-goods (Carver 2011: 926).

Most recently, Carver (2019: 61) described the 'Mound 1 hero', distinguishing between items of 'personal paraphernalia' as opposed to the 'more ceremonial objects outside the coffin' (Carver 2019: 62), describing items from the 'Mound 1 burial ship' (Carver 2019: 117) and the Mound 1 ship burial (Carver 2019: 333). He reconnected archaeology with *Beowulf* too in the search for the 'props' for 5th–7th-century Britain (Carver 2019: 614-615). He called Mound 1 an 'assemblage, of a richness and variety so far unsurpassed in Britain or Ireland' (Carver 2019: 339–340). Carver saw the burial assemblage as analogous to epic poetry in recording the mortuary theatrics of early Anglo-Saxon rulers retaining strong links with the 'ancestral homelands in Scandinavia while exploiting new relationships with the continent of Europe and remaining plural in its religious alignment' (Carver 2019: 340). So, 'treasure' is broadly eschewed in Carver's writings (and indeed, directly addressed and critiqued in his 2000 book chapter): he was acutely aware of its pitfalls. However, the equation of the finds with a royal 'treasury' and the possessions of a 'king', of a single man, and a pagan too, led to the consideration of the assemblage as 'treasure' in specific instances within Carver's popular writings.



Figure 2: Encountering the ‘Sutton Hoo treasure’ in the Sutton Hoo Exhibition Hall in 2016 (this iteration of the reconstructed burial chamber had the assemblage pushed to the side to allow groups of visitors to enter into the space. This display has now been removed (Photographs: Howard Williams)

Treasure on display

Treasure has persisted and reemerged in heritage contexts over the last 20 years. Opened in 2002 by Seamus Heaney who produced the acclaimed translation of *Beowulf* (see below), the National Trust estate at Sutton Hoo has an Exhibition Hall with a long-standing reconstruction of the burial chamber (now removed) and a screen presentation (Figure 2). There is also a ‘Treasury Room’ which is secure and for displaying temporary exhibitions.

Associated with the first iteration of the exhibition, the Mound 1 grave-goods are pointedly referred to in Steven J. Plunkett’s associated guidebook in terms of their context as a ‘furnished burial-chamber’ (Plunkett 2002: 4). In the book section ‘The Man in the Ship’, Plunkett asks: ‘In whose honour might these extraordinary treasures have been consigned to a burial ship, intended never again to be seen by living eyes?’ The ‘treasure’ is here the fabulous array of grave-goods, not a legal or cultural status for these objects. Still, the details of the artefacts are discussed without reference to ‘treasure’ (Plunkett 2002: 26).

A more recent guide book, however, takes a different approach and ‘treasure’ is more expansively addressed. The finds were called

‘glorious’, and described as ‘grave goods’ but the discussion nevertheless refers to ‘A Ship of Treasures’ (Bullen 2014: 16) and ‘Claiming the Treasure’ (Bullen 2014: 22). Indeed, while with subtly different connotations to scale and quality, ‘treasure’ and ‘treasures’ seem to be used interchangeably. Meanwhile, the chamber’s contents are called ‘the Sutton Hoo treasure’ twice (Bullen 2014: 23, 36). The second heading and second use of the phrase relate to the Coroner’s decision of 14 August 1939 when Edith Pretty was assigned the ‘treasure’ by the decision that the artefacts were not a ‘Treasure Trove’ in a legal sense. The discussion of the headlines ‘Treasure Given to Woman’ and ‘Saxon King’s Treasure Worth £30,000’ show the media’s use of the term. Thus the Mound 1 items are portrayed as ‘treasure; despite being declared Pretty’s and not ‘Treasure Trove’; indeed through her subsequent gift to the nation, the title of ‘treasure’ legitimised (see also Walsh and Williams 2019).



Figure 3: Encountering the 'Sutton Hoo treasure' in contrasting guises: the 1:1 grave-plan inside the the Sutton Hoo Exhibition Hall in 2022 (top-left), its outdoor parallel as part of the new ship sculpture outside the Visitor Centre in 2022 (top-right), the 'treasure' reanimated in the guise of Paul Mortimer in 2016 (middle-right), a reproduction of the Mound 1 helmet in the 'Treasury' in 2016 (bottom-right) and integrated into the wider landscape as part of an 'Anglo-Saxon royal landscape', at Woodbridge railway station in 2022 (bottom-left) (Photographs: Howard Williams)

The latest iteration of the National Trust guidebook refers to 'an array of precious objects' (Hanks 2019: 3) and describes the 'lavish grave goods' (Hanks 2019: 8) and 'wonderful objects' (Hanks 2019: 19) from the 'the King's Mound' at Sutton Hoo (e.g. Hanks 2019: 38). Tudor-period hunts for 'treasure' are referenced (Hanks 2019: 11) but the 1939 discovery is also called a 'king's treasure' (Hanks 2019: 18) and 'truly a treasure trove' (Hanks 2019: 19), illustrating the persistent counterintuitive connotations of the 't-word'. Reference is made to the 'treasure ...buried once more, but this time in a disused London Underground tunnel with other precious objects from the British Museum' (Hanks 2019: 21). More than 'signs of incredible wealth' (Hanks 2019: 30), the back-cover extends the use of treasure to the metaphorical: referring to Mound 1 as a 'treasure trove of information'.

Online, the website for the National Trust Visitor Centre at Sutton Hoo matches the latest guidebook in describing the 'awe-inspiring Anglo-Saxon royal burial site'.⁵ The established National Trust capitalised terminology asserts an interpretative authority, repeatedly calls the cemetery the 'Royal Burial Ground', replicating terminology to be found in the latest guide book (Hanks 2019). The site was described as containing the 'Great Ship Burial or King's Mound One'. King Rædwald remains the exclusive occupant for Mound 1, buried in a 90ft ship 'surrounded by his extraordinary treasures'. The website then poses the question 'Where's the Treasure?' noting that the 'King's Mound treasure' is in the British Museum... (see also Cross 2019).⁶ The 'brief introduction' section of the website uses 'The Treasures' to refer to the burial assemblage as a whole.⁷ The only other reference to 'treasure' relates to the Tudor-period ransacking of the mounds by what the website describes as 'Tudor treasure-seekers',⁸ while the discovery is also perceived as a 'treasure' itself, captured on camera by Mercie Lack and Barbara Wagstaff during August

⁵ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo>

⁶ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo/features/the-royal-burial-mounds-at-sutton-hoo>

⁷ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo/features/a-brief-introduction-to-sutton-hoo>

⁸ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo/features/history-of-archaeology-at-sutton-hoo>

1939.⁹ In short, most web-pages avoid the term ‘treasure’, with the current website referring simply to ‘precious objects’.¹⁰ Still, the few references to the word on the website encapsulates the mutable meaning of ‘treasure’ for Sutton Hoo, referring to the burial assemblage but also to their state on display in the British Museum and represented in the new Netflix film *The Dig* (see above).

On site, the long-established National Trust Visitor Centre at Sutton Hoo not only included many reproduction items from the assemblage but also references to ‘the king’s treasures’ and *Beowulf* is quoted for reference to ‘Far fetched [sic] treasures...’ (see McCombe 2011: 235–242; Figures 2–4).¹¹ The re-envisioned displays installed during the course of the COVID-19 global pandemic continue to reference ‘treasure’ as well as describing the ship burial as ‘spectacular’ and ‘splendid’. Inside Tranmer House, as part of a new display about the 1939 excavations, one panel records how Peggy Piggott ‘struck gold’, describing how ‘other treasures’ followed on her initial discovery; the panel is titled ‘We have found the treasure’. Another panel describes how crowds gathered at Sutton village hall hoping to catch a glimpse of the ‘treasures’. In the Exhibition and Treasury building (now dubbed the ‘High Hall’), the Mound 1 assemblage is described as containing ‘an abundance of valuable belongings’ and ‘treasured possessions that mark his power’. Meanwhile, an interpretation panel associated with the new Viewing Tower opened in September 2021 records how ‘the dead King has been placed inside, surrounded by abundant treasures’ (Figure 4). Again and repeatedly, the ‘treasure’ is tied to the assertion of kingly status for Mound 1’s (singular) occupant and the ‘royal’ associations of the site as a whole.¹²

An evaluation of the displays in the British Museum over time must be tackled elsewhere (see McCombe 2011: 230–235; Cross 2019; Williams *et al.* 2020). Still, it was worth noting that the exhibition when last visited (in 2020) described the 1939 discovery of the ‘central chamber filled with treasures’ and referred to the assemblage as ‘magnificent treasures’ from a ‘spectacular Anglo-Saxon grave’ with the silverware perhaps serving as ‘royal treasure’. Meanwhile, Seamus Heaney’s *Beowulf* is quoted high up on the display case glass: ‘Far-fetched treasures were piled upon him...’ and ‘They let the ground keep that ancestral treasure, Gold under gravel, gone to earth...’ (Figure 1).¹³

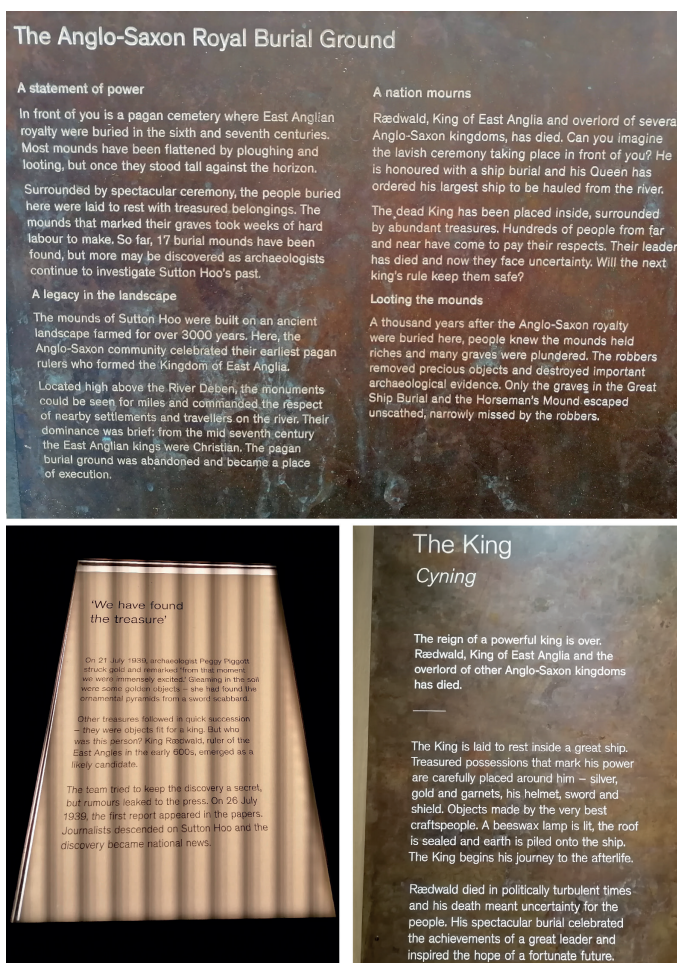


Figure 4: Encountering the ‘Sutton Hoo treasure’ through texts at the Sutton Hoo site in 2022, at the Viewing Tower (above), inside the Exhibition Hall (bottom-right), and inside Tranmer House (bottom-left) (Photographs: Howard Williams)

⁹ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo/features/conservation-in-action-at-sutton-hoo>

¹⁰ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/appeal/sutton-hoo-appeal>

¹¹ As observed, December 2016.

¹² Last visited, April 2022.

¹³ Last visited, February 2020.

More broadly, through academic, popular publications and digital media, Mound 1 assemblage is inconsistently but repeatedly called 'treasure' (see McCombe 2011: 202–203, 242–248). It can be concluded that the concept of the assemblage as 'treasure' has not simply persisted, arguably it has burgeoned in public-facing discussions of the Sutton Hoo Mound 1 ship burial and the cemetery as a whole through the 21st century thus far.

Poetic treasures

The discussion above has repeatedly identified the importance of *Beowulf* to the interpretation of Mound 1, and the identity of the grave-goods as 'treasure' has been pivotal to this connection between grave and poem. Roberta Frank claimed that 'Sutton Hoo in 1939 lit up a bit of Dark Age Britain; *Beowulf* responded, like a moth to a flame; and nothing has been the same since' (Frank 1992: 47). However, in regards to Anglo-Saxon funerary 'treasure', *Beowulf* was already long established in scholarly and popular minds. The poem's modern English translations used 'treasure' as the reference point for grave-goods, pyre-goods and for the dragon's hoard alike. So, having reviewed the archaeological and heritage dimensions of the connotations of 'treasure', we must dedicate space to addressing the aforementioned repeated specific parallels with the epic Old English poem *Beowulf* (see also McCombe 2011: 209–215; Allfrey 2020).

The desire to connect Sutton Hoo and *Beowulf* has persisted from 1939 through the media and immediate reports thereafter (Frank 1992: 48–53). Crucially, the equation of *Beowulf* with Sutton Hoo rested not on the 'pagan' status of either, but in fact on their perceived convert-Christian contexts. For Lindqvist, the status of grave-goods as heirlooms and war-booty is inspired by *Beowulf*. He described the 'Sutton Hoo treasures' but his focus is upon matching archaeology specifically to the poem by pronouncing the Uffingas as Swedes in origin (Lindqvist 1948: 133). Augmenting and legitimising the suppressed, simmering but ultimately tenacious and percolating evocations of 'treasure' in archaeological and heritage discourse is the silent bond with the poem. Thus, *Beowulf* feeds into the accepted narrative that the artefacts from Mound 1 are the 'possessions' and 'treasury' of an East Anglian kings.

Translations of *Beowulf* already established 'treasure' as the preferred perception of early medieval grave-goods long before the Sutton Hoo discoveries of 1938 and 1939. Indeed, the very origins of Anglo-Saxon archaeology have the concept of 'treasure' integrated into their fabric, consolidated by perceived connections between *Beowulf* and repeated archaeological discoveries from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (Frank 1992: 49–50). Notably, in the translation of John Mitchell Kemble (1837), where, for Scyld's funeral he translated 'there was much of treasures, of ornaments, brought from afar'... and 'Upon his bosom lay a multitude of treasures' (Kemble 1837: 2-3) and, having repeatedly referred to the dragon's hoard as 'treasure' and the dragon as its keeper (Kemble 1837: 103, 105, 112, 121-126), in *Beowulf*'s own funeral he translated: 'they suffered the earth to hold the treasure of warriors, gold on the sand, there it yet remaineth as useless to men as it was of old' (Kemble 1837: 127). Set against this tradition, one can hardly blame 'the media' and 'the public' for wishing to regard the Mound 1 assemblage as 'treasure' from 1939 to the present: it is integrated into the long tradition of marrying *Beowulf* with archaeology!

While literary scholars have long recognised the value of the archaeological evidence to enrich scholarly and public appreciations of the poem (Frank 1992), I have not discerned any critical evaluation of the language of *Beowulf* influencing the interpretation of the Sutton Hoo finds beyond 'giving voice it (its) dumb evidence' (Frank 1992: 59) and the poem being the 'speaking partner' for Sutton Hoo's 'possibilities' (Frank 1992: 58). For example, Roberta Frank (1992: 51) quoted Wrenn's 1959 supplement to R.W. Chamber's *Beowulf* describing the 'East Anglian King's ship-cenotaph with its treasures almost intact in the summer of 1939', subsequently describing them as 'finds' and 'treasures', paralleling the funeral of Scyld Scefing and the 'hoard of ancient treasures in the dragon's mound' (Frank 1992: 52). Yet

the conception of the grave was not considered by Frank in any clear sense, even though it is evidence that the equation of poem with the grave has facilitated the narrative that the Mound 1 items constitutes a 'royal' association and kingly identity, as well as a single 'collection' or 'treasure'. *Beowulf* scholarship as responded to Sutton Hoo with an extrapolation of assumptions regarding what is meant by *fraetwa* ('ornaments, treasure, armour') to mean 'gold, silver and gems', reflecting the discoveries at Sutton Hoo in a largely subconscious fashion (Frank 1992: 55- 56), but so too has the archaeological narrative benefitted from this long-term association to the present day. While Frank recognised the light that *Beowulf* shed upon Sutton Hoo's 'pagan', 'regal' and 'Scandinavian' character (Frank 1992: 56), she too makes the mistake of failign to evaluation the appropriateness of the term 'treasure' as a collective term for an array of burial deposits. Yet, there has clearly been a feedback loop by which Sutton Hoo's assemblage is constituted as 'treasure' via association with the tradition of poetic translation from the Old English into modern English. The treasure-bestowing kings of *Beowulf* find their match in grave-goods considered 'treasure' and belonging to a royal treasury (Frank 1992: 57). Perhaps this omission is because, as Frantzen insightfully observed, the very concept of treasure linked to aristocratic culture was integral to the Anglo-Saxonist discourse applied to the archaeological evidence of 'becoming English': of the origins of a nation. The notion of 'treasure' served to 'save Anglo-Saxon England from its reputation of barbarism' (Frantzen 1992: 25).

Hence, translation after translation of *Beowulf* uses the Sutton Hoo finds on their front covers and in their notes and prefaces, but also deployed 'treasure' as a way of segueing from poem to grave and back to poem. For instance, Mitchell and Robinson (1986: 131) dedicated a discussion to the 'Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial' which deferred to Wrenn in stating that Sutton Hoo sheds light on the date and genesis of *Beowulf*. They claimed that the poem and grave revealed sensibilities and aesthetics that linked the literary world to the archaeology of early medieval Britain.

Even in reference to Scyld's funeral alone, those popular translations used by archaeologists again and again use 'treasure'. For example, David Wright's (1957) translation describes Scyld Scefing's funerary boat as containing 'a mass of treasure [which] was brought there from distant parts' (Wright 1957: 27). Alexander (1972: 52) opts for 'mound of treasures' and 'treasures and trappings' on his breast. Crossley-Holland's (1982) translation of *Beowulf* described Scyld Scefing's funeral ship as being loaded 'By the mast in majesty; [with] many treasures...' and 'On his breast lay countless treasures that were to travel far, With him into the waves' domain' (Crossley-Holland 1982: 75). Bradley (1982: 412) preferred 'a great number of treasures' and 'amidships lay a multitude of treasures'. Heaney (2002: 4) went with 'Far-fetched treasures were piled upon him' and 'The massed treasure' (see also Figure 1). A similar exercise can be conducted for the dragon's hoard and *Beowulf*'s own funeral (e.g. Wright 1957: 80-82, 91-101; Alexander 1972: 121-127, 138-150; Bradley 1982: 471-472, 475, 484, 490-493; Crossley-Holland 1982: 129-132, 140-144, 152, 154; Heaney 2002: 56-59, 69, 76-78), while Grendel's mother guarded 'treasures' too (e.g. Crossley-Holland 1982: 114), otherwise called 'treasure in abundance' (Heaney 2002: 42). These translations are ladened with displayed, exchanged, wielded, hoarded and funerary treasures, and by determined close association since 1939, so was Sutton Hoo's Mound 1!

Discussion: beyond treasure

...richness is not sufficient in itself to earn the epithet of treasure... A *treasure* should lie under the ground, where it can be properly guarded by dragons and rediscovered by the valiant, or the lucky (Carver 2000: 25-26).

Given Sutton Hoo has held such a pivotal place in both academic and popular discourses on early Anglo-Saxon society, kingdoms and religious conversion set in a wider European context (Marzinzik 2011:

1030; McCombe 2011), the assemblage's interpretation has far wider implications than the story of this one grave and its cemetery context. Whilst I have surveyed and evaluated the 'semantic freight' (Webster 2000: 49) of the 'Sutton Hoo treasure', it must be left for a future discussion to address how the myopic focus on Mound 1 affects and directs the wider interpretation of the cemetery and the period as a whole. Indeed, a comparative analysis with the way other early Anglo-Saxon graves and hoards are interpreted, including Prittlewell princely grave (Brophy and Brown, both this volume), the Staffordshire Hoard (Greaves this volume), and also the 'Treasures of St Cuthbert' (Durham Cathedral 2022), would be a welcome and undoubtedly revealing endeavour. Stepping back, the broader issue is not so much what we refer to the Mound 1 assemblage, but the enduring tendency to fixate upon this one grave rather than the story of the broader cemetery and its landscape context (Williamson 2008; Carver 2005; Fern 2015).

Despite the inevitable restrictions of this chapter, I have demonstrated that 'treasure' is more than just inaccurate and misleading. The Mound 1 burial chamber was never legally 'treasure' and the items which are foregrounded and most frequently referred to as 'treasure' – the collection of gold-and-garnet, silver and other items of 'regalia' – are merely elements of a larger and far more varied and complex mortuary assemblage (Carver 2000, 2005, 2019: 61). The lure of the 'treasure'/'treasures' epithets emerged from multiple causalities and interpretive (and arguably emotive) bonds to key concepts: not only its exceptional survival and monetary value, but also regarding the burial chamber as a space containing royal 'belongings' of a single late-pagan/early Christian male royal; his possessions or items selected from the East Anglian royal 'treasury'. 'Treasure' also evoked the burial assemblage's nested and shifting Anglo-Saxonist significances – celebrating a nationalistic and racialised conception of English origins. This discourse has operated on nested levels, from the story of the locality beside the Deben estuary, to Suffolk as part of the former kingdom of East Anglia, Anglo-Saxon England, the early medieval 'Germanic' northern world and the European 'Dark Ages'. The focus and scale of the story has fluctuated and adapted as interpretations of the Mound 1 assemblage evolved and within shifting socio-economic and political contexts. The 'treasure' shifted from being seen as wholesale and direct importation of ideas and traditions from Sweden to evidence of complex connections across Europe and beyond with a more 'English origins' narrative of recent decades (Filmer-Sankey 2007; Cross 2019). Through these shifts, the 'treasure' status has endured and, indeed, flourished over time, asserting a value for 'us', for the English (and British more broadly) in today's world. The 'Sutton Hoo treasure' has become a rhetorical device, asserting also the legitimacy of Pretty's benefaction and its curation at the British Museum. Also, 'treasure' affords the Sutton Hoo assemblage an international standing, affording it with a legitimacy and 'worth' in an international museum akin to other great global archaeological funerary finds, including Tutankhamun's tomb (Brown this volume). This 'national treasure' is also linked to *Beowulf* and as Sutton Hoo has given form to the 'treasure' within the tale (Frank 1992), so Sutton Hoo has become the materialised treasure of *Beowulf* – merging visions of Scyld Scefing's funeral, the Last Survivor's treasure, and *Beowulf*'s barrow.

The problem raised by the interpretive associations with 'treasure' is shared with contentious early medieval ethno-linguistic labels, the most debated of late being 'Anglo-Saxon' (Williams 2020b). Our task as academics and educators is to critically evaluate, critique, challenge and subvert accepted notions and their various loaded interpretations with attention to the historiographical context of their use. The end-game is therefore not to jettison these terms wholesale where they have interpretive utility and the possibility of engaging audiences beyond the academy (contra Harland 2021: 24–32; see Williams 2020b: see also chapters by Williams *et al.*, Boyle, Brophy, Brown and Reavill this volume). In any case, the problem does not reside in the term itself, but in *how* it is utilised. Hence, I find myself critiquing the term's nest of associations, not its use *per se*. The very emotive and popular engagement with 'treasure' can serve as an introduction to the fascination of discovery and the stories which can

be told from the complex burial assemblage (see Williams *et al.* this volume). Likewise, I disagree with Cross's recent argument that the Sutton Hoo finds are 'so rich and complex that to reduce the Sutton Hoo finds to an assessment of ethnicity would have been impossibly limiting' (Cross 2019: 432–433; see also McCombe 2011: 206–207). In contrast, I argue that a nested East Anglian/Anglo-Saxon/Germanic/Teutonic identity was explicitly couched from 1939 onwards using 'treasure' as a lynchpin. Hence, a sense of Englishness set against a broader pan-Germanic, Scandinavian and Continental canvas has been fluctuating but integral to the British Museum and National Trust interpretations of the assemblage as well as academic and popular accounts of its discovery and significance. The problem does not lie so much with the utilisation of a single descriptor for the grave as 'royal', 'Anglo-Saxon', 'treasure', but the mesh of concepts binding these terms together on nested scales. Moreover, I would contend that this narrative finds new audiences within a post-Brexit Britain where the island is perceived as 'going it alone' once more.

'Treasure' is thus the crux of a cluster of associations - a tenacious interpretative mesh - linked not only to celebrating the origins of Anglo-Saxon/East Anglian kingship and the national and racial discourses surrounding that concept, but also fetting Mrs Edith Pretty gift 'to the nation' as a 'national treasure' of international, pan-Germanic 'barbarian' standing and significance worthy of being curated by the British Museum. Thanks to *Beowulf*, Sutton Hoo manifests Germanic heroic convert kingship. Like the hero and king Beowulf, King Rædwald of East Anglia struts out of legend, boneless but tangible through the visage of the helmet's face-mask (McCombe 2011), perpetually at the interface between the 'barbarian' and the 'civilised' (Cross 2019: 414), crossing the threshold from the 'pagan' to the 'Christian' (Cross 2019: 419). Hence, to facilitate richer and alternative readings that combat this nationalist view and the legacy of racialised discourse in which Sutton Hoo has always been implicated, we must compose fresh accounts that pay due respect and attention to the funerary context of deposition and discovery, including fair and appropriate consideration to the wide range of artefacts therein not made of precious materials. By this I mean that we are obligated as scholars to actively reconstruct our interpretative narratives focused on *contexts* in order to compose new academic readings and public-facing narratives regarding these fabulous finds and their archaeological and historical contexts.

Conclusion

Despite a long history of caution and frequent careful avoidance of the word 'treasure(s)' for the Mound 1 burial assemblage since 1939, archaeologists have allowed Sutton Hoo's Mound 1 multi-faceted identity as 'treasure' to endure in specific prominent publication and has resurfaced for new generations in the 21st century without sufficient care or critical consideration. This situation applies to academic literature, museum displays and heritage sites, the media and popular culture. I foresee that 'treasure' will continue to be utilised as a shorthand for the spectacular burial assemblage. Yet, while purging the term might be neither viable nor necessary, public archaeologists must work to critique and reconfigure the interpretative nexus distilled on the concept of the 'Sutton Hoo Treasure' and 'the treasures from Sutton Hoo'. Positive uses to tell the stories of the grave-goods and the wider early Anglo-Saxon society are certainly possible through 'treasure' (Williams *et al.* this volume). Yet, challenging the singular and tenacious concept of the 'Sutton Hoo Treasure' when applied to early medieval material cultures and the communities and kingdoms in which these items circulated and were selectively buried in complex funerary rituals must go hand-in-hand with deconstructing the connotations of the assemblage's inheritance as 'treasure' in our contemporary society. Doing this critical work will foster the development of fresh readings of Mound 1's grave-goods in the early medieval past, in contemporary society, and for the future within academic research specifically but also popular culture more broadly. This chapter thus presents a first step in that direction and has wider ramifications for how we write about, envision and display early medieval material cultures in public archaeology and heritage contexts.

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