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Early Medieval Language and Literature as Heritage: a Sutton Hoo Case Study

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This article is both a reflection on the cultural, social, and political stakes of how early medieval literature and language functions as heritage in England, and on my practices as a museum educator. Language and literature in heritage contexts may enable rich emotional and intellectual engagement with early medieval stories, landscapes, and objects in ways which may unloose the early medieval from the grip of exclusionary narratives. I discuss how Old English language and literature may be understood within wider contexts of early medieval heritage, often called 'Anglo-Saxon' in English institutions, by sketching the overlapping public spaces of encounter with the past, and how we may read across them. With its longstanding links with Old English poetry across scholarship and public history, I suggest that Sutton Hoo provides an ideal case study for examining the enmeshment of early medieval literature, language, landscape, and archaeology as heritage categories. I discuss the planning and delivery of 'Trade and Travel', a temporary display and learning programme that I organised with the National Trust in 2017, and present findings from qualitative data I collected to suggest how people make sense of place, archaeology, and early medieval language and literature. Understanding language and literature as heritage, I show how visitors discover and create meaning through encounter and conversation. In heritage spaces, literature and language are sensory and emotional artefacts and experiences: observing visitor engagement reveals how both become integral to creative and identity-making work.



Introduction

In this article, I interrogate the affective, social, and educational work that early medieval language and literature may perform as heritage. To do this, I present a case study of practical and theoretical reflection on a heritage project which I organised in 2017 at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, home of the early-7th-century Mound 1 ship burial. This article is arranged into three sections. In Part One, I discuss how Old English language and literature may be understood within wider contexts of early medieval heritage, often called ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in English institutions, by sketching the overlapping public spaces of encounter with the past, and how we may read across them. I introduce Sutton Hoo’s longstanding links with Old English poetry to propose that Sutton Hoo provides an ideal case study for examining the enmeshment of early medieval literature, language, landscape, and archaeology. In Part Two, I introduce ‘Trade and Travel’, a temporary display and learning programme that I organised during a placement with the National Trust in 2017. I reflect on how and why I brought together my academic interests and museum education practice, and some of the challenges and opportunities that I encountered, as I looked to answer the question ‘what can language and literature do at the Sutton Hoo heritage site?’. In Part Three, I present findings from qualitative data I collected via ethnographic field notes, comment cards, and semi-structured surveys with ‘Trade and Travel’ visitors, to suggest how people make sense of place, archaeology, and early medieval language and literature by reading and responding within meshworks of historical remains.

To think of early medieval literature and language as heritage is to understand them as things created through encounter and conversation—that is, as sensory and emotional artefacts and experiences—and invites reflection on their political, identity-making work (Hall, 1993 and 1999; Hooper-Greenhill, 2013; Moody, 2015; Bonacchi, 2017). As Beth Whalley has shown, heritage programming, signage, and interpretation may ‘cleave’ to events or ideas represented in early medieval texts: even if these texts may be short or subject to contested scholarly interpretation, ‘nuance’ is sometimes apparently understood as antithetical to ‘a good story’ (Whalley, 2023: 315). Unpacking and querying the work of early medieval literature in and as heritage can help us reconsider how we facilitate engagement in all kinds of heritage learning environments, including curated displays, interactive programming, and traditional classrooms, and what is at stake with these practices. In the same gesture of expansiveness, when I refer to ‘heritage practitioners’ in this article, I mean to encompass various people who enable access to the past: including writers, curators, interpretation professionals, education facilitators, and heritage site staff and volunteers. I do not wish to elide the imbalances of power held by different individuals

and institutions, nor deny the skills specific for each role; rather, I want to insist how each have important and overlapping roles—all demanding of analysis—in shaping what early medieval language and literature can signify, and therefore what social, cultural, political work the early medieval may perform now and in the future. This article is then a call-to-arms to collaborative practice. I argue that facilitating heritage encounters and witnessing how people engage with language and literature draws our attention to how both may enable rich emotional, social, and intellectual engagement with early medieval stories, landscapes, and objects, to inform strategies for unloosing the early medieval from the grip of exclusionary narratives.

Part One: Where Early Medieval Heritage ‘Meets the World’

1.1 Contexts of early medieval language and literature as heritage

Early medieval heritage is created across formal and informal spaces, including school and university classrooms, mass media, and museum and heritage sites. I understand these spaces, and their media and practices, to be constitutive of each other as a meshwork of ‘Anglo-Saxon heritage’ in the English imagination. Gabriel Moshenska (2017) has identified the need for a broad-ranging discipline—with theoretical and practical focus—around ‘public understanding of the past’, advocating for studies which interrogate where the past ‘meets the world’, in ‘public history, classical receptions, elements of digital humanities, museum studies and others’ (Moshenska: 12). I wish to emphasise the importance of literature and language as two of these ‘other’ forms of engagement, which are resourced across a variety of heritage spaces.

The early medieval—as the ‘Anglo-Saxon’—has powerful and ambivalent cultural significance in England. The 19th-century origins of Anglo-Saxonist myths and antiquarian-to-scholarly practices were formulated within and in support of ethno-nationalist and colonialist projects, with the early medieval period idealised as a ‘Golden Age’ of ‘faith, order, joy, munificence, and creativity’, and a time which satisfied a ‘desire to give man a sense of social and political belonging’ within strict, yet harmonious (because perceived natural) hierarchies of race, gender, and class (Chandler, 1970: 1; Utz, 2016; Rambaran-Olm and Wade, 2022). These myths persist, with the early medieval enmeshed with constructions of white, masculine identities, from the local and national, across British, European, ‘Western’, and global Anglophone cultures (D’Arcens and Jones, 2013; Davies, 2018; Rambaran-Olm and Wade, 2022).

Anglo-Saxonist heritage projects often seek positive social effects—for instance, funding being made available for community and arts projects, boosting local pride, rejuvenating infrastructure and the public realm, or encouraging creativity and economic growth. However, without specific attention to anti-racism, equality, and

justice, such projects may slide into complicity with exclusionary imaginaries of the past and present. Beth Whalley has demonstrated how heritage organisations, local government, and artists in Essex have instrumentalised the Old English poem ‘The Battle of Maldon’ to facilitate cultural activity in the area, albeit that an all-too-frequent effect of its deployment is that stories of ethno-religious conflict and violence are prioritised over others (Whalley, 2023). In another example, 2018 commemorative programming in Gloucester for Æthelflæd, the 10th-century lady of the Mercians, saw much needed investment in the public realm and creative activity to boost the local area’s cultural industries and capacities (Gloucester Council, 2017). However, the choice of a young, white, blonde woman to perform Æthelflæd during a re-enactment funeral procession reveals how, in the public imaginary, the link between Anglo-Saxon and white English identity—in this case an idealised, able-bodied, slim, young, fair-haired femininity—is naturalised (BBC News, 2018; Williams, 2018b). I would suggest that—intentionally or otherwise—the casting enacts specific political ideals which may read as misogynist and ageist (Æthelflæd died in her late 40s), and racialising, indeed, racist (Fell et al., 1984: 81). Scott Thompson Smith’s study, which examines medieval to modern textual and visual representations of Æthelflæd (including a sculpture commissioned by Gloucester Council), demonstrates how Æthelflæd has been a ‘flexible site for expressing and contesting different constructions of gender, identity, and history’ over time, with the new sculpture especially emphasising Æthelflæd’s ‘warlike’ qualities above other versions of femininity and leadership (Thompson Smith, 2022: 102–104, 108). Old English literature is implicated in this construction. During the Æthelflæd memorial service at St Editha’s, Tamworth, which I attended, Old English was read aloud at the service which included a procession of reenactors in early medieval dress alongside present members of the uniformed services, clergy, civic dignitaries, and Prince Edward (identified by the local tourist board as ‘a descendant of Æthelflæd’) all in ceremonial attire, including livery collars and chains of office: more vernacular medievalisms (Visit Tamworth, 2018). Early medieval language and literature was thus incorporated as a tool for creating a hegemonic vision of English militarism, governance, and faith over time, even if the programming more generally benefitted certain parts of the community.

Such instrumentalisation of the Anglo-Saxon past echoes 18th-century historians’ attempts to ‘bring their particular localities into the national community by identifying their county’s or town’s origin and articulating its contribution to England’s history, development, and contemporary glory’ (Frazier, 2020: 88). Indeed, archaeologists, historians, literary historians, and art historians have all shown how mass media, museum, and heritage presentations of the early medieval, including public sculpture, archaeological sites, and tourism materials, often perpetuate—unintentionally

or otherwise—conceptions of the narrow ‘roots’ of ‘Englishness’ or ‘Britishness’ (Yorke, 1999; McCombe, 2011a; Last, 2019; Williams, 2019; Karkov, 2020; Bonacchi, 2022; Jolly, 2022; Williams, 2022). In fiction and non-fiction mass market books, documentary and drama television and film, news coverage of archaeological finds, re-enactment events, and museums, the created ‘Anglo-Saxon’ world is often narrow at best, actively exclusionary at worst.

The contested early medieval sits within a political context of heritage practices and the formal teaching of historical topics coming under increasing scrutiny, and budget cuts affecting arts and humanities cultural and educational institutions alike in the last decade (Olusoga, 2021). The case study explored in Parts Two and Three of this article took place before so-called ‘anti-woke’ agitation reached its peak in the 2020s, which saw some MPs blame heritage practices which unsettle status quo (sexist, racist, and nationalist) narratives for inciting a ‘culture war’, and repeated unsuccessful attempts by a group of National Trust members to ‘restore’ the Trust’s ‘traditional’ values (Duffy, 2021; Hall, 2021). These developments only make the arguments in this article more urgent.

Despite public interest, early medieval topics are marginalised in formal education. Reforms in 2007–8 and 2012–14 mean that the early medieval—as ‘Anglo-Saxon’—histories, material, and textual culture feature in the English National Curriculum only in primary Key Stage 2 (KS2), and in 2011 Marzinzik noted the outdated focus on elite culture and Britons vs Saxons, or Saxons vs Vikings military action (Marzinzik, 2011; UK Government, 2013). Although ‘Anglo-Saxon art and culture’ is listed on Curriculum guidance, under-resourced primary school teachers who do not necessarily have specific training in History, Archaeology, or Literature, may inadvertently reproduce out of date, yet easily available, materials (MacDonald and Burtneiss, 2000). Secondary school pupils may encounter the Old English poem known as *Beowulf*; however, it is not a compulsory text, and students are rarely given access to Old English language (Mogford et. al, 2020; Mogford, personal communication, 2023). While, as Marzinzik identifies, pockets of good work may be found—the British Library ran training for teachers during their 2018–2019 ‘Anglo-Saxons: Art, Word, War’ exhibition, and historians of later medieval England have engaged closely with educators to develop curriculum resources, for instance for ‘Our Migration Story’ (2016)—there remains a need for high-quality, frequently updated early medieval studies training and resources for teachers, especially with regard to literature and language (School Travel Organiser, 2018).¹

¹ The University of Nottingham’s long-running programme of outreach is an example of best practice (University of Nottingham, n.d.).

To add to the problems of how early medieval stories are most often told (and perhaps as a symptom of narratives which focus on white, elite cultures), there have long existed uneven heritage participation rates along classed and raced identities, even though many institutions offer free access and invest in inclusivity programmes (Hall, 1999; Crang and Tolia-Kelly, 2010). In the UK, 75.4% of white people and 42.3% of Black people visited a heritage site in 2019 (UK Government, 2019). However, while this discrepancy is significant, participatory divides that correspond to structural inequalities are in fact *less* marked in heritage than other cultural activities, making heritage a vital medium of public history (Audience Agency, 2018).² Despite and because of the sector's problems, heritage practitioners have a vital role to play in creating a more complex, inclusive early medieval world.

In contrast to how the early medieval is often implicated in narrow or exclusionary imaginaries, it would be remiss not to celebrate the expansive work which is happening. Feminist, queer, and experimental writers, creators, and communities have long resourced early medieval language, literature, histories, myths, and material culture in ways which explicitly or effectively interrogate or trouble patriarchal, national, and exclusionary narratives of past and present. This work does not invent a medieval which did not exist: rather it demonstrates how the medieval is more strange, diverse, and heterogenous than traditional narratives would suggest (see Lees, 2016; 2017; Davies, 2018; Kears, 2018; Lees and Overing, 2018; 2019; Ferhatović, 2019; Whalley, 2019; 2023; Brooks, forthcoming).³ Through play and revoicing, heritage-makers may provide models of how to write the early medieval chapter of 'our island story' (Hall, 1999), and how to productively engage with the difficulty, joy, difference, strangeness, and pleasures of the distant past, giving me reason to hope that the early medieval may signify more authentically expansively today. It is this hope which fuelled my investigation into language and literature at Sutton Hoo.

² Considering that COVID-19 and the aftermath of Britain's referendum vote to leave the European Union have also disproportionately negatively affected already-deprived groups in England, I expect that cultural participation has become further unequal along raced and classed lines. Although the sector has released research on how both have impacted the heritage industry, research on participation demographics are, hereto, unavailable (Heritage Alliance, 2020).

³ I encountered the following works after 'Trade and Travel' took place, however I include them here as they continue to sustain my hope for early medieval heritage to fuel new forms of community, art, and aesthetics, and I hope that they may attract further research: Carl Gent's body of medievalist work (Gent, 2015-ongoing and 2022); Yinka Shonibare's *Mappa Mundi* project (Hereford Cathedral, 2019) and earlier works (Overbey, 2012); poetry by Kayo Chingonyi, Rachel Bower, and Joe Kriss commissioned by the British Library (British Library, 2021); poetry and programming by Exeter Cathedral 'Riddler in Residence' poets, Chris White, James Wilkes, and Aly Stoneman (Exeter Cathedral, 2022-ongoing); Coventry UK City of Culture's 'Modern-Day Lady Godivas' initiative, 2021 (Coventry City of Culture, 2021).

1.2 Sutton Hoo as case study

Sutton Hoo—figured by archaeologist Martin Carver as ‘page one of English history’—occupies a privileged place within the public construction of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ (Carver, 1989). ‘Sutton Hoo’ is a shorthand which may signify concurrently a combination of places, artefacts, burial, and excavation events. The place is in Suffolk, part of a larger area called East Anglia (following medieval nomenclature), on a bluff above the River Deben where early medieval people buried their dead through the 6th to 9th centuries (Bruce-Mitford, 1975; Carver, 2017). Following the 1939 excavation of the 7th-century ship-burial now known as Mound 1 and the subsequent ‘treasure trove’ trial, the landowner and dig instigator Edith Pretty donated all the Mound 1 finds to the nation, and the collection has been on display at another place, the British Museum, in various formats since 1940 (Carver, 2017). The last 80 years have seen further excavations at Sutton Hoo, and the estate was acquired by the National Trust in 1998, opening to visitors in 2002 (Fern, 2015; Carver, 2017).

Sutton Hoo public archaeology overwhelmingly focusses on Mound 1, and the reconstructed Mound 1 helmet is an icon for the ‘Anglo-Saxon world’ in media even where Sutton Hoo is not the main focus: adorning popular history books, Old English poetry translations, early medieval news articles, and websites (McCombe, 2011b; Echard, 2010; Williams, 2018; Walsh and Williams, 2019). Howard Williams proposes that this attention to Mound 1 has been enabled by the naming of the finds as ‘treasure’ in scholarship, museums, and popular books (2022). ‘Treasure’ is not a neutral term simply for sparking the imagination, it has sustained the focus on elite society, and Williams also notes the frequent collocation of nationalistic-complicit language in these Sutton Hoo presentations.

It was not my innovation to bring early medieval language and literature to Sutton Hoo, rather—as I will discuss in Part Two—my intervention was to expand temporarily the range of texts and their presentation medium, and to measure participant responses to the new and existing literature and language at the Suffolk site. Before putting together ‘Trade and Travel’, I began by reviewing the state of literature at the National Trust visitor centre, as well as past and present uses of literature with Sutton Hoo at the British Museum and in mass media. Since 1939, Sutton Hoo has been an important public locus through which people encounter early medieval literature and language, especially the Old English poem known as *Beowulf*. From archaeological and literary-historical perspectives, the early-7th-century East Anglian burial and the poem about Scandinavian warriors uniquely preserved in a 10th-century manuscript witness of uncertain provenance may have little to do with one another, yet, through repetition, their bond has become naturalised (Frank, 1992; Fisher, 2008). Quotations

from and references to Old English feature in newspaper coverage of the Mound 1 excavations, Old English poems are quoted in the original language and modern English in Sutton Hoo television documentaries, and extracts of *Beowulf* adorn the British Museum Sutton Hoo display (McCombe, 2011b; Allfrey, 2021; 2022).

Performances of poetry—especially *Beowulf*—have taken place at the Sutton Hoo site both before and since the National Trust took ownership, and poetry featured in the visitor centre and in signage across the Sutton Hoo landscape between 2002–2019 (Anon., 1988; Care Evans, 2002; Anon., 2003; McAndrew, 2003; McCombe, 2011b; Kriebel, 2017; Allfrey, 2022; The Suffolk Coast, 2022). **Table 1** shows the texts and themes in the permanent display during that time, with *Beowulf* featuring most heavily. I have argued elsewhere that the relatively narrow selection of texts on show, and the themes of war, elite culture, and ship-faring represented in quotations contribute to the ongoing formation of Sutton Hoo as a place of paganism, masculinity, and royalty (Allfrey, 2022). Although reflecting on the post-2019 displays is beyond the scope of the present article, it is worth noting Williams’ argument (2022) that the Visitor Centre display, following a National Trust and Heritage Lottery Funded refurbishment, retains a focus on *Beowulf* and a narrow range of themes, obscuring the diversity of burial practices across the cemeteries at Sutton Hoo, eliding the stories of non-elite early East Anglians (although the exhibition film stages a conversation between fictional peasant-women), and creating a somewhat homogenous ‘Anglo-Saxon’ world.

Visitor Center permanent display		Trade and Travel programming	
Text	Themes	Text	Themes
‘New Old English’ in introductory film (see Allfrey, 2022)	Warriors, paganism, feasting, swords	–	–
Laws of Ethelbert of Kent	Kingship and law-making	–	–
East Anglian genealogy	Links Eastern Angles to Woden and Ceasar	–	–
Fight at Finnesburgh, ll. 2–12.	Battle scene, bravery of warriors.	–	–
<i>Beowulf</i> , ll. 1119–1123; ll. 20–25; ll. 611–622; ll. 309–311; ll. 212–218; ll. 26–52.	Cremation; Ideal of warriors; Queen Wealtheow gives out drink at a feast; hall life; Description of a ship sailing; Ship-funeral scene	<i>Beowulf</i> , ll. 50–52; ll. 3166–68	Uncertainty on life after death; Uncertainty on the use of burying treasures with the dead.
The Seafarer, ll. 70–74	Sickness, old age, and death	The Seafarer, ll. 1–9, 91–102	Physical and spiritual journeying

(Contd)

The Wanderer, ll. 92–100.	Lament for lost kin	The Wanderer, ll. 1–5.	Physical and spiritual journeying
Bede’s ‘Ecclesiastical History’, Book ll. 15.	On Rædwald as King of East Angles; on his Queen	Bede’s ‘Ecclesiastical History’, Book ll. 15.	On Rædwald’s visit to Christian Kent; on his queen; on Sigebert
Riddles, 5, 69, 7, 25, 86.	Likely solutions, shield; ice; swan; onion; onion seller.	Riddle 7; Riddle 19, including Exeter Book manuscript facsimile; Riddle 32	Likely solution, swan; likely solutions: ship / horseman and hawk/ writing; likely solutions: ship/ wagon/ millstone/ wheel.
–	–	Andreas, ll. 882–883	Travel by sea.
–	–	Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum.	Rivers as borders.
–	–	The Whale.	Sailors mistake a whale for an island and they meet a watery doom.
–	–	The Old English History of the World by Orosius, Book I.i; Book I.xi.	On the location of Britain; on the layout of the known world; Ohthere the Northman’s sea travels; Trojan War.
–	–	The Wonders of the East, ll. 70–73; ll. 81–83.	Panotii (people with enormous ears); Gems that grow on trees.
–	–	Gildas’s De Excidio Britonum [History of Britain] (Latin), p. 89.	On the location of Britain.

Table 1: Literature and language in Sutton Hoo permanent displays and Trade and Travel programming.

Part Two: ‘Trade and Travel’ at Sutton Hoo

2.1 Programme planning and design

‘Trade and Travel’ was a temporary display and events programme which I planned and delivered in collaboration with the National Trust in summer 2017. My overarching aim for the project was to examine, first, what early medieval literature and language can do at a heritage site and, second, what participants in turn do with such materials. I have volunteered and worked in museum education since 2014, which has included conducting participant surveys, and contributing to several university–arts collaborative public engagement projects, the learnings from which informed my approach to the ‘Trade and Travel’ programming and research methods (Videen, 2014; Allfrey et al., 2015; Videen, 2016). I consider working with visitors—as participants and collaborators—to be a form of relational arts practice, and subscribe to the idea that ‘conversations are the process and the outcome of museum learning’ (Leinhardt et al., 2003: xi). I mean learning here in the broadest sense of thinking about texts, environments, and objects triggered by

an encounter, including reflection on the self and other, on fact and emotion (Ritchart, 2007). Chiara Bonacchi, referencing Stephen Bitgood, terms this activity ‘engagement’, however I prefer ‘learning’ as a verb connoting an experience which may inform future thought (Bitgood, 2010; Bonacchi, 2017: 61). I further prepared for the project with training offered by King’s College London’s Centre for Doctoral Studies in qualitative research methods for humanities. Although my limited sample size means that larger conclusions may not be drawn, I offer an example of how literature scholars may conduct such research. I outline my experience here not to say that a researcher needs similar experience before running a programme such as this, rather, to demonstrate how my own approach was shaped by my previous theoretical and practical experience.

My work at Sutton Hoo was made possible thanks to the National Trust team’s openness to experiment and their creation of a loose brief, at the time facilitated by the site being in an exploratory phase of the Heritage Lottery-funded project to ‘Release the Sutton Hoo Story’ (Heritage Fund, 2015). ‘Trade and Travel’ was one of several options suggested by the team, who were keen to expand interpretation strategies around the site to reveal wider cross-cultural networks in the early medieval period. I was also asked to find ways of facilitating and measuring spiritual engagement alongside intellectual and social engagement: three types of engagement previously measured by the team which had shown to be uneven.

Summer 2017 was a pertinent moment to be thinking about early medieval trade and travel, which also influenced my choice of the topic. Post-Brexit vote discourse and anti-immigration sentiment dominated the mainstream press (Bhattacharyya et al., 2021). References to the early medieval past were interwoven in right-wing popular responses to both topics (Bonacchi, 2022). Concurrently within academia, across popular and scholarly blogs, conferences, and social media, conversations about the nationalist, racist history of early medieval studies as a discipline proliferated in tandem with increased global visibility of exclusionary Anglo-Saxonisms (Kim, 2017; Livingstone, 2017; Miyashiro, 2017; Clarke et al., 2020).

I combined the National Trust brief with my own research interests and commitment to an inclusive, expansive medieval studies when designing the content of the displays and activities, and in my approach to evaluation. I proposed a temporary display and a selection of activities across three weeks in August and September 2017. The activities included a ‘Word Hoard’, a ‘Sound Walk’, origami boat-making and drawing to represent the boats that carried afterlife treasures, a children’s activity trail, a board game, and talks from colleagues and volunteers. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on the temporary display, the Sound Walk, and Word Hoard.

The temporary display took the form of eight panels hung around the half-length replica of the Mound 1 ship, *Sæ Wylfing*, which was docked in the Sutton Hoo courtyard

for the summer (**Figure 1**). I combined Old English, Latin, manuscript images, and interpretive texts, and questions to prompt reflection and wondering. Texts included biblical and classical stories, treatise, and encyclopaedic entries. **Table 1** above outlines the texts and themes present on the site in permanent displays, alongside the ‘Trade and Travel’ display, Word Hoard, and Sound Walk (the editions consulted for the programming: Kemble, 1844; Liebermann, 1903; Krapp and Dobbie, 1936; Winterbottom, 1978; Colgrave and Mynors, 1993; Crossley-Holland, 2008; Fulk, 2010; Bjork, 2014; Godden, 2016; Exeter Cathedral Library, n.d.). I was alert to potentially homogenising the early medieval world by bringing together disparate material and textual cultures from a wide geographical and temporal span. However, as literature was already present at Sutton Hoo, I reasoned that bringing in more could only expand the narratives, and I indicated the provenance of quotations in the display. This did result in pushing the display panels into higher-than-recommended word counts according to then-National Trust standards—although best practice in the interpretation of text is split on how much visitors read (McManus, 1989; Perry, 2012).



Figure 1: The Trade and Travel temporary display. Photograph by Fran Allfrey, CC0.

The Word Hoard is an educational game initiated by Hana Videen (Allfrey et al., 2015; Videen, 2014; 2014-ongoing; 2022). The ‘Trade and Travel’ Word Hoard took the form of a bowl full of folded cards printed with Old English words and runes (**Figure 2**). Inside each card was a definition on the right (drawn either from the Bosworth Toller

dictionary online, the Dictionary of Old English (2007), or from edition notes), and a contextual line of poetry or prose on the left. Visitors could then graffiti words directly onto a paper table covering. My co-facilitators Miranda Rainbow, Rose Griffiths Evans, and Jasmine Higgs collaborated with me to compile the Word Hoard with a mix of everyday, spiritual, and metaphorical words, kennings, and runes.⁴

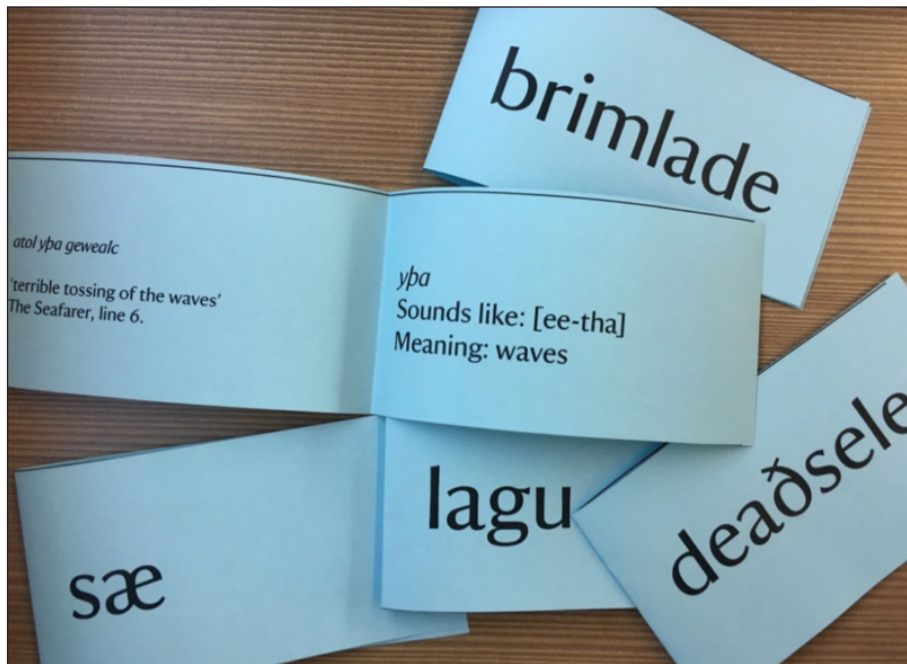


Figure 2: Example Word Hoard cards. Photograph by Fran Allfrey CC0.

Nikos Bubaris notes that sound contributes to enabling ‘multiple interpretations’, effectively and affectively facilitating ‘visitor–exhibition interaction, providing the visitor with a sense of immediacy and participation’, and the increased ‘potential [for] personalised paths of experiencing the museum’ (2014). I therefore designed a Sound Walk for the programme to experiment with language and literature at Sutton Hoo in a multi-sensory way. I hoped that incorporating both written and spoken words into the ‘Trade and Travel’ programme would help to facilitate emotional and spiritual engagement. For the Sound Walk, visitors borrowed MP3 players loaded with poetry and prose in Old English and its translation into English to listen to as they walked around the burial mounds. Texts were chosen by me, and translated and read by me, Rose Griffiths Evans, Carl Kears, James Paz, Miranda Rainbow, Victoria Walker, and Beth Whalley.

⁴ The cards may be downloaded at the following link: <https://teacholdenglish.school.blog/trade-and-travel-word-hoard-2/>.

Extracts of poetry and prose, short phrases, and individual words were chosen based on their description of travel, or as representations of ‘traded’ knowledge; as with the texts on the display panels, they drew from a variety of early medieval text traditions (see **Table 1**). I combined the readings with my own field recordings from Sutton Hoo, and recordings of beaches, rivers, and woodland in England by artist–producer Luke E. Walker.⁵

Don Henson proposes that a general view held by public-facing scholars and heritage practitioners is that ‘our investigations of human behaviour can lead us towards a feeling of common humanity with others and a more empathetic understanding of human experience’, or a sense of ‘what makes us human’ (Henson, 2017: 45, 54). I am both attracted to and suspicious of this belief, or the desirability or possibility of these outcomes. Posthumanists have warned us that the category of ‘human’ is not as open and inclusive as idealistic understanding may have it—historically and in the present, many people are denied human status due to race, gender, sexuality, ability, and other characteristics (Braidotti, 2013; Ferrando, 2019). Encounters with the early medieval past may well trigger affective and intellectual reflection on the sameness *and* difference of human groups and individuals across time. I was keen that a sense of ‘having things in common’ should not be the sole basis for affective, intellectual, and spiritual engagement. As Simon Gaunt argues, ‘shouldn’t it in fact be *difficult* and *challenging* to access a different culture, and isn’t being confronted with the alterity of a strange language part of this process?’ (2012: 254–5). To think optimistically (albeit with no doubt of the enormity of the task at hand) with Sylvia Wynter, we might think instead of the human not as *homo sapiens* but as *homo narrans*, which Gumbs translates emphatically as ‘not the ones who know, but the ones who tell ourselves that we know’ (2020, xi). McKintrick and Wynter discuss how the concept of *homo narrans* invites us to reflect on being human ‘as a verb’, always in a process of becoming through storytelling (McKittrick, 2015: 7–8, 25–26). I want to insist that the unfamiliar and familiar—the knowable and strange—may be evoked with medieval literature in the museum to generate new ways of becoming.

2.2 Data collection

Listening and carefully watching visitors produced the largest quantity of data. I made ethnographic field notes on 231 visitor interactions with myself, facilitators, and with other visitors. My approach to collecting visitor data was fuelled by an understanding of ‘heritage’ articulated by Jessica Moody: that heritage is ‘a discourse about the past which is ever in fluctuation’ (2015: 114–15). Putting this principle into practice means

⁵ Listen to the recordings at: <https://teacholdenglish.school.blog/listen-to-old-english/>.

that listening to visitors talk together or with facilitators is as important as giving out information. Gaea Leinhardt and Karen Knutson have shown how observing body language from a distance and measuring the time a visitor spends at an exhibit are not the best methods of gauging engagement: fluent readers absorb large amounts of text quickly; in time that can seem insignificant (2004). Therefore, attending to visitor talk, and engaging with conversations enables researchers to gather evidence of social, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual engagement more effectively.

In my experience, when visitors perceive me as a staff member or a volunteer—rather than a visitor or a researcher—they will disclose opinions, life stories, and share knowledge without much prompting. Of course, interactions with visitors are never neutral, often surprising, and even the silent presence of nearby facilitators may affect visitors' talk. Perceived race, gender, sexuality, and age, and biases and assumptions made by facilitators and participants will affect each encounter. This can be difficult for first-time facilitators—especially women, genderqueer, and global majority people—so if you plan on co-facilitating it is worth discussing strategies for responding to awkward or uncomfortable topics according to the ethics and values of your project and its research aims.

I briefed the team who co-facilitated 'Trade and Travel' with the above approaches and advice. Then-undergraduate students of Old English at King's College London, Miranda Rainbow (now a PhD candidate at SAS, University of London and the British Museum) and Rose Griffiths Evans (now finishing her MSt at Oxford), and Jasmine Higgs, then an undergraduate student of Old English and Old Norse at the University of Nottingham (and now completing her PhD), joined me for six days each across the programme. It was important to involve additional facilitators as this enabled us to record more encounters and run the activities on a practical basis more smoothly, and offered some skill development for me and for them. We discussed how visitors' 'entrance narratives', social and familial commitments, prior learning, emotions, and even factors such as the weather, would be subject to huge variety (Doering and Pekarik, 1996). I briefed Miranda, Rose, and Jasmine to invite and respond to questions, and to observe visitors' talk and behaviour while making sure to avoid pressuring visitors toward specific activities or topics. Visitors need to feel at ease before learning can happen, and the wellbeing of participants, and their social, intellectual, and emotional enjoyment was a priority, so I encouraged us to listen actively rather than to lead conversation (Hooper-Greenhill, 2013).

A second data collection method was through the use of anonymous comment cards which I gave to visitors and left on tables across the site. A total of 132 visitors filled in the anonymous comment cards and dropped them into a ballot box which I positioned near

the exit. Of these, 125 cards were printed with ‘The Anglo-Saxons were...’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon poetry is...’, with the remainder bearing the prompts ‘Today at Trade and Travel I have thought...’ and ‘Today at Trade and Travel I have felt...’ (I had planned to use both equally, but it became difficult to manage in practice). Although my tendency is to discuss ‘Old English’ rather than ‘Anglo-Saxon’ poetry when referring to texts written in the vernacular, I chose ‘Anglo-Saxon’ to echo its use across the Sutton Hoo site, and precisely because I am interested in the resonances of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ today. However, as I will touch upon in the conclusion, if given the opportunity again I would insist on using ‘early medieval’ instead, as the display incorrectly perpetuated ‘Anglo-Saxon’ as an accurate term. Finally, I conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with visitors, with 25 questions, and five demographic-measurement questions; all questions were optional. I took a grounded theory approach to the data, allowing themes to emerge as analysis progressed rather than pre-defining them (Urquhart, 2021). I coded the data using NVivo software, which allowed me to bring together differently collected data easily, and to continually create and edit codes and categories as they emerged.

Unfortunately, I did not collect gender, race, class, or other demographic information within the comment cards, nor from the visitors that I observed, and in the structured surveys the optional demographic responses did not reveal diversity in participants. I cannot assign race from observation, but my overall impression was that most visitors were from white, English-speaking backgrounds. Given the particular intersections of ethnonationalism and early medieval heritage, I would suggest an important avenue for future research would be in how racial identity affects the ways in which visitors engage with early medieval heritage.

Part Three: What Can Early Medieval Literature and Language Do as Heritage?

A wide variety of social, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual responses to the archaeology, places, literature and language at Sutton Hoo emerged from the survey data. The most overwhelming response was one that I had feared: that early medieval poetry is perceived to be difficult! Responding to the prompt ‘Anglo-Saxon poetry is...’ in the comment cards, over 50% of people returned an answer that imagines the poetry as unknown, unknowable, difficult or strange. This was also an important theme in the interactions and surveys, for example:

‘Largely unreadable and a mystery to me, but probably rewarding if one has the time and means to study it not taught in the schools I attended!’

‘?’

‘mysterious’

‘difficult’

‘unrecognisable’

‘Hard to read! Derived from an oral tradition it celebrates heroes from previous ages’

‘Mostly unknown? Appears to mainly be based on Beawolf [sic]’

‘One of the first examples of written stories?’

Many people indicated they didn’t know anything at all, or didn’t know enough about poetry to comment, with several responses containing question marks. Such responses could indicate that for these visitors: poetry was not an important part of their experience at Sutton Hoo; they did not encounter any poetry on their visit; or, if they did encounter it, their engagement was only superficial, it left them feeling alienated, or it was not affective or interesting enough that they remembered it or felt able or willing to offer further thoughts.

At first this result worried me—after all, the last thing I had hoped is that language and literature would create an alienating experience, or that the activities or displays might be somehow elitist or exclusionary. However, many of these responses that assigned a sense of strangeness and difficulty to poetry could also be coded positively: they enjoyed their encounter because of or despite difficulty. For example, following the Poetry Walk, one participant left the comment:

‘great sound background (enhanced by wind on site) – loved hearing sound pattern of the spoken Anglo-Saxon. Echoes of my cousins’ Dutch heard as a child. Loved the sea words – a sea weary mind!! Excellent. Thank you.’

For this participant, the inability to understand the meaning of words did not preclude sensory enjoyment of the ‘sound pattern’, which raised the comfort of a family memory. The fact that the phrase ‘sea weary mind’, a phrase taken from the Sound Walk, was copied down on the comment card suggests intellectual and affective engagement with what they had heard, and a desire to remember it.

Three encounters at the Word Hoard also show how medieval literature and language can facilitate learning with people of all ages. One adult and three children turned the Word Hoard into a place for sharing passions and initiated their own riddle-exchange. The children chose several words and read the Old English aloud. Their adult commented that the words sound like words from *The Lord of the Rings* which led one child to ask, ‘are these words from Middle Earth?’. Miranda explained how

Tolkien was an Old English teacher, and he was inspired by Old English when he wrote his books. The children called out different character and place names from Tolkien to find out if they had any special meaning, and Miranda told them their Old English roots. One child asked why the letter in the middle of the word they had chosen—‘wæd’, meaning shallow water—was ‘funny’, and Rose told them about how to say the ‘æ’, or ‘ash’ letter. The unfamiliar letter-form prompted them to return to Middle Earth, asking ‘is this language like Elvish?’, and Miranda talked about how the runes were Anglo-Saxon, and that Tolkien was inspired by them. She pulled out words with runes and ‘ð’ and ‘þ’ graphemes, and the children copied the letters down. Once more, the adult initiated further activities as they commented that the children enjoyed riddles in the *Hobbit* films, and Miranda said how the Sutton Hoo Anglo-Saxons loved riddles too. The children initiated a riddle exchange, with Miranda paraphrasing the Old English Swan riddle, which the children tried to guess, giving ‘cloud’, ‘wind’ and—eventually with some more clues—‘bird’. For this group, the encounter with language and literature facilitated joyful social, intellectual, and, on account of the children’s creativity and willingness to share their own stories, emotional engagement. The way that the adult in the group guided the children and facilitators to topics of interest is exemplary of the way that hierarchies between ‘experts’ and ‘participants’ can be effectively broken down in heritage settings. The exchange also demonstrates the important role of pop culture in modern encounters with the medieval, as they triangulated Sutton Hoo, fantasy books, and Hollywood movies to creatively interpret the words and riddles.

One carer brought a kinaesthetic approach to language, staging a performance for two children. As they drew words from the bowl, I encouraged them to read their words aloud and to try and guess the meaning. They had chosen the words on the second bullet point of the slide: ‘iglund’ [island], ‘east’, and ‘eardstapa’ [earth-stepper, or wanderer]. The adult had chosen ‘eardstapa’. They read the word aloud, and then opened the card to check the meaning. They began to stamp their feet on the ground and asked the children ‘stappa—what does it sound like?’. They repeated the word, shifting the vowel sound each time: ‘stappa, steppa, what could that be?’. She voiced ‘eard’ like ‘eeyard’ (/i:ja:(r)d/), pointing at the ground, saying again ‘yard’, and repeated her ‘stappa’ action. The children guessed ‘stomping’ and ‘stamping’, and she coaxed a translation of ‘yard stamper’. Once the children guessed the meaning of ‘eardstappa’, she looked at their cards and proposed a new sentence using them all, ‘I eardstapa-ed around the eeyast of the iglund!’. She repeated the sentence slowly, encouraging the children to do the same, and explaining to them that this is what they were doing on their visit to East Anglia. Here, then, the specific location of the

Word Hoard at Sutton Hoo was important to the translation, as the group made the link between the gravel-covered yard we were standing in, and ‘east’ ‘iglund’ as a synonym for East Anglia.

Another family’s interaction with the Word Hoard shows how children can lead conversations, and even reveals the limits of close-quarters observation of talk and action to measure engagement with museum activities. A young visitor approached the activity tent alone, his parents lingering a few meters away. He asked Rose how to say the first word he chose: ‘wæter’ [water], and laughed at her demonstration of the Old English pronunciation, /wætə(r)/ (as opposed to Standard Southern English pronunciation /ˈwɔːtə(r)/), calling back to his carers ‘this is how *you* say water!’ (the near-open front unrounded vowel ‘æ’ is common in many UK regional accents). He chose a second word ‘scipgebrec’ [shipwreck], and observed ‘it sounds like ‘the ship broke!’ as he wrote the word down. He related unfamiliar old words to modern English to make sense of them; the only remarks the adults made here were to correct or compliment the child’s handwriting. However, in the afternoon, one of the carers replied to my tweet that had been shared by the NT Sutton Hoo Twitter account (@NTSuttonHoo). His comment again referred to handwriting, but he also brought Old English into his reply ‘þancword!’ [a word of thanks] (@munichbeer, 2017). He later followed the @OEWordhord account, responding to words for some days after the family’s Sutton Hoo visit. These post-visit interactions suggest a personal social, intellectual, and emotional investment greater than I had observed. They also reveal the importance of acknowledging sources or production-collaborators in public engagement work: Hana Videen agreed to tweet ‘Trade and Travel’ words during August and to put together an @OEWordhord poster for our activity table. For anyone who facilitates museum learning, I’m sure we all wonder how much of it sticks, so it’s gratifying to see that something is remembered after the event!

In these three scenarios from the Word Hoard, visitors engaged creatively and critically with single words and poems, whether through carer-led or young person-led activity. People recited words to themselves or to others, evaluated the linguistic qualities, and offered interpretations, making ‘comparisons, attachments to memories, and evaluations’, and applying knowledge and imagination to bring about further understanding for themselves and for people accompanying them (Leinhardt and Knutson, 2004: 7).

To reiterate: *Beowulf* and other Old English poems already featured in the permanent display at Sutton Hoo, and in many cases people referred to this poetry rather than any ‘Trade and Travel’ material. Visitors asked about the relationship between the beliefs of the people who were buried at Sutton Hoo, and *Beowulf*’s beliefs; visitors were

curious about time periods and timelines (several people asked me to clarify the order of Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, and where Sutton Hoo and where *Beowulf* fit in). For some visitors, then, encountering poetry in place led them to critical questions regarding interpretations of Sutton Hoo and *Beowulf*, and the cultures and beliefs which shaped both.

During a semi-structured survey, one visitor spoke about new Old English poetry which—at the time—featured in a film in the permanent visitor centre display (Allfrey, 2022). They first ‘agreed’ with the question-statement ‘I enjoyed reading or listening to early medieval poetry today’, before elaborating:

I was gutted when I found out that the poetry in the video is a pastiche! We asked the guide in the exhibition hall where the poetry was from because it was like listening to an authentic voice from 1000s of years ago, but it’s made up. But it sounds very authentic anyway, does the job, it gives a good impression of the atmosphere and ideas. Without the written record, we’d have such a tiny sliver of knowledge, it’s important and interesting to have it on display. Nice to hear it spoken too.

This is exemplary of the kind of doubled way that visitors may experience early medieval, or indeed medievalist, literature as heritage. Although this respondent was disappointed to find out that the exhibition film poetry was not ‘authentic’, this did not stop him from experiencing it as such and enjoying it—implying that the ‘atmosphere’ it created matched his expectations of what an Anglo-Saxon poem might be, or what it might be like to experience an Anglo-Saxon time or place. Such sentiments were echoed in other comment cards which linked poetry and ‘atmosphere’:

‘Anglo-Saxon poetry is... Affecting and atmospheric.’

‘Anglo-Saxon poetry is... magical because it was like the wind and surroundings were amplified.’

‘poetry plays off the landscape and vice versa. Very atmospheric.’

‘Having the sound of AS poetry as I walked round the burial ground was such a joy. It made the experience so much richer. I want to hear more.’

‘great sound background (enhanced by wind on site) – loved hearing sound pattern of the spoken Anglo-Saxon.’

The way these visitors describe experiencing poetry indicates that they felt that it enhanced their experience of place. I would suggest here that poetry functions as a

simulacrum, a sort of replacement, of the original object(s) of Sutton Hoo. The original archaeological objects from Mound 1 are at the British Museum, while visitors to Sutton Hoo have the landscape, photographs, and replicas to view. Poetry might evoke the place as it was at the moment of burial, and the objects buried and now removed—bridging present and distant past, adding to the aura of the landscape.

Conclusion

Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl note how medievalist mass media are experienced as authentic when they are ‘evocation[s] of what the Middle Ages should be as much as what it was’, especially if they satisfy ‘nostalgic desires for meaning and purpose, emotion and feeling, and mystical wisdom that humans lost with the humanism of the Renaissance’ (2012: 115). They also call experiences created from the desire for authentic experience as ‘only a medieval fantasy’ (107). But the idea of ‘fantasy’ at Sutton Hoo is troubled by the real geographical space that it occupies, and visitor comments reveal the power of literature to make space feel real in the sense of authentic and historic. If literature can be such a powerful tool in heritage, it is vital that texts are chosen carefully.

Visitors to Sutton Hoo responded to literature, language, place, and objects to make connections between their own language and the language of Anglo-Saxons, to imagine different ways of describing the world, and to explore sensations of the familiar and strange. Some encounters were specific to Sutton Hoo, as people brought literature or language together with Sutton Hoo events or objects to discuss or ask questions about early medieval ways of living. Other interactions could have happened at any medieval site, and a Poetry Walk or Word Hoard-style activity could be adapted for different contexts.

Sutton Hoo is often used to teach Anglo-Saxon history at KS2, where children are encouraged to think about the impact of Anglo-Saxons on the country. The focus is usually on kingship and justice, so an activity centred on language and poetry complements and expands meanings of the medieval, moving away from elite life to encourage reflection on the everyday experiences, beliefs, and realities of the expanded network of thought and trade routes which joined this island to the wider world. Indeed, after the Trade and Travel project at Sutton Hoo, in 2018 Carl Kears, Beth Whalley, and I were invited by local historian Peter Daniel to facilitate creative writing classes for KS2 children as part of a heritage project which took inspiration from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’s entry for 456AD, marking a battle between ‘Anglo-Saxons and Britons’ at Crayford. We certainly found that through exploring poetry and language, students produced personal and often touching reflections on the realities of early medieval conflict and community (Allfrey and Whalley, 2020). Through conversation,

creating experiences, and storytelling, we can create space for the narratives that we, as heritage practitioners, as people, are most interested in. It is only through listening to and observing how others understand poetry, place, and objects of the past and their implications in the present that we might formulate strategies for future exchanges.

I would hope to see ‘Anglo-Saxon’ eventually removed from much of its current use across English heritage sites and museums, with more specific terms used as alternatives, or frameworks used to explain its precise technical use: discussions are continuing to unfold in early medieval studies, although conversations between academics and heritage- and policy-makers outside of the academy should be further facilitated (Williams, 2015; Clarke et al., 2019; Karkov, 2020; Sayer, 2020; Rambaran-Olm and Wade, 2023). However, for now it continues to occupy a firm place within the English heritage industry and education curriculum. For so long as this remains the case, alongside laying the theoretical grounds and setting best practice standards for the more precise use of language, heritage-makers must take active steps to disentangle the early medieval past from patriarchal, racist, and oppressive discourses in the present. This is not about rehabilitating the term itself, but rather taking a firm anti-racist stance in our work, and modelling alternative ways of heritage-telling. Visitor responses to the 2017 display and events programme at Sutton Hoo demonstrate how the presentation of early medieval textual culture alongside landscape and material culture may facilitate imaginaries of the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ world that avoid exclusionary myth-making, expanding what ‘Anglo-Saxon’ may signify today.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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