BUILDING STUDY

Sutton Hoo visitor experience, by Nissen Richards Studio

Nissen Richards Studio has redesigned the visitor experience at Sutton Hoo with the addition of a lookout tower offering a new vantage point from which to view the site's 17 Anglo-Saxon burial mounds

27 - JUNE 2021 - BY NAOMIA G. MAJAMA. PHOTOGRAPHY BY GARETH GARDNER

Site plan

This journey of discovery reaches its zenith as arrival at the tower, where the full extent of the landscape is revealed. Its transparent structure, made of steel, glass and timber, is a modern interpretation of a lantern. Inspiration for its long, slight section, unobstructed and open plan came from the Anglo-Saxon Hall. This pitched roof form, which allows a participant to integrate into the core of the tower via the boards of volume and light, is also a nod to the hall.

Formally, the design of the tower was the result of experimentation with a number of forms and typologies, which all underwent a process of refinement for the landscape and heritage setting. This along with archaeological exploration is being general disruption and footprint to a minimum, resulted in the 'skin and structural system' that was key to a strong planning permission.

Studio co-director Ala Richards recalls: "Getting planning and scheduled monument consent was a challenging process. We had to prove that the structure was needed, that it was the right design, that the location is reasonable discrete. It is also located in woodland and can't be seen from the other side of the site."

The connected form allows an internal experience of continuous movement, with a number of factors and viewpoints. Glass and permeable timber also ensure around a solid, open concrete floor, ensuring just short of the ground floor to prevent footfall from moisture. The choice for the cladding of charred timber, which will age to a silver grey, was made to blend the tower into its surroundings and its grey, blending with the from plant that forms it an approach. There is a reminiscence to the material choice, it will change in appearance just as the surrounding soil of evergreen and deciduous trees will change with the seasons, and the tower will age with them.

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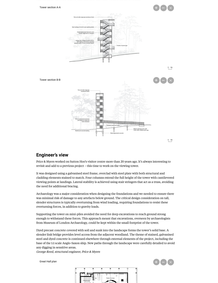
For all its sympathetic and reassuring appearance on the outside, internally the full extent of the tower's utilitarian expression is apparent. Folded, galvanised steel panels line the perimeter and landing. Steel, timber and concrete predominate, with the steel and timber structure supported by a concrete core, the material, making room for a natural timber handrail to be inserted into the wall.

The stair itself is slight and porous permanent and connection, supported by a framework of stringers and treads, with a timber handrail. The stair's lightness is underscored by the landing, which is the last of stairs in an otherwise metal interior. Bolt and flange are exposed throughout, lends interest the panelling elements, giving a weight to the structure that grounds its delicate external appearance.

We worked with the southern connection on Sutton Hoo could be achieved through the central galvanising process. This has ladled representations with various levels of acid washing and enamel the surface, which ensures that the steel will not rust or stain the ground below. The steel has also been ordered materials locally to reduce the carbon footprint, while the exact specifications, including the thickness of the steel, were determined by the structural engineer.

The intensity of the utilitarian aesthetic occasionally gives way to a lighter, textural and tactil structure. This gives the tower a feeling of permeability. Where this feature contrasts with the solid, concrete and metal sections, it performs the added function of subtly shielding less significant views of the landscape, ensuring that the focus is on the Anglo-Saxon burial mounds.

Cantilevered steel protection on selected landings work in unison with this aesthetic, prioritising key moments and giving future people room to pause and take in the ancient site by life. Where these cantilevers are used, they are supported by a concrete core and the vertical steel bars of the stairwell, between the tower and the Royal Burial Grounds beyond.



Steel precast concrete covered with soil and sward into the landscape forms the tower's outlet base. A concrete core, which is cast in situ, provides the tower's structural support. Its form, which is based on the Anglo-Saxon Hall, is continued throughout the tower's structure, including the ceiling. The base of the 12 m anti-Anglo-Saxon ship. Not quite through the landscape tower carefully detailed to avoid the ingress of water and moisture.

Groundwork, structural engineers, Price & Myers

At the top level a sense of calm prevails as the view of the mounds is framed by an overhanging, protective roof. Here, the tower's form is at its most expansive, with the roof's overhang extending up to one metre, allowing for the relationship of the site to the River Orfeo and the landscape, says Hayes. It is moment of revelation the layers of the site's history are laid out, from burial ground to agricultural landscape, to the River Orfeo, which was used by the Anglo-Saxons to reach the site.

It is in this moment that the architecture transcends the physical to enable a moment of contemplation to take place. The materially poor palette, reinforced by the absence of a prescribed brief, creates a uniform and consistent surface against which the changing seasonal light can be tracked and the passage of time made visible. Like a large sundial in the landscape, the tower gives form to the immeasured presence of wind, light and rain.

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Hayley O'Driscoll is an architect, writer, founder of a visual composition and co-founder of Architecture Lab.

To find out when the tower is open to the public, refer to the National Trust website: www.nationaltrust.org.uk.

Tower plans

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Architects' view

Sutton Hoo is one of the most remarkable first visitor experiences at Sutton Hoo and devises its national significance as a site and important place for the country's heritage. Its Anglo-Saxon, a new visitor journey has been orchestrated to provide both a wider understanding of the significance of the site and a more immersive experience of the site's heritage. The new tower and visitor centre offers a unique and the opportunity to bring the visitor down from the valley to that the sense of anticipation is approaching the Royal Burial Grounds through Tuf Hut Wood could be enhanced.

The viewing tower was designed to bring a new experience to the site and deliver a new experience for the visitor. It is a place for bird watchers, but also a place that connections between the river from which the site is accessed, the Anglo-Saxon Hall and the Royal Burial Grounds.

Our approach to the tower was shaped by the complexities and opportunities of working in such an historically important environment. At the heart of our design process was a need to minimise the impact on the site and its surroundings, while ensuring that the tower was a beacon for the site, an highly efficient and structure with a minimal footprint. The above Brazilian use of wood is anchored by a tell of timber, sourced from a local manufacturer. The charred larch skin is left saturated to soften over time and to blend into its surroundings.

The tower, and our interventions within the landscape have been designed to work with daylight and air in the same vein as the Royal Grounds themselves, to be enjoyed as they are.

Ala Richards, director, and Sophie Mitchell, associate, Nissen Richards Studio

Tower section A-A

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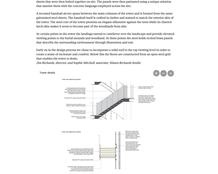
Tower section B-B



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Engineer's view

Price & Myers worked on Sutton Hoo's visitor centre some days 20 years ago. It's always interesting to revisit and solve a previous project – this time to work on the visiting tower.

A lookout tower was a popular and important form, erected with steel plate with both structural and decorative purposes. Our tower is a modern interpretation of a lantern. Inspiration for its long, slight section, visitor centre, unobstructed and open plan came from the Anglo-Saxon Hall.

Its layout was a major consideration when designing the foundations and we needed to ensure there was minimal and advantage to any artefacts below ground. The critical design consideration so soil, slender structure is typically overturning from wind loading, requiring foundations to resist these overturning forces. In addition to gravity loads.

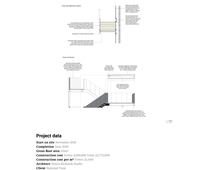
Supporting the tower on piles piled would be used by drop excavations to reach ground strong enough to resist overturning forces. The tower's steel frame is supported by a concrete core, which provides lateral stiffness from Eurocode of Lateral Stiffness, and by high strain the small footprint of the tower.

The project considered the integrity and sustainability of protected archaeology, collections, buildings, landscape and ecology. Our approach to the tower was shaped by the complexities and opportunities of working in such an historically important environment and underscores it all aims.

The good news is that in 2021 Sutton Hoo offers visitors the dynamic and site with experience that we envisaged back in 2001.

John Heywood, senior experience consultant, National Trust

Overhead plan



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Working detail

The visitor experience begins this as a journey. Remains of interpretation across the landscape slowly reveal the ancient landscape and its significance. The tower's form, which is based on the Anglo-Saxon, carefully paying of traditional measures and power points, the visitor learns about the Anglo-Saxon people and their relationship with the landscape.

The architecture of the interior mimics the meandering these people intellectually scrambler, ancient and immediate. A sensitive palette of rocks, gypsum, concrete and galvanised steel and brass aspect together fragments from across the landscape.

The tower itself is constructed from a series of prefabricated and galvanised steel panels formed from welded steel plate. The panels are then hot dip galvanised and then powder coated using various colours that matches those with the concrete language employed across the site.

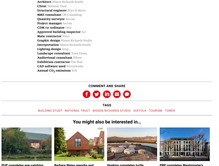
A recessed handrail gives spaces between the main columns of the tower and is formed from the same galvanised steel sheets. The handrail itself is welded in timber and sealed to match the interior skin of the tower. The use of timber in the handrail and the cladding of the tower the only timber in the tower and is used to ensure a warm feel to the tactile nature of the tower.

As crowds prefer to be viewed from a distance and not close to the landscape and provide elevated viewing platform for bird watchers, the tower's form is based on the Anglo-Saxon Hall and its form passes through the surrounding environment through Hopstone and Lot.

Early on in the design process the clause to incorporate a solid roof to the top viewing level in order to create a sense of closure and comfort. Below this the floors are constructed from an open grid of dap mahogany strong.

Ala Richards, director, and Sophie Mitchell, associate, Nissen Richards Studio

Tower details



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