

*Digging for the Truth: A Review of Netflix's *The Dig**

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Let's talk about archaeology movies.

Every few years or so, the powers that be in Hollywood decide to introduce another archaeology film into the universe, and who can blame them? Archaeology is an exciting field that has captured the hearts and imaginations of generations. When done well, movies like *Indiana Jones* and *The Mummy* have made the discipline more relevant and exciting to people everywhere. However, this popularity comes with a slight cost. While there are kernels of truth in these films, some portray archaeologists as reckless treasure seekers or digging up dinosaurs. Archaeology enthusiasts can identify and even enjoy or laugh at some of these misrepresentations, but the general public may not have the background to make these distinctions. In fact, most of these movies form the foundation for their understanding.

So when Netflix teased the upcoming release of a British archaeology drama at the beginning of the year, *The Dig*, the trailer's familiar tone and images of shovel work had us cautiously optimistic for a realistic portrayal of the discipline. The movie depicts the 1939 excavation of a ship burial overlooking the River Deben in Suffolk, England. Recognizing the mounds on her property as archaeologically significant, Edith Pretty hired a professional excavator, Basil Brown, to begin working on the site. His small operation uncovered what is



The Dig stars Carey Mulligan as Edith Pretty and Ralph Fiennes as Basil Brown.

undeniably one of most well-known archaeological sites in the country, Sutton Hoo. The site consists of two early medieval cemeteries dating between the 6th and 7th centuries; however, the film focuses on the excavation of Mound 1, a buried ship containing an elaborate array of offerings. One end held spears and a shield, while the other contained cooking implements and utensils for feasting. At the center of the boat, archaeologists identified the sword, helmet, purse, and clothing of the deceased, likely a prominent leader at the time. The individual was not recovered in the excavations, but soil analyses in the late 1960s suggest the body succumbed to the acidic soil.

With this information in hand, the question then becomes how well did the movie depict archaeology? One Saturday night, we decided to snuggle up with our blankets and



Reconstruction of Burial Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo.

poporn to answer this exact question. Our hope is that this review will shed some light on the accuracy of the film and provide you with the necessary information to decide if you'd like to watch the movie or recommend it to a friend. For full transparency, this review will focus on the archaeology, but there are certainly other compelling elements of the storyline tied to the imminent threat of World War II, the profound loss of a loved one, and the excitement of a budding romance that readers should consider before deciding whether or not to watch the film.

When evaluating the accuracy of the depiction, we thought it was best to start with the techniques or methods the excavators used in the field. Deciding where to dig is a significant but often overlooked component of fieldwork. In the film, Brown reasoned that a depression in the center of Mound 1, the largest at the site, indicated it had been looted at some point in the past, suggesting the area would be heavily disturbed and artifacts

would no longer be present. He chose a nearby mound instead, much to the dismay of Pretty who had a gut feeling about the former. Eventually, he changed his mind and convinced himself that Mound 1's oblong shape meant that part of it had been plowed away and looters had missed the center of the mound in their frenzy to collect. There are several aspects of this that ring true. Disturbances to the landscape from activities like plowing and looting continue to be common frustrations for archaeologists today, and they often must record and plan around them accordingly. Much like Brown hypothesized, these disturbances can heavily distort or even destroy sites. Mound 1 just happened to avoid this fate. It's also worth men-



Reconstruction of a helmet found at Sutton Hoo currently on display at the British Museum.

tioning that modern technology provides archaeologists today an edge that those in the past lacked. For example, geophysical survey consists of a number of non-invasive techniques that archaeologists can use to assess what may lie beneath the soil. While it won't provide a perfect x-ray image, these techniques spot anomalies that can help archaeologists identify areas of interest if they move forward with excavation.

The excavation depicted in the movie is surprisingly spot on. Anyone who has been in the field knows that excavating a site can be a slow process as archaeologists carefully remove dirt to recreate how occupations would have looked in the past. While most movies speed through fieldwork, place it in the background, or ignore it completely, *The Dig* allows the process to exist, unhurried, as the focal point of the film. Close up shots of archaeologists carefully troweling away are a common and welcome sight. Of course, the film does take place in 1939, and archaeologists didn't operate with the same safety precautions we utilize today. The film shows the repercussions of that in a heart-pounding way. Fair warning readers, that scene will steal your breath away! However, the majority of the fieldwork appears to be in line with our expectations for that time period and work today. The film even shows Brown and others taking detailed notes about the work at the site, including the location of features and artifacts.

What's perhaps more compelling is that the film shows several cringe-worthy accidents and mistakes that *do* take place in the field. After the ship is mostly exposed, a team led by Cambridge archaeologist Charles Phillips takes over the site. At one point, two excavators try to lift a fragile wooden plank and fail to remove it in one piece. Worse, there is an inexperienced archaeologist who accidentally steps through a brittle piece of wood at the center of the ship and crashes into the burial chamber. This same archaeologist later sees a glimpse of gold beneath the dirt and proceeds to yank it out of the ground without any consideration for its context. While these events were likely embellished to add drama to the film, they aren't too far removed from some of the incidents that occur at any field school. Even experienced archaeologists can struggle to remove fragile materials like bone, plant, and wood in one piece. These scenes made our stomachs plummet in anxiety, but we couldn't help but empathize with the people involved.

But the film doesn't stop at the methodological components of archaeology. It also does an excellent job exploring why the discipline is important. As the Cambridge team takes over, Brown is forced to step back as the project lead and becomes frustrated with the lack of control and recognition. His wife none-too-gently reminds him that he doesn't do archaeology for the fame but rather for the personal connection he has with the job (his



Edith Pretty's home near Woodbridge, Suffolk. Pretty and her husband purchased the estate to preserve and research the mounds.

father and grandfather had a passion for archaeology) and the importance of teaching the next generation about our shared history. This theme persists through the movie as the script juxtaposes the failing health of one of the characters and the excavation of the burial. As things seem terminal, they resign and say, “We die, and we decay. We don’t live on.” To this pessimistic sentiment, Brown reminds us that handprints in caves have lasted for thousands of years and that we are “part of something continuous, so we don’t really die.” While a bit poetic, *The Dig* does express a sentiment that attracts many people to the field: the idea of shared history and being a part of something greater than ourselves.

While this interpretation may be appropriate in areas like Britain, the issue of shared history becomes far more complex in regions with a history of recent colonization. In the United States specifically, most archaeologists are of European descent, while in contrast, most sites

are affiliated with Indigenous communities. Some maintain the argument that any research into the past elucidates our knowledge of human practices and can be valuable to people around the world, but this perspective ignores the unequal power dynamic historically plaguing the field and that fact that some knowledge is exclusive, culturally sensitive, or not meant to be brought into the present. This topic deserves more attention than we can give it here, but we felt obligated to point out this important distinction.

As we finish our review, we want to provide an honest answer about the accuracy of the film as it relates to the archaeology. Can we recommend this movie to our friends, or is this simply going to cause more confusion at the next family get-together? We would say you don’t need to worry as *The Dig* is a heartfelt yet realistic portrayal of fieldwork. While there are certainly artistic licenses taken, the film is one of the few to showcase the excitement of archaeology without embellishing or deviating from the discipline’s core principles. Perhaps this will inspire more realistic portrayals of archaeology in the future. However, we admit this seems unlikely given the announcement of the fifth installment of Indiana Jones franchise due to come out in 2022. Either way, we recommend *The Dig* as a fun watch for archaeology enthusiasts and an excellent introduction to the field of archaeology for the general public. ■