



FACTsheet 27

Sutton Hoo and Penmaenmawr

The film 'The Dig' starring Ralph Fiennes and Carey Mulligan was released in January 2021. It was based on the novel of the same name by John Preston and it is a mostly-true-story about one of the famous archaeological discoveries in Britain at Sutton Hoo. So what has this got to do with Penmaenmawr?

The connection is quite a close one. Edith Pretty, the remarkable woman featured in the film who owned the Sutton Hoo estate and paid for the excavation, was the granddaughter of Robert Dempster of Eden Hall. Her maiden name was Dempster and family records show that she often visited her grandfather in Penmaenmawr.

Robert Dempster developed the gas works in Penmaenmawr in 1872/3. It was around this time that he purchased 'Bryn Eithin', a guest house that he re-named Eden Hall after the River Eden which flowed through his birthplace of Cupar, Fife.

Robert's business was extensive. He had developed a large gasworks at Rosemount, Elland and built a family villa near the site. His son (Edith's father) and other members of the family carried on the gasworks business when Robert retired around 1881.

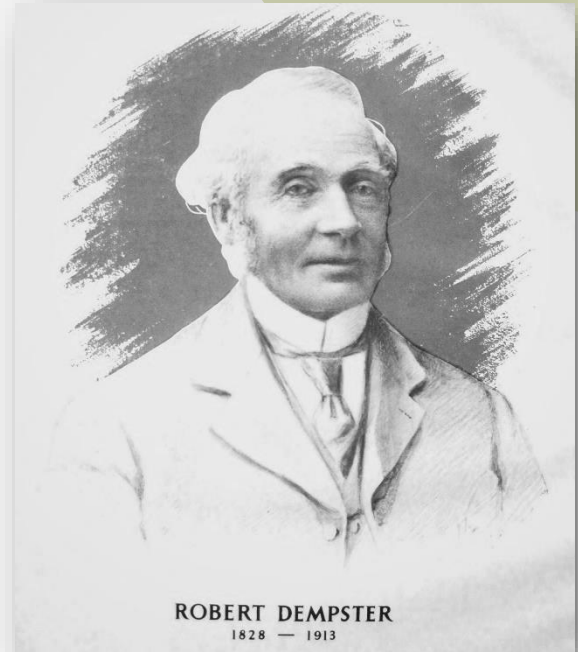


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Or perhaps 'semi-retired' is a better description for Robert. He did spend more of his time in Penmaenmawr with his wife Elizabeth, but he also continued to secure gas contracts and act as a consultant on gas engineering and marketing projects, including a few in Penmaenmawr.

Robert and Elizabeth Dempster designed the gardens at Eden Hall in 1882. Old photographs of the grounds show that their love of travel and Italianate-style is echoed in the design, with a beautiful glasshouse, connecting pathways, formal viewpoints, statues and a fountain. A plaque on the remains of the fountain states that it was reconstructed in 1932 by the grandchildren of Robert and Elizabeth Dempster.

Could one of these grandchildren have been Edith of Sutton Hoo fame?



Robert's time in Penmaenmawr didn't always go to plan. He was summoned for not having a dog licence, he wrangled with the local council at times, and a local butcher tried to sue him for an unpaid meat bill!

Elizabeth Dempster died in 1905. The 1911 census shows that Robert Dempster continues to live at Eden Hall with his daughter Elizabeth, son-in-law George and a servant also called Elizabeth. Robert died in 1913.

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Eden Hall had various owners and uses until it became the offices for the Urban District Council in the 1930s. They vacated the site in 1973 but the gardens were retained for the use of the public. Unfortunately, vandalism and neglect led to some of the key features of the garden being removed or damaged.

One of those damaged features was the statue of an eagle on a plinth, which was smashed into small pieces. Thankfully, Cllr Ken Stevens retrieved the broken pieces of the eagle and painstakingly pieced them together with the skill that a conservator would be proud of!

The eagle now stands on its original plinth on the first floor of the museum.



The eagle isn't the only legacy from this story. Edith Pretty's (nee Dempster) determination to engage Basil Brown to excavate Sutton Hoo resulted in one of the most amazing archaeological discoveries in Britain.

The Sutton Hoo treasures are on permanent display at the British Museum and the Penmaenmawr eagle is on permanent display in Penmaenmawr Museum.

