

# TUTANKHAMUN UNMASKED

As the UK welcomes a new exhibition on Tutankhamun's tomb – considered by many the greatest archaeological discovery of all time – mystery still surrounds ancient Egypt's most famous son. Here, **Joann Fletcher** unearths seven intriguing truths about the pharaoh and his legendary treasures





**Facing the facts**

A statue of Tutankhamun, who may not, says Joann Fletcher, have been the "tragic boy-king" of popular perception



**Born to rule**

A calcite figure of King Pepi II – crowned at around the age of six – with his mother, who acted as regent

## He was not a unique ‘boy-king’ – nor was his reign particularly brief

Often described as a tragic boy-king whose 10-year rule in Egypt ended only too swiftly, Tutankhamun was not really unique in either respect. At his accession in c1336 BC, he was aged around eight or nine, but this was not uncommon for an ancient Egyptian king. In c2278 BC, King Pepi II of the Old Kingdom had become pharaoh aged around six, requiring his mother to act as regent until Pepi came of age. Similarly, Tutankhamun’s grandfather Amenhotep III was approximately 10 years old at his accession in c1390 BC, and so again had been guided by his mother in the role of regent.

Among other youthful rulers, Tuthmosis III, the so-called ‘Napoleon of ancient Egypt’, was only two when he became pharaoh in c1479 BC and, later, King Ptolemy V, for whom the Rosetta Stone was produced, came to the throne in 204 BC aged only five. King Sesostris I

(c1965–1921 BC) had even boasted that the gods had considered him ready to rule when he was still in nappies, “not yet loosed from swaddling clothes”.

As for the supposed brevity of Tutankhamun’s reign, there is no reason to consider it as such in a world where 35 was the average life expectancy, and where even the elite died young by modern standards. His own great-grandfather Tuthmosis IV had similarly ruled for a single decade, as did the later king Merenptah. Ramses I, Sethnakht and Ramses VIII all managed only a few years at most. The record for regnal brevity, however, is surely held by Ptolemy XI, who was pharaoh for only 18 days in 80 BC.

Even the common claim that Tutankhamun’s 10-year reign was insufficient time in which to construct him a tomb in the Valley of the Kings is illogical, since the huge tomb of Tuthmosis IV (who reigned about 60 years before him) was completed and decorated within his decade on the throne. In fact, earlier Old Kingdom monarchs Djedefre and Userkaf were both able to complete pyramid tombs of at least 50 metres in height during even briefer reigns.

# 2

## His tomb contained a lot more than just gold, as neatly folded underwear proves

Although the public gaze rarely extends beyond the gold, the tomb contained

another kind of treasure: a virtually intact royal wardrobe made up of a wide range of clothing in both child and adult sizes. From sumptuous regalia and neatly folded underwear to leather armour, linen socks, patterned gloves and fragments of an elaborate wig, all were stored inside the chests and boxes carefully placed within the tomb. With many of these emptied out during a spate of small-scale robberies soon after the burial, the royal officials charged with restoring the tomb hastily stuffed them back into the nearest receptacle, producing the creases, crumples and general confusion that greeted Howard Carter in 1922.

During the 10 years it took him to clear the tomb, Carter recognised the unique nature of the several hundred delicate garments, advising the need for their “very careful study”. Yet, eclipsed by the gold on their arrival at Cairo Museum, most were placed in storage for 70 years until textile historian Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood and her team began their work, conserving the fragile originals while reconstructing 36 representative examples, from elaborate bead-encrusted robes to simple loincloths.

Recreating the ultra-fine quality of the ancient linen and its once vivid colours, the team also identified the original purpose of some of the garments. A pair of curious linen ‘headdresses’, for example, were actually meant to be worn on the arms to replicate the wings of a

falcon – a symbol of kingship. Unusual ‘riding gauntlets’ turned out to be linen socks with gaps between the large and smaller toes to accommodate the flip-flop-style thongs of the royal sandals, whose soles portrayed Egypt’s enemies, ready to be ground into the floor at every step.

Complemented by tapestry-woven necklines and borders naming the wearer as the “vanquisher of all the foes of Egypt” and “protector of the country”, the further addition of golden collars, necklaces, earrings, bracelets and headgear ensured Egypt’s ruler and living god would look the part at all times. Yet on long state occasions in the Egyptian heat, the mantle of state must have proved a heavy burden in every sense, especially when the king was still a child.

## Many of the objects found in his tomb were not made for him

Although the new exhibition in London's Saatchi Gallery is entitled Tutankhamun: Treasures of the Golden Pharaoh, identifying the owner of these treasures is not as straightforward as it might seem. Virtually every object from the tomb is usually described as having belonged to Tutankhamun himself, but Egyptologists have long recognised that many – some say most – of the 5,000 or so items were not made for him, but for members of his family. This includes his immediate predecessors – his father, Akhenaten, and his stepmother Nefertiti, who most likely ruled briefly as pharaoh in her own right after Akhenaten's death and whose funerary objects were later recycled for Tutankhamun.

This would explain the distinctly different facial types of the three golden coffins and of the several hundred *shabti* (servant) figurines. It also explains the obvious physical differences among the statuettes dressed in kingly regalia, some of which are flat-chested while others have breasts. Although such features have been unconvincedly dismissed as quirks of an ancient

art style, some objects – from jewellery and weapons to calcite vessels, storage boxes and pen cases – are actually inscribed with the names of other members of the royal family, all of which have therefore been interpreted as 'family heirlooms'.

Yet this cannot be the case with those items intimately associated with Tutankhamun's mummified body, from the inlaid gold 'mummy bands' surrounding the linen wrappings to the four miniature coffins that once held the king's preserved entrails. All of these were originally inscribed for 'Ankhkheperure', the throne name taken by Nefertiti as ruler, just as Tutankhamun's throne name was actually 'Nebkheperure'.

Even the gold death mask, recently subjected to microscopic scrutiny, was found to have originally carried the name Ankhkheperure, before being reinscribed to read Nebkheperure. Clearly the sheer beauty of these objects so dazzled the modern world that it has taken almost a century to begin to work out for whom they were originally made, and why they were then reused.

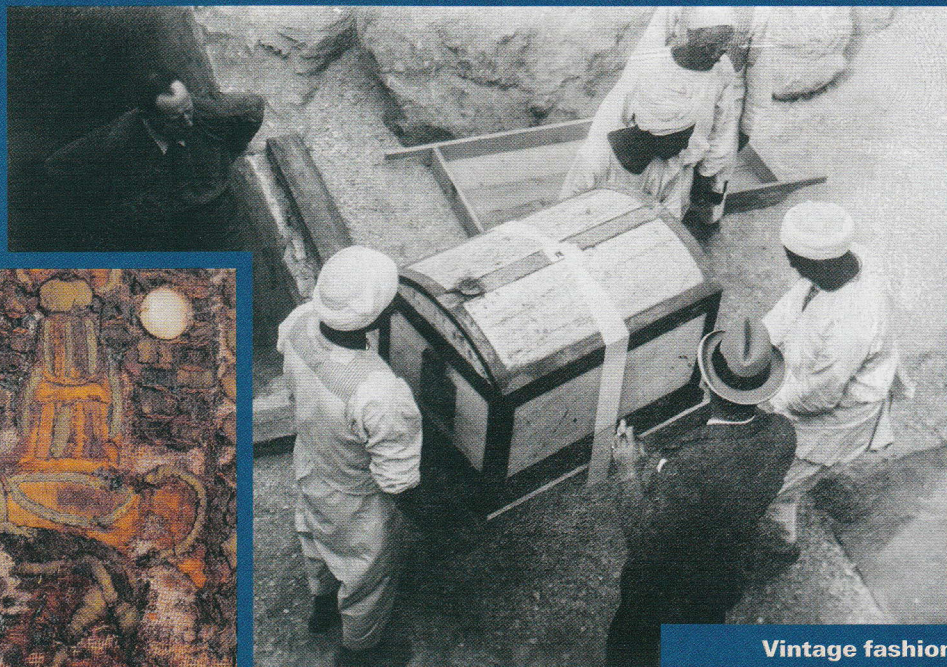
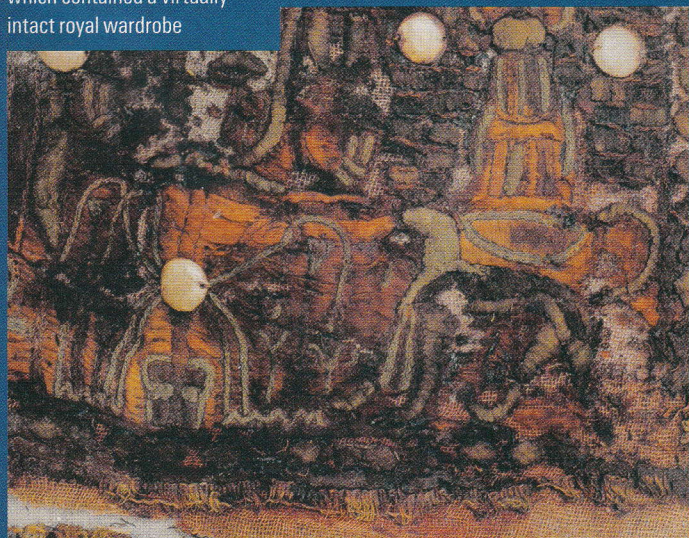


### Golden boy

Tutankhamun's funerary mask, inlaid with lapis lazuli and other semi-precious stones, was previously inscribed for another monarch

### A different cloth

A detail of the decorative appliqué needlework on a linen garment found in the tomb, which contained a virtually intact royal wardrobe



### Vintage fashion

Men carry one of many chests from Tutankhamun's tomb, 1923. Some of these contained clothing and regalia, including linen socks and parts of an elaborate wig

# 4 Tutankhamun was not buried alone

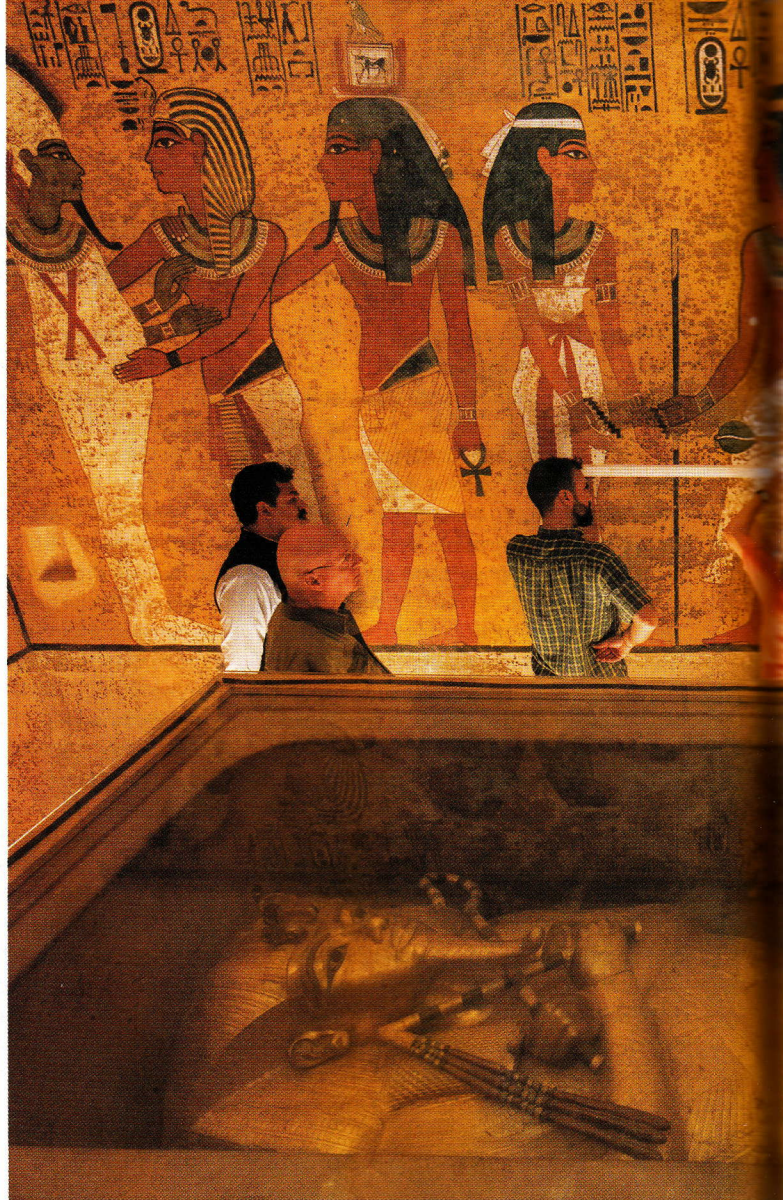
Although most pharaonic tombs are regarded as places in which monarchs were interred in solitary splendour, a considerable number of rulers were buried with other members of their family. This was a practice that continued into the 18th Dynasty (c1550–1295 BC), of which Tutankhamun was a member.

The tombs of Amenhotep II and Tuthmosis IV once held the bodies of children who had predeceased their royal fathers, while Amenhotep III was provided with a tomb complex large enough to accommodate the planned burials of his own wife and eldest daughter. Similarly, Tutankhamun's father, Akhenaten, was initially buried in the Royal Tomb at Amarna in the company of his mother and at least one of his daughters.

All of this means that it is perhaps unsurprising that Tutankhamun was also not alone in his tomb. When Carter was removing the contents of one of its side chambers, which he designated 'the Treasury', he discovered two tiny bodies that

had been carefully mummified, wrapped in linen, and provided with tiny gold masks and sets of small coffins. When examined in 1932 by anatomist Douglas Derry of Cairo's Kasr al-Ainy Medical School, both were revealed as stillborn female foetuses, one of five months' gestation and the other seven months – an estimation raised to nine months following x-ray examination in 1979.

This study and others since have identified the same scoliosis and related genetic conditions shared by Tutankhamun himself, so it is widely believed these two unnamed children were his daughters, whose premature deaths were followed by their interment in their father's tomb. Carter himself went even further, and in the grand tradition of casting Tutankhamun as a tragic figure, regarded the foetuses as the last representatives of the 18th Dynasty royal family, musing that "had one of those babes lived there might never have been a Ramses" – a reference to the famous Ramses II of the subsequent dynasty.



**Royal tragedy** Tiny coffins found in Tutankhamun's tomb are thought to belong to stillborn daughters

# 5 Rumours of secret chambers in his tomb are just that – rumours

Tutankhamun's tomb has been a massive tourist draw since its discovery in 1922. But ever since its discovery, the effect of so many people crowding into such a small space had increased the levels of humidity, dust and microbacteria – and had begun to damage its painted wall scenes.

In an effort to solve this problem, a facsimile burial chamber was created, using high-resolution 3D laser scanning to reproduce the exact dimensions of the original. When the scan data was published in 2014, it revealed faint traces of what appeared to be two doorways on the north and west walls of the burial chamber. Egyptologist Nicholas Reeves interpreted these anomalies as entries to hidden chambers, which he believed would contain a further royal burial – in his opinion, most likely that of Nefertiti.

This sensational claim made headlines around the world. The Egyptian Ministry of



## 6 There is no direct evidence that Tutankhamun was murdered

Although the tomb was discovered in 1922, it took Carter three more years of excavation before he could access Tutankhamun's body within the burial chamber, where it was protected inside a series of gilded shrines erected around the sarcophagus. Inside, within a nest of three coffins, the king's mummified body was stuck fast to the base of the innermost coffin, as a result of resin-based embalming fluids – so the autopsy carried out by Douglas Derry in 1925 required the use of heated knives to remove the body piece by piece.

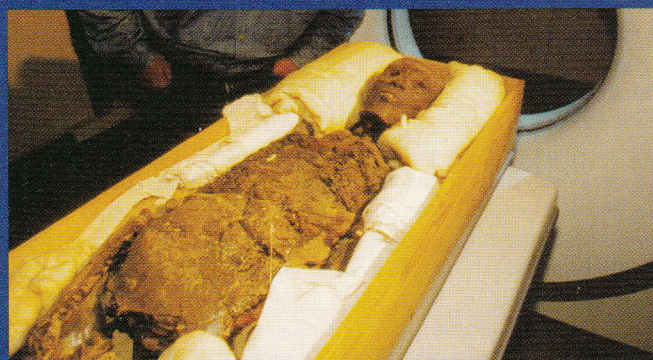
Although he was unable to establish a cause of death, Derry estimated Tutankhamun was between 17 and 19 when he died – a claim confirmed in 1968 by the first x-rays of the body, which also revealed a small, dislodged bone fragment within the skull. The suggestion that this might have been caused by a blow to the head became a veritable whodunnit, the notion of foul play fitting the stereotype of the tragic boy-king so well that his 'murder' became virtual fact.

When the fragment was

shown to be postmortem damage, some turned their attention instead to the damaged chest and broken ribs. Likely caused when valuables were stolen from the reassembled body after its 1925 reinterment, such damage has nonetheless been claimed as evidence of a violent death inflicted by a chariot wheel in battle.

In 2005, CT scans highlighted that Tutankhamun's left femur had been fractured – the lack of healing meaning this was probably more postmortem damage. Yet some suggested the wound had become fatally infected, though the scans showed no evidence of that. The same study added that he might have succumbed to malaria, while others have claimed his death was hastened by syndromes such as Marfan, Klippel-Feil and Klinefelter's.

Ultimately, the only consensus remains that Tutankhamun died around 19, still older than several of his half-sisters and certainly his own stillborn daughters, whose demise was most likely related to the cumulative effects of the family's inbreeding.



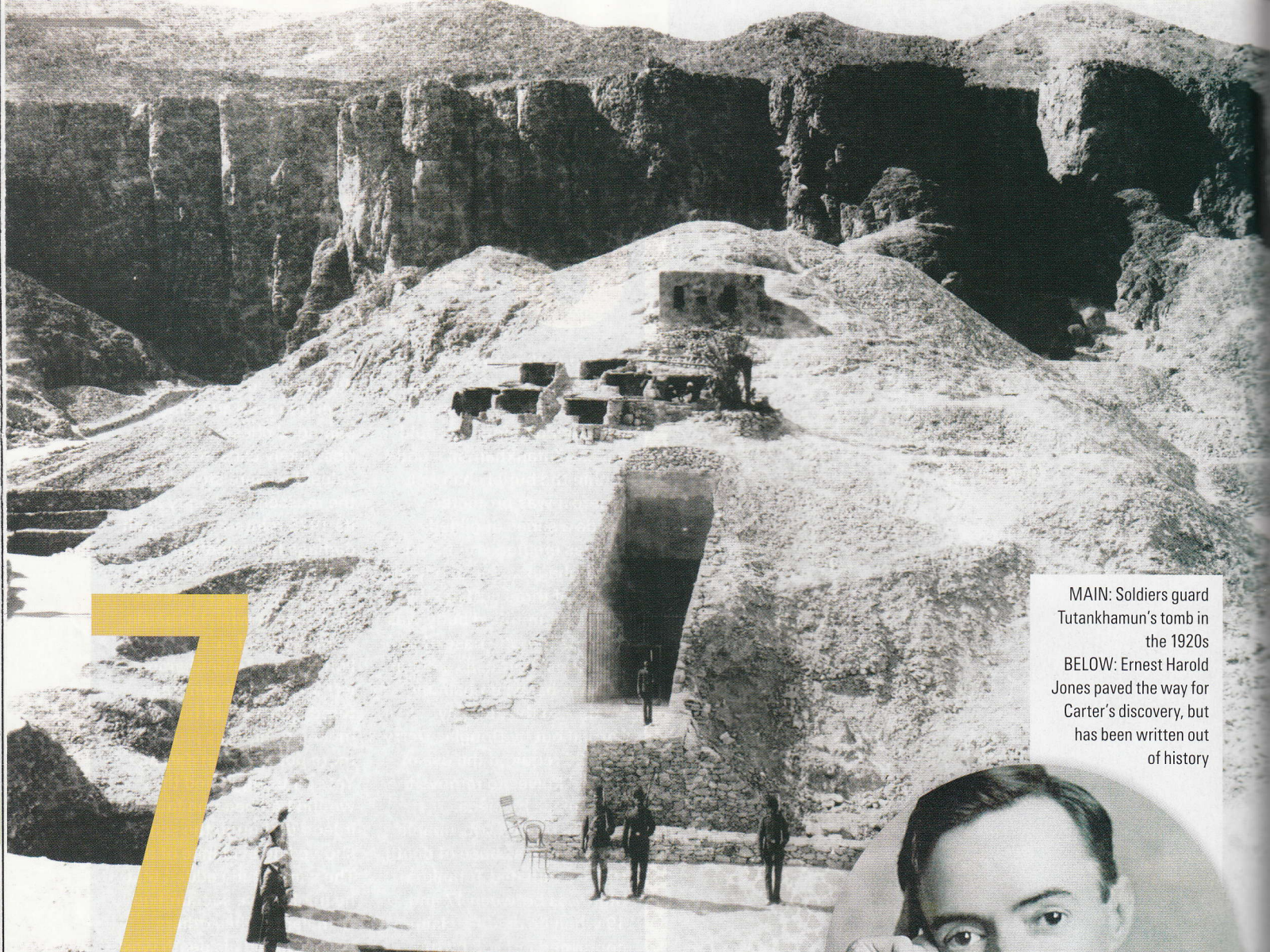
Tutankhamun's mummy enters a CT scanner. There are multiple theories about how he died

Antiquities commissioned further investigations using ground-penetrating radar (GPR) to detect any hidden voids, declaring they were "90 per cent sure" that further chambers did indeed exist. Yet a second GPR scan of the tomb, undertaken by engineers from the National Geographic Society in 2016, found no such hidden features, meaning that archaeologists proceeded to argue among themselves as the world media continued to speculate.

So Egypt's antiquities minister commissioned a third and final set of scans in 2018. Carried out by the University of Turin and two Italian imaging companies, again supported by National Geographic, the scan was cross-checked with the two previous studies, suggesting that the original anomalies were probably the result of the radar waves being affected by the wall plaster and stone sarcophagus. They concluded "with a very high level of confidence" that "the existence of hidden chambers... is not supported by the GPR data". The findings were accepted by Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, who added that these final scans "conclusively prove that there are no additional chambers or passages" – that is, at least, until the next scans are undertaken...

### Hidden secrets?

Engineers conduct a GPR scan of a suspected doorway in the tomb's north wall



MAIN: Soldiers guard Tutankhamun's tomb in the 1920s  
BELOW: Ernest Harold Jones paved the way for Carter's discovery, but has been written out of history



## Carter was not the first to find "the tomb of Tutankhamun"

While the 1922 discovery of Tutankhamun's burial chamber made Howard Carter a household name, "the tomb of Tutankhamun" had actually been unearthed 13 years earlier by archaeologist Ernest Harold Jones.

Jones, who has since been virtually air-brushed from history, was born in the Yorkshire town of Barnsley in 1877. Described as a "dark-haired, small, pleasant young man", he, like his friend Carter, had gone out to Egypt to work as an archaeological artist before gaining sufficient skills to undertake excavations himself.

Jones spent successive excavation seasons in Egypt, initially at Beni Hasan in 1903, then at Esna, Hierakonpolis, Abydos and Amarna. By 1907 he was taken on by the wealthy American Theodore Davis, who was funding excavations in the Valley of the Kings. From then on, Jones was involved in the excavation of some of the valley's most significant tombs – from that of Tutankhamun's father, Akhenaten, to Tutankhamun's eventual successor, Horemheb. Initially responsible for drawing their

contents and making facsimiles of their wall scenes, he was soon appointed director of excavations, noticing the name of the then little-known 'Tutankhamun' on seal impressions, ring bezels and other finds that had begun to turn up around the valley.

In 1909, he discovered tomb KV58, which contained goldwork that again named Tutankhamun. Jones rightly suspected it to be a robbers' stash, but his boss Davis insisted it was "the tomb of Tutankhamun", announcing it as such in 1912 and declaring that "the Valley of the Kings is now exhausted".

Sadly, by then Jones had succumbed to tuberculosis, dying in his dig house in the valley, aged 34. With his colleagues Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon organising his funeral in Luxor, and taking over Davis's concession to dig in the valley, Jones himself was soon forgotten. Even his grave was lost during the moving of Luxor cemetery in 2013, a sad fate for the man who had helped pave the way to the discovery of the most famous tomb in history. **H**

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**Professor Joann Fletcher** is based at the University of York. Her latest book is *The Story of Egypt* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2015)

### VISIT

Tutankhamun: Treasures of the Golden Pharaoh is at Saatchi Gallery in London from 2 November 2019–3 May 2020.  
[tutankhamun-london.com](http://tutankhamun-london.com)

### LISTEN

A new BBC Radio 4 documentary, *The Cult of King Tut*, is available on BBC Sounds: [bbc.co.uk/sounds](http://bbc.co.uk/sounds)

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