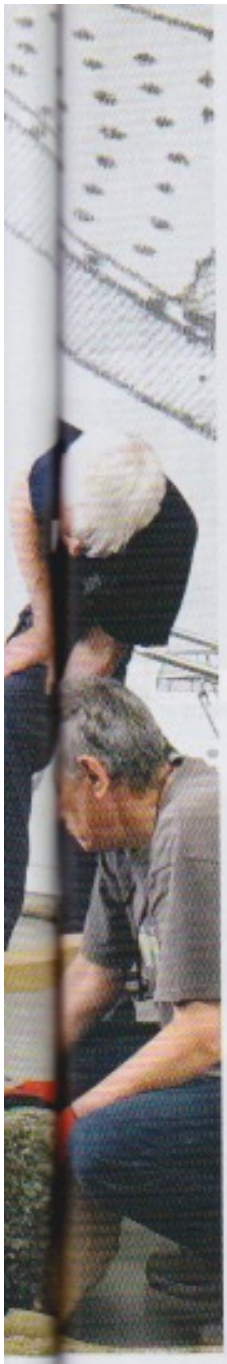
The Ship's Company

In a shed on Woodbridge's quayside volunteers and maritime experts will build an exact copy of the Sutton Hoo burial ship

WORDS: Richard Ginger • PHOTOS: The Ship's Company

When the breath-taking treasures of Sutton Hoo were dug up from the Suffolk earth in the summer of 1939, the excavation also revealed a ghostly and tantalising glimpse of the great ship that was the final resting place of the legendary Anglo-Saxon king, Raedwald. The centuries old network of lines and indents that stained the sandy soil offered an earthy facsimile of the vessel in all its magnificent dimensions.

Fortunately, realising the profound importance of all aspects of the discovery, archaeologists and photographers recorded each detail of the ship in an exercise which was to prove prescient. Now, some 80 years later, a team of maritime professionals and volunteers have taken on the incredible task of rebuilding an exact copy of Raedwald's ship in Woodbridge, just across the River Deben from the atmospheric burial grounds now managed by the National



Trust. Inside a modern workshop, The Longshed, purpose-built for the construction of the iconic Anglo-Saxon boat, it's a hive of activity under the watchful eye of director and project manager of The Sutton Hoo Ship's Company, Jacq Barnard.

While the project is still in the developmental stage, the eventual ship, scheduled to be finished in about three years, will be impressive to behold, measuring just under 30 metres long and over four metres across the beam.

"It will be huge," says Jacq. "If anything, we're now realising that the building might not be

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big enough because once we start building it there's not going to be much room around it."

The enormity of the task is obvious and rife with challenges. As such, the project's 30 or so local volunteers and professionals are harnessed to a range of experts contracted in when needed, ranging from marine archaeologists, ship architects and shipwrights to experts in green wood working. They also have academic support from the Universities of York and Southampton.

So, where do you start when

taking the shadowy skeleton of an ancient Anglo-Saxon ship entombed for centuries and making it sail in the 21st century?

"There's an awful lot of evidence," Jacq explains. "None of the wood was still there, but there was a completely formed imprint so all of the measurements and a lot of detail. It was buried in almost a crisp layer, which held while they were measuring it." A fortuitous template in terra firma.

"Some people would argue that we have more evidence by not having an actual ship. Often people find a section and have to guess the rest. We've got the whole shape of it."

However, while a relatively clear picture of the ship's shape exists and can be virtually created and viewed via 3-D computer modelling, many of the ancient skills, techniques and tools that built the original vessel have all but disappeared from modern boatbuilding.

Moreover, while the project makes use of modern technology and machinery, they are determined to keep the build process as authentic as possible in order to learn how it would have been done in the distant past.

"Every single one of the planks that goes down the side will be hand-cleaved out of a tree trunk. Modern methods would use machinery, but these have all got to be done by hand, so it will take a long time." They've even had to make some of the actual tools they need to undertake the work.

"The planking will be held together with wooden clamps, and we've had a team making those. So, we need to make these clamps and other tools as well as building the ship."

Similarly, the green oak they need for planking doesn't just arrive off-the-shelf from a timber merchant, but rather as hefty sections of gnarly trunk.

"You split the wood in half, quarters, eighths and sixteenths so you end up with lots of wedges and, from those, you make planks." The help of leading archaeological woodworking specialist Damian Goodburn has proved invaluable.

"We're also picking up the skills as we go along. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. The guys in the workshop have been around for a good year or so

IMAGES: The Sutton Hoo ship project is now in the developmental stage. The eventual ship, scheduled to be finished in about three years, will be just under 30 metres long and over four metres across the beam.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The Sutton Hoo Ship's Company is currently running a scheme to allow donors to sponsor one of the 3,500 rivets that will go into the ship's construction.

If you're interested in sponsorship, volunteering or finding out more about The Sutton Hoo Ship's Company project visit saxonship.org

practising with axes and perfecting those skills.

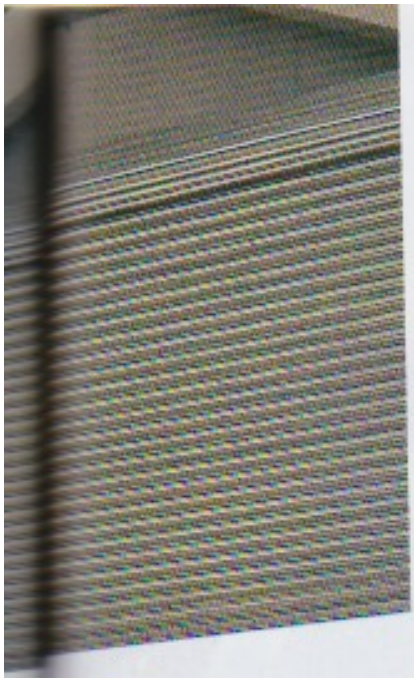
"Also, the way in which you construct a plank will affect its strength. If we were to machine-tool it, the plank would be different to how they would have done it in Saxon times. To be authentic is to have a ship that's the same as the one that went in the ground. We've got to follow the same methods to build it."

Mastering some of these methods involves a combination of common-sense trial and error, watching YouTube videos of similar projects and input from like-minded experts, such as the team at the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, Denmark. "They have an operational boatyard there and about 30 Viking ships so they are always building. We went to a symposium there and they also came here to look at what we're doing to critique it and add advice."

While the earlier detailed recordings and photography at Sutton Hoo offered a unique resource to determine many elements of the ship's construction, some elements had disappeared altogether. "Where there's less evidence is the stem and stern, which were higher and had more deterioration. There are things missing that we've got to work out." This entails the team building scale models and replicas to ascertain how the boat's various sections were crafted and created.

One such example of this approach, which Jacq calls 'experimental archaeology', is the construction of a full-size, half-section re-creation of the mid-ship portion of the boat. Again, the work invariably throws up more questions along each stage. "Once you start to build it you've got to know what went into the build and at what point," Jacq explains. "We don't know where the thwarts or the seats would have been or what the arrangement was. Or even the length and weight of the oars."

How the boat was rowed through the water is one area of the project that particularly fascinates Jacq. As captain of the Deben Rowing Club and founder of the Woodbridge Coastal



Rowing Club, she's keen to find out how such a large vessel was manoeuvred by ancient mariners. "In history, boats have been rowed in all sorts of ways – one person per oar, two people per oar, one person standing up and sculling with an oar out of the back."

The leaf-shape of the Sutton Hoo boat also prompts queries about the length of the oars that would have been used, their arrangement and who sat where inside the boat. "Depending on where you sit in the ship can dictate the length of the oar. Either they had some long oars in the middle section to keep them all the same length along the boat or they rowed in different positions at different times to do different things."

It's obvious that Jacq relishes the prospect of the boat eventually being launched so it can be put through its paces. She envisages as many as 80 to 120 rowers could be needed to manoeuvre it and give a clearer understanding of how well it performs on water.

"We want to find out how they would have used it, how rough could they have been with it, could they have rammed it onto a beach, how much weight would it have taken."

Before then, there are many more obstacles to navigate before she gets answers. "In some ways it's not that complicated because they only had the tools and skills they would have had in Saxon times. It's not like we're trying to reconstruct a spaceship. Things have moved on, but not perhaps in the boat-building world as much as you would think."

It's tempting to imagine that the ghost of Raedwald is keeping a spectral eye on developments from his final resting place across the water, awaiting the day when his great ship once again launches on the Suffolk river. ◆

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