

A ship fit for a king

Catherine Larner, writer and rower, is following the progress of the mighty replica of the Sutton Hoo Anglo-Saxon burial ship being lovingly built across the river at Woodbridge

For more than three decades, the replica Anglo-Saxon longboat, *Sae Wylfing*, has been turning heads. The pitch-black wooden boat, with its flat, broad body and high prow and stern forms a mesmerising and ethereal presence gliding along the River Deben or moored in its resting place beneath the Woodbridge Tide Mill.

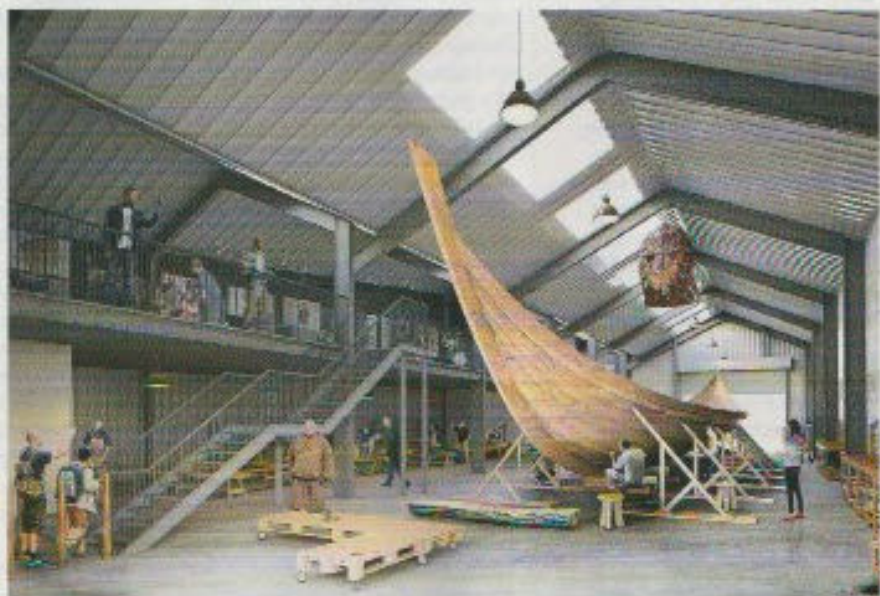
Imagine, though, that distinctive silhouette in a boat many times the size, spanning almost 90 feet in length, rowed by a crew of 40 oarsmen, and crafted using the materials and techniques which would have been in place 1,400 years ago, in a vessel fit for a king.

"I think people will be immensely impressed by the spectacle," says Martin Carver, professor of archaeology at the

'Everyone can see the difference between a Rolls-Royce and a Ford Fiesta'

University of York and director of the most recent excavations at Sutton Hoo. This summer he was appointed chair of the Sutton Hoo Ship's Company, a charitable organisation formed to create an authentic, full-size reconstruction of the royal burial ship uncovered in the dig of 1939.

"Everyone can see the difference between a Rolls-Royce and a Ford Fiesta," Martin says. "The sheer size of this boat on the water, and the quality of the



ABOVE: The Ship's Company are building a replica of the Sutton Hoo burial ship at Woodbridge

LEFT: The *Sae Wylfing*

materials and the craftsmanship with which it is being constructed means this boat was, and will be again, a picture of excellence.

"We have made the tools of Anglo-Saxon type, selected the oak and used all the surviving evidence for the form of the ship. But assembling it shows us what works and what doesn't – the ship is teaching us what it should look like. The more we work on it, the more we realise what a thing of beauty it would have been," he says.

The work, underway in The Longshed on the riverfront in Woodbridge, is a piece of "experimental archaeology".

"Normally you would pay a naval architect to design a boat for you and those instructions would be handed over to a shipwright who would build it," says Joe Startin, a director of the project. "But an archaeological reconstruction isn't quite the same thing. There is a lot of information to extract and different interpretations to take on board."

The original treasure discovered in 1939 is believed to mark the burial place of the East Anglian king Raedwald in around 624AD. Now in the British Museum, it is one of the richest finds in England. But all that was left of the original ship were ▶

the stains of its timbers and the rusty iron rivets that held them together. "It's why we know so little about this period of history as a whole," says shipwright for the project, Tim Kirk. "Everything they made was in wood which has rotted away."

This means there are many questions still to answer.

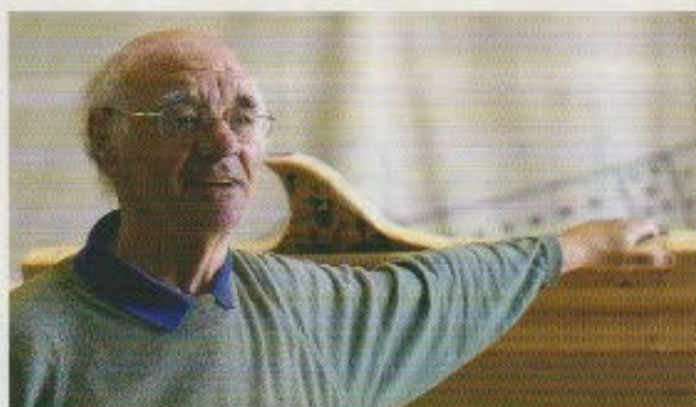
"We knew it was a rowing boat," says Martin Carver, "because it had bits of wood – tholes – that you place the oar against to row. And this boat definitely had royal pretensions – it was meticulously made and incredibly large."

Every step of the process, from

'There's a real buzz in the Longshed, creating the pieces of wood which are going to fit into this ship'

investigating the evidence of the first Sutton Hoo excavation to the modern technology – including radar, X-ray, 3D digital design and photogrammetry – which is enabling the team to interpret the data and recreate it as a full-size ship, has considerable significance and interest to historians, archaeologists, shipwrights and enthusiasts around the world. But the spectacle of this ship when it is finally launched on to the water is likely to astound everyone.

"The king's mound at Sutton Hoo housed very, very high-quality jewellery and weaponry. The craftsmanship of these objects was astonishing," says Martin Carver. "In the same way, there seems to be no limit to the care and ingenuity that's been



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taken in constructing this ship."

"The biggest surprise, I think," says shipwright Tim Kirk, "is how accurate and how skilled the Saxons were – and this ship was built using axes." The vast trunk of a tree, which will form the keel of the ship, was placed in The Longshed this summer. The team has been steadily cleaving this, as well as the stem and stern posts, with axes, into the required shape and size.

"As a modern boatbuilder," Tim says, "when I want a piece of wood I go to the timber yard, but for this ship I've got to go to the forest and find a tree. We spent 18 months searching for the right tree." And it takes patience, dedication and care to bring the timber into the form required.

"Working with an axe doesn't really involve muscle strength, it's a lot more about concentration," says Alec Newland, a nature conservation graduate who is working full time on the project.

"You're not hacking away with an axe and getting sweaty – it's fine work, taking off small pieces at a time and coming down to very accurate lines."

Alec is affectionately known to the team as an Anglo-Saxon in their midst because he has embraced everything about the period – using tools based on those which have survived from that time, wearing clothing in the style and fabric, rowing in Sae Wylling and even living under canvas at one point.

"It's hard to switch off," he says. "I do find myself dreaming about the keel! I could easily get obsessed with this project because I'm so passionate about it. I have such a respect for the skill and craftsmanship of the Anglo-Saxons."

Many of the volunteers involved in the shipbuilding are retired professionals and some, like David Turner – the oldest member of the team at



The Sae Wylling on the River Deben



LEFT: Alec Newland rowing the replica Anglo-Saxon longboat, Sae Wylling. Alec is affectionately known to the team as an Anglo-Saxon in their midst because he has embraced everything about the period



The Sae Wylfing on the River Deben – the replica Sutton Hoo ship will be many times the size, spanning almost 90 feet in length, rowed by a crew of 40 oarsmen

89 – can bring their own insight and experience to the project. “I made a modification to the clamps we were making,” he says. “As an engineer, I could see the force that was being applied was wrong. But it amuses me sometimes, the detail – we’re working to half millimetres on this huge ship.”

There are some 60 people now engaged in the project, and more will be needed as work progresses. In addition to building the ship, volunteers are fulfilling other tasks such as research, documenting, photography, marketing, fundraising and rowing trials, too. The project manager, pulling all these elements together, is Jacq Barnard, a British Rowing coach and captain of Deben Rowing Club and founder of a newly formed Woodbridge Coastal Rowing Club.

With each step forward in the

BELOW: Jacq Barnard, a British Rowing coach and captain of Deben Rowing Club, intends to start a Saxon Rowing Club and train on land initially so they can work out basic things such as how the Anglo-Saxons got in and out of such a huge boat and handled the oars

construction, more questions are raised and decisions made. Among the elements still unknown are the practicalities of getting the ship on the water and navigating the river.

“We don’t know how they would get into the boat,” Jacq says. “Or the dimensions of the oars, or if they would sit or stand to row. How would they hear their instructions to row and how would the helmsman see to steer the boat?” Many of these

issues may not be resolved until the ship is on the water, which will possibly be as soon as spring of 2023. In anticipation, Jacq is seeking to train rowers to be equipped for these trials.

“My intention is to start a Saxon Rowing Club and call people in initially for land training. We need to establish such things as how to get the oars in place the minute you’re on the boat because, with 40 enormous oars, there has to be a system to do that.”

“There’s a real buzz in The Longshed, creating the pieces of wood which are going to fit into this ship,” says Joe Startin. “We cannot wait to watch this magnificent vessel slide down the slipway into the river. Rowing this ship will be really, really thrilling.”

Follow the ship’s progress at saxonship.org



Photo: Andy M