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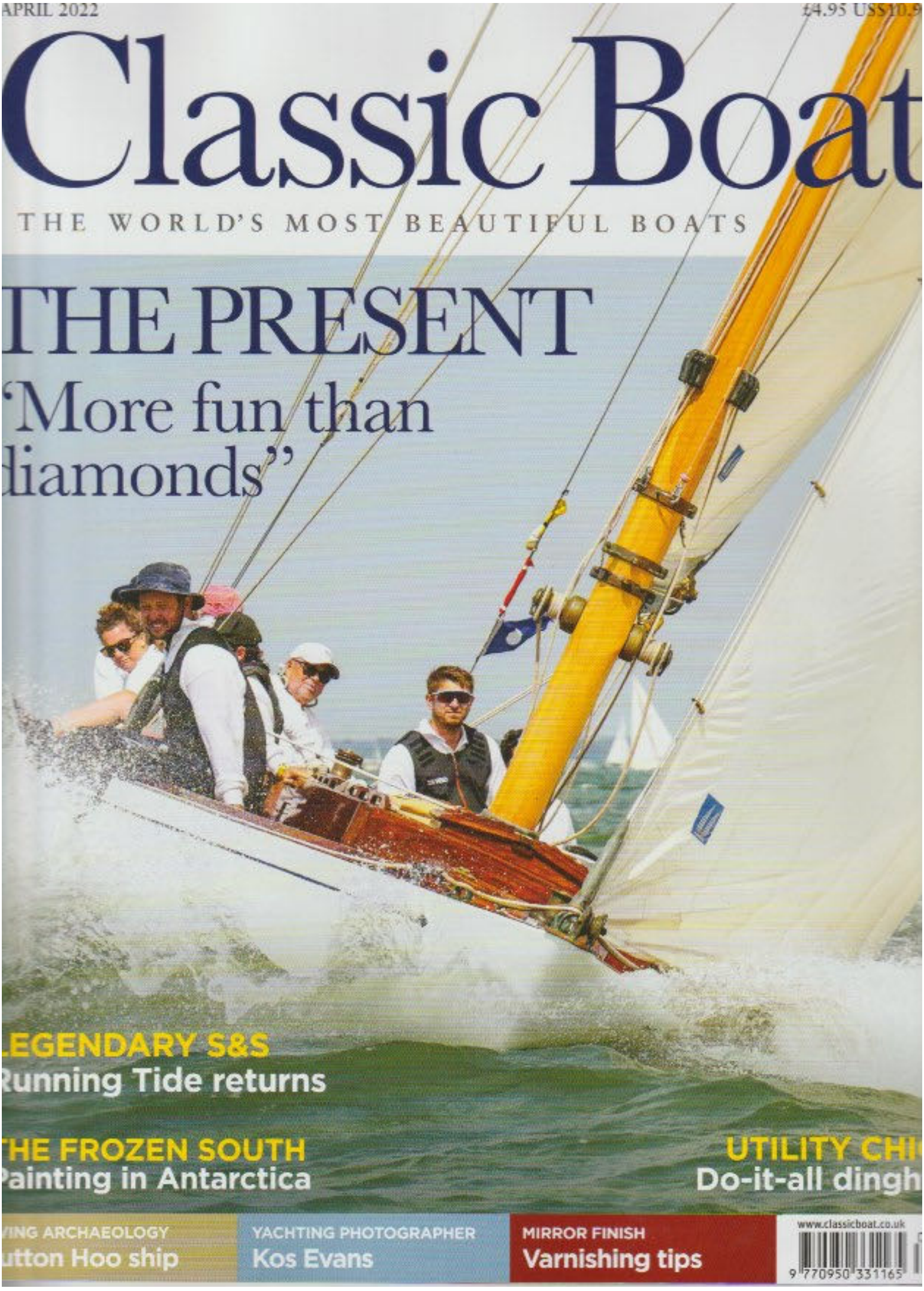

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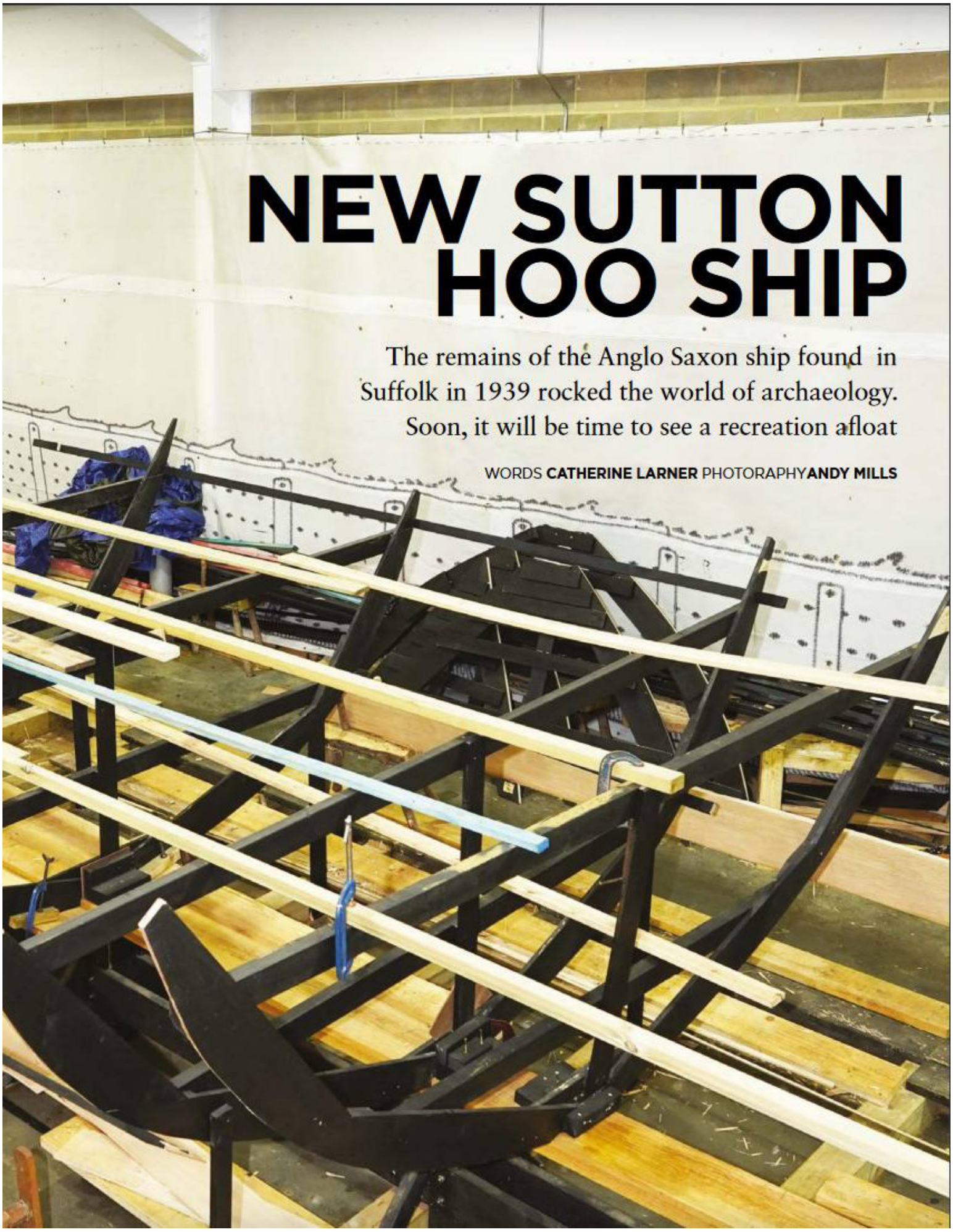

NEW SUTTON HOO SHIP

The remains of the Anglo Saxon ship found in Suffolk in 1939 rocked the world of archaeology. Soon, it will be time to see a recreation afloat

WORDS **CATHERINE LARNER** PHOTORAPHY **ANDY MILLS**

The shadow of a vast, ancient vessel has lain in the ground above the River Deben in Suffolk for 1,400 years. Believed to be the burial place of the East Anglian king Raedwald in around 624AD, stains of timbers and rusty iron rivets were all that remained when the treasure, one of the richest finds in England, was removed and installed in the British Museum in the famous excavation of 1939.

Now, historians, shipwrights and many volunteers are using the specifications meticulously gathered by those wartime archaeologists to reconstruct the Sutton Hoo Ship and gain a greater understanding of our earliest maritime history.

"We knew it was a rowing boat," says Professor Martin Carver, chair of the Sutton Hoo Ship's Company, the charitable organisation running the project. "It had tholes that you place the oar against to row. And this boat definitely had royal pretentions – it was meticulously made and incredibly large. 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. There seems to be no limit to the care and ingenuity that's been taken in constructing this ship."

There would have been a crew of up to 40 oarsmen rowing this 90ft (27m) ship and, using the tools and materials available at the time of build, the team is in no doubt that this was an incredible construction.

"The sheer size of this boat on the water, and the quality of the materials and the craftsmanship of its construction means this boat was, and will be again, a picture of excellence," says Carver.

It's an ambitious project of considerable significance and interest to historians, archaeologists, shipwrights and enthusiasts around the world and it has been a long time reaching fruition.

"I've sat on many committees discussing how to make a reconstruction of the ship buried at Sutton Hoo," says archaeologist and trustee for the project, Angela Care Evans. "This time it looks like it will actually happen!"

Now retired, Angela joined the British Museum as a postgraduate in 1967 and even then there was talk of creating a full-size replica ship, she says. "We made a plastercast then a fibreglass model. We even got a quote from a shipbuilder. But we didn't know what we would do with it when it was built, so nothing came of it."

The intent this time is very much to see the ship afloat and it says something of the commitment of the team of experts and enthusiasts that they have got this far.

"We don't know what the original ship was used for before the burial," says project manager, Jacq Barnard. "We don't know how far it would have travelled. Would they have rowed it into battles? Would they have carried cargo? Would they have lived on it? We don't know its capabilities but we do know it was probably on the water for about 20 years."

Every step of the process, from investigating the evidence of the first Sutton Hoo excavation to the modern technology (including radar, X-ray, 3D digital design and photogrammetry) facilitated by a team of academics in Southampton, is enabling the team to interpret the data and recreate it as a full-sized ship.

Above: Alec Newland at work, the River Deben visible in the background

"Because we're working with the outer shell of the ship from the archaeological dig, there is no evidence of the seating or the oars that would have been used," says Jacq Barnard. "We have created a section of the ship from plywood to experiment with seating positions and the angles, weight and length of the oars, and how these might be secured. We make a small change and then test it. If it doesn't work, we put it back and think again."

With each step forward in the construction, more questions are raised and decisions made.

"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 trustee 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."

Based across the river from Sutton Hoo, on the Woodbridge waterfront, the Ship's Company is working in a community space called The Longshed which was given to the town through a redevelopment of the derelict Whisstocks boatyard site. While their schedule was interrupted by the pandemic, of course, they hope to launch the boat in the spring tides of 2024, almost 10 years since the developmental work began.

"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 that forms the keel of the ship was placed in The Longshed last summer, and the team has been steadily cleaving this 150-year-old green oak, and the stem and sternposts, with axes, into the required shape and size. With this now in place, molds have been fixed to guide the positioning of the planking. These timbers will all be individually sourced, and crafted using Anglo-Saxon techniques and tools.

"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 for the keel."

And it takes patience, dedication and care to bring the timber into the form required.

Clockwise from top: The replica in frame; Alec Newland doing fine axe work; axe work; Jo Wood carving with an axe; a fifth-size replica of the ship; Tim Kirk and Jacq Barnard

"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 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 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."

There are some 60 people currently 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. At present the team has the benefit of a half-size replica boat called *Sae Wylfing*, for water-based tests but Jacq Barnard hopes the local Coastal Rowing Clubs will feed into her Saxon rowing squad. It will need around 120 rowers to undertake the extensive water-based trials when the Sutton Hoo Ship is seaworthy.

***Above left to right:* Sae Wylfing; Laurie Walker inspects the ship in frame**

***Below left to right:* Assessing the fifth-size replica; A GCI image of the Sutton Hoo ship**

"As soon as we launch the ship we will have lots of scenarios to test," she says. "We don't know how they would get into the boat, with 40 enormous 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?

"We need to get to a point where we're confident enough to take it into trickier waters, and possibly out to sea. And the final stage will be establishing whether it could be put to sail. These trials will take several years."

"There's a real buzz," 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."

To learn more about the project or to help fund it, visit saxonship.org. You can support the project by sponsoring a rivet to help with the fundraising and be an ongoing part of the ship's legacy. All rivets are numbered and the owners given details on their location on the ship.