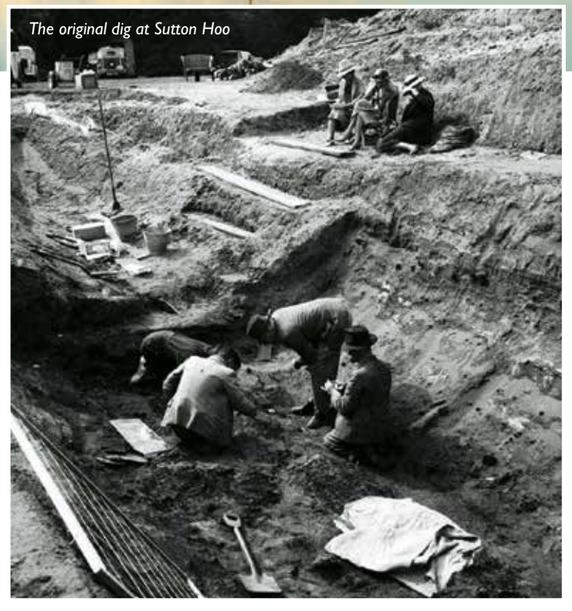
Woodbridge on the River Deben where the boat is being built

ROWING

BACK THE YEARS

Catherine Larner on the reconstruction of the Anglo-Saxon ship unearthed at Sutton Hoo



The original dig at Sutton Hoo

THE unearthing of the mysterious grassy mounds at Sutton Hoo in 1939 was one of the most important excavations in British history. Carried out by an amateur archaeologist, when war was looming, the sandy Suffolk soil revealed the shadow of a vast wooden ship cradling extraordinary riches.

Believed to be the last resting place of Raedwald, the king of East Anglia, in 624AD, this burial chamber housed hundreds of artefacts. A ceremonial helmet, sword and shield, buckles and brooches: the treasures were made from intricately worked precious metals and decorated with gemstones and provided a wonderful insight into our ancient past.

The riches are now housed in the British Museum. The site is owned by the National Trust and attracts hordes of visitors each year, and the story of the discovery has provided rich material for the stage, literature and, most recently, in the film *The Dig*.

But all that was left of the original ship were the stains of its timbers, the rusty iron rivets that held them together and a lot of unanswered questions.

Questions such as: what was the ship used for before the burial? Where did it come from? Had it sailed up the river? Would it have been used in battles or carried cargo? And how was it moved from the waterside up the hill to its resting place at Sutton Hoo?

Now historians, shipwrights and volunteers are using the specifications gathered by the wartime archaeologists to create an authentic, full-size reconstruction of the Sutton Hoo ship and to gain a greater understanding of our early maritime history. This piece of "experimental archaeology" is taking place just over the river from the original find, in the town of Woodbridge.

The Sutton Hoo Ship's Company is a charitable organisation. It is working in a community space called The Longshed which was given to the town through a redevelopment of a derelict boatyard. While the schedule was interrupted by the pandemic, they hope to launch the ship in the spring tides of 2024, almost 10 years since the developmental work began.

"Normally you would pay a naval architect to design a >

ROWING LIKE THE ANGLO-SAXONS

The pitch-black wooden boat, with its flat, broad body and high prow and stern forms an ethereal presence gliding along the River Deben or moored in its resting place beneath the Woodbridge Tide Mill.

The trappings of a modern rowing boat are missing – there are no sliding seats, footplates or even gates for the oars – but *Sae Wylfing*, the nearest thing to an Anglo-Saxon rowing experience, slips effortlessly through the water under the power of its eight rowers, and turns on a sixpence with its vast side rudder.

Its distinctive curled leaf silhouette means that the oars are of differing lengths, and they sit against a thole, a wooden crest of a wave, loosely tied with a rope and toggle. The oarsmen sit on wooden planks and, one behind the other, are restricted in how far they can reach for the length of their stroke.

It's easy to get into a rhythm, listening to water lapping alongside with the narrow spoon of the oar tapping in and out, but the visibility for the helmsman seeking hazards ahead is restricted by a high prow.

Double the length, spanning 90 feet in total, with a crew five times the size, there are many more considerations in rowing the full-size reconstruction of the Sutton Hoo ship.

"We don't know how they would get into the boat," says Jacq Barnard, project manager at the Ship's Company who is also a British Rowing coach. "We don't know the dimensions of the oars, or if they would sit or stand to row. How would they hear instructions to row and how would the helmsman see to steer?"

Many of these issues may not be resolved until the ship is on the water, but in anticipation, Jacq is seeking to train rowers.

"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. With 40 enormous oars, there has to be a system!"

Sae Wylfing undoubtedly gives a fascinating insight to the Anglo-Saxon rowing experience. The name means "sea wolfcub" and the boat was initially built in 1993, to establish whether Anglo-Saxon boats could sail. Owned by the Gifford family in Southampton, *Sae Wylfing* has been loaned to the Woodbridge Riverside Trust and until recently has largely been shore-based, towed around the country to raise awareness and curiosity about Anglo-Saxon life. *saxonship.org*

The Anglo-Saxon rowing experience

Left: the ship's progress in the shed
Above: authentically robust rivets

> 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."

Every step of the process, from investigating the evidence of the first Sutton Hoo excavation to the modern technology (including 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.

"The more we work on it, the more we realise what a thing of beauty it would have been," says Martin Carver, Professor Emeritus of archaeology at the University of York, director of the most recent excavations at Sutton Hoo and chair of trustees of the Ship's Company. "There seems to be no limit to the care and ingenuity that's been taken in constructing the ship."

There would have been a crew of up to 40 oarsmen propelling this 90 foot ship and, using the tools and materials which would have been available to the Anglo-Saxon boatbuilders, the team is in no doubt that this was an incredible construction. The vast trunk of a tree which forms the keel of the ship was placed in The Longshed last summer and the team has been steadily cleaving the 200-year-old green oak with axes into the required shape and size. With this now in place, moulds have been fixed to guide the positioning of the planking. All these timbers will be individually sourced.

"As a modern boatbuilder," says shipwright for the project Tim Kirk, "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 eighteen months searching for the right tree for the keel."

There are some 85 people currently engaged in building the boat 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.

"We know it was a rowing boat," says Carver. "It had tholes that you place the oar against to row. And this boat definitely had royal pretensions – 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 sheer size of this boat on the water, and the quality of the materials and the craftsmanship with which is it being constructed means this boat was, and will be again, a picture of excellence," says Carver.

And the spectacle of this ship when it is finally launched on to the water is likely to astound everyone. "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."

Images: Andy Mills, National Trust

A VOLUNTEER SHIPBUILDER

Trained accountant Jo Wood had been working for charitable organisations overseas for many years but, in 2016, wanted a change so decided to pursue a boatbuilding course in Lowestoft. She achieved a City and Guilds qualification and looked for the next step. Hearing of the Ship's Company's plans and, living nearby, she volunteered and contributes regular shifts at the Longshed in between her work commitments. Currently Jo is the only female shipbuilder and although it looks challenging physical work, she is contributing as an equal with the other crew members. "It's about working cleverly," she says. "We are using the materials and techniques of the Anglo-Saxons, but it's about using the tools rather than engaging brute force. And it's important to rotate the tasks, almost like circuit training. You can't do axe work all day."

Jo hopes that other women will be encouraged to get on board with the project. "Women are more than capable of being involved in boatbuilding," she says. "There are lots of transferable skills from what are seen as more traditional women's pursuits – I do a lot of sewing, and woodworking is comparable. You're using the same precision skills."

And she says she has gained so much from being involved in the project. "In terms of building my skills and making connections with the local community, and also learning about this amazing history on our doorstep, this has been fabulous. It's a great journey that I feel I'm on, along with the ship."

Anyone interested in helping with the project should visit the volunteering section at saxonship.org. Support this 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.

A career change for Jo Wood

Alec Newland at work on the authentic boat

LIVING AND WORKING LIKE THE ANGLO-SAXONS

Alec Newland was one of the first shipwrights working on the project and was affectionately known to the team as an Anglo-Saxon in their midst because he embraced everything about the period – using his own tools based on those which have survived from that time, wearing clothing in the style and fabric, rowing in the fifth-size replica boat, *Sae Wylfing*, and even going so far as to live under canvas at one point.

A nature conservation graduate, he worked full time on the project after leaving university and was one of a number of members of the team steadily cleaving the timber with axes into the required components of the ship. It demands patience, dedication and care.

"I have such a respect for the skill and craftsmanship of the Anglo-Saxons," he says. "Working with an axe doesn't really involve muscle strength, it's a lot more about concentration. 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."

A CGI image of the Longshed and the boat in its final stages