

SAXON



Carey Mulligan as Edith Pretty and Ralph Fiennes as Basil Brown in *The Dig*. Photograph: Larry Horricks.
Credit: NETFLIX 2021

A review of the film *The Dig* by Nigel Maslin

Netflix R/T: 1' 52"

Dir. SIMON STONE, Cam. MIKE ELEY

When the novel first appeared in 2007, I thought, why do I need to read a novelisation of Sutton Hoo? (I had volunteered for the British Museum's re-excavation of the ship in the sixties). But I was quite wrong. When I read the Penguin paperback the following year, I realised that this is an engrossing – positively operatic –

telling of the Sutton Hoo story.

It pits our hero, Basil Brown, and the other artisans like John Jacobs (Mrs. Pretty's under-gardener) and William Spooner (her gamekeeper), against the Cambridge academics who elbowed them out of the way: Charles Phillips of Selwyn College and the younger Stuart Piggott, who subsequently became Professor of Archaeology at Edinburgh. Also, in the story are Reid Moir and Maynard Smith, Mrs. Pretty's original advisers from Ipswich Museum. The Netflix film released in January does the same.

It was interesting that at our virtual AGM, our speaker Sarah Doig, Basil's 'work in progress' biographer, said that Basil did feel aggrieved by the way he was treated, and this was endorsed from the chair by our President Angela Care-Evans. Mind you, there is another view. For all his dedicated hard work and his countryman's instincts, Basil simply did not have the knowledge and experience of Anglo-Saxon material culture to be able to cope with the detailed contents of the burial chamber. Once he had directed the heavy lifting and located the ship, he simply could not be allowed to continue. As Charles Phillips (played by Ken Stott) says in the film, "An *ad hoc* team from a provincial museum cannot be left in charge."

At the time of the original publication, John Preston had written three novels and been Television Critic of the Sunday Telegraph for many years, which helps explain the plethora of coverage when the film appeared. He has since published *A Very English Scandal* about the trial of Jeremy Thorpe, and *Fall* in February this year about Robert Maxwell.

Originated on film and then digitally scanned, the colour of *The Dig* is perfect in a pre-war sort of way, washed out so that it favours hazy Suffolk suns and evocative silhouettes. It establishes its slow, gentle pace from the start, with Basil rowed across the river by foot ferry, clutching his trusty bicycle. Played thoughtfully by Ralph Fiennes with an impressive Suffolk accent, properly coached, he is rightly a focus of the film. So is a young-looking Edith Pretty (Carey Mulligan) who was

59 when she died in 1942, after suffering with a weak heart.

Although *The Dig* did not win any BAFTA awards, it did earn nominations in several categories, including Outstanding British Film, Adapted Screenplay (by Moira Buffini), as well as Make Up and Hair, Costume, and also Production Design. Recreated, I read, somewhere near Godalming, the Sutton Hoo site is pretty convincing (if with less bracken and fewer rabbits, though there is no need to be too 'anorak' about this). I assume the recreation of the ship, level with the old ground level, had a bit of digital help, and time has been well spent looking at the familiar contemporary black and white photographs, which for instance show planks set vertically against the side of the mound.

The juvenile Robert Pretty runs around, more present than in the novel, often the target for simple, indulgent, explanations from Basil. The novel is narrated simply by three main voices: successively, Edith Pretty for how it all began, Basil Brown for the first rivets, then Peggy Piggott for the main artefactual discoveries. Mrs. Pretty narrates the inquest. The film script makes liberal use of voice-overs rather than dialogue, which must have simplified the shoot considerably.

One or two things have naturally been exaggerated. In the film, the newly-married Peggy Piggott, who was John Preston's aunt, enjoys an affair with Rory Lomax, Mrs. Pretty's invented nephew. The universally admired Stuart Piggott is more interested in archaeology than Peggy, and while he also appears in the novel his wife does not have an affair.

Throughout the novel there are references to the war which becomes increasingly menacing the nearer it approaches. The irony of excavating a past civilisation, while the contemporary one is threatened becomes a particular theme, which makes history particularly important as a continuing link with the past.

Much to one friend's regret, the archaeology is not really the star of this film. There is a partial shot of the iron standard being

lifted, glimpses of the shield boss, the small silver dishes, and the large Anastasias dish, as well as the great gold belt buckle. But it is only conservation that makes these artefacts look exciting, and the helmet was of course fragmentary and the lyre vestigial. If you are telling the story of the dig visually, that is not the way to go. Rather it is the personalities involved, and the surprise and excitement of the excavation. Come on, it's a film!

As the Society of Antiquaries' online newsletter *Salon* put it, "*The Dig* is a quiet and sincere film, which celebrates the excitement archaeology can provide and explores the lives of those who uncovered this national treasure."



Another slant on the Sutton Hoo ship story

by Valerie Fenwick

John Preston's novel, *The Dig*, and now the beautiful film based on it, has breathed renewed interest in Sutton Hoo. As soon as Covid restrictions are lifted we can expect the result to be a welcome increase in visitors to the site. Members of the Society and volunteer guides can expect to be bombarded with questions about the film and how true to life it was. As I knew the chief characters later in life and took a key part in the ship re-excavation, the following notes may help members to answer a few of them.

Firstly, the film was based on the novel by John Preston, who admitted to having taken



Photo of Basil Brown digging, possibly at West Stow, taken by Ivan Moore. Permission to print from his son, Chris Moore.

some liberties for dramatic effect. The novel was unlikely to change public perception of the ship-burial excavation. It did not detract from the story that he: telescoped the 1938 and 1939 excavations; omitted the site photographer (OGS Crawford) – replacing him with a fictitious relative of Mrs Pretty; made numerous other 'adjustments'; and omitted the survey of the ship.

However, the film's superbly created characters have replaced the original, perhaps less colourful, people and incidents were necessarily created to add a bit of drama: Basil Brown buried by a landslide; his touching friendship with nine-year-old Robert Pretty; the use of ferries and long cycle rides; the plane diving overhead to crash into the Deben; the marital mismatch of the Piggotts and hint of unfaithfulness are examples.

The omission of the last part of the excavation (the ship itself, omitted also in the book) has skewed the roles of Basil Brown and Charles Phillips. It would have shown that Basil Brown (officially the latter's assistant) continued to excavate the rest of the ship. Both of them are photographed working alongside the Science Museum team. To Phillips this was the most important and interesting find and Basil's achievement was to have uncovered it so expertly.

There was indeed a clash of personalities on the site but it emanated from Ipswich Museum. Basil records his problems with an unnamed member of staff who tried to oust him the previous year. When the intact ship-burial was found, Reid Moir and Maynard were desperate to ensure the finds went to their museum. Basil was placed in a difficult position and sensibly insisted that he was working for Mrs Pretty.

What ensued was another clash, this time between the generations. Reid Moir, Guy Maynard, and Basil Brown, in their fifties and sixties, were all old guard, a generation older than the new guard of archaeologists, who arrived with skills formally taught in Mortimer Wheeler's new Institute of Archaeology. The film cannot show this as the key actors are the wrong age. Grimes and Piggott were in their

twenties, without university education, brilliant but not bespectacled academics. Phillips was only in his thirties with a track-record of brilliant excavation. All had come from modest backgrounds and class was not a factor.

Mrs Pretty had already died when the British Museum prepared to re-excavate Mound One. I took Basil Brown to the site (providing a photo opportunity for the *Woodbridge Reporter*), and remained a friend until he died. He expressed no bitterness at the way things had turned out. Basil was a lone archaeologist, fully aware that he lacked the skills to deal with the burial chamber deposit. The film and Ralph Fiennes sensitive portrayal is a wonderful tribute to him.



BASIL BROWN: THE BOY WITH A GILT-EDGED IMAGINATION

by *Sarah Doig*

Basil Brown came from a different social class than the other main players involved in the 1939 excavation of the Sutton Hoo burial ship. However, Basil's working-class background proved no obstacle for this determined farmer's son. Apart from the first few months, Basil lived all his life in the north Suffolk village of Rickingham; a community dominated by agriculture. Basil Brown was admitted to the infant class of the local National School in 1893 at the age of five. Sadly, we know little about how the young Basil performed and behaved in class, but he gave this interesting, brief insight into his schooldays to a local boy who reported: "Basil distinctly remembers disliking history, waiting to prove his teacher wrong at every possible opportunity."

Basil Brown's thirst for knowledge apparently started at an early age. He talked about how his interest in astronomy started at

the age of five, saying “my grandfather was interested in it and I got hold of some of his old books and charts.” And a local resident recorded that “Right from his childhood Basil’s interests have been archaeology and astronomy... he would often dig and dig and see what he could find and when it was too dark, he would watch the stars.” In typescript notes on his boyhood, Basil Brown describes how he grew up with stories of gold coins having been unearthed at Helmingham, where his father’s family came from. He wrote “my grandmother’s accounts of finds used to fan my boyhood coin collecting, exploring propensities etc. So perhaps on my several excursions along this route my imagination may have been a little gilt edged.”

After leaving school at the age of twelve or thirteen to help his father on the farm, Basil Brown continued his studies in his spare time. In one of his numerous notebooks Basil recorded this: “In 1907 I was given a diploma for my paper in which the questions answered were set by the editor of the Harmsworth Self Educator. This diploma was for geography, geology and astronomy.” Indeed, the survival of Basil’s diploma certificate in a bundle of his personal papers is testament to how proud he was to have achieved this level of education. The Harmsworth Self-Educator was an educational magazine series, published in forty-eight issues between 1905 and 1907. The emphasis was on practical subjects of use to the various professions. Basil was also known to be able to speak, or at least understand, several languages including Latin, Greek, and Spanish; all possibly learnt from the Harmsworth magazine issues.

Another indication of Basil Brown’s thirst for knowledge is an interesting, surviving set of scrapbooks kept by him, two of which date from the first few decades of the twentieth century, so when Basil was in his late teens and twenties. Newspaper and magazine cuttings in these volumes range in subject matter from countermarks on ancient coins, new astronomical discoveries, archaeological explorations (including the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun), postage stamps, aspects

of arable and livestock farming, flora and fauna (especially birds), through to weather phenomena and rare books. They show the sheer breadth of Basil’s interests.

Basil Brown told the newspapers that like other boys at the time, he had received private tutoring in addition to his day schooling. We know no more about the nature of this education, nor do we know who his tutor or tutors were, but even if he were not one of his formal tutors, the Revd. Edmund Farrer influenced Basil Brown’s passion for history and archaeology. Basil wrote of the various interesting talks he had with him. Farrer contributed regular articles on local and general history for “East Anglian Miscellany” which appeared in the *East Anglian Daily Times* from 1901, and cuttings of some of these appear pasted into Basil’s notebooks and scrapbooks.

Basil Brown continued to study many aspects of history and archaeology throughout his life, and he was never too proud to ask experts for their views on his latest discovery. He also cultivated a wide range of contacts, both local and further afield (with whom he corresponded by letter), seeking opinions and, in turn, offering his own thoughts. Basil was a man driven by a passion to unearth and explain the unknown, and it was clearly this, coupled with his gilt-edged imagination, that led to one of the greatest archaeological discoveries of all time.



Sarah Doig is an independent historical researcher, author, and speaker (www.ancestral-heritage.co.uk) who lives in Rickingham. She is currently researching and writing a book on Basil Brown, Rickingham’s most famous resident.



**PROCEEDINGS OF THE
SUTTON HOO SOCIETY
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
*5th March 2021***

The Sutton Hoo Society held its first ever “virtual” Annual General Meeting on Friday 5th March 2021. The proceedings took place online via Zoom, chaired by the Society’s President, Angela Care Evans FSA. There were 64 participants logged onto the Zoom call, including members from across the country, and in some cases family members were also in attendance.

The President opened the meeting and welcomed members. Chantal Thomas, Guiding Secretary, explained the Zoom protocols including important matters like use of the mute button and how to ask a question via the Chat function. Then the President reminded those present that it was the first AGM since the passing of our previous Chairman, Michael Argent and everyone was invited to pay their respects with a pause for a few minutes of silent reflection.

The Minutes of the 2020 AGM, available on the website www.suttonhoo.org, were adopted.

Elections for President and Committee Members

Bryony Abbott was re-elected to serve as Chair of the Society for a further year. Seven members of the committee indicated their willingness to continue and were re-elected. Members present used the Chat function on

Zoom to express their support and appreciation for the work of the committee in keeping the Society active during these difficult times. Dr Michael Barrett stood down from the committee and we thanked him for his service. The vacancy is on hold at present.

Extract from the Chair’s Report, (full version available on the website)

Bryony Abbott presented her report to members and reflected on a difficult year for everyone during which the Society has faced challenges. Thanks to the hard work of the committee and our adoption of new technology, we have kept going throughout this time. SAXON has continued to be published thanks to the efforts of the Editor, Caryl Dane, and our Facebook page has kept up to date with interesting snippets and links to articles of interest. It is a Members Only page so please do sign up and have your membership number to hand when you register.

As we heard from our President, Michael Argent was an excellent Chairman who loved to volunteer at Sutton Hoo. We are pleased that the National Trust has agreed to our request for a wooden bench near Tranmer House and Mike’s family will write the wording for an inscription to be carved in his memory. Sadly, we also lost two long serving Guides and members during the year, John Ireland, and Neil Montgomery, both very experienced at giving guided tours at Sutton Hoo and we sent condolences to their families.

There has been great interest in the Netflix film of *The Dig* starring Ralph Fiennes and we are seeing huge interest in the story of the 1939 Excavation and that all bodes well for the future of Anglo-Saxon archaeology. The Society is here for the long-term and thanks to the continued support and loyalty of our membership, we can carry out our Aims and Objectives. We are partners with the Ship’s Company in Woodbridge who are working on the reconstruction of the mound one ship and we have loaned two of the original rivets in our collection for scientific analysis. Early indications are that they are full of information

which we hope to share with members when the findings are published later this year. Finally, to sum up the past year, the Chair quoted a few words from an Anglo-Saxon poem, translated by Seamus Heaney: *“That passed over, this can too.”*

Treasurer’s Report on the Accounts, (available on the website) and Election of Auditor

The Treasurer, Steve Cant, announced that the Society’s Auditor, Mr Mike Woolgar, has approved the Accounts for the 2020 year. He reported that Mike is willing to continue as our independent examiner for another year, in line with Charity Commission requirements and this was agreed. The Treasurer then proceeded to comment on the Society’s financial position which had been impacted by the pandemic, most notably because under government regulations, the National Trust had to close the site. All our events were cancelled, including Guided Tours, our main source of income. On the plus side, there was no major expenditure during the year and commitments made to Grant funding for archaeology projects will be ring-fenced in the accounts until 2022.

That concluded the business of the AGM and it was time to welcome the speaker.

AGM Talk by Sarah E. Doig, BMus (Hons.), DipLib

“Basil Brown of Rickinghall: beyond Sutton Hoo.”

Sarah Doig, Local Historian, gave a most interesting presentation on her research into the diaries and oral history accounts of Basil Brown. Sarah is writing a book about Basil, to be published later this year and she has brought together a variety of detailed evidence that shines a new light on Basil before and after his time at Sutton Hoo. Sarah’s Talk included many photographs, some in private collections, and fascinating accounts based on oral history gathered by Jonathan Abson, a long-standing member of the Society, who recorded audio recollections of people who knew Basil. Sarah’s article about her revealing insights is published

elsewhere in this edition of SAXON.

Questions from the audience were taken, moderated by Chantal Thomas via the Zoom Chat function. The President thanked the speaker and members for participating in the Society’s successful first “virtual AGM” and the meeting closed at 20.45.



**Proceedings of The Sutton Hoo Society
Annual Basil Brown Memorial Lecture
2021**

**SUTTON HOO THE REAL 1939
STORY: A MODERN
ARCHAEOLOGIST’S VIEW**
**Guest speaker: Angus Wainwright,
Regional Archaeologist, National Trust**
*Saturday 8th May 2021 at 11am
via Zoom*

The Society’s flagship lecture would normally take place at the historic Riverside Theatre in Woodbridge. Last year it was cancelled because of Covid regulations and this year we moved with the times and held the meeting via Zoom. There were 52 members on the call, some from further afield who would not usually be able to attend, and some who listened to the lecture with family members. There were a few gremlins at work and Sutton Hoo Society President Angela Care Evans was not able to connect and delivered her opening remarks by mobile telephone.

Following widespread interest in the new Netflix film of John Preston’s 2007 book, *The Dig*, we were delighted to welcome Angus Wainwright who talked us through “Wainwright’s View of Sutton Hoo in 1939”. This was a treasure trove by Angus, offering his own personal interpretation of the excavations in 1938 and 1939 with great attention to detail and illustrated with rarely seen photographs and

images of the excavation and the key players involved. Angus gave the audience a fascinating insight into how archaeology transitioned from the Antiquarian age of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, developing new techniques and methodologies during the 1930's and 1940's. The Sutton Hoo discovery was a practical example of both approaches.

Angus posed some questions about what would have happened IF... What *if* it had been a wet summer? What *if* the site had been better protected from the ravages of the weather and WW2 tank practice on the mounds?! What *if* the excavation had access to laboratory conditions? What would have been found then? What *if* Charles Phillips had not arrived on the scene? What *if* the new generation of professional experts like the Piggotts had not been called in? Who would have recorded the excavation and produced the lovely drawings we can see today? These are all thought-provoking questions and were followed up by members during the Question-and-Answer session, moderated by Chantal Thomas, Guiding Secretary.

Bryony Abbott, Chair of the Society, standing in for Angela Care Evans, thanked the speaker on behalf of the President and congratulated Angus for his excellent presentation. Members agreed and submitted their compliments via the Chat function on Zoom.

Angus emailed following the Lecture to say: "It was interesting to research all the characters involved and I feel there is even more to find out about the background. As ever it was great to talk to Society members as they always have such interesting and searching questions." Hopefully, next year we will be able to meet in person once again and invite members of the public to join us.



*Bryony Abbott, Chair the Sutton Hoo Society,
May 2021*

HOLD THE DATE: Saturday May 7th 2022 with guest speaker Tom Williams of the British Museum. More details will be available in our January newsletter.

Statement by The Sutton Hoo Society and Entry in the Book of Condolences for His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, May 2021

As Chair of The Sutton Hoo Society, I would like to express our sincere condolences to the Royal Family and pay tribute to His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, who was our Patron and first President of the Society.

Professor Martin Carver, Director of the Sutton Hoo Research Project and Emeritus Professor of Archaeology at the University of York, recalls the occasion in 1987 when His Royal Highness visited Suffolk and came to see the Sutton Hoo excavation site for himself.

"We were fortunate to have Prince Philip as our first President in those early years. His Royal Highness was a most rewarding guest and

Prince Philip's visit to Sutton Hoo in 1987 Original photograph by Nigel Macbeth. ©National Trust



gave us excellent advice. His visit to Sutton Hoo enabled us to link seventh century kingship with royalty today in a way that raised finer feelings of the bigger history.

I am sad he did not live to see our reconstruction of the Ship being launched, I feel he would have enjoyed that.”

We thank Prince Philip for his enthusiasm and support to the Sutton Hoo Society for six years as our President and for all his achievements on behalf of others, throughout his lifetime.

Bryony Abbott FRSA Chair The Sutton Hoo Society

This statement was also submitted to Suffolk County Council and we received the following reply: “*Thank you for sharing your message of condolence with us.*” ❖



Prince Philip's visit to Sutton Hoo in 1987 Original photographs by Nigel Macbeth.

© National Trust

**A proposed new appearance for the
iron stand from Sutton Hoo**
by Rowan Taylor

The Iron stand was excavated in 1939 during the original excavation of the Sutton Hoo mound 1 burial. Since its discovery, the stand has been a difficult object to interpret with regards to its appearance and function. Degradation during its period of inhumation has made its original form difficult to define and the fact that it is an object currently without equivalent in the archaeological record compounds this problem.

Several separate renditions of the object's appearance were made between 1940 and 1970, However, none were considered satisfactory. Then, during the early 1970s, the stand was re-examined as part of the in-depth analysis of the finds from Sutton Hoo, with the drawing of the current representation being released in 1972 and Bruce-Mitford's analysis of the object being published in 1978. The 1972 reconstruction was to be a conservative one and left-out certain features which were considered ambiguous at the time.

Those include copper alloy plating on the surviving strut, which descends from the grille. A layer of copper-alloy corrosion was noted by C.W. Phillips and Bruce-Mitford. However, this was considered to be cross-contamination and the majority was removed during conservation of the stand. However, some photography shows copper alloy corrosion still extant on the strut and X-Radiography may show portions of the original plating still present, complete with residual porosity from the plating process. On the "elbow" of the strut, a small fragmentary iron ring survives, brazed into place and which may have been used as a suspension device or for retaining guy lines.

The 1972 reproduction also shows the lower cruciform plate as having been the base to which the struts attached. While the base of the strut and the cruciform plate do not currently

align, an explanation is given that the plate has dropped down the shaft and rotated through 120 degrees. However, evidence points to the plate still being in its original location: The shaft of the stand is twisted through 45 degrees just below the plate, possibly to create a step for the plate to sit on. The expansion of corrosion (7 or 8 times the original volume of iron) would also not have allowed the plate to drop to its current location by the time it had become disconnected from the struts. The lack of braze-plating on the plate also suggests that it was unrelated to the struts.

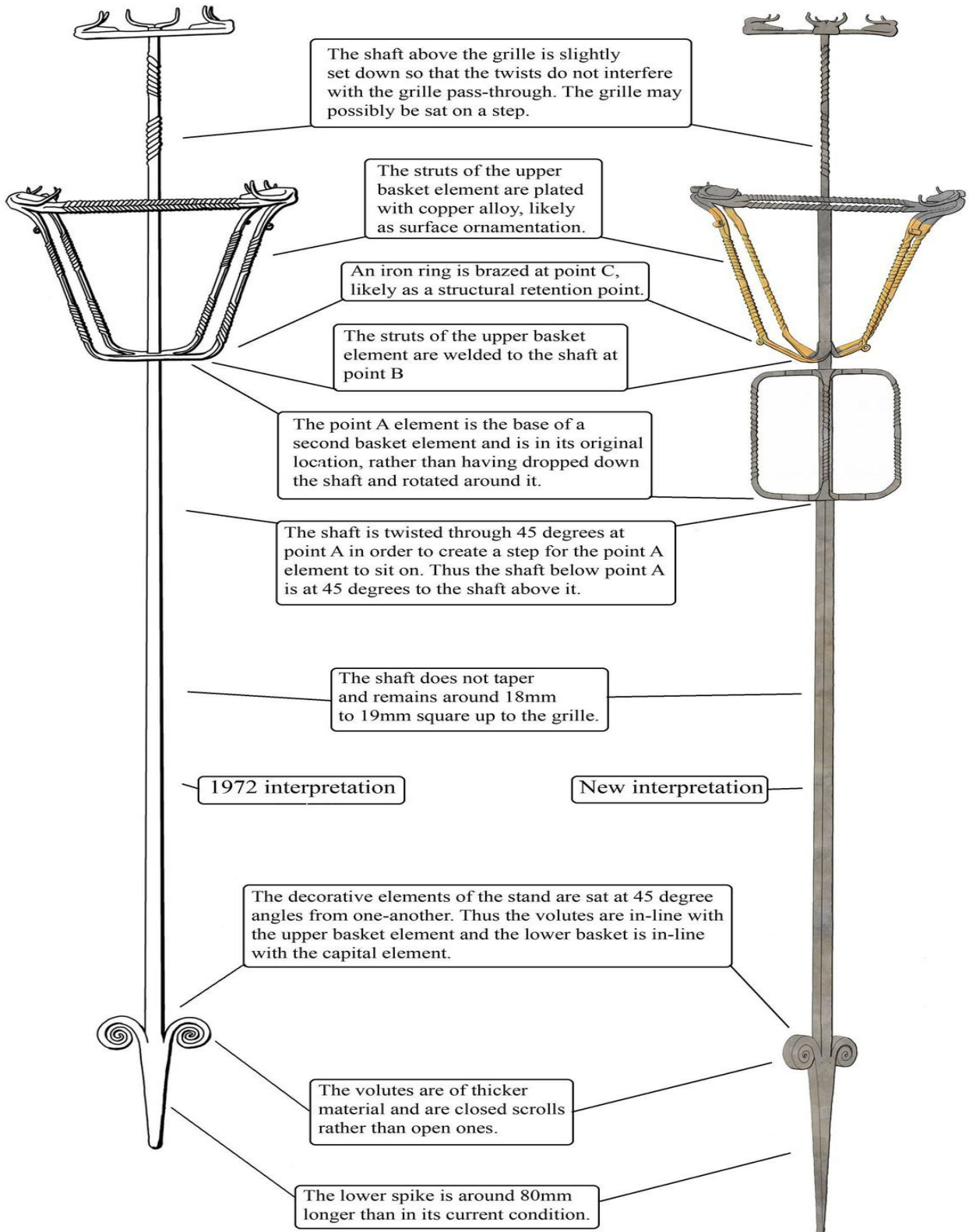
A bulge on the shaft of the stand, located around two-thirds of the way up the shaft is clearly discernible in photography and X-radiography of the stand. This is a solid feature and recognised as such by C.W. Phillips and R Bruce-Mitford. While not included in the 1972 reconstruction, this swelling may represent the remains of a fireweld in that location and may be where the struts descending from the grille were actually affixed to the shaft.

Furthermore, a form of corrosion called crevice corrosion, which occurs in pass-through fixings, is visible above the plate as well as below the fireweld, indicating that two pass-through fixings were present. Given that the lower plate has four struts of its own, two being forged-out and two being forge-welded, it may be the case that the lower plate represents the remains of a basket element of its own, separate from the upper basket element formed downwards of the grille.

While this research has not attempted to interpret the function of the object, it may be that updating knowledge of its construction and appearance will contribute to a better understanding of its purpose. This research is currently being prepared for publication.



Main differences between the 1972 interpretation and the proposed new interpretation.





Wuffing Education Online

Study-Days

Wuffing Education Online offers Study-Days on the history, archaeology, landscape, languages, literature, and art of Eastern England, Britain, Ireland, Scandinavia, and Europe.

Wuffing Education Online will be back in the autumn term.

Study-days planned so far for the autumn include

Viking Age East Anglia;

The Battle of Stamford Bridge (25th September 1066);

Gothic Language & Legend;

St Edmund and the Last of the Wuffings; and

an anniversary special on the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun;

plus, more from Professor Michelle Brown and Edward Martin.

Dates and details of these events and more will be announced in due course on Eventbrite via

www.wuffingeducation.co.uk

STOP PRESS: Rendlesham Revealed are offering a private tour to the Sutton Hoo Society - probably early next year. Details to be confirmed.

THE SUTTON HOO SOCIETY

Registered Charity no. 293097

www.suttonhoo.org

President

Dr Angela Care Evans

Research Director

Professor Martin Carver

Chair

Bryony Abbott

Treasurer

Steve Cant

Secretary

Sue Moss

Membership Secretary

Marc Brewster
22 Deben Road
COLCHESTER
Essex
CO4 3UZ

membership@suttonhoo.org

Events Co-ordinator

Kate Hayhow

Guiding

Chantel Thomas

Committee

Nigel Maslin

SAXON Editor/ Design & Layout

Dr Caryl Dane

lycraviking@gmail.com

Printing

Leiston Press

<https://www.leistonpress.com>