

# SAXON

## FORGOTTEN WOMEN OF SUTTON HOO I. The Copinger-Hill twins

*By Eric Houlder*



*A 1968 picture of the twins besides a section on the North East quadrant of the mound. Their skill with sections is easily apparent. © Eric Houlder LRPS, courtesy Dr R Bruce-Mitford & the Trustees of the British Museum.*

In the past I have written articles on skilled photographers who recorded the Sutton Barbara Wagstaff and Mercie Lack, the two Hoo Ship in colour; some of the first colour

photographs in British archaeology. Here I want to draw attention to two of the other women who uniquely worked at Sutton Hoo, from 1939 to 1970.

When Joan and I joined the site in July 1967, we were introduced to Rhoisia and Bridget Copinger-Hill, the identical twin ladies who had been friends of Mrs Pretty. They were skilled excavators in their own right, with a particular expertise with sections. Sections, or profiles as trans-Atlantic archaeologists call them, are vertical cuts which exhibit the stratification at various points on a site. Needless to say, the archaeologist has to be able to read the section, and before this, it must be prepared by someone who has experience of stratification, and the skills to emphasise the strata or layers without falsification. Rhoisia and Bridget had the latter skills in abundance, and they could only have learned them at Sutton Hoo, from Charles Phillips or one of his professional colleagues.

During the 1968 and 1969 seasons, the twins were allocated to my team. I quickly built up a great respect for their skills, as well as a friendship. Joan and I were lucky to be invited to their home on at least one occasion 'for coffee,' a euphemism for a bath. Our friends, Peter Rooley and his fiancée – later wife – Barbara Stevenson were also invited. We made the journey to Park House, Saxmundham, in our Morris Oxford estate car behind the twins' Jaguar. In spite of its staid appearance and 1.6-litre engine, the Oxford was not challenged in performance as we soon realised that the Jag was rarely driven above third gear!

Park House had two bathrooms, although as Peter and I eventually discovered, only one hot water tank. The water was barely tepid after Joan and Barbara had bathed. This was no hardship compared to the luxury of being clean, or the effort of bathing in a washing-up bowl, the alternative.

Following the ablutions, we were treated to coffee and biscuits, and it was during this stage of the evening that we were treated to some of the gossip of the 1939 season. Here we realised that not only did Rhoisia and Bridget

know Edith Pretty, but that they had moved in the same - somewhat elevated - social circles. They had also participated in the dig, though none of the books, papers and articles actually mentioned them. This was typical of the misogynistic pre-war era, and indeed that unfortunate attitude was only just beginning to crumble in the more enlightened 'sixties.

Towards the end of the evening, they intimated that they needed advice. Peter and I were supervisors, so fairly high in the site pecking-order, but sufficiently close to them to be confided in. At this point, they produced a shoebox whose base was covered thickly in cotton wool. Resting upon this base were half a dozen or so clenched nails, or rivets, as we colloquially referred to them on site. At this point, I was desperate to go to the car and bring in my camera, a Minolta SR1v, and my electronic flash unit – a Sunpak 7S. However, nothing was more likely to destroy the rather furtive and secretive atmosphere than flashes, so I remained sitting whilst they related the tale:

At the end of the '39 dig, Basil Brown remained in Mrs Pretty's employ to finish off certain jobs, including digging out and constructing an Anderson Shelter, and protecting and covering the remains of the ship for the duration of the expected war. For the latter task, Brown proposed to cover the ship with grass sods and turves, but he realised that more labour would be needed. The twins volunteered to circulate a message to local churches the following Sunday, asking people to go to Sutton Hoo House after the service to pull up sods and fill the trench. This was done, though the announcement of the Declaration of War perhaps reduced the number of volunteers; Rhoisia and Bridget did not comment on this. It was whilst undertaking this final task that they 'recovered' the clenched nails. Now, they were worried that their possession of the rivets for 29 years would mark them out as criminals. What should they do?

We assured them that their action would be viewed as conservation rather than theft and that the best thing to do was to pass them to Paul Ashbee, our site director. Whether they did so,

we never discovered. Ever since that evening, this is a picture that I deeply regret not taking. We moved on to other sites following the closure of Sutton Hoo and sadly lost touch with Rhoisia and Bridget.

By the late 1990s, Joan and I had retired, and I was teaching a number of WEA archaeology classes. Sutton Hoo was a popular subject in the classes and two of the students were a Church of England vicar and his wife. One evening, they produced a clipping from a recent issue of *Church Times*. It was written by Ronald Blythe, the famous Suffolk author and clergyman. The article, one of a standing series *Word from Wormingford*, was an affectionate look at the Copinger-Hill twins and their participation at Sutton Hoo. It was clear that neither was still alive at this time. I immediately obtained his address from the Editor and forwarded a number of my photographs of Rhoisia and Bridget. He responded with a handwritten letter. Later, after the development of digital photography and printing I sent more and again received a proper letter.

It is fitting that these lovely ladies be remembered, and hopefully, some local researcher will be able to use this brief article to find out more and publish it. That is the least that Rhoisia and Bridget Copinger-Hill deserve.



### New discoveries of Suffolk's Anglo-Saxon past unearthed in the Deben Valley

Archaeological excavation near Rendlesham is adding to Suffolk's rich history, with archaeologists uncovering evidence of settlement and community 1,400 years ago at the time of the earliest East Anglian kings.

The discoveries have come as part of the community archaeology project Rendlesham

Revealed: Anglo-Saxon Life in South-East Suffolk, run by Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service and funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, who awarded a grant of £517,300 for the four-year project.



*Children from Rendlesham Primary School excavating and finding artefacts.*

© Suffolk County Council

Summer 2021 saw the first season of archaeological excavation, which uncovered the remains of buildings and pits over a wide area indicating an extensive settlement whose inhabitants were engaged in farming and craft

working. Evidence that helps build up a picture of everyday life over 14 centuries ago includes:

- bones from butchered cattle, sheep and pigs, indicating the types of livestock that were kept and the meat that was eaten.
- items associated with spinning and weaving, including spindle whorls and loomweights.
- melted metal fragments and slag which indicate iron smithing and the manufacture of copper-alloy objects.
- pottery vessels for cooking and storage.
- items of dress, including a copper-alloy brooch and buckle.

Soil samples were also taken which will give evidence of crop farming and the local environment of the past.



*Young people from Suffolk Family Carers excavating the cellar of an Anglo-Saxon hut.*  
© Suffolk County Council

Discoveries of other periods of history were also made:

- field boundary ditches and pits pointing to agriculture and activity in the Bronze Age.
- a settlement enclosure of the Iron Age.
- a First World War training

trench, probably dug by a battalion of the Territorial Force in 1914 or early 1915.



*Young person from Suffolk Family Carers finding Anglo-Saxon pottery.*  
© Suffolk County Council

The excavation was undertaken by local volunteers under the guidance of a small expert team co-ordinated by Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service and staff from the Suffolk Office of Cotswold Archaeology. More than 150 volunteers from the local community contributed to the summer's fieldwork, including from Suffolk Family Carers, Suffolk Mind and the local Rendlesham and Eyke primary schools.

Professor Christopher Scull, the project's principal academic advisor (Honorary Visiting Professor at University College London and University of Cardiff), said:

“1,400 years ago, south-east Suffolk was the power centre of the East Anglian

kingdom, which covered modern day Suffolk and Norfolk. At Rendlesham, there was a royal settlement which flourished for 300 years from the 5th to the 8th centuries.



*Fragment of decorated Anglo-Saxon pottery excavated from an Anglo-Saxon hut.*

© Suffolk County Council

“Our first season of excavation has unravelled some of the complexities of this internationally-significant site, and given us important insights into the lives of the people whose farming and craft

skills supported the early rulers of the East Anglian kingdom.

“We have had a terrific team of volunteers and partners this year, and could not have hoped for better results. Together we have taken a big step towards a better understanding of this place and its landscape contexts, and we all look forward to continuing the journey of discovery next year when we will be investigating different areas and aspects of the settlement.”

Not only is the project providing a better understanding of the significant role Suffolk played in the country’s history, but is working with local charities to improve the mental health and wellbeing of their clients.



*Suffolk Mind volunteers excavating and taking environmental samples from the cellar of an Anglo-Saxon hut. © Suffolk County Council*

Jon Neal, CEO of Suffolk Mind said:

“Our clients have really benefitted from being involved with the archaeological fieldwork, getting hands on, being outdoors and learning something new. This has had a positive impact on their mental health, helping our clients to see life from a different perspective and improving their self-awareness beyond their diagnosis.

“Being part of such an important

archaeological project has been a wonderful and unique experience for our clients, and we look forward to continuing to work with the Rendlesham Revealed project.”



*Finding a fragment of Anglo-Saxon glass.*  
© Suffolk County Council

Councillor Richard Rout, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Environment at Suffolk County Council, said:



*Children from Rendlesham Primary School excavating the cellar of an Anglo-Saxon hut.*  
© Suffolk County Council

place. This has been a hugely successful first year for the project, I look forward to next summer and the new discoveries we’ll make!”

This season’s fieldwork at Rendlesham is now over and the excavations have been backfilled. Work has begun on analysis of the finds with provisional results expected in Spring 2022.

The next season of archaeological fieldwork will take place in Summer 2022 and local people will again be able to sign up and volunteer

To find out more about the Rendlesham Revealed project visit [heritage.suffolk.gov.uk/rendlesham](https://heritage.suffolk.gov.uk/rendlesham)

*Volunteer excavating the cellar of an Anglo-Saxon hut.* © Suffolk County Council



“The archaeology at Rendlesham is hugely significant and I’m so pleased that we have been able to work with local communities and charities. Not only are we understanding more about Suffolk’s history, but we are able to support people by providing new experiences which are benefitting their mental health and wellbeing.

“This wouldn’t have been possible without the co-operation of the landowners and the farmers who manage and work this historic landscape, so I thank them for supporting the project and generously allowing the fieldwork to take



*Volunteers sorting, marking and bagging artefacts excavated from the site.* © Suffolk County Council



*Children from Rendlesham Primary School washing the artefacts excavated from the site.*

© Suffolk County Council



*Children from Rendlesham Primary School fieldwalking with Professor Tom Williamson.*

© Suffolk County Council



Please nominate 'Cookham' for the 'Best Archaeological Project' in the annual Current Archaeology Awards. It's the only Anglo-Saxon project in the line-up.

The link for voting is here and nominations close on 7 Feb next year:

<https://archaeology.co.uk/vote>

And if you need a reminder of what was discovered, you can hear Dr Gabor Thomas talking to Time Team here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBhKqzUW1L4>

## THE SUTTON HOO SOCIETY

Registered Charity no. 293097

[www.suttonhoo.org](http://www.suttonhoo.org)

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### **Wuffing Education Online**

*Study-Days on Sutton Hoo and related studies in the archaeology, history, languages, literature, art, and landscape of Britain, Ireland, Scandinavia, and Europe.*

**Saturday 15th January: Sutton Hoo and the Ostrogoths -  
with Dr Sam Newton FSA;**

**Saturday 22nd January: Life and Death in the Bronze Age - with Edward  
Martin FSA;**

**Friday 28th January: Raising the Dead: The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon  
Death and Burial - with Dr Richard Hoggett FSA MCIfA;**

**Saturday 5th February: The Archaeology of Late Iron Age and Roman  
Colchester - with Howard Brooks FSA;**

**Friday 11th February: The Old English Year - with Stephen Pollington;**

**Saturday 12th March: The Art of the Isles: Celtic, Pictish, Anglo-Saxon, and  
Viking-Age Visual Culture, Part 1, c. 500-900 - with Professor Michelle  
Brown FSA.**

For further details and bookings, please visit

<http://wuffinged.eventbrite.com>

[www.wuffingeducation.co.uk](http://www.wuffingeducation.co.uk)

### **Dates for the diary 2022**

**The Annual General Meeting of the Sutton Hoo Society will take place on Friday 4<sup>th</sup> March 2022 at 7pm.**

**The venue will be the Vista Suite, Ufford Park Hotel, Yarmouth Road, Melton IP12 1QW, or via Zoom, subject to government Covid-19 guidelines.**

Our speaker will be Professor Martin Carver, FSA, who recently took over the role of Chair of the Ship's Company based in Woodbridge.

Martin will be speaking about the reconstruction of the Sutton Hoo mound one ship, their progress and their forward plans, including river trials.

Tea and coffee on arrival.

**Basil Brown Lecture - Saturday 7th May – from 11am – speaker Tom Williams**

The venue is the Riverside Theatre, Quayside, Woodbridge, IP12 1BH.

This is the Society's public outreach event, further information in the New Year.