

The Pontefract connection



Part of a much larger group picture, this section conveniently shows five of the Sutton Hoo diggers in 1963, on a site which PontArc is still digging. L to R: Kevin Stubbs; Fred Morris; Terry Carney; Ken Wilson; Margaret (Peggy) Wilson.



The end of the Mound 1 ship in 1967: Don Lodge extreme right.

Last year's reunion of Sutton Hoo diggers from the 1960s made one of them, ERIC HOULDER, reflect how fleeting people's memories are: the subsequent feature in the *East Anglian Daily Times* showed how faulty memories could become over forty years. Here he puts the record straight on the group of '60s Sutton Hoo excavators who came from Pontefract on the eastern boundary of Yorkshire. Edith Pretty, incidentally, the owner of Sutton Hoo in 1939, came from Elland on the western edge of West Yorkshire.

The Pontefract connection with Sutton Hoo really begins in the late 1950s. Inspired by a WEA class in archaeology sponsored by Leeds University, a group of enthusiasts in Pontefract formed the Pontefract & District Archaeological Society (PontArch). The same thing was happening all over the country at this time, and much of the momentum came from the wonderful programmes the BBC was broadcasting at this time. The Pontefract group, however, was different in one particular: it attracted a charismatic pair of experienced archaeologists who had the knowledge, contacts, and sheer inspiration to empower a group of individuals to become really efficient excavators, both as a team and individually. As one of that group, and moreover the only one who has remained seriously involved in archaeology to the present day, I want to set down the background to our involvement at Sutton Hoo.

Ken & Peggy Wilson

The Pontefract group had its own dig, St John's Priory, which was advertised each year in the *CBA Calendar of Excavations*. In 1959, one of the respondees was Kenneth Wilson, Schools Museum Officer at the Abbey House Museum in Leeds. Ken had had a varied career since his birth

in Hull, including service as a regular in the Royal Navy, war experience aboard *HMS Rodney* and other vessels, and teacher training. (It was only later that we discovered that Ken was a published war poet with a national reputation. He was also one of the eye-witnesses to the loss of the airship R38.) During regular excavation work during the summer vacations after the war, he was lucky enough to be a joint discoverer of the St Ninian's Isle Treasure. A brilliant raconteur, the evenings spent in local pubs were enlivened by Ken's tales of his adventures both in the war and in the trenches. These tales encouraged a few of us to subscribe to the *CBA Calendar* and participate in other digs. This was easier for those of us in full time education either as students or teachers, for most 'serious' digs took place during the academic summer holidays.

By total coincidence, another respondee to the *CBA Calendar* that summer was Margaret (Peggy) Markham White. Peggy had a privileged background, her father being important in the diplomatic service. Whilst she was young, her family had been posted to the Falkland Isles where Peggy learned many useful skills including how to strip down and re-assemble a Lee Enfield rifle. Following education at Roedean

she became an actress under her maiden name of Margaret Dean. Peggy was also an excellent raconteur, telling, amongst other tales, the one of her tea-date with J. B. Priestley. Her skills with the Lee Enfield had been put to use in the early days of the Home Guard, after which she became involved in the supply of clothing to bombed-out civilians – a vital but largely unrecognised role.

After the war Peggy came into archaeology, and her top-level contacts enabled her to move into the higher echelons. This is not the place to describe the very small world of post-war archaeology, suffice to say that fewer than one thousand people were involved, largely in the academic summer holidays. It was inevitable that Ken and Peggy would be drawn together, and they set up home in Ilkley, from where they began a programme of re-invigorating Yorkshire archaeology. As part of the plan, they organised small-scale digs using the very best of current methodology; someone once remarked, "Peggy out-Wheelered Mortimer

Wheeler himself." Whilst true, the couple were also aware of the developing trend towards open area excavation, and this eventually became the cause of the rift that developed between them and the Ashbees in 1967/8.

Their position at Sutton Hoo was always somewhat anomalous. Many of us believed at the time that Ken was actually Deputy Director (with Peggy in the background – a position she preferred), though in many ways Richmal Ashbee also fulfilled that role.

As someone who remained friendly with both parties, I am in a good position to describe what happened. It must be said that Paul never regarded their parting of the ways as a rift, more as a difference of opinion. Basically, Peggy felt that the Sutton Hoo site should be dug as an open area excavation with recording in metric, following the new trend being pioneered by the emerging younger archaeologists like Barry Cunliffe and Peter Addyman. (Peter, a friend and contemporary of mine, is currently President of the Pontefract & District Archaeological Society, and recalls working as a supervisor for Paul long before Sutton Hoo.) Paul, on the other hand, felt that as Basil Brown and Charles Phillips had begun the dig as a series of boxes using Imperial measurements, it made sense that it should continue as such. My opinion, for what it is worth, was with Paul. Thus, Ken and Peggy were absent from Sutton Hoo for the 1969 and subsequent seasons.

Fred Morris and Don Lodge

During the autumn and winter of 1966-7, I was directing a small-scale dig on a Roman road at Ilkley for the Yorkshire Archaeological Society. Amongst the workers were Don Lodge and Fred Morris, both members of the Pontefract group. Following each meeting of PontArch (as it is called today) we active diggers gathered in the New Inn – now long demolished – to analyse the lecture and catch up on the gossip. It was here, under conditions of strict secrecy, that we heard about the proposed new work at Sutton Hoo from Ken & Peggy. Amongst those invited to participate were Don, Fred, myself and Joan, Terry Carney, and Kevin Stubbs.

Fred was of the older generation. He had taken part in the ill-fated Norwegian campaign of 1940, and as a result never spoke of his wartime experiences. He was a lorry driver by profession, working for one of the local liquorice manufacturers, Dunhill's. Fred was a type you rarely meet today, but common on the committees of local societies of all types then. He had only had an elementary education, but by dint of evening classes and much reading he had educated himself in both topography and archaeology.

Don was of the same generation, and indeed was a boyhood friend of my own father. His family owned a local building



Derek and Anne Thorpe outside their tent, probably on a Sunday, at the Five Winds campsite (photo: Derek W. Thorpe; other photos, Eric Houlder LRPS).

firm so that he served an apprenticeship as a bricklayer and stonemason. In 1939 he proved unfit for the forces, and joined the fire service, with which he served in, amongst other blitzed towns, Coventry and later the York Baedeker Raid. He is the foreground fireman damping down in York station in the picture seen in many history books of the Second World War. Like Fred he had educated himself and was a founder member of PontArch. Don eventually became President of PontArch, and died shortly after visiting Sutton Hoo with a group of my students in about 1985.

By the time we found out about the 1967 season at Sutton Hoo, some of us had made holiday arrangements which could not be altered. Thus, whilst Don, Terry and Kevin accompanied us to Sutton Hoo, Fred was unable to come, though he and Don spent a fortnight each in the subsequent 1968 and 1969 seasons. This was their entire annual holiday entitlement, and the minimum time which Paul allowed anyone to stay on the site. It should be said that this condition was quite normal as most directors felt that it took a week to become familiar with local soils etc., so that only the second week became archaeologically productive.

Derek & Ann Thorpe

When Paul asked me to supervise a quarter of the site in the 1968 season, he asked me if any other PontArch members should be asked. I suggested Derek and Ann Thorpe. Derek was (and is) a skilled photographer, having undertaken the

photography on a number of the Wilson's sites. As they only had a fortnight paid holiday per year from Derek's work in engineering, the pair came on the same conditions as Fred Morris and Don Lodge. Naturally, they timed their stay to coincide with that of the latter two, and made a point of going around together on Sundays and in the evenings. Shortly after Sutton Hoo Derek and Ann started their family, and dropped out of PontArch and archaeology in general.

Kevin Stubbs

Kevin was a founder member, with Terry Carney, of the junior section of PontArch. At the time of Sutton Hoo he was a trainee teacher, and attended Paul Ashbee's annual Whitsuntide dig on the Scilly Isles. He only dug at Sutton Hoo in 1967.

Terry Carney

Terry was another member of PontArch who joined the excavation circuit, digging with the Ashbees on Scilly, and supervising at Sutton Hoo followed by a similar job at Mucking. All this was done in his vacations from university and for a few years afterwards. Staying in the area of Mucking, Terry eventually obtained a post in the museum at Thurrock, working his way up the hierarchy until he retired quite recently.

Eric & Joan Houlder

As a founder member of PontArch, I was heavily involved with both society and the Wilsons' digs from 1957 onwards.

Joan and I married in 1963 and from then onwards she came with me on various excavations chosen from the *CBA Calendar of Excavations*. Among them were West Stowe and those along the (then) new M4 motorway. I too specialised in site photography, though my oeuvre was colour rather than monochrome. Around the time we were digging at Sutton Hoo I was experimenting with the newly available polarising filters which clarified soil sections in some lighting conditions.

Outside archaeology, I taught history in a mixed school, and Joan was head of geography at a large girls' school. Naturally my work involved much archaeology, and included some of the earliest excavation work undertaken by school pupils.

During our involvement at Sutton Hoo, where I ended up being supervisor in charge of half the site, I was offered a similar post on a ship excavation in Scandinavia, and had to make a decision on whether to stay in teaching or strike out as a professional archaeologist. After much heart-searching I chose teaching, though archaeology played an increasingly important role in this; one of the last such involvements was working with sixth form pupils on an Anglo-Saxon cemetery.

Following early retirement because of ill health, I went back into professional archaeology as chief photographer to the Wood Hall Archaeological Trust. I was also involved with photographing the Towton Battlefield skeletons, and shortly afterwards was asked to participate as photographer/supervisor on the St Aiden's Sunken Ships Project; we won the Pitt Rivers Award for this with special commendation of the photography.

PontArch survives as a small town society with an average of a hundred members in most years. However, those heady days of the late 1960s were probably the last occasions when skilled amateurs could participate in supervisory roles on a dig of international importance. Each time I speak on Sutton Hoo, I remember those times with affection, pride and rather too much nostalgia.



Eric and Joan Houlder outside our tent on the Wood Hall campsite, one Sunday in 1968.