

OBITUARY

BASIL BROWN

BASIL BROWN of Rickingham, an honorary member of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology since 1937, died on 12 March 1977. He made a niche for himself in archaeological history as the discoverer and initial excavator of the great 7th-century Anglo-Saxon royal ship burial at Sutton Hoo, the most important single find ever made in this country, and one of outstanding European importance.

The son of a tenant-farmer, Brown ran a small-holding which proved unsuccessful, and in 1935 turned to casual excavation for the Ipswich Museum as a livelihood. It was in this way that he came to be recommended to Mrs Pretty when she consulted the Ipswich Museum about her wish to investigate a group of barrows on her estate at Sutton Hoo. As a field worker Brown was self-taught but he combined a keen eye with great familiarity with local soils and a good deal of experience. He began archaeological investigations, it is said, at the age of five.

Having encountered the remains of a clinker-built boat at Sutton Hoo in 1938, and knowing Hele's description of the excavation of the ship-burial at Snape in 1862, Brown recognized the first rivet of the bow of the goft ship for what it was as soon as it was uncovered. As no wood survived he was in effect dealing with a ghost ship, defined chiefly by its rivets which remained in position. It is entirely due to Brown's judicious initial approach to the mound and his restraint in not disturbing any of these rusted iron lumps, but in following their alignments, and in refraining from over-cleaning exposed surfaces, that it was in due course possible to obtain perfect visual records and recover much of the technical detail of a uniquely important vessel. Brown also exposed elements of the intact burial-deposit but left it undisturbed, handing the formidable task ahead over to C. W. Phillips.

Brown never published any of his archaeological work, his field notes and diaries being worked up for publication by the Ipswich Museum. A personal record survives however in the shape of his diary of his excavations at Sutton Hoo in 1938 and of the early stages of the excavation of the ship-burial in 1939. This is published, with a photograph of Brown, in my *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology* (1974). Besides being informative and entertaining, it is a very human and touching document; it makes very good reading.

He made a mark also in a quite different field, that of amateur astronomy. His only instrument was a 2-inch telescope, but the good reception which greeted his various astronomical papers led him to publish in 1932, with the aid of his friend H. E. Waddilove, *Astronomical Atlases, Maps and Charts*, a work sufficiently in demand to be reprinted in 1966, and one which the publishers then described as 'filling an inexplicable gap in the literature'.

The complete countryman, Brown spoke with a strong Norfolk accent, and was a modest man filled with a captivating enthusiasm for his chosen interests, to which he was dedicated. He also showed much courage and independence of spirit in facing the difficulties that often confronted him. His services to archaeology were recognized in the award to him of a Civil List pension in 1968. His widow survives him.

R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford

A shorter version of this obituary appeared in The Times of 23 March, 1977