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## PEGGY PIGGOTT: WOMEN AND BRITISH ARCHAEOLOGY (1930–1945)

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*Summary.* *The 2021 film, The Dig, stimulated much interest in discovering more about Peggy Piggott, the archaeologist who first ‘struck gold’ at Sutton Hoo. Piggott was a leading British prehistorian, who produced over sixty published works for the field. Here we examine her early life and career; her training with the Curwens and the Wheelers, her marriage to Stuart Piggott, and her recognized expertise that led to her joining the Sutton Hoo team in 1939. During WWII, she established the modern standard for barrow excavation, and in 1944 was recognized by the Society of Antiquaries for her ‘devotion to the study of archaeology’. Piggott provides a lens through which we consider the careers of 1930s women archaeologists – those factors enabling access to archaeology (class, wartime opportunity) and factors that limited progress (lack of a degree, marriage).*

### INTRODUCTION

Peggy Piggott was given a prominent role in the 2007 novel, *The Dig*, based on the Sutton Hoo excavations, and written by her nephew, journalist [John Preston](#). Sadly, Preston did not know his aunt, and the novel plays down Peggy’s professional experience, instead creating her as a girlish character, although 27 at the time, whilst Stuart, two years older, is portrayed as her teacher ([Roberts 2015](#); [Preston 2021](#)). Remaining faithful to the novel, the film adaptation saw actress [Lily James](#) play Peggy as a ‘ditzzy’ character. This, alongside the erasure of other Sutton Hoo women, provoked disappointment, as expressed in the media ([Carr 2021](#); [Connor 2021a](#); [2021b](#); [Crumlish 2021](#); [Davies and Pope 2021a](#); [2021b](#); [Morrison 2021](#); [Simpson 2021](#); [Wallis 2021](#); [Wragg Sykes 2021](#)). For those working on the history of archaeology, the issue was the under-researched nature of the ideas – a back-projection of modern notions of historical sexism, rather than a more positive portrayal of women’s active participation in the field during the 1930s, though the character of Piggott was uniquely well-placed to tell that story. Instead, women’s professional expertise was further downplayed. The defence, that it was a fictional adaptation and so it does not matter, is inadequate in the light of the late twentieth-century exclusion of women’s earlier contributions (e.g. [Trigger 1989](#); [Renfrew and Bahn 1991](#), 17–40; [Murray 1999](#)) which continued into the early twenty-first century (e.g. [Stout 2008](#)). Analysis by [Prtak \(2019, 15\)](#) reveals

that Trigger (1989) and Murray (1999) list just 2% and 3% of ‘important’ archaeologists as women, respectively – something that we know now not to have been representative.

To uncover a less fictional understanding of Peggy Piggott, and provide insight into the role of women in 1930s archaeology, we explore her early life and archaeological training with Dr Eliot Curwen, his son Eliot Cecil Curwen, and Mortimer and Tessa Wheeler. As a young woman, Peggy Preston had worked on a number of leading excavations (Neolithic Avebury, Whitehawk Camp, The Trundle and Maiden Castle hillforts, Roman Verulamium) and was one of the best trained archaeologists in Britain. The present paper reveals a falling out with Mortimer ‘Rik’ Wheeler following Tessa’s death and prior to her marriage to Stuart Piggott and considers her career beyond marriage – her work on Bronze Age landscapes in Dorset, Hampshire, Wiltshire and Berkshire, on the Prehistoric Society’s first excavation at Little Woodbury, at Sutton Hoo, and finally her war-time contribution and recognition. Peggy’s later career is discussed in a companion paper (Pope and Davies *in press*).

We then consider those factors aiding and limiting women’s participation in early twentieth-century archaeology. With reference to the Wheelers, it has been thought difficult to separate out the work of archaeological couples (Champion 1998, 190–1; Roberts 2005, 210). This is less difficult with the Piggotts: in this paper we identify Peggy’s own contribution. In reintegrating women into our disciplinary history, how we approach the task is important. This project began with the provision of a short biography around key figures (Champion 1998), progressing quickly to longer biographical works (Smith 2009; Carr 2012) alongside a move towards greater understanding of social context and synthesis (Roberts 2005; Pope 2011). In 2013, the establishment of Trowelblazers began to consider women’s scholarly networks, with work on applied method on this by Prtak (2019). Now, the archival project *Beyond Notability* is analysing new material for the period 1870–1939 (Harloe *et al.* 2023). The aim of the present paper is to employ the life of Peggy Piggott as a lens, through which to further examine women’s relationship with mid-twentieth-century archaeology.

#### EARLY LIFE

Peggy Piggott was born Cecily Margaret Preston, in Beckenham, Kent on 5 August 1912, to Elsie Mary Fidgeon and Arthur Gurney Preston (‘Cecily Margaret Preston’ 1912<sup>1</sup>). Born into considerable wealth, her maternal grandfather was a bank manager of independent means, and her paternal grandfather ran the Preston family business, J. Stone and Co., a flourishing metalworking and engineering company to the shipping industry, established by his father in Deptford in 1842. Peggy’s father, a Cambridge-educated electrical engineer, worked as a Director of the company (Allen 2018). Peggy’s parents were married in 1909, her father aged 35 and her mother just 20, with Peggy’s eldest sister Gabrielle Mary born in December of that year (Allen 2018).

Peggy was the second of four children. Her younger siblings, Pamela and Dennis, were born in 1915 and 1916. The Prestons’ first family home was Wood Lodge, and subsequently Monks Orchard, in West Wickham, in the London borough of Bromley, on the line of a Roman road out of the city. Following the birth of her fourth child, and after eight years of marriage, her 28-year-old

<sup>1</sup> As on her birth certificate.

mother ‘ran away’ from the family home, when Peggy was just five. 1918 brought divorce, and on completion in spring 1920, Peggy’s mother married the divorce’s co-respondent, Surgeon Capt. Percival James Bodington, Medical Officer to the Royal Horse Guards (Allen 2018). On Friday 13 August that year, Peggy’s father, aged 46 and already retired, was witnessed running into the sea in Cornwall, where he drowned. The Coroner recorded a case of accidental death.

At the time of her father’s death, Peggy was eight, and her younger siblings just four and five. Arthur had appointed his brother, Edwin Mumford Preston, executor and guardian, with the children brought up by their aunt (Allen 2018). Peggy’s father left an estate worth £188,229, equivalent now to several million pounds, to be held in trust for his children, equally, and inherited at 25, or upon a daughter’s marriage (Allen 2018). From the industrial successes of the Preston family, Peggy was to inherit the equivalent of a £2¼ million fortune. Despite a tumultuous early childhood, Peggy seems in later life remarkably well-adjusted, suggesting perhaps that her later childhood may have helped to compensate for matters. As a child, she is recorded as having had a keen interest in Roman coins, a hobby that ultimately brought her into the orbit of Mortimer Wheeler, who set her on the path to field archaeology, by introducing her to the Curwens (*The Times* 1994; Mercer 1998, 425).

#### WOMEN AND EDUCATION IN 1930

Peggy Preston turned 18 in 1930. At the time, there were no formal options open in their complete form to young women wishing to study European Prehistory in England. Those institutions allowing women degrees centred on Egyptology and Classical Archaeology – e.g. London (women’s degrees from 1878, Egyptology established 1892) and Liverpool (women’s degrees from 1880, Egyptology and Classical Archaeology established 1904). Women’s access to British universities had already peaked at the end of the 1920s (reaching 28% of all undergraduates) as Victorian mothers encouraged their Edwardian daughters to attend (Dyhouse 2006, 35, 44). Access to the arts at Edinburgh saw equal enrolment in the late 1920s-early 1930s (Fig. 1b). For the inter-war period, roughly half of young women were opting for Humanities subjects, although many middle-class women were attracted to the natural sciences, particularly biology, botany and zoology, especially those with ‘vocational ambitions’ (Fig. 1a; Dyhouse 2006, fig. 2.1), a trend previously identified for inter-war archaeology (Pope 2011, 67–8).

For Peggy in 1930 then, whilst Scotland and Wales saw women students at 32% and 33% respectively, England languished at 25% (Dyhouse 2006). The epicentre of English resistance to women’s higher education was the University of Cambridge (Pope 2011, 67–9) – which was also the primary location for 1920s Prehistory teaching, under Miles Burkitt and J.M. (Toti) de Navarro. In 1921, Cambridge had seen a mob of male students attack Newnham College, at the proposal that women be allowed their degree on an equal basis to the men, rather than receiving only a titular degree, the BA Tit. (McWilliams-Tullberg 1998, 165). There followed the imposition of artificial quotas for women: 1:10 at Cambridge from 1922, and 1:6 at Oxford from 1927 (Dyhouse 2006, 84–6).<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Garrod was training out of Newnham in the 1930s, but the focus was a diploma in earlier prehistory (Seton-Williams 1988, 26). Cambridge, although Peggy’s father’s University,

<sup>2</sup> Cambridge only improved its ratio to 1:5 in 1946. Oxford removed it in 1957, Cambridge in 1960 (Dyhouse 2006, 84–6). The latter act leading Lord Renfrew to claim post-war archaeology an era of ‘democratisation’ (see Pope 2011).



FIGURE 1

a) Women and men’s ‘vocational ambitions’ regarding higher education in inter-war Britain,  $n = 523$  (source: Dyhouse 2006, 36); b) Faculty of Arts student numbers at Edinburgh 1927–1946 (source: Ralston 2009, table 3).

may not have seemed particularly welcoming, imposing on women scholars the humiliation of the tit. degree until 1948 (see Pope 2011).

The only course in later prehistory available to Peggy in 1930 would have entailed a move to Edinburgh. Edinburgh had offered women’s degrees from 1894, slightly later than at London and Liverpool, with Vere Gordon Childe the first Chair in European Prehistory from 1927. There was no

full Honours Archaeology syllabus, however, and most students completed a three-year MA Ordinary degree, within which archaeology could be studied. Extraordinarily, however, Margaret Crichton Mitchell (later Stewart) completed a PhD under Childe in 1934 (Ralston 2009, 54, 65). By that year, Bill and Joan Varley were offering training in Prehistory fieldwork at the University of Liverpool, with a mixed-sex team, but from Bill's role in the Geography Department, not the Institute of Archaeology (Pope *et al.* forthcoming).

In the mid-1930s, as economic depression took hold, women's access to higher education in Britain stagnated at one in four university students until as late as 1968, with greater access only gained temporarily during WWII (Dyhouse 2006, 35, 82; Fig. 1b).<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the Wheelers were actively recruiting young women to prehistory (Seton-Williams 1988, 25). In 1934, the Wheelers' new London Institute of Archaeology offered only a Diploma in European Prehistory (Seton-Williams 1988, 24; Roberts 2005, 194). In 1939, Garrod was made Disney Professor at Cambridge, but not until the later 1940s was the study of European Prehistory established more widely (Oxford, Exeter, Liverpool, London). Garrod established the first Archaeology degree in 1948, the same year that Cambridge finally allowed full degrees to women (Smith 2009). Peggy then, as a later prehistorian, and despite having a Cambridge-educated father, was at a peculiar disadvantage in 1930. Without moving to Scotland, her only option was Newnham. Her family's wealth meant perhaps that she, or they, did not see the need for a degree.

#### FIELDWORK (THE CURWENS AND THE WHEELERS)

Instead, as an 18-year-old, she opted for training in the field, volunteering on the Curwens' 1928–1930 excavations of The Trundle hillfort in Sussex. In 1932, she joined the Royal Archaeological Institute and in 1933, excavated with Tessa Verney Wheeler at Verulamium, spending her 21st birthday under canvas (*The Times* 1994; Mercer 1998, 425; Thornton 2022). With women in equal numbers at least on the Wheeler excavations, it was there that she met Mary Kitson Clark and Joan du Plat Taylor, who would become lifelong friends (Roberts 2005, 204, 236). Following Verulamium, Peggy joined the Wheelers' Maiden Castle excavations in Dorset in 1934, where she met Veronica Seton-Williams (Roberts 2005, 239). Both were particularly fond of Verney Wheeler, speaking of her with great affection in later life, Peggy dedicating her first volume on ancient glass-beads to Tessa 'in grateful memory' (Seton-Williams 1988, 30, 54; Roberts 2005, 211; J. Price *pers. comm.* 2016). Peggy, one of this new generation of young 1930s women archaeologists, clearly regarded Verney Wheeler as a role model.

In autumn 1935, Dr Curwen asked Wheeler for four of his young team to help on the road-scheme rescue excavation of Neolithic Whitehawk Camp in Sussex (Seton-Williams 1988, 32). This association between Wheeler and Curwen was presumably how Peggy first began digging at The Trundle. At Whitehawk, Peggy was given responsibility in the excavation, and was involved too in the finds work – she was photographed working on the ceramics with E. Cecil Curwen (Curwen 1936, 61; Fig. 2). At just 23, she was described as 'an expert' in the *Brighton Herald*, which included a photograph of her reassembling a pot (Fig. 3). Amidst a popular debate in the press about the apparent 'waste' in educating women (Dyhouse 2006, 88), we also see Miss L. [Leslie]

<sup>3</sup> Representative access to an archaeology degree for women was achieved nationally by 1975; with equal access to postgraduate study achieved by that same cohort in 1978 before immediately falling away again, only to recover fully by 1989 (Rocks-Macqueen 2015).



FIGURE 2

Peggy Piggott with E. Cecil Curwen in 1935, working on the Whitehawk Camp ceramics (reproduced courtesy of the School of Archaeology, University of Oxford).

Scott highlighted as ‘a valued leader’, revealing that by 1935 there was some public appetite for highlighting women in leadership roles, and that both the Wheelers and the Curwens had a part in promoting this.

Following five weeks at Whitehawk, Peggy enrolled on the diploma in Western European Prehistory at University College London, under Mortimer Wheeler (Roberts 2005, 194). Like the Wheelers’ excavations, the course had equal numbers of male and female students (Roberts 2005, 204). Whilst studying, Peggy shared a flat with Egyptologist Peggy Drower, with whom she had shared a tent at Verulamium (Roberts 2005, 236). That winter, Peggy, a fluent German speaker, visited German and Belgian museums with fellow student Veronica Seton-Williams, and Peggy’s younger sister Pamela (Seton-Williams 1988, 25; Roberts 2005, 235). Having already met the ‘intensely shy’ Stuart Piggott at the Curwens’ Trundle excavations five years earlier, Peggy now found herself studying alongside him at London, and the two became close friends (Mercer 1996). Also studying that year were Molly Cotton and Dorothy Marshall (Seton-Williams 1988, 25).

Whilst Peggy was studying with Wheeler, Verney Wheeler died, in April 1936, aged just 43. Wheeler’s extra-marital affairs were no secret, something Peggy had managed to avoid (Roberts 2005, 211, 239). With Tessa’s death, ‘the magic was gone’ and Peggy split with the



FIGURE 3

Newspaper clipping (*Brighton Herald*, November 1935) showing 'Miss Preston' reassembling the ceramics (after Robertson 2021).

London School, instead attending Alexander Keiller's 1936 Avebury excavations with Stuart (Seton-Williams 1988, 55; Hegener 1992, 10). Despite spending two seasons digging at Maiden Castle in 1934 and 1935, Peggy was omitted from the site report's personnel (Wheeler and Cotton 1943). In later life, Peggy was 'candid about her distaste and contempt' for Wheeler, suggesting that he took credit for Tessa's work (Roberts 2005, 211), as stated too by Beatrice de Cardi, who also dug at Maiden Castle, and with whom Peggy worked during WWII. Seton-Williams (1988) confirmed Tessa as field director, with Rik a more hands-off project director (see especially Prtak 2019, 70 ff.). Following the 1936 season, Seton-Williams also left the Maiden Castle excavations, after 'difficult to work with' Wheeler had dismissed her observations on rampart construction. She instead joined Liverpool's John Garstang (Seton-Williams 1988, 22, 55). Stuart also disliked Wheeler, as evident in his poem 'To REMW' – a study on Wheeler's narcissism (McArdle and McArdle 2021). Wheeler certainly omitted the names of his three women co-directors from the Maiden Castle site-report cover (Prtak 2019, 71–2). The result was that Peggy was always keen to see her contribution credited.

## MARRIAGE TO STUART PIGGOTT

Following Avebury, Peggy and Stuart were married, on 12 November 1936, enabling Peggy to inherit. Her aunts and uncles, however, did not approve, a result perhaps of Stuart's association with the by-then twice-divorced Keiller; the pair honeymooned at his Avebury Manor (Mercer 1998, 425; McArdle and McArdle 2021; M. Hegener *pers. comm.* 2021). The Piggotts moved to Priors Farm, Rockbourne, near Fordingbridge, Hampshire, which they set about improving (Allen 2018; Thornton 2022). In this 1936–37 'honeymoon phase', Peggy and Stuart worked to record the henges and stone circles of Dorset (Piggott and Piggott 1939). The Dorset plans are signed with their entwined initials – the 'C' central in hers, the 'S' central in his. Similarly, Stuart's poems 'An epistle to Peggy, Christmas 1938' and 'Marlborough Revisited' of March 1967, argue against a 'lavender' marriage, although in later life Peggy confirmed it was never consummated (M. Hegener *pers. comm.* 2021; see McArdle and McArdle 2021). There was nonetheless a deep affection, which it was felt the 2021 film had misrepresented. By this marriage, and in gaining her inheritance, Peggy was more able to access archaeology outside the usual system of dependent patronage (e.g. Molly Cotton and Wheeler, Seton-Williams and Garstang). In moving beyond the London School, her work returned instead to her training with E.C. Curwen, to Early Iron Age ceramics.

## BARROWS (LATCH FARM, CRICHEL AND LAUNCESTON DOWNS)

Having trained on major Neolithic sites, Iron Age hillforts and a Roman town, Peggy turned the first years of her career instead towards the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age periods (for discussion on the notion of an archaeological 'career' for women in early-mid twentieth-century Britain, see Prtak 2019, 81–3). Peggy began by writing up the ceramics from Wilfrid Seaby's rescue excavation of an Early Iron Age site at Southcote (Berkshire), publishing in the new *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* (Piggott and Seaby 1937). That year, at the request of archaeologist John Calkin, she directed her first rescue excavation, at the age of 25, of a Bronze Age barrow and urnfield cemetery at Latch Farm (Hampshire). The Latch Farm excavations saw Peggy highlighted in her role as director on the *Christchurch Times*'s front page: 'Mrs Stuart Piggott, who is in charge



of the excavations'; and the Latch Farm team even became the subject of a painting (Figs. 4 and 5). For a public already inspired by the Maiden Castle excavations, a woman directing operations was not entirely remarkable. Dorothy Liddell, for example, had directed the Hembury hillfort (Devon) excavations between 1930–35, receiving lots of public interest (see Pope *et al.* 2020, fig. 15).

The Latch Farm site report was published in the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, the year following excavations (Piggott 1938a). This model excavation report reveals Peggy's cutting-edge excavation strategy (notably beyond Grinsell 1936) – with Wheeler's influence clear in the illustrations, and exemplary digging on display in the high-quality field photography (Fig. 6). It was primarily on the strength of this report that Peggy was invited to Sutton Hoo (below). Her gazetteer of cremation urns was a significant contribution to Bronze Age studies, providing distribution maps of different types across central southern England. The same year saw her publication of the ceramics from Iron Age Theale in Berkshire, with a note too on Late Bronze Age urns from Swindon in Wiltshire (Piggott 1938b; 1938c). As Latch Farm came out, Peggy, with husband Stuart, went on to excavate a further eighteen Bronze Age barrows on Crichel and Launceston Downs (Dorset), this time for the Government, the work noted as having been under the 'joint supervision' of the couple (Piggott and Piggott 1944, 47; Mercer 1998, 426). At 26, married, and becoming established as a leading prehistorian, Peggy had her portrait painted by Paris-trained artist Frank Griffith – a portrait capturing her confidence, over a personal modesty more usually on display (Fig. 7).

#### PREHISTORIC SETTLEMENT (LITTLE WOODBURY, RAM'S HILL)

In 1938–39, Peggy joined The Prehistoric Society's flagship research excavation, at the Early Iron Age type-site of Little Woodbury in Wiltshire (Bersu 1940). Bersu (1940, 110–11) acknowledges her 'active assistance' throughout the excavation, and her 'advice and help' with the publication. By this point in her career, although still just 26, she had worked with some of Britain's best excavators, and had begun her own programme of research into Bronze Age landscapes. With and without Stuart, at the time of Little Woodbury, she had directed five research projects. At Little Woodbury, her director was Gerhard Bersu, a German archaeologist, engaged by O.G.S. Crawford, specifically to enhance British excavation techniques in Iron Age settlement architecture. This was a result of Wheeler's continued belief in the out-dated notion of the pit-dwelling (Wheeler and Cotton 1943, 52; Evans 1989). In contrast to Scottish Prehistory and 1920s Wiltshire and Sussex Bronze Age settlement studies, Iron Age studies were behind the curve on recognizing domestic timber architecture, as a result of their focus on hillfort earthworks (see Evans 1989; Pope 2003, 5–10). Important here was Peggy's training with the Curwens at The Trundle, where timber posts were understood by the early 1930s (Ralston 2003, 13). Of note too, is that it was Peggy who went on to resolve Bersu's somewhat confused thinking on roundhouse architecture (Evans 1998; Pope 2003, 9–12; Ralston 2003, 17–19). Peggy's contribution to the Little Woodbury excavations, as for Sutton Hoo, has not been previously recognized.

In the two years that Peggy was working at Little Woodbury, she and Stuart were also invited by the Newbury Field Club, again 'jointly in charge' to excavate sixteen sections across the hilltop enclosure of Ram's Hill (Berkshire) to determine the site's Middle Bronze Age origins, and subsequent occupation in the Late Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman periods: the resolution of an important multi-period site was achieved in just four weeks, published the following year



FIGURE 4  
Latch Farm: Peggy in the *Christchurch Times* (2<sup>nd</sup> October 1937).



FIGURE 5

Painting of the 1937 Latch Farm excavations, on display at the Red House Museum – Peggy on right, sister Pamela Preston (middle) and Mary Eily de Putron (left) with John Brailsford and Peter Fitzgerald Moore (Photograph © Miles Russell).

(Piggott and Piggott 1940). In 1939, Peggy also published two sites with John Bernard Calkin: Neolithic Corfe Mullen, and a second Early Iron Age ceramics assemblage, of over 1000 sherds, from Langton Matravers in Dorset (Calkin and Piggott 1939a; 1939b). In this we see her building on the ceramics work of Maud Cunnington (1923) at All Canning's Cross, and her mentor, E.C. Curwen, at the Caburn and Trundle hillforts (Curwen and Curwen 1927; Curwen 1929; 1931). This renewed interest in Early Iron Age ceramics was presumably inspired by the work at Little Woodbury.

#### SUTTON HOO

The above provides the background to Peggy's invitation to excavate at Sutton Hoo in 1939. At 27 years old – having already excavated with the Curwens, the Wheelers, Keiller, and the Bersus on major Neolithic, Iron Age, and Roman period sites, having directed rescue

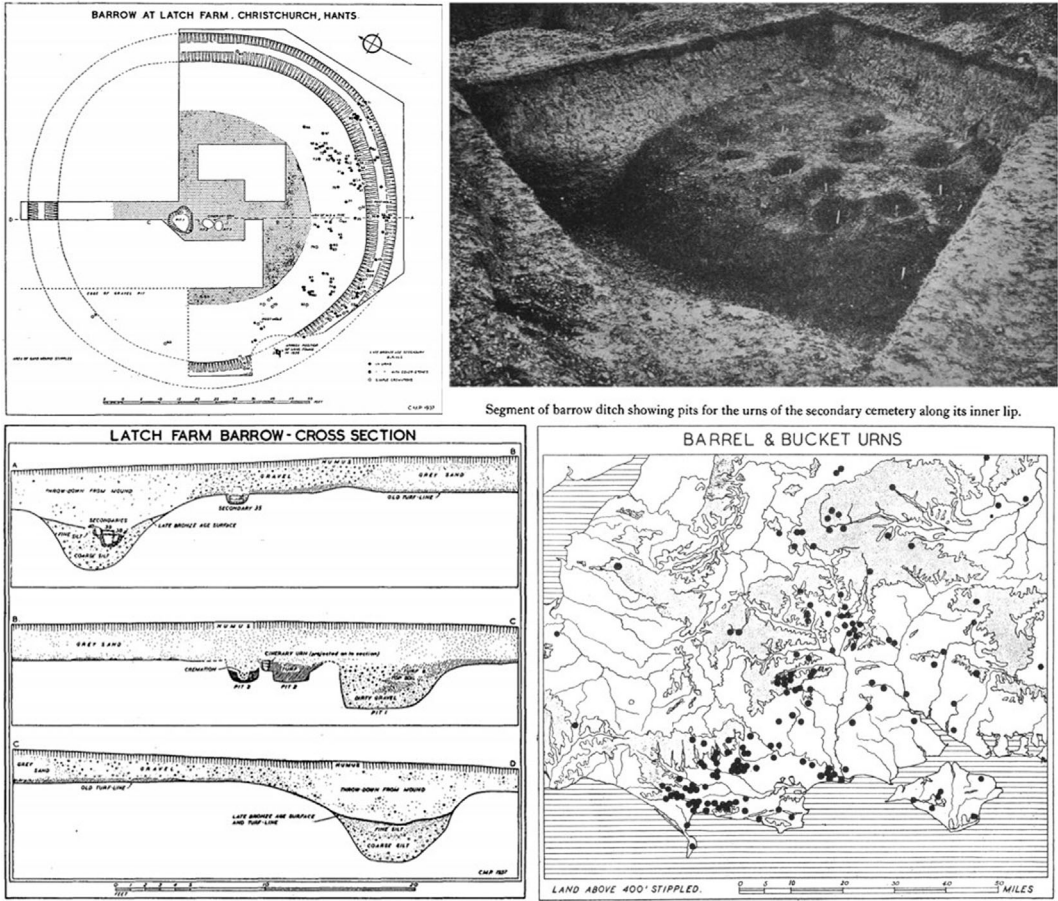


FIGURE 6

Peggy’s 1937 Latch Farm excavations: catching the secondary interments.

excavations, including some for HM Government, on Bronze Age barrow cemeteries, as well as having resolved, with Stuart, the sequence of a multi-period hilltop enclosure at Ram’s Hill – Peggy was recognized within the wider field as a particularly skilled excavator, at a time when British archaeology was establishing itself as a modern, scientific discipline. It was this expertise in archaeological fieldwork that led to Peggy being a leading protagonist in the Sutton Hoo ship-burial excavations. Charles Phillips wanted the very best excavators available, to join Basil Brown for the task that faced the site in 1939: to locate and excavate the burial chamber.

Phillips knew that both Peggy and Stuart were ‘exceptionally well informed’ on barrow excavation. The previous year alone, the Piggotts had excavated eighteen round barrows. Stuart was a recognized expert on Neolithic long barrows, and at Latch Farm, Peggy had demonstrated her keen ability to catch secondary interments in excavation: what Phillips called ‘verticalities’ in the barrow (see Fig. 6b). This was something he hoped would help to locate the dimensions of the burial chamber at Sutton Hoo. In addition, Peggy was also considered ‘an excellent photographer’ by Phillips, for her Latch Farm site photographs (Phillips 1987, 74). It was Peggy’s



FIGURE 7

Portrait of Peggy Piggott (c. 1938) by artist Frank Griffith (1889–1979) (© Wiltshire Museum).

skills as an excavator, however, that were clearly the main draw (Table 1). Peggy was also well-respected within the field more generally by this time. By May 1938, she had been invited to sit on the Royal Archaeological Institute (RAI) council (1938–41), and on the Executive Committee from June 1939–44, serving alongside Joan Evans (Thornton 2022). This was mid-way between Rose Graham becoming the first woman to sit on RAI Council in 1928, and Joan Evans, having been elected Vice President in 1946, being the first female President of the RAI between 1948–1951 (Evans 1949). Perhaps interesting to note is that all of Peggy’s recorded participation in discussions at RAI meetings were during wartime, between 1943–1945, after Stuart was posted to India (see Thornton 2022).

By contrast, in John Preston’s novel, Peggy is unknown to Phillips, something that even a cursory read of Phillips’ (1987) autobiography would have corrected. In the novel, Phillips invites

TABLE 1  
Peggy's 'curriculum vitae' on joining the 1939 Sutton Hoo excavations

	Site	County	Director	Period
1930-35	The Trundle	Sussex	The Curwens	Early Iron Age
	Whitehawk Camp			Neolithic
	Verulamium	Hertfordshire	Tessa Verney Wheeler	Roman
1936-37	Maiden Castle	Dorset		Middle Iron Age
	Avebury	Wiltshire	Alexander Keiller	Neolithic
	Henges and SCs	Dorset	Peggy & Stuart	Neolithic-Early Bronze Age
1938-39	Latch Farm	Hampshire	Peggy	Early-Middle Bronze Age
	Bronze Age enclosures	Wiltshire	Peggy & Owen Meyrick	Later Bronze Age
	Crichel & Launceston Downs	Dorset	Peggy & Stuart	Early Bronze Age
	Ram's Hill	Berkshire		Later Bronze Age-Roman
	Little Woodbury	Wiltshire	The Bersus	Early Iron Age
	Langton Matravers	Dorset	Peggy & J.B. Calkin	Early Iron Age
	Corfe Mullen			Neolithic
	Sutton Hoo	Suffolk	Charles Phillips	Anglo-Saxon

Peggy to Sutton Hoo as an adjunct to her husband, and primarily, in an astonishingly sexist trope, due to her womanly size (Preston 2007, 130). In fact, Phillips' autobiography reveals a clear professional respect for Peggy, both as skilled excavator and field-photographer. The two had worked together at Little Woodbury in 1938, and Phillips had assisted Peggy on her Dorset barrow excavations that same year. Further, the 1965 BBC documentary on Sutton Hoo credits Peggy as responsible for 'changing the whole character' of the excavation. Her involvement in the documentary was later recognized as having helped with public communication of the site (BBC 1965; *The Times* 1994). As one of the best excavators of her age, Piggott was the first to 'strike gold' at Sutton Hoo, not by chance, but because of her keen abilities as an excavator. In photographs of the Sutton Hoo excavations, Peggy appears to be in the process of digging a linear section through the ship fill, during which she located the gold belt-buckle (Fig. 7). Note however that in the 2007 novel, Stuart is cast as the excavator, with Peggy observing. Wearing a boiler-suit – rather than the film's fashionable playsuit – we see Peggy waiting patiently for Stuart to finish planning, so that she can commence digging (Fig. 8). The Piggotts' involvement was limited to the excavation itself (Bruce-Mitford 1972, Note 3) and Peggy seems not to have contributed to Phillips' (1940) write up, with full publication achieved much later (Bruce-Mitford 1975).

#### WWII: BEAULIEU HEATH AND RESOLVING THE BRONZE AGE

As WWII began, the Piggotts' early fieldwork on Dorset henges and stone circles appeared in *Antiquity* (1939) – a joint piece, with Peggy producing more of the plans. The same year, she published two further Dorset sites with J.B. Calkin (Calkin and Piggott 1939a; 1939b). The Piggotts' 1938–39 excavations at Ram's Hill (Berkshire) were published in *The Antiquaries Journal* (1940) with Stuart providing the plans, and Peggy analysing the finds. In the same year, she also provided a note on the Winklebury ceramics. It is clear from Peggy's work in the 1930s and early 1940s discussed above that she did not fit the 'archaeological wife' or 'helpmeet' template – in the sense of an unpaid research or administrative assistant to her husband's career agenda – their intellectual relationship, and their approach to archaeology, was clearly far more equitable.



FIGURE 8

Peggy Piggott excavating the gold belt-buckle at Sutton Hoo, observed by Stuart Piggott and W.F. Grimes; b) Peggy waiting for Stuart to finish planning so that she can commence digging/photography (© Trustees of the British Museum).

In the early war years, Peggy took a short break from fieldwork, to prioritize caring responsibilities. In 1939, she was living with her sister Pamela in Hampshire, before moving to Dorset to become guardian to her niece Susan, eldest child of her younger brother, Lt. Comm. Dennis Anthony Gurney Preston. Peggy looked after her niece ‘as if she were her own’ whilst working with evacuees (Mercer 1996; Roberts 2005, 212, 294; Allen 2018). Jacquetta Hawkes was also in Dorset in 1940, during the early months of the Blitz, before returning to London in early 1941 (Hawkes 1982, 213). WWII saw greater opportunity for women: Garrod was appointed Disney Professor at Cambridge in 1939, whilst Aileen Fox lectured at Cardiff between 1940–45, covering for Victor Nash-Williams, who had volunteered for military service (Fox 2000, 95–9; Quinnell 2006). From 1941, Garrod was stationed at Medmenham, Seton-Williams and du Plat Taylor were together at the Ministry of Information, and Jacquetta Hawkes was a civil servant for the War Cabinet (Hawkes 1982, 213; Seton-Williams 1988, 95). Meanwhile, Stuart was posted to the Intelligence Corps in 1941, and to India in 1942, with his good friend Glyn Daniel.

In the autumn and winter of 1941–42, building on her barrow excavations at Latch Farm and Cichel and Launceston Downs, Peggy directed her third major rescue excavation, again for the Ancient Monuments Department of the Ministry of Works, involving barrows in the New Forest (Hampshire), on sites commandeered for defence purposes (*pace* Roberts 2005, 212). Here she directed young men ‘inclined to be insubordinate’ during winter excavations (*The Times* 1994; NFNPA 2016). At Beaulieu Heath, Peggy’s excavation strategy was again designed for rapid

assessment, specifically to gain a section across the barrow and excavate the central deposit. This strategic acquisition of maximum information from minimum effort was by now a characteristic feature of Peggy's excavations. Notable young helpers on the New Forest dig were Leslie Grinsell, R.J.C. Atkinson and Beatrice de Cardi. Published in 1943, the report again reveals high-quality site photos and section drawings (Fig. 9; Piggott 1944). It was Peggy's 1941–42 New Forest excavations that inspired R.J.C. Atkinson's barrow excavation standard (Atkinson 1946, fig. 12). Although Peggy went uncredited by Atkinson, he reflects on his own poor digging at Beaulieu II (Atkinson 1946, 60) despite Peggy's gracious note on its resolution in the report. By the age of 30, Peggy's publications of Latch Farm and Beaulieu Heath had brought barrow excavation into the modern era.

In 1942, the year that Stuart was posted to India, and perhaps inspired by their Ram's Hill work, Peggy published on five Late Bronze Age 'cattle enclosures' and related linear ditches in Wiltshire. Branching out into agricultural landscapes, Peggy was gaining a grasp of later prehistory at a scale beyond that of a regional archaeologist – beginning to posit Middle-Late Bronze Age continuity and 'local invention' over Hawkes' invasionism, with the important resolution of the relative chronology between Bronze Age field systems and linear earthworks (Piggott 1942, 16). In 1943, returning to Dorset barrows, she published a further three, and in 1944–45, published joint fieldwork with Stuart on a barrow in Hampshire, and eighteen Dorset barrows for *Archaeologia* (Piggott 1943; Piggott and Piggott 1944; 1945). Peggy was published in four national journals. She clearly wanted all her Wessex fieldwork published, even producing a note on the section across the undated, probably late, earthworks from her New Forest excavations (Piggott 1945). By the end of the war, she had published almost 40 excavated barrows and six Bronze Age enclosures (see Pope

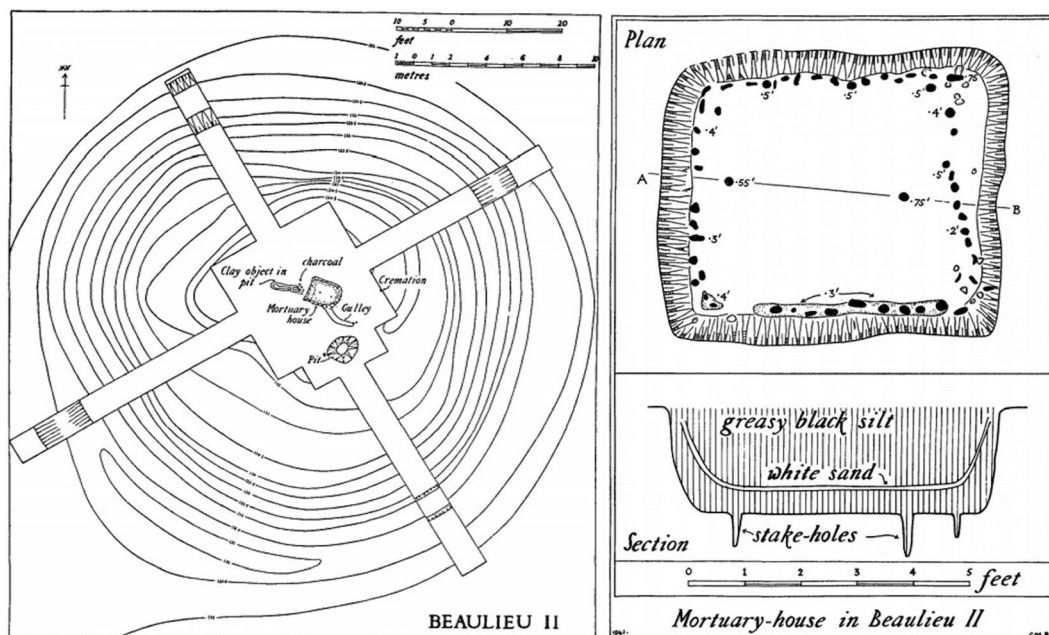


FIGURE 9

Excavation strategy on Peggy's 1941–42 New Forest excavations – the barrow worked on by R.J.C. Atkinson, who later established Peggy's strategy as the standard in his 1946 book.



and Davies *in press*, table 1). Inside this flurry of activity, there was a tendency to publish in national journals when the work was with her husband, and regional journals when it was her own. Despite the work being Peggy's research specialism and written by her, Stuart's name came first. One might even argue that she was purposefully building his career.

Peggy had learned from the very best fieldworkers of the 1930s, worked alongside talented peers like her husband and Phillips, and then welcomed younger archaeologists onto her own excavations. She was very much a collaborative worker, undertaking projects with Wilfrid Seaby (Berkshire), John Calkin (Dorset), Owen Meyrick (Wiltshire), and J.F. Head (Buckinghamshire). Her network covered most Wessex counties; she was well-known, and well-liked. Between 1938–44, she sat on the Council and Executive Committee of the Royal Archaeological Institute, giving her a voice, during the war, at the top of a major archaeological organization until retiring from the role under rotation in 1944. At this point she and Joan Evans were replaced on the Executive Committee by Jacquetta Hawkes and Kathleen Kenyon, as Stuart joined Council in 1945. Joan Evans was the first female President of the RAI between 1948–51 (Evans 1949), a role not held again by a woman for another 52 years, until 2003. Similarly, Caton-Thompson had seen the Prehistoric Society through WWII as its longest-serving President – after which it would be 59 years until another woman took that role, in 2005.

## LATE WAR YEARS: RECOGNITION AND OPPORTUNITY

In England and Wales, women's wartime contributions were recognized by a bid for equal education (Board of Education 1943, 23) as London University voted to open medical degrees on the basis of 'equal opportunity' (Dyhouse 2006, 85). 1944 saw the second woman FBA in Caton-Thompson, aged 56. Peggy saw recognition for her 'devotion to the study of archaeology' in 1944, at the age of 32, as she was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1946 (*PSAS* 1951, xxvi). Her FSA came just 16 years after the first ever election of a woman – Peggy's mentor Tessa Verney Wheeler, in 1928. Piggott was one of a 'select band' of nine women, largely wives of archaeologists, elected across 1943–44 (*The Times* 1994; Table 2). Although the majority were in their thirties, as is usual, we also see the inclusion of older women: of particular note is prehistorian Elsie Clifford, who had earlier been black-balled (Roberts 2005, 30; CT 2022). Peggy's 'blue paper' – her nomination paper for the Society of Antiquaries of London fellowship – provides a line-up of the great archaeologists

TABLE 2  
Women archaeologist FSAs elected in 1943–44 (Source: Kat Petersen)

	Dates	Age in 1944
Margaret Davies	b.1914–d.1982	30
K. Rachel Maxwell Hyslop (née Clay)	b.1914–d.2011	30
C. Margaret Piggott	b.1912–d.1994	32
Lady Aileen Fox	b.1907–d.2005	37
Barbara Parker-Mallowan	b.1908–d.1993	36
Audrey Grimes (formerly Williams)	b.1902–d.1978	42
Cecil L. Curle	b.1901–d.1987	43
Elsie Clifford	b.1885–d.1976	59

of the day and shows that she retained the support of mentors and peers, gaining the respect even of the great Harold St George Gray (Fig. 10). Notably absent is Wheeler, despite his having worked with Stuart during the war.

Towards the end of WWII, there is a sense that Peggy wanted to move on from barrows, turning instead to Late Bronze Age-Iron Age agricultural and settlement landscapes. Developing her pre-war work on the cattle-based Bronze Age landscapes of Wiltshire, Peggy produced a detailed study of the Grim's Ditch earthwork complex (Piggott 1944). She also returned to her early interest in Iron Age finds, helping to publish a Buckinghamshire Iron Age site excavated by J.F. Head, with W.F. Grimes providing the illustrations (Head and Piggott 1944). In 1944, she began looking towards Scotland, visiting the island of Colonsay with her friends the Maxwell-Hyslops. Here she lamented a neglect of the prehistory, most notably the Neolithic monuments and the many duns, which she promptly set about photographing, cataloguing and surveying. She returned to the islands, with Stuart, in 1945, where they assessed more sites together, including a chambered tomb. The bulk of the work here seems Peggy's, but again Stuart's name came first. This period interest was visibly picking up the work of Gordon Childe, with whom the couple were great friends (Green 1981, 74). In this, we perhaps see Peggy making a joint bid for the Abercromby Chair of Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh, as their good friend Vere Gordon Childe left Edinburgh in 1946 to take up the Directorship of the London Institute of Archaeology.

Regarding Peggy's wider family at this time, research by Allen (2018) has revealed that by 1946, Peggy's mother and her husband had moved to Chelsea, living with Peggy's sisters in the 'Gateways' development off Sloane Avenue, in a house recently valued at £2.5 million. Pamela had not married; Allen (2018) reports learning difficulties, which may explain Peggy's inclusion of Pamela in her early archaeological activities. Meanwhile, Peggy's elder sister, Gabrielle Sugden-Wilson, had married in 1937, but was soon estranged from her older husband. Gabrielle

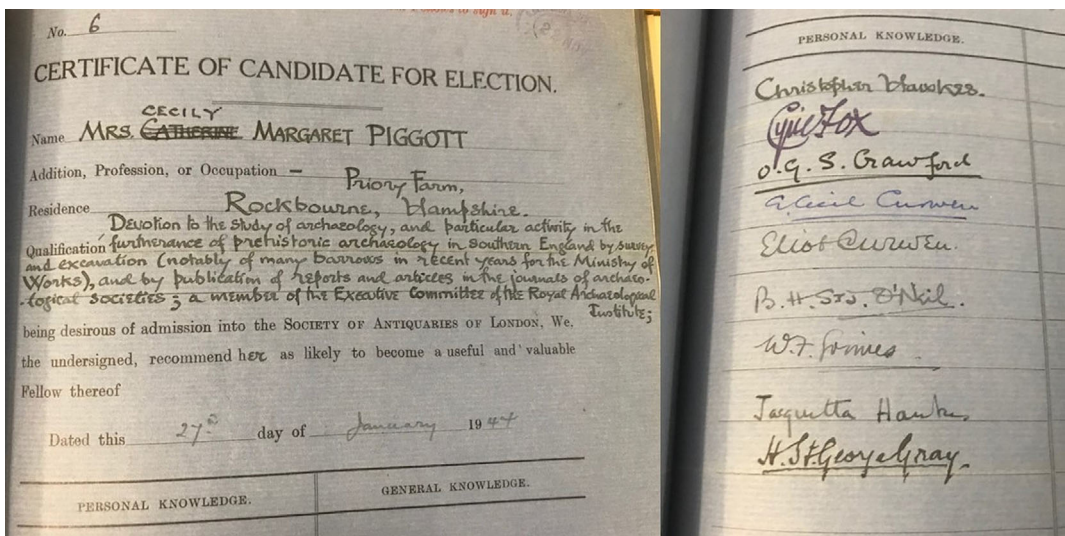


FIGURE 10

Peggy Piggott's 'blue paper' – Peggy's nomination for Society of Antiquaries of London Fellowship was sponsored by Christopher Hawkes, Cyril Fox, O.G.S Crawford, E. Cecil Curwen, Eliot Curwen, B.H. St. J. O'Neil, W.F. Grimes, Jacquetta Hawkes and H. St George Gray (reproduction courtesy of Society of Antiquaries).

had left Chelsea by 1948, and the following year their half-brother William J. Bodington moved in. By 1950, however, Allen (2018) finds Peggy's mother, then 61, living in a second Gateways house, separate to Pamela and William. With her family centred in post-war London, Peggy instead moved to Edinburgh, to begin her post-war career (see Pope and Davies *in press*).

## DISCUSSION: WOMEN AND ARCHAEOLOGY – PROGRESS AND BACKLASH

For a handful of 1880s–1920s women, limited professional opportunities existed, via the progressive Victorian forces of University College, London and Newnham College, Cambridge (see Pope 2011, 65–6). As a wealthy patron, Amelia Edwards (1831–92) had enabled women Egyptologists of the 1880s–1900s (Margaret Murray, Hilda Petrie, Gertrude Caton-Thompson). Of these, only Murray held a post (University College, 1898–1935) with Hilda Petrie gaining access via her marriage, Caton-Thompson through Newnham. In Edwardian Britain, women's careers were largely restricted to teaching, with marriage bars active by 1909, so that by 1914 it was recognized that women were having to choose between childlessness and a career (Dyhouse 1989, 77–8).

In 1915, an insightful comment comes from Professor Droop of the Liverpool Institute – who sought to make it clear that, whilst wives were acceptable on an excavation, women were not (Moorey 1992, 92). Progressive attitudes continued further north, however, as Newnham scholar Nora Chadwick lectured at St Andrews during WWI. Immediately following the war, the 1919 Sex-Disqualification Removal Act should have abolished the marriage bar for the professions. However, a strong social backlash – including the 1921 rioting of Cambridge male students, horrified at the prospect of women gaining the award of their degrees – saw a London marriage bar *introduced* in 1923, and remaining in operation until 1935 (Dyhouse 2006, 48–9, 79–80).

Despite this, scholars of Newnham, London and Edinburgh persisted and occasionally gained posts (e.g. Jocelyn Toynbee, 1924). The late 1920s were particularly progressive, as all women gained the vote, personhood in law, and equality in higher education peaked (Pope 2011, 67). Tessa Verney Wheeler, who had read history at London, gained a lecturing post at London Museum, and became the first woman FSA in 1928 (Carr 2012, 124–5, 139). Margaret Simpson, Childe's student, was appointed Assistant Inspector of Ancient Monuments to the Edinburgh Office of Works in 1930 (Breeze *et al.* 2019). Verney's contemporary, Dorothy Garrod, who had read history at Newnham, and with the patronage of respected French prehistorian, Abbé Breuil, received a lectureship at Cambridge (Smith 2009; Pope 2011, 67).

This was the background to Peggy joining archaeology in 1930. Despite the relatively violent Edwardian and early 1920s backlashes, the 'new young woman' of the 1930s was considered a character at odds with elder Victorian and Edwardian feminists. Confident, and uninterested in feminism, some believed she took her hard-won freedoms for granted (Alexander 1994, 204). When Peggy chose later prehistory in 1930, it was arguably already at the forefront of women's inclusion, having formed under formidable and well-respected women like Nina Layard, Maud Cunnington, and Dorothy Liddell. Then, out of a liberal tradition at University College London, came the Wheelers, and out of the progressive 1920s Scottish and Welsh higher education systems were Childe in Edinburgh, and the Varleys in Liverpool (Pope *et al.* *forthcoming*).

By the mid-1930s, in all three locations (London, Edinburgh, Liverpool) young men and women were gaining access to field training in British prehistory in equal numbers (Pope

*et al.* forthcoming). Meanwhile, despite the more conservative force of the University of Cambridge, women could access prehistory through Newnham. A combination of Victorian feminist and 1920s socialist effort had enabled access for young 1930s women of class, even if they did not always appreciate it. By the mid-1930s more generally, economic depression saw further social backlash against women in the professions (Dyhouse 2006, 41–3, 49). Nevertheless, the London Institute of Archaeology continued to invite women to give lectures between 1936–38 (e.g. Molly Crowfoot, Winifred Lamb, Elsie Clifford, Thalassa Cruso). Other women archaeologists, however, were more likely to find opportunities abroad (Midgley 1995, 264) – e.g. Kathleen Kenyon (1906–78), Veronica Seton-Williams (1910–92), Peggy Drower (1911–2012), Nancy Sandars (1914–2015) – especially in Egypt and the ancient Near East, courtesy of the Victorian tradition of women Egyptologists.

Despite the loss of the marriage bar in 1935 London, professional opportunities for (wealthy) women prehistorians of the London and Newnham schools did not advance in Britain until WWII. In 1939, Garrod gained the Cambridge Chair, whilst Margot Eates saw the London Museum through WWII, and Caton-Thompson led the Prehistoric Society (1939–46). Aileen Fox, who read English at Newnham, lectured at Cardiff (1940–45), with Kenyon acting Director at the London Institute (1942–46). In Wales, Audrey Williams became the first middle-class woman, with an Oxford English degree, to gain a post as Honorary Curator at Swansea, and Assistant Inspector of Ancient Monuments for the Ministry of Works (1941–44) (Bryan 2015). Meanwhile, Peggy worked for the Ministry of Works, the executive committee of the RAI, and gained recognition with an FSA. As society closed back down for women after WWII, however, Peggy turned her focus instead to her husband's career (Pope and Davies *in press*).

There was a cyclical pattern then to women accessing archaeology, amidst waves of wider social backlash. Since the 1860s, Victorian activism had worked to open up society, only for Edwardian 'marriage bars' to close it back down; WWII provided opportunity, and post-war society withdrew it, with a stronger trajectory not gaining traction until the late 1960s civil rights movements. London, Newnham and the early Scottish and Welsh education systems played particularly important roles. We see the role of class, how wealthy women found opportunities through antiquarianism, Empire, and war. The role too of sexuality and gender had a marked effect in that a minority of unmarried 'bluestockings' might be tolerated in the professions, but women at large, as wives and mothers, were not. We find that middle-class, and even working-class men (Wheeler, Hawkes, Piggott, Varley) progressed faster and further than upper-class women, and that whilst non-white archaeologists were involved in 1930s excavations (see Seton-Williams 1988, 22) they did not progress in the wider British society. This was the social environment that Peggy Piggott entered in 1930s archaeology.

#### CONCLUSION

To conclude, we find that the recent debacle surrounding a perceived undermining of Peggy Piggott's role at Sutton Hoo had more to tell us about modern, uninformed views on early twentieth-century women, *onto whom* we inaccurately back-projected a perception of historical sexism. It failed to reflect more of the historical reality of 1930s Britain, when young, wealthy women like Peggy Piggott had seen equal access to field archaeology, garnering both professional and public respect (Roberts 2005; Pope 2011; Prtak 2019, 52). The sad irony perhaps is that it was Peggy's own nephew who sought to diminish her professional role, just as she felt Rik had done to

Tessa – the very thing that she had been so keen to avoid. As such, the 2021 film, in failing to research more fully the characters of the novel, exists as somewhat of a missed opportunity. It is hoped that this article redresses the imbalance.

*Acknowledgements*

This paper is written for John Preston, in the hope to reveal how much his aunt was respected within her chosen field, and how she remains so to this day. Grateful thanks to Ken Allen, who developed our earlier research (Davies and Pope 2016) especially on Peggy's early life, Michiel Hegener for sharing his memories of Peggy, and to Elaine Pope for her unparalleled genealogical research. Thanks also to Amara Thornton and Becky Wragg Sykes for discussion, to Miles Russell (University of Southampton), Sally Crawford (University of Oxford), David Dawson (Wiltshire Museum), archivist Kat Petersen (Society of Antiquaries of London), Sue Brunning (British Museum), and Christchurch History Society for help in sourcing images.

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