

THE VIKING SHIP IN THE HAMBLE RIVER.

By C. FRED. FOX, F.S.A.

DOUBT has been expressed as to whether the timbers from the ancient wreck in the Hamble, near Bursledon (on exhibition in the Westgate, Winchester), are of the 9th or 15th century, or even later. My purpose in this paper is to summarize the information I have been able to gather over a long period from the Press and from private letters, together with data never before recorded in this connection.

The ship's timbers lie buried in mud in Wreck Creek, on the Swanwick shore, some three-quarters of a mile above Bursledon Bridge, and are now only barely visible at low water of spring tides. She is clinker-built of oak, pinched in stem and stern, answering all the characteristics of Scandinavian build. Her measurements, according to Mr. R. C. Anderson, F.S.A., to whose careful investigations I shall again refer, were 135 feet by 37 feet—traditionally 130 feet by 30 feet, but I should be inclined to accept his "alternative suggestion that she was 130 feet on the keel, 200 feet from stem to stern-post and 50 feet wide." Nothing now remains but her bottom boards, but I remember playing inside her some eighty years ago, when her upper timbers were partly visible above the water.

In February, 1926, I gave at Winchester a "Museum Talk" on the ship, which was reported *verbatim* in the local Press. An interesting discussion followed. Mr. Frank Warren, with a knowledge of local lore characteristic of his father before him, enlightened me as to how the timbers came to the Museum. In 1899 our Club visited the wreck when the late Mr. Alfred Bowker was Secretary, and it was he who secured the timbers, and in his Memorial volume following the King Alfred Millenary, at which time he was Mayor (1900 - 1901), he gives the measurements on the authority of Mr. Crawshay, who uncovered the ship in 1874, as 130 feet by 40 feet and depth 12 feet, estimating the tonnage at 1000. There would appear to have been photographs taken at the time which I have not seen. As to the depth I venture to think that it must have been conjectural, for at no time during my long knowledge of the wreck was the top rail in evidence. Mr. Bowker then refers to "a movement to transport the same to a place of safe keeping at Winchester where it may no longer be subject to the ravages of the weather or the petty raids of filibustering antiquarians." To the late Mr. Tebbutt I owe the following: that a private individual was removing the timbers wholesale, to whose despoliation we owe the present state of the wreck.

Lord Selborne, then First Lord of the Admiralty (*circa* 1880), was informed and stopped the plundering for private gain, and it

is probably to this that Mr. Bowker refers as "filibustering antiquarians."

The first printed account of the wreck which I can trace is in White's *Hampshire and Isle of Wight Directory*, 1859, which records: "Higher up the river are the timbers of an ancient vessel, finely caulked with moss. Its figurehead was a griffin. It was supposed to have been burnt by the Saxons." And as such it has been traditionally handed down through the ages. Mr. Bowker seems to have also noticed the caulking; but no evidence in support of its antiquity can be placed in the belief that any man for centuries had ever seen the figurehead.

Yet many letters appeared in the local Press by those who had read my paper, and I quote from one: "It was a Viking ship, but the figurehead was that of a *woman*. It was put up in a garden in Botley 60 years ago by a man who was employed in a ship-building yard, who employed a *diver* to get it for him."

If the ship were of the date I believe it to be the head was certainly dragonesque and not female, and I would refer those interested in their build to two learned brochures on these ships, fully illustrated.¹ I should here remark that the northern men called their warships *Snekkja* or *Dreki*—our friend, dragon—so suggestive of the sneaking fondness these wild rovers had for nosing up creeks land-hungering or on trading intent. In the ancient book of the laws of Iceland it is laid down that when approaching their own territory the figurehead should be removed lest they frightened the spirits of the dead, the *Landvaetter*. So on this authority we can be assured that our dragon was not a woman.

In February, 1933, the late Mr. G. S. Laird Clowes of the Science Museum, London, read a paper before the Society of Antiquaries contending that the wreck "despite its resemblance in outline to a Danish or Viking ship was, on account of its great size; that of a large sailing ship of the mid-nineteenth century": admitting that his conclusions were based on the scanty remains of the wreck visible. Yet he also exhibited photographs to support his contention. To this I promptly replied in the local Press under the pseudonym "1859" (the date of my birth), pointing out the ignorance of local conditions shown by the lecturer; how did he "get his full-rigged ship of approximately 1850 under our wooden bridge built in 1800, under which a sailing dinghy would have to unstep its mast"?

I now return to Mr. R. C. Anderson, F.S.A., who read a carefully-argued paper contending that the wreck was that of "the *Grace Dieu*, built at Southampton 1418, laid up near Bursledon 1434, and burnt at her mud-berth 1439." Having in my time handled

1. *London and the Vikings*, London Museum: Catalogue No. 1, 1927.
The Bayeux Tapestry, King Penguin Books, 1943.

many articles, large and small, made out of her upper timbers, etc., I have never seen any showing evidence of fire: Mr. Anderson does not appear to have looked for such evidence (which should have been present since he got down to the keelson where her mast was stepped). It was my misfortune that I had no knowledge that the investigation was going on in my home waters or I should have looked for moss caulking and other small but significant details so important in these days of scientific research. However, this does not detract from Mr. Anderson's laborious and costly undertaking; to him we Hampshiremen are indebted. Mr. Anderson agreed in one point with Mr. Clowes, namely, that the size rules out Viking age. Granting Mr. Anderson's 130 feet on the keel, what has the old northern literature to say? "Next winter after King Olaf came from Halogaland he had a large ship built at Hiadhamrar; it was far larger and longer than the other ships in the country; it was 148 feet touching the grass. . . . Long was that ship and broad of beam, high of bulwark and great in the scantling. On this Dragon were thirty benches of oars; he called it 'The Long Serpent.'" Then from another source:² "Knut the Great had in his Dragon 60 pairs of oars." Lastly, I come to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a portion of which was certainly compiled by King Alfred or under his direction. In A.D. 847³ he had "long ships built twice as long as the others; some had 60 oars, some more." I suggest, then, that the size of our ship does not rule out Viking age.

And now to my final reference—to the fate of the *Grace Dieu* which my son, Sir Cyril Fox, has found out for me. The *English Chronicle*, 1377-1461, printed in 1861 for the Camden Society, has the following entry on p. 85:—

A.D. 1460. "And whanne the sayd Erle of Warrewyk sawe a convenient tyme, he sent some of his men to Sandwiche by nyghte, the whyche took the sayd lord Ryvers and Antony his sone in theyre beddes had them over to Caleys and took them alle the grete shyppas, save one called 'Grace Dieu' the whyche myghte not be had away because she was broke in the botome."

Sir Cyril writes me:—"Observe she was not destroyed; therefore she might have been afterwards repaired, and the entry does nothing to preclude her having been berthed in the Hamble later, but I think in my heart that her 'botome' may be in Sandwich sands."

So whether one of King Alfred's long ships or Olaf's Dragons I leave our old ship in her mud berth. Perhaps if she were bodily lifted objects of a date which would fix her identity would be disclosed. Lacking such a final undertaking (involving great expense) I submit that she is more likely to be of Viking age and build than any other, a ship over which the tides of Bede's Solente have murmured their mysterious song for perhaps one thousand years.

2. *Heimskrugla*, Morris and Magnusson. Index "Ships."
3. See A. S. C. Parker MS. "A", under this year.