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MEDIAEVAL AND SIXTEENTH CENTURY SHIPS
IN ENGLISH CHURCHES.

By H. H. BRINDLEY, M.A., St John's College.

(Read Monday, 27 January, 1913.)

It was pointed out that our knowledge of sailing vessels and smaller craft in the Middle Ages is derived from miniatures, painted glass, seals, carvings, and certain inventories preserved in the Record Office and elsewhere; for the times produced no works on seamanship or shipbuilding; Luke Wagenhaer's *Speculum Nauticum*, which, though in the main a treatise on pilotage, has claims to be called the earliest book dealing with seamanship, did not appear till 1586. The nautical archaeologist has therefore great difficulty in his endeavour to ascertain the details and trace the evolution of vessels to the middle of the xvith century. After this his task is somewhat easier, as more was written about ships and the new art of engraving vastly increased representations of them. The artists who painted glass or miniatures, seal engravers, and sculptors had little knowledge of ships and therefore frequently omitted things which are essential and portrayed many others in a way which would be impossible in a real ship. Thus it is only by the collection and comparison of many representations of mediaeval vessels that we can make out with any claim to success the features that characterised them. In illustration of this a series of examples ranging from the xith to the xvith centuries gathered from English churches was shown on the screen. By way of comparison a number of representations of mediaeval ships from other sources and views of present day craft were also shown.

The examples gathered from English Churches were in chronological order:—

- (1) Legend of St Nicholas, Brighton Parish Church font, 1050–75.
- (2) Aspido legend, Alne Church porch, c. 1150.
- (3) Noah building the Ark and the Ark with the animals, west front of Wells Cathedral, c. 1230.
- (4) Lohengrin's Boat, misericord in Exeter Cathedral, 1224–44.
- (5) Legend of St Nicholas, painted glass in Jerusalem Chamber, Westminster Abbey, c. 1270–90.
- (6) Ship, possibly that of St Candida, carved stone in tower of Whitechurch Canonicorum, Dorset, xivth century.
- (7) The Drowning of the King of Denmark in The Confessor's Screen, Westminster Abbey, c. 1430.
- (8) Ship in mural painting of St Christopher, Breage Church, Cornwall, c. 1470.
- (9) Jonah's Ship, misericord in Ripon Cathedral, xvth century.
- (10) Ship in painted glass of inner vestry, St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol, c. 1474.
- (11) Ship carved on bench-end, East Budleigh Church, Devon, 1537.
- (12) Ship carved on bench-end, Bishops Lydeard Church, Somerset, probably late xvth century.
- (13) Ship in painted glass, Ickworth Church, Suffolk, Flemish, late xvth or early xviiith century.

The writer is indebted to Mr G. C. Druce, F.S.A., for lending him the slides of Alne and Ripon and also for several others shown, to Mr P. B. M. Allan of Clare College for his water-colour sketch of the ship in the Jerusalem Chamber, and to the Rev. F. G. Walker and Lady Marjorie Hervey (the latter of whom very kindly made the sketch) for the Ickworth ship shown as a lantern slide.

One of the most interesting of these representations of ships is that from Breage. The present Church of St Breaca,

about four miles west of Helston, overlooks Mount's Bay, and was erected about 1460 on the site of a Norman Church and therefore in the same period as so many Cornwall and Devon Churches. The walls of the body of the Church are covered nearly throughout with the remains of paintings, which were discovered, after being long hidden beneath successive layers of whitewash, during the restoration of the Church in 1890-91. The present vicar, the Rev. H. R. Coulthard, of Christ's College, to whom I am indebted for the above information, kindly informs me that he believes that "the frescos were probably painted very soon after the rebuilding of the Church" and that "the colours of St Christopher were retouched (i.e. at the restoration) though the outlines were scrupulously followed." Since my visit to Breage last year and the reception of Mr Coulthard's letter which I quote above he has described these paintings more fully in *The Story of an Ancient Parish, Breage with Germoe* (Camborne, 1913).

Nearly all of them represent local and other saints, including St Corentine and St Germoe, and are more or less faded and obliterated, but the figure of St Christopher, which is in the usual place, opposite the south door, and that of Our Lord on the same piece of wall, are in good condition, though this is to a certain degree due to retouching at the restoration. Both figures are more than life size: that of Our Lord has the crown of thorns, whilst the drops of blood caused by it are falling upon the instruments of daily village life and husbandry. There is an East Anglian example of this subject among the mural paintings in Hessett Church, near Bury St Edmunds. Some of the implements and other objects surrounding the figure at Breage are curious and difficult to identify.

The dress of St Christopher seems to confirm the attribution of the painting to the xvth century. In the waters through which he wades are many fishes, a mermaid with mirror, and a small boat with a man and a curiously drawn dog or monkey facing him. This boat is the ordinary clincher-built cock which we see so often in pictures of the xivth—xvth centuries. Further away sails the vessel of which a sketch is here reproduced. She is without a crew. Her hull is a partial and

incorrect representation of that of a vessel of moderate dimensions of the xvth century: thus, the planking of a real hull would not curve up into the poop as shown, for the latter was a structure built on to the hull. As regards spars and rigging there are several features we should expect to see in the xvth century, thus the top with panels and the large square sail with eyelet holes for lacing on the bonnets or additional pieces of canvas removed from the foot of a sail

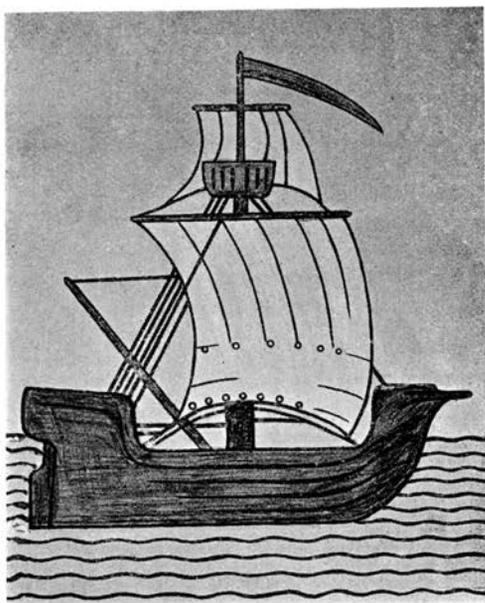


Fig. 1.

in strong winds, the alternative to reefing. The bonnet proper is carried by the sail as we see it, and the row of eyelet holes at its foot are for the lower bonnet or drabblor, which is not being carried. The yard is so close up to the top and the roach or space under the sail is so small that there is hardly room for the drabblor. But this is only one of several technical errors or at least puzzles in the ship. The foremost rope is the forestay, but that just aft of it, coming from the top and

ending at the yard, is not identifiable: it is in the wrong place for a lift and probably means nothing.

Of the five parallel ropes leading aft the foremost may be the main halyard, but it is not seen from the mast. The next is by error in front of the bellied sail, no halyard or brace could be here. The remaining three may be backstays led to the mast through the floor of the top, an arrangement which is seen in other representations of mediaeval craft. The long and short horizontal ropes below the sail cannot be explained unless we suppose that they are the falls of the mainsail sheets shown incorrectly. The sheets themselves are accurate and the sail is apparently sheeted for a wind on the port beam. The curved line parallel with the foot of the sail is apparently a rope, but is quite impossible. The artist who painted this ship seems to have learned little from the craft in Mount's Bay and Porthleven Harbour hard by. There are however two features in the ship which are of interest to the nautical archaeologist. One of these is the spar which runs from the foot of the mast and is supported to it by a horizontal rope. It has all the look of a derrick for handling cargo and is perhaps meant for one. On the other hand it may be the yard of a mizen mast which has been rubbed out. If this is the case the spar is too large and extended in error to the foot of the mast. Moreover, if the ship had a mizen mast we should expect a foremast also, of which we see no trace. But in this matter we are faced by the question as to when and how the one-masted vessel of several centuries of the Middle Ages passed into the three-master of the xvth century. The scanty evidence from contemporary representations leads us to suppose that in the two-masted ships of the age the smaller mast was stepped in the forestage. A third possibility as to the raking spar in the Breage ship is that it is a sprit for carrying a spritsail set from the mast of a one-masted craft. Now the earliest picture showing an undoubted fore-and-aft spritsail dates from about 1420.

Mr Morton Nance, in *The Mariner's Mirror* for May 1913, p. 155, states that it seems fairly certain that the spritsail originated in Northern Europe and was the earliest form of

fore-and-aft sail to become general: it was common in the second half of the xvth century. The Breage ship certainly has something very like a sprit, and therefore is of value to the archaeologist. Her other feature of particular interest is the topsail. This is shown incorrectly as it is on the opposite tack from the mainsail—perhaps the artist wished to make the most of the top—and the halyards and lifts are omitted, as are the latter in the case of the mainsail also. But this topsail is very up-to-date for the xvth century in its large size—the earliest topsails were very small compared with the lower sails—and in its being sheeted to the main yard arms, a consequence of its size, whereas the early topsails, as far as we can trust representations of the xvth and xvith centuries, were sheeted to the tops.

If the attribution of the Breage paintings to about 1470 is accurate, and the evidence favours this, the topsail is very noteworthy in the features mentioned above; I do not know another instance of so large a topsail of the time. The rig of the ship has a curious parallel three centuries later in that of the Thames and Severn Canal boats as represented on the Company's half-penny token of 1795, which by the kindness



Fig. 2.

of the Council of the Society for Nautical Research I reproduce here from a note by myself in *The Mariner's Mirror* for May, 1913. The hull is very different from that of the Breage ship, but its marked sheer suggests occasional passages in open waters: the Breage ship too was no doubt intended by the artist for a sea-going vessel. Mr Nance, in the article on

spritsails which I have quoted, sketches a modern Turkish "tchekderme caique"; if the spar aft of the Breage ship's mast is a sprit, the rig of the two craft is identical save for the bowsprit and jib carried by the Turk.

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n. p. means that the Communication has not been printed in full.