



Ancient Boat in Baddiley Mere

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(ARCHDEACON OF CHESTER)

NOTE.—Since the following article was written, I have received a letter from Mrs. Macdonald, of Betley Hall, saying, “We have arranged that the old boat should be given to the Archaeological Society for the Chester Museum.”

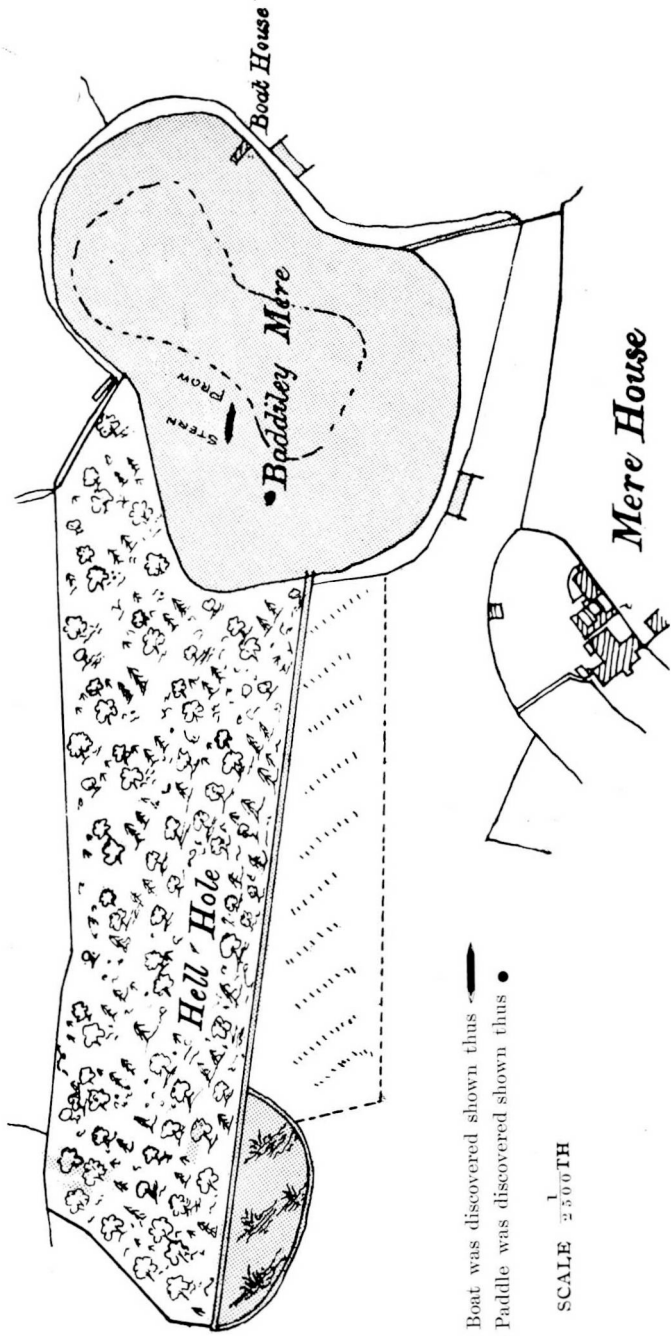


THE year has witnessed a most interesting discovery at Baddiley Mere, near Nantwich. The Mere, at present about three and a half acres in extent, is the source of the water supply of the town of Nantwich, which is distant about four miles. The exceptionally dry season afforded an excellent opportunity of clearing it out, and accordingly the Urban District Council undertook this work. On September 1st, 1911, the workmen engaged came across the prow of an ancient canoe or boat sticking out of the bog. This was carefully uncovered, and was found to be hollowed out of the trunk of a large oak tree, its length being eighteen feet, and its extreme breadth three feet, and its depth one foot eight inches. Near it was found the paddle, about four feet long, made out of one piece of oak without any joining. The

PLAN

By W. F. Newey, C.E.

*AREA OF MERE WHEN FULL ABOUT 3½ ACRES.
BLACK DOTTED LINE DENOTES AREA MERE
WAS PUMPED DOWN TO.*



NOTE.—Site where Boat was discovered shown thus —
Site where Paddle was discovered shown thus •

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pelvis of an extinct animal, pronounced to be *bos longifrons*, was also discovered.

The boat has been seen by Professor Boyd Dawkins, who writes to me as follows:—"From my examination of the canoe I gather that it has been cut with a metal tool, either of bronze or iron; and from the rust round a nail-hole in a piece of wood found along with it, that it belongs to the Iron Age; whether pre-historic or not I have no evidence. The Mere was larger in ancient times, and its area has been encroached upon by peat." The boat was removed to Nantwich, and is at present in the custody of the Urban District Council, being placed in an open shed and covered with a tarpaulin. By the kindness of the photographer, Mr. Berry, of Nantwich, we are able to give an excellent view of the boat. It will be seen from this that it was found necessary to secure temporarily one side by a piece of wood, which has now been removed. The boat was apparently strengthened by leaving three bands of thicker wood to give it solidity. The paddle, I am told, was taken charge of by one of the workmen; but its proper resting place is certainly with the boat, which in bygone days it propelled. How such a relic of the past can best be preserved (wherever its home may be) will be a subject for anxious consideration. I am told that Professor Boyd Dawkins suggests that it should be treated with some liquid mixture to preserve it; and some recommend filling it with wet sand, but this would surely involve some arrangement whereby the sand should be kept moist.

No doubt its preservation for 2,000 years is due to the fact that for the greater portion of that time it has been submerged in wet peat or sand, and not exposed to

the air. In this connection the following paragraph from a recent number of "The Standard" may be of interest:—

"The Roman boat recently lent to the London Museum by the County Council is to be inset in the ground, some four feet below the surface, for purposes of exhibition, in the new Kensington Palace Gardens building. This plan has been adopted as the fittest method of preserving a large and brittle relic and of presenting it to the eye under the conditions in which it was originally brought to light. The surrounding surface of the plaster-of-Paris into which it is to be fitted will be given the appearance of actual damp Thames mud; the cans found on the bottom will lie in their original positions, and one will therefore look down upon an exact reproduction of the scene presented by the boat on discovery. Another advantage of the plan is that the expenses of wiring the beams for preservation—which would have amounted to some £1,500 if it had been exhibited above ground—are avoided."

Whilst we shall look with interest to the result in this case, we have no room for such an experiment at the Museum if we are permitted to take charge of the boat.

We may add here some particulars gathered from the late Mr. Shone's book, "Prehistoric Man in Cheshire," referred to on page 214. From this we learn that "In June 1819, an ancient canoe was dug out of a peat bog below Cholmondeley Castle. It was a considerable depth from the surface. Its length was 11 feet, and its breadth 30 inches, and it was hollowed out of the trunk of a single tree. In shape it was

not unlike an Indian canoe." What became of this boat Mr. Shone does not say, but he mentions two preserved in the Warrington Museum, which were found in the Mersey, one in September 1893, and the other in March 1894, in Arpley Meadows, close to Walton Lock. "These meadows are still subject to flooding at spring tides. The length of this latter canoe is 12 feet 4 inches, and its greatest width near the stern is 2 feet 10 inches, and it diminishes in width to 2 feet $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches near the round of the bow. The timber is about $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches thick at the bottom." From the photograph of it given in Mr. Shone's book, it differs somewhat in shape from that found at Baddiley, the end being rounded and not pointed, the stern being indicated by crescent-shaped pieces, and by a seat which had been fastened by wooden pegs.

On a subsequent page is a paragraph on the origin of mere-basins, from which I quote the following, as I believe it is applicable to Baddiley Mere: "They (the Meres) often have no streams running into them nor any outlet, and the water in those which still exist as lakes is not held up by any impervious stratum, but stands at the water-level of the locality as regulated by the form of the ground."

Since writing the above I have, through the kindness of Mr. H. J. Tollemache, had the advantage of seeing the boat in company with Dr. Bridge. The object is a most interesting one; but it is evident that its present temporary resting-place is most unsuitable.

A closer inspection of the boat alters some of the impressions which might be conveyed by the excellent photograph which we, through the kindness of Mr.

Berry, are able to reproduce. For instance, the picture led me to suppose that the canoe was sharply pointed at both ends, so that, properly speaking, there was neither stern nor prow; but examination shows that one end (that to the left of the picture) is broader than the other, which almost seems to represent the head of an eagle. The three thicker bands of wood are part of the original trunk, cleverly and deftly left in when it was hollowed out, and are not extraneous pieces applied, as might have been supposed. This fact, however, is clearly shown by the grain of the wood. Again, from the grain of the wood running different ways on either side of the boat, it might have been supposed that there was a joining of side to bottom; but this is not the case, and this is but an illustration of the natural features of a tree of that growth and size, the boat being constructed out of a solid trunk. Whilst the sides are naturally very frail, and are no doubt feeling the change by exposure to the air, the bottom seems quite sound and is from three to four inches thick. The paddle was also brought for us to see; it is a little over four feet in length, the blade being eighteen inches long. It is in one piece, and the wood is little more than an inch in thickness. It is evident that it could not have been used alone, and that at least another would be required with it to propel the boat, in which no trace of a seat is left.

As has been stated above, the Mere at present covers only three and a half acres, but it must originally have been of very much larger extent; the exact size could only be determined by a careful examination of soil in the immediate neighbourhood, and of the contour of the surrounding land. Whether other Meres were connected with it, or whether a stream flowed into or out

of it, is also a matter of conjecture: and on the correct answer to this would depend the use that the boat originally served. Was it only used for fishing, or for means of transit from place to place? Great praise is due to the Surveyor of the Nantwich Urban District Council, and to the workmen under his charge, for the care which was taken in digging out this relic of past ages. Other pieces of timber were found, being trunks of trees which had been submerged, and these were dragged out by chains being fastened round them. A like fate nearly befel the boat, but fortunately it was seen to be of a different character, and was gradually and carefully uncovered, an operation which must have required the most delicate treatment. We can readily understand that but for this we should have been deprived of any knowledge of this unique specimen of the handiwork of men who lived some seventy generations ago.

The Engineer and Surveyor, Mr. Newey, has most kindly supplied me with a plan of the Mere, showing where the boat was found. The plan shows how the Mere had shrunk through the dry weather and the pumping out of the water for the supply at Nantwich. The prow of the boat was thus left sticking a few inches out of the mud and peat. The stern end was embedded to a depth of at least six feet under the peat. When the Mere is full there would be a depth of nine or ten feet of water. The paddle was found at about the same depth as the boat, at a little distance from it, as marked upon the plan. The wood of the sides varies in thickness from one and a half inches at the bottom to an inch at the top. The solid ribs, which are cut out in the solid in the inside of the boat, are six inches wide and about two inches thick,

and in the case of the sides, tapering to about one inch at the gunwale. The digging out of the peat gave some interesting features in its formation, the successive layers being clearly shown, and the marks of the submerged rushes being plainly discernible.

The subjoined extract from the Nantwich paper will show that the District Council are willing that the boat should be brought to Chester; and it is hoped that Mrs. Macdonald will give her permission, so that it may be taken care of at the Museum, and may be seen by the public generally:—

“At a meeting of the Nantwich Urban Council on Thursday night, November 16th, Dr. Turner said the Archdeacon of Chester and Dr. J. C. Bridge, representing the Chester Archæological Society, had that day visited Nantwich, to inspect the historical boat discovered in the Mere of the Council's Water-works during the summer. They had been in correspondence with Mrs. Macdonald, on whose land the boat was found, and the probable owner of the boat. The Archdeacon and Dr. Bridge said the Society were willing, in fact desirous, to take care of the boat on behalf of the County, if the Urban Council would allow them, and if Mrs. Macdonald was willing to let them have it. They would be prepared to convey it to Chester, and place it in the Grosvenor Museum. The Society were willing to allow the question of ownership to be in abeyance. He (the Chairman) was sorry to see a historic relic like that go out of the town, but he failed to see what they could do with it at Nantwich, because before they had a museum in that town it seemed to him that the boat would crumble to dust. Some members of the Council urged that it should be a stipulation

that, if the boat was taken, it should be labelled with something as to the place where it was discovered. Mr. J. Gilbert thought the old City was the proper place to send the boat to, and he moved that the request of the Society be acceded to. Mr. W. Lovatt seconded. Mr. E. T. Haighton much preferred that the boat should be kept in the town; but in the circumstances they ought to let it go elsewhere to be preserved. The motion was carried."

At a subsequent meeting of the Council, on December 14th, this action was confirmed, it being understood that a label would be placed on the boat, recording that it was found at Baddiley Mere during the progress of pumping operations carried on by the Nantwich Urban District Council, and presented to the Museum by the owners of the property.

The following will not be out of place here: In the "Southport Visitor" of November 20th, 1906, was a paper by the Rev. W. T. Bulpit, a Lancashire Archæologist. The paper was headed, "Our oldest Boat," and gave an account of the discovery, on April 22nd, 1899, of an ancient canoe in Martin Mere, in the parish of Crossens, in the neighbourhood of Southport. Martin, it may be observed, is really Mere-town. The canoe, about 16½ feet long, was dug out of a single log of timber. The paper says that this is the largest of those found in the Mere, and that at the close of the 17th century eight canoes were discovered there, and that one of the largest was shown at the Great Exhibition of 1861, and excited much interest. The same paper contained also a letter, "The Lament of a Canoe," supposed to have been written by the boat itself. In it was a graphic description of the con-

struction of the canoe, and also of the Mere in which it found its home. Then came an account of its being buried by accumulated mud and soil, and, finally, of its being struck by the plough-share, and subsequently unearthed, and located in the Cambridge Hall, Southport, where it was seen by many unappreciative visitors, and finally carted off to Blowick Gas Works, there to "lie pretty well asphyxiated with the horrid fumes." We are only glad that the Baddiley canoe, this relic of prehistoric man and of hoary antiquity, has been spared such a fate as this, and will be duly preserved in the Grosvenor Museum.

