During repair work at St Dunstan's Church, Snargate, a painting in terracotta colours of a Great Ship was discovered on the north wall. It has been dated to around 1500 and is a good likeness of one of the Great Ships built at Smallhythe (six miles west) in the same period

CHAPTER 2

The Medieval Shipyards of Smallhythe

Fred Walker

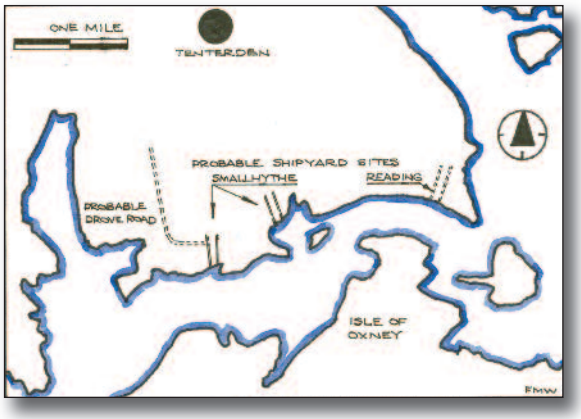
Smallhythe, now a tiny land-locked village on the edge of the Romney Marsh, has a remarkable history and can claim to have taken a leading part in the founding of the Royal Navy. While readers may be aware that there are long lost shipyards in the south-east corner of Kent, few realise that 500 years ago shipbuilding – on a near industrial scale – was practised at Smallhythe, a parish of Tenterden. Indeed, if one excludes the Royal Dockyards, Smallhythe was the largest English shipbuilding site in the early 16th century. It is known that three Kings – Henry V, Henry VII and Henry VIII – all placed work there.

Evidence that Smallhythe was a shipbuilding site

Despite the fruits of increasing geographical and historical research, our knowledge of the Smallhythe shipyards remains limited, and any analysis can be little more than a tentative foray into their probable layout and administration. Information has been culled from a wide range of sources and we are fairly certain as to the position of at least two construction sites and also of the means of building, launching and ultimately moving the "new-builds" from Smallhythe and nearby Reading Street down the River Rother to the sea. A conjectural portrait has been developed of the 15th and 16th century shipyards which will have to be tested in the light of ever-improving historical and geomorphological information, and of our ever-increasing understanding of medieval shipbuilding practice.

The evidence for shipbuilding at Smallhythe is conclusive: County records mention a wide range of industries which cluster round the ship construction sites, including timber suppliers, animal haulage teams (the transport contractors of medieval times), charcoal burners, iron smelters, blacksmiths, rope and canvas makers, sail-makers and so on. Recent investigations have unearthed iron spikes and nails as used in shipbuilding in the Smallhythe area and, as an exercise, some of the roadways of 500 years ago have been walked over, checked and found suitable for the haulage of heavy lumber by horses and oxen.

The most compelling evidence of all is from records of the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII which confirm that ships of the fledgling English Navy were constructed in the area. The Anthony Roll indicates several ships constructed at Smallhythe, Reading Street and Winchelsea. It is possible that some of the Winchelsea hulls were in fact built and launched at Smallhythe and then towed unfinished to Winchelsea for outfitting (that is the completion of



A conjectural plan of Smallhythe and Reading Street in the 15th and 16th centuries, showing likely positions of shipbuilding sites and the Drove Road north from Smallhythe

the internal work) and for masting and rigging. Such a situation would arise when lack of water at Smallhythe forced the builders to keep the ships as light as possible enabling them to sail downstream with the least possible draft.

Why Smallhythe was suitable for shipbuilding in medieval times

In medieval times, shipyards could be found in many parts of the coastline of Europe. Smallhythe, as with these other places, was subject to the following standard requirements:

Adequate Water – enabling ships to be launched safely, subsequently moored (preferably afloat) for the weeks or months while the finishing touches were bestowed on the new hull, and then with adequate water at high tide for the ship to leave for her appointed delivery voyage along the Rother Water and then southwards on the Appledore Water to Winchelsea and the sea.

Strong and Stable Land for the Construction Site – the ground which becomes compacted with regular use has to bear intense point loads from the ship under construction. It should have a gentle slope (known as the declivity) to the water's edge to ensure the completed hull could be launched with the minimum of effort.

Storage Space – as shipbuilding is a complex assembly process, adequate space is vital, not just for the myriad of small items required in construction, but also for the vast quantities of lumber arriving on a daily basis from the forests. Once cut and prepared this material, now known as dressed timber, had to be stacked carefully to dry out partially before being used on the ship.

Access – important for delivery of timber and other materials. In those days great reliance was placed on the Drove Roads – the "motorways" of the age, following routes with the easiest gradients for the ox and horse-drawn trailers in regular use.

Availability of Materials – was vital. Delays in supply – always unacceptable – were overcome by holding adequate stock and by regular deliveries of items as diverse as rope and tar, iron pigs and lumber. Timber came in two forms, long tree trunks for planks and pieces known as "grown timber" for the many small shaped items like knees, brackets, breasthooks and so on. The main timbers were:

Oak – a general purpose timber for keels, frames and shell planking and occasionally for decks.
Elm – a tough straight-grained timber for keels and parts of a ship subject to abrasion.
Fir – for masts and spars and sometimes decks and planking.

Possible extent of tidal waters around the Isle of Oxney 14th-15th centuries. Shorelines based on Ordnance Survey map 10-metre contour

The Anthony Roll

Grand Mistress

Known also as Graunde Masterys, *this 450 ton galleasse was built in Smallhythe for King Henry VIII and is celebrated for all time by inclusion on the Anthony Roll of Henry VIII's Navy*

In 1546, a clerk in the Ordnance Office, rejoicing in the name of Anthony Anthony, produced a pictorial survey of 58 ships in the fleet of King Henry VIII. Each ship is shown in elevation with the starboard side in view, so the ships are pointing to the right hand side of the page; almost all are drawn with flags flying, an anchor line extended and a pinnace or jolly boat attached at the stern. Ranking as one of the earliest public relations exercises for the Navy, the Roll endeared Anthony to the King who had by then realised the importance of naval power.

One drawback of the Roll is that all the ships look alike, bringing into question the accuracy of the draughtsmanship. Any such problem is compensated for by the wealth of written detail regarding guns and equipment and by the listing of the complement carried, broken into 'soldiours, marrynars and gonnars'.

The drawings were on a single roll of vellum, which in the course of time was divided into three parts; the first and third now deposited in the Pepys Library of Magdalene College, Cambridge and the second or middle roll in the British Library, London.

Self-Sustaining – the community had to have inbuilt resources: A population large enough to maintain local services and supply labour and apprentices to the shipyards and housing to meet the needs of a thriving local community whilst accommodating influxes of itinerant labour in times of high production. In all respects Smallhythe came up to the mark.