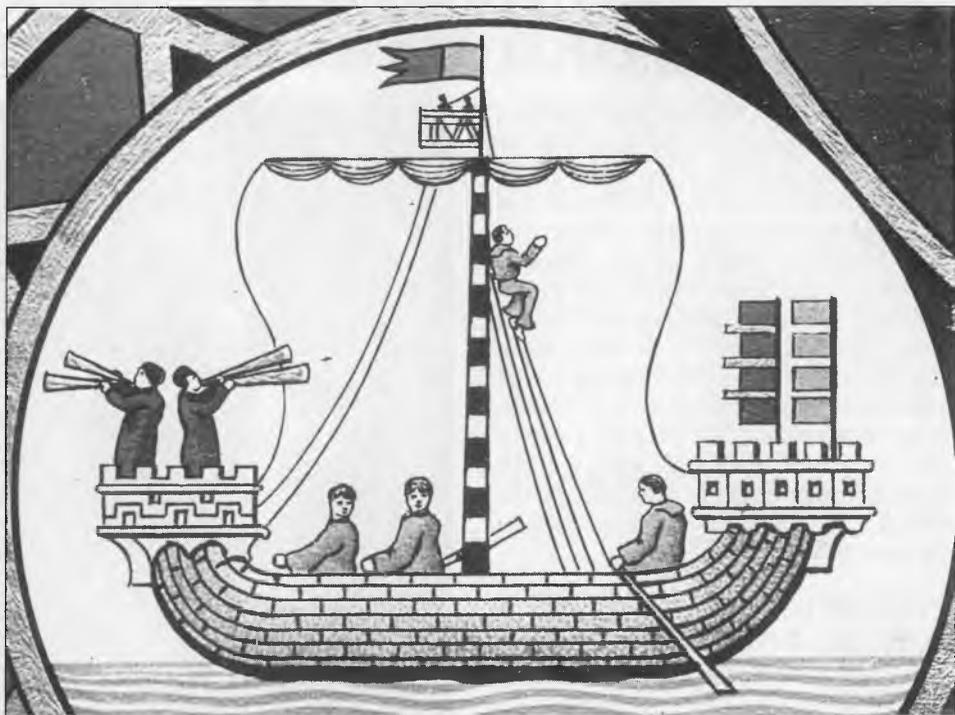


# Dover's Early Cinque Port Ships

BY IVAN GREEN

*(Editor's Note: This article has been waiting in my file for a year or so and has never been printed in the Newsletter. I am delighted to include it here, a year after Ivan's death and also the year of the installation of a new Warden of the Cinque Ports.)*



**T**HE ILLUSTRATION SHOWS an early Dover Cinque Ports ship as depicted on an ancient seal. The hull consisted of planks of wood fastened to ribs, with the planks butted against each other but not overlapping, the joints being caulked by seaweed mixed with a binding agent. The material was unseasoned wood, and such a hull had to be kept constantly in water, since any protected period on land would allow the

timbers to shrink, and the hull would be unusable for a period until the timbers absorbed water and expanded once more.

Such a ship was essentially a large open boat propelled principally by means of oars, and this explains why a large crew of twenty men was needed. These men, each pulling a single oar, provided the principal means of propulsion. A single square sail on the central mast could be used when the wind was astern.

The rudder had not then been invented and the craft was steered by means of a sweep, which was a large oar worked over the stern, usually on the port side, but anything similar to our modern system of tacking was of course quite impossible. It will therefore be seen that Dover's responsibility to the Crown to build and supply twenty such little ships each with its crew, was by no means a simple matter.

These little ships were built on the beach as a communal activity, though doubtless, as was the case with most such communal efforts everywhere, certain families developed special skills which were passed down through individual families.

The ships were general purpose vessels and did carry a limited amount of cargo, and besides their important, and fairly constant, demand for working the Passage across the narrow straits, the crews traded with towns on the French coast and ventured also into the Baltic and even to the eastern Mediterranean from where they brought back rich fabrics, incense, fine wine and other luxuries to supply them to kings and their courts, important members of royalty and government, and of course to the church, the important members of which were principal customers for all fine and scarce items such as wines, rare fabrics and other luxury goods.

But trading with foreign places and working the Passage was only part of their work. They were great fishermen, landing large quantities of fish, but principally herrings in their little harbour near old St James's church. These were split open, dried and then packed in barrels, a layer of herrings followed by a layer of salt and so on, until the cask was full. The large numbers of religious institutions then existing and indeed increasing in numbers were important

customers for these. The salt would probably have come from Folkestone, Saltwood or Whitstable, all of which are recorded as having salt pans, though as far as can be ascertained, there were none in or near Dover.

An important responsibility for Dover, for which they held enormous privileges from the king himself, and who dealt directly with them and the other ports through the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, was to provide him with the twenty ships, each staffed with twenty men (a major undertaking for a small town) to join with the other Cinque Ports in guarding their coast from pirates and other raiders from overseas, and to be mobilised by the king himself when he needed them to carry him and his court overseas, to transport his armies, and to form his navy during times of warfare.

When they were summoned for such a duty they hauled their little ships up on the beaches and fitted three 'castles' which were raised platforms to accommodate the king's soldiers. The three were the fore castle, the stern castle, and the masthead castle, all these being shown in the illustration, the ship shown being in its state of readiness for warfare under the king's order. It is interesting that the fore castle survives in modern ships as the focsole.

The usual means of attacking an enemy was by coming alongside and grappling him to prevent his escape, when the soldiers in the castles would fight each other, much as they would on dry land. Cinque Port sailors however, disliking the bloody consequences of such a method of warfare, had razor sharp bows to their ships and the pilot, manning his great sweep with consummate seamanship, would attempt to strike the enemy vessel amidships, resulting in its immediate destruction, the enemy crew being thrown into the

sea and left to drown since, in any case, there would be no room to accommodate them aboard the attacking ship. Another method was used in the great sea battle in the Straits in 1069, the first sea battle the Portsmen fought for William. There the Portsmen steered to windward of the enemy ships and then threw quantities of lime at them, which temporarily blinded their crews and resulted in their complete destruction, an early form of chemical warfare.

For centuries there was no overall command of the Cinque Port fleet. On coming to grips with an enemy each ship engaged an enemy ship of its choice, grappled to it, and fought its crew on a one to one basis. It was not until 1294 that one man was appointed to direct the whole of the Cinque Ports ships in operations. He was Gervaise Alard of Winchelsea who was styled 'Captain and Admiral', but he was less officially known as the 'Chief Pirate' a title with perhaps more than a little truth in it!

But important questions remain. How did William's invading armada evade the Portsmen's ships to land his army on the English coast? 1066 was a year fraught with danger for King Harold. He was facing the possibility of invasion from William, but was also forced to defend the country from the invasion of Yorkshire by his brother Tostig and Harald Hardrada of Norway. He marched his army northwards and ordered his Cinque Ports fleet to sail up the coast to support him and to engage Hardrada's ships.

At that moment William of Normandy decided to strike in the south. His attempt was hazardous since he had to transport his army, their large number of horses, and his prefabricated wooden stockades across the Channel, but to do this he had to employ little ships similar to those of the Portsmen. There were none other, so to accommodate his invasion army he

was forced to abandon the rowers of the ships and their oars and to rely solely on the single square sails of his little ships. The Bayeux Tapestry shows his heavily laden ships in this condition sailing towards England. He had perforce to wait for a strong south-east wind and his first attempt was forestalled by a change of wind from the westward and he was forced to sail his invasion fleet back home. A later change of wind direction prompted him to try again and this time he was successful but his ships, slow moving, clumsy and difficult to manoeuvre and very subject to wind and tide, made it impossible for him to reach Dover, his primary objective, and took him much further west than he wished.

He met with no opposition, since King Harold had mobilised his army and marched northwards to repel an invasion of Yorkshire by his disaffected brother Tostig and an invading force under Hardrada, and his Cinque Ports fleet had sailed north to support him. Quelling that invasion, he marched his troops southwards in what has since become an epic emergency march to confront William, but the irony was that the very wind which supported William's invasion had made it impossible for the Cinque Port ships in the north to use their sail assistance, and their crews had to struggle to row south against the very wind which had made William's invasion possible, so they were unable to defend their own homes in the south. Had they been at their home ports there is little doubt that they would have inflicted a terrible carnage upon William's heavily laden, slow moving fleet. It also explains why Dover was almost defenceless against the pillaging, raping and murdering Norman hordes when William marched upon the town. Most of her men were at sea, hundreds of miles away on the king's service.