

COMING DOWN TO EARTH

In July 2019, a flying Walrus was spotted in the Avalon Marshes. The 2 ton Walrus had migrated from its former home at the National Maritime Museum, Falmouth and had come to rest beside a Saxon long hall at the Avalon Marshes Centre. A local naturalist commented on how unusual it was to see a walrus in the Avalon Marshes and an especially rare sight to see one flying one during its migration. No twitchers were harmed during its arrival.

Richard Brunning



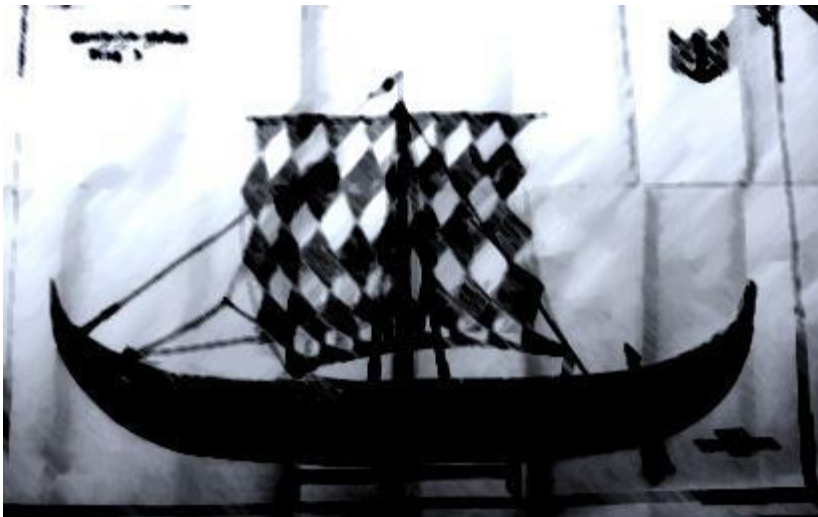
The boat arrives via the M5, the tides obviously being right. Then it flew into its new berth at the Avalon Marshes Centre



The Walrus being shifted around on site and with its mast and sails still to be raised. What flag will be used?

The *Walrus* is a replica of a trim oak-built craft, 14m long, the prow of which was fashioned from one piece of wood. It is a typical small merchant ship of the Viking period, used for carrying cargo across the Baltic. Its freight was stowed amidships under some hides, whilst the crew of not more than 6 men kept to the half-deck fore and aft. The crew could use oars, but generally they travelled under sail. The mast was midships, fitted into a mast step in the keelson and braced by a mast beam. Shrouds led from the mast top to the sides and a stay to the forward end of the boat. The *Walrus* was constructed in Falmouth by a couple of

Roskilde boat builders using local volunteers. The boat is a replica of the Skuldelev 3 Viking trading ship from Denmark which was 14m long. The sketch below shows the details of this particular boat which has been christened (for some reason) the *Walrus*. The Skuldelev 3 had a cargo capacity of 4-5 tons and a draught of just 0.9 m. It was constructed around 1040, somewhere in Denmark. With a crew of 5-8 and a 45m² sail as its primary power, Skuldelev 3 would have been well-suited for shorter journeys in Danish waters and the Baltic Sea. It could reach a top-speed of c. 10 knots. Skuldelev 3 is the best preserved of the Skuldelev ships, with 75% of the original remaining.



All Viking ships were built to the same basic pattern: they were double-ended and a hull of overlapping planks. The best known are the warships which carried the raiding parties and which were narrow in relation to their length and had a shallow draft. They were speedy as well as being manoeuvrable and could be easily beached or rowed up rivers to reach their targets. Good examples of these have been found in Denmark. For longer voyages, to Britain, Iceland or Greenland, a wider, deeper, stronger craft was required.

These would have been crewed by 30 oarsmen and carried heavy goods for trade as well as for the voyages. Little evidence of rigging or sails has survived. Sails were used principally on longer voyages. Surviving fragments show that the sails could be made of wool, although linen may also have been used. Fragments from the Gokstad ship in Norway were of white woollen cloth with red stripes sewn on. It is thought that each boat had a single large rectangular sail. Ropes could have been made from vegetable fibres or of walrus or seal skins. There are a large number of illustrations of rigging on Viking carvings and tapestries. The image below is from the Bayeux Tapestry.



An extract from the Bayeux tapestry showing the Norman fleet crossing the Channel

Towards the close of the Viking Age - presumably at some time between 1060 and 1080 AD - the fairways of Roskilde Fjord were blocked by a series of barriers to protect the important trading town of Roskilde from attack by enemy fleets. The five Viking ships in the Roskilde museum come from one of these barriers in the Peberrende channel at Skuldelev, 20 km north of Roskilde. Here, three ships were sunk across the channel and boulders heaped up on top of them. A little later the barrier was strengthened by a further two ships at the spot. In 1962 a coffer dam of sheet piling was built around the blockage so that it could be drained. In little less than four months, all five ships were excavated. For more details of the excavation, see www.donsmaps.com/viking1.html. The finds, and the analysis and reconstruction of the ships provided the world with its first detailed look at a range of Viking craft.



If you want to see the newly installed *Walrus*, visit Avalon Marshes when Covid restrictions relax. MC