

5th Annual Public Lecture - 1996

TUDOR SHIPWRIGHTRY AND THE MARY ROSE

Christopher Dobbs

Mr Dobbs started his lecture by describing the Solent Battle, from an Isle of Wight perspective, that took place at the time of the Mary Rose sinking. He reminded his audience that the Mary Rose had actually given many years of active service before that fateful day in 1545. The first reference to the Mary Rose at sea dates from July 29th 1511. In 1536, she was refitted and partially rebuilt on the Medway. He briefly summarised the major excavations leading to the successful raising of the hull in 1982.

He then went on to describe how he was now trying to learn more about the Tudor shipwrights by replicating some of the timbers inside the hull of the Mary Rose using only the tools and skills available at that time. This new work is a form of experimental archaeology and also acts as a way of bringing history and archaeology alive for us today.

The Tudor shipwright had to select different parts of a tree for parts of the ship's hull and curved pieces were a particular challenge. Two of the main tools were the axe and the adze, which each leave a characteristic mark on the timbers. Pit saw techniques had been evaluated during Chris's 'Tudor Shipwright Project' along with the use of trestles.

In particular, cleaving, where timber was split down the grain and divided into halves, quarters, eighths, sixteenths and then thirty seconds, used no saw but employed the wedge and mallet. This produced slightly wedge shaped planks which, after fine trimming with a broad axe, resulted in strong and stable planks that are very resistant to the ravages of the elements.

It was explained that modern forestry practice did not value or need curved timber and thus a lot of the ancient wood working techniques have become redundant. Dendrochronological tree ring dating was explained and its ability to provide both dates and the area where a tree was grown. Using this analysis it is suspected that the timber for the Mary Rose had not all come from local sources.

Mr Dobbs concluded his lecture with a fascinating account of timber management at Numwell on the Isle of Wight through the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, citing the 'forward planning' of Sir John Oglander in 1630.