Introduction

Navigating by the spire, I skirt my old school with a rumour in my head: 'From a tradition which the inhabitants have among them . . . a large ship was built near the place where there is now a spring of fine water . . .'[1]

Lying between the Forest of Dean and the River Severn, Lydney can fairly be called an unprepossessing town. I do so affectionately, for I have known it for years. Its buildings straggle and sprawl unpretentiously. It lacks the picturesqueness for which Gloucestershire is better known. Very little you see today predates the nineteenth century, which wracked Lydney with train tracks and industry. It does have a few civic ornaments – Bathurst Park, the Town Hall, the Cross. But it is a place, mostly, where people live, are schooled, work, grow old, pass on. A place that to the outsider would not seem to have much magic. For a while I thought it had no magic either.

Nor did I think it had much to do with the sea. Lydney harbour – for it does possess one – lies at a strange remove from the town proper, as though it were straining for a maritime presence. It is the result of a comparatively recent, nineteenth-century scheme in which the river Lyd was canalised and trammelled down to the Severn. When thriving, it was an artery for the minerals mined from the Dean and sent abroad. I knew it only as a place of truants, mossy quays, stagnant water. But in fact, Lydney has richer, more occluded maritime pedigree than this.

I walk towards the church through a Lydney I have known all my life, a place in which I was raised, confirmed and schooled; a place I later sought to leave and still later shyly revisited. Mostly my recollections of those years are shapeless, but the ensemble of the road, the school and the church vividly uncork all their navigations and humiliations. But I refocus on the spire and come up to the churchyard, looking for the scene of a shipbuilding.

I navigate, too, by Samuel Rudder, aptly named Gloucestershire antiquarian, who walked here three hundred years before me, himself navigating, in turn, by even older voices. In compiling his *History of Gloucestershire*, published in 1779, he heard that 'from a tradition which the inhabitants have among them, the tide [of the Severn] in its usual course formerly came up to a bank of earth called the Turret, just without the churchyard . . .'[2] Now, the churchyard edges an asphalt crossroads, beyond which the land falls gently into an industrial estate where once, according to Rudder's informants, 'a large ship was built . . .' Now, as then, the suggestion seems unreal.

Weekday morning doldrums. Hush hanging over the low warehouses behind steel fences. A mild breeze reaches the crossroads from the estuary, carrying whiffs of turbid water and alluvium, spectral suggestions of the Severn's former presence here. For it was here, somewhere here, that the river once appeared when in spate, and there, over the crossroads and down the shelving road, where that large ship must have been built. It's not an exact piece of triangulation, for the overlain mesh of rails and roads have made the underlying topography quite hard to read. Then I halt upon the threshold of an industrial unit. Within are orderly rows of shipping containers stencilled with the runes of modern freight.

Shortly after this mysterious vessel was built, the Severn heaved its great body further east and left Lydney landlocked. Perhaps this is why, barely a century later, the site of her construction had been lost to memory. To Rudder, the townsfolk of Lydney could relate only imprecise details, but the next century yielded a tantalising clue. During the building of a new railway line to link the town with its now-faraway harbour, the remains of a stone wharf, cannonballs and chain-shot were found somewhere below this concrete hardstanding. Then, before the First World War, certain state papers of the Stuarts, rediscovered by another Gloucestershire antiquary, rekindled the old rumour. And I, casting off for this book, heard the story which made Lydney blaze anew in my eyes.

For here, in the dog-days of the Commonwealth, that

terse, strange period of English history, Lydney and her people built a warship. She was a fifth-rate frigate mounting twenty guns, built to serve in the Commonwealth navy, to patrol, to convoy, to skirmish with Cromwell's enemies. She was a creature of Forest oak and Forest ore, and she projected Lydney into some of the most pivotal naval engagements of the day, extending this parish's horizons beyond its boundaries. She was, in fact, a character who should loom large in Lydney's story. Her name was *Forester*.

This book tells of ships and their shaping of Britain: the lost vessels underfoot, on our seabeds, below our horizons, to which we owe so much. It is a story we have thus far traced back 8,500 years, beginning with these isles' cleavage from the continent. Mysterious vessels duly appeared to make the crossing between the new chalk cliffs. They were delicate things, their yew stitches – no nails, yet – easily sundered in rough weather, leaflike in relation to the vast currents of water they were crossing. And though worked and shaped by bronze tools and the evolving skill of their handlers, there was something definingly organic about these first ships, the sense that, their stitches unlaced, they might return in an instant to their roots.

All this, of course, took place before history began. Only some millennia later, in the first century BC, were the first drops of ink spilled on what Roman scribes called Britannia. Over the next few centuries, foreign hull-forms asserted themselves in these waters, from a very different shipbuilding tradition. Roman warships rode at anchor in the harbours of Britannia which, no longer wholly natural, had been augmented with quaysides and seawalls. The bronze rams on the prows of these vessels were like chisels crafting a new seascape for this annexed province.

Centuries washed by. Roman hulls ceased to work the water, while new, equally aggressive vessels came in arrow-showers from Scandinavia. Viking longships harried the painfully exposed eastern and southern flanks of what had been

called Britannia. They were long, serpentine and from an equally foreign shipbuilding tradition to those the Romans displaced. Eventually the harrying ceased with another conqueror, William the Bastard, who crossed the Channel with his men in vessels not terribly dissimilar to those Viking longships – from which they were descended. His flagship was called *Mora*, one of the earliest ships whose name we know.

Trade persisted all the while, carried on in rotund freighters ambling between England, as it was coming to be called, and the Baltic, the Mediterranean. Or skirting England's coasts. Or risking the pirate-infested Channel to bring back Gascon wine, or whatever desirable goods could be attained from the by-now French land mass that was sometimes foe, sometimes friend. Sometimes, with timber fortifications nailed to their frames, they would carry parties of soldiers into the Channel for maritime jousts and battles. Just occasionally these ships would stray further into the Mediterranean and touch the Holy Land. But mostly they pottered in coastal waters, content not to stray too far from the shorelines the first ships knew.

Then, the sixteenth century. The equator, if you like, between the poles of the Conquest and our own time. Near enough on this mid-point, Iberian navigational lore and instruments became available to the English, freeing fleets to travel further abroad. These innovations allowed for transoceanic sailing, land firmly sunk under the horizon, sailors navigating more and more by the stars than by terrestrial contours. Galleons – as we might loosely term these newer vessels – began to supersede their frowzy predecessors. Following centuries of experimentation, they sported three masts instead of one or two. Ships for these voyages had to be lithe and trim, of course, but they also needed roomy holds for New-World trophies, sturdiness for all sorts of seas and strength enough to mount guns. For gunnery was now the order of the day. Gone were the tubby, high-waisted ships of the medieval period, designed for armoured men with swords and longbows; now, these ships' low and lean lines were drawn to the flight of the cannonball.

Russia, Newfoundland, the Far East, the Americas – these new ships expanded the charts of the world, establishing new sites of bounty for European powers. English galleons made fortunes through piracy, poaching upon the transatlantic trades – including slavery – established by Spain and Portugal, fig-leaved into lawfulness by commissions from the Queen. Escalating enmities spawned the Spanish Armada of 1588, a vast fleet of warships driven away by a smaller, leaner English fleet in the Channel. In fast new ships, navigated by French and Iberian teaching, England claimed the seas as its own. Though, to be true, it was as much English weather as English seamanship that seems to have won the day. And, ever since, the English have talked incessantly of both.

Seamanship is synonymous with Elizabethan England, but less so with the following age of Jacobean Britain. This was a strange, uncouth time. Britain, as it became with the accession of James I and VI in 1603, was no longer at war, and naval standards slipped. Without Elizabethan grip, ships were built on the cheap; territorial waters reverted to a state of quasi-medieval lawlessness. Foreign powers warred impudently with one another within sight of the cliffs. No capable navy existed to chase them away. Under the next king, Charles I, ships grew larger and more ornamented. Warships became more spectacular but also more cumbersome, too big to be effective in the bread-and-butter work of convoying merchantmen. Under the Commonwealth, the navy was taken in hand, in a grip almost as tight as that of the Elizabethans. Honed by this zealous dictatorship, the fleet once again fought successful maritime engagements, protected trade and annexed lands.

Now *Forester* was launched, into a story already thousands of years old. In September 1657 she left Lydney for patrols in the English Channel. The next year, she convoyed twenty merchantmen to destinations as diverse as Lisbon and Virginia. The year after, she returned from Copenhagen with her mainmast sprung, was repaired and sent to cruise with Lord Sandwich's fleet in the Mediterranean.

By now, Charles II had been restored to the British

throne. Unlike all his predecessors, the Merry Monarch intimately understood ships and the sea, having spent much of his adolescence fleeing from Parliamentarians in ships of the Royalist navy and indulging, in exile, in the Dutch pastime of yachting. But his relations with the Dutch soon broke down over the question of the trade routes by now firmly established as lines of vast profit between the Old and New Worlds. At the Battle of Lowestoft in June 1665, *Forester* fought in the rear division of the blue squadron, in a sprawling and bloody engagement that revealed just how totally gunnery had come to dominate naval warfare. In lines of battle the Dutch and English warships pounded one another with shot until one side or the other disintegrated.

Ships were lost in mists of shot, but *Forester* seems to have escaped unscathed. That same summer, under Captain Richard Country, she captured a Dutch merchantman off the Norwegian coast. Nations at war, as Britain and the Dutch Republic then were, could lawfully prey on one another's shipping as prizes. *Milkmaid* of Hamburg was bound for Amsterdam from St Kitts, laden with sugar and tobacco. These were the fruits of the plantations, worked by enslaved people, that by this time proliferated across the Caribbean. It is even possible that *Milkmaid* was herself completing the final leg of the 'triangle trade', the last in a series of voyages by which European goods were shipped to Africa, African people were abducted, enslaved and transported to the Americas, and the commodities they were forced to produce were shipped back to Europe.

Under Captain Country, *Forester* took many more prizes in the Baltic and Atlantic: *Fortune* of Hamburg, carrying brandy and town wine from Bordeaux; *St Servane*, carrying beef, hides and herring from Galway to St Malo; *Island of Walcheren*, carrying wine, brandy, tobacco and prunes from Bordeaux; *Mackerel* of Zierikzee, apparently a heavily armed fishing vessel with whom *Forester* exchanged over one hundred shots before she was captured. Then, as now, fishermen are not to be trifled with.

*

I pace out eighty feet on the hardstanding. Pacing halfway back, I sidle five feet sideways to the right, then ten feet to the left. I look up, imagining the height three men would reach if they stood, wobbling, upon my shoulders. Finally, I spread out my arms to make a fathom, and measure two of them. In this way, I sketch *Forester*'s dimensions in a void between the shipping containers, approximately where she was created. Though I gather odd looks from the men in reflective bibs guarding the place, it's a useful exercise in coming to an understanding of her size. And reaching across the void that separates us.

For this is also a search for the lost characters of British history. Ships were protagonists in all the key events of the world until only recently. Think of *Mora*, in which the Conqueror landed at Pevensey. Or the *Matthew*, in which John Cabot made the first English landfall in the Americas. Or *Michael,* the pride of the Scottish navy and the largest ship in the world when she was launched from Newhaven in 1511. Or Francis Drake's *Golden Hind*, the first English vessel to circumnavigate the world. Or *Agamemnon*, built in 1781 at a little Georgian shipyard in Hampshire, the favourite of a certain young Captain Horatio Nelson. These ships were more than mere vehicles. They had individual quirks, soul, discernible personalities. And this is just as true of less famed craft like *Forester*.

To Daniel Furzer, arriving in summer 1656, the Forest of Dean appeared a 'forlorn wilderness'.[3] In some of my less charitable moments I have thought the same thing of Lydney. Yet it was a place, then, where throve the myriad trades required to build a warship; a place capable of building a warship to the tune of £380,000, the modern equivalent of *Forester*'s eventual cost. Furzer was the shipwright who built her. He soon found that Dean timber made for excellent shipbuilding, later lobbying his naval masters to allow him to make masts out of Forest oak, and promoting Forest iron as the best in England. The Forest even yielded a ship's carver, who executed her ornamental work and figurehead; I picture the latter as a verderer of the Dean, replete with horn, staff and green mantle.

We can deduce *Forester*'s appearance from a series of watercolours made by Willem van de Velde the Younger, a Dutch artist who, alongside his father, was commissioned by Charles II to make 'Draughts of Sea Fights . . . for Our particular use'.[4] Van de Velde had begun his career in Amsterdam, depicting *Forester*'s prizes – or mercantile and fishing vessels very like them, anyway – in meticulous shipping scenes. In England, by contrast, he painted warships for the King. As well as the formal paintings of 'Sea Fights', he made many other studies of warships, not of *Forester* but of ships comparable to her.

From these drawings, *Forester* would have had a high stern ornamented with scrolling, gilding and heraldic devices. This higher area of the ship was the quarterdeck, reserved for officers. This was the place from which the ship's direction came and where the whipstaff was located: a lever which turned the rudder. *Forester* was built just a few decades too early to have a ship's wheel, which only appeared in the 1690s, the invention of an unknown genius. The rear or 'mizzen' mast rose through this higher part. Thereafter, the remaining two-thirds of the ship were lower in level, bearing the mainmast in the centre and the foremast towards the bows, which curled together in the curious, ornamental form of a beakhead. Above the waterline, her sides were flanked with nine hatches or ports for the guns. Originally *Forester* carried twenty-two: nine per side, two in the bows and two in the stern. At first, she was worked by a hundred men, but this figure fluctuated depending on how many could be pressed into service or turned over from other ships. Fully laden, she drew twelve feet of water; twelve feet of hull that Van de Velde could not have drawn, since it was hidden below the waterline.

I wish Van de Velde had drawn *Forester*; I wish I did not have to piece her together in my mind's eye from the gleanings in the records. For, at over 300 tonnes, she would have been a powerful wooden presence up close. And somehow, on this concrete hardstanding, she feels maddeningly close, yet just out of grasp.

From the correspondence of Captain Anthony Archer,

her first commander, we gain a glimpse of *Forester*'s quirks. Newly built, Archer reported that she was 'tender-sided'[5] – that is, she made long, slow rolls on the waves and took time to return to the perpendicular. You might picture her making her maiden voyage down the Severn, into the Bristol Channel and round to Plymouth with the long, loping stride of a verderer. Additional ballast seems to have cured her of this roll. Then, in the summer of 1659, Archer reported that her gunports were too low in her sides, so that they were submerged in a gale, and that her stern was too high – though the meaning of this last complaint is less clear.

As well as prize-taking, she passed her life in the grind of convoying. Autumn 1669 found her at Yarmouth, ready to accompany ships to Iceland; the next spring found her in the west dock at Deptford, ready to be graved (her hull cleaned of excrescences). At the Battle of Solebay, in May 1672, she fought in the rear division of the red squadron, again escaping unscathed. Afterwards she was posted to the Mediterranean under Captain Robert Stout where, based in Tangier, she cruised as part of the Mediterranean squadron, convoying merchantmen and attacking Algerine corsairs. In November she sailed for Leghorn (modern Livorno) for two months' provisions. And there she met her end. In the words of Captain Stout's later report to the Admiralty: 'I had not been above a quarter of an hour ashore, till I heard a great report, which shook the house, and immediately one came in and told how the English man-of-war was on fire.'[6] At Livorno, by some unknown accident in her powder magazine, *Forester* was blown asunder.

At the heart of this book is an absence, for ships are definingly perishable things. Sea washes, wears, squashes their hulls. Wind pulls, pushes, prises apart structural members or hull coverings. Salt abrades, corrodes, dissolves until a ship may scarcely be identifiable. Never mind shipwreck or naval engagements. Even in a clock-calm, a ship is a wasting asset.

This is not just a story of ships' lives, but of their afterlives too. And it's hard to overstate how few physical traces

there now are of the great ships of the past, how roomy the nation's docks and ports, compared with the maritime ages. These coastal places are like empty sherry casks, drained of a potency yet still fragrant with the scent. Often, only quayside ephemera – a rusting anchor here, a spar or mast there – hint at the rich forms now absent. And if ships could be described as buildings – and indeed they were defined as 'large hollow buildings, made to pass over the sea with sails' in Samuel Johnson's first English dictionary of 1755 – then we have lost whole townships of timber, sailcloth and hemp, great estates of iron.

As it happens, a vessel from the prime of sail does survive. As Nelson's Trafalgar flagship, HMS *Victory* is one of the most famous ships in the world. Launched in 1765, substantially rebuilt in 1801, she illustrates the late pitch of perfection to which sail had been brought by the end of the eighteenth century. Gone is that archaic stepping of deck to the stern – instead, her level decks seem curiously to anticipate those of the later aircraft carriers which can be seen behind her in Portsmouth. Now, she's propped in a dry dock, out of the sea's grasp, fighting not revolutionary France but the more insidious forces of decay.

And by happenstance, also, *Victory* serves as a punctuation mark, for her proposed breakup in the early 1830s – causing outrage, never actioned – coincided with the ascendancy of iron steamships. Hitherto, iron had manifested at sea only in the heavy forms of cannon or anchors; in this context, seaworthy iron ships took a long time to emerge, though they would later make up for lost time with their sheer presence. From the Industrial Revolution came the capacity and expertise that would enable Britain to mass-produce iron on a heroic scale – and what's more, work it deftly enough to shape hulls out of all proportion to anything that had come before. Naval architects, like their terrestrial counterparts, discovered that iron members could be shaped beyond the tree-trunk limits that had previously checked the size of their buildings. Consuming ore instead of oak, these new vessels spared the forests for the first time. When he visited the Forest of Dean in 1802, Nelson

ordered a great sowing of oaks to provide for the navy's future. Today, the trees still stand there, unused.

Early on, sail drove some of the smaller iron ships, but only steampower could move them as they grew larger. Fire, for so long nervously proscribed aboard, was now specially accommodated in great boilers and furnaces. First, these engines turned cumbersome paddle-wheels, half-in and half-out of the sea, then wholly submerged propellers that thrummed the ship forward far more effectively. Compared with the thousands of years that had slowly grown the hulls and masts of sailing ships, these new forms appeared seemingly in an instant.

But the greatest change was an unshackling from the wind. Hitherto, seafarers had obsessively courted the breeze. Contrary winds had bottled up fleets in harbours for weeks, while ferocious gales could scatter them in an instant when at sea. Under sail, there was no certainty of passage, no guaranteed course, arrival or departure. Were you to plot sailing voyages on a globe of the world, they would appear as great, looping courses of knots and curves. Steam changed this. Arrivals could be planned to within the day, the hour even; the linear courses of steamships cut like arrows through the looping wakes of their forebears.

Steam advantaged the maintenance of Empire, the flow of people and of international trade, the union of nation states, but it disadvantaged the intricate gaggle of smaller coastal places fringing Britain. For they were not always large enough to accommodate these new ships, which in any case, freed from the vagaries of the wind, could more easily favour specific ports. Gradually, Britain's harbours began to be drained of their contents, just as their quaysides steadily filled with day-trippers seeking atmospheric delights. Amongst we Britons, experience of the working sea, that dirty, malevolent entity, began to wane. By the early twentieth century, it had been repackaged as a commodity to be consumed from harbour towns and transoceanic liners. From the decks of these unequalled steel ships, perhaps comparable only to the greatest, most luxurious hotels on land, the oceans were held at a comfortable remove.

We had transcended wind. We had, it seemed, transcended the oceans themselves; we were shortly to take to the air. Below, the sea which had shaped our history for millennia seemed almost irrelevant, excluded as it was from the ballrooms in the bellies of these vessels. Cruise ships, their successors, maintained this sense of the sea as scenery; container ships, dominating the second half of the twentieth century, brought about a great tidying-up of docksides as cargoes were rationalised and packed into identical oblong containers, marshalled in large new freight ports fenced off from civilians. Slowly, inexorably, our eyes lifted from the horizon.

Today, coastal places are more often drained than brimming. For instance, it's now hard to see how trade with the West Indies made Lyme Regis as cosmopolitan as a capital city. Or from its dilapidated quayside far upriver, how shipwrights at Brockweir in the Wye Valley were once inspired by their Caribbean counterparts to build Bermuda sloops. Or how news – the most precious of all commodities – reached London from the coastal margins, not the other way around. Or how, at the end of the First World War, a great herd of German U-boats surrendered at Harwich, Essex. Like Lydney, so many places once had a *Forester*.

Our relationship with the sea now seems threadbare. Trade is now consolidated – concealed – far offshore in those vast container ships; further inshore, decimated fishing fleets pinprick the North Sea, the Channel, the Atlantic, while dwindled ferry sailings pass in and out of their terminals, maintaining tenuous contact with the islands and the Continent. In many marinas, there are more boats propped out of the water than there are bobbing in it. Shipbuilding has slowed to a trickle and become dramatically skewed: these days, only tiny yachts or nuclear submarines seem to be launched from British slipways.

Although no-one in Britain is very distant from the sea, fewer and fewer people remember how thoroughly its influence

once permeated the country. Who now can recall granite quay-sides heaped with fish or hides or spices, forests of masts gently swaying on harbour swell or clifftop views crowded with ships of all persuasions? Maritime affairs enriched the country with striking juxtapositions: oceangoing galleons far upriver, stone lighthouses far out to sea, precious cargoes in rural backwaters, broad horizons in narrow valleys.

And yet the sea continues to have a hold over us, a hold of profound strength despite the fragile or fragmentary remains of the great ships of the past. In 1856 John Ruskin, mercurial thinker and conservationist, brooded as intensely on ships and boats as he had done on anything else: 'But one object there is still, which I never pass without the renewed wonder of child-hood, and that is the bow of a Boat.'[7] He was writing an accom-paniment to J. M. W. Turner's maritime scenes, *The Harbours of England*. And he made a striking proposal: 'I should not have talked of this feeling of mine about a boat, if I had thought it was mine only; but I believe it to be common to all of us who are not seamen. With the seaman, wonder changes into fellow-ship and close affection; but to all landsmen, from youth up-wards, the boat remains a piece of enchantment . . .'[8]

Like Ruskin, I'm a building conservationist rather than a seafarer. And like him, I'm convinced that the sea and its ar-chitectures have much to say to us land-dwellers, despite our frequent ignorance of their ways. I see ships as moving build-ings, and this book will explore their fabric, their conservation, their resurrection. Yet theirs is such a perishable kind of archi-tecture. So little survives of the great ships of the past, because timber, iron and fibre are inherently vulnerable to the sea and the salt air. Can we successfully preserve a past which is defin-ingly transient? What may be gained from trying?

If Britain's seafaring history were embodied in a single ship, she would have a prehistoric prow, be driven by an ocean liner's propeller, bear a mast plucked from a Victorian steamship – and all would be outlandishly grafted onto the hull of a modest fishing vessel. Stone anchors would adorn her

gunwales; painted figureheads would decorate her bows. Archaic props would litter her deck: a medieval ship's trumpet, an Elizabethan captain's chair, a Georgian ship's bell.

Let us call her *Asunder*, a fantastical composite of unlikely parts. Like the maritime history she represents, she would by turns be exotic, improbable, glorious and tragic. And though she may only be a figment of the imagination, the fragments that could build her are real, scattered across the British Isles, some lying quietly in the nation's creeks, others looming prominently over its coasts. In piecing these together, this book will explore what survives of seafaring Britain.

Each of its chapters revolves around a ship-fragment from a specific period of Britain's seafaring history. Each is, symbolically, all that remains of this particular kind of vessel or time. A few of these are in museums, because of their age and rarity, but most are not; I'm most drawn to artefacts which must fend for themselves. And I must acknowledge that nearly all of them are in England – meaning that Scotland occupies less space in this book than its distinctive seafaring heritage deserves. While the locations covered to an extent reflect my own heritage (Cornwall, the Wirral, Gloucestershire and London have all been my hinterlands), the fragments in this book are ultimately chosen through happenstance survival. Through their stories it is possible to see a wider narrative of the ascendancy, decline and fall of seafaring in Britain – as our attitudes to and dependence on the sea begin to change, as the prestige of ships and their coastal berths begins to dim, as the last of the sea drains out of the country, leaving only residue in an emptying vessel.

I come to the end of the track which connects the industrial estate with Lydney Harbour. The Severn at this point is broad enough to be a kind of miniature sea, as good a place as any to launch a whimsical ship. I shield my eyes from the sun and turn downstream, the wind at my back, the broadening, deepening river falling over the horizon. And here I envisage my *Asunder*, riding improbably at anchor, awaiting a favourable breeze. I yearn to see if she swims.
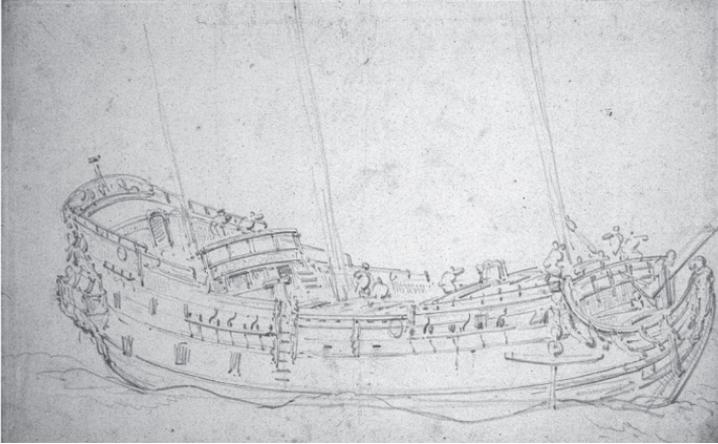
1. A view of an unidentified British fifth-rate frigate, drawn rapidly at sea by Van de Velde circa 1675. Is this how *Forester* looked?

Prow

The Dover Boat

> *'Then first did rivers feel upon their backs*
> *Boats of hollowed alder, then the mariner*
> *Grouped and named the stars . . .'*[1]

First through the water, first to touch land, the prow is the foremost part of a ship. And if the nation's ports could be so compared, then Dover might be Britain's prow.

From here, landfall can almost be touched: France, its coastline once the inverse of ours. Eight thousand years ago, an inundation carved this island from that continent, cutting chalk cliffs for the seawalls of both. When new, these cliffs must have resembled gleaming white sashes with dampened hems: finery that was then also fortification, with no breaches through which to pass.

With the passing of the centuries, age has weathered them from new sashes to old curtains, ragged in some places, bunched in others. No longer finery, or indeed fortification. And on the English side, a thin chalk-stream, bubbling up from somewhere far inland, has sliced downwards through the soft chalk-like cheesewire and made an opening.

This – the Dour estuary – is the only gap in the White Cliffs. It is the only landing-place on a twenty-mile stretch of coastline, and it is what drew the earliest seafarers to the future site of Dover. Accordingly, the town has an unmatched maritime pedigree.

I follow the Dour's course in the wake of an ancient prow. Underfoot, a hot ribbon of tarmac; ahead, a prospect of the sea etched with rooflines. I take my first steps through a Dover in suspension: cloudless, windless, unpeopled in the July

sunshine. Today, the sky is an undiluted blue that the sea off these shores, in its restlessness, never seems to attain.

Of all a ship's parts, the prow takes the sea's untrammelled force, halving wave after wave to disperse them around the vessel. The town has endured similar pressures. Ever since the Dour carved out a landing-place within convenient reach from France, Dover has been seen as the key to the kingdom, the 'very front door of England'[2] according to the medieval chronicler Matthew Paris. Over two millennia of sea-borne conquest and occupation, fighting and trading, decline and resurgence, the port has parted wave after wave of incomers and dispersed them inland.

It's the hottest day of the year so far, and Dover sizzles. Fortunately, my first port of call here is not the seafront, but the cool shadows of an underpass that leads there. Built as part of a dual carriageway scheme, the walls of this subway celebrate Dover's maritime traditions. Colourful tiles depict the ships it has known since records began. The familiar passenger ferries of today, crisscrossing the Channel to Calais. Early Victorian steamships, strange hybrids equipped with paddlewheels and chimneys. Sprightly tea clippers. Sturdy, square-rigged warships. An Elizabethan galleon, arched up to the stern like a high-heeled shoe. And then, on one curve of wall, a Viking longboat prowls in the Channel, while a Roman trireme slits the water under the White Cliffs.

But there is an absence on these tiles. For behind this smooth curve of wall, during roadworks here thirty years ago, a remarkable vessel surfaced which rewrote Britain's seafaring history, extending it back by another 1,500 years, beyond the Roman period when written records begin. It lay in an ancient creek with its prow pointing out to sea.

From here, a time-spool back to a drizzly Monday in the early 1990s. They are laying a new road in the south-west periphery, near the seawall: the A20, between Dover and the Channel Tunnel terminal at Folkestone, designed to alleviate the appalling traffic on the existing coastal roads. But the project

is nineteen weeks behind schedule and the foreman is under pressure. Today, they are sinking a deep shaft to house a water-pump below the new pedestrian subway and dual carriageway structure. Rain drips onto the archaeologists gathered at the bottom.

This area of Dover is known to have great archaeological potential. It's thought to be where the medieval town wall ran down to the sea, girdling the maritime quarter. The team aren't sure precisely what they'll find, but they have high hopes.

As the digger peels away each layer of earth, the archaeologists inspect the rain-sodden ground and record the finds before they are destroyed by the excavation. Soon they come upon the expected town wall, an impressive masonry structure surviving to a height of nearly four metres underground. Erosive patterning on its south face reveals that this had once been a wall between land and sea; in some areas, the sea had washed it too fiercely, collapsing the masonry and driving shingle into the breaches.

Below the medieval wall they find the massive timbers of a Roman quay, baulks of oak morticed together into square shapes and braced with cross-pieces, a style of construction well known from other Roman harbours (once they had found a winning formula, the Romans were never ones to reinvent the wheel). This quay had been driven into the original bed of the west side of the Dour estuary. So far, the archaeology suggests that this was pristine and undeveloped when the Romans arrived. But this is not to say that the Romans were the first ones here.

Rain patters. With considerable difficulty, they painstakingly record and dismantle the stout Roman quay. Already, the team considers this sequence of finds to be a good haul, with the potential to enrich our understanding of Roman and medieval Dover. But then, from below the Roman levels of the site, emerges a remarkable find that dwarfs the significance of everything else.

They are now perhaps six metres below the modern ground level. In the corner, a dewatering pump works furiously

to keep the bottom of the shaft free of the groundwater. Near the pump, an archaeologist sees something. Embedded in the soil is an innocuous-looking side of wood, carved on one face with a semi-circular feature like a section of a doughnut. A strand of what looks like rope trails loosely from it. The archaeologist is intrigued: perhaps a Roman shipwreck? But hasty examination of the surrounding sediments suggests that the timbers lie in undisturbed prehistoric levels. And the way the semi-circular feature has been carved is like no Roman woodwork they have ever seen.

A long halt in the digging; the foreman's heart sinks. He watches the excitement brewing in the bottom of the shaft and feels the delay lengthening. The archaeologists work gently and quickly, peeling back the layers of sediment from the rest of the timbers. What emerges is the midriff of a boat that has been astonishingly well preserved in the moist ground. They find the base and sides of this vessel, hewn with bronze axes from oak, with all the details crisp and comprehensible; they can see ledges for the thwarts, the planks on which the oarsmen sat.

Over the centuries, the vessel had taken the shape of the ancient creek in which it lay, flattened out by the weight of later ages' work above. Freeing the timbers is an arduous task. They are prised from the ground with a variety of improvised tools, from metal excavating implements for the larger pieces, to sharpened lollipop sticks for the last, most delicate parts. And as they are revealed to the air for the first time in 3,500 years, the vessel's timbers begin to glow.

Chalk is fragile when excavated; friable, crushable between thumb and forefinger, yet it endures when compressed underground. The same goes for the timbers of the earliest ships we know.

During the last Ice Age (around 12,000 years ago), most

of what is now Britain,* from the Orkney Isles to London, lay under glaciers. As they retreated, meltwater trickling into the oceans caused a slow rise in sea levels. And with all that glacial weight lifted, Orkney, which was pressed most deeply under the ice, began to rise, while southern England, hardly ice-locked at all, began to sink (the tipping point of this see-saw is apparently somewhere near Hull).

In the Mesolithic period – around 6,500 BC – swathes of this low-lying land were flooded, Britain became an island and what was to become Kent acquired a coastline. Inland, the new island was inhabited by people who hunted, gathered and moved their seasonal settlements on a semi-nomadic basis. It was a time of foraging for roots and berries, and the pursuit of wild beasts such as deer and aurochs, a now-extinct kind of wild cattle. But around 4,000 BC, this restlessness began to fizzle out. People's lives shifted into a pattern that might be recognisable today, defined by agriculture and more perma-nent domesticity. In this new period – the Neolithic – soci-ety started to become more settled and the parameters of life began to expand.

Debate has raged over exactly why and how this change occurred, but the prevailing view is that the new way of life did not originate from within Britain. A recent study of isotopes in Neolithic teeth has shown that many people were born on the Continent. So, this new Stone Age must have arrived by water, but we can only speculate how people crossed the new Channel, for no Neolithic boats have been found in Northern Europe. Yet these vessels must have been skilfully made to carry people and livestock across the future Strait of Dover. One possibility is that they were like coracles, skeletal wooden structures over which waterproofed hides were stretched. None survive.

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* For the rest of this chapter I shall use the term 'Britain', though, of course, this name only really begins to apply to these isles from the Union of the Crowns in 1603.

Dated to circa 1,550 BC, the Dover Boat is the earliest known prehistoric vessel in Northern Europe. By this time, thanks to those seminal Neolithic Channel crossings, proto-Kent had been a prospering agricultural area for thousands of years, with widespread evidence for metalworking from the start of the Bronze Age (2,500 BC). Fertile, well-wooded, well-drained and temperate, it is not hard to see why the area was well populated in prehistory, thickly studded with roundhouses and landscapes of sublime monuments.

Until the finding of the Dover Boat, evidence for prehistoric seafaring in Britain was limited to Bronze Age logboats. There are over 150 known examples of these from sites in England and Wales. Shaped into vessels from individual treetrunks, many of them are skilfully constructed and could have traversed long distances on inland waterways. But logboats aren't seaworthy.

In the early twentieth century, traces of larger, plankbuilt vessels had been found in Yorkshire, but not enough to reconstruct how they might have looked, sailed or coped with rough seas. The significance of the Dover Boat is that it was found almost intact, except for one end (which lay outside the shaft and was not excavated) and some elements that seemed to have been deliberately removed. As the only substantial prehistoric vessel we have, it serves to embody the astonishingly early origins of maritime Dover – and Britain – after the last Ice Age. These timbers carry with them a sense of seafaring in its first bloom.

I make my way from the underpass, closest to where the boat was found, to the museum where it now resides on permanent display. When they were first unearthed, the ancient timbers glowed golden brown before speedily darkening, the result of a long-postponed courtship between tannins in the wood and ions in the modern air. To avoid any further degradation, the timbers are now kept in a dark gallery, in conditions approximate to the soil.

I want to touch it, but glass intervenes. What immediately strikes me is the vessel's organic character, its soft and

frayed edges, the gentle flattening and distressing of the hull giving the whole thing the qualities of a torn leaf. But this is the work of the ground in which it spent millennia, the glacier-like pressing of the strata, the relentless exchange of moisture between the wood and the soil. Enough survives to show that it was once a sturdy and watertight boat, built by people who knew how to contest the waves.

And they were serious about it. To have felled the trees and shaped the timbers alone would have required months of patient, collaborative effort. With remarkable nuance, and much trial and error, the woodwork sections were contrived to fit together without a single mechanical fixing; instead, the timbers were sewn together with fibres of yew – since dubbed 'withies' – and held fast with a series of timber wedges. And, in shaping the lines of the vessel, these boatbuilders saw clearly how to set the grain of the wood against the traits of the water.

What remains of the hull reveals a sophisticated system of interlocking sockets and sections. It's surprisingly large: just over nine metres long and three metres wide in the middle, with room for up to fifteen people. On the bottom, planes of the wood undulate with tool marks, spreading out to the sides where the upwards hull-curves, though slightly crumpled, are clearly recognisable. And at the prow, the hull mysteriously tapers into two pointed sections, making the whole thing strangely reminiscent of a mermaid's purse (a leathery, tendrilled pouch holding a shark embryo, which beachcombers often find tangled in seaweed).

Originally, the prow seems to have been very like that of a river punt. Experts conjecture that between these pointed sections would have been slotted a third board that rose at a diagonal angle from the base of the hull; as such, the prow would not have curved to a point, but tapered gently to a straight edge. There are strange echoes of this prow-form in the landing craft used during the D-Day invasions of France in 1945, the similarly angled fronts of which fell open to disgorge soldiers upon the Normandy beaches. And perhaps the Dover Boat was a similar kind of people-carrier, albeit without an opening prow.

Over its life it made many voyages, was ground against rocky moorings and hauled effortfully up beaches for safe-keeping. At least, this is the narrative told by the outer faces of the boat, which are much scratched and weathered. But of the nature of its cruises, no trace remains.

Perhaps it coast-hopped, meandering amiably from place to place along the south-east shores of Britain, distributing people, goods or tidings among Bronze Age communities like a floating general store. Perhaps, like a mermaid's purse, its leathery exterior concealed a shark-like purpose, disgorging soldier-sailors to raid rival territories. Or, most tantalisingly of all, perhaps it was the prehistoric equivalent of those P&O ferries that now shuttle between Dover and Calais.

When it had reached the end of its life, the Dover Boat was abandoned in a creek in this estuary. Most of its fittings were stripped back to the hull. And the central section of the prow was prised free and taken elsewhere so that, without it, the vessel could no longer put to sea. It then lay gently decomposing, under the eyes of passers-by, for hundreds of years.

Before Dover was even a glimmer in the eye of a Roman engineer, this place would have been a dramatic portal between the land and the water. Up from where the Dour broadens into the sea, grassy shoulders of chalk climbed steeply into cliffs framing the Strait. Before the A20 was even a shimmer in the mind of a traffic planner, this would have been a resonant junction between the land and the water.

At such places, it is common to find Bronze Age artefacts that have been deliberately broken before disposal. Swords bent in half. Smashed cups. Shattered tools. This is what Dr Francis Pryor, a Bronze Age specialist, discovered in his excavations of sites in the fens of eastern England. The artefacts had been cast into bodies of water from timber causeways that had been built specifically for the purpose. The hypothesis is that these items had been symbolically deactivated before being sent – or returned – to another realm, suggesting that Bronze Age people regarded them as something more than just tools or implements.