



PREHISTORIC "DUG-OUT" BOAT, FOUND AT
SHAPWICK, SOMERSET, 1906.

Photograph by Wood & Son, Bridgwater.

Prehistoric Boat, found at Shapwick, 1906.

BY ARTHUR BULLEID, F.S.A.

ON Saturday, September 15th, 1906, whilst a man named G. Wall was cleaning out a ditch near Shapwick Station on the Somerset and Dorset Railway, he cut into a piece of timber which he thought resembled the end of a boat. Having recently been to the Glastonbury museum, and with the canoe exhibited there fresh in his memory, he was prompted to unearth more of the wood. This further investigation proved the correctness of his surmise and was the means of bringing to light the flat-bottomed boat which is the subject of the accompanying illustration.¹

The Shapwick specimen is the fourth boat which has been found in the Brue district during the last seventy years. What the exact shape and dimensions were of the one discovered in the turbaries somewhere about the year 1840, we shall probably never know, but we may reasonably suppose it to have been of much larger proportions than either of those more recently discovered. The only knowledge we have of this interesting relic is the brief notice of it given by the late Mr. W. Stradling,² who, unfortunately, only heard about it after its destruction. He describes the boat from information obtained as being "a very large canoe, formed from an immense oak, and no doubt excavated by fire," and proceeding, he says it was "long known as 'Squire Phippen's big ship,' and

1. The photograph is reproduced by permission of Messrs. Wood and Son, Monmouth Studios, Bridgwater.

2. *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, vol. i, pt. 2, p. 52.

made its appearance partially in dry seasons" and was finally "broken up and used by the cottagers for fuel." In a previous paragraph mention is made of "three paddles or oars by which canoes were steered" as coming from the same neighbourhood as the boat. One of these paddles is in the Stradling collection in Taunton Castle Museum; it is 24½ ins. long, and was found in peat at Edington Burtle.¹

The Glastonbury canoe was found in 1892 protruding from the side of a ditch situated in the vicinity of the Lake Village, and, like the Shapwick boat, one end was damaged by the spades of successive ditch-cleaners. The Glastonbury boat is flat-bottomed, tapering towards the bow and cut out of a single trunk of oak. When complete it measured 18ft. long; its greatest width is 2ft., and its greatest interior depth 12ins.²

A portion of a second boat, not made of oak, was found in the substructure of the Glastonbury Lake Village during the excavations in 1895. The fragment was twenty feet long and included one half of the bow-end and part of the starboard side; the piece probably belonged to a boat of much greater length. The wood was much decayed and quite soft, and at several places tool-marks and charring were distinctly seen on the inner surface.

The Shapwick boat was found at the west side of the ditch bordering the east side of the road leading from the station to Shapwick Village, and at the distance of 309ft. from the railway gates. It was lying lengthways in an E.N.E. and w.s.w. direction: the bow-end being eastward and protruding into the ditch was at a considerably higher level than the stern. The boat was tilted sideways towards the south, resting on its starboard side; the port side, being uppermost, was pressed inwards and downwards almost to a horizontal position by the weight of the superincumbent layers of peat.

1. *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, vol. xlviii, pt. 1, p. 85.

2. It is figured in *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, vol. xl, pt. 2, plate facing p. 148.

When the site was visited by the writer the boat had been removed to an adjoining shed and the hole filled in. Enquiries, however, were made as to the depth at which it was found, and produced estimates varying from 12 to 16ft. below the surface for the stern, and 4ft. for the bow-end. The great difference in the level of the two ends is at first sight misleading, and suggests an exceptional inequality of the beds of peat, but the discrepancy may to a large extent be accounted for by the proximity of the stern end to the roadway which is artificially raised, and on the other hand by the fall of the surface level towards the ditch margin.

The boat is cut out of one stem of oak; the bottom is flat and quite whole; the sides are straight for 16ft. 6ins., slightly inclined outwards from below upwards, and remarkably thin for their length. The stern looked at from above has a semi-circular outline and although in several fragments is otherwise complete. The bow is much damaged, but appears to have been round like the stern. The wood shows no ancient tool-marks, the surface being smooth and even. No holes, plugged or otherwise, are noticeable through the sides or bottom, and the edge is without a notch. At 2ft. 6ins. from both ends the bottom slants up towards the edge like a modern punt. The following measurements were made after the removal of the boat to the shed:—Total approximate length 20ft. 7ins. The depth inside ranged from 11½ins., to 13ins. The inside width of the bottom at 3ft. from the stern measured 2ft. 3ins., at 9ft. from the stern 2ft. 1in., and at 15ft. from the same end 1ft. 9½ins. The greatest inside width across the top is at 6ft. from the stern, where it measured 2ft. 11¼ins. The average thickness of the sides near the upper edge is ¾in., and at the junction of the sides with the bottom 1½ins. The thickness of the bottom at the centre of the boat is 1¾ins., and at the damaged end 1½ins. As the sides approach the stern, the thickness of the wood gradually increases to 6ins.

Nothing was found in the boat except peat, and a thin layer

of soft blue clay, about $1\frac{1}{2}$ ins. thick, next to the wood. The clay was similar to that which underlies the peat throughout the moor. With reference to the age of the boat, it is difficult to give even an approximate date as nothing was found associated with it. The depth at which it was found is of little help, as peat beds are unstable, and their growth most uncertain. Judging by the workmanship and finish of the wood, it is possible that the boat was made with iron tools, and this surmise is strengthened by its resemblance in several details to the Glastonbury specimen which was found in the immediate vicinity of remains of the Early Iron age, dating from about B.C. 250, or rather earlier. The boat must have been made from a grand tree, as it was all heart of oak.

I have been given to understand that Capt. B. A. Warry who owns the boat has had a large trough made, and at the time of writing it is being preserved under water at the "Griffin's Head" Inn.