



the FIGUREHEADS *of* VALHALLA

The collection of figureheads on display at Valhalla, within the Abbey Gardens on Tresco, is a unique monument. The majority were salvaged from the remains of ships wrecked on Scilly and the figureheads serve almost as a roll of honour to those who lost their lives in the waters around these islands.

The exhibits at Valhalla are not limited solely to figureheads. In one corner of Valhalla's gravel terrace stands a large cannon. It is 3.15 metres long (ten feet and four inches) and weighs between two and three tonnes. In its day, the cannon would have been capable of firing an eighteen pound ball. The cannon is not remarkable simply as a piece of ordnance. Its coppery green hue betrays the quality of the bronze from which it was made and the handsome decoration denotes that this was no ordinary gun.

Towards the cannon's muzzle is a crowned "L" and a number of fleurs-de-lys. These refer to the French monarch Louis XIV, Le Roi Soleil (1638-1715). Near to the breech is the main decoration which consists of the arms of France and Navarre. These are surrounded by the collars of the orders of Saint Michel and Saint Esprit. Above all of these emblems is a crown. Closer to the breech still are a pair of anchors, crossed and dressed with a ribbon. The ribbon reads "LE DUC DE BEAUFORT". The Duke in question was Francois de Vendome, Grand Maitre, Surintendant de Commerce et de la Navigation, 1665-1669. The cannon is a most aristocratic piece of artillery.

The wreck of Admiral Sir Cloudisley Shovell's flagship Association, along with three other ships of his fleet, in October 1707 was responsible for bringing this splendid gun to Scilly. The cannon was plundered. The Admiral was returning from besieging Toulon that summer but the likelihood is that it was seized at the Battle of Vigo in 1702, as part of Shovell's haul of sixty bronze cannon.

Apparently, these captured pieces had the word VIGO chiselled between the reinforcing bands about the breech. The "VIGO" of the Valhalla cannon was not in evidence to my eyes, at least, but much corrosion has occurred to the bronze. The loss of the Association on the Gilstone in 1707 condemned this gun and several like it to the ocean floor.

In 1967, the discovery of the wreck by a Royal Navy diving team saw the raising of Shovell's bronze spoils of war. This particular cannon was salvaged in 1970. Two ornate lifting dolphins once graced the middle of the barrel but both these have been broken off. There is some conjecture as to the possible cause of this damage. It is suggested that the dolphins might have been destroyed in an abortive salvage attempt made in 1709 by Edmund Herbert.

This seventeenth century cannon is the oldest exhibit in Valhalla. It is also the most recent addition to the collection. Nearly nine hundred shipwrecks have occurred around the Isles of Scilly. Many of their secrets and treasures remain beneath the waves but this cannon demonstrates that even after hundreds of years there are prizes still to be wrestled from the ocean's grasp. The cannon is also a fitting memorial to the fighting men of Admiral Shovell's fleet who perished three hundred years ago, amongst the Western Rocks of Scilly. ■

Acknowledgements to the National Maritime Museum, Admiral Shovell's Treasure by Peter McBride and Richard Larn, Poor England Has Lost So Many Men ed. Richard Larn.

Valhalla is to be found in The Abbey Gardens, Tresco. The gardens are open every day of the year 10am-5pm.

For further information: www.tresco.co.uk

