

THE PRESERVATION OF VIKING SHIPS IN OSLO

by Susan and Peter Stuckey

Just outside Oslo is the famous open-air **Folk Museum** at Bygdoy where one can see complete streets from old Oslo faithfully reconstructed, even to the cobble stones, and not far from the **Folk Museum** is the **Viking Ship Museum**. The Scandinavians have a real flair for display. In their maritime museums much thought and care have been given to the design of the buildings to suit them to the mood of the exhibits for which they are to be used. Thus the stark simplicity of the elliptical roof over the Viking ships adds immeasurably to the initial impact of the exhibits. On entering this cruciform building, one is conscious of nothing but the towering prow of the *Oseberg* ship.

There are three ships in the Bygdoy collection - the *Oseberg*, the *Gokstad*, and the *Tune* - taking their names from the districts in which they were discovered. All date from the ninth century A.D. - the beginning of the Viking era - and all were used as burial ships. Their remarkable state of preservation is due to the excellent preservative qualities of the blue clay in which they were buried for 1,100 years.

Contrary to popular belief, these are not the '*long ships*' used by the Viking invaders of Western Europe, but are of the type known as '*karvi*' - small craft used in sheltered waters or for coastal work. Their dimensions are all in the region of 70-80ft overall and about 17-18ft beam, with an un-stayed mast of something like 40ft - only half the size of the war vessels, but otherwise identical in general appearance. It is said that these craft reached an ultimate in design for their type and certainly their influence can be seen to this day in small craft, not only in Scandinavia, but in the Shetland and Orkney '*boars*' as well as in the Yorkshire '*cobles*', which set a square main-sail over their fine, clinker-built, hulls.

The show-piece of the Bygdoy collection is undoubtedly the *Oseberg* ship. Believed to be the funeral ship of the

Viking Queen Aasa, it contains some superb and intricate carving, particularly in the stem and stern posts, and is almost extreme in hull form even by the standards of the day. She had probably been the ceremonial or day-boat of the chieftainess and had certainly been sailed hard at times, judging by the mast partners which are badly strained and reinforced with iron bands. According to Viking custom, the burial ship contained all that the dead would need on the voyage to *Valhalla* including, in this case, a luckless bond-woman who had been slain in order to accompany her mistress. Oddly enough, whilst giving their illustrious departed all they required for the last voyage, the Vikings made it impossible for them to get away by loading the ship with boulders and - in the case of the *Oseberg* ship - making her anchor warp fast to an enormous stone before building the burial mound around and over her. Apparently, this was to prevent the dead from returning to haunt the living.

The *Gokstad* ship, although less spectacular, is probably a better example of a small work-a-day coaster, being much fuller in the bilge and of heavier construction altogether. She is completely devoid of decoration except for a carved animal head on the tiller. Most of the items found on board were those of a seaman, including a ship's boat and two other small craft. The remains of 64 circular shields were also found in position along the ship's side, although the gunwale is pierced for sixteen oars each side. Like the *Oseberg*, the *Gokstad* ship has been crushed under the weight of the boulders and the burial mound, and it took years of patient labour to rebuild the ship. The third vessel - the *Tune* ship - has been left as she was excavated. Nevertheless, enough remains to be of great interest.

(This is part of a longer article entitled 'Scandinavian Ship-Hunt' which first appeared in *Tideway* in March and April 1964)

