

Clive Burlton, *The Matthew of Bristol* (Long Ashton, Bristol Books 2017). 117pp., many b/w & col. illustrations. Hardback, £14.00 [ISBN: 9781909446106]. **Reviewed 06.2018**

2017 was the twentieth anniversary of the voyage of the *Matthew*, a replica of the original vessel, to commemorate the ‘discovery’ of Newfoundland by John Cabot in 1497. This book is a timely account of the circumstances and thinking around the reconstruction of replica, the voyage itself, and the subsequent history of ship. Its approach is more ethnographic than Peter Fosbrook’s *Voyage of the Matthew* (BBC Books 1997), detailing the people involved in the project, where the money came from and how the design was agreed on. The voyage narrative includes lengthy quotes from the ship’s log, its circumnavigation of Newfoundland, as well as the return to Bristol in 1998 and its subsequent use, including a revamp as the *Dawn Treader* to promote the Disney ‘Chronicles of Narnia’ films! Much of the research seems to have been derived from the *Matthew* papers, now in the Bristol Archive, as well as numerous photographs taken by those involved over the twenty years.

The short historical account of the original *Matthew* makes no attempt to include much of the recent scholarship, particularly of Dr Evan Jones, that shows the original ship was an unremarkable merchant vessel with a long life both before and after the 1497 voyage, or the new insights that we have from the investigations of the Newport Ship, a rather larger vessel of the mid-15th century, trading between the Bristol Channel and the Basque country.

This book does not however claim to be academic – there is for example no bibliography or citations – but does contain original material that is of interest to historians of the future, who may be interested in this little bit of Bristol’s social history; why the City took to celebrating the 1497 anniversary with not only the building of the *Matthew* but also the Festival of the Sea, that ultimately cost over £3m. There is of course no mention of the backlash from the largely Afro-Caribbean community in Bristol, as to why the city might want to celebrate a discovery of the New World that ultimately led to the enslavement of 12 million Africans, and vividly expressed in Tony Forbes’ painting, ‘Sold down the River’ on display in the M Shed.

There have long been issues with the *Matthew* replica. As there are no contemporary illustrations of the ship, its construction, proportions and rigging are largely guesswork. As an exercise in understanding 15th century ship construction, it had little value. Its general instability was discovered during the sea trials, so the crow’s nest at the top of the main mast built of oak was replaced by lighter glass fibre. The boat has an engine, which the original would not have done, and this has itself been subject to modification with the addition of hydraulic systems.

However as an educational resource the *Matthew* is invaluable, providing an experience of what these vessels felt like and looked like. This volume adds to this, by providing the story of the replica and will hopefully help maintain interest in the vessel so that it can continue to form part of the local Bristol seascape for many years to come.

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