Viking Longships

The Vikings built ingenious ships for raiding and war. These ships were 'dragon-ships' or 'longships'. The ships were long and narrow, this meant they could travel quickly which was important in surprise attacks and get-aways.

Viking longships could sail in shallow water so they could travel up rivers as well as across the sea. In a raid, a ship could be hauled up on a beach. The Vikings could jump out and start fighting, and then make a quick getaway if they were chased.

A Viking ship had one big square sail made of woven wool which was held in place with the mast. When there was not enough wind for the sail, the men rowed with long wooden oars. This meant they weren't dependent on the wind, therefore the oars were the main source of power. To steer the ship, one man worked a big steering oar at the back end, or stern. Shields were tied over the oar holes when the ships were in port. The shields were very important for protection in battle.

The introduction of the sail made it possible for the Vikings to travel very long distances across the Oceans to places as far away as America and Africa. However, it wasn't as easy as it sounds, even for a seafaring people like the Vikings; the Longships often capsized if the wind was blowing from the beam (the side) and it is thought that almost half of those ships that set sail for Greenland and Iceland were lost due to bad weather.

Because of the size of the ship, there was room for between 50 and 60 men. Most of the men would be rowing with a few steering and navigating. The men slept and ate on deck. There was some space below deck for stores, but no cabins.

At the curved front end (prow) of the ship, was a carved wooden figure-head, which were meant to scare enemies.