

## On This Day – 12<sup>th</sup> October 1511

The 'Great' Michael is launched for the first time



*Pont's map of Scotland 1583-1614 maps of Scotland showing ships at Higgins Neuk. Reproduced with permission of the National Library of Scotland.*

As part of the 'Hidden Remains of Higgins Neuk' project the SCAPE Trust, along with a group of volunteers, have been working to uncover the site of a former royal dockyard at Higgins Neuk, just next to the Clackmannanshire Bridge. Years of research by local historian John Reid has identified this area as the likely site at which James IV's ship the 'Great' Michael, first launched over 500 years ago, was docked.

First ordered in 1505, the Michael was the largest ship afloat at the time when construction finished in 1511. It was 240ft long, had 10ft thick oak walls, and was manned by a crew of 300 sailors and 120 gunners. It used, it was said by Lindsay of Pitscottie, a contemporary Scottish chronicler, 'all the woods of Fife', and the port of Newhaven near Edinburgh was specifically built to provide a ship-building harbour big enough to house it. The intention was to use the vessel to lead a Scottish crusade against the Ottoman Empire, something which never came to pass when a French war with England activated the Auld Alliance commitments.

The location at Higgins Neuk was likely chosen as it was near James's royal residence at Stirling Castle, and on a clear day he may have been able to see the Michael from the battlements; this reflects the Forth's position as an important area of influence and trade.

However the greatness of the Michael was short-lived. Its position as the world's largest ship was usurped the next year by the 'Henri Grace a Dieu', built at the order of Henry VIII of England (which was no doubt designed to the specifications of 'bigger than the Michael'), and by 1513 the cost of maintaining such a sizeable ship was taking its toll on the Scottish economy. In August of that year it was rent to the French navy, and the death of James at the Battle of Flodden shortly afterwards meant that the Michael was sold permanently. While some reports indicate that the Michael was left to rot in a French dock at Brest, there are suggestions that it was used in battle as late as 1545, under the new name of La Grande Nef d'Ecosse, or The Big Nave of Scotland.

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