

teeth, but did not allow him to see her in the bath once a week, which he did, eventually, especially the two tails, following which she fled, leaving only her image in French heraldry and on coffee cups and a few other places. Actually, there are quite a lot of images of mermaids with two tails if you look about.

Another strange thing is that in all these sightings there is a notable absence of comment on paddles. The schoolmaster in Reay watched his mermaid combing her hair, as they do, but was unable to see whether her hands were webbed. If they were, was she using hand paddles?

A further characteristic reported regularly was the ability to dive at will and come up some distance away. Did that mean taking a big breath or would a breathing tube down into the cockpit have done the job?

So here we have it, maids paddling across the North Sea with hand paddles in squirt boats. Surely you don't still harbour some slight scepticism.

In 1814 two Buckie fishermen of integrity were 400m offshore in calm conditions when they saw a merman near them, close enough to see no scales on his tail. He dived and came up some distance away, accompanied by a mermaid. Meanwhile, the men rowed for the shore and safety as quickly as they could.

Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* was interested in these goings on. It includes various sightings including an English ship 720km from land in the Greenland seas in the late 17th century, approaching a flotilla of 60 - 70 'skiffs' with a man apiece, all of whom dived when the ship approached them.

If you were going to hunt for mermaids, where and when would you look? I'll bet it wouldn't be the far north of Scotland at the beginning of January yet the most recent sighting was on January 5th 1900 at Sandwood Bay, within the lifetime of the late Queen Mother, to name but one person who has lived up there. About the only thing plausible here is that it is the first landing point after Cape Wrath but even then you would want to be a fair surfer to land here in most conditions. The other factor is that the shepherd concerned might still have been under the influence, it being only four days after Hogmanay.

Little people

In for a penny, in for a pound. What about goblins, dwarfs, pixies, elves and the rest? Obviously fairies have wings (as distinct from a backpack of split paddles) and trolls live under bridges and eat gruff billygoats but the others are just a set of malevolent little imaginary malingerers and troublemakers to blame when things go wrong, disappear, get broken or generally need to be blamed on someone else. Even if you wanted a decent pygmy the nearest were in Africa, weren't they?

Apparently not. Due west of Sandwood Bay is the Butt of Lewis. Not far from the point is a near island where the bones of a colony of small people have been unearthed, predating 1549. The site is at Luchruban, a name which should not be confused with leprechaun, mythical little people who lived in Ireland. Mermaids may have been reported from as far down as the Mull of Kintyre but these Luchruban characters were not known to have got beyond Colonsay, only three quarters of the way to Ireland.

Miniature mermaid

Six Shetland fishermen working off Yell in 1833 landed a metre long creature which they kept on board for some three hours. She had stiff bristles on top of her head and down to her neck which she could raise and lower at will but otherwise looked like a normal mermaid with a salty Mohican, no gills, fins or scales, no aggression, just a piteous moaning. They were all quite certain she was a mermaid and eventually decided to get rid of her over the side, whereon she dived vertically.

Three years earlier some crofter women in Benbecula had met a creature playing just offshore, about the size of a four year old child but with a fully developed chest. A few days later she was found dead about 3km further down the coast. She had a tail without scales from the waist down, not unlike a sea sock by the sound of it. She was given a decent burial but, of course, nobody wanted to pry too much. Mermaids are a bit like CRT television sets, perhaps able to give a fatal shock even when dead.

Superstitious nonsense

This is only a selection of the reported sightings on offer. There is so much romantic rubbish, folk fancy and superstitious nonsense around that if you started to believe any of it there is no knowing where it would lead. It would be much better to ignore it completely than loosen the lid of this can of worms.

I claim no particular right to describe the story of modern day ocean paddling.

I'm not an academic.

I claim to be an amateur historian on a subject about which I do know something.

I'm simply an ex-paddler who believes that how any activity, institution or country's history evolves matters. Here's why...

Why recognizing the history of our sport is important

It matters, as the origins of a nation, for example, will set the scene for its future. Will it become a totalitarian state or one where human rights and democracy matter? Will an institution or an activity succeed in its endeavours by setting out its purpose and constitutional principles that are deemed appropriate from the onset? I believe that the historical significance of every activity sets the tone for its future, hence its importance. According to Wikipedia, history is always incomplete and will retain its debatable mysteries.

So it is with my account of the evolution and establishment of ocean kayaking from its place in the survival of the Inuit aboriginal people to its use today as a global recreational activity.

Here's a quote from the man himself, Duncan Winning OBE, 'I feel that it is important to record the history of our sport and that every effort should be made to get it correct. It is very easy to mislead, albeit unintentionally, and an error repeated often enough readily becomes accepted as fact' which means I'm open to correction or even advice regarding our history.

First, a brief overview of the origins of sea kayaking

I have given this subject a fair coverage in my books, *Sea Touring* and *Sea Kayak Touring*, as have others. Much greater experts than I have written about the European development of these 'not so frail craft', those such as John Brand (*The Little Kayak Book*), Duncan Winning, Harvey Golden and many others.

All I plan here is to provide my own take on what have been watershed moments of the recent developments of our sport since it was introduced to ourselves here in western Europe so, first, I'll give credit to its very roots.

The Inuit were the first among nations to use kayaks as a medium of travel. There is clear modern evidence that five thousand years ago they were building kayaks from driftwood, whale bones and seal skins. Their prime use was to provide access to their coastal waters where they hunted for seals and fish. Given that they lived in the high Arctic with no opportunity for farming, this was their only source of sustenance.

Wooden kayaks and fabric kayaks on wooden frame (such as the Klepper) dominated the market up until the 1950s, when glassfibre boats were introduced. Rotomoulded plastic kayaks first appeared in 1984.

I remember make a couple of early crossings of the English Channel using such craft, to which we added a skeg to aid directional stability. This consisted of a fixed rudder made from glassfibre which was made to fit over the rear of a touring kayak and held in place by elasticated cord secured by wrapping around the cockpit coaming.

Second, by whom, how and when did kayaking begin as a modern recreational activity?

The story of how these craft found their way to Europe and, very soon after, were adopted as an activity in their own right is one of opportunity and foresight.

First, there are several accounts of how the kayak was introduced to Europe as well as how travellers from Europe were able to visit and discover how the Inuit were building and paddling this narrow and apparently flimsy craft in their local waters.

An early example was Vitus Bering who, in the 1740s, visited the Aleutian Islands with a party of Russians. Here he found the local people using kayaks with skill and daring in order to hunt for food. At this time sea otters were a popular commodity in Europe and Asia for hats and other items of clothing and it was hardly a leap of imagination that led to the rapid decline of the poor old otters that populated the Aleutian seas as they were exploited for profit by the Russians.

This is not meant to be a definitive historical record of how paddling on the ocean originated and developed

Instead it is an attempt to summarize the key moments.

This is my take on what these moments are...

1 The Inuit developed the kayak as a hunting tool which provided food for them.

2 The Scottish moneyed class took up sea kayaking in the 19th C but