

Gamul Terrace opposite St. Olave's Church Chester, and the Vikings

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On Lower Bridge Street, Chester - just opposite St. Olave's Church - is a raised terrace which now houses the Brewery Tap public house and a number of private homes. The terrace - Gamul Terrace - was the former location of Gamul House, the home of Sir Francis Gamull (1606-1654) a former Mayor of Chester and prominent Royalist during the Civil War. The name Gamul (Gamul) itself derives from a Norse personal name. It is therefore an intriguing coincidence that Gamul Terrace sits at the heart of Viking Age Chester. This short article considers the Vikings in Wirral and Chester and its connection with the name Gamul.

Viking Wirral and Chester, and St. Olave's Church

For at least part of the 10th and 11th Centuries the southern part of the City of Chester was once home to a vibrant Viking community, contributing towards the success of this former financial centre (Harding, 2002; Griffiths, 2010 & references therein). Documented Viking activity at Chester started in AD893 when the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* (see Thorpe, 1861) first tells us how in AD893 the Danes "moved rapidly to a desolate town in Wirral called Chester" and stayed there (until ~ AD895) before embarking on a campaign of raiding in Wales. The Ancient Welsh annals – *Annales Cambriae* (see Morris, 1980) and *Brut y Tywysogion* (Jones, 1952) pick up on the story from the Anglo Saxon Chronicle:

Nordmani venerunt et vastaverunt Loyer et Bricheniaue et Guent et Guinnligiauc.

"And then the Northmen devastated England, Brecheiniog, Morganwy, Gwent, Buallt, and Gwenllwg".

The reference of the Anglo Saxon Chronicler to Chester as a "desolate town in Wirral" is interesting. Almost three centuries earlier the Anglians had crushed the Britons at the Battle of Chester AD613 and it seems the old city was left to waste, hence the "desolate state" the marauding Danes found it in.

The next Viking encounter was a very different one. Irish chronicles – *The Three Fragments* - tell us of the mass settlement of Wirral by primarily Norse or Norwegian Vikings expelled from Dublin in the year AD902 after a deal between Æthelflæd, Queen of Mercia and the Norse leader Ingimund (Cavill et al, 2000; Harding, 2002, 2006; Griffiths, 2010). The settlement appears, from place-name evidence of major settlements with Norse or Hiberno-Norse names (Harding 2000, Harding et al, 2010) to have been both substantial and largely confined to the north and west of the peninsula, with Raby (ON *rá-býr* "boundary settlement") at its southern boundary and Thingwall (ON *þing vollr* "Assembly field") its place of Assembly or 'parliament' at the centre (Figure 1a). The deal with Æthelflæd no doubt required the settlement to be peaceful – which appears to have been honoured at least for the first few years. To make sure of this Æthelflæd appears according to the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* (see Thorpe, 1861) to have refortified and reoccupied the garrison of Chester. The relative peace ended abruptly in AD907. Possibly due to intense overcrowding with more and more settlers coming in, together with a growing dissatisfaction at the low quality of the lands they had settled – much of the northern part of Wirral suffering periodic inundation (there are a large number of carr and holm place names, reflecting the presence of flooded land – Harding 2007-8), the *Three Fragments*

tell of a meeting between Ingimund and the leaders of the Norsemen, Danes and their Irish followers. This meeting – possibly at Thingwall (Jesch, 2000) – resulted in the issue of an ultimatum followed by subsequent attacks on the city. The attacks – reported in legendary detail in the Fragments - were repeatedly repelled but the story ends “*but it was not long before the Norsemen came to do battle again...*”

<Figure 1 & 2 near here>

Although the Three Fragments *Story of Ingimund* ends there – and we are not told of the final outcome - it is clear that the Vikings did eventually gain a presence in the southern part of the city in what seems to have been a largely peaceful co-existence with their Anglian cousins, and contributing to the growth of the city as a major financial centre and this appears to have continued through to the 11th century and the time of Danish rule through Canute and his sons. The distribution of minor (field, track and topographical names) of Norse or Irish origin shows a greater spreading throughout the peninsula (Harding, 2006; Harding, 2007-8) compared to the older major names, spreading beyond Raby and towards Chester– Figure 2 gives the distribution of these names based on their earliest recorded forms. This is because field and track names can change depending on the local farmer at the time – and reflects more the language and dialect being spoken at the time the field/track was named (see Harding, 2002). The diaspora of the Wirral Vikings had clearly reached Chester.

From 910 to 1066 in Chester appear a significant number of moneyers and landowners bearing Norse names (see Tait, 1916; Wainwright, 1942). The proportion of moneyers with Norse names was far higher than many mints elsewhere in England even during the period of Scandinavian rule by King Canute (1017–1035) and his sons Harald (until 1040) and Hardacanute (1042). By Canute’s time a strong Scandinavian community appears to have been well established in the southern part of the City around what is now Lower Bridge Street and also south of the River Dee at Handbridge. This is also reflected in some of the street names in the City: Clippe Gate (near Bridge gate) and Wolfeld’s Gate (the old name for Newgate), derive from the Norse personal names of the man *Klyppr* and woman *Úlfhildr* respectively. There is also Crook Street (ON man’s name *Krókr*). Fragments of arm rings and brooches dated to 970-980AD discovered in Castle Esplanade in the southern part of the city resemble strongly jewellery discovered at Ballaquayle (Isle of Man). A Norse brooch discovered in Princess Street, Chester, is identical to one discovered in Dublin and was doubtless made from the same mould (see Harding 2002). And not far away a hoard of Viking treasure dated to Ingimund’s time was discovered in 2004 in the village of Huxley (Graham-Campbell and Philpott, 2009).

Remains of a Scandinavian style timber building – similar to one’s discovered at Wood Quay, Dublin and York - was found during excavations on Lower Bridge Street in the 1970’s (see Harding 2002 and references therein). A putative plan of 10th Century Chester is given in Figure 3.

<Figure 3 near here>

In the southern part two churches have Norse-Irish roots. One of these is St. Olave’s, a church dedicated to the Norwegian king, Ólaf Haraldsson, “King Ólaf the Saint” (died in battle at Stikkelstad, 1030). The church is located just inside the southern City wall along Lower Bridge Street. Other churches dedicated to the same saint can be found across northern Europe. Another church (now lost) was St. Bridget’s, dedicated to the Irish saint Bridget (OIr Brigid). St. Olave’s is no longer used for regular formal services. In 2001 and 2002 it was used for St. Olav’s day services (in English and Norwegian), to celebrate the 1100th anniversary of the arrival of Ingimund (see www.nottingham.ac.uk/~sczsteve for recordings of these events), and since 2007 has been the destination of an annual St. Olav’s Day (July 29th) pilgrimage from St. Bridget’s Church in West Kirby to parallel the main annual St. Olav’s pilgrimages in Norway (Harding & Robinson 2009).

<Figures 4 & 5 near here>

Gamul Terrace, Sir Francis Gamull and John Gamel

Across the road from St. Bridget's is Gamul Terrace (Figure 4) and Gamul House, the former home of Sir Francis Gamull (1606-1654) of Buerton, Chester, Mayor of Chester (1636-1638) and a prominent Royalist who survived the Civil War (Ward, 2009). Intriguingly the origin of the name is Old Norse (*gamall* – “old” or man's name *Gamall*) is listed as a pre-Norman conquest Cheshire landowner in the Domesday Book as Gamel (see Tait, 1916; Wainwright, 1942). Scandinavian names persisted well after the Norman Conquest and their names appear in Medieval Documents. A John Gamel appears in the Chester Chartulary (Tait, 1920-23). So unknown to him, Sir Francis – whose house was built opposite the Church of the Patron Saint of Norway – was carrying the name of a Scandinavian landowner who would have been living somewhere in the vicinity some 20 generations previous.

Conclusion

Whilst we are not suggesting that either Gamul Terrace or Gamul House on Lower Bridge Street, Chester themselves go back to the time of the Vikings it is at least interesting that they carry the name of a Viking landowner and are located directly opposite the centre of the former Scandinavian Community in Chester – St. Olave's Church.

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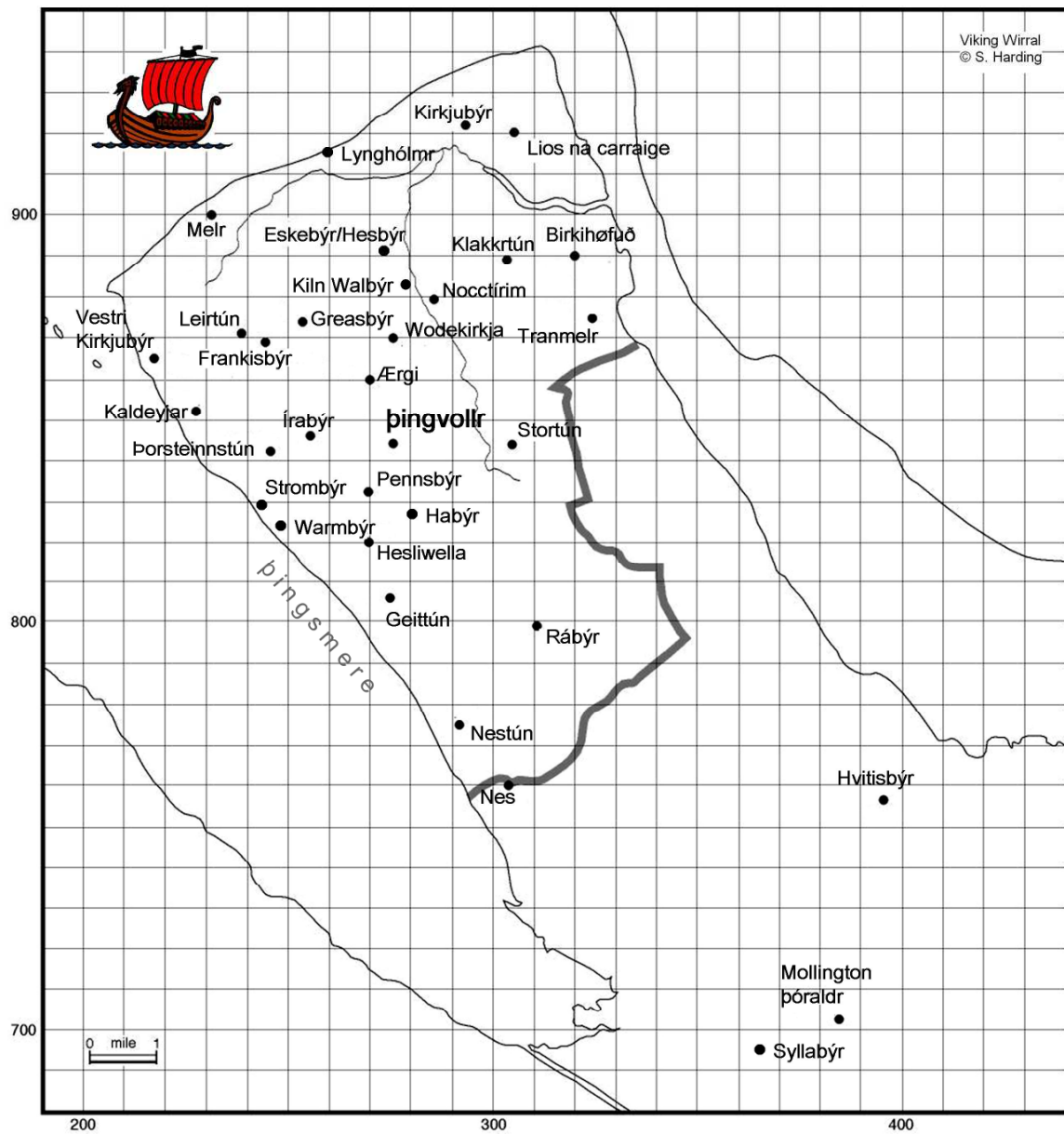


Figure 1: Distribution of major place names of Norse or Irish origin in Wirral (in their putative Norse/ Irish forms (Harding et al, 2010). The boundary shown is due to Dodgson (1957) and Griffiths (1992)

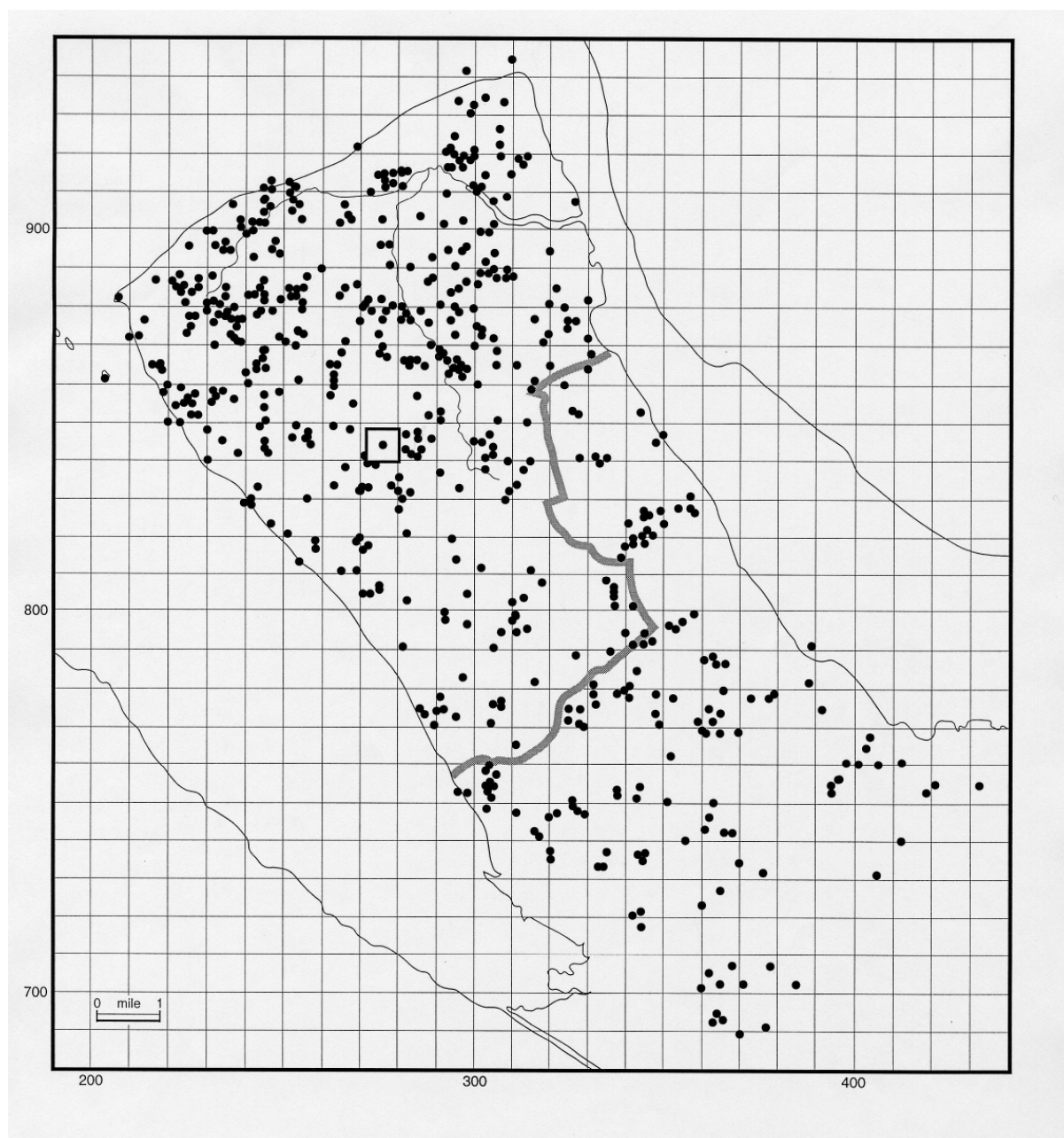


Figure 2: Distribution map of field/track names containing Scandinavian elements.

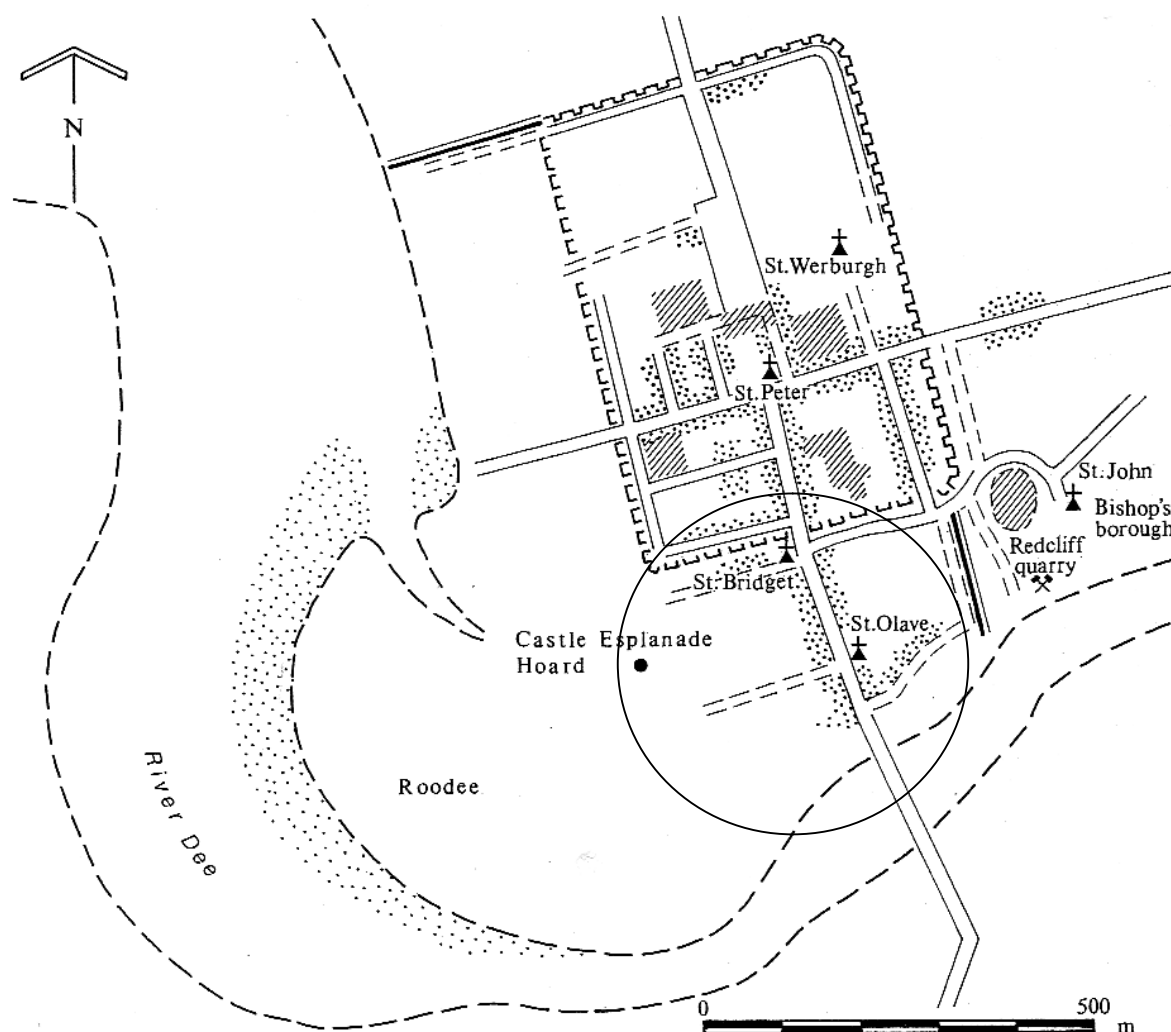


Figure 3: 10th Century Chester: areas of settlement (indicated by dots). The main Scandinavian community was towards the south of the city (approximately marked by the circle) although there appears to have been considerable integration. For full explanation of symbols, see Harding (2002, p. 78). Reproduced courtesy of Cheshire West and Chester City Council



Figure 4: St. Olave's Church, Chester



*Figure 5: **Gamul Terrace** . From *ON gamall*. A reflection of St. Olave's directly across Lower Bridge Street can be seen on the window*