

## Chapter 6

### VIKING CHESTER

The highly respected Cheshire historian and place-name expert, John McNeal Dodgson (1928-1990), made the following assessment of the aftermath of the 902AD settlements in the Wirral peninsula<sup>57</sup>:

The Wirral colony began a programme of vigorous and occasionally armed expansion almost immediately after its establishment, towards the better lands of the English districts to the south.

Having settled in Wirral and, save the occasional skirmish with the English, kept their promise to Æthelflaed of not causing trouble, did the Vikings keep to their permitted area, presumably demarked by Raby? A perusal of the distribution of minor names of the area bearing possible Scandinavian or Irish roots reveals otherwise. The large number of places with Viking roots not only inside the boundary of the original Scandinavian enclave but also outside demonstrates that after settling in the less fertile areas of North-west Wirral, the Scandinavian community of Wirral was soon exercising its muscles and engaging in an active programme of expansion towards the rest of Wirral and the surrounding hinterland - this included the coastal areas across the shores on the Wales side of the Dee (e.g. Talacre in Flint). This programme of expansion also extended towards Chester.

#### Viking designs on Chester

Ingimund's story - as described in the previous chapters - tells of Scandinavian Wirral's repeated attempts to secure Chester, by military means, working with its Danish and Irish allies and starting in 907AD - some five years after the start of the settlements. This was not the first time that the former Roman fortress had been subjected to attacks or occupation by Vikings or other germanic invaders. The Anglian tribes led by an *Ethelfrith* had first acquired Chester from the Britons in a battle recorded by the famous scribe Bede. This battle was assigned by him to a date of 613AD, although latter-day scholars have suggested a slightly later date. The historian F.T. Wainwright says<sup>58</sup>:

<sup>57</sup> J. McN Dodgson (1957) *Saga Book of the Viking Society* 14, 303-316

<sup>58</sup> F.T. Wainwright (1941) The Anglian Settlement of Lancashire, *Transactions Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 93, pp 1-45.

Ethelrith consolidated the Anglian power in northern England. Not only did he weld Northumbria<sup>59</sup> into a powerful, if temporary, unity, but he made the first and most spectacular advance against the Britons in this area. He penetrated to the West coast of England. Of two discernible movements, the first culminating in the battle of Degsastan, AD603, by which an Anglian wedge was driven between the Strathclyde Britons of the remote North-west and their kinsmen of Lancashire and the South. The second thrust was towards Chester, and this seems to have brought the Lancashire plain under Anglian control. Bede describes the Battle of Chester, which was an annihilating defeat for the Britons. The usual interpretation is that the battle of Chester opened Lancashire to the English settlers who now flowed across the Pennines to take possession of their conquests. Archaeology has as yet no comment to make upon this view that Ethelrith's was the first step towards the colonization of Lancashire.

280 years later in 893AD it was the Vikings - Danish Vikings - who were in Chester. At that time the Danes had control of Eastern England - the Danelaw - and had intentions on Mercia. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records how, late in 893AD the Danes moved rapidly to "a desolate town in Wirral which is called Chester", and stayed there until probably 895AD before embarking on a Welsh campaign. The ancient Welsh annals known as the *Annales Cambriae* and *Brut y Tynysogion* recall:

*Nordmani venerunt et vastaverunt Loyer et Briceniaue et Guent et Guinnligiauc.* "And then the Northmen devastated England, Brecheiniog, Morganwy, Gwent, Buallt, and Gwenllwg".

RH. Hodgkin, writing in the *History of the Anglo-Saxons* states: "The Danes then broke out of Chester, for a time ravaged in North Wales before returning to Essex through Northumbria and East Anglia", and it has been suggested that on their return they passed through Chester again. A most interesting point however is the reference by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle to the desolate and wasted state of Chester before the Danish arrival in 893AD. Wainwright says the following:

It has been suggested that the desolation dates from the Battle of Chester, 613AD. This would mean that for 280 years, the

<sup>59</sup> Northumbria in medieval times was different from today and included what is now Yorkshire, Lancashire and part of the Lake District.

seventh, eighth and ninth centuries, the town of Chester has no history worth the name. It may be, however, that the desolation was more recent: it may have been due to some raid of the Norsemen who had been plundering along the Irish and Welsh coasts for years. Chester, if it had recovered from Ethelfrith's campaign, was not likely to have escaped from the attention of these ubiquitous sea-rovers.

A few years later there was a movement of far greater significance: the new and powerful Scandinavian settlements of Wirral were flexing their muscles in the direction of Chester: the English had in the meantime refortified the city by 907AD, and were waiting for the Vikings to strike.

### **907AD and after**

The previous Chapters described in detail the settlements and subsequent attacks based on the *Three Fragments*, now accepted by scholars as accurately recording the settlement and dates of the attacks on Chester. Although the detail of the skirmishes themselves has been open to question, the account presents a fascinating cycle of measure and countermeasure: "we did this so they did that". The full account has been given in Chapter 3 but we summarise the essence of the attacks on Chester here.

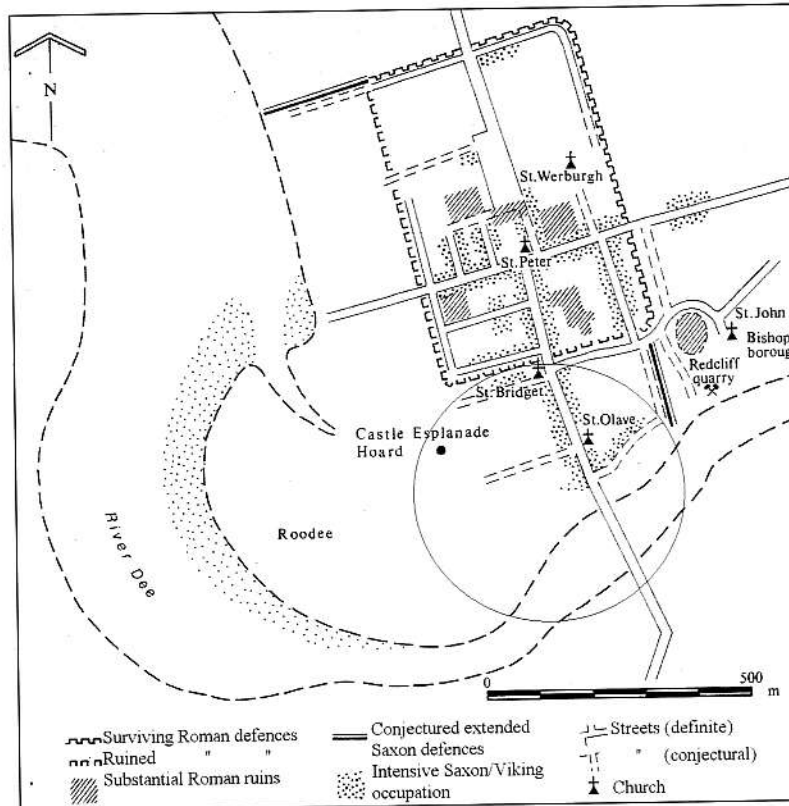
Although there has been five years of peace, the settlers have had to put up with poor quality land for their farms; so Ingimund calls together an emergency meeting of the Norse and Danish chiefs, presumably gathering them at Cross Hill, Thingwall. They agree they want action: a request is made for possession of Chester, which until recently has been a relatively deserted city, at least as found by the Danes some fourteen years previous. The English respond negatively, and re-fortify the city, expecting trouble. The first wave of attack is launched by a combined Norse, Danish and Irish force. They are tricked into going inside the city where many are trapped and killed. We are told that they regrouped and came back to attack again, but this time the English persuade the Irish contingent of the Wirral force to turn on the Danes which they do, killing some of them whilst they are off guard. The Norsemen, however, press on again, trying to ram down the gates. The English throw spears and boulders at them, so the Norsemen come back with hurdles to protect themselves as they batter away. Then the English throw boiling ale over them. The Norsemen counter this by covering the hurdles with hides. Then the English respond by setting bees on their attackers! The story finishes with the Vikings retreating back to Wirral.

### 910AD: Raiders to Traders - and then Settlers

Although the Scandinavians had not succeeded, the Ingimund story, as recorded in the *Three Fragments* ends with the tantalising statement "*but it was not long after that before the Norsemen came to do battle again...*" We do not know

what this refers to, but eventually they were to achieve considerable success at Chester by abandoning aggression. Adopting a more peaceful approach seems to have paid dividends, with a trading community developing in the south of the city paralleled by an active involvement in the financial organisation of not only Wirral but also Chester. Scandinavians like Kolbein, Thorald and Othulf played a major role in developing the Chester Mint, prolific in the 10th and 11th Centuries.

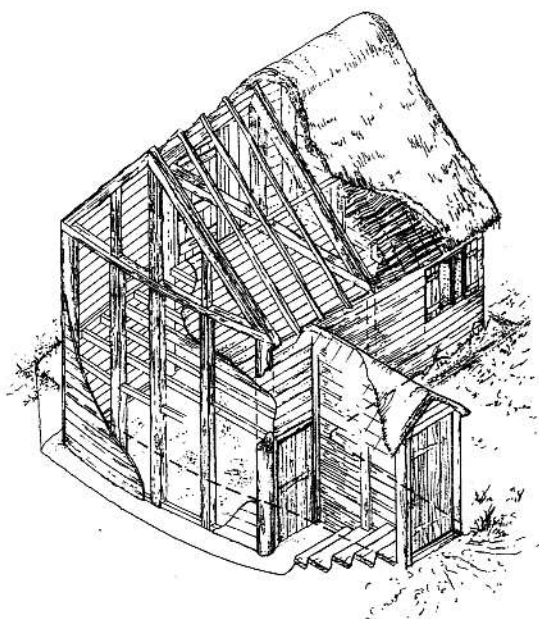
Chester, first revived by Æthelflæd in 907AD following the Viking settlements of Wirral, grew during the 10th-Century into a major trading port, with the Dee as its major waterway, and the old Roman roads giving links to the Midlands and to York. The Dee, Wirral and Chester were conveniently on the axis between



*Plan of 10th-Century Chester, areas of densest settlement and the most substantial Roman ruins. The main Scandinavian community was the southern part of the city as indicated by the circle, although there appears to have been considerable integration. Approximately 25% of the population were thought to have been Scandinavian.*

the major Viking centres of Dublin and York: Dublin was rapidly recovering as a Viking power base again after the expulsions of 902AD. Chester thus found itself on the southern edge of a vibrant, if unruly, Viking world with huge opportunities for trade. This Viking world stretched out from the Dee and across the seaways to Dublin and Ireland, the Isle of Man and Scottish Isles, Scandinavia and Iceland, and later to Greenland and, for a short period, even to North America. The desolate, deserted city, as found by a marauding Danish army only some two decades previously, had now found a new life. And it seems that, after the disagreements with Ingimund's Wirral had been settled, this time the Scandinavians were here to stay.

*A reconstruction drawing of a Scandinavian-style timber building found during excavations in Lower Bridge Street in the 1970's. Note the typical cellar. Reproduced by courtesy of Chester City Council/ Chester Archaeology; drawing by Peter Alebon.*



### **The Scandinavians in Chester**

A significant number of the Chester Scandinavians had come from Ireland. We know this because a proportion of the 10th-Century moneyers from the area bore clear Irish-Norse origins with the name of *Irfara* (ON derivation "Ireland journeyer") and others included *Oslac* and *Mældomen*. But these were just three of a large number of moneyers bearing Scandinavian names from 910 onwards - three years after the start of the feuds with Ingimund. It appears the main enclave was in the south of the city, in the area from what is now Grosvenor Street and the Grosvenor Museum area, extending eastwards to at least the corner of Bridge Street, where St. Bridget's church (now gone) once stood, and down Lower Bridge Street to where St. Olave's church is located (on the same site as the original wooden church), and extending south beyond the city walls into Handbridge. St. Olave's was dedicated to the patron saint of Norway, and St. Bridget's to the patron saint of Ireland.

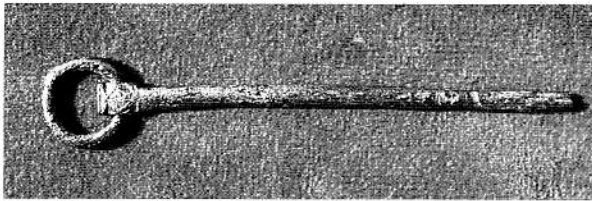
### **Integration between the Scandinavians and Saxons**

This community would have existed side by side with the English who were within the old Roman Fortress area. The discovery of Saxon "Chester Ware" pottery in the Scandinavian area, together with Scandinavian and Hiberno-Norse metalwork such as ring headed pins and a brooch with an exact parallel in Dublin found in the Saxon area,

suggests considerable integration between the two communities: the recent indiscretions by the raiders appear to have been forgiven or forgotten.

*Viking disc brooch of silvered bronze in the form of an interlaced serpent, found in the ruins of a Roman building in Hunter Street, Chester. It is in the Jellinge style and dates to the 10th-Century. Reproduced by courtesy of Chester City Council/ Chester Archaeology.*





*A ring-headed dress pin made of bronze from Chester. This style of dress fastening was adopted by the Vikings who settled in Ireland; an almost identical example was found at L'Anse-aux-Meadows in Newfoundland, the only known Viking settlement in America. Reproduced by courtesy of Chester City Council/Grosvenor Museum.*

### The Chester Mint

The 10th-Century saw Chester emerge as one of the main mints, in fact the fifth largest in England, with a prolific output of silver pennies. This growth was fuelled by the rapidly expanding trade with the Viking North through the River Dee. Chester, along

with Meols at the top end of Wirral, was booming as a trading port, and a measure of this activity is that silver pennies and pottery from Chester were soon to be common in Dublin, as archaeological finds there have shown. Unfortunately we do not know the actual location of the mint in the city.

The Dublin connections proved particularly important, and the increased trade was the catalyst for further growth of the Scandinavian community in Chester. In 921AD a pair of dies had been cut at Chester for a coin of the Dublin Viking leader Sithric. Sithric was succeeded in 927 by Guthfrith, whose son Ólaf came face to face with Æthelstan's English at the Battle of Brunanburh, as we consider in detail later in this book. The mint and ties with Dublin continued to flourish throughout the 10th-Century. There would no doubt have been a lull at the time of Brunanburh in 937AD, and then there was another lull in the 970's for reasons that are not properly understood, although it might be connected with King Edgar taking British chiefs rowing on the Dee in 975AD (reminding them of Brunanburh?), or a major Viking raid into the area which took place around 980AD. The mint did, however, revive near the end of the 10th-Century, and was thriving again during the period when the Danish King Cnut (Canute) (1017-1035) and his sons Harald (until 1040) and Harthacnut (1042) were in control of England.

Besides silver coins from this period, modern discoveries in Chester have included 'hacksilber' (= scrap silver), and silver ingots. One of the latter, presumably from Chester, was found in 1995 in a farm in Ness, Wirral, and described by Simon Bean<sup>60</sup>: the shape is similar to two stone moulds found in Chester. A more impressive discovery had been made in 1950 at Castle Esplanade in the South-west area of the city: *The Castle Esplanade Hoard* consisted of a large number of coins (at least 520) marked with the names of Scandinavian and English moneyers. These were stored in a Saxon pot, together with a quantity of hacksilber and a number of fragmentary or whole silver ingots of the Ness type. The hoard has been dated at c965AD, and its total value has been estimated at some 1300 pennies, a very considerable sum of money for the 10th-Century! The find spot - between the Saxon area and the river - has led to the theory that the hoard belonged to a Viking trader, presumably from Dublin, who had left his ship and hidden his fortune in a safe place before entering the Saxon town. For some unknown reason he never came back to retrieve it.

<sup>60</sup> P. Cavill, S.E. Harding and J. Jesch. (2000) *Wirral and its Viking Heritage*, English Place-Name Society, Nottingham, pp. 19-20.





*Part of the Castle Esplanade Hoard, consisting of silver pennies, ingots and backsilver - pieces of jewellery chopped up to act as currency. Everything was contained in the small cooking pot which stands in the background. The hoard was lost by a Viking trader some time around 965 AD. Reproduced by courtesy of Chester City Council/Grosvenor Museum.*





*Close ups of the Castle Esplanade Hoard. Reproduced by courtesy of  
Chester City Council/Grosvenor Museum.*





### Moneyers names on reverse of coins

The Anglo-Saxon practice of putting the names of moneyers on the reverse of their coins has provided us with a valuable clue about the extent of the Scandinavian influence on Chester. Being a moneyer involved what we would describe as buying a franchise from the king to make a quantity of coins, so to be a moneyer you had to be a rich and influential man. 25% of the names on Chester coins are Scandinavian (a list is given in Chapter 12), with people such as *Raenulf* in the reign of Æthelstan (924-940) and *Þóraldr* (Thorald) under Æthelred (979-1016).

### Jewellery: Broochs and ring-headed pins

Several ring-headed pins of a type used by the Vikings in Ireland have been discovered in Chester, and also at Meols; this reinforces the picture of very strong trade links through the Dee and the Irish Sea. Fragments of arm rings and brooches dated to 970-980AD in the Castle Esplanade Hoard from Chester resemble strongly jewellery discovered at Ballaquayle (Isle of Man). A Norse brooch discovered in Hunter Street, Chester, is identical to one discovered in Dublin and was almost certainly made from the same mould. The timberwork in cellared structures discovered in Lower Bridge Street, near St Olave's Church, is the same as structures excavated in Viking Dublin and York.

The names of streets and churches also bear out the impact of the Scandinavians. *Clippe Gate* (near Bridge gate) and *Wolf Gate*, (next to the present New Gate) derive from the names of the man *Klyppr* and woman *Úlfhildr* respectively. There is also Crook Street (from ON *krokker*, or *Króker*). St Bridget's Church and St Olave's Church, both in the southern part of the city, have been mentioned already. Finally there was a stonemason (or perhaps a school of stonemasons) based near the Church of St John's producing high quality stonework in the Irish-Norse style and which is found in Chester and Wirral. He was clearly either of Scandinavian origin himself or he was producing work for Scandinavian clients. Irish-Norse stonework is considered later in this book, and also by W.G. Collingwood and J.D. Bu'lock (see Chapters 6 and 7 of P. Cavill, S.E. Harding and J. Jesch, *Wirral and its Viking Heritage*).

### Resonances from the Chester Scandinavians

The mark of the Norsemen on the financial, administrative and legal arrangements of Chester and its shire remained at least until the 13th-

Century. One Norseman, *Gunnor*, held one third of the then important episcopal manor of Redcliff. The twelve iudices of the city, mentioned in 1086 as chosen from the men of the king, bishop, and earl, and obliged to attend the Chester hundred court, resembled the lawmen of the Scandinavian boroughs. A powerful Scandinavian community at Handbridge, south of the city across the River Dee, was reflected in terms of its Domesday assessment, where the Scandinavian term *carucate* was used as a land measure rather than the English *hide*.