

Ethelfred was ready

VIRTUALLY all the available evidence suggests that Wirral's Vikings were both peaceful and Christian.

For the bulk of the time the Norse colonists seem to have been primarily concerned with the farming of their lands and the welfare of their families. But this image of rural tranquillity is rudely shattered by our knowledge of a Norseman called Ingimund — a man whose hatred incited Wirral's Vikings to rise in rebellion against the Saxon rulers of Mercia.

THE SOURCE OF THE STORY

Uncritical acceptance of the following story is not recommended. The tale is based on account on an ancient and damaged vellum manuscript. This has been lost but a copy was made in 1643 by an Irish scholar. A copy of an original always poses problems, but even that copy has been lost! Our knowledge is based on a copy of the copy which was made in 1860 and published in John O'Donovan's rare "Annals of Ireland, Three Frag-

ments." The scope for amendment to and alteration of the story through the ages has been great, even if we accept the reliability of the original.

INGIMUND SETTLES IN WIRRAL

In a certain year (A.D. 902 seems likely) the Norsemen were driven out of their settlement in Ireland and one group, led by Ingimund, tried to take lands in Britain. (Some evidence suggests he landed at Anglesey). Ingimund was forced back and turned to Ethelfleda, Lady of the Mercians.

He asked to be allowed to settle on her lands and explained that he was tired of war. Ethelfleda seems to have accepted this because she gave Ingimund and his followers lands "near Chester" (given place-name evidence, this is taken to be a reference to Wirral). There they remained for some time.

INGIMUND'S PLOT

Ingimund became jealous of the wealth of Chester and the choice land around it. He met the

leaders of the Norsemen and Danes and told them that they were not well off without good lands. His plan was to present an ultimatum to the Saxons — either they handed over the City of Chester or it would be taken by force. All the leaders are said to have agreed to this.

SAXON STRATEGY

Although Ingimund's meeting had been held in secret Ethelfleda's spies dutifully informed her of the threat. She collected large forces and filled Chester with her host (Chester was actually re-fortified by Ethelfleda in AD 907)

A plan was devised by Ethelfleda and her ailing husband, Ethelfred, to save Chester. Saxon forces were ordered to start fighting outside the city walls and to leave the gates wide open. Inside the City, knights would be hidden. The attacking Norsemen and Danes would then chase the Saxons into the city, thinking that they had won the day. Then the gates would be closed, the knights would appear

and the attackers within the city killed.

IRISH WON OVER TO SAXON SIDE

Ethelfleda's plan was put into effect and many enemies were killed. However, Norsemen and Danes outside set about battering the city walls, under the protection of hurdles built for the attack.

There were, according to the source, some Irish among the attacking armies. They had less in common with the Danes than they had with the Norsemen so they were persuaded to lure the Danes to a special place and ambush them. The Irish co-operated well by killing Danes with rocks, large beams, darts, javelins and other weapons.

CHESTER SAVED BY BEES

Meanwhile, the Norsemen were still busy battering at the city walls. The Saxons now backed by the Irish, threw large rocks down on their attackers, but this did not stop them from battering the walls. Boiling beer and water were poured down but the attackers contin-

ued to batter, under the protection of hides. Finally the Saxons threw all the beehives of the city down and the Norsemen were forced to abandon the attack. But, so the source says, it was not long before they came to wage battle again.

Mr. Healey, who lives in Little Neston, completes his four-part series by discussing a Norseman called INGIMUND — a man who incited Wirral's Vikings to attack Chester. Or did he? And did he exist at all?



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TRUE OR FALSE?

The tale, once recorded on the damaged vellum fragment has reached its premature conclusion. We do not know if Ingimund did return or what became of him. With justification, we can ask if he existed at all and exactly how much of the story is likely to be true. One historian, F. T. Wainwright, did detect a "ring of truth" in much that was in the story and, by using Welsh sources, demonstrated that Ingimund did exist.

The racial mixture of the colonising population mentioned in the story had some credibility. Place-names and archaeological finds suggested a significant Irish element with the Norsemen and that Wirral's colonists were part of a secondary migration from Ireland. There is less evidence for Danes in Wirral, although the prefixes of Frankby and Thurston may be derived from Danish personal names.

As for the details, especially those concerning the battle tactics and those heroic bees, a pinch of salt seems most appropriate! There is apparently a Germanic legend that the Rhineland town of Andernach was once saved from attack by Lintz because two small baker boys threw all the bee-hives over the battle-

ments onto the enemies below.

We can scarcely doubt that anything and everything could be used in the defence of a fortified position and bees might prove to be valuable in reaching the parts untouched by boiling beer!

However, use of this tactic as a battle winner is dubious. It seems likely that the recurrent mention of the tactic in old annals is more of a literary device than an infallible military tactic.

A thorough analysis of the source of the story of Ingimund and a detailed discussion of its reliability is to be found in "Scandinavian England", edited by H. P. R. Finberg. The book contains a valuable collection of articles by F. T. Wainwright which throw considerable light on local history during the Viking period.