

# Wirral's place names — Viking

Historians currently undertaking a reappraisal of the Viking period are presenting it as a time which saw a substantial outburst of creative energy. Although the Vikings were violent men in violent times, the old chroniclers wildly exaggerated the extent of the pagan destruction. The contribution made by Scandinavian colonists to the development of art, poetry, sculpture, government and the English language itself has been seriously underestimated.

An appropriate starting point for the examination of Viking influence in Wirral is the place names themselves. Wirral can proudly boast a fine collection of place names which owe their existence to Norse colonists of the



DAVID HEALEY

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NEWSPAPERS

**THE Viking Influence on Wirral** — 29-year-old David Healey, in a fascinating four-part series, looks at how the Nordic invaders have affected local history. Mr. Healey, of Little Neston, is ancient history master at Calday Grange Grammar School. He first became interested in Vikings when he realised how many places there are in Wirral ending in "by" — the mark of a Viking place name.

10th century. A close look at the place names gives an insight into the type of Vikings who inhabited Wirral.

Confirmation of Viking influence in Wirral comes from the abundance of place names with a 'by' ending. This is derived from the old Norse 'byr' which meant a farmstead. The word certainly developed to come to mean a 'locality' in general, for it is the origin of terms like by-pass, by-election and by-law.

West Kirby was so named because the Norsemen found that the tiny 10th century village possessed a church or 'kirkju'. That this was important to them attests to the Christianity of the early colonists. Wirral's Norsemen were part of a secondary influx from Ireland where they, or their forefathers, must have been converted. It is probably they who dedicated the West Kirby church to St. Bridget, the patron saint of Limerick. There was another church at Wallasey where 'Kirkby in Whalley' formed the basis of a Norse settlement.

In some cases the traditional Saxon place names were given a Scandinavian form by the new settlers and this seems to have been the case with Greasby. According to J. McN. Dodgson's 'The Place Names of Cheshire' Greasby is derived from terms which traditionally mean 'the stronghold at the wood'. Whirby also fits into this category and seems to have been a 'white manor or village' which came under Norse influence.

Liby is derived from old Norse words which meant 'the farmstead of the Irishmen' and supports the theory that the settlers had spent some time in Ireland. They will probably have been second generation Norsemen who came over with Irish kin. Hence the

origin of Gaelic place names in Wirral like Nocturum (derived from 'Cnoc tirim' which meant a 'dry hill') and Arwee (derived from 'aergi' which meant a 'shieling or summer pasture'). Mystery surrounds the origins of Frankby and Pensby in Wirral. One of two possibilities seems likely for Frankby. It may have been the farmstead of a Frenchman (from 'Franka' the old English term for a Frenchman) or 'Franki' may have been the name of a Dane. In the case of Pensby the 'Pen' may have been the name of a person or prominent hill. In both cases, however, the 'by' component attests to Norse influence.

Raby comes from the old Norse 'Rá' which meant a boundary. The settlement therefore initially consisted of a farmstead by the boundary. One interesting theory that flows from this was that there was a boundary beyond which the Saxons of Mercia did not permit Norse settlement. A collection of 'hybrid' place names in Wirral tells us that even within the recognised boundary, Norse and Saxon people mingled in relative harmony. Several place names contain both Norse and Saxon elements and suggest that the settlers were peacefully assimilated. The term 'ton' is generally taken to be a Saxon word for a farmstead or settlement but in the cases of Cloughton, Larton, Storeton and Thurston there are Norse components. Cloughton was the farmstead on the hillock ('Clough' being derived from the old Norse 'Klakk'). Larton comes from the old Norse 'Leir', which meant clay and was therefore a 'farmstead by a clayey place'. Storeton comes from the old Norse 'Storr' which meant big. It was therefore a large farmstead. In some cases these names may have been used by the surrounding Norse

population to describe a Saxon settlement and only prove that Norsemen lived in the locality.

Contrary to popular belief, the place name Thurston does not come from 'Thor's stone'. Nor is it at all likely that either Norsemen or Danes carried out human sacrifices on the Thor's stone on Thurston Hill. The old Norse or Danish personal name 'Thorenstein' accounts for the first part of the word. Thus Thurston was nothing more exciting than the 'farmstead of Thorenstein', Sandstone quarrying by successive generations and the effects of wind and rain adequately explain the origins of Thor's stone without any help from Wirral's Vikings.

It was not the pagan blood stone of Thor but the assembly at Thingwall which provided the focal point for the Norsemen of Wirral. Like Tynwald in the Isle of Man and Thingvellir in Iceland, Wirral's Thingwall was the site of a local parliament or 'Thing'. It was literally the 'Assembly field'. Cross Hill has been put forward as the traditional site of the Thing and this would probably be the natural crossing point of pathways from the various farmsteads of the Scandinavian community.

Taking Raby as the boundary, Thingwall would be the most central site within the area of colonisation. The choice of the site itself suggests a sense of fairness on the part of the Norsemen.

No evidence has been found in Wirral to help explain what happened at Thingwall but we do know from elsewhere that laws for the community were passed at things and that on certain occasions a Norse lawman used to recite the laws. We can safely assume that Thingwall fulfilled a similar legislative and judicial functions in Wirral. As

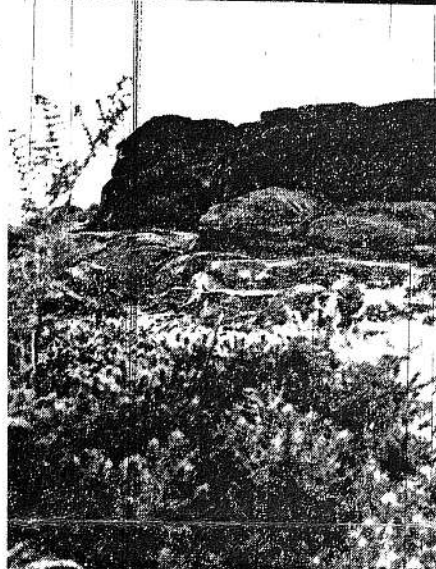
people gathered at the Thing so too would those who wished to sell or barter goods. Thingwall could easily have served as a market place in these early times. Although much has been said about the lawlessness and barbarism of the Viking invaders, the Wirral evidence points toward a people who sought to abide by the rule of law within their community. This is one of the hallmarks of civilisation. It is with a touch of irony that the English language owes the word 'law' to the Vikings.

There are other Norse place names in Wirral, although in some cases their derivation is open to dispute. J. McN. Dodgson has suggested that Caldý may come from the old Norse 'Kald ey' which meant 'Cold Island' and this could be a reference to Hilbre Island which is clearly visible from Caldý Hill. Meols has seen several ancient settlements but the name itself probably comes from the old Norse 'Meir' which meant 'sandhills or sandbanks'. 'Meir' may also be the second element in Tranmere. The old Norse word 'Tran' meant a crane and it has been argued that Tranmere was the 'Cranes' sandbank'.

Although some of the suggested derivations are the product of conjecture, taken as a whole the place names provide proof of a densely populated Scandinavian enclave in Wirral. There were exceptions but the place name evidence suggests that they were law-abiding and Christian. Together with their Irish relatives, the Norsemen seem to have been accepted relatively peacefully by the existing Saxon population.

## References:

- Barnes G. "The Evidence of Place Names for Scandinavian Settlements in Cheshire" TLCAS LXIII 1952-3.
- Bu'lock, J. D. "Pre-Conquest Cheshire 145-1066", 1972.
- Dodgson, J. McN. "The Place Names of Cheshire" 1970.



Thor's Stone, Thurston Hill — its origin probably had nothing to do with Wirral's Vikings. 160180.

## KEY TO MAP

- A Arwee
- C Caldý
- Cl Cloughton
- F Frankby
- G Greasby
- I Irby
- L Larton
- M Meols
- N Nocturum
- P Pensby
- R Raby
- S Storeton
- Thing Thingwall
- Thur Thurston
- Tr Tranmere
- W Whirby
- WK West Kirby

# place names — Viking heritage

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A collection of 'hybrid' place names in Wirral tells us that even within the recognised boundary, Norse and Saxon people mingled in relative harmony. Several place names contain both Norse and Saxon elements and suggest that the settlers were peacefully assimilated. The term 'ton' is generally taken to be a Saxon word for a farmstead or settlement but in the cases of Cloughton, Larton, Storeton and Thurston the 'ton' is Norse components. Cloughton was the farmstead on the hillock ('Clough' being derived from the old Norse 'Klakk'). Larton comes from the old Norse 'Leir', which means clay and was therefore a farmstead by a clayey place. Storeton comes from the old Norse 'Storr', which meant big. It was therefore a large farmstead. In some cases, these names may have been used by the surrounding Norse

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No evidence has been found in Wirral to help explain what happened at Thingwall but we do know from elsewhere that laws for the community were passed at Things and that on certain occasions a Norse lawman used to recite the laws. We can safely assume that Thingwall fulfilled a similar legislative and judicial functions in Wirral. As

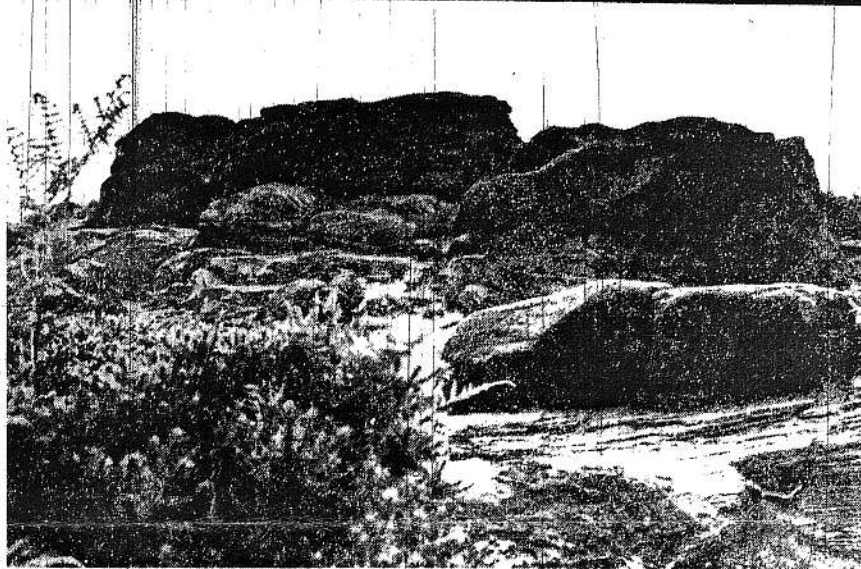
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Thor's Stone, Thurston — its origins probably had nothing to do with Wirral's Vikings. J60180.

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- L Larton
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- P Pensby
- R Raby
- S Storeton
- Thing Thingwall
- Thur Thurston
- Tr Tranmere
- W Whitby
- WK West Kirby



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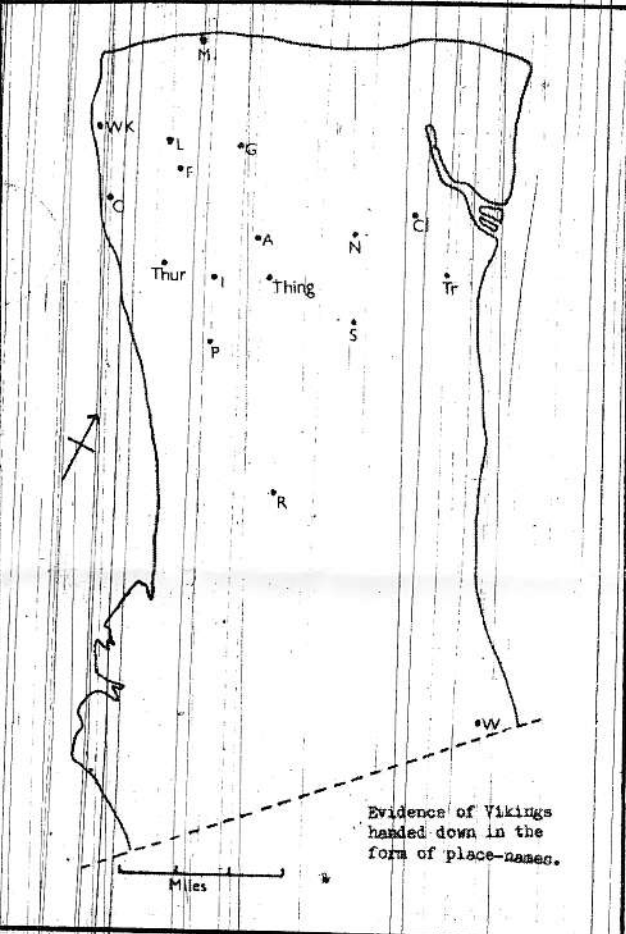
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