

THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH

A Casebook

edited by
Michael Livingston

UNIVERSITY
of
EXETER
PRESS



STEPHEN HARDING

WIRRAL: FOLKLORE AND LOCATIONS

Earlier chapters have examined the possible locations within Britain for the Battle of Brunanburh and have shown that it might have taken place in the Wirral peninsula in north-west England. If this is correct then it is possible to make suggestions as to where the battle may have taken place and the possible escape route of Anlaf's men. But this is a rather hazardous enterprise because the earliest sources give little indication of place beyond names: the contemporary (or near-contemporary) Old English poem provides only a few clues, but these, together with knowledge of the current and former topography of the area and surrounding coastline, and knowledge of how the local Scandinavian and English populations were distributed in tenth-century Wirral, enable some suggestions to be made. First, though, this essay examines the local folklore to see if any reliable evidence may be found as to the location of the battle from antiquarian traditions of the Wirral.

I. LOCAL FOLKLORE: BROMBOROUGH COURT HOUSE AND WARGRAVES

Two places on Wirral have been associated in local antiquarian lore with the battle and both are within the (modern) township of Bromborough itself. These traditions are interesting in themselves and are worth investigating; but they generally tell us more about the antiquarian enthusiasm of the writers than the location of the battle.

The first of these is at what was formerly a set of fields near the banks of the River Mersey referred to in a 1731 map as *Wargraves* and in the 1839 Tithe Apportionment as *Wergreaves*. Because of its unusual name, local folklore has associated this place with the battle. Reflecting this folk-etymology, a well-known local Victorian clergyman, the Reverend Edward Dyer Green, later echoed by the local historian Phillip Sulley,¹ made the suggestion that the elements were ME *werre* [war] and *graef* [a grave, a digging] (an etymology at first accepted by Dodgson).² Thomas Helsby also records Green as reporting that

A large tract of land near the sea shore at Bromborough has long been known by the name of Wargraves. This fact, and that of the recent discovery (June 1877) of a large number of skeletons near the coast of the Dee, a few miles further off, with other circumstances, combine to prove that this parish was the unquestionable site of Athelstan's famous victory over the Danes and their allies in 937.³

¹ Sulley, *Hundred of Wirral*, pp. 213–16.

² Dodgson, "Background," p. 303n7, rpt. in Cavill, Harding, and Jesch, *Wirral and Its Viking Heritage*, p. 61n7.

³ See Ormerod, *History of the County*, p. 427n1.

Dodgson later more plausibly suggested the second element to be OE *græfe* [a wood] and the first to be ME *werre* or ON *verri* [worse, the less valuable], and concluded that the name is not evidence for a battle (*PN Ch* 4.242). Today Wargraves is an industrial area off the A41 trunk road and on the 1831 Bryant map of Wirral (the relevant part of which is shown in Figure 1) — which, besides the tithe maps, provides one of the last maps of the area before heavy urbanization — it corresponds approximately to the area between Rice Wood and Bromborough Mills.

Secondly and more recently, 1.5 km (1 mile) further north along the A41 (New Chester Road) at Bromborough Pool, the formerly highly ditched/moated nine-acre site of what used to be (until 1969) the Bromborough Court House and Court House Farm, has been associated with the battle, possibly as the site of the *burh* or stronghold. The site is located on the south bank of the River Dibbin just near its entry into the River Mersey. The earliest attestation of the name is 1412 *le Courteway* [the way to the court] (see *PN Ch* 4.241). The site was the manor house of the abbots of St Werburgh's in Chester and is described in 1819 — not long before the Bryant and Tithe maps were produced — as follows: “occupying an

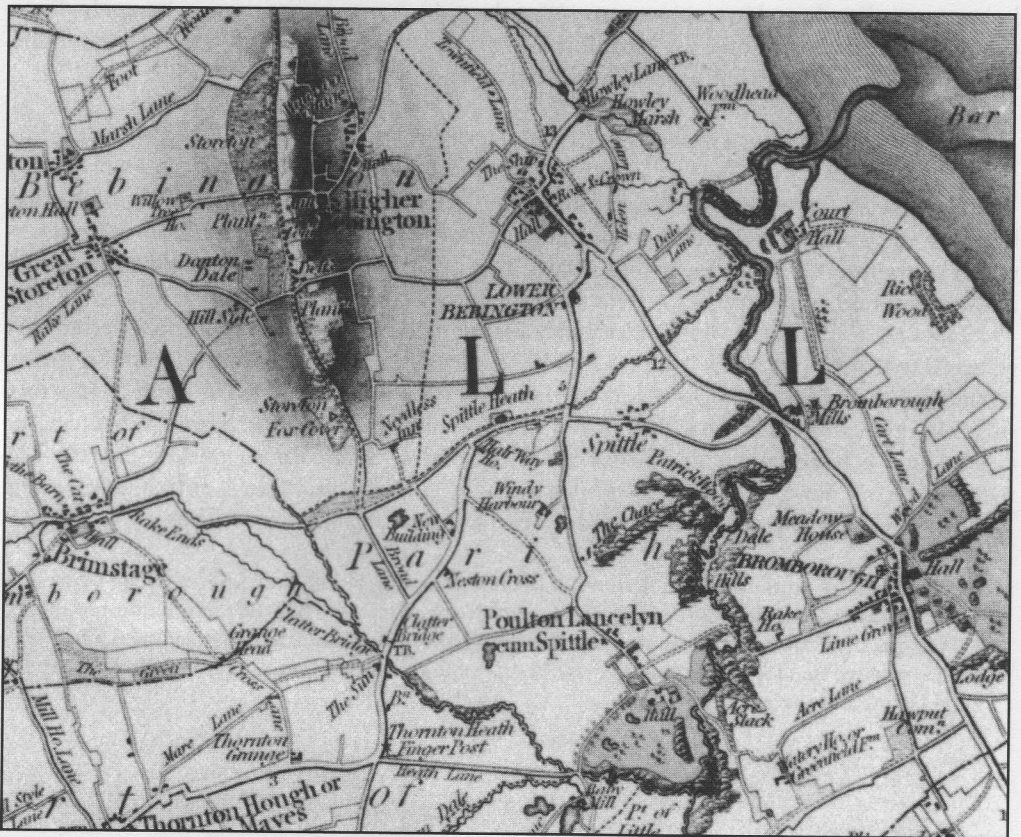


Figure 1. Part of 1831 map by A. Bryant of the Wirral. The map shows the ridge of high ground (now Mount Road) in the Storeton/Bebington area running up to Tranmere Pool and Oxtou. Bebington Heath and Storeton woods can be seen as well as “Court Hall” near the mouth of the Dibbin and Poulton Hall to the bottom of the map and Brimstage Hall to the left. Courtesy of Chester & Cheshire Archives & Local Studies.

extremely strong position at the neck of land, accessible only from the south, to the east it is defended by the estuary, on the other sides by precipitous banks descending to an inlet which forms a channel between this parish and Bebington" (*PN Ch* 4.241).

The unlikelihood of the name Wargraves having anything to do with "war" does not preclude the possibility that the Court House could have been sited on the ancient fortified site of Brunanburh. The occupation of some such site commanding the river by Athelstan's forces would have denied the defeated forces the means of a quick escape to ships arriving via the Mersey and could have forced the day-long retreat mentioned in the Old English poem.

Mount Road Ridge, Bebington, Storeton, Brimstage, and Heathland

In the early decades of the twentieth century local historians were fostering the belief that the battle had taken place around what is now Bebington Heath, 2.4 km (1.5 miles) south-west from Bromborough Court House, and (if that was where the *burh* was sited) still very much *ymbe Brunanburh*. Bebington Heath is adjacent to the Norse townships of Storeton to the west and Tranmere to the north: on the Bryant map (Figure 1) its position is centered around the first of the large L letters. Just over 1000 years later World War II American soldiers were using the same heathland for battle practice. Today part of it is common land and part of it is the site of Brackenwood Golf Course sloping eastwards to the ridge of high ground of Prospect Hill and Storeton Hill. Mount Road — the township boundary — now runs along the ridge. The ridge is now partially wooded and although some of this is due to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century fir plantations it is not unimaginable this might have been the case in medieval times. Sir John Stanley, knight of the Garter (1453–1519) was resident at Storeton Hall (top left corner of Figure 1) and Master Forester of Wirral.⁴

One early twentieth-century local historian, Godfrey Mathews, made the suggestion that the ridge would have made an ideal defensive position for Anlaf's army, as recalled by Anne Anderson, and that it was from this ridge between Spital and Higher Bebington that the battle was fought.⁵ Another, Francis W. T. Tudsbery, a student at Oxford and colleague of the Icelandic antiquarian Eiríkur Magnússon, in his 1907 book, *Brunanburh AD 937*, argued that the bulk of the fighting took place on the *western* side of this ridge between Brimstage and Storeton which was also, he says, heathland.⁶

Although a lot of the evidence presented by these historians is based on unreliable sources, for example *Egil's Saga*, this is an intriguing argument. The topography of the area can be gauged from the Bryant map of Wirral in 1831 and one can see that, regardless of which side of the ridge the bulk of the fighting might have taken place, the heathland around Mount Road makes a plausible site for a battle. From here it is 8 km (5 miles) as the crow flies to the Dee estuary at Heswall or Ness, and 13 km (8 miles) to the medieval seaport of Meols. Anlaf's raiders escaping from the Saxons might have headed in these directions (Figure 2).

The Lancelyn Greens and Poulton Hall

Although the Reverend Dyer Green may have been building on an earlier tradition with his learned suggestion concerning Wargraves — only shown by later scholarly analysis to be unlikely — this cannot be said for some other interesting pieces of Victorian folklore sur-

⁴ See, for example, E. Wilson, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Stanley Family."

⁵ See A. Anderson, *Story of Bromborough*, p. 18.

⁶ For discussion and citations, see Wawn, "Vikings and Victorians."

rounding the battle. Although these stories are based on fantasy rather than fact, they nonetheless demonstrate the wish of the locals to appropriate the significant battle for the area and its history: they are also interesting in a study of the imaginative and sociological impact of local history on residents.⁷ The first piece of Victorian tradition concerns the roadway leading down from Mount Road to Storeton Hall known as Red Hill Road (the road running below “Danton Dale” on Figure 1), which was so named from “the blood that once ran down it.” In reality the Red Hill refers to the red sandstone: Storeton Hill is part of one of two ridges of sandstone running through Wirral. The other ridge of red sandstone runs along the western side of the peninsula, and at Thurstaston Common is an impressive outcrop known as “Thor’s stone.” It has been impossible to trace this name before the Victorian period and it appears to have been introduced by the prominent Liverpool antiquarian Sir James A. Picton on the mistaken assumption that the place-name Thurstaston derived from Thor’s stone⁸: the origin of Thurstaston was shown by Dodgson and others to derive from the personal name Thorsteinn with *tun*. Nonetheless Picton’s association of the place with the Norse god was quickly echoed by others, culminating in Hilda Gamlin’s suggestion in *Twixt Mersey and Dee* that “the stone was probably raised by the Danes to commemorate the



Figure 2: Escape routes to the coast. Top line: through the carrs and holms to Meols. Dark line: to Heswall. Third line: to Ness. Adapted from 18th-century map of Moll (ca. 1724).

great battle of Brunanburh.”⁹ Not only does the folklore have the Danes fighting at Brunanburh — and celebrating a victory — but also has King Alfred fighting, too: King’s Road on the Bebbington side of Mount Road was once believed to have been named after King Alfred, who was thought in this tradition to have fought at Brunanburh. Although locals now accept this could not possibly be true, another piece of folklore was that King’s Road had not been improved since King Alfred’s time — this is considered true!

One final piece of folklore which is worthy of more serious consideration concerns the Lancelyn Green family, residents at Poulton Hall (2 km south of Bebbington Heath) since 1093. The late Roger Lancelyn Green was a well-known author and his many books included *The Saga of Asgard: Retold from the Old Norse Poems and Tales* (Puffin, 1960) reprinted in 1994 as *Myths of the Norsemen* (Puffin Classics, 1994). He was well-

⁷ For evidence of widespread interest in Brunanburh among the Victorians, see Joanne Parker’s essay in this volume, pp. 385–407, and Wawn, *Vikings and Victorians*.

⁸ Picton, “Great Stone of Thor,” pp. 364–65.

⁹ Gamlin, *Twixt Mersey and Dee*.

versed in all things Viking. In memory of him the family commissioned the *Brunanburgh Viking*, a bronze sculpture which was unveiled in April 2004 and stands high in the gardens of the hall. The family believe the grounds were once the site of Bruna's stronghold or *burh*, with some stones from it remaining not far from the present building.¹⁰

The parish/township map of Wirral shown in Figure 3 has changed little over hundreds of years. Although Poulton is now in the parish of Bebington, it lies between the two modern townships of Bromborough and Brimstage which make up Bromborough parish: right in the middle of the territory anciently bearing Bruna's name. Poulton as a name may not have existed in 937 CE (it is not recorded before 1260). The commanding position of Poulton Hall, flanked by the River Dibbin and overlooking the Norse settlements at Raby and Storeton, would have made this location an ideal position for a boundary or border stronghold and a good alternative to Bromborough Court House as a possible location of Bruna's *burh*. As Ormerod reports,

Poulton Hall and the ground adjacent are situated above the most romantic part of the valley, sheltered with respectable timber and commanding a delightful prospect of the Clwydian mountains. The former hall stood at short distance from the present one, on a knoll, overhanging the dale below, and within the area of the ancient castle of the Lancelyns, the site of which is still indicated by the slight traces of earthworks, and was remarkably strong, defended by the dale in front, and on the two sides by deep ravines issuing from it. At the early period of its erection its strength and difficulty of access was materially increased by a large pool or mere, then formed by the tide below, which seems to have given its name to the township, and to the contiguous tracts of meadow ground called the Marfords. The effects of waves are still visible in the worn face of the rocks, at the upper end of the valley.¹¹

Folklore Conclusions

This brief review of the local traditions reveals a great deal of interest in the battle and the possibility that it might have taken place locally. None of the supposed connections between the names and local features made by enthusiastic antiquarians can be historically verified, but nevertheless the traditions show a serious and creative interaction between the literary sources and the Wirral topography. It remains a question worth asking: how does the local evidence chime with arguments that the battle was fought on the Wirral?

2. WIRRAL AS A POSSIBLE LOCATION FOR THE BATTLE

The Old English poem

The tenth-century poem (Item 4 in this volume) tells us the following geographical information:

1. Line 5: the battle took place *ymbe Brunanburh* [around Brunanburh];
2. Line 21: the retreating raiders were chased by troops of West Saxons *ondlongne dæg* [for the entire day] (though it may be this is a poeticism meaning "for a long time");
3. Line 54: the fleeing raiders from Dublin escaped from a place on or near the coast called *Dingesmere* and sailed to Dublin.

¹⁰ Mrs. June Lancelyn Green, personal communication.

¹¹ *History of the County*, p. 440.

This information indicates that the battle took place somewhere around Brunanburh but at some distance from the point of escape; it took Anlaf's men an entire day of evading hostile forces to get to *Dingesmere*. If, as has been argued in other chapters, *Brunanburh* is Bromborough and *Dingesmere* is "the wetland by the Thing" (the meeting-place denoted by the name Thingwall), then the battle ranged from east to west across the Wirral. The escape-route for the repelled raiding army was one that might have been used by sea-travelers trading with the Wirral or visiting the Thing.

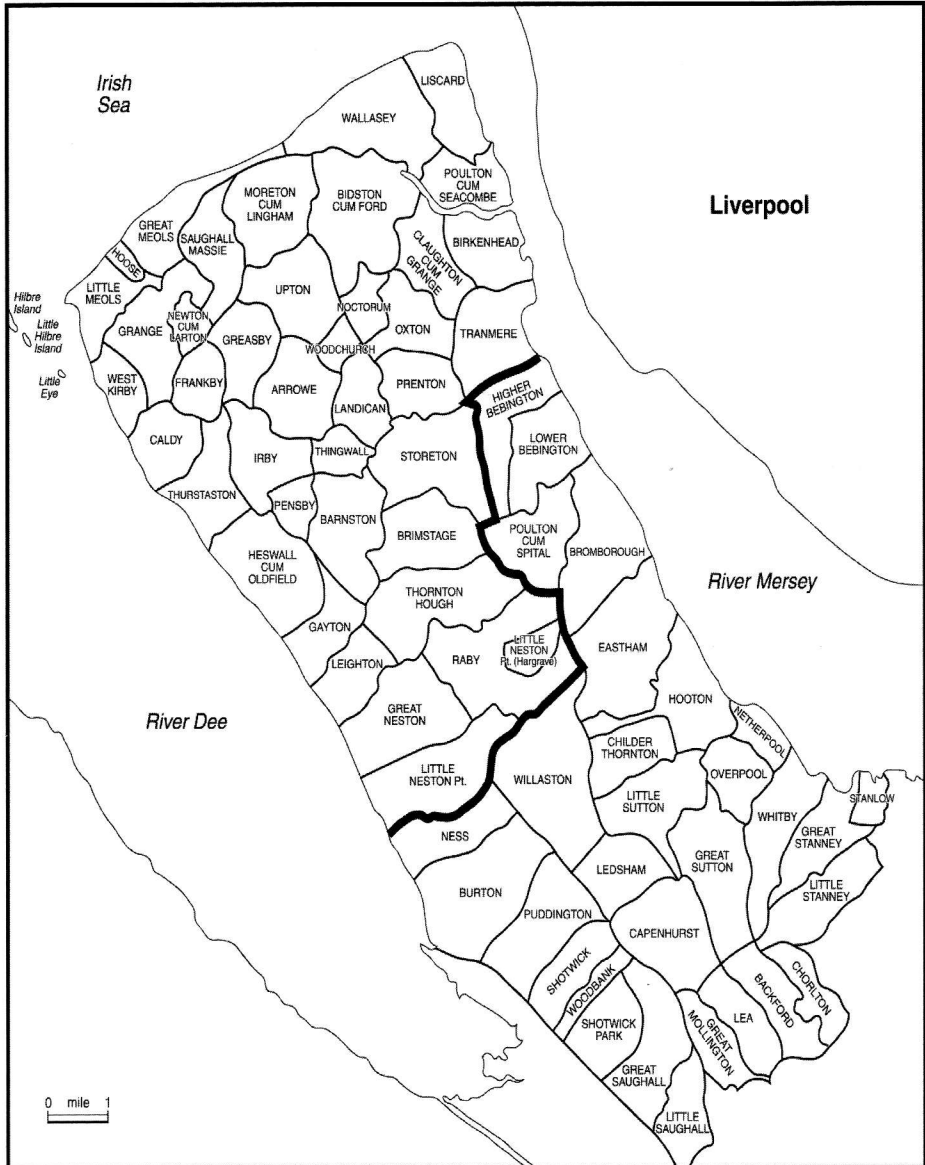


Figure 3: Wirral parish/township map (19th century). The bold line demarks the approximate boundary of the tenth-century Norse enclave, based on baronial manor holdings and place-names. Courtesy of Chester & Cheshire Archives & Local Studies.

Tenth-century Wirral

By the time of the Battle of Brunanburh, a linguistically Scandinavian population had been established in the north and west of the Wirral peninsula, and the existence of its Thing at Thingwall — one of only two surviving Thingwall place-names in England — attests to the Scandinavians being the dominant population. Although there may have been some degree of integration, the English-speaking communities were concentrated to the south of the peninsula. Within the conjectured Norse area there are some English-named places like Moreton, Upton, Bidston, and (just outside) Poulton: these could have been in existence by the time the Norsemen arrived although there is no clear evidence to support this (the earliest of these, Upton, is first recorded in Domesday Book, 1086); they could equally have been established after the Scandinavian settlement period.

Norse Wirral is blessed with many fine examples of Viking Age stonework and treasure; the most outstanding examples include the magnificent hogback grave marker at St. Bridget's Church, West Kirby (recently beautifully restored by the Merseyside Conservation Centre), and another smaller hogback from Bidston, identified in 2004. Other examples include a large number of Viking artifacts discovered in low tides off the old Viking port of Meols. Although the majority of the finds were made in the nineteenth century they have only recently been cataloged and include coins, Hiberno-Norse pins, brooches, a drinking horn, and what appear to be weapons from a possible pagan burial.¹² Evidence was presented at a recent public meeting of the remains of an elliptically shaped Viking house at Irby.¹³ Amongst other impressive evidence of the Viking settlements are artifacts at the Church of St. Mary and St. Helen at Neston. There are seven fragments belonging to at least three Hiberno-Norse crosses, with fascinating imagery including the touching scene of a Viking couple embracing.¹⁴ A silver ingot attributed to the Viking period was discovered not far away in Ness.¹⁵

This wealth of archaeological evidence has been supported by modern genetic research tools. Recent y-chromosomal DNA analysis of men from old Wirral families (i.e., those possessing surnames extant in the area prior to the industrial revolution) has shown, in common with neighboring West Lancashire, substantial Norse ancestry with a prevalence for example of the haplogroup R1a, common in Norway but relatively rare in other parts of Western Europe.¹⁶

Ness and Neston probably mark the southern extremity of the original Norse enclave, and it is possible to assess the initial boundary of the settlements from the distribution of Scandinavian place-names and the topography. The neighboring settlement of Raby (ON *rá-byr*) means "boundary settlement." On the English side of the posited boundary is the Old English place-name Hargrave [grey wood], with Old English *hār* [grey] used in a specialized sense meaning "boundary."¹⁷ From Raby the boundary appears to have run north-eastwards along the River Dibbin and the ridge of high ground separating Bebington from Storeton (ON *stórr*

¹² See D. Griffiths, Philpott, and Egan, *Meols*, pp. 58–76.

¹³ Philpott and Adams, *Irby, Wirral*.

¹⁴ R. White, "Viking Period Sculpture," pp. 45–58.

¹⁵ Bean, "Silver Ingot."

¹⁶ Bowden, et al., "Excavating Past Population Structures," pp. 301–09; see also Harding and Jobling, "Looking for Vikings," pp. 22–25.

¹⁷ A. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, 1.234.

[big], presumably with ON *tún* [farm]), up to Tranmere (ON *trani-melr* [crane sandbank]). This division (Figure 3) also corresponds to the boundary of major baronial holdings in Domesday Book which, according to Dodgson, “represents a Norman adaptation of an administrative pattern that already existed when the Norman earls took over the shire. It looks as though the Norse enclave in Wirral was so politically distinctive that it justified a special feudal administration,”¹⁸ an administration that survived in relict form as the “Hundred of Caldý” until 1819.¹⁹ Along the boundary there is evidence from early field-names of a certain degree of assimilation or communication between the originally distinct communities. In the township of Storeton, for example, there is an old name (last recorded 1330) *le Gremotehalland*, where the first element is the Old Norse compound *gríða-mót* [place of a meeting under a truce], which may reflect a mechanism for the resolution of disputes (*PN Ch* 4.256).

There is evidence for the notion that in 937 there was an originally Scandinavian community to the west and north of the boundary shown in Figure 3, and a primarily English community to the east and south. In assigning battle lines for Anlaf’s men it would therefore make sense to place them with their backs to this Scandinavian community (for the reason that there might be some element of sympathy between the marauders and the originally Scandinavian settlers), and vice versa for Athelstan’s forces. This, together with the three points identified from the poem above, may help us in the attempt to locate the battlefield and *Dingesmere*.

Thingwall, Dingesmere, and Heswall

Placing Anlaf’s (and Constantine’s) forces with their backs to the enclave would therefore be consistent with the local tradition considered above that the battle had taken place at or near Bebington Heath (or on the other side of the ridge near Storeton and Brimstage). In the battle, however, the tenth-century poem tells us the surviving marauders were put to flight. So for where on the coast would Anlaf’s forces head? The solution offered in 2004 to the Dingesmere mystery allows us to make some informed suggestions.²⁰ It is a distinct possibility that the fleeing forces were prevented from reaching their own vessels which *might* originally have been moored as far away

as the River Ribble as hypothesized by Nicholas J. Higham: the escaping forces would have attempted to head for any part of the coast likely to have seaworthy vessels, or where their own vessels manned by a skeleton crew could have hurried, to effect an escape (Figure 2).²¹

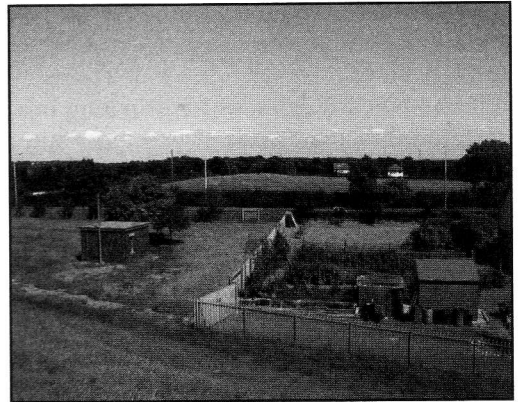


Figure 4: View of Cross Hill, possible site in Thingwall of the Thing. Photo: Stephen Harding.

¹⁸ Dodgson, “Background of Brunanburh,” p. 312; rpt. in Cavill, Harding, and Jesch, *Wirral and Its Viking Heritage*, p. 66.

¹⁹ Ormerod, *History of the County*, 2.518.

²⁰ See Cavill, Harding, and Jesch, “Revisiting Dingesmere.”

²¹ Higham, “Context of Brunanburh,” p. 153.

One such place was the coastal water used by travelers to the Wirral from Wales and elsewhere. The Dee bank of the Wirral, as suggested in a 2004 paper, could be named *Dingesmere* as in the Old English poem, from the Norse assembly (*ping*) of Thingwall, and the wetland or tidal marshland that lines the coast (OE *mere* [pool or wetland]).²² But where was this Dingesmere? The nearest accessible point (that is to say not involving negotiation of a cliff) on the coast to Cross Hill (believed to be the site of the Thing at Thingwall, Figure 4) is at Heswall Point (Bryant map, Figure 5) not far from the former, now lost, settlement at Warmby. Figure 6 shows the scene from there today. Based on the present-day topography of Wirral, this would appear to be a good candidate for the escaping forces after Brunanburh after they had dodged their way to the coast in search of anything seaworthy: today the area is marshland and, depending on the tide, vessels can reach the estuary only by a channel through it. Moving along the coast northwards the marshland has disappeared before Thurstaston. Moving the other way along the Dee coastline to the south is the ancient ferry at Gayton — connected to Thingwall via an old track: this is another candidate as a coastal entry point for visitors to the Thing. Still further down the coast there are other ancient ports at Parkgate and Neston which may also have been coastal targets for the fleeing raiders. Tudsbery has also suggested the promontory at Ness, another entry point used by medieval mariners.²³ Wherever the main entry point for the Thing was, the whole stretch of the Dee coast from Ness to Heswall Point could have been known by the locals and sailors as *Dingesmere*.

Some caution is necessary here as we know the topography of the Dee river and coastline was different at the time of the battle. Large changes are known to have occurred in the nineteenth century through silting and coloni-

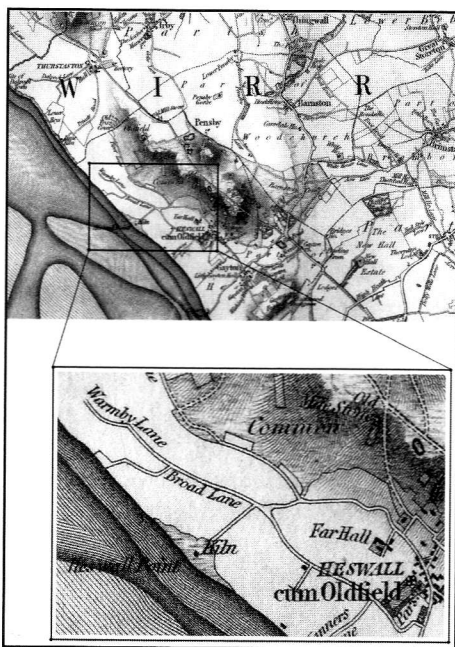


Figure 5: Part of Bryant map showing Bebington, Thingwall, and Heswall in 1831. Storeton and Brimstage are at the right, Cross Hill and Thingwall can be seen at the top, with the area around Heswall Point highlighted. Courtesy of Chester & Cheshire Archives & Local Studies.



Figure 6: Heswall Point today, now known as Sheldrakes after the nearby restaurant of the same name. Photo: Stephen Harding.

²² Cavill, Harding, and Jesch, "Revisiting Dingesmere," pp. 25–38.

²³ Tudsbery, *Brunanburh*, p. 30.

zation with *Spartina* grass brought in by ships from America, rapidly colonizing the coastline from Heswall down to Chester.²⁴ The once-thriving seaports of Parkgate and Neston and the old ferry between Gayton and Holywell in north Wales all ceased to operate. However it is possible to gauge from earlier records that areas of difficult navigation along the Dee coast may well have existed in medieval times: this has already been alluded to in Paul Cavill's chapter in this volume. In John Trevisa's translation of the *Polychronicon* of Ranulf Higden, for example, he notes the folklore which had arisen in relation to the Dee:

Below the city of Chester runs the River Dee, which now separates England and Wales. The river often leaves the established channel, and changes the places shallow enough for fording every month, as the local people tell. Whichever side the water draws closer to, either England or Wales, that side will have the disadvantage in war and be overthrown in that year, and the men of the other side will have the advantage and will get the better of them. When the water changes its course in this fashion, it presages these events.²⁵

"The river often leaves the established channel" implies that the medieval Dee had large amounts of silt and mud around it even then. The larger-scale Bryant map (Figure 7) shows the distribution of channels and less navigable waters in 1831: this is before the *Spartina* colonizations, which would have required existing marshland and silt to gain a hold.

It is therefore not unreasonable to suppose that along the Wirral side of the Dee estuary in 937 there were significant areas of wetland or marshland. This was the mere of the Thing — *Dingesmere* as suggested in 2004.²⁶ The location of *Dingesmere* on the Dee coast is also at least consistent with the activities of King Edgar some forty years after the battle. John of Worcester, a twelfth-century historian, reports how in 973 Edgar took a party of Celtic kings in a boat along the Dee in Chester:

Edgar, the peaceable king of the English, was blessed, crowned with the utmost honour and glory, and anointed king in the thirtieth year at Pentecost, 11 May, in the first indiction, by the blessed bishops Dunstant and Oswald, and by the other bishops of the whole of England in the city of Bath. Then, after an interval, he sailed round the north coast of Wales and came to the city of Chester. Eight underkings, namely Kenneth, king of the Scots, Malcolm, king of the Cumbrians, Maccus, king of many islands, and five others, Dufnal, Siferth, Hywel, Iacob, and Luchil, went to meet him, as he had commanded, and swore that they would be loyal to, and co-operate with, him by land and sea. With them, on a certain day, he boarded a skiff; having set them to the oars, and having taken the helm himself, he skilfully steered it through the course of the Dee, and with a crowd of ealdormen and nobles following in a similar boat, sailed from the palace to the monastery of St John the Baptist, where when he had prayed, he returned with the same pomp to the palace. As he was entering it he is reported to have declared to his nobles at length that each of his successors would be able to boast that he was king of the English, and would enjoy the pomp of such honour with so many kings at his command.²⁷

Edgar was *probably* re-enacting Athelstan's taking submission from the Celtic kings at Eamont Bridge, Westmorland, in 926, reinforced by military power at Brunanburh in 937:

²⁴ Freethy and Freethy, *Discovering Cheshire*, p. 33.

²⁵ Text taken from Sisam, ed., *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, with translation by Cavill.

²⁶ Cavill, Harding, and Jesch, "Revisiting Dingesmere."

²⁷ John of Worcester, *Chronicle*, ed. Darlington and McGurk, pp. 423–25.

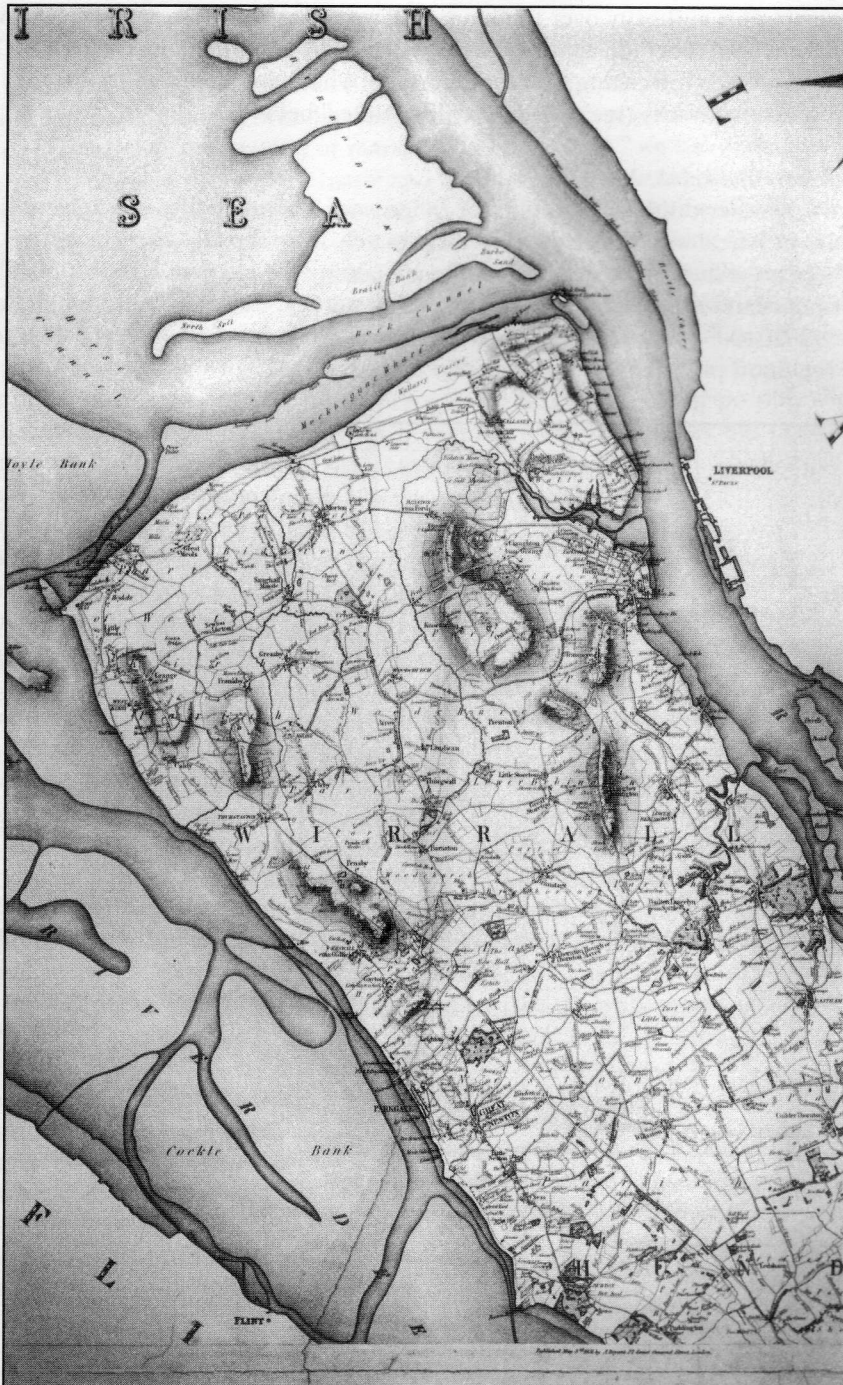


Figure 7: Larger-scale Bryant map showing the channels of the River Dee in 1831. Courtesy of Chester & Cheshire Archives & Local Studies. Dingsmere, suggested by Cavill, Harding, and Jesch to be the Thing's wetland or marsh, is believed to correspond to the shallow channel from Heswall down to Ness.

he was asserting his authority over the kings and waterways of those areas which most recently had fomented rebellion against the English crown. The trip along the Dee at Chester would then have been refreshing Celtic memories of what happened a short distance downstream 46 years previously (see further Cavill's "Note," below).

The Wirral carrs and holms: Meols

There is another candidate location for *Dingesmere*. There are fifty-one ancient field- or track-names in Wirral with the element *carr*, ultimately from the ON *kjarr* [marsh, or brushwood]. There are a further twenty-four names containing the element *holm*, ultimately from ON *holmr* [an island or useable area in a marsh], a notable example being Lingham (*lyng-holmr*) at SJ252910.²⁸ All the carrs, and all but four of the holms lie between Bebington and Meols in the flood plains of the Rivers Birket and Fender (Figure 8). Parts of north Wirral

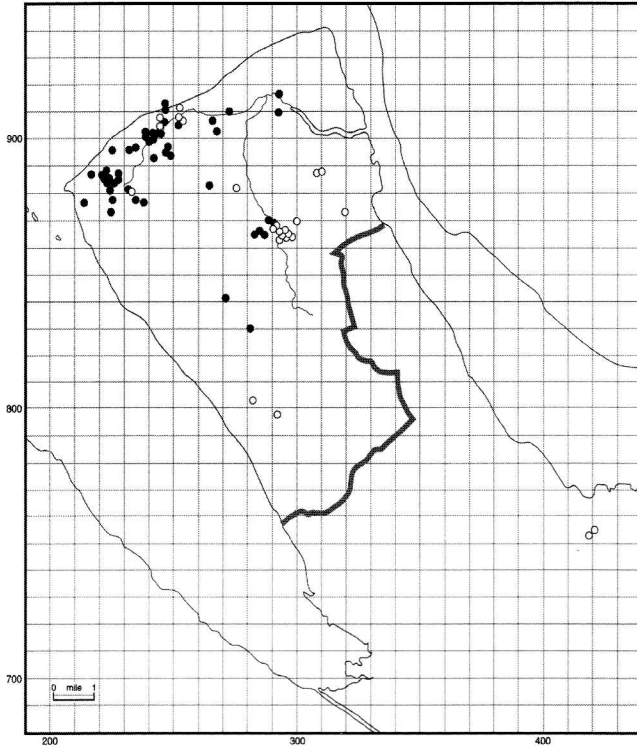


Figure 8: Distribution map of field/track names in *carr* (filled circles) and *holm* (open circles). Courtesy of the English Place-Name Society.

have been subject to inundation throughout the centuries, and this was so until the twentieth-century construction of sea defenses. This flooding has led to the modern local tradition that the famous story of King Canute trying to repulse the sea actually might have taken place here.²⁹ The early part of the nineteenth century saw the erection of a "Canute chair," which survived until 1950.³⁰ An alternative to a coastal *Dingesmere* on the Dee (since a wetland is only rarely coastal) might therefore be flooded marshland around the Fender and Birket, between Thingwall and the north Wirral coast: Anlaf's men might be trying to get to Meols, the ancient Roman seaport revived by Wirral's Scandinavian community. This would be consistent with the suggestion that here the fleeing raiders would expect to find vessels to escape in, even if they were not their own.³¹

²⁸ Harding, "Wirral Carrs and Holms," pp. 46–49.

²⁹ Cavill, Harding, and Jesch, *Wirral and Its Viking Heritage*, pp. 120–22.

³⁰ Ormerod, *History of the County*, p. 473n1.

³¹ Higham, "Context," p. 155.

CONCLUSION

In summary, on the premise that Brunanburh in the contemporary Old English poem is the same place as the modern Bromborough, and with the recent identification of Dingesmere in the poem with the “the wetland or marshland of the Thing,” we can make informed suggestions as to possible sites for the battle and the place of escape for the marauding forces. Bearing in mind the large scale of the conflict and the likelihood the fighting would have taken place over a wide area, two possible sites for the battle — or at least the main part of the fighting — have emerged: Wargraves and Bebington Heath. Two coastal locations for Dingesmere have also been considered: Heswall Point and Meols. Two possible sites for Bruna’s fortress have also been discussed: the former Bromborough Court House, where the River Dibbin joins the Mersey, and Poulton Hall, positioned between the two Bruna townships in modern Bromborough parish of Bromborough and Brimstage. Other possible sites for any of these cannot be ruled out, but as yet no evidence for alternatives has been advanced. Narrowing down of the possibilities in this way may also help the field archaeologist although the chances of finding significant remains would appear to be remote. Tudsbery reported the discovery of many bones of unknown age in Storeton Hall garden, Brimstage Hall and moat, and bones and arrow-heads in Lower Bebington Church around 1870: these may be significant, but we have no modern analysis of the evidence.³²

Finally, in January 2005 a group of ten hardy enthusiasts, including two contributors to this book and several members of the re-enactment society (the Wirhalh Skip Felag, dressed in contemporary clothing), retraced a possible route of retreat of the Dublin raiders. The 12 km (7.5 mile) route started at Poulton Hall, through Bebington Heath and then up Storeton Hill (possibly near Anlaf’s base), through the woods onto Red Hill Road, past the historic Storeton Hall (ancient home of the Stanley family). From there they cut through the woods connecting Storeton with Thingwall. Emerging from the woods, passing Cross Hill, the possible Scandinavian Thing site, they passed the Barnston *gil* (ON dip or ravine), to refreshment at the Fox and Hounds in Barnston. This was then followed by a field hike to Heswall Slack (ON *slakki* [cutting]), and down to Heswall Point (now known as Sheldrakes), and finally, after a six-hour trek, past Sheldrakes restaurant to the wetland/marshland of *Dingesmere*. They fought no desperate rearguard action against enemies, and there was no need for escape to Dublin, but at a comfortable pace the walk took a whole day. As they retired to the local hostelry,

the sun, up
in the morningtide, that splendid light,
glided over the ground — God’s bright candle! —
. . . the eternal Lord’s noble creature
sank to its seat. (Item 4.13–17)³³

³² Tudsbery, *Brunanburh*, pp. 22–23.

³³ The author thanks Dr. Paul Cavill, Professor Judith Jesch, Dr. David Griffiths, and Dr. Rob Philpott for helpful comments, and also Mr. Allan Alsbury, author of *Fir Bob Land* (Birkenhead: Countywise Limited, 1999), and Mrs. June Lancelyn Green concerning some aspects of folklore. The views expressed are those of the author.

A NOTE ON THE DEE-ROWING OF EDGAR IN 973

Paul Cavill

Two articles have recently been published on this episode. David E. Thornton ("Edgar and the Eight Kings") argues the John of Worcester misunderstood Ælfric's phrase about the submission of the "eight" kings of Britain to Edgar, "hi ealle gebugon to Eadgares wisunge" [they all submitted to Edgar's rule].³⁴ According to Thornton, John took the naval situation as the backdrop and interpreted *gebugon* as something like "bent (at the oars)" and *Eadgares wisunge* as "Edgar's steering (at the tiller)." At any rate, this notion of the Dee-rowing appears to be John's invention, and in view of John's weaknesses in understanding Old English evident from his distortion of the poem on Brunanburh, this is entirely plausible as the source of the episode.

The second article, by Julia Barrow ("Chester's Earliest Regatta?"), gives important parallels from European sources for peace meetings and submissions taking place in neutral territory such as on rivers or bridges. However, Barrow's argument that this was a companionable affair, more of a regatta than a submission, depends on the supposition that in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* phrase "ealle wið hine getreowsodon þæt hi woldon efenwyrhtan beon on sæ [ond] on lande" [they all pledged to him that they would be helpers/fellow workers by sea and on land],³⁵ the words "wið hine" "leave open the possibility that all seven swore the same oath" and that "they were making a treaty as equals rather than acknowledging the overlordship of Edgar."³⁶ This is not the case: *getreowsian* [to pledge oneself] takes the preposition *wið* plus the accusative (here *hine*, i.e., Edgar) to indicate the person to whom submission is made.³⁷ The same phrase is used of the Northumbrian submission to Eadred at Tanshelf in 947, and there can be no disguising the savagery of Eadred's retribution the following year when the oaths and pledges were not kept.³⁸

This broadens the context of Brunanburh. The *ASC*, version D, locates important tenth-century political maneuverings of the English kings in relation to the Celtic kings in the north-west: the 926 submission at Eamont Bridge (near Penrith) and Edgar's taking submission in 973 at Chester, either side of the Brunanburh encounter, all three (if the argument made elsewhere in this volume is accepted) in the north-west. Barrow has helpfully indicated that the peaceful meetings have a ritual function and the place is significant. Perhaps the 973 submission was not as explicitly humiliating as John of Worcester's rowing episode would make it, but the Dee was not merely a convenient site for the day's events: it was, within living memory, the place where the Celtic and Norse forces *were* humiliated at Brunanburh and therefore a timely reminder of the consequences of rebellion.

³⁴ Text and translation from Lapidge, *Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 606–07.

³⁵ See s.a. 972 for 973, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* [MS D], ed. Cubbin, p. 46.

³⁶ Barrow, "Chester's Earliest Regatta?" pp. 89, 92–93.

³⁷ Bosworth and Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Supplement*, *sub verbum*.

³⁸ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* [MS D], ed. Cubbin, p. 44.