

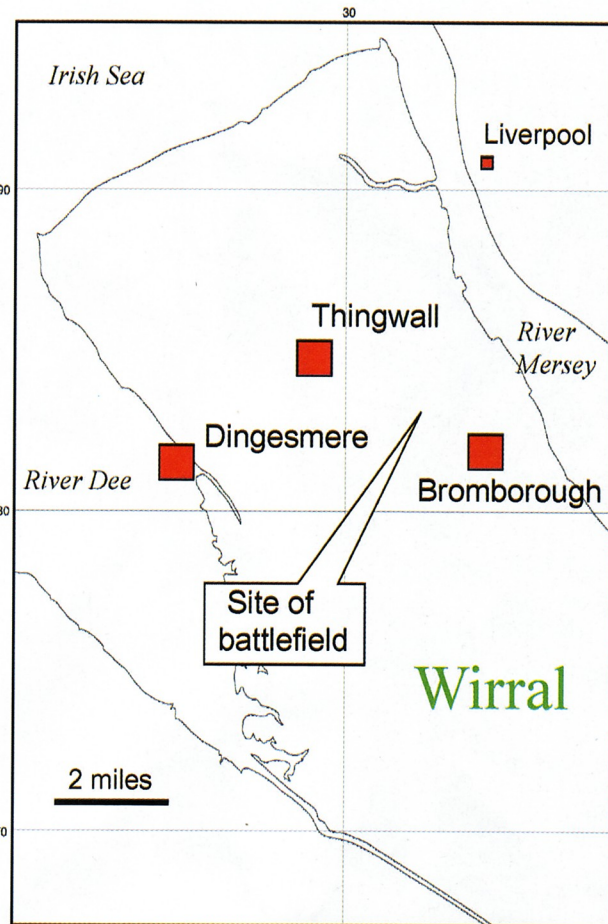
Where Wirral's Vikings fought

Steve Harding goes in search of the ancient battlefield of Brunanburh

Wirral's Steve Harding, now a Professor at the University of Nottingham, and colleagues Dr Paul Cavill and Professor Judith Jesch, think they have now sorted out an age-old mystery of the location of one of the British Isles' most famous of Battles



Wirral's Steve Harding at Bebington near Bromborough



King Athelstan, grandson of Alfred the Great. Despite its huge significance in the history of the British Isles and also Scandinavia – it is recorded in the Icelandic sagas – the location of this battle has been something of a mystery and has formed one of the great historical debates of the 20th century. The majority of experts have favoured a location in or around Bromborough in Wirral, although no-one has been quite sure ... until now. A paper has recently appeared in the Journal of the English Place Name Society which appears to clear up the mystery.

Above: Map showing Bromborough, Thingwall and the 'Thing's mere' believed to be the Dee near what is now Sheldrakes Restaurant, Heswall. A likely area for the battlefield – Bebington Heath – is also marked

IT IS hard to believe from the peace and serenity of the area today but new evidence has emerged to suggest that the rolling landscape, woods and a golf course between Poulton Hall near Bromborough and Sheldrakes restaurant in Heswall was the scene of one of the largest and bloodiest battles and escapes – to have taken place on British soil. The Battle of Brunanburh was fought over 1000 years ago between a combined army of Norwegian Vikings from Dublin and Scots from Strathclyde against the Anglo-Saxon English coming from the Midlands and South led by





Above:
Dingemere
Sheldrakes today

Below left:
Storeton Hall farm.
Some of the
escaping raiders
may have passed
through Stór-tún
(old Norse for the
great farmstead).
This was also the
14th century home
of the Stanleys. Sir
John Stanley,
(1350-1414)
Knight of the Garter
and first earl of
Derby, is an
ancestor on Steve's
mother's side

Our only contemporary source of information about the battle is a poem, known as The Battle of Brunanburh, recorded in various versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 937AD. According to the poem, one of the most lurid and gripping pieces of Dark Age Literature, the battle 'fought around Brunanburh' was one of the bloodiest in the history of the British Isles: 'Never yet on this island has there been a greater slaughter', with victory to Athelstan. The Dublin Vikings were led by Olaf Guthfrithsson, whom the poet call 'Anlaf', and their Scottish allies by King Constantine. After the battle, the poem records how the defeated raiders fled: 'Then the Northmen, dreary survivors of the spears, went in the nail-studded ships on Dingemere, over deep water, to seek Dublin, went back to Ireland, ashamed'.

The only mentions of place-

names that give us a clue to the location of the battle are Brunanburh and Dingemere. Experts have favoured Wirral for the battle mainly because Brunanburh (Bruna's fort) is the old name for Bromborough and there was already a well established Scandinavian colony in the north and west of the peninsula at the time of the battle, thus making it a sympathetic base for the raiders. But where or what was Dingemere? Apart from the poem, no other reference to this place-name has been discovered.

Researchers at the University of Nottingham appear to have now solved this mystery.

In a paper recently published in the Journal of the English Place Name Society, Paul Cavill, research fellow of the English Place Name Society, Judith Jesch, professor of Viking studies, and I explain that Dingemere actually relates to the

old Viking parliament or Thing which used to be held at Thingwall on Wirral (similar to Tynwald in the Isle of Man and Thingvellir, Iceland). Thingwall (Old Norse: þing-völlr 'place of assembly') is in the centre of Wirral and served Wirral's Scandinavian population from the establishment of the colony in circa 902 AD through the 10th and possibly into the 11th century.

The Thing field itself, believed to be at Cross Hill just off the A551 or Barnston Road, is on relatively high, gently sloping ground just over two miles from the Dee Estuary at Heswall. This coastal area even today is dominated by marshland. What we have suggested is that Dingemere derives from the Old Norse þings-marr 'marshland of the Thing' or þinges-mere 'wetland of the Thing'. The word 'Thing' would have been pronounced 'Ding' by the local Scandinavian community, who had

Dingemere actually relates to the old Viking parliament or Thing which used to be held at Thingwall on Wirral (similar to Tynwald in the Isle of Man)



acquired a Celtic accent, and by Celts themselves. Nearby places like Irby 'the settlement of the Irish' confirm a strong Irish influence around Thingwall. The purpose of the name Dingemere would be clear to those who used it: it would locate the feature near the important Thing site; and it would warn travellers using the shallow tidal waters of the Dee estuary, including and especially those attending the Thing, of the danger of marshland.

German propaganda piece

THE Anglo-Saxon poet's intention was clear: his poem highlighted the brutal fact that the Scandinavian raiders fled from a place close to, and named after, the centre of local

Scandinavian power and symbol of Scandinavian independence and self-determination - the Thing. And the poem emphasises the desperation of the retreating raiders, in that they had to depart as best they could from an unsuitable place, flooded

marshland, before they could make the safety of the deeper water and escape on humble craft to Dublin. Having put the Scandinavians firmly in their place, the poem closes by refreshing memories of how their glorious Germanic tribes had conquered the Celts:

Above: 15th Century map of Wirral showing the likely escape route
Left: Sheldrakes at dusk. 'King Anlaf departed, onto the yellow flood and saved his life'.
 Photo: Paul Cousans





Top: Poulton Hall, believed to be the site of Bruna's burh or fortress

Above: Egil Skallagrimsson, Iceland's most famous Viking, fought at Brunanburh

'The Angles and Saxons from the east, Over the broad sea sought the land of Britain, Proud warmakers, victorious warriors, Conquered the Welsh, and so obtained this land'.

No hero

THE Saxon army from the south would not have been perceived by the locals as heroes rescuing them from barbarian raiders: quite the opposite. The 10th century population on both sides of the Mersey would have been predominantly Scandinavian, and hostile, a hostility which continued until King Canute took the throne a century later. Athelstan was no hero and they would have been glad to see the back of him as he and his army returned south.

According to a later source, the Icelandic Saga known as Egil's Saga, Vikings fought on both sides, with Egil, Iceland's most cherished Viking, fighting with Athelstan

against the Dublin raiders. If this later source is to be believed, then it also tells of the battle taking place on heathland flanked by a small river and some woods, with a fortress not far away.

Bebington Heath (part of which is now Brackenwood Golf Course and the grounds of Wirral Grammar School) appears to fit the bill with the River Dibbin/Clatter Brook to the south, Storeton Woods to the north west and overlooked by Poulton Hall, believed to be the site of Bruna's burh or fortress. Other sites in the area are also possible, but this appears to be a good candidate. Poulton Hall has been the home since 1093 of the Lancelyn Green family, and it is highly likely they would have chosen the same prominent site chosen by the Angle Bruna, some centuries earlier. Intriguingly also, World War II American soldiers used the same heathland for battle practice. Two

years after Brunanburh, Athelstan was dead and the Vikings had regained political control of the area again.

Retracing the Escape

ON 22nd January this year a group of ten hardy enthusiasts retraced the likely retreat of the Dublin raiders, the first time since 937AD. The 7.5 mile route started at Poulton Hall, probably the base of the Saxon force through Bebington heath and then up Storeton Hill (probably near Anlaf's base), through the woods onto Red Hill Road, so named according to the locals 'because of the blood that once flowed down it', past the historic Storeton Hall (ancient home of the Stanley family).

From there we cut through the woods connecting Storeton with Thingwall. Immediately as you come out you are faced with the Cross Hill Thing site. Past the Barnston gil (old Norse for dip or ravine) to a mandatory refreshment at the Fox and Hounds in Barnston. This was then followed by a field hike to the Heswall Slack (from the Old Norse slakki or cutting) and then down to Sheldrakes and past the restaurant to the wetland/marshland of Dingesmere. This time there was no need for a desperate escape to Dublin but a quick move to the nearest alehouse sufficed, and just as the sun was about to set.

'The plain darkened with the blood of warriors after the sun glorious heavenly body, bright candle of God, the eternal Lord, rose up in the morning, glided over the vast expanse, until the noble creation sank to its resting place'

'Revisiting Dingesmere' can be downloaded from www.nottingham.ac.uk/~sczsteve ■