The Wirral *Carrs* and *Holms*

Stephen Harding
University of Nottingham

The Wirral peninsula in north-west England (Figure 1) was once home to a vibrant colony of Scandinavian settlers, many of whom were Norsemen expelled from Ireland. The arrival of one group, led by Ingimund in AD 902, has now been well described but there were others, including Danes (Cavill *et al.* 2000 & refs therein). The intensity of the settlement is borne out by the distribution of major or settlement names in Wirral, such as Arrowe, Caldy, Claughton, Gayton, Larton, Lingham, Mollington Torold, Ness, Neston, Storeton, Thingwall, Thurstaston, Tranmere, the *-by* names (Frankby, Greasby, Helsby, Irby, Kirkby in Wallasey, Pensby, Raby, West Kirby, Whitby and the now lost Haby, Hesby/Eskeby, Warmby, Kiln Walby, Stromby and Syllaby) and the Norse-Irish Liscard and Noctorum. Some further settlement names, such as Birkenhead, Heswall and Woodchurch, are of Anglian origin but were influenced by the incoming Norsemen. The intensity of settlement can, however, perhaps best be gauged from the minor or field names. The distinguished antiquarian, F.T. Wainwright, stated the following in 1943 (repr. Cavill *et al.* 2000: 98):

> It is known that during the early part of the tenth century there occurred a large scale Norse immigration into Wirral. How heavy was this influx is illustrated by the field-names which, even in their modern forms, preserve ample proof of the intensity of the Scandinavian settlement.

Outstanding examples are *brekka* 'slope, hillside' (e.g. The Breck SJ 297917, Flaybrick SJ 293895, Wimbricks SJ 247879 and the Newton Breken SJ 238875), *slakki* 'shallow valley' or 'hollow' (e.g. the Heswall slack at SJ 272818, the Bromborough Slack at SJ 360821, Acre Slack Wood at SJ 339815 and the West Kirby Slack at SJ 216865), the many instances of *ærgi* 'shieling, pastureland' (e.g. Arrowe Park at SJ 270860), *þveit* 'clearing' (e.g. the many thwaites in the Bidston area), *klint* 'projecting rock' (e.g. *the Clynsse stone* (1642), now the Granny stone, at the Wallasey Breck SJ 297917 and The Clints at SJ 345827 at Brotherton

Park, Bromborough), *hestaskeið* 'horse race track' (at Irby SJ 257844 and Thornton Hough SJ 302812) and the >100 instances of the element *rák* 'lane'.

Of particular interest are the 51 instances of *kjarr* (*carr* / *ker*) and 24 of *holmr* (e.g. Lingham) in north Wirral, names associated with marshy land (Table 1): *kjarr* is an ON word meaning 'brushwood; marsh; boggy land overgrown with brushwood' and *holmr* is ON meaning 'dry ground in a marsh; island of useable land in a marshy area; a water meadow'. It is notable that there are no instances in Wirral of the corresponding English names – elements such as *mersc* 'marsh' and *ēg* 'dry ground in a marsh' – for the same features.

Table 1. The Wirral *carrs* and *holms* [all names were recorded in the 19th-century tithe map apportionments or earlier].

Name	Parish/Township	Location
Bedestoncarre (1306; now Bidston Moss)	Bidston	SJ 293910
Wallacre	Bidston	SJ 293917
Oxholme	Bidston	SJ 276903
Olucar (1347)	Bidston	SJ 295912*
Holmegarth	Bidston	SJ 289888
Near Holmes Wood	Claughton	SJ 310888
Further Holmes Wood (1824)	Claughton	SJ 309888
Carr	Grange	SJ 232881
Carr	Grange	SJ 224884
Carr Farm	Grange	SJ 242893
Carr Field	Grange	SJ 226878
Carr Side Field	Great Meols	SJ 232896
Carr Hall Farm	Great Meols	SJ 245895
Carr Farm	Great Meols	SJ 242893
Carr House	Great Meols	SJ 248897
Carr Lane	Great Meols	SJ 244902 to SJ 249894
Carr Lane	Hoylake	SJ 217887 to SJ 224885
Carremedowe (1306) now Carr Bridge Meadow	Landican	SJ 287865
Carr Bridge Field	Landican	SJ 285866
Near Carr Bridge Field	Landican	SJ 283865

Holme Hays	Leighton	SJ 282803
Carr	Little Meols	SJ 228887
Carr	Little Meols	SJ 223885
Carr Lane Field	Little Meols	SJ 225896
Carr Field	Little Meols	SJ 223888
Carr Side Hey	Little Meols	SJ 222887
Carr Hey	Little Meols	SJ 223881
Lingham	Moreton cum Lingham	SJ 252910
Lingham Lane	Moreton cum Lingham	SJ 252913 to SJ 255903
Dangkers (now Danger) Lane	Moreton cum Lingham	SJ 266907 to SJ 268903
Bottom o'th'carrs	Moreton cum Lingham	SJ 273910
West Car	Moreton cum Lingham	SJ 247911
West Carr Meadow	Moreton cum Lingham	SJ 247913
West Carr Hay	Moreton cum Lingham	SJ 252905
Holme Hay	Moreton cum Lingham	SJ 245905
Big Holme Hay	Moreton cum Lingham	SJ 252908
Little Holme Hay	Moreton cum Lingham	SJ 254907
Holme Intake	Moreton cum Lingham	SJ 253911
Holme Heys	Neston (Great & Little)	SJ 292798
Newton Car (1842)	Newton cum Larton	SJ 225881
Sally Carr Lane (now footpath)	Newton cum Larton	SJ 235878 to SJ 238877
Carr Lane	Newton cum Larton	SJ 214877 to SJ 225873
Carr	Newton cum Larton	SJ 228885
Carr Meadow	Newton cum Larton	SJ 226884
Holmesides	Newton cum Larton	SJ 234881
Banakers	Newton cum Larton	SJ 236877
Salacres[#]	Overchurch and Upton	SJ 273879

Salacre[#] Lane	Overchurch and Upton	SJ 272881 to SJ 276877
Lanacre[#]	Overchurch and Upton	SJ 266885
Hough Holmes	Overchurch and Upton	SJ 276882
Le Kar (1294)	Overchurch and Upton	SJ 265883*
Holm Lane	Oxton	SJ 296866 to SJ 320873
New Home (1831)	Oxton	SJ 300870*
Home Field	Oxton	SJ 293866
Home Hey	Oxton	SJ 292868
Little Home	Oxton	SJ 291867
Carr Bridge Meadow	Oxton	SJ 289870
Carr Field Hey	Oxton	SJ 291869
Carr House Croft	Pensby	SJ 271841
Five Acre Holme	Prenton	SJ 294863
Bridge Holme	Prenton	SJ 294865
Top Holme	Prenton	SJ 298864
Lower Holme	Prenton	SJ 297865
The Holme	Prenton	SJ 296866
Higher Holme	Prenton	SJ 296864
Carr Farm	Saughall Massie	SJ 242893
Carr Houses	Saughall Massie	SJ 247906
Carr Meadow	Saughall Massie	SJ 239901
New Carr	Saughall Massie	SJ 235897
Carr	Saughall Massie	SJ 239902
Carr Hay	Saughall Massie	SJ 241899
Old Carr Meadow	Saughall Massie	SJ 242902
Old Carr	Saughall Massie	SJ 245902
Old Carr	Saughall Massie	SJ 242900
Carr Lane	Saughall Massie	SJ 244902 to SJ 249894
Wallacre Road / Waley-Carr	Wallasey	SJ 294917 to SJ 297919
Routeholm (1306)	Wallasey	not known
Lower Ackers[#]	Woodchurch	SJ 282866
Higher Ackers[#]	Woodchurch	SJ 283866
Holmlake (1209)	Great Stanney	SJ 419754*
Holmlache (1209)	Stanlow	SJ 421756*

\# = last element could be ON *kjarr*, ON *akr*; * = estimated position

Plotted on a map (Figure 2), they reveal an interesting trend and most congregate around the Rivers Birket and Fender. They suggest that much of north Wirral was of relatively low-quality farming land subject to flooding and tidal inundation, a feature that persisted through the centuries until the sea defences and embankments were constructed and completed in the late 19th / early 20th centuries. The scene captured in the photograph of Figure 3, taken in 1912 at Kerr's Field, Lingham, must have been commonplace and indeed appears to have led to the belief amongst locals that the legendary event, when King Knut tried to stem the waves ("I command you therefore not to rise on my land, nor to presume to wet the clothing or limbs of your master", see Greenway, 1996: 366–8), took place on the north Wirral coast. Wirral was home to the Canute chair, built by the Cust family of Leasowe in the 1820s (see Harding 2000; 2006: 33–5).

Persistence of a Scandinavian dialect

Recent studies by scholars such as Kenneth Cameron (1997) have shown that the minor names in an area tell us a great deal about the kind of vocabulary of the community. The distribution of the *carrs* and *holms* (Figure 2) taken alongside the distribution of all minor names in Wirral with Scandinavian elements (Figure 4) attest to the persistence of dialect reflecting the intensity of the original settlement, re-affirming Wainwright's (1943) proposition. Specific distributions of *brekka*, *slakki*, *rák* and *inntak* are given in Harding (2000).

Taken alone, individual names describing a landscape feature are limited to the occurrence of that feature – so that the distribution of *carrs* and *holms* shows the concentration of boggy areas in Wirral as much as the Norse influence of naming. The original Scandinavian words *kjarr* and *holmr* would have been borrowed early into English as *ker* and *holm*, and the evidence of the use of these elements in Wirral is all from after the Norman Conquest, the earliest recorded examples being *Holmlache* (1209) in Stanlow (PN Ch 4: 186; perhaps the same place as *Holmlake* (1209) in Great Stanney, PN Ch 4: 184), *le Kar* (1294) in Overchurch and *Routheholm* (1306) in Wallasey where *holmr* is compounded with the ON adjective *rauðr* 'red' (PN Ch 4: 335). But perhaps the fact that the normal Old English words for these particular topographical features are completely absent in these areas is of some significance. The Norse-derived words had become the normal ones in Wirral when the names were given. The persistence of a Scandinavian dialect through the centuries is reinforced by other evidence. The 14th-century poem *Sir*

Gawain and the Green Knight, in which part of the action takes place in Wirral, is thought to have been written by someone from the area or not far away (Wilson, 1979; Mathew, 1968: 166; Harding, 2002: 181–7). This poem is notable for its use of a large number (amounting to some 10% of its content) of Norse dialect words, such as *storr*, *karp*, *renk*, *gata*, rendering it very different from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written around the same time.

Wirral was not entirely boggy and uninviting. In Bidston, close to the *Bedestoncarre* and *Olucar*, we have evidence of extensive clearing with large numbers of *thwaite*-names: from the 19th-century tithe apportionments (with earlier forms recorded in 1644 or 1646) we find The Cornhill Thwaite (SJ 79913), The Great Thwaite (SJ 281912), Marled Thwaite (SJ 277914), Meadow Thwaite (SJ 279915), Salt Thwaite (SJ 282916), Spencer's Thwaite (SJ 281916), Tassey's Thwaite (SJ 277915), Whinney's Thwaite (SJ 277913) and the associated Thwaite Lane. Earlier we find *Inderthwaite* and *Utterthwaite* (both 1522), *the Thwaytes* and *Oldetwayt* (both 1357). Around the centre of the Norse enclave, moreover (Figure 4), we still find, in the 19th century, the use of ON *ærgi* in its original sense of 'a shieling, a hill pasture'. From the tithe apportionments for Arrowe we find, for example, Youd's and Bennet's Arrowe (SJ 268855), Brown's Arrowe (SJ 264865), Bithel's Arrowe (SJ 263863), Harrison's Arrowe (SJ 263860), Widings Arrowe (SJ 263861), Whartons Arrowe (SJ 262857) etc., as well as associated names such as Arrowe Hill (SJ 275873), Arrowe Bridge (SJ 265868) and Arrowe Brook, a tributary of the River Birket. The persistence of this word of Celtic origin, adapted by Viking settlers abroad (PN Ch 4: 262) is not only evidence of a continuing dialect but also of the continuation of a type of farming used (and still used) by the Norwegians, i.e. transhumance (see, e.g., Jesch 2000), whereby cattle and sheep are pastured away from the farmhouse during summer months, saving the nearby pasture for winter fodder.

Connection with the battle of *Brunanburh*

Finally, it is worth commenting on the possible (and perhaps unexpected) relevance of the *carrs* and *holms* to the battle of *Brunanburh*. This battle was fought in AD 937 by a force of Dublin Norsemen led by Olaf Guthfrithsson – known in Old English sources as Anlaf – with Celtic allies, principally from Scotland, against a combined English army led by King Æthelstan of the Mercians and West Saxons, coming from the Midlands and the south. The only contemporary record of the battle is in

the form of a poem, recorded in versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 937 (A, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge 173; B, British Library Cotton Tiberius A vi; C, Cotton Tiberius B.i; D, Cotton Tiberius B. iv and one manuscript now lost). The poem tells of the battle taking place *ymb Brunanburh*, i.e. 'around *Brunanburh*' and of Anlaf's defeated force escaping *on Dingesmere*, then across the deep waters of the Irish Sea back to Dublin (Campbell 1938: 115):

> Gewitan him þa norþmen nægledcnearrum,
> dreorig daraða laf, on Dingesmere,
> ofer deop wæter Difelin secan,
> eft Ira land, æwiscmode. (53–6)
> [Then the Northmen, dreary survivors of the spears, went in the nail-studded ships on Dingesmere, over deep water, to seek Dublin, went back to Ireland ashamed.]

Nobody has been quite sure where the battle took place – the poem only mentions the three place-names *Brunanburh*, *Dingesmere* and *Difelin* – although most scholars accept that *Brunanburh* is Bromborough on the Wirral (see Cavill 2001: 105–6), *Brunanburh* being an old form of Bromborough (Figure 5). The other favoured major sites have included Brinsworth near Rotherham or Burnswark near Dumfries, although the arguments for these sites have been subject to severe criticism (see, e.g., Higham 1997; Cavill 2007). One of the mysteries until recently has been the location of *Dingesmere*. Earlier proposals had suggested *Dingesmere* meant 'the [river] Dee's mere' (Dodgson 1957; 1967) or 'the noisy sea' from the variant spelling *Dinnesmere* but these have been dismissed on linguistic grounds (PN Ch 4: 240). A more plausible suggestion was made by Cavill *et al.* (2004) that *Dingesmere* actually means 'the Thing's mere', i.e. 'water, or water feature overlooked by, or controlled by, the Thing'. Not far from Bromborough is Thingwall, the centre of the (Wirral) Scandinavian settlement and site of the Thing – its assembly field or parliament. The -*mere* appears to come from OE *mere* 'wetland' or ON *marr* 'marsh', rather than 'sea', and the term was used to warn travellers coming by sea or from the Dee to the Thing, of the presence of this feature. In considering a likely site on Wirral where this 'Thing's mere' might be, Cavill *et al.* suggested (because of its proximity) a region of wetland/marshland around the coast at Heswall (Figure 5), approximately 4km from Thingwall, with the caveat that this coastline would have been different in the 10th century. Such a site would not necessarily have been the point of landing of Olaf's fleet, but might have been a site at which some sort of craft for part of a force to escape from was located, or to which a skeleton fleet could quickly have been moved from where the fleet was moored (possibly Meols, then, with its natural

harbour, Hyle Lake, one of the main sea-ports in the Irish Sea region). This present analysis of the existence and distribution of the large number of minor names expressing marshy features reinforces this view, although the analysis is also consistent with the coastal wetland or marshland of *Dingesmere* being near Meols itself (Figure 5).

Conclusion

The distribution of topographical minor names tells us as much about the distribution of natural features as it does about the people who named them. In the case of the Wirral *carrs* and *holms*, the high density in the former Norse enclave tell us about the distribution of boggy ground before the modern construction of the sea defences. It also reflects the persistence of the Scandinavian dialect throughout the centuries, and the absence of the corresponding English names for the same features is testament to the dominance of this dialect in the medieval period. This conclusion is also reflected in a recent sociolinguistic study (Coates 1998) and further strengthened by evidence from recent genetic studies, which shows a population admixture for the area of around 50% Celtic and 50% Norse (Bowden *et al.* 2007).

NCMH Laboratories
University of Nottingham
Sutton Bonington
LE12 5RD, UK
E: Steve.Harding@nottingham.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

References

Bowden, Georgina R., Patricia Balaresque, Turi E. King, Ziff Hansen, Andrew C. Lee, Giles Pergl-Wilson, Emma Hurley, Stephen J. Roberts, Patrick Waite, Judith Jesch, Mark G. Thomas, Stephen E. Harding and Mark A. Jobling (2007), 'Excavating past population structures by surname-based sampling: the genetic legacy of the Vikings in northwest England', *Molecular Biology and Evolution* (forthcoming issue).

Cameron, K. (1997), 'The Danish element in the minor field-names of Yarborough Wapentake, Lincolnshire', in *Names, Places and People: an onomastic miscellany in memory of John McNeal Dodgson*, A.R. Rumble and A.D. Mills, eds, Stamford: Paul Watkins, 19–25.

Campbell, Alistair, ed. (1938), *The Battle of Brunanburh*, London: Heinemann.

Cavill, Paul (2001), *Vikings: fear and faith in Anglo-Saxon England*, London: Harper Collins.

— (2007), 'The site of the battle of *Brunanburh*: manuscripts and maps, grammar and geography' in *Festschrift for Margaret Gelling*, O.J. Padel and D.N. Parsons, eds (in press).

Cavill, Paul, Stephen E. Harding and Judith Jesch (2000), *Wirral and its Viking heritage*, Nottingham: English Place-Name Society, Popular Series 2.

— (2003–04), 'Revisiting *Dingesmere*', *JEPNS* 36, 25–38.

Coates, Richard (1997–98), 'Liscard and Irish names in Northern Wirral' *JEPNS* 30, 23–6.

— (1998), 'The sociolinguistics of western Wirral in the tenth century', paper to *Centred on Mann: issues in sociolinguistic theory and method*, Centre for Manx Studies, Douglas, Isle of Man (forthcoming in proceedings ed. by Andrew Hamer).

Dodgson, John McN. (1957), 'The background of *Brunanburh*', *Saga-book of the Viking society* 14, 303–16; rpt in Cavill *et al.* (2000), 60–9.

— (1967), 'The English arrival in Cheshire', *Proceedings and transactions of the historic society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 119, 1–37; rpt in PN Ch 5:2 262–307.

Greenway, Diana E., ed. (1996), *Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon* Historia Anglorum: *The History of the English People,* iv. 8.

Harding, Stephen E. (2000), 'Locations and legends', in Cavill *et al.* (2000), 100–24.

— (2002), *Viking Mersey: Scandinavian Wirral, West Lancashire and Chester,* Birkenhead: Countyvise.

— (2006), *Ingimund's Saga: Norwegian Wirral,* 2nd ed., Birkenhead: Countyvise.

Higham, Nicholas J. (1997), 'The context of Brunanburh', in *Names, Places and People: an onomastic miscellany in memory of John McNeal Dodgson*, A.R. Rumble and A.D. Mills, eds, Stamford: Paul Watkins, 144–56.

Jesch, Judith (2000), 'Scandinavian Wirral' in Cavill *et al.* (2000), 1–10.

Mathew, Gervase (1968), *The court of Richard II*, London: Murray.

Wainwright, Frederick T. (1943), 'Wirral field names', *Antiquity* 27, 57–66; rpt in Cavill *et al.* (2000), 98–9.

Wilson, Edward (1979), '*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Stanley family of Stanley, Storeton, and Hooton' *Review of English Studies* 30, 308–16.
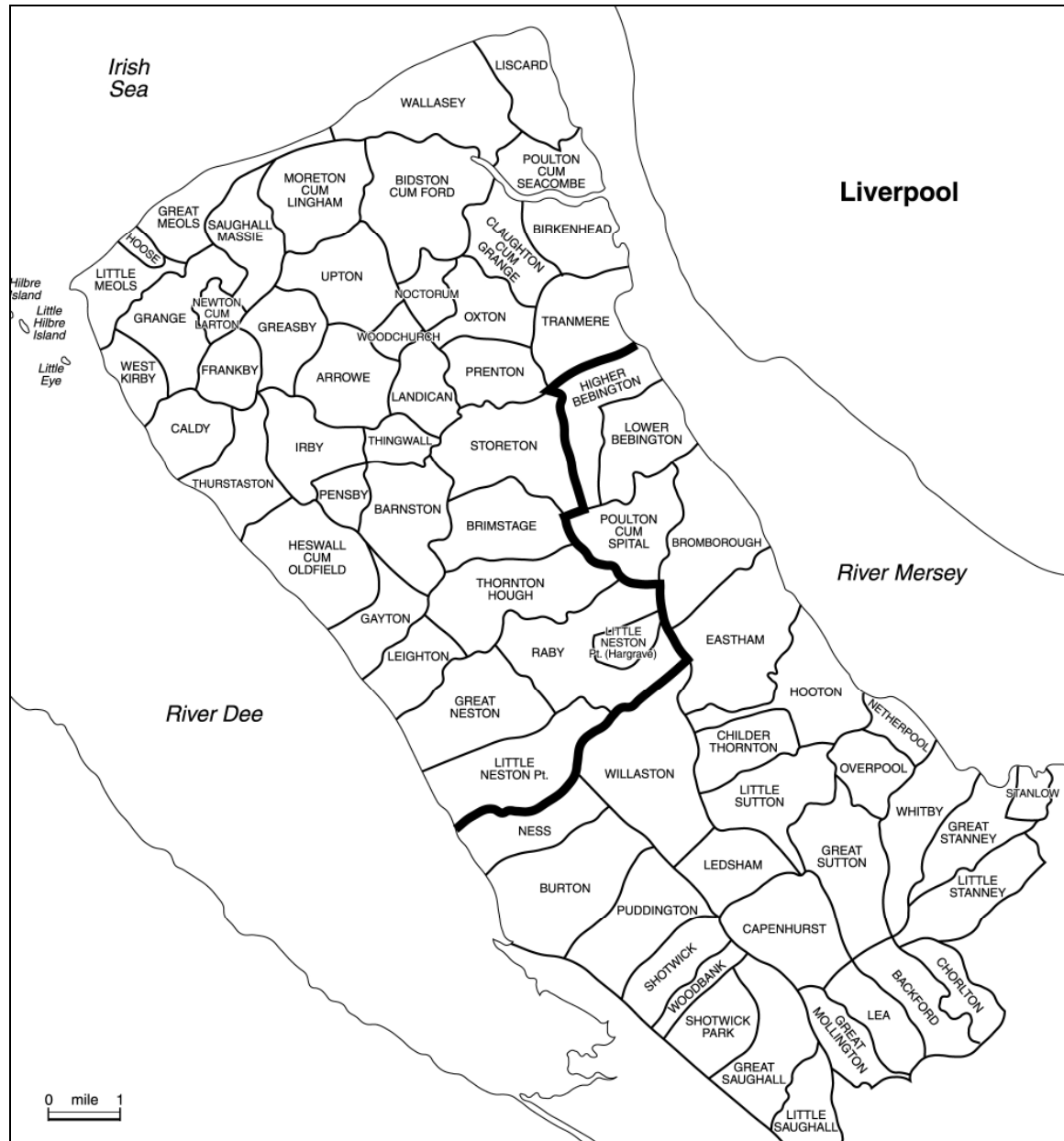
Figure 1: Wirral parish map (19th cent.). The bold line demarks the approximate boundary of the 10th-century Norse enclave, based on baronial manor holdings and place-names. Courtesy of Chester and Cheshire Archives & Local Studies.
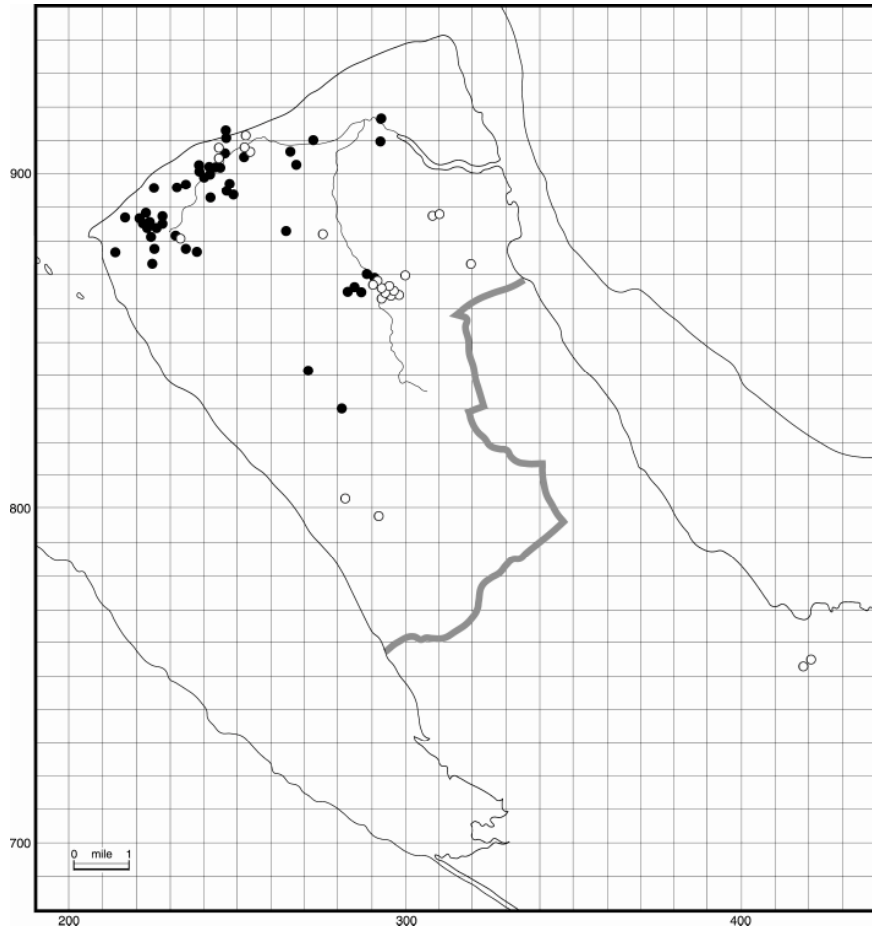
Figure 2: distribution map of field/track names in *carr* (filled circles) and *holm* (open circles).

Figure 3: Flood scene in 1912 at Kerr's Field, Lingham (SJ 252910). Photo courtesy of Mr. Frank Biddle.
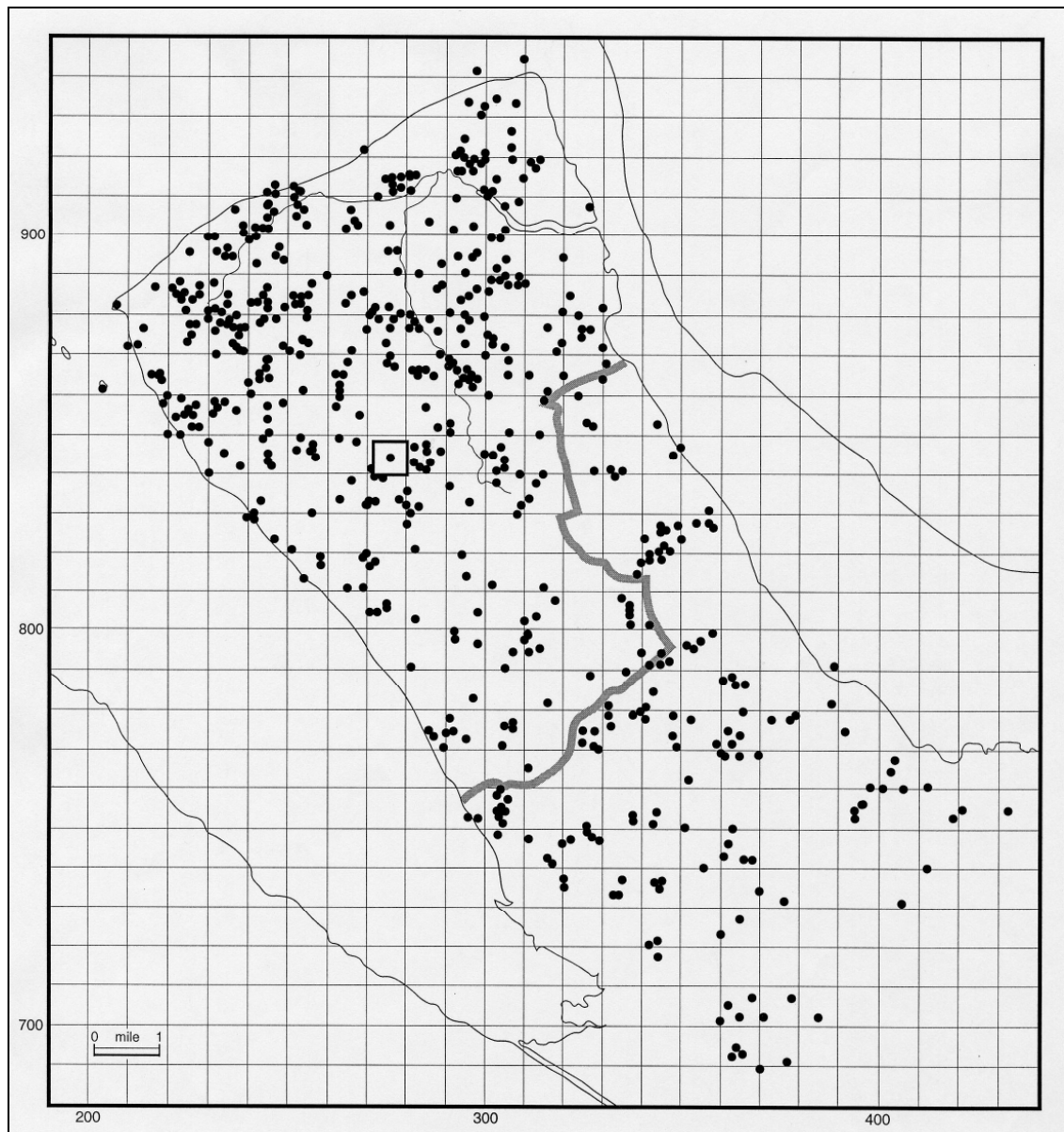
Figure 4: distribution map of field/track names containing Scandinavian elements. Square marks Thingwall.

Figure 5: escape routes to the coast. Dark line: to Heswall. Lighter line: through the *carrs* and *holms* to Meols. Adapted from 18th-century map of Moll (*c*. 1724). Map courtesy of Paul Cavill.