

Viking Wirral – and Viking Genes

A thousand or so years ago, Wirral – recently described by TV Weatherman Fred Talbot as ‘Little Scandinavia’ - was once home to a thriving community of Vikings of primarily Norwegian descent. Scientist and Viking expert Professor Steve Harding tells us more.



First Vikings led by Ingimund arrive in Wirral
Painting © Chris Collingwood - www.chriscollingwood.co.uk

The Norsemen came to settle in Wirral after being driven out of Ireland and then Anglesey. This initiated a mass migration of their fellow countrymen into the area and soon they had established a community with their own leader – a man called Ingimund, their own language – Old Norse (perhaps with an Irish accent), a trading port – Meols, and at its centre a place of assembly or government – the Thing at Thingwall. Experts believe Viking Wirral was the scene of what BBC's Neil Oliver described as one of the most important battles in the history of the British Isles. Their legacy also remains in a wealth of archaeology – and in all the place names these Norsemen have left behind. And these Vikings are still with us today: a recent genetic survey of Wirral and neighbouring West Lancashire has shown that up to half of the DNA from old Wirral families is of Norse origin: a new book will soon be published based on the survey.

What's in a name?

Wirral has a fantastic wealth of Scandinavian place names – major and minor. It has amongst the highest concentration of place names in the country ending with – by, a Viking term meaning a settlement or farmstead, but there are many other examples.

Most are concentrated in the northern and western end of the peninsula and their distribution gives us an idea of the boundary of the Norse community. Some place names show clearly that many of the Norse settlers came from Ireland and bringing Irish people with them: names like Dove Point ('black point'), Liscard ('hall on a rock') and Noctorum ('hill that's dry') all have clear Irish elements. Irby itself is an Old Norse name meaning "settlement of the Irish". Places like Denhall (from Old Danish Danir – Danes) tell us that Danes were there too. Ness ('promontory') and Neston probably marked the southern extremity of the initial Norse settlements and the neighbouring settlement of Raby is an Old Norse name meaning 'boundary settlement'. From Raby the boundary appears to have run north-eastwards along the River Dibbin and the ridge of high ground separating Bebington from Storeton (Old Norse 'big farmstead') up to Tranmere ('crane or heron sandbank'). The existence of the community's Thing at Thingwall ('assembly field' – one of only two definite surviving Thingwall place-names in England – attests to the Scandinavians being the dominant population. The large numbers of minor names/dialect words like carr (Old Norse kjarr - 'marsh brushwood'),

holm (holmr – 'island on marshy area'), rake (rak – 'lane'), breck (brekka – 'slope on a hillside') and slack (slakki – cutting/cut through) also helps tell us the population were primarily Norse speaking, a language which affected the dialect of the population for centuries after the settlement period.

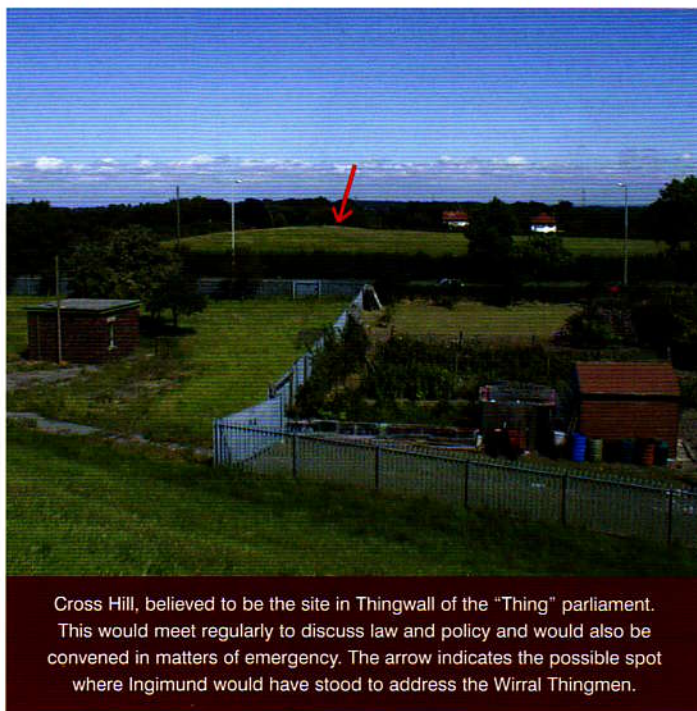
The large numbers of carr and holm names around the Birkett and Fender tell us that much of the land was boggy and prone to flooding.

Ingimund's deal

The arrival of Viking settlers into Wirral is recorded in Irish chronicles reinforced by Welsh and Anglo Saxon records (the refortification of Chester shortly after their arrival). They tell of how the Norseman Ingimund gained permission to settle 'in lands near Chester' how their settlements were peaceful – presumably as part of the deal with Queen Aethelflaed – at least initially. Several field names for example have the name element arrowe (Old Norse – aergi - 'shieling/pastureland') – Bithell's Arrowe, Wharton's Arrowe etc. – and this shows a peaceful farming activity. However the story of Ingimund in the Irish Chronicles ends by telling us of how in 907 he called a meeting of the leaders of all the Norsemen, Danes and their Irish followers after which they started attacking Chester.

Archaeology and stonework

Wirral is blessed with many fine examples of Viking Age archaeology. In the 19th century Viking artefacts were discovered at Meols as coastal erosion exposed ancient settlements: these finds were catalogued and published in 2007 by the Oxford University School of Archaeology (D. Griffiths, R.A. Philpott & G. Egan: Meols, the Archaeology of the North Wirral Coast): they include coins,



Cross Hill, believed to be the site in Thingwall of the "Thing" parliament. This would meet regularly to discuss law and policy and would also be convened in matters of emergency. The arrow indicates the possible spot where Ingimund would have stood to address the Wirral Thingmen.



You can't escape the Vikings on Wirral – they are even on our signposts. Take this one for example in the centre of Irby: all the names – including Irby itself – are Viking or Viking influenced

Hiberno-Norse pins, brooches, part of a drinking horn and what appear to be weapons from a possible pagan burial.

Other Wirral finds 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. Remains of an elliptically shaped Viking house have been found at Irby. Viking cross fragments have been found at Hilbre Island, West Kirby, Woodchurch and Bromborough. At the Church of St Mary and St Helen at Neston, there are several pieces belonging to at least three Hiberno-Norse crosses, with fascinating imagery including the touching scene of a Viking couple embracing.

Ancient seaport

Archaeological evidence suggests that Meols had been used as a seaport long before the arrival of the Vikings, indeed many of the finds show it probably began in the Iron Age and was used by the Romans. Although Meols today offers only few advantages as a port this was not true in medieval and ancient times, and from a perusal of old maps it is not difficult to see why. Until the 19th century the coast at Meols extended several hundred metres outwards from its position today – a lost landform which was known as Dove Point. A tidal channel known as the Hoyle Lake provided a sheltered anchorage. Viking-Age Meols became a point of communication with other Norse communities around the Irish Sea and an important trading base, and it continued to trade well on into the Middle Ages. Coastal erosion, silting and other changes to the coastline resulted in the loss of Dove Point by the end of the 19th century.

Tranmere and horse racing

Wirral's Tranmere Rovers (Trani-melr – 'cranebird/heron sandbank') is unique in being the only team in the English Football League with a Norwegian Viking name: all Viking

fans should support Tranmere. Although they were not kicking footballs in the 10th century there is place-name evidence that they were participating in another type of sport – the field names Heskeths in Irby and Thornton Hough derive from the ON *hestaskeid* meaning 'horse race track'.

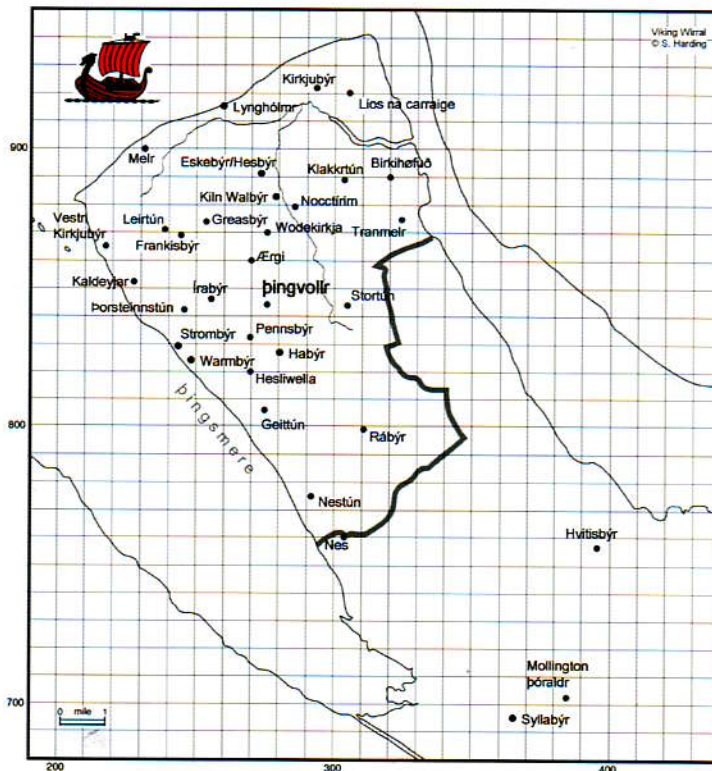
Battle of Brunanburh

Next year marks the 1075th anniversary of the Battle of Brunanburh one of the most important battles in the history of the British Isles – comparable in importance to Hastings – and yet, as BBC presenter Neil Oliver said in a recent broadcast – few people have even heard of it. Brunanburh is the old name for Bromborough on the Wirral and although its location has been debated most experts now accept that the battle was fought on Wirral. It took place in AD937 – almost 40 years after the first Viking settlements and involved invading armies coming from Ireland and Scotland confronting Anglo-Saxon armies coming from central and southern England. The Anglo-Saxon poem describing the battle tells how the invaders departed from Dingesmere, recently explained as the "Things-mere" – the wetland or marshland of the Thing – a term used earlier by locals and seaman to warn sea-travellers coming to the Thing meetings about the hazards of coastal marshland. Much later sources coming from Iceland claimed that Vikings fought on both sides with one of the warriors their most famous Viking – Egil Skallagrímsson. Although the precise location on Wirral for the main battle site and Dingesmere are not known with any certainty, it is believed the bulk of the fighting took place in the Bebbington-Brimstage region and Dingesmere was along the coast from Neston up to what is now Heswall Point or Sheldrakes.

Genes in old Wirral families

Recent Y-chromosome DNA analysis of men from old Wirral families (i.e. possessing surnames extant in the area prior to 1700) has shown, in common with neighbouring West Lancashire, that a substantial amount – up to as much as 50% - of the DNA admixture appears to be of Norse origin. Many of the individuals who took part also had strong personal matches in Scandinavia including Heswall-born Brian Totty. When asked if he was surprised about his results he replied as follows: "Well, I wasn't surprised, I was delighted to get the proof of something which had been suggested to me for many years by a local historian. His name was Canon Lee who was the rector of St. Peter's, Heswall Church and he would be poring over the Parish Registers and whenever I bumped into him he would say 'Here comes Totty the Viking'. I used to laugh and think he was winding me up. I accepted in good faith what he said about the Parish Register and that goes back five centuries or so to the

Viking Wirral – map of major Wirral place names in their probable Old Norse form – can you identify these with their modern forms? Norse *þ* is pronounced "Th"



1650s but this took us back another seven hundred years would it be. This has scientifically proven what the suggestion was so the result has proved something that couldn't be established with certainty, despite the glamour of many of my family's and local friends' anecdotes backed up by the eminent Canon's detailed studies of Parish records." The survey led by Professor Mark Jobling from the University of Leicester – the birthplace of genetic fingerprinting – was recently published in a leading scientific journal and a book will be published in a forthcoming book by Nottingham University Press.

Viking heritage walks

Viking trails are now being suggested linking sites of Viking interest – see www.nottingham.ac.uk/~sczsteve. Some of the sites are on private property – such as the site of the

Thing parliament, so 'trailers' should not enter these areas unless prior permission has been received. There is, however, a new annual walk celebrating not only the area's great Viking heritage but also the patron saint of Norway and Scandinavia – St Olav. This walk is held over the nearest weekend to St Olav's day (29th July) and links three churches with strong Viking links – St Bridget's West Kirby, St Mary and St Helen in Neston and St Olave's in Chester. This year's walk is on Saturday July 31st and Wirral walkers will be joined by walkers and St Olave pilgrims from Scandinavia. Anyone interested in doing all or part of this should register using the link given in the website above.

For further information on anything discussed in this article contact Steve via *Heswall Magazine* or steve.Harding@nottingham.ac.uk

How can I find out more?

1. Come on the Viking Heritage walk in July
2. Take part in the Viking Wirral News blog site which is due to start shortly, being run by myself and Oxford archaeologist Dr. David Griffiths.
3. Visit the Viking Wirral website – www.nottingham.ac.uk/~sczsteve and Liverpool Museum's archaeology website – www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/mol/archaeology
4. Read the following books referring to the Vikings on Wirral: *Wirral and its Viking Heritage* (P. Cavill, S.Harding and J. Jesch, English Place Name Society, 2000); *Viking Mersey* (S. Harding, Countywise, 2002); *Ingimund's Saga* (S. Harding, Countywise, 2006), *The Wirral and West Lancashire Viking DNA project* (S. Harding, M. Jobling and T. King), shortly to be published.