

VI: Gamul Terrace and the Viking Connection

by Stephen E Harding*

On Lower Bridge Street, Chester, just opposite St Olave's Church, is the raised Gamul Terrace, which now houses the Brewery Tap public house (the former Gamul House) and a number of private homes. Gamul House was the home of Sir Francis Gamull (1606–1654), a mayor of Chester and prominent royalist during the Civil War. The name Gamul derives from a Norse personal name. It is therefore an intriguing coincidence that Gamul Terrace sits at the heart of Viking-age Chester. This short article summarises recent research on the settlement of the Vikings in Wirral, their expansion towards Chester and proposes a context for the name Gamul.

Vikings in Wirral

For at least part of the tenth and eleventh centuries the southern part of the city of Chester was home to a vibrant community of Viking origin that contributed towards the success of this former trading centre (Harding 2002; Griffiths 2010 and references therein). Documented Viking activity at Chester started in AD 893, when the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Thorpe ed 1861 and Swanton ed 1996) tells us how the Danes moved rapidly to a deserted or desolate town 'in Wirral called Chester' and stayed there (until ~ AD 894/895) before embarking on a campaign of raiding in Wales. The ancient Welsh annals – *Annales Cambriae* – (Morris ed 1980) and *Brut y Tywysogion* (Jones ed 1952) pick up on the story from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*:

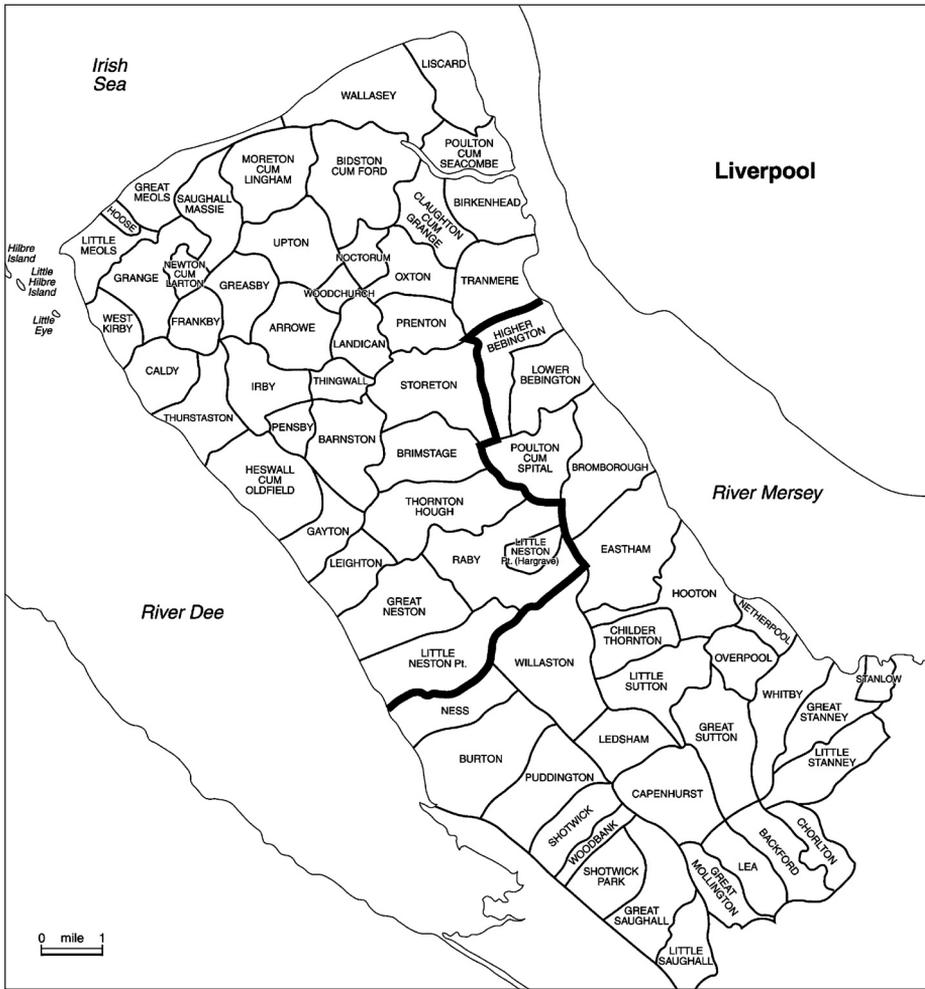
Annales Cambriae sa 895: Nordmani venerunt et vastaverunt Loyer et Bricheniaue et Guent et Guinnligiauc. 'The Northmen came and laid waste England, Brecheiniog, Gwent and Gwenllwg.'

Brut y Tywysogion sa 894: 'And then the Northmen devastated England, Brecheiniog, Morganwy, Gwent, Buallt and Gwenllwg'.

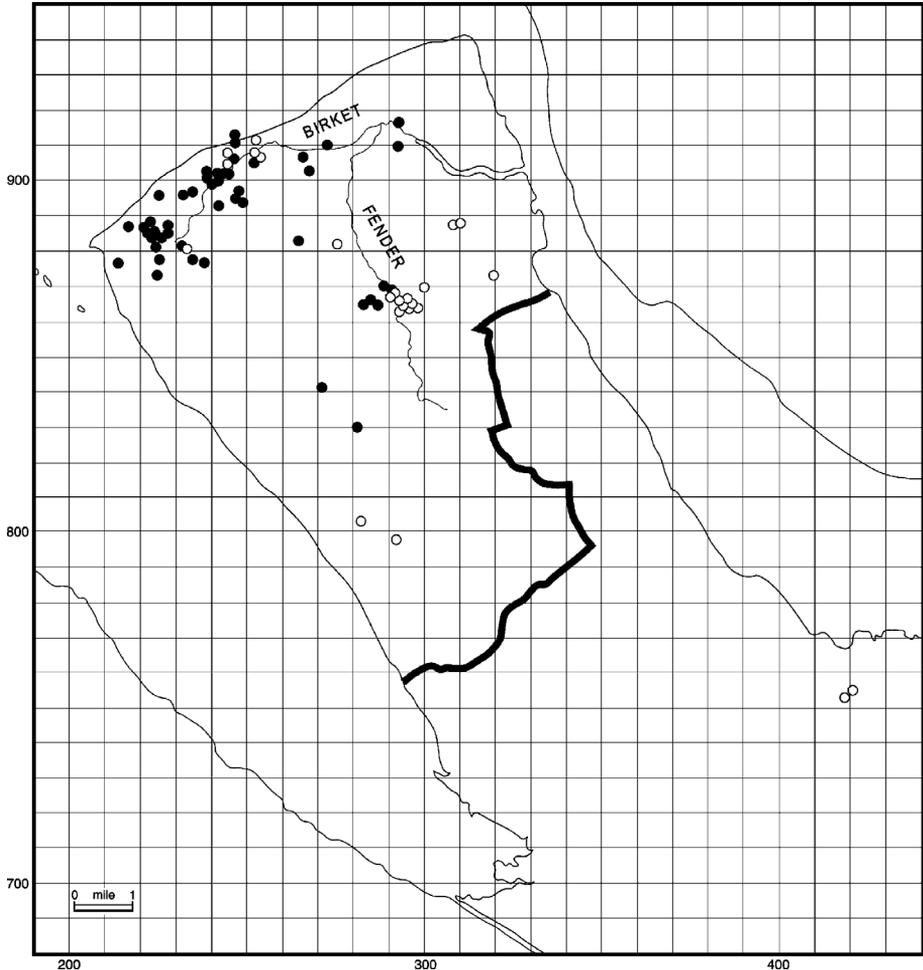
The chronicler's reference to Chester as a deserted/desolate town in Wirral is interesting. Wainwright (1942, 5, 12) speculated that the desolation may have dated from the Battle of Chester ~ AD 613 in which the Angles crushed the Britons, or to a more recent attack by Norsemen operating in the Irish Sea, or by an attack by the Welsh.

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The next Viking encounter was a very different one. Irish chronicles – *The Three Fragments* – tell us of the settlement of Wirral by Vikings of primarily Norse or Norwegian origin who had been expelled from Dublin in the year AD 902, after an agreement between Æthelflæd, Queen of Mercia, and the Norse leader Ingimund (O’Donovan ed 1860; Wainwright 1942; see also Cavill et al 2000, 20–5, 40, 44–59). From the evidence of major localities with Norse or Hiberno-Norse names (Wainwright 1942; Dodgson 1957; Cavill et al 2000, 35–42; Harding 2000, 109) this settlement appears to have been both substantial and, initially, largely confined to the north and west of the peninsula, with Raby (ON *rá-býr* ‘boundary settlement’) at its southern boundary and Thingwall (ON *Þing vǫllr* ‘Assembly field’) its place of assembly or ‘parliament’ at the centre (III VI.1). The agreement



III VI.1 Nineteenth-century map showing distribution of parish/township names in Wirral. The boundary line, according to Dodgson (1957, 306) and Griffiths (1992, 67), passing along the southern edge of Raby (from ON *rá* and ON *býr*) marks the southern limit of the initial Norse enclave as deduced from the names of Norse or Norse-Irish names in Wirral and also manorial holdings at the time of the Domesday Survey (AD 1086) by people with Norse or Norse-Irish names.



III VI.2 Distribution map of place names in -carr (filled circles) and -holm (open circles) in Wirral recorded in the nineteenth-century tithe map apportionments or earlier (Harding 2007-8)

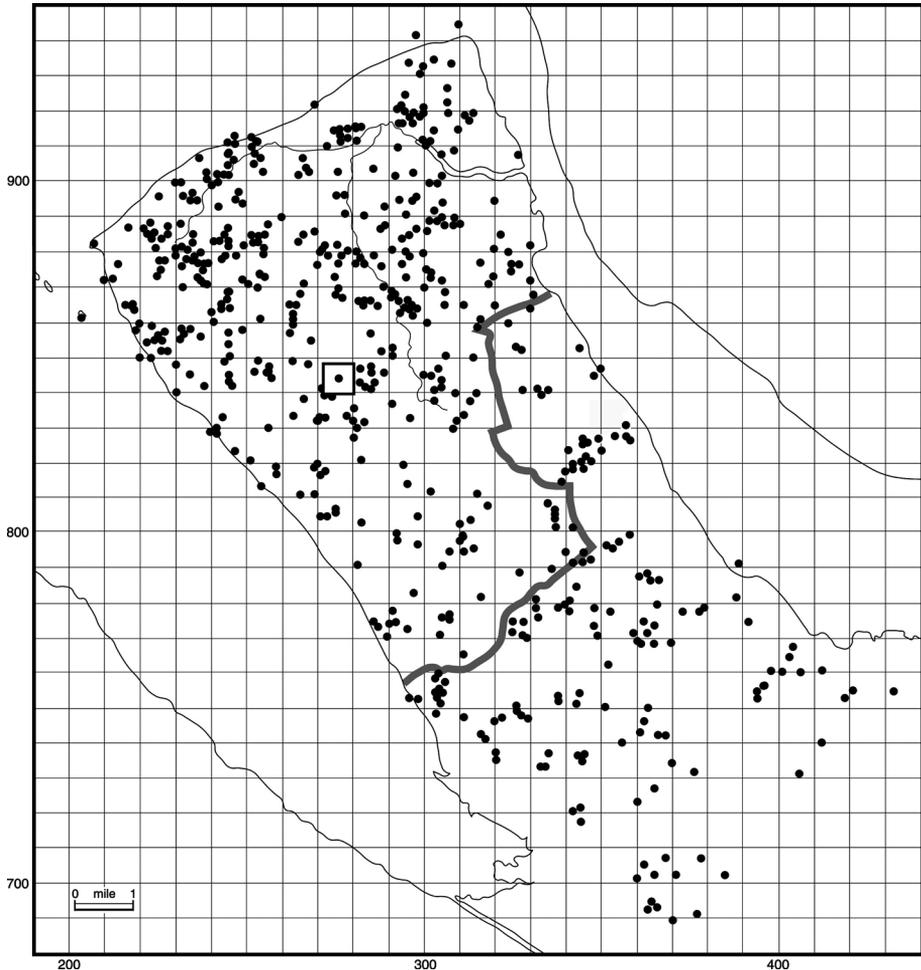
with Æthelflæd no doubt required the settlement to be peaceful – which appears to have been honoured at least for the first few years. To make sure of this Æthelflæd appears according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 907 (Thorpe ed 1861; Swanton ed 1996) to have re-fortified Chester. The relative peace ended abruptly in that year. Possibly as a result of overcrowding together with a growing dissatisfaction at the low quality of the lands they had settled – much of the northern part of Wirral suffering periodic inundation (there are a large number of -carr and -holm place names, reflecting the presence of flooded land: *see below*) – the *Three Fragments* (O’Donovan ed 1860; Wainwright 1942, 16–18; Cavill *et al* 2000, 20–5, 40, 44–59) tell of a meeting between Ingimund and the leaders of the Norsemen, Danes and their Irish followers. This meeting, possibly at Thingwall (Jesch 2000), resulted in the issue of an ultimatum, followed by attacks on Chester. The attacks, reported in legendary detail in the *Three Fragments*, were repelled but the story ends: ‘but it was not long before the Norsemen came to do battle again...’ (Wainwright 1942, 18).

The distributions of the -carr and -holm names are particularly interesting (Harding 2007–8 and III VI.2). Ultimately the word ‘-carr’ is derived from the Old Norse (ON) *kjarr*, ‘brushwood, marsh, boggy land overgrown with brushwood’. At first sight it appears that, with a few exceptions, the use of this place name element is peculiar to the area of the original enclave as defined by the names of major settlements. However, the distribution map shows the location of the boggy areas of Wirral as much as it does the Norse influence on naming. Much the same applies to the ‘-holm(e)’ names, derived from ON *holmr*, ‘dry ground on a marsh, a water meadow’. There are fifty-one instances of carr and twenty-four of holm in Wirral, all recorded in the nineteenth-century tithe map apportionments or earlier. The earliest recorded examples include Holmlache (1209) in Stanlow (Dodgson 1972, 186), le Kar (1294) in Overchurch and Routhholm (1306) in Wallasey where *holmr* is compounded with the ON adjective *raudr*, ‘red’ (Dodgson 1972, 307, 335).

The overlap between the distributions of -carr and -holm is striking, mostly congregating around the Rivers Birket and Fender. What is also striking is the fact that the normal Old English words for these topographical features, elements such as *mersc*, ‘marsh’ and *ēg*, ‘dry ground in marsh’ are almost completely absent from these areas. This is significant: the Norse-derived words had become the normal ones in the area when the names were given and had possibly replaced earlier ones.

Although the story of Ingimund in the *Three Fragments* ends in AD 907 – and we are not told of the final outcome – it appears that the Vikings did eventually gain a presence in the southern part of Wirral and also in Chester, in what seems to have been a largely peaceful co-existence and indeed to some extent fusion with the English (Wainwright 1942, 45). The distribution of minor (field-, track- and topographical) names of Norse or Irish origin shows a wider spread through the peninsula (Harding 2000; Harding 2007–8; 2016) compared to the older major names, extending southwards beyond Raby, although it is impossible to establish how far this took place before the Norman Conquest. III VI.3 shows the distribution of these names based on their earliest recorded forms. The earliest forms are relevant because field- and track names can change depending on the local farmer at the time and reflect the language and dialect being spoken at the time the field or track was named (see Wainwright 1943, 98–9; Griffiths & Harding 2014).

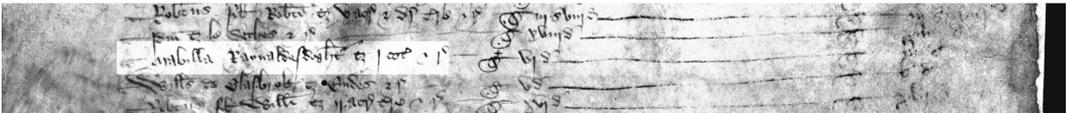
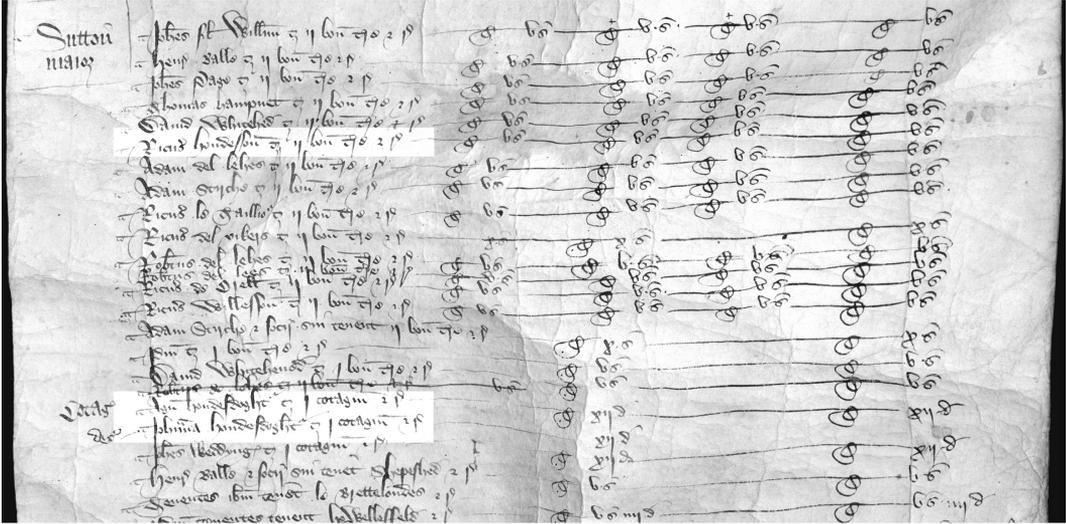
Other evidence for a surviving dialect in the area at least until the start of the fifteenth century comes for example from records of rentals, with personal names such as Agnes and Johanne Hondesdoghter and Richard Hondesson recorded in Great Sutton parish for 1398 and Mabilla Raynaldesdoghter in Childer Thornton parish (III VI.4). The fourteenth-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 (it has been associated with Sir John Stanley (1350–1414) of Storeton Hall, either as the patron of the poet or the poet himself (Mathew 1968, 166; Wilson 1979)), and is notable for its use of a large number (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 (see, for example, Harding & Vaagan 2011, 188–194, 273, 284).



III VI.3 Distribution map of all field/track names in Wirral containing Scandinavian elements. Thingwall is marked as a square. Such names can change over many generations depending on the wishes of the local farmer/local community, and this distribution appears to reflect a continuing Scandinavian influence. One can also see how this influence appears to have spread past the boundary of the initial enclave and throughout the peninsula to Chester.

Nevertheless, the Viking influence on the local dialect has not been as long lasting as in parts of the Lake District, where there had been perhaps less integration with the English – for example the West Ward of the Westmorland Barony area – as a recent study has shown (Rye 2015, 231–345). In all the Viking place names of Wirral there are no examples of inflections which indicate the preservation of an advanced form of Viking language: the nearest examples are in neighbouring south-west Lancashire with Litherland – Hlíðarland, ‘Slope’s land’ and Lathom – Hlaðum, ‘at the barns’ (Wainwright 1944–6).

The historical and place name evidence for the existence of a strong and vibrant Viking colony on Wirral is supported by archaeological evidence and genetics. Wirral is home to



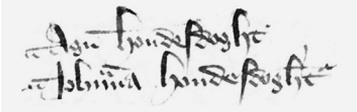
III VI.4a Parts of 1398 rental of Henry de Sutton, Abbot of Chester. The top image shows the rental for Great Sutton and the lower image part of the rental for Childer Thornton. Highlighted and expanded are entries for Richard Hondesson (III VI.4b), Agnes Hondesdoghter and Johanna Hondesdoghter (III VI.4c) and Mabilla Raynaldesdoghter (III VI.4d). The Viking style *-sson* and *-doghter* format for surnames are still used in modern Iceland. BL Add MS 36764. ©The British Library; reproduced by kind permission.



III VI.4b



III VI.4d



III VI.4c

two hogback tombstones, at West Kirby and Bidston, and a Hiberno-Norse cross at St Barnabas Church Bromborough has been restored. There are fragments of at least three further crosses at Neston; a replica of one, which includes the touching image of a couple embracing, has been produced by the Merseyside Conservation Centre (White 2014). Further archaeological evidence includes the discovery of a silver ingot at nearby Ness (Bean 2000), Hiberno-Norse ring pins at Meols, and weaponry (bent spear head, shield boss, axe) that appears to come from a Viking burial, also at Meols (Griffiths 2014). A recent genetic survey of men from long-established families in Wirral and west Lancashire

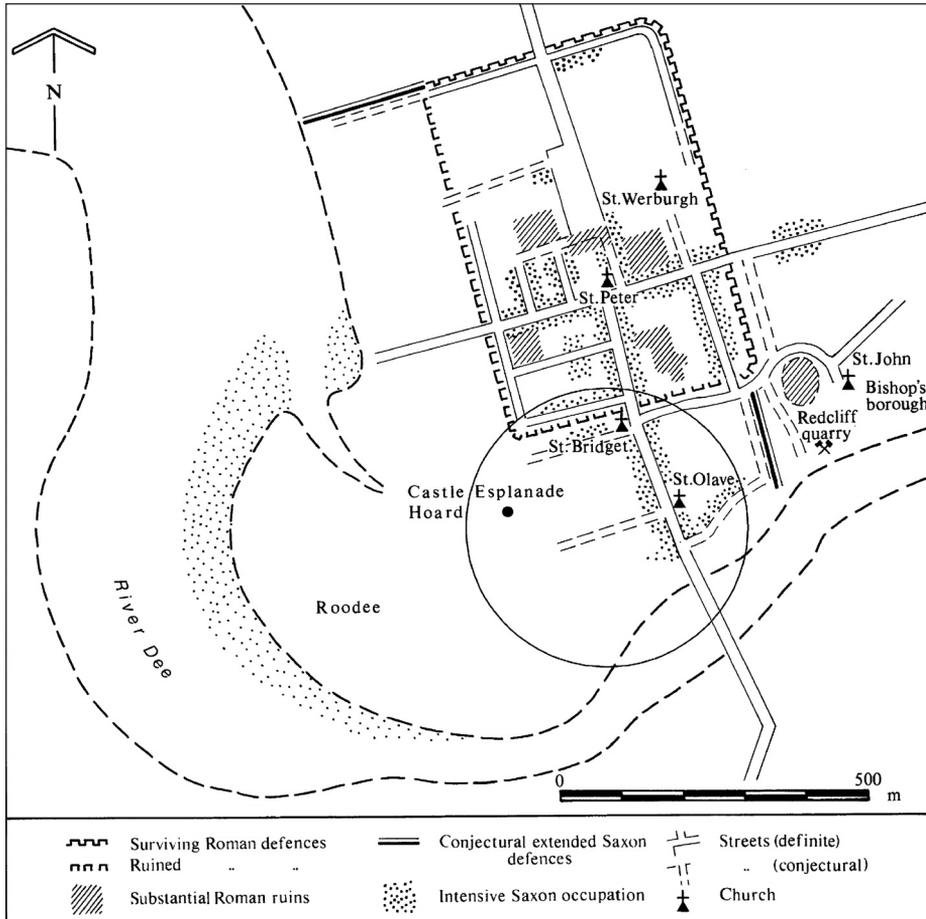
(possessing surnames that were present in these areas prior to 1600) based on the male Y-chromosome has shown that up to 50% of the genetic admixture is Scandinavian in origin in both areas (Bowden *et al* 2008; Harding *et al* 2010, 93–111; King 2014).

Vikings in Chester

From AD 910 to 1066 a significant number of moneyers and landowners bearing Norse names appear in Chester (*see* Wainwright 1942, 32–3; Pagan 2012, 13–15). The proportion of moneyers with Norse names appears to have been far higher than at many mints elsewhere in England, even during the period of Scandinavian rule by King Canute (1017–35) and his sons Harald (until 1040) and Hardacnute (1042), when one would expect them to be ubiquitous. By Canute's time a strong Scandinavian community appears to have been well established in the southern part of the city around what is now Lower Bridge Street, with evidence of this influence extending to the south of the River Dee in Handbridge (*see* Wainwright 1942, 31). The existence of this community is reflected in some street names: Clippe Gate (near the Bridgegate) and Wolfeld's Gate (the old name for Newgate) derive from the Norse personal names of the man Klyppr and woman Úlfhildr respectively. There is also Crook Street (ON man's name Krókr).

Again the historical, place- and personal name evidence is matched by archaeology. A number of hoards from the Viking age have been found in the city (Griffiths 2010, 108–9), the best known being the Castle Esplanade hoard discovered in a pot in 1950 and dated to *c.* 965–70; it comprises twenty-seven ingots, 120 pieces of hack silver and 547 coins. Fragments of arm rings and brooches resemble jewellery from Ballaquayle, Isle of Man. Other finds – all coins – were made at St Johns Church (1862, dated to 917–20), Eastgate Row (1857) and Pemberton's Parlour (1914), dated to the 970s (Griffiths 2010, *ibid*). The coins from the Castle Esplanade find, along with the other Chester finds, have been recently well reviewed by Pagan (2012, 17–26). A Norse brooch discovered in Princess Street, Chester, is identical to one discovered in Dublin and was doubtless made from the same mould (Graham-Campbell 1994). Not far away a hoard of Viking treasure dated to Ingimund's time was discovered in 2004 in the village of Huxley (Graham-Campbell & Philpott 2009). Remains of Scandinavian-style sunken-featured timber buildings, similar to examples discovered at Wood Quay, Dublin, and York, were found during the 1974–6 excavations at 26–42 Lower Bridge Street (Mason 1985, 8–21; Griffiths 2010, 132–3, Harding 2002 and references therein). A putative plan of tenth-century Chester is given in Ill VI.5.

In the southern part of Chester two churches have Norse-Irish roots. One of these is St Olave's, a church dedicated to the Norwegian king, Ólaf Haraldsson, 'King Ólaf the Saint' (died in battle at Stikkelstad, 1030). The church (Ill VI.6) is situated on the east side of Lower Bridge Street, almost opposite the Scandinavian-style buildings referred to above. Other churches dedicated to the same saint can be found across northern Europe (*see* Dickins 1939). Another church (now lost) was St Bridget's, dedicated to the Irish saint Bridget (OIr Brigid). St Olave's is no longer used for regular formal services. However, in 2001 and 2002 it was used for St Olav's Day services (in English and Norwegian), to celebrate the 1100th anniversary of the arrival of Ingimund (*see* www.nottingham.ac.uk/~sczsteve for recordings of these events), and since 2007 has been the destination of an



III VI.5 Plan of tenth-century Chester: areas of settlement indicated by dots. The main Scandinavian community was towards the south of the city (approximately marked by the circle) although there appears to have been considerable integration. © Cheshire West and Chester City Council; reproduced by kind permission.

annual St Olav's Day (29 July) pilgrimage from St Bridget's Church in West Kirby to parallel the main annual St Olav's pilgrimages in Norway (Harding & Robinson 2009).

Gamul Terrace, Sir Francis Gamull and John Gamel

Across the road from St Olave's is Gamul Terrace and Gamul House (III VI.7), the former home of Sir Francis Gamull (1606–54) of Buerton, Mayor of Chester 1636–38) and a prominent Royalist who survived the Civil War (Ward 2009, 69; King *et al* 1778, 553–70). Intriguingly the origin of his name is Old Norse, as in *gamall*, 'old' or as in a man's name, Gamall. The name Gamel is listed as that of a pre-Norman Conquest Cheshire landowner in Domesday Book (Wainwright 1942 34, 39). As noted above, Scandinavian personal names persisted well after the Norman Conquest and appear in medieval documents: a John Gamel appears in the Chartulary of St Werburgh's Abbey (Tait ed 1920, 102–7). Thus, while neither Gamul Terrace nor Gamul House themselves go back to the time of



III VI.6 St Olave's Church, Lower Bridge Street, Chester



III VI.7 Gamul Terrace today. A reflection of St. Olave's directly across Lower Bridge Street can be seen on the window.

the Vikings, it is at least an interesting coincidence that they carry a Viking personal name and are located directly opposite the centre of the former Scandinavian community in Chester, St Olave's Church.

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