As the world's largest longship arrives in Merseyside
DEBBIE JOHNSON investigates our Nordic heritage

The journey of the 115-foot long Draken Harald Hårfagre has been tumultuous — losing its mast when a huge wave knocked it overboard and forced the vessel to dock at the Shetland Islands.

It arrived in Wallasey after a challenging journey from Norway.

And Norse tradings' own Viking past is no less exciting — leaving a rich legacy that is still seen around the region today.

The Vikings were expelled from Dublin in AD 902, and, initially led by Norwegian Viking Ingebrand, they made their way to the Wirral.

The Norsemen and the Danes would have landed their own boats (without the back-up power of the Dragon Harald Hårfagre being blessed with) along the north Wirral coastline, probably around what is now the lighthouse at Birkenhead, Hoylake, Meols and West Kirby.

Although there were Viking raids in Chester, they appear to have settled peacefully in Merseyside — spreading throughout the area, and meeting regularly at Thingwall to discuss law and policy.

Although the traditional image of the Viking raider is a terrifying one, reflected by the recent History Channel series, the Vikings were also farmers, fishermen and traders — and gave us many of the place names we know today, such as Croxteth, Thornton, Kirkdale, Aigburth, Aintree, Crosby, Hesswall, Thingwall, Tranmere, West Derby and Childwall.

Professor Steve Harding, Wallasey-born Viking expert who is based at the University of Nottingham, has extensively researched the genetic legacy of the Vikings in the area. Focusing on the Wirral and West Lancashire, and backed up by anthropology and place name clues, his team tested old established families for their Viking ancestry — with amazing results.

They found that around 50% of the people they tested had Norse roots.

There have also been treasure hoards and weaponry found in the area, and there is compelling evidence that one of the most important battles of the era — the Battle of Brunanburh in 937 — actually took place in what we now know as Bromborough.

Even football team Tranmere Rovers has Viking heritage, and its own supporters' club in Norway!

Professor Harding, who has two new books coming out soon — Viking Tranmere and In Search of Vikings in North-West England — is passionate about the role the Vikings played in the region.

He says: "Merseyside is steeped with Viking tradition and the whole area is stuffed full of Viking place names on both sides of the Mersey — even our sporting venues can't escape from them. Arrins is from Old Norse 'tin-tre' meaning one tree, Tranmere is from Old Norse 'tran-moel' — cape, headland or headland at a sandbank, and outside Anfield Stadium we find Walton Breck Road — Breck is from 'brekka' — slope on a hillside.

"The area has some impressive archaeology, particularly on Wirral, including what appears to be weaponry from a Viking burial at Meols, two Viking hoard tombs at Newton (including a replica reconstruction showing the touching image of a Viking couple embracing) and evidence of two Viking houses at Irby and Lingham/Moreton.

"We also have our own genuine Viking saga — The Story of Ingimbird, the man who led the first settlements in AD 902. Professor Harding adds: "Many people have heard of Tryvann in the Isle of Man where the Vikings had their 'thing' or Assembly, but we have two on Merseyside — Thingwall on Wirral and Thinghall near Ken Dodd's old jam factory at Knotty Ash, showing just how substantial the Viking presence here once was."

"And our DNA survey showed that the Vikings are still here — with up to 50% of the DNA of men from Wirral and West Lancashire being Scandinavian in origin. I think it's a heritage that we can be truly proud of!"

The Draken Harald Hårfagre is at Wallasey Docks until August 3, where it will be repaired before her return voyage. You can also join the 18-mile St Olaf's Day walk, which starts in West Kirby on July 28 and finishes in Chester the next day, marking our Viking heritage.

To see Professor Harding's Viking Research, go to https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/

Who do you think you are?

Who were your ancestors? Do you think that you could be a descendant of the Vikings? Do you have an interesting family history that has often left you wondering about your genetic make-up? Is there an old family story that locates your roots back to another continent? We have teamed up with Roots for Real (http://www.rootscomf.co.uk) and leading genetist Dr Peter Forster to offer three ECHO readers the chance to find out more about their heritage.

Using a simple home test, they will then analyse the results and provide a genetic profile — along with a totally individual map, showing where in the world you have matches, to estimate the location of your ancestral origins.

To enter, write and tell us your story — and why you would like to know more about your ancestry — including your name, address and daytime phone number, by July 29 to: Vikings, C/o Janet Tansley, Liverpool Echo, PO Box 48, Old Hall Street, Liverpool L1 3EB.