



# Viking Wirral ... and the Battle of Brunanburh

*Professor Steve Harding*



Neil Oliver, "History of Scotland"  
BBC2, 2009

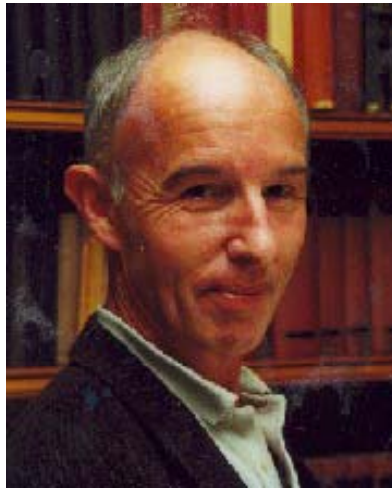


*“ The many armies, tens of thousands of warriors clashed at the site known as Brunanburh where the Mersey Estuary enters the sea. For decades afterwards it was simply known called the Great Battle. This was the mother of all dark-age bloodbaths and would define the shape of Britain into the modern era. Although Athelstan emerged victorious, the resistance of the northern alliance had put an end to his dream of conquering the whole of Britain. This had been a battle for Britain, one of the most important battles in British history and yet today few people have even heard of it. 937 doesn't quite have the ring of 1066 and yet Brunanburh was about much more than blood and conquest. This was a showdown between two very different ethnic identities – a Norse-Celtic alliance versus Anglo-Saxon. It aimed to settle once and for all whether Britain would be controlled by a single Imperial power or remain several separate kingdoms. A split in perceptions which, like it or not, is still with us today”.*

# Some of the people who've been trying to sort it out



John McNeal Dodgson  
1928-1990



Nick Higham



Paul Cavill



Michael Wood



# Plan

- Background of Brunanburh
- Evidence for Wirral location for the battle
- If it did happen in Wirral, where is a likely site for the battle
- Consequences of the Battle for Wirral – and Britain

# Background of Brunanburh

“Cherchez la Femme!”

Ann Anderson (1964) *The Story of  
Bromborough*

**Late 9<sup>th</sup> century partition  
King Alfred & Guthrum**



**Aethelflaed “Lady of the  
Mercians”(870 - 918),  
and Aethelstan (895-939)**

**Aethelstan, King of  
Wessex/England 925-939**





- **AD900** Danelaw firmly established
- **902/3** Ingimund arrives in Wirral – Norwegian Vikings colonise coastal NW England
- **907** Aethelflaed fortifies Chester and other strategic places
- **910-924** Aethelflaed and Edward regain parts of the Danelaw
- **925-936** Aethelstan continues the program of re-assimilation:
- **926** *He married his sister to Sithric, Irish-Norse king of Northumbria*, made peace with Hywal Da (Welsh), Owein (Celtic Cumbria “Strathlyde Welsh”)
- **927** Sithric died, brother Guthfrith took over but Aethelstan kicked him out!
- **934** Guthfrith dies - Olaf “Anlaf” Guthfrithsson assumes control of Dublin. Devastating raid by Aethelstan on Alba/Scotland, submission from Constantine.
- **937** Northern alliance arrives to take on Aethelstan, led by Anlaf, Constantine, and Owein at what the contemporary 10<sup>th</sup> century poem describes as Brunanburh

**Egil Skallagrimsson –  
Icelander**

**According to *Egil's Saga*  
fought with other  
Icelanders at the Battle –  
his brother Thorolf was  
killed.**



The Old English  
poem from the  
Anglo-Saxon  
Chronicle

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King Athelstan, the lord of warriors,  
Patron of heroes, and his brother too,  
Prince Edmund, won themselves eternal glory  
In battle with the edges of their swords  
Round **Brunanburh**; they broke the wall of shields,  
The sons of Edward with their well-forged swords  
Slashed at the linden-shields; such was their nature  
From boyhood that in battle they had often  
Fought for their land, its treasures and its homes,  
Against all enemies. Their foes fell dead,  
The Scottish soldiers and their pirate host  
Were doomed to perish; and with blood of men  
The field was darkened from the time the sun  
Rose at the break of day, the glorious star,  
God the eternal Lord's bright candle passed  
Across the land, until this noble creature  
Sank to its resting-place. There many men  
Lay slain by spears, and northern warriors  
Shot down despite their shields, and Scotsmen too,  
Weary, with battle sated. The West Saxons  
Throughout the whole long passing of the day  
Pressed on in troops behind the hostile people,  
Hewed fiercely from the rear the fleeing host  
With well-ground swords. The Mercians refused  
Hard battle-play to none among the fighters  
Who came with Anlaf over rolling seas,  
Bringing invasion to this land by ship,  
Destined to die in battle. Five young kings  
Lay dead upon the battlefield, by swords  
Sent to their final sleep; and likewise seven  
Of Anlaf's earls, and countless of his host,  
Both Scots and seamen. There the Norsemen's chief  
Was put to flight, and driven by dire need  
With a small retinue to seek his ship.  
The ship pressed out to sea, the king departed  
Onto the yellow flood and saved his life.

Likewise the wise old Constantinus came,  
The veteran, to his northern native land  
By flight; he had no reason to exult  
In that encounter; for he lost there friends  
And was deprived of kinsmen in the strife  
Upon that battlefield, and left his son  
Destroyed by wounds on that grim place of slaughter,  
The young man in the fight. The grey-haired man  
Had little cause to boast about that battle,  
The sly old soldier, any more than Anlaf;  
They could not with their remnant laugh and claim  
That they were better in warlike deeds  
When banners met upon the battlefield,  
Spears clashed and heroes greeted one another,  
Weapons contended, when they played at war  
With Edward's sons upon the place of carnage.  
The Norsemen left them in their well-nailed ships,  
The sad survivors of the darts, *on Dingesmere*  
Over the deep sea back they went to **Dublin**,  
To Ireland they returned with shameful hearts.  
The brothers also both went home together,  
The king and prince returned to their own country,  
The land of Wessex, triumphing in war.  
They left behind corpses for the dark  
Black-coated raven, horny beaked to enjoy,  
And for the eagle, white-backed and dun-coated,  
The greedy war-hawk, and that grey wild beast  
The forest wolf. Nor has there on this island  
Been ever yet a greater number slain,  
Killed by the edges of the sword before  
This time, as books make known to us, and old  
And learned scholars, after hither came  
The Angles and the 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.



# Spellings of *Brunanburh*

*Bruna's burh* = *Bruna's fortress*

Anglo Saxon Poem (~AD937):	A	<i>Brunanburh</i>
	B&C	<i>Brunnanburh</i>
	D	<i>Brunanburh</i>
	E	<i>Brunanbyrig</i>
	F	<i>Brunanbyri</i>
Symeon of Durham (12 <sup>th</sup> C)		<i>Etbrunнанwerc vel Brunnanbyrig</i>
John of Worcester (12 <sup>th</sup> C)		<i>Brunanburh</i>
Henry of Huntingdon (12 <sup>th</sup> C)		<i>Bruneburh</i>

# Alternative names

OE **weorc** ‘fortification’

Symeon 12thC      *Etbrunnnanwerc*

Gaimar 13thC      *Bruneswerce*

OE **dūn** ‘hill’

Æthelweard late 10thC *Brunandune*

Symeon 12thC      *Weondune, Wendune*

*Scottish Chronicle*      *Duinbrunde*

# Other variants

OE **feld** ‘open land’

William of Malmesbury

*Brunefeld*

12<sup>th</sup>-century charters and chronicles

*Bruningafeld*

ON **heiði** ‘heath land’

Snorri Sturluson (13<sup>th</sup> Century)

*Vinheiði vid Vinuskogar*

+ Haukr Valdrisarson (12<sup>th</sup> century) in *Islendingadrapa*  
records Thorolf’s death in Athelstan’s battle

Welsh traditions  
Annales Cambriae  
Annales of Clonmacnoise

Cad Tybrunawc  
Brune  
Plaines of othlynn,  
othlyn

>source only known in modern  
English translation

>“the Danes gave battle to the  
Saxons on the plains of  
othlynn”

>Higham: oð *Lynne* (up  
to the Lyme)



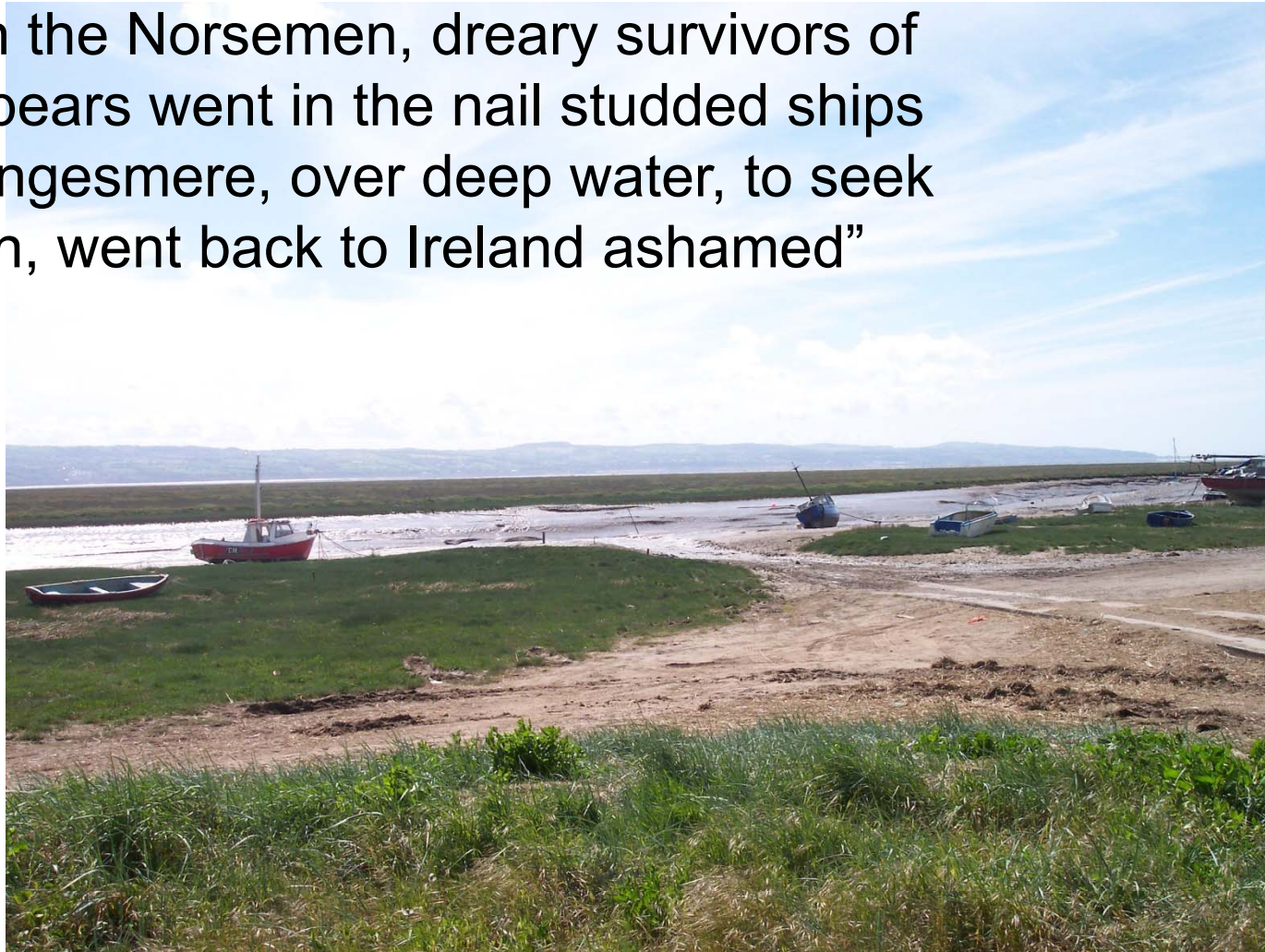
# Bromborough

## *Brunanburh* to Bromborough

- weakening of unstressed inflectional ending *Brunan-* → *\*Brunen-*
- Loss of nasal in unstressed syllable → *Bruneburh*
- syncope of unstressed vowel → *Brunburh* (11<sup>th</sup> cent.)
- assimilation of *-n-* to following bilabial *-b-* → *Brumburh* (12<sup>th</sup> cent.)
- lowering of *-u-* to *-o-* → *Bromburh* (12<sup>th</sup> cent.)
- parasite vowel appears in second element → *Bromborough* (13<sup>th</sup> cent.)

# *Dingesmere?*

“Then the Norsemen, dreary survivors of the spears went in the nail studded ships on Dingesmere, over deep water, to seek Dublin, went back to Ireland ashamed”





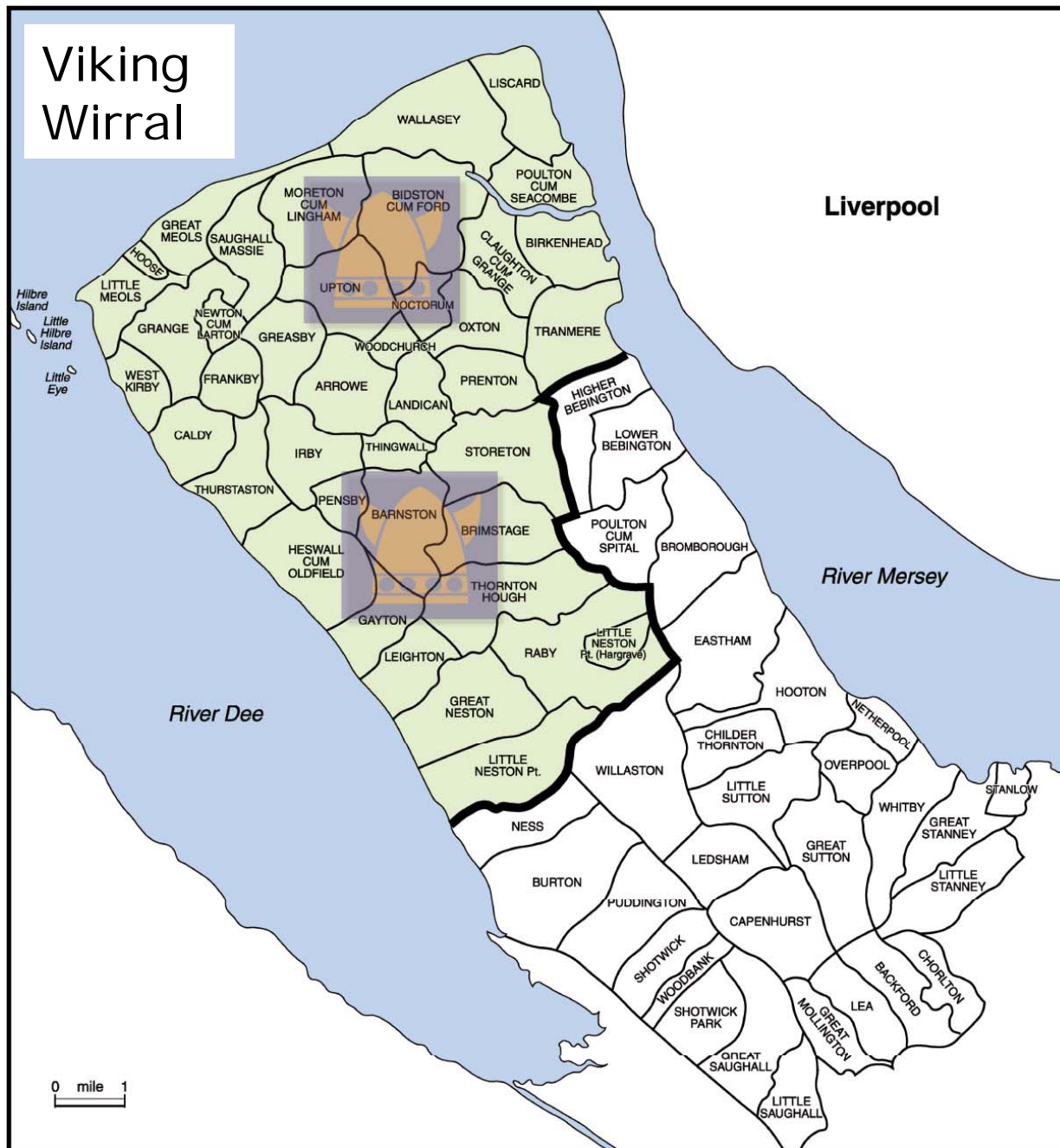
Dingemere = “Things mere”:  
connection made, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2004


I remember pausing to stare at the previous slide (map of Wirral 1732) at a talk I gave – on Brunanburh – at the Thurstaston Visitor Centre, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2004. I said to myself “hang on, this has been staring us all in the face for all these years and Dodgson and everyone has missed it!”  
– and made the connection.

I rang Dr. Paul Cavill up the following Monday with my suggestion saying it was too obvious to be true & he said “well actually Steve you may be right”.



# Viking Wirral



A small inset map in the top left corner shows a green landmass with a white dot indicating the location of Wirral. The landmass is surrounded by blue water.

Thingwall (*þing-vóllr*):  
Wirral's Viking "parliament"





# Thingvellir, Iceland






















# Thingvellir, Iceland





A small inset map in the top left corner shows a green landmass with a white dot indicating the location of Wirral.

Thingwall (*þing-vóllr*):  
Wirral's Viking "parliament"













Courtesy of Brian MacDonald



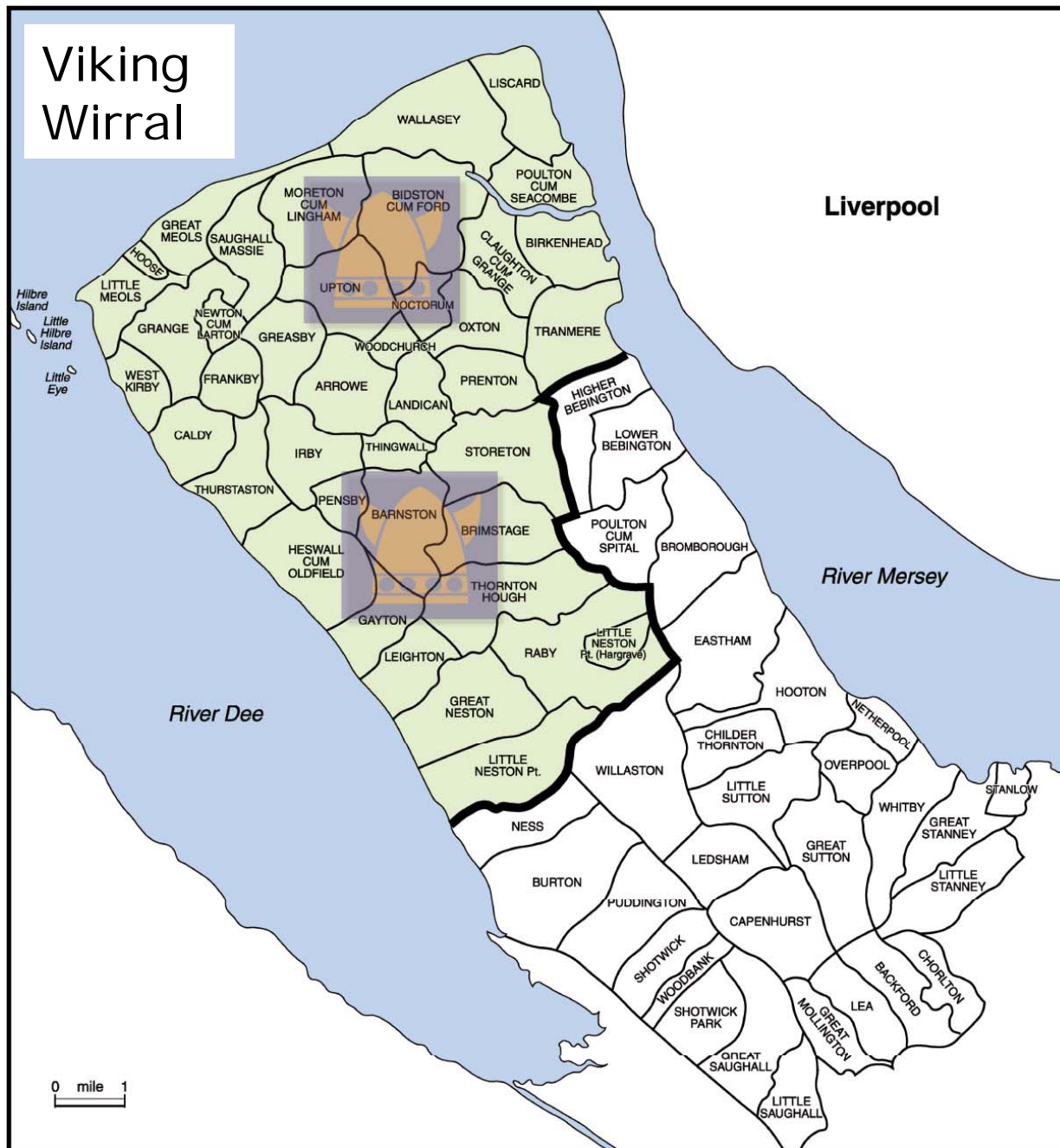


**Tingvollfjorden, Norway**



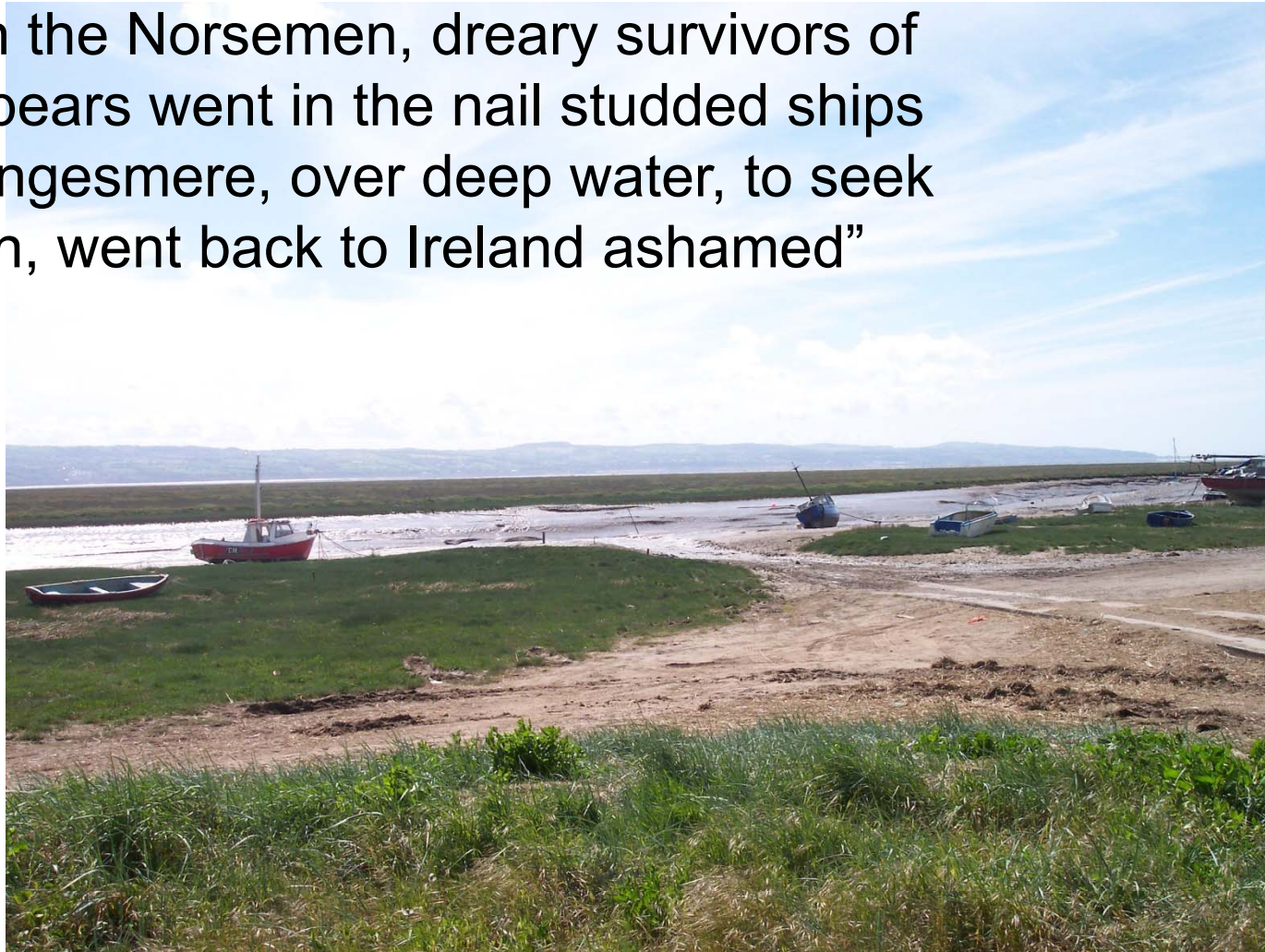


# Viking Wirral



# *Dingesmere?*

“Then the Norsemen, dreary survivors of the spears went in the nail studded ships on Dingesmere, over deep water, to seek Dublin, went back to Ireland ashamed”





# *Dingemere* again

Variant spellings in the OE poem MSS

*dingemere* ASC A and C

*dyngemere* ASC B

*dynigemere* ASC E

*dinnesmere* BL Add 43703, a 16th-century copy of a copy of ASC A

Glosses previously suggested

\**dinne* ‘storm or tempest’ [only relates to BL Add]

\**dyng*e ‘noise, dashing or storm’ [does not exist in OE]

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Revisiting *Dingesmere*

Paul Cavill, Stephen Harding and Judith Jesch,  
University of Nottingham

*Dingesmere* is a place known only from the Old English poem *The Battle of Brunanburh*, found in versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 937 (A, Corpus Christi College Cambridge 173; B, London, British Library Cotton Tiberius A. vi; C, Cotton Tiberius B. i; and D, Cotton Tiberius B. iv and one manuscript now lost, but copied and published before 1731 when the original was destroyed, Cotton Otho B. xi). After the resounding victory of Æthelstan and Edmund at *Brunanburh*, the coalition of Dublin Norse, Strathclyde Welsh, Picts and Scots split up, with the survivors making their own way home. The Dublin Norsemen sailed away *on dinges mere*.

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.)

This is Campbell's text (Campbell 1938), and with minor variations of word-division, punctuation and spelling, the text of more recent editors. The manuscript variants of the phrase *on dinges mere* found in the A and C texts are as follows: *on dyngesmere* in B, *on dynigesmere* in D and *on dinnesmere* in Otho.

There are two main lines of interpretation in relation to this phrase. One is that it is not a place-name at all, but that *dinges*, or more particularly *dinnes*, is a noun in the genitive which qualifies *mere* and thus means 'sea of noise' (Bosworth-Toller 1898, s.v. *dynges*), i.e. 'noisy sea' (see, for example, Cockburn 1931). A corollary of this interpretation is that the phrase has no particular relevance to the localisation of *Brunanburh*: it could be any sea. The other approach is that *dinges mere* is a name, with a personal- or place-name in the



# John of Worcester

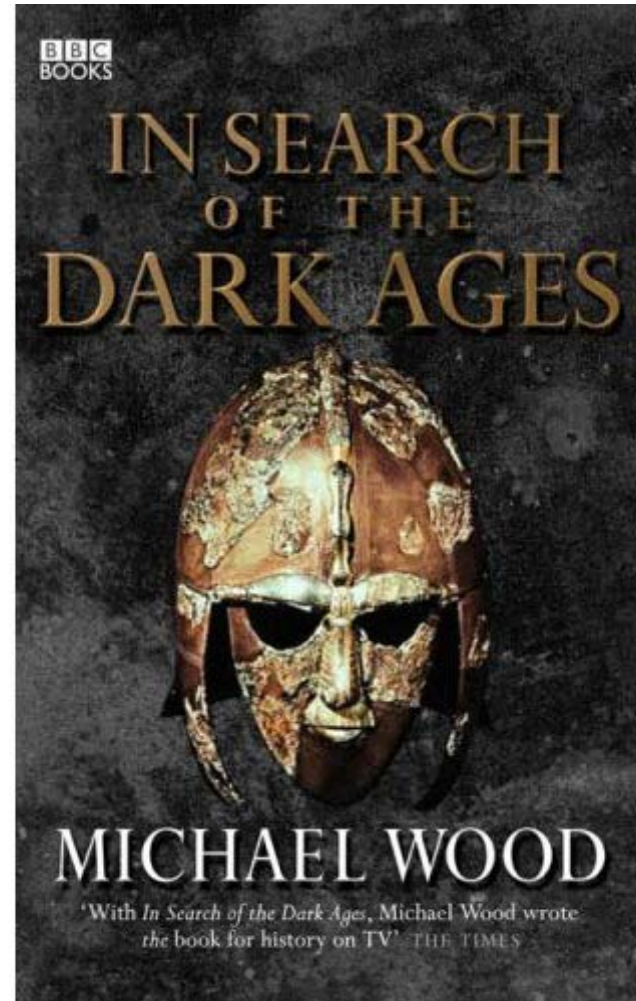
John of Worcester writing 200 years after the battle gives an account of events but misreads or adjusts information in the poem

- Reports that Athelstan forced kings Anlaf *and Constantine* to flee to the ships. Poem says only Anlaf, followed by the rest of the surviving Norsemen: Constantine escapes north by *fleam* (land)
- Confuses Anlaf Guthfrithsson with Anlaf Sithricsson, the latter associated with Northumbria. For this reason (we think!) he mistakenly places the entry and escape point of Anlaf as the Humber.





Michael Wood, BBC Broadcaster





# John of Worcester and the Humber entry

## *Brunanburh*

Hiberniensium multarumque insularum rex paganus  
Anlafus ... ostium Humbre fluminis ualida cum classe  
ingreditur.

[Anlaf, pagan king of the Irish and of many other islands ...  
entered the mouth of the River Humber with a strong fleet.]

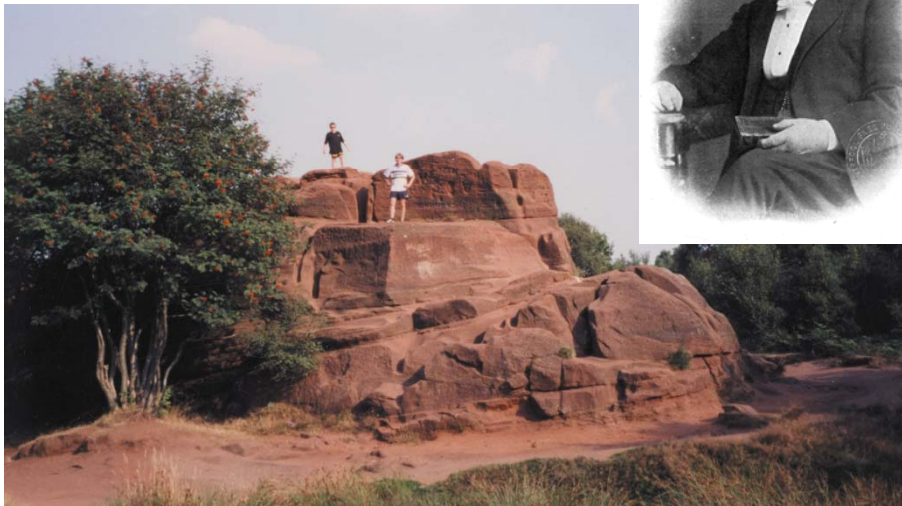
## Harald Hardrada and Tostig's expedition

Ad quem comes Tostius . . . sua cum classe uenit, et citato  
cursu ostium Humbre fluminis intrauerunt ...

[Earl Tostig joined him with a fleet . . . and on a swift course  
they entered the mouth of the River Humber]

# If it did happen in Wirral, where was Brunanburh and where was Dingesmere?

- Local folklore – at best unreliable, and tells us more about the enthusiasm of local antiquarians!



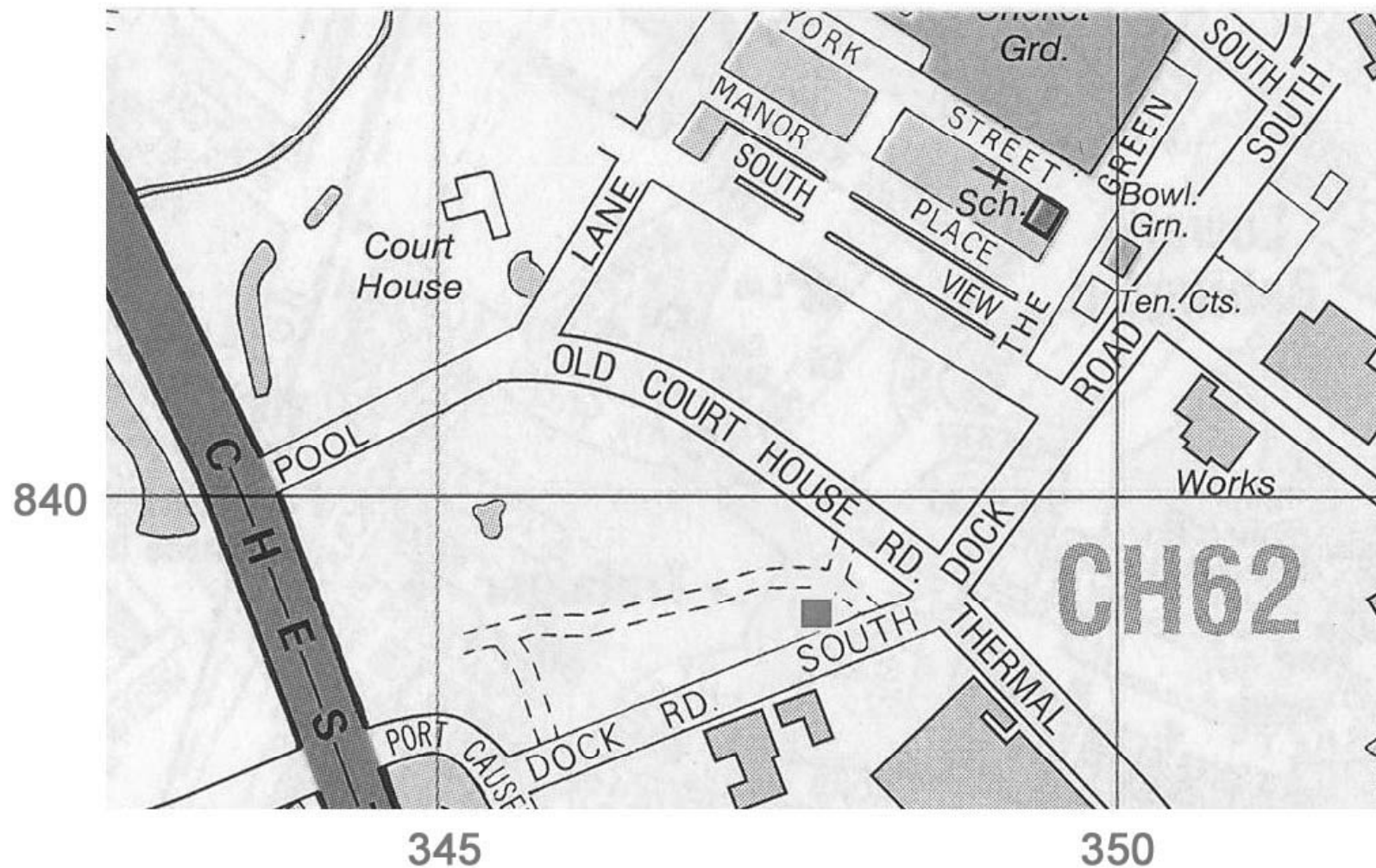
# Wargraves

- Between Rice Wood and Bromborough Mills
- 1731 “Wargraves”, 1839 Tithe map “Wergreaves”
- 19thC. Revd. Edward Dyer Green – ME “were” “War” and “graef” – grave”
- J.M. Dodgson ME/ON werre/verri “less valuable”, OE graefe” - wood

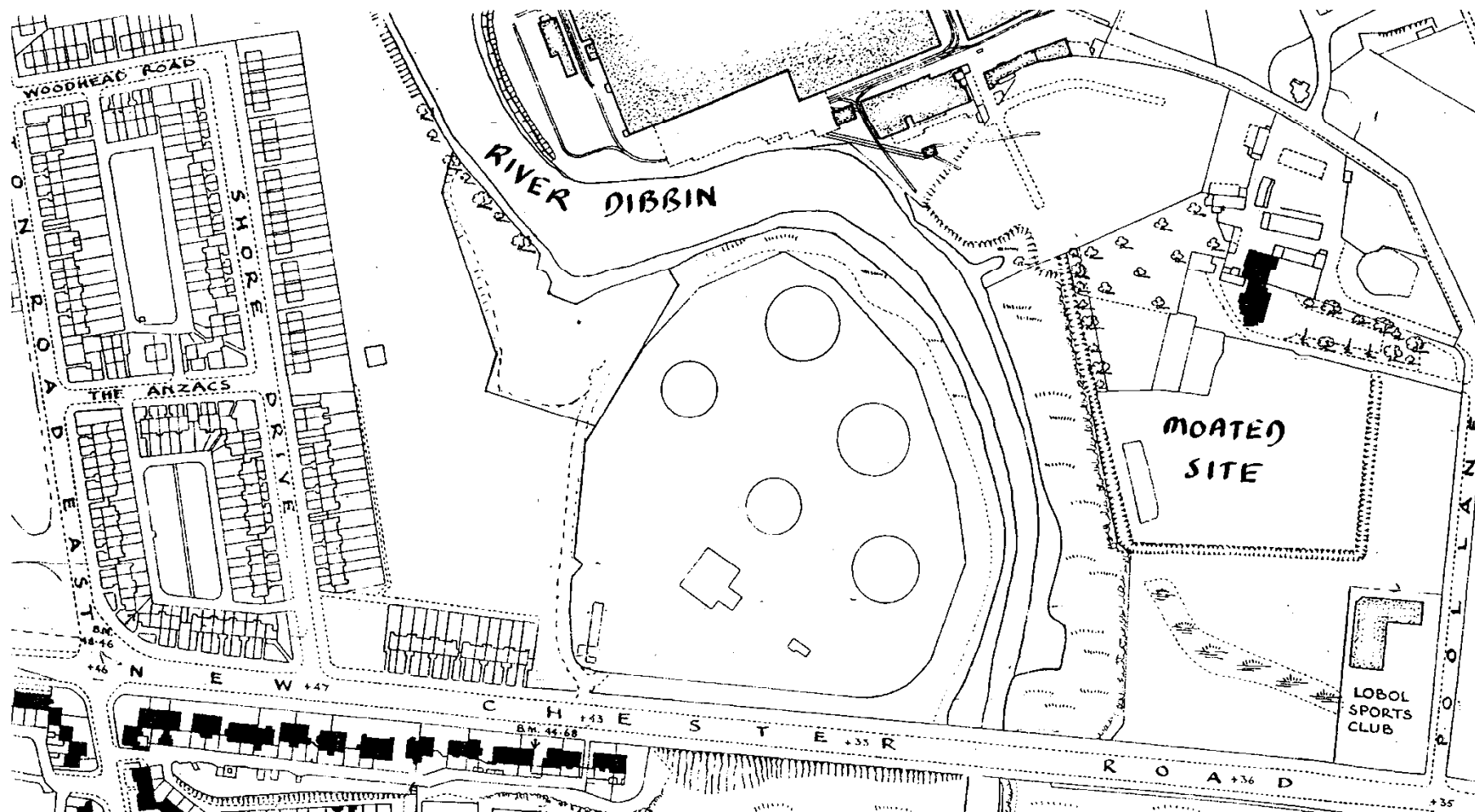




# Bromborough Court House



Site of Bruna's burh?



# Court House Farm, 1967







# Poulton Hall

- Home of Lancelyn Green family since 1093
- Commanding position overlooking River Dibbin and Raby



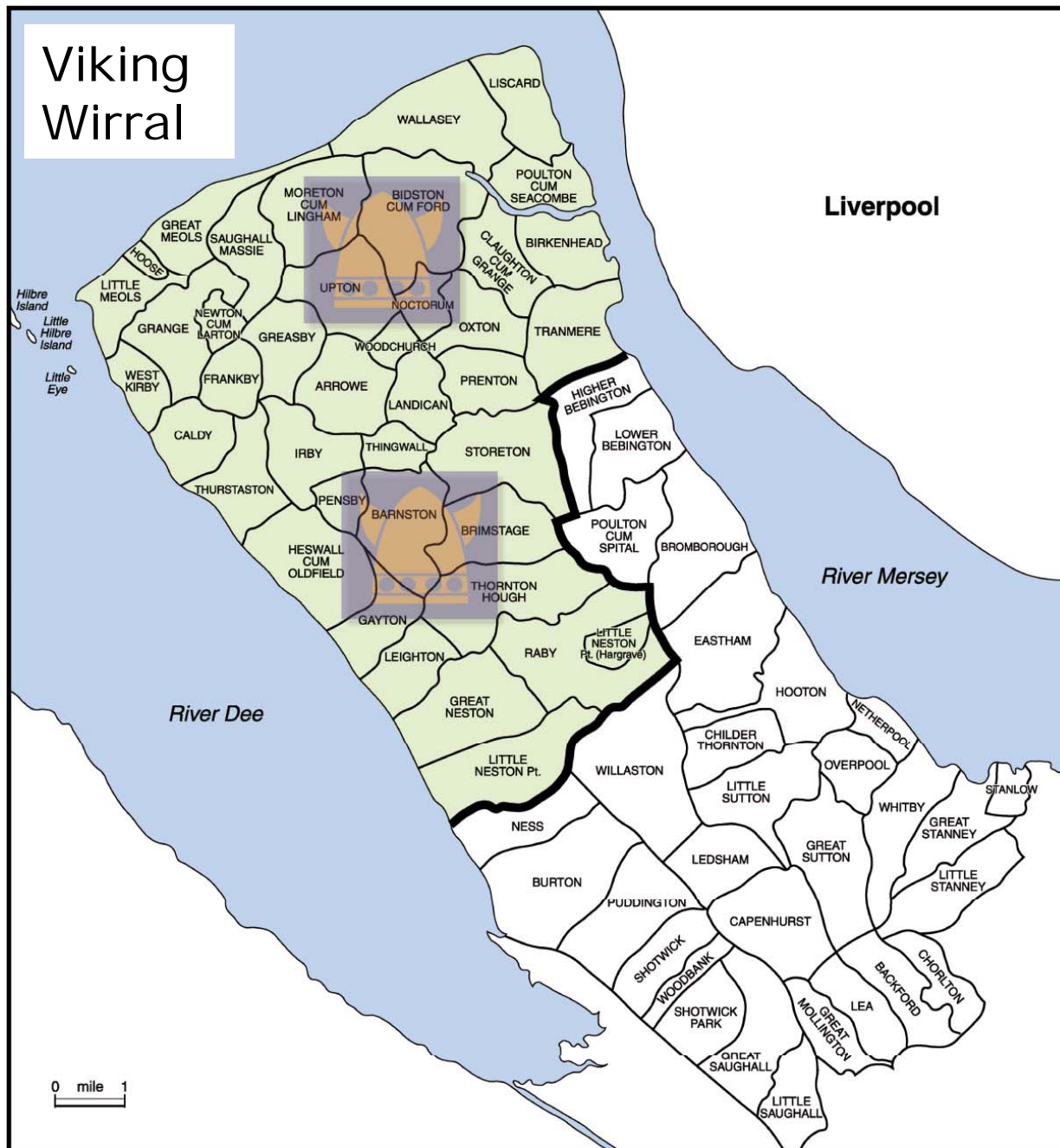


# The “Brunanburgh Viking” ...commemoration of Roger Lancelyn-Green





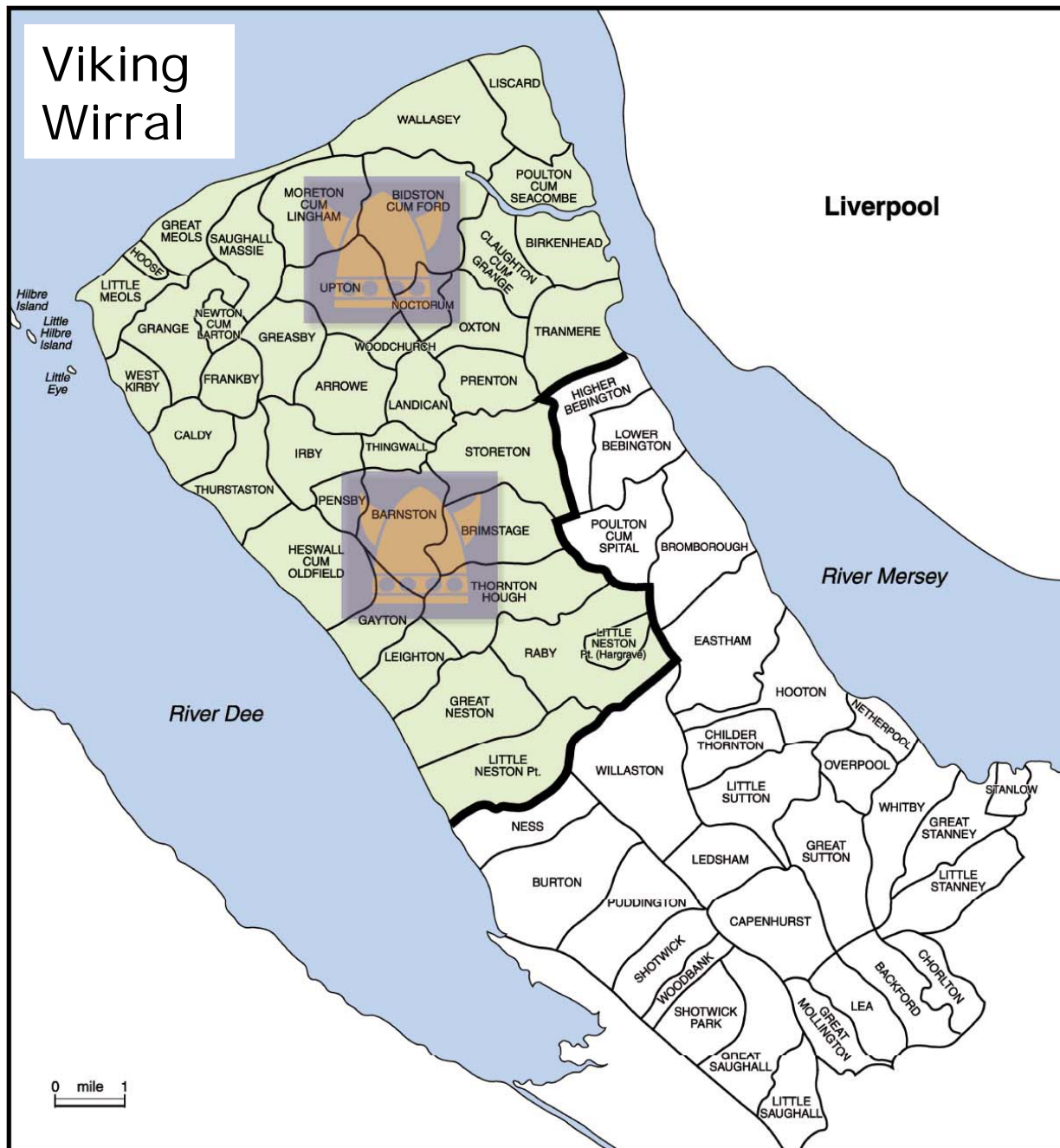
# Viking Wirral



## If it did happen in Wirral, where was Brunanburh and where was Dingesmere?

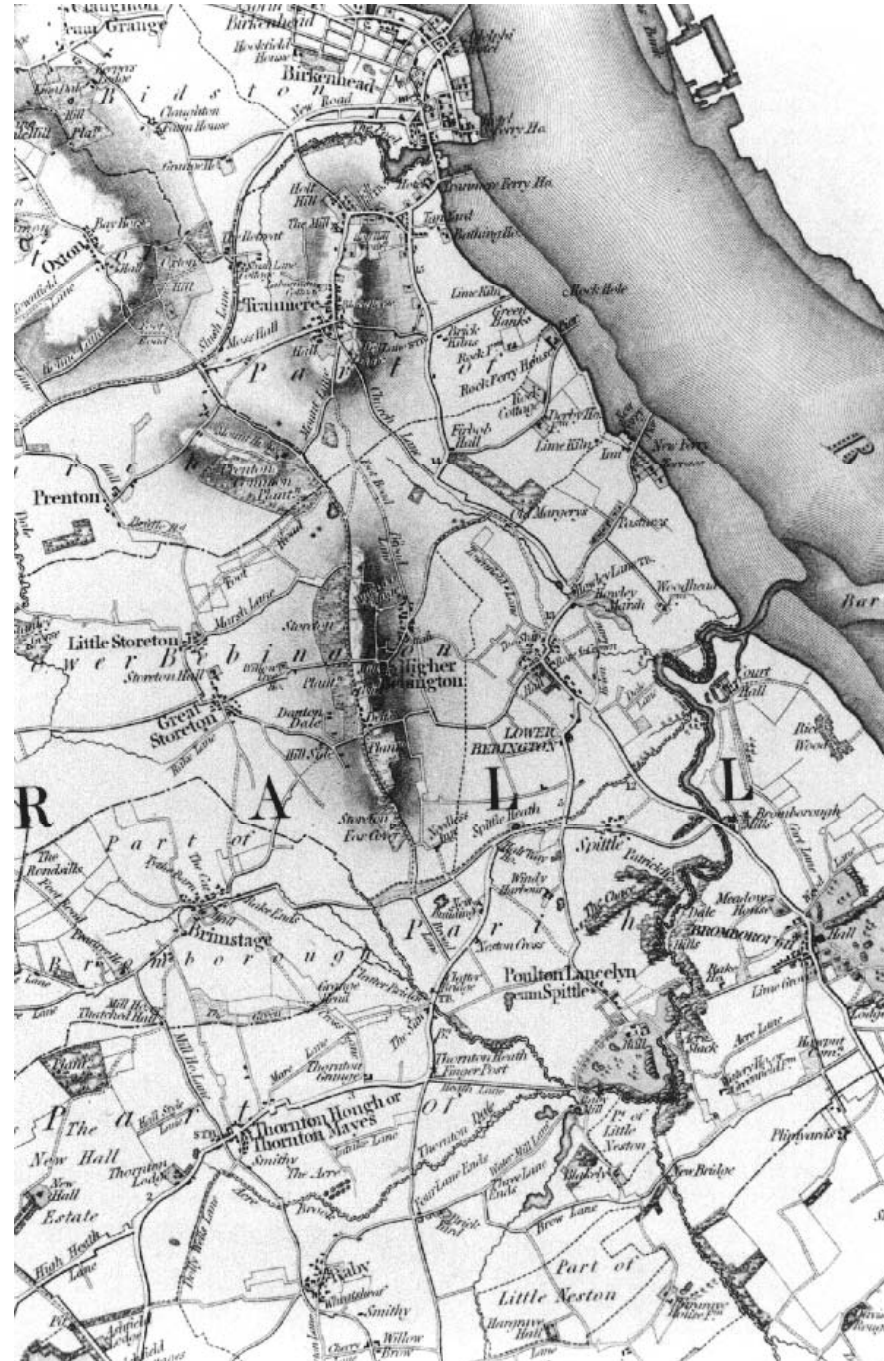
- Need to look at the Old Poem:
  1. *ymbe* Brunanburh “around” Brunanburh. Where was Bruna’s burh and his territory?
  2. Retreating forces chased *ondlongne daeg* – “for the entire day”
  3. Dingesmere, place of escape. The “Things mere”. This term that had been in use by locals to warn boat-travellers coming to the Thing about tricky coastline!

# Viking Wirral

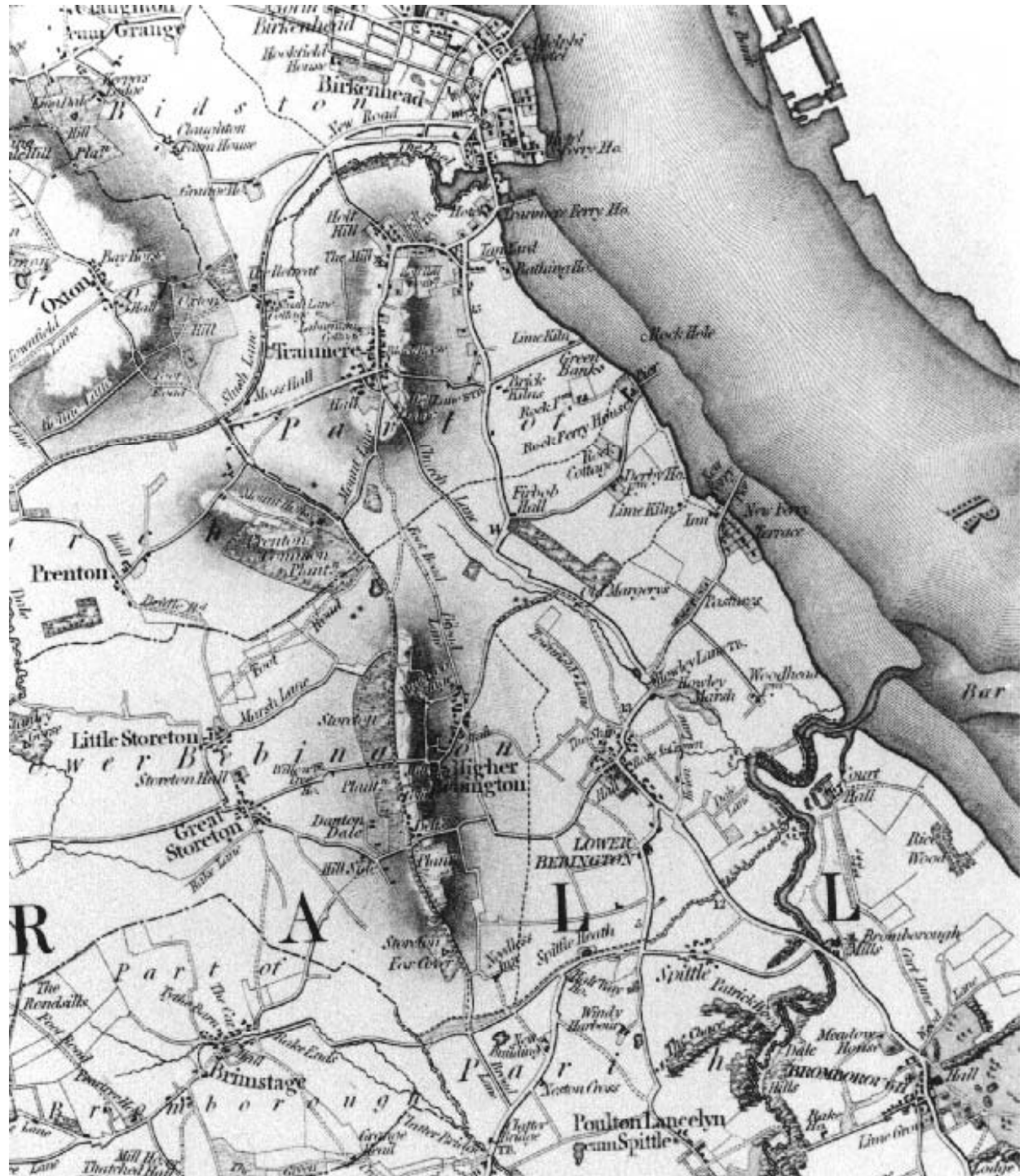




## Battle area?

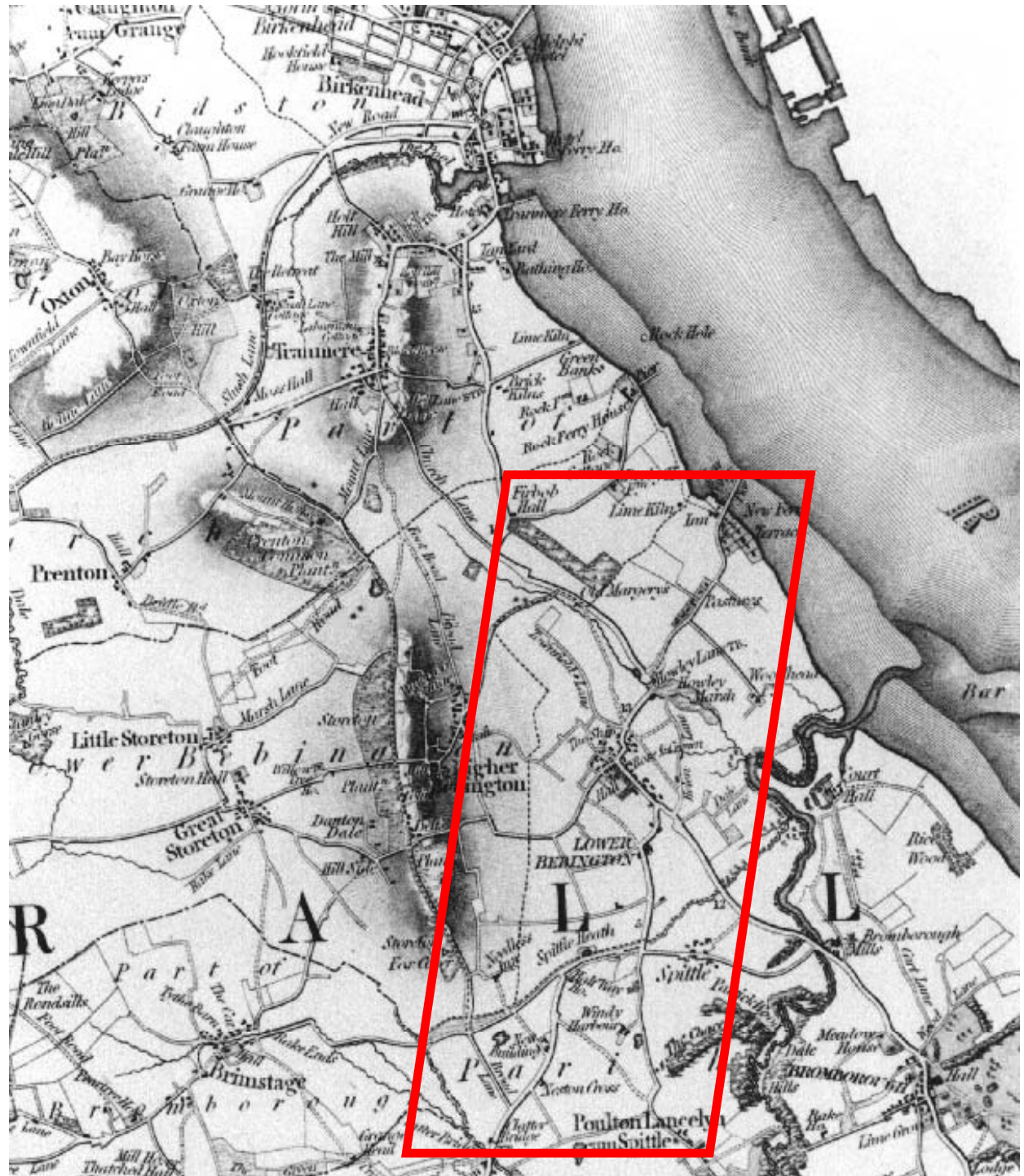


Battle area?





## Battle area?

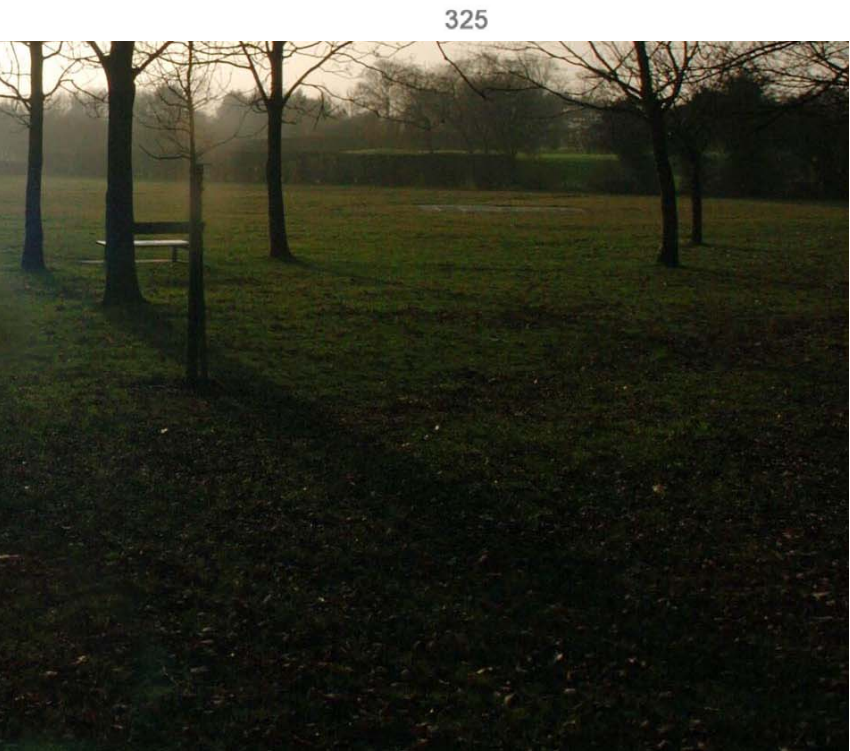
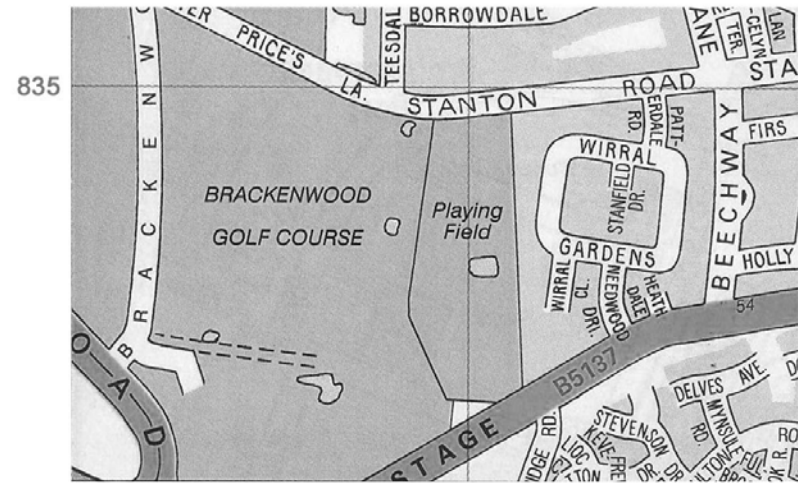




Battle area?



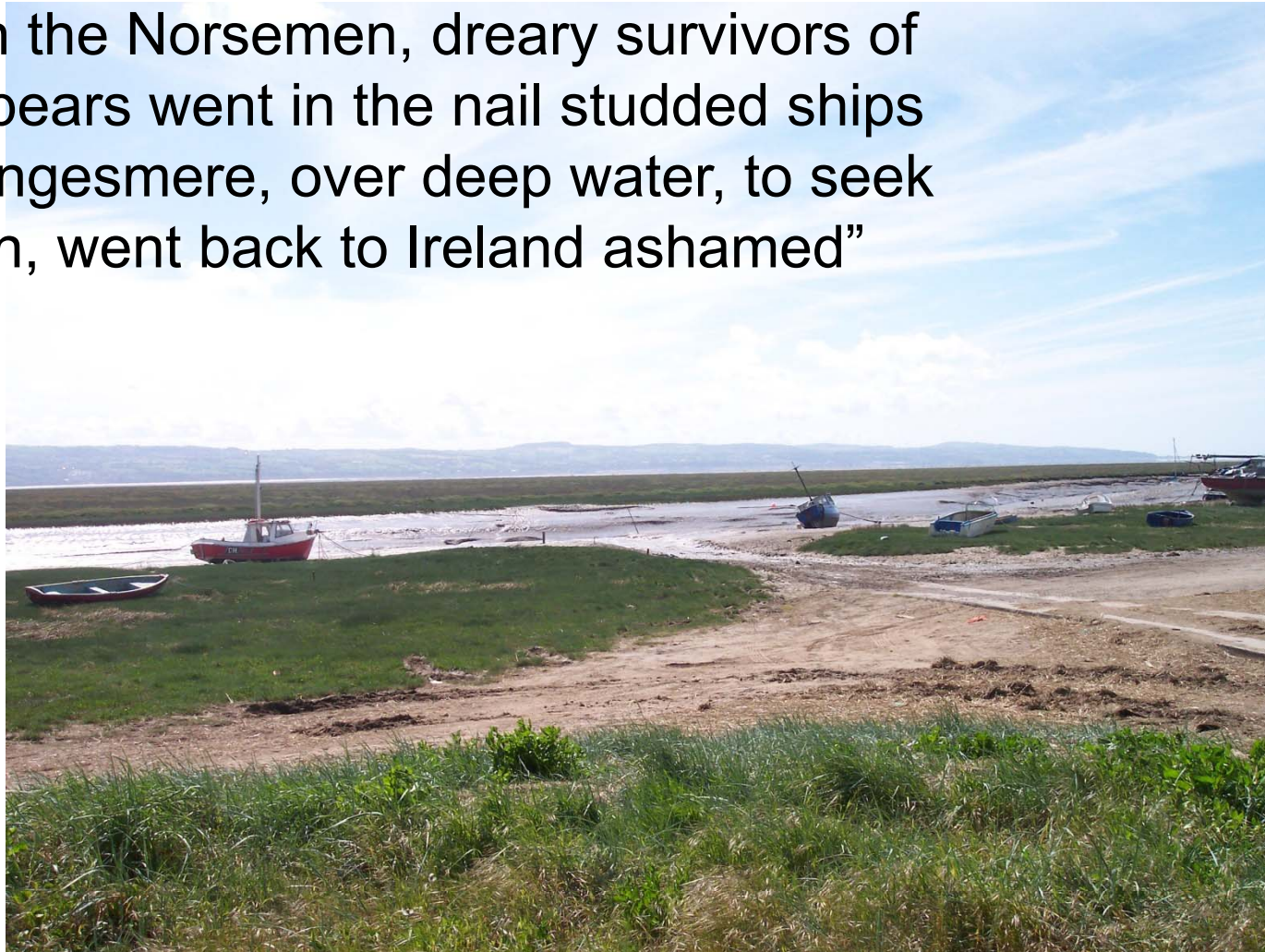






# *Dingesmere?*

“Then the Norsemen, dreary survivors of the spears went in the nail studded ships on Dingesmere, over deep water, to seek Dublin, went back to Ireland ashamed”







# Dee Rowing of Edgar

John of Worcester:

AD973: King Edgar  
takes 8 Celtic  
underkings along the  
Dee at Chester



# Dee Rowing of Edgar

Is Edgar reminding  
them of this event  
further downstream?





# Archaeological evidence?

Francis Tudsbury (1907) reports

- “many bones of unknown age” found at Storeton Hall
- “discovery of bones and arrowe heads” in Lower Bebington Church ~ 1870

No modern analysis of this evidence.

Viking Skiphuset 2001: with  
Arne Emil Christensen



# Archaeological evidence?

Francis Tudsbery (1907) reports

- “many bones of unknown age” found at Storeton Hall
- “discovery of bones and arrowe heads” in Lower Bebington Church ~ 1870

No modern analysis of this evidence.

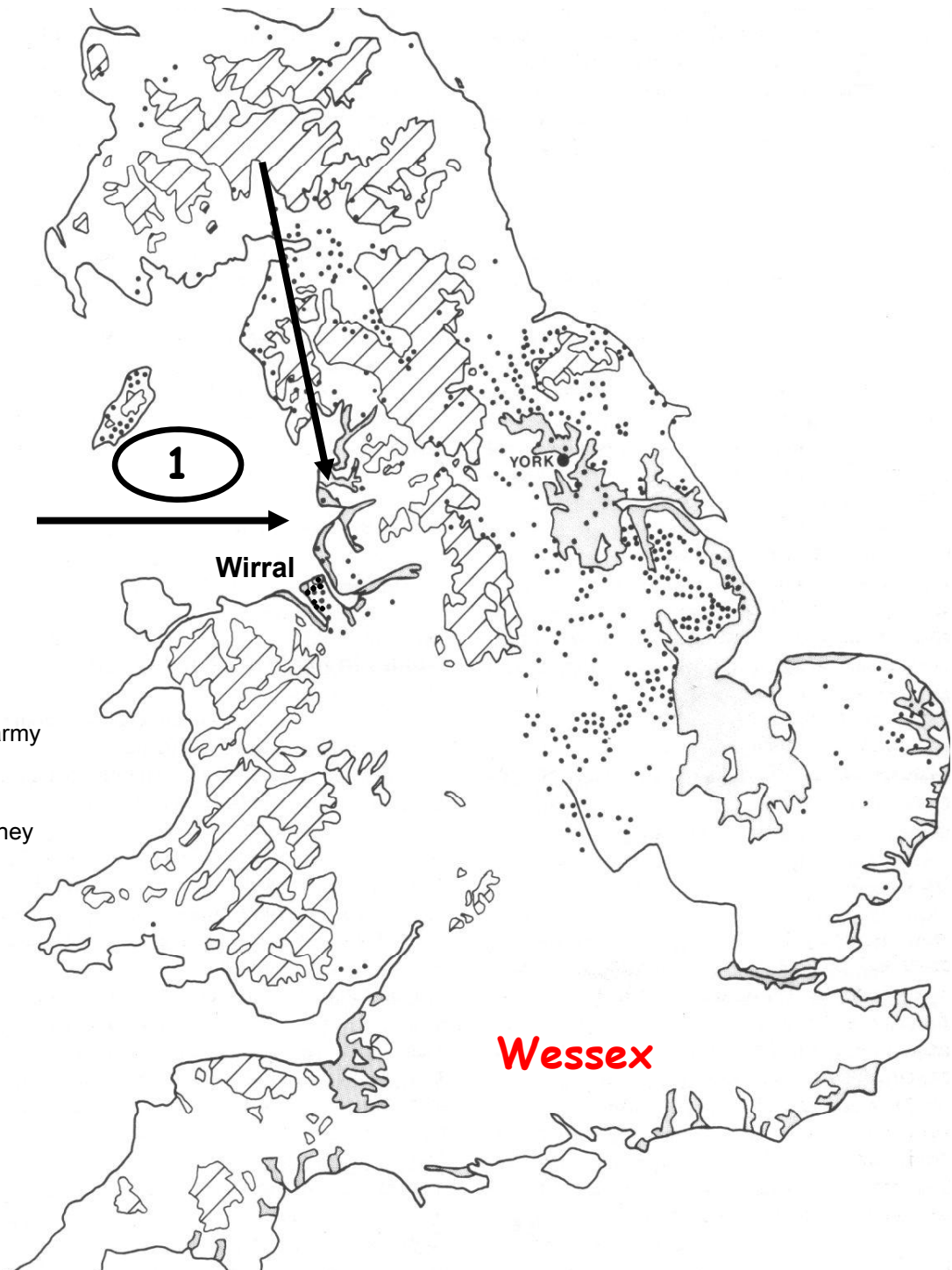
Wirral Archaeology has started a systematic investigation and has made some “promising finds”



## Brunanburh

1. Scottish and Irish Viking raiding armies arrive into the Region AD937AD, whilst Athelstan is in Wessex
2. They raid and ravage deep into Mercia
3. They are caught by a rapid moving combined English army of Wessex and Mercia forces
4. Retreat rapidly but cut off from crossing point at Warrington & head for Wirral instead. When cornered they turn and fight

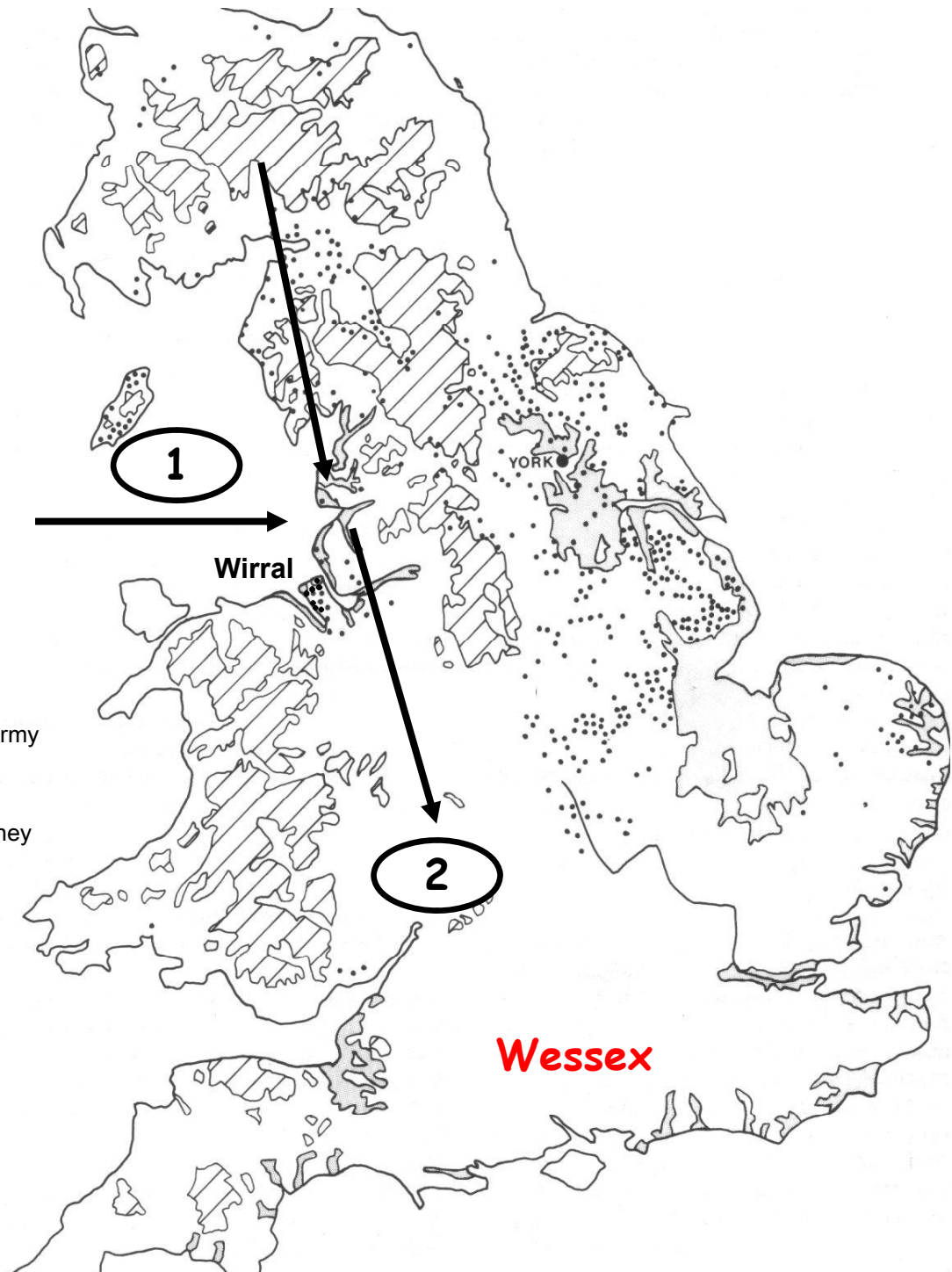
The dots represent place names with -by.



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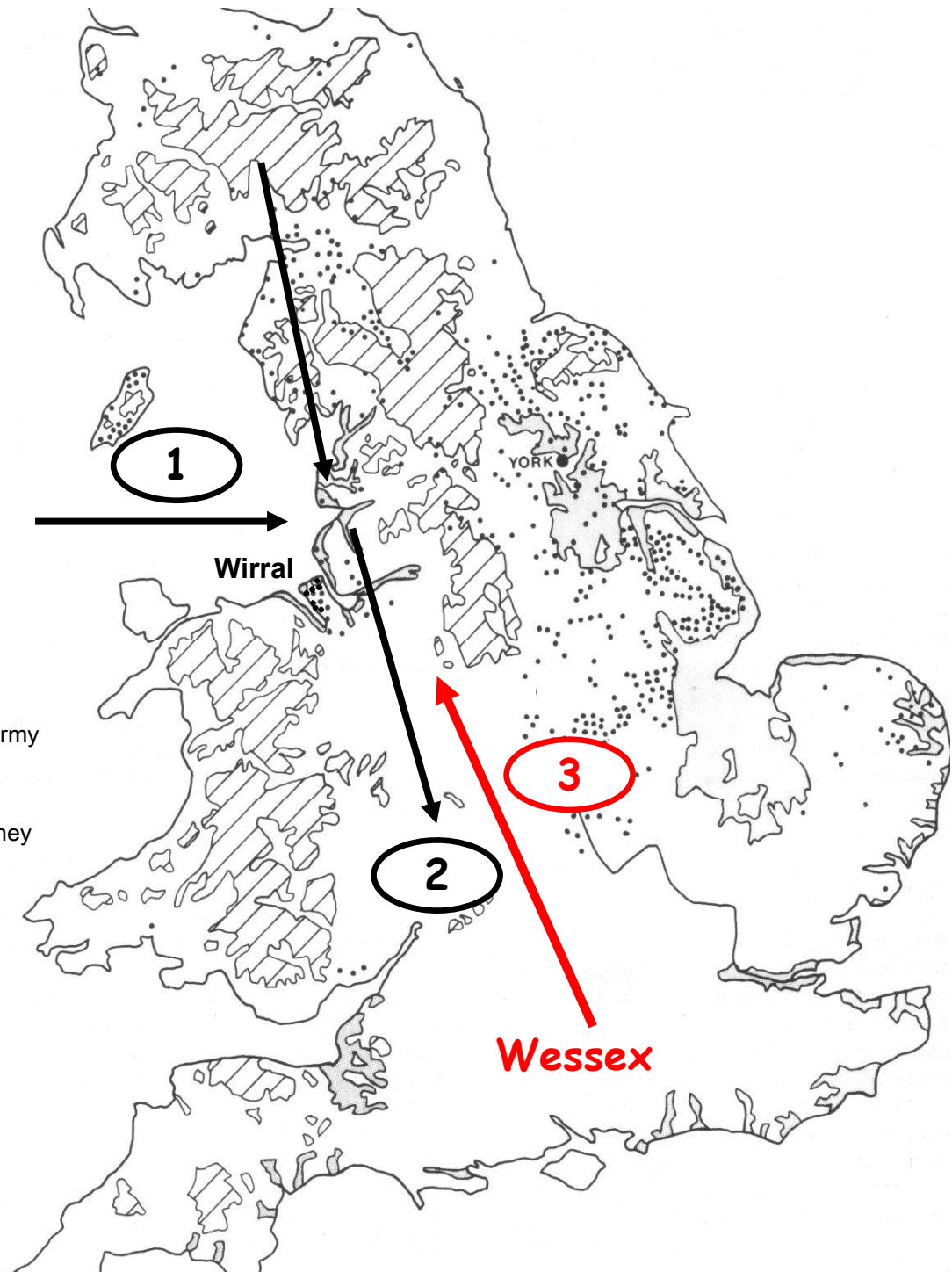
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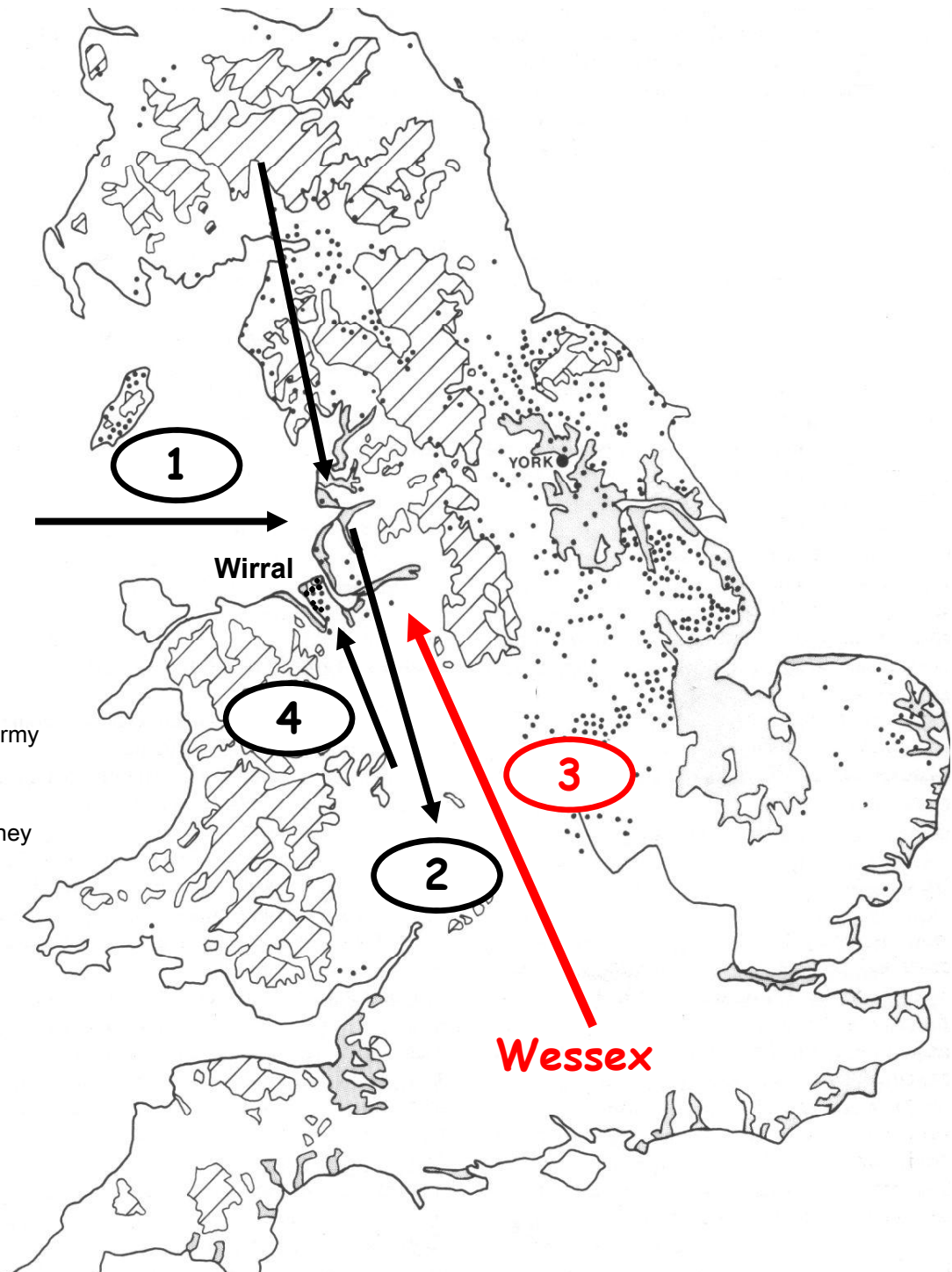




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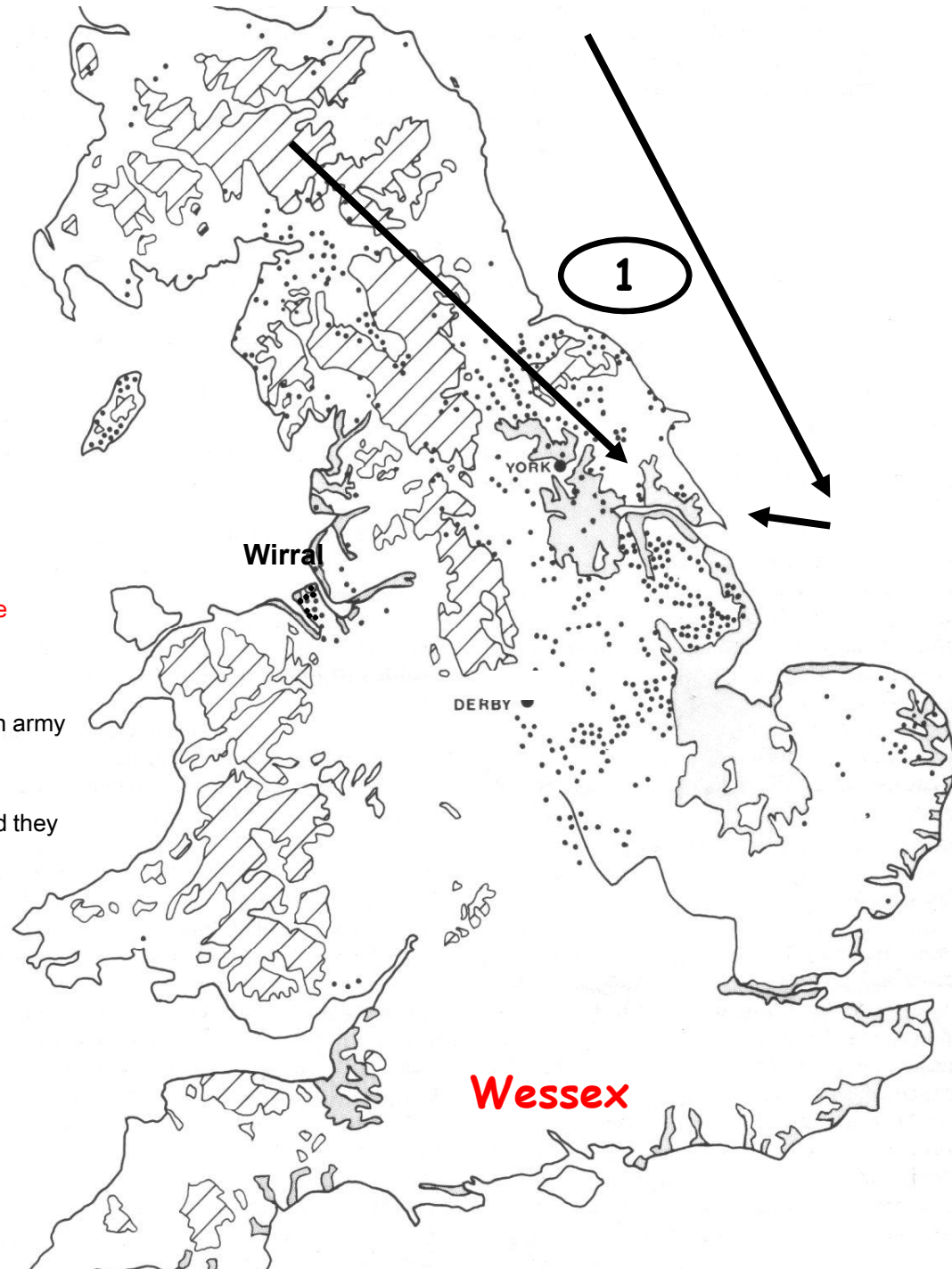
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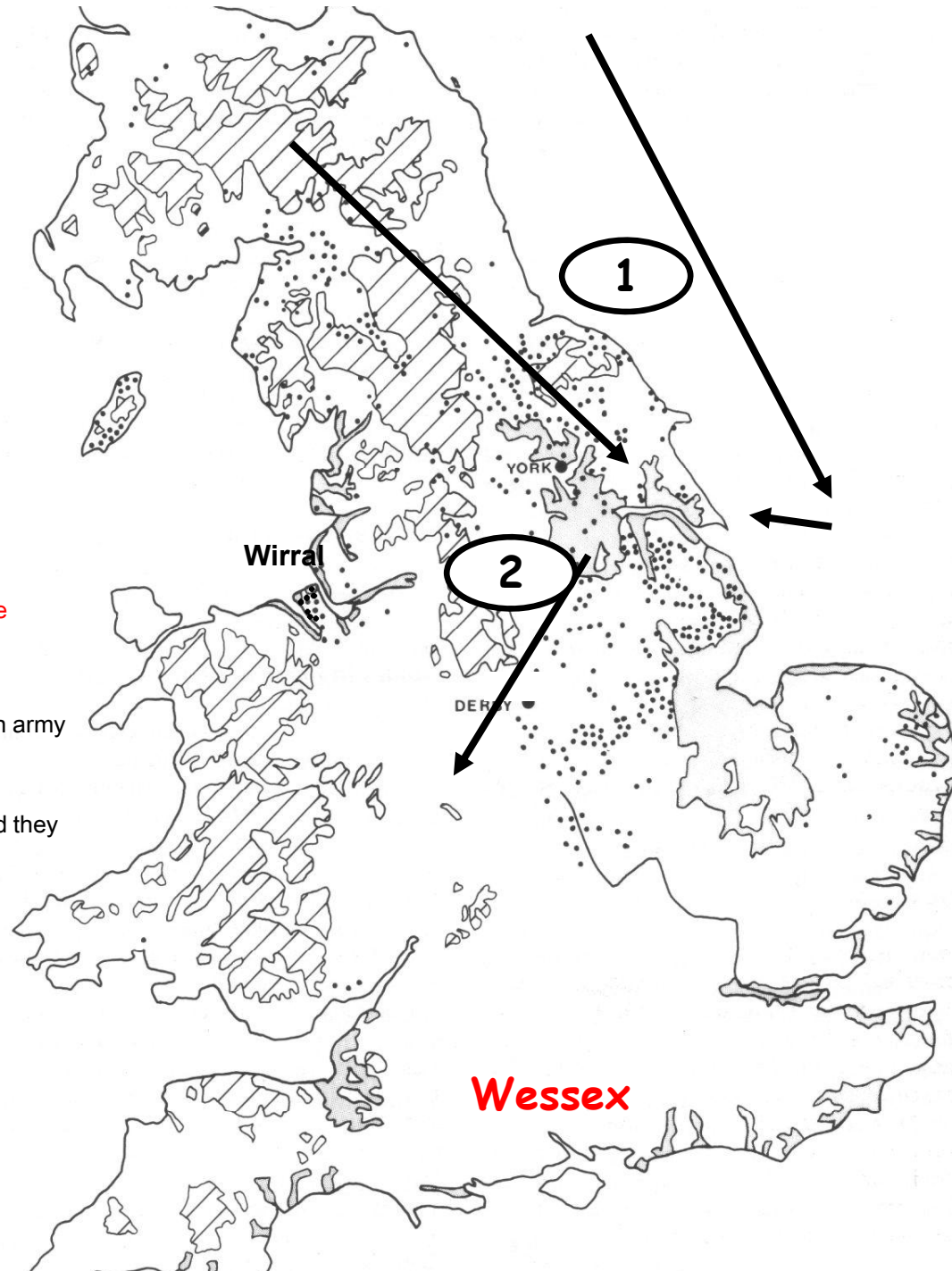
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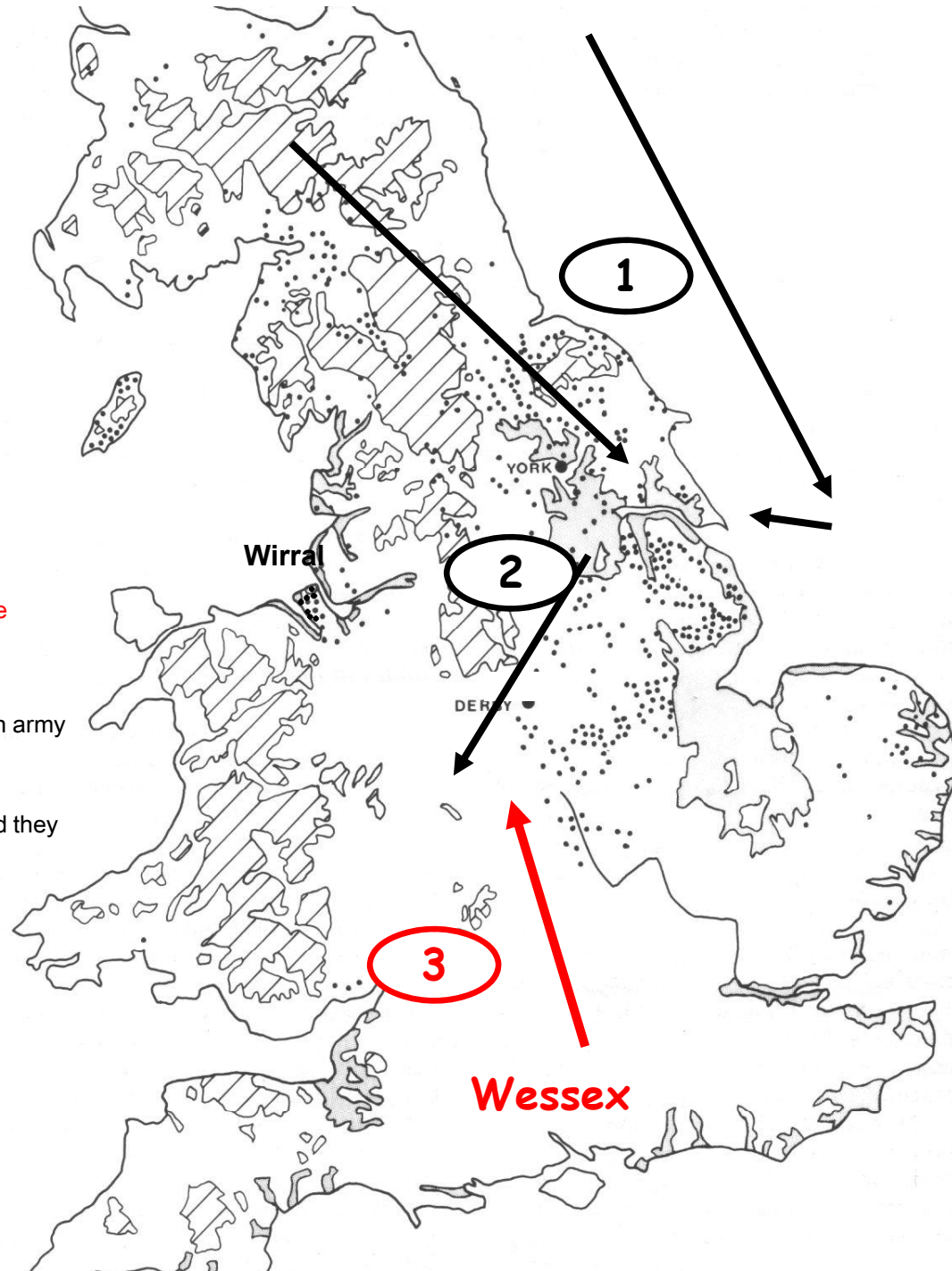




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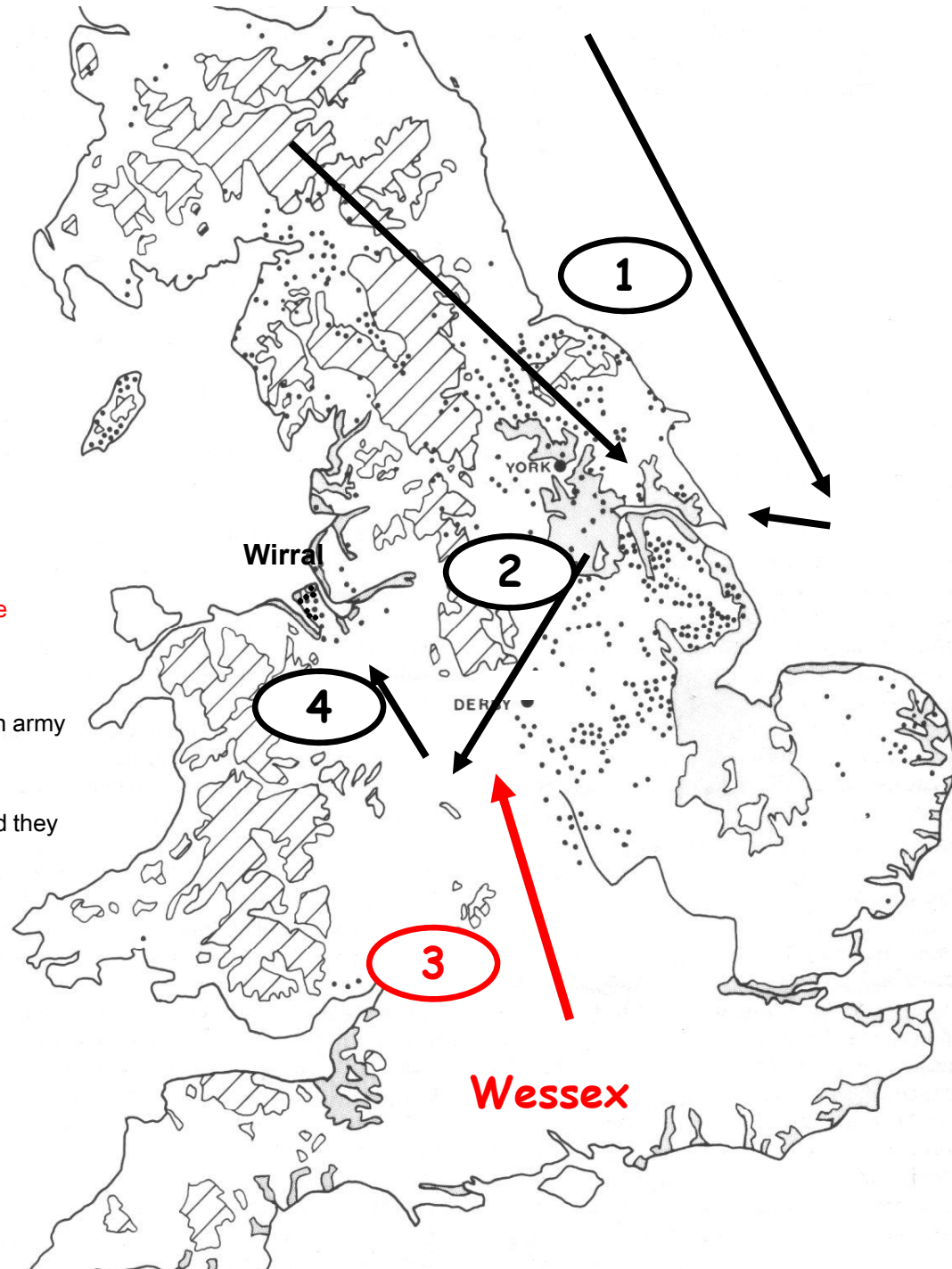
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# Epilogue: Was this the end of Vikings on Wirral?

## Wirral and West Lancashire Viking DNA Project 2002-2007

*Mol. Biol. Evol.* 25(2):301–309. 2008

### Excavating Past Population Structures by Surname-Based Sampling: The Genetic Legacy of the Vikings in Northwest England

*Georgina R. Bowden,\* Patricia Balaesque,\* Turi E. King,\* Ziff Hansen,† Andrew C. Lee,\*<sup>1</sup> Giles Pergl-Wilson,‡ Emma Hurley,‡ Stephen J. Roberts,‡ Patrick Waite,§ Judith Jesch,|| Abigail L. Jones,¶ Mark G. Thomas,# Stephen E. Harding,† and Mark A. Jobling\**

\*Department of Genetics, University of Leicester, Leicester, United Kingdom; †National Centre for Macromolecular Hydrodynamics, University of Nottingham, Sutton Bonington Campus, Loughborough, United Kingdom; ‡The Queen Katherine School, Kendal, Cumbria, United Kingdom; §West Lancashire Heritage Association, Ormskirk, United Kingdom; ||School of English Studies, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, United Kingdom; ¶The Centre for Genetic Anthropology, Department of Biology, University College London, London, United Kingdom; and #Department of Biology, University College London, London, United Kingdom

The genetic structures of past human populations are obscured by recent migrations and expansions and have been observed only indirectly by inference from modern samples. However, the unique link between a heritable cultural marker, the patrilineal surname, and a genetic marker, the Y chromosome, provides a means to target sets of modern individuals that might resemble populations at the time of surname establishment. As a test case, we studied samples from the Wirral Peninsula and West Lancashire, in northwest England. Place-names and archaeology show clear evidence of a past Viking presence, but heavy immigration and population growth since the industrial revolution are likely to have weakened the genetic signal of a 1,000-year-old Scandinavian contribution. Samples ascertained on the basis of 2 generations of residence were compared with independent samples based on known ancestry in the region plus the possession of a surname known from historical records to have been present there in medieval times. The Y-chromosomal haplotypes of these 2 sets of samples are significantly different, and in admixture analyses, the surname-ascertained samples show markedly greater Scandinavian ancestry proportions, supporting the idea that northwest England was once heavily populated by Scandinavian settlers. The method of historical surname-based ascertainment promises to allow investigation of the influence of migration and drift over the last few centuries in changing the population structure of Britain and will have general utility in other regions where surnames are patrilineal and suitable historical records survive.

#### Introduction

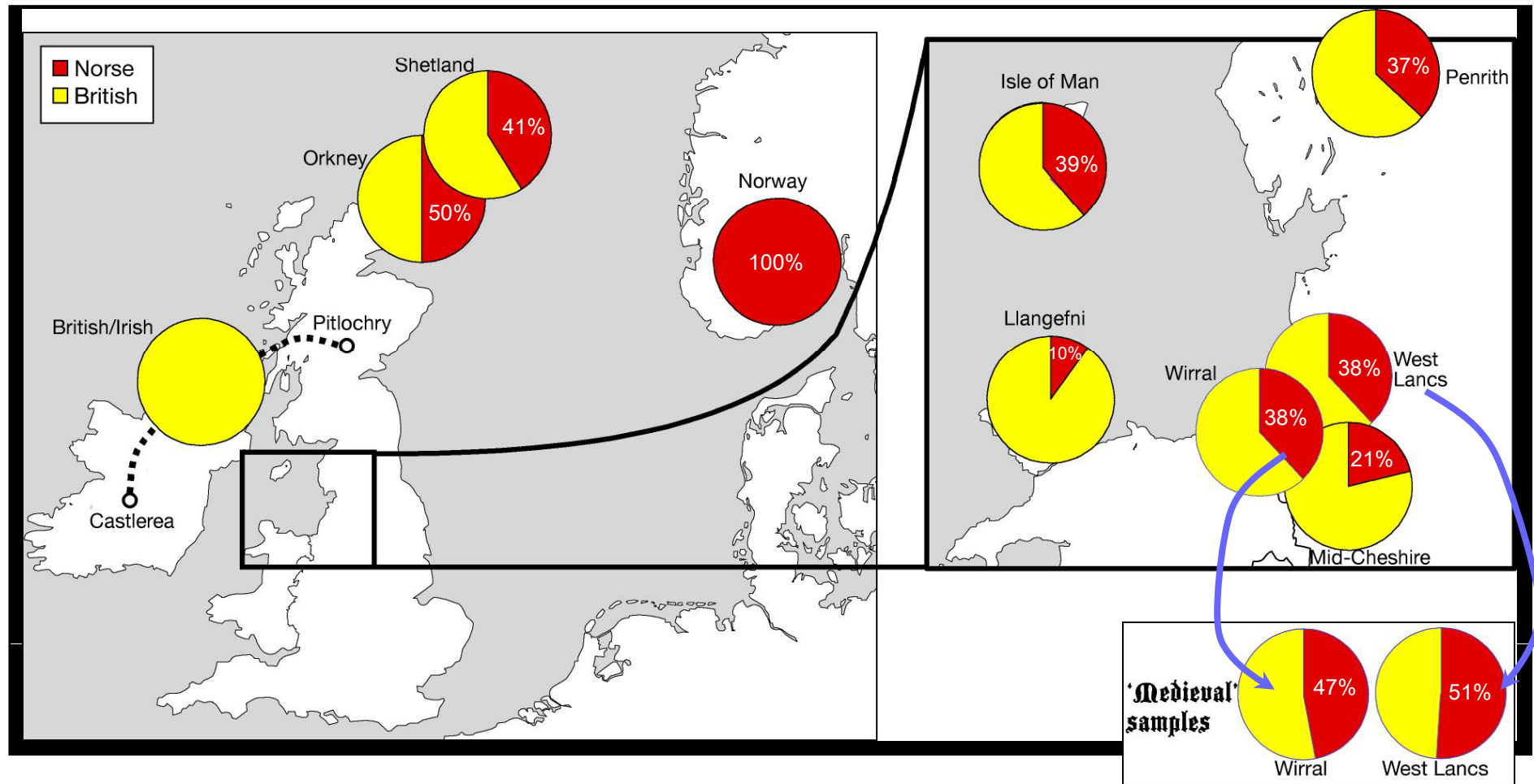
Studies of the human past draw on lines of evidence

through studies of men sharing surnames (Sykes and Irven 2000; King et al. 2006; McEvoy and Bradley 2006). Although the link between surnames and Y chromosomes has



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Wirral and West Lancashire Viking DNA Project 2002-2007



Viking admixture results: upto 51% Norse

2005: Testing “The retreating forces were chased  
*ondlongne daeg* - for the entire day”

1. Start Poulton Hall/ Bebington Heath, ~11am



2005: Testing “The retreating forces were chased  
*ondlongne daeg* - for the entire day”

2. Finish, Heswall Point, “Sheldrakes”, ~4.30pm





The sun  
glorious heavenly body, bright candle of God,  
the eternal Lord,....  
Sank to its resting place



The sun  
glorious heavenly body, bright candle of God,  
the eternal Lord,....  
Sank to its resting place

