

The Meols Pub Boat: a hypothesis

In 2007 Ground Penetrating Radar confirmed the existence of an old boat buried deep under a car park/patio area of a pub near the Railway Station in Meols, Wirral (Fig. 1), a find that had been reported some 70 years earlier.



Fig. 1. Satellite view of the Railway Inn Pub. The position of the vessel is marked by an ellipse.

1938 Discovery

In 1938 the Railway Inn Pub was being rebuilt further away from the road with the site of the old building becoming a car-park. Workers unearthed part of an old clinker boat buried in waterlogged blue clay some 2-3m underneath the surface. One of the workers, Mr John McRae, made detailed notes about the vessel - its size and clinker design (built with overlapping planks) - and noted its location before it was covered over. In 1991 his son - also John - compiled the notes together into a report with a sketch (Fig 2), and presented it to Liverpool Museum (now National Museums: Liverpool) in 1991, after which the information was entered by an assistant curator into the Sites and Monuments Record [1]. No further action was taken.

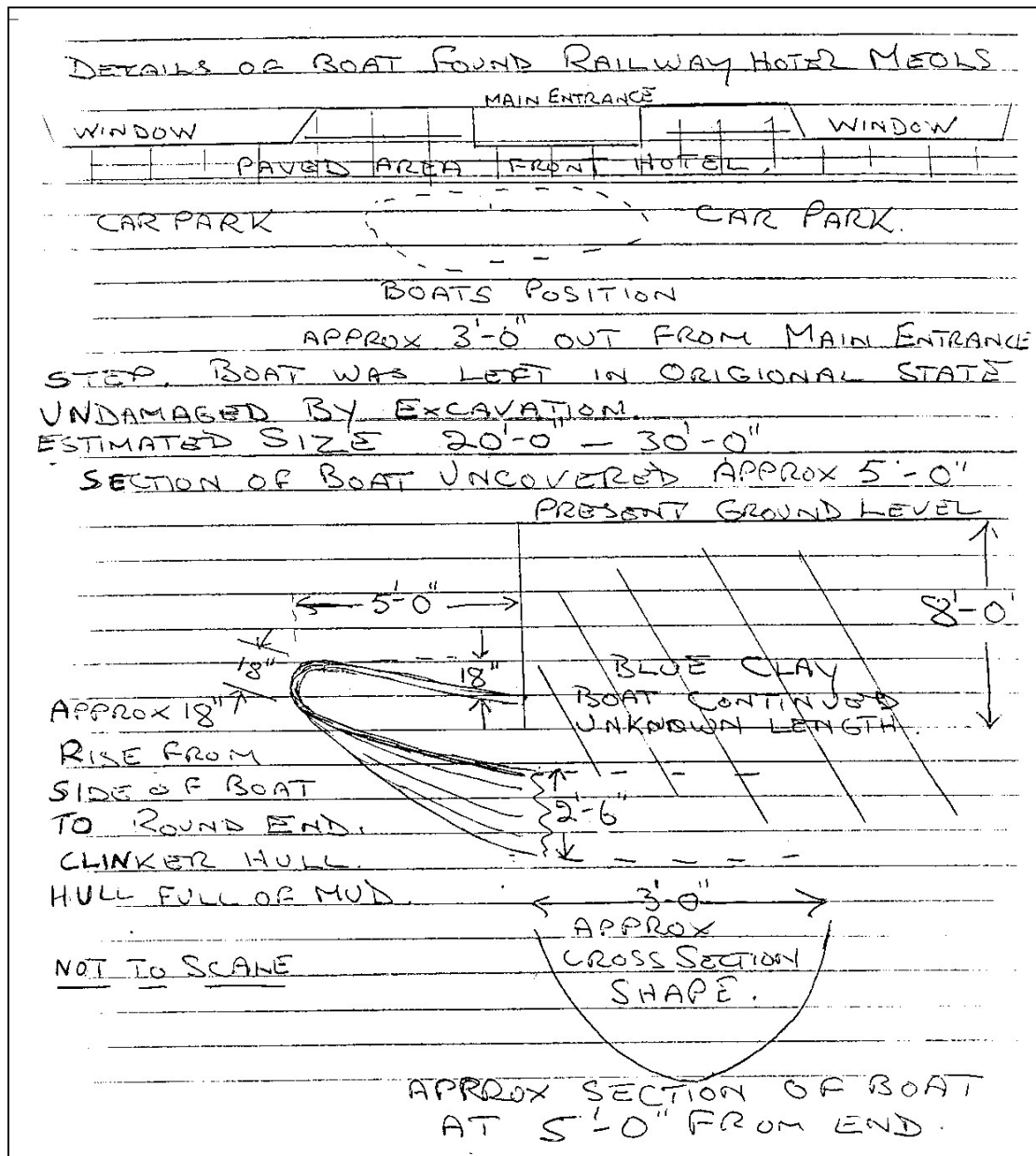


Fig. 2 The sketch and report of the vessel made by the McRae's and presented to the National Museums, Liverpool in 1991.

The find was largely forgotten about- apart from loose rumours of a Viking boat somewhere - until the report was brought to the attention of the current landlord following a planning application to construct a patio. The landlord then contacted well-known local police officer - and amateur history sleuth - Tim Baldock, who in turn contacted myself at the University of Nottingham. With the help of colleagues in the Museums service and local authorities, we were able to obtain a copy of the reported discovery and sketch.

Radar confirms boat is still there

Enlisting the services of Malcolm Weale of Geofizz Ltd as well as John McRae Jr, a survey using ground penetrating radar was conducted in front of the pub entrance, using the McRae sketch as an approximate guide. The radar images (Figs 3-6) revealed the existence of a boat-shaped anomaly in the underlying clay, whose approximate position and dimensions broadly matched those given in the sketch, although:

- The vessel appears further towards the west of the entrance to the pub than that given in the sketch

- Only part of the boat was thus captured by the scans, which appears to show a somewhat larger vessel of between 10-15m (30-45ft) in length.

Results from further scans made to try and capture the rest of the vessel are currently awaited.

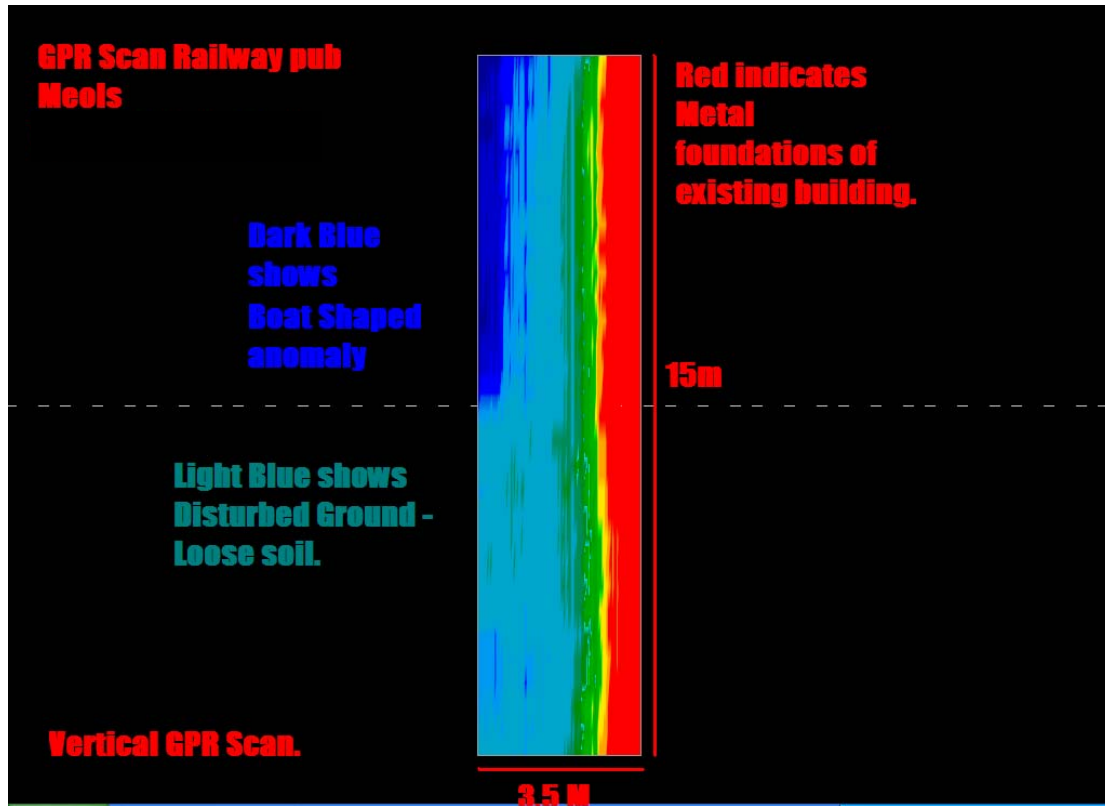


Fig 3. Ground penetrating radar (GPR) results – view looking down on the area scanned

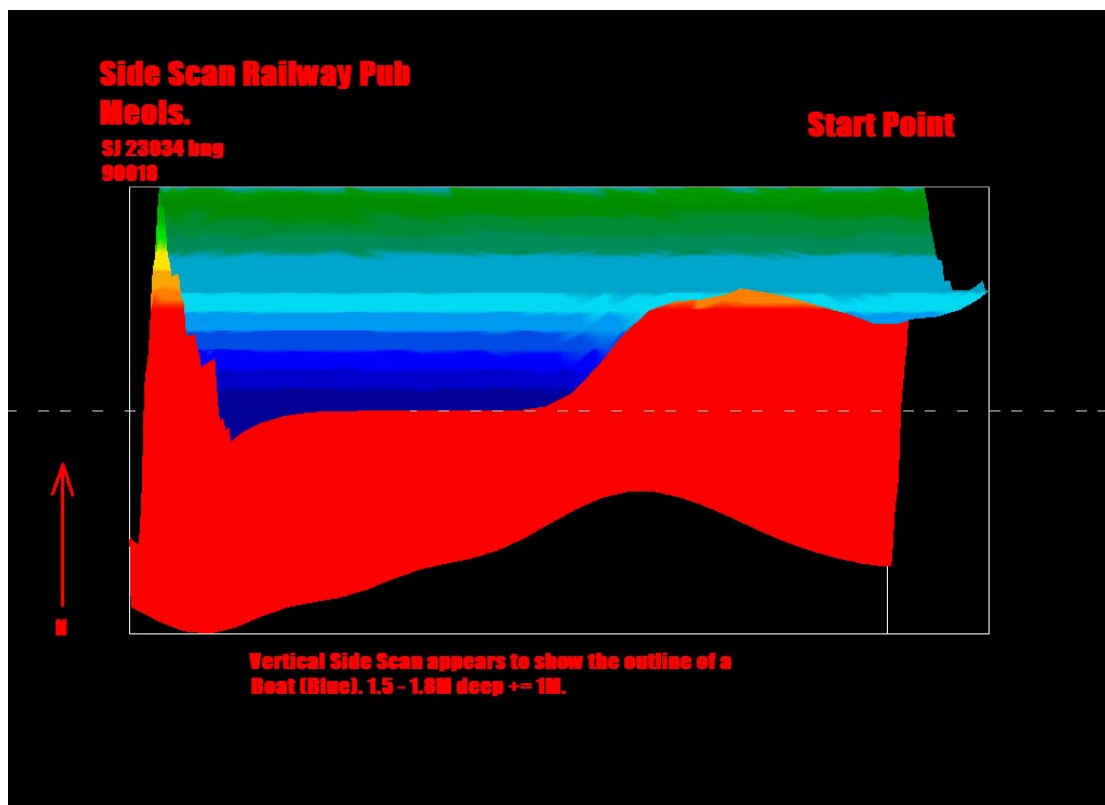


Fig 4. GPR scan results: View looking from side

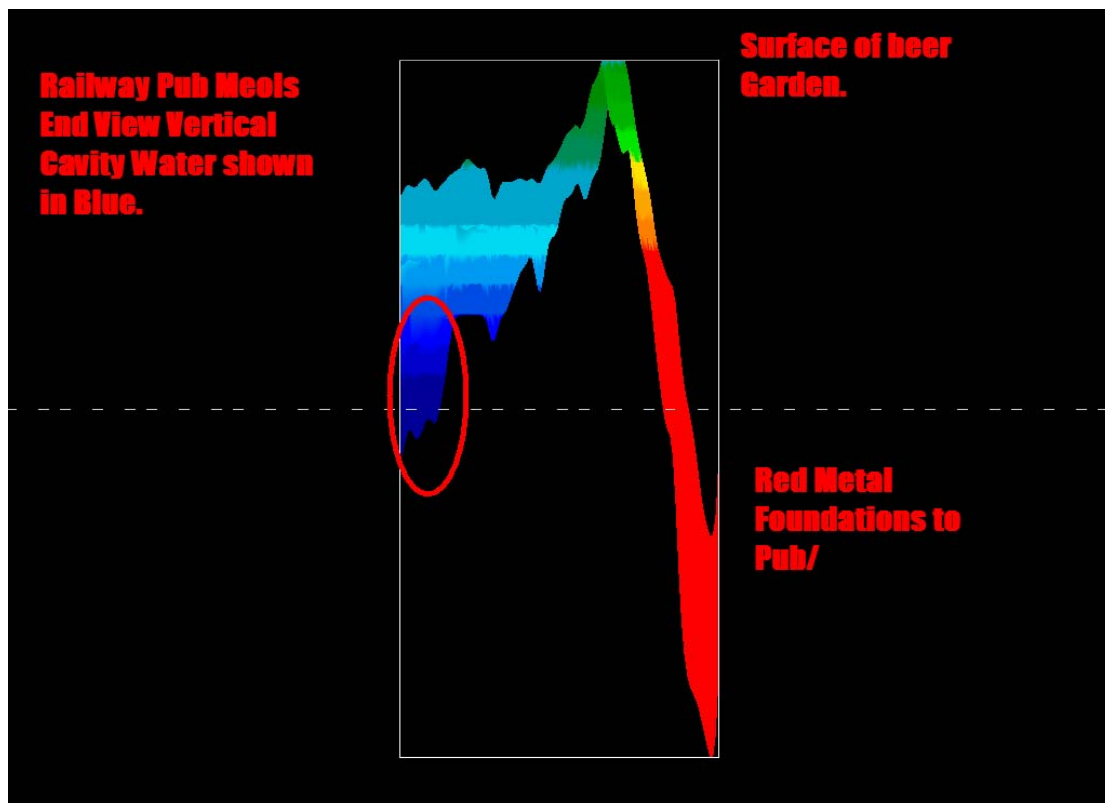


Fig. 5. View looking from behind the vessel

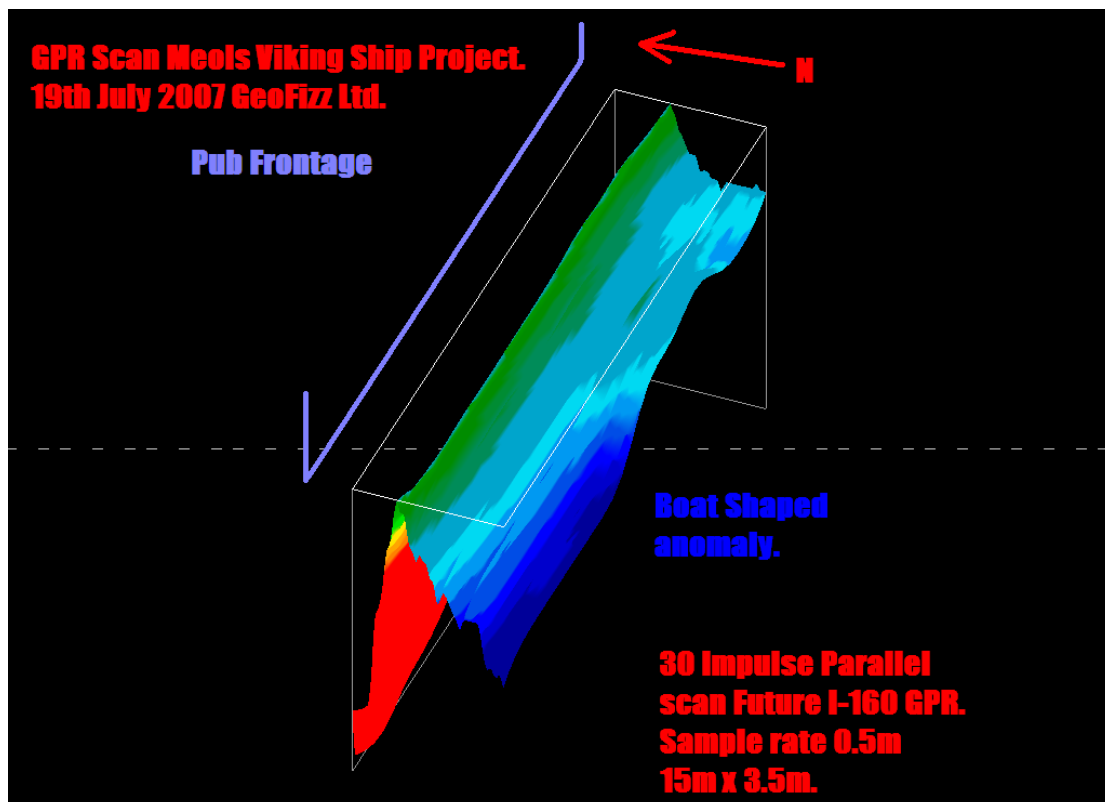


Fig. 6. Oblique view



Fig. 7. Scan team standing over the position of the boat. Left to right: PC Tim Baldock, Malcolm Weale (Geofizz Ltd.), John McRae jnr., Professor Stephen Harding

How did it get there?

The position and depth of the potential vessel raise the possibility that it is of considerable antiquity. Intriguingly, the find spot is approximately 1km away from the present coastline and even further from the medieval coastline, which was once a thriving port with a natural harbour formed by the large sandbank known as “Hyle bank” (Fig. 8). I have been quoted as suggesting [2] that the boat may have been washed in by an ancient flood and/or sank in a local marsh - as that part of Wirral is full of old Norse field/track names such as carr (*kjarr*) and holm (*holm*) associated with marsh and wetland [3]. Indeed my own family comes from such an area - the flood scene is a picture in 1912 from nearby Lingham (lyng-holm) before the sea defences were built (Fig. 9).

What is the boat?

When the report had been archived in 1991, the then Keeper of Archaeology Michael Stammers made the following note [4], comparing the Meols boat with boats found 50km away down the River Mersey near Warrington:

“the description of a round bow and clinker build is intriguing because its shape is very similar to the dug-out canoe finds in the Warrington Museum. It may be a development of these”.

A detailed analysis of the Warrington hollowed out logboats had been made in 1979 by McGrail and Switzur [5]. The seven Warrington boats and two others from Barton and Irlam had all been dated to between AD 1000-1100 (within reasonable error estimates – Fig 10). Although clearly “Viking Age” all these vessels were discovered outside areas which had been significantly colonised by Scandinavians.

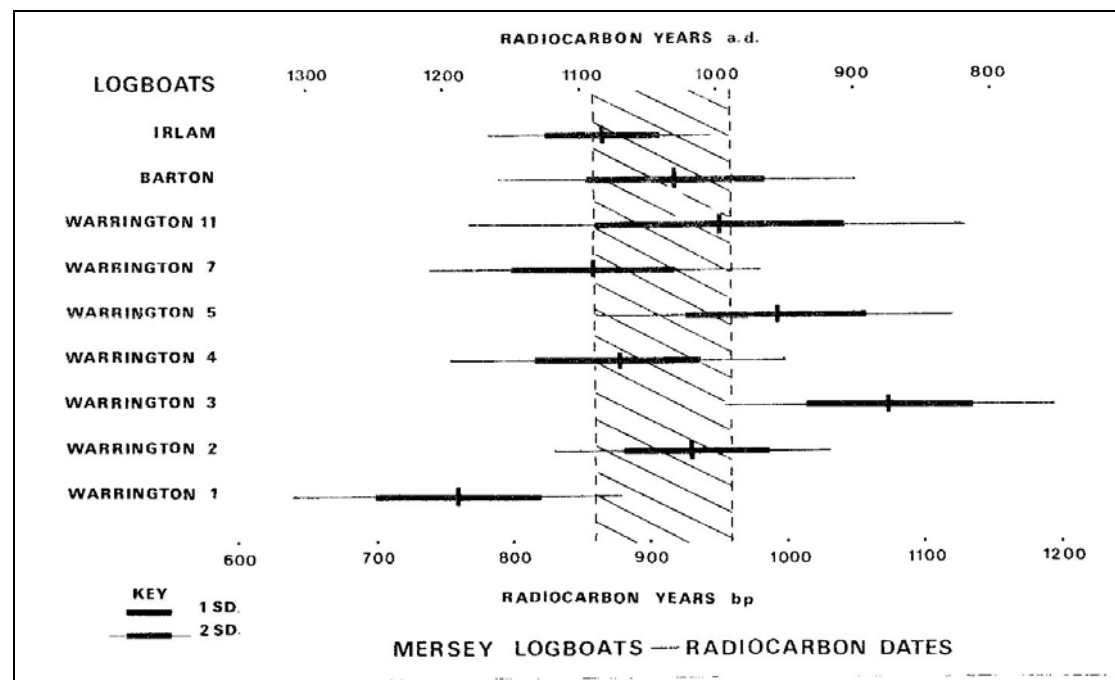


Fig. 10. Warrington logboats- radio carbon dates (from McGrail & Switsur, 1979) bp= before present

In contrast to the Warrington boats the Meols boat is clinker in design and was discovered in an area – Wirral - which had been intensely settled by Scandinavians, an intensity manifested by them having their own Thing parliament at Thingwall [6-8]. Scholars such as F.T. Wainwright and J. McNeal Dodgson were the first to demonstrate this intensity on the basis of place-name evidence, documentary evidence (Irish and Welsh annals reporting the expulsion of the Norse from Dublin in AD902 and their arrival in Wirral, and the Anglo-Saxon reporting of the refortification of Chester in AD907) and this has been reinforced by a wealth of archaeological evidence (such as two hogback tombstones, the latest being discovered in 2004) . The strength of the settlements and its persistence through the centuries was recently confirmed by a recent detailed genetic study [9]. Permission for the Scandinavians to settle in Wirral had been granted to their leader - Ingimund - by Queen Aethelflaed presumably on the basis that Wirral had previously been only sparsely populated. Meols itself is a name given by the Scandinavians meaning “sandbank” with no record of a previous English form.

Stammers in his 1991 memorandum also drew a parallel to a boat discovered in 1955 on the floor of Kentmere Lake in Cumbria “One is reminded of the Kentmere Boat from Cumbria which essentially is a dug-out bottom with the sides increased in height”[3]. This has been

dated to after the Viking age period (1320±130) years and was considered in detail in a paper by Wilson [10] – it is a dug out with sides extended by 4-5 wooden planks (Fig. 11).

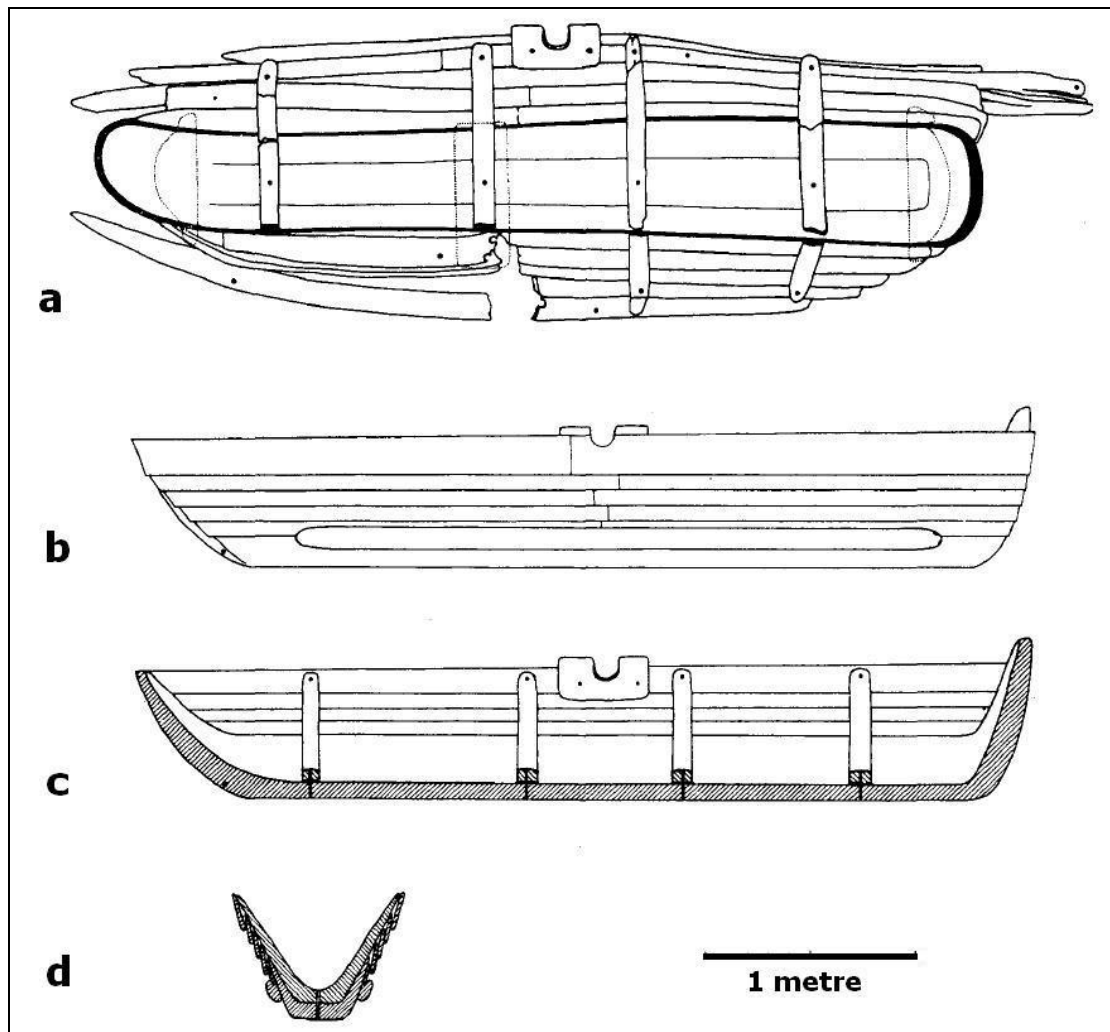


Fig. 11. Reconstruction of the Kentmere boat from Cumbria (from [9]).

The Cumbrian boat however is only a small vessel of only 61cm wide and 4.25m length – considerably smaller than the Meols vessel, based on the ground penetrating radar measurements on the latter. Stammers in making his suggestion did not have the benefit of these measurements. Mr. McRae junior – who had never been interviewed – also recently said his father had discovered a substantial prow or stem from the boat which had been broken off: such a feature is absent from the Cumbrian vessel. Intriguingly Cumbria was also an area also heavily settled by Scandinavians and like Wirral we know their influence persisted through the centuries from the continuing dialect (reflected also in minor place/field names) and strong genetic evidence.

Clinker vessels have been constructed since the first ones were made in Scandinavia ~AD320 (the Nydam vessel in Jutland, Denmark) and are still constructed today. Indeed I rowed in a “clinker-8” as a student. However the position and depth of the Meols boat suggests it is of considerable antiquity.

We are well aware also of the large number of speculative and loose reports of Viking ships found – a recent one being in York which turned out to be the grave of a nail maker. But is the Meols boat a Nordic clinker vessel and perhaps with a design peculiar to the Irish Sea region? Or is it from the descendants of these people?

Hypothesis

Based on this evidence I would therefore like to reiterate a hypothesis quoted in a recent item in Current Archaeology [2] that the Meols Boat is a moderate size (10-15m) transport vessel deriving either from the Irish-Sea Scandinavians who settled in Wirral in the 10th /11th Centuries – or from their descendants afterwards – up to 1600.

The position and depth of the vessel would suggest a later deposition of the vessel as unlikely. The hypothesis cannot be tested until the boat is properly dated.

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References

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