

VIKING WIRRAL



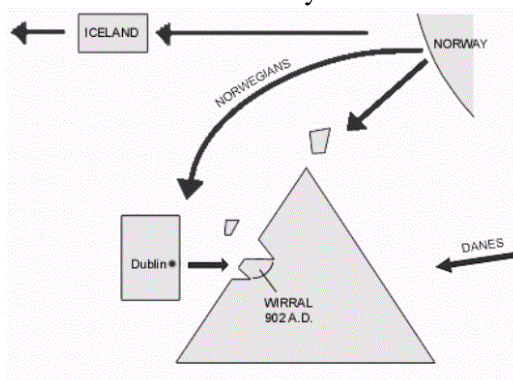
“In Wirral we are dealing with an alien population of mass migration proportions”
F.T. Wainwright (1917-1961)

Illustrations by: Pocketbond Ltd (top), Jennifer McGlaughlin (left), C. Krohg (right)

VIKING WIRRAL

Wirral has a very special Heritage based around its great Viking history, and it is a Heritage locals are becoming extremely proud of.

- Wirral is the only place in mainland Britain with documented evidence of Norwegian Viking settlers. Ancient Irish Chronicles report the first peaceful settlements led by the Norseman *Ingimund* in 902AD, followed by repeated raids on Chester after the peninsula became full of Norse settlers. The Chronicles tell how the English of Chester used elaborate means to keep the Wirral Vikings back, including setting the town's bees onto them! The story of Ingimund represents Wirral's very own ancient Viking Saga. In two years time we celebrate the 1100th anniversary of these raids.



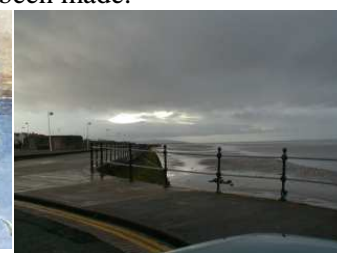
Many of the local population maintain a keen interest in the Viking heritage of the Wirral, and so the spirit and memory of Wirral's early medieval settlers is kept alive and well through various public heritage events and activities staged around the peninsula.



- The area is full of major and minor place names of Scandinavian origin: it has one of the highest densities of *-by* place names in the UK. And in Tranmere ("*Trani-melr*: Cranebirds' sandbank") it has the only English League team with a Norwegian Viking name. Forty generations or so ago Wirral was home to a thriving Scandinavian population with its own language and customs, its own parliament at Thingwall ("*Ping-vollr*: Assembly Field") and its own seaport at Meols ("*Melr*: sandbank") where an impressive array of Viking age finds have been made.



Tranmere Rovers FC



Wirral's Viking seaport: Meols

- English communities in the southern end of the peninsula (south and east of Raby – *ra-byr*: boundary settlement) would keep a watchful eye from the other side of the River Dibbin, for example where the Saxon *Bruna* had his *burh* or fortress. Although we're not sure this may have been on the site of what is now Poulton Hall, home since 1093 of the oldest family name on Wirral - the Lancelyn-Greens - or the moated site at Bromborough Pool known as the old Court House. Since 2004 Poulton Hall has been home of the Brunanburgh Viking Sculpture. Brunanburgh or *Brunanburh* the old name for Bromborough gives its name to a famous battle fought in AD937 which, following recent evidence, most experts believe took place on Wirral soil.



Raby Mere: at Viking Wirral's border



Poulton Hall



Bromborough Court House

- Norse dialect words from the settlers have been passed down through the centuries – we know this from the large number of minor field/track names (e.g. rake, carr, thwaite, breck). Someone has said Wirral has more carrs –*kjarr*- than Jeremy Clarkson and more rakes –*rak*- (over 100) than Alan Titchmarsh!. *Kjarr* is old Viking for marsh and *rak* for a lane. Even by the turn of the 15th century people with Scandinavian names like Mabilla Raynaldesdoghter, and the siblings of Hondes, namely Agnes Hondesdoghter, Johanna Honesdoghter and Richard Hondesson - were still filling in their rent books.



- The famous 14th century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* written by some unknown poet in or near the area has a large proportion of Norse dialect words such as *storr* (big), *karp* (to chatter), *gata* (roads), *renk* (knight). Some have associated the patron of the poet – or even the poet himself – who recalls Gawain wandering through Wirral in search of the Green Knight at the Green Chapel – with Sir John Stanley of Storeton Hall (1354-1408), Knight of the Garter and ancestor of local Viking expert Steve Harding: Maybe Storeton Hall was the Green Chapel!



Storeton Hall: home of the Green Knight?

- Wirral prides itself in its Viking Legends – such as Thor’s Stone at Thurstaston (Thorsteinn’s farmstead). Locals have believed for centuries that this impressive outcrop of red sandstone was Thor’s hammer Mjollnir. Thurstaston Common is the highest point on Wirral and the most prone to lightning strikes, befitting for such a monument. In 2001 a famous article in a Norwegian newspaper “De Fant Tors Hammer” – they found Thor’s hammer – reported how a senior delegation from Trondheim (Mayor and Cultural Affairs Director) visited the stone but were happy with how Wirral people were looking after it and would not be taking it back with them “on this occasion”.



Thor fights Frost Ogres
..then loses his hammer

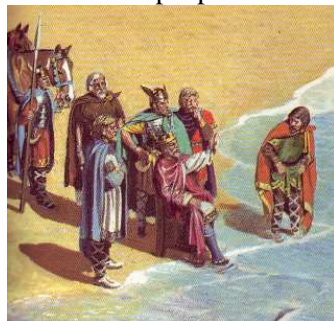


It's Official!: Thor's hammer found in Wirral –
Norwegian Press 2001



Thor's stone. Daybreak
May 1st 2002 with Hrolf!

- Everyone has heard of King Canute attempts to turn back the tide: but for centuries locals have believed that this event took place on the north Wirral shore to help reverse the constant flooding at Meols, Moreton and Leasowe, once the site of the “Canute Chair”. Although we cannot guarantee the accuracy of these legends they do show how much Wirral people cherish their Norse ancestry.



“Sea come not hither not wet the sole of my feet”

- Wirral also prides itself in its well-known re-enactment group, the Wirralh Skip Felagr, (www.wirralvikings.org.uk) who stage various events around the peninsula entertaining the public and educating them about life here during the tenth century.



Entertaining and educating
the modern people of Wirral



Vikings weren't just raiding,
they raised their families here



The Viking board game -
hnefatafl



Ever popular combat
displays

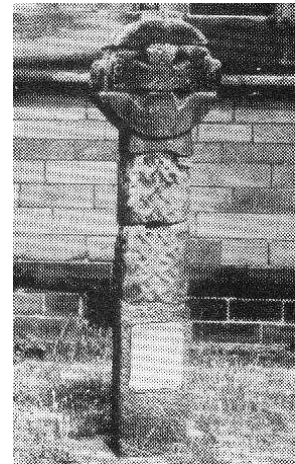
- Many outstanding pieces of sculptured stonework from the Vikings in Wirral survive today. The famous 10th century Viking hogback tombstone proudly resides near the pulpit of the old Viking church of St. Bridget's at West Kirby (*Vestri Kirkjubyr* – the West Village of the Church), and has been described as a “huge monument to Viking colonialism”. A smaller hogback tombstone recently turned up in someone's back garden in Bidston! At the church of St. Mary's and St. Hilary's at Neston there are a collection of stones from a former cross, which when pieced together record the remarkable events in the life of a Viking couple, and at St. Barnabas, Bromborough there is another Viking cross.



Hogback, West Kirby



Cross fragments at Neston



Viking cross, Bromborough

- Visit Hesketh's field at Irby, where the Wirral Vikings used to race their horses (*hesta-skeið* – horse race track), and another Hesketh's field in Thornton, and enjoy the beauty of Ufaldi's land at Klakkr-tun (Cloughton) now Birkenhead Park



Hesketh's Viking Horse Race Track at Irby



Ufaldi's Green or Birkenhead Park (on which New York's Central Park was modelled)

- Visit Bebington Heath, believed to be the site of the Battle of Brunanburh, the name of a famous Anglo-Saxon Poem. According to later records from Iceland, Vikings are supposed to have fought on both sides – a group led by a King Olaf from Dublin with the Scots and a group, led by Iceland's most famous Viking, Egil Skallagrimsson - with the English.



Old map showing the escape route of the 937AD raiders



Egil fought with the English at Brunanburh

- The losing group (Olaf) made a quick exit! Follow the escape route of one raiding Viking army through Storeton and Thingwall woods, through to the Heswall Slack or *slakki* and then to the Heswall shore at Sheldrakes, believed to be the site of the Thing's mere or *Dingsmere* where the raiders escaped.



Start of the trek: Bruna's fortress (Poulton Hall)



Brunanburh Viking at Poulton Hall

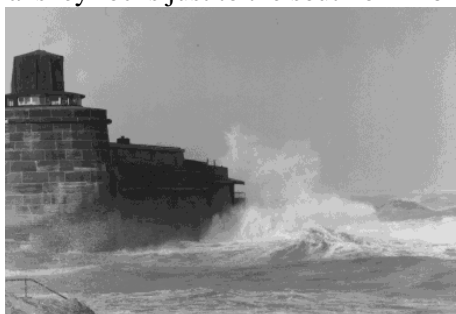


Bebington Heath today



Sheldrakes Restaurant/ "Dingsmere" at Heswall

- Visit the thrilling Viking Svartskere – Black Skerries or Rocks at New Brighton, upon which Fort Perch Rock has been built, and Tonnskere – Tooth skerries or Tanskey rocks just to the south of Hilbre Island.



Svartskere

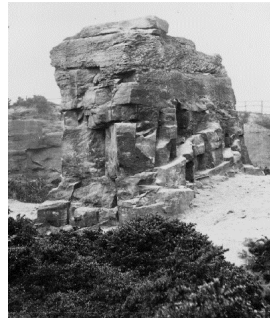


Tonnskere rocks – just off Hilbre Island

- Climb Thor's stone at Thurstaston and the *klintir* - "projecting rocks" at the Wallasey *brekka*, and Dibbinsdale Clint, Brotherton Park...



Thor's stone, Thurstaston Common



The "Clynse" at the Wallasey Breck or *brekka*



The Dibbinsdale Clint, Brotherton Park

... and visit Cross Hill, Thingwall, the site of Wirral's Viking parliament – possibly the oldest parliament in mainland Britain, and pre-dating Iceland's Thingvellir by some 30 years and the Isle of Man's Tynwald by some 70 years. Visit the Arno – *Arnishaug* -burial mound for *Arni* at Oxton and then make the short distance to cheer along Viking Tranmere!



Cross Hill, Thingwall – site of the "Thing": Wirral's Viking parliament



Arni's Haug at the Arno



Viking Tranmere!

- July 29th 2007 – St. Olav's Day - marks the start of an annual "Olsok" pilgrimage walk linking the two Viking Churches of St. Bridget's in West Kirby with St. Olave's in Chester, along the beautiful Wirral Way: come and join us! ..or do this exhilarating walk any time of year!



Walk the Wirral Way...



.. from the Viking church of St. Bridget's at West Kirby..



.. to Viking St. Olave's at Chester

- Viking Wirral prides itself in its strong and developing links with Dublin, Isle of Man, York, Iceland, Denmark.. and Norway.



Scandinavian VIPs at Wirral: Thorsteinn Palsson, former Prime Minister of Iceland; Pauline Cocker, Mayoress, Wirral; Gerhard Dalen, Director of Cultural Affairs, Trondheim; Liv Sandven, Mayor of Trondheim



2002: Gerhard and Liv, with Per-Olav Uddu (Director of Norway's St.Olav's Festival) visit Thingwall School (as part of the 1100th anniversary celebrations of Viking Wirral



2002: Norway's St. Olav's Pilgrim Priest –Kjell Skartseterhagen - wife Ursula and Revd. Paul Robinson study ancient document about Vikings at St. Hilary's, Kirkby (Wallasey Village)



2003: The first waves of Scandinavian tourists hit Wirral. Icelanders, fresh from visiting their own Thing Parliament site at Thingvellir, visit Wirral's Thing Parliament site at Cross Hill, Thingwall

In 2001 the BBC Blood of Vikings series focussed on a man from Meols as their outstanding genetic link with the Viking past. A more recent genetic survey on men from old Wirral families has shown that 50% have their strongest genetic matches in Scandinavia. Today that Viking influence still echoes in the Wirral landscape and its people.



You can learn more about Viking Wirral from the 1100th anniversary web site:

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/-sczsteve>

and from the *Wirralh Skip Felagr* web site

<http://www.wirralvikings.org.uk>

The following publications are also available about the Vikings in Wirral:

1. Ingimund's Saga: Norwegian Wirral (Stephen Harding, with Foreword by Magnus Magnusson), Countyvise Limited: new Hardback edition available December 2006.
2. Wirral and its Viking Heritage (by Paul Cavill, Stephen Harding and Judith Jesch). The English Place Name Society, 2000.
3. Viking Mersey (by Stephen Harding), Countyvise Limited, 2002.

Wirral's Roger Lancelyn Green wrote the Puffin Classic "Myths of the Norsemen" (Puffin, 1970).