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Viking Boat Found?

By Stephen Harding

Two to three metres under the tarmac and concrete of a Meols, Wirral pub car park and patio rests the remains of what is hoped to be the only intact Viking Age boat in the British Isles. Originally discovered in 1938 during excavation of the pub's basement, the boat's timbers were intentionally covered over by builders reluctant to have their work delayed by an archaeological dig - thus the story, along with the boat, was buried. However, a witness to the cover-up recently stepped forward, and myth quickly became reality when the site was subsequently surveyed with ground penetrating radar. Images from the radar confirmed the existence of a boat-like object buried deep beneath the surface.

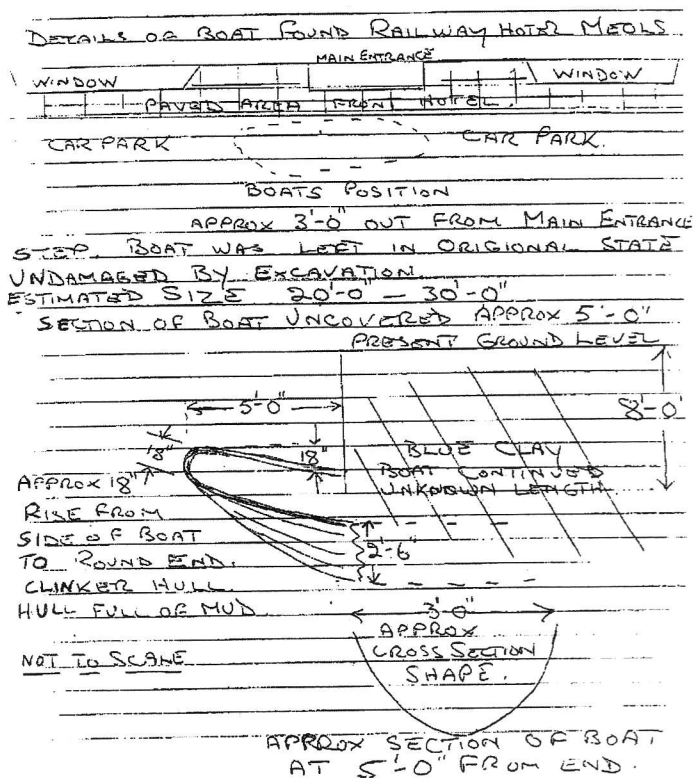


The form and unusual depth of this intriguing find have prompted a number of recent news reports and headlines referring to a Viking boat or ship. Indeed, Meols is an old Viking name meaning sandbank, and was once a thriving Viking Age seaport.

However, both the character and date of the find remain unproven, and

further study is still necessary to resolve the mystery of the 'boat' beneath a pub car park.

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, and presented it to Liverpool Museums in 1991, after which the information was entered into the Sites and Monuments Record.



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

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. I have suggested 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 (*holmr*) associated with marsh and wetland¹. 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. My Mother recalls often coming downstairs for breakfast with seaweed strewn over the floor where the tide had been in and out.

We also know the Wirral was an area of intense Scandinavian settlement with its own Thing parliament^{2,3,4}, an intensity confirmed by a recent detailed genetic study⁵: although currently unproven there is a good chance it is from this period or from the descendants of these people. Indeed, we have had the 1938 sketch and report scrutinised by Norwegian Viking ship expert Dr. Knut



Paasche from the University of Oslo: he has noted a similarity with a 30ft long clinker of the 'Faering' type discovered along with the famous Gokstad burial vessel: but the origin of the Meols boat still remains a mystery.

A phase of consultation is now underway, The team – which includes Dr. Howard Jones and other archaeologists at Trent and Peak Archaeology at Nottingham University - would like to emphasise that as both the date and the precise character of the reported discovery are still unknown, the initial focus will be on the possibility of additional survey and analysis with a view to assessing the stratigraphic position and general context of the find. Pending the results of this assessment and further discussions with interested parties, consideration will then be given to moving forward with the possibility of evaluation (dating) and excavation.

Professor Stephen Harding is author of Viking Mersey and an expert on the Vikings in the North West of England.

Bibliography

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4. <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~sczsteve> (The Wirral and West Lancashire Viking Home Page)
5. Bowden, G.R., King, T.E., Hansen, Z., Lee, A.C., Pergl-Wilson, G., Hurley, E., Jones, A., Roberts, S.J., Waite, P., Jesch, J., Thomas, M.G., Harding, S.E. and Jobling, M.A. (2007) Excavating past population structures by surname-based sampling: the genetic legacy of the Vikings in northwest England, *Molecular Biology and Evolution* (in press).

Figures:

1. 1724 map of the Wirral peninsula showing Meols and Thingwall. The "Hyle bank" provided a natural harbour for Meols, but was lost in the 19th century probably because of the effects of dredging of the River Mersey. Courtesy of Dr. Paul Cavill.
 2. John McRae Sr.'s original 1938 sketch of the clinker vessel found under the Railway Inn pub. The drawing was given to the Liverpool Museum in 1991.
 3. Flood scene at the neighbouring village of Lingham (*lyngholm*) in 1912. Courtesy of Mr. Frank Biddle.
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