

SCANDINAVIAN SETTLEMENT IN WEST CHESHIRE – STRETCHING THE BOUNDARIES

by Dan Robinson

THE upsurge in interest in the Viking period over the last few years has taken various forms, but perhaps it is possible to discern an underlying theme where the inhabitants of the modern world are trying to find closer links between themselves and the Scandinavians of a millennium ago. Across the Atlantic, celebrations for the thousandth anniversary of the voyage of Leif Eirikson to America attracted sponsorship from the U.S. Government and led to an exhibition travelling round the major cities of the USA and Canada from 2000 until 2003; its final audience was well over 3 million people, many of them of Scandinavian descent vicariously renewing their links with their homeland. Here in Britain the TV series and accompanying book, *Blood of the Vikings*¹, has brought home to the general public a concept already well known by historians, that the Vikings not only raided in Britain but settled here as well, and settled in some numbers; and that their blood, however thinly, runs through many of our veins. More locally, Professor Stephen Harding of Nottingham University has published several popular books which deal with the Scandinavian settlement of the Wirral² and again his work takes a special interest in the role the Vikings may have played in creating the genetic make-up of the people now living on the banks of the Dee and the Mersey.

The process by which the 'pure' Vikings from Norway and Denmark merged into the local communities of Britain is an intriguing one, and something which has not been considered to any great extent until recent times when modern techniques became available. The Icelandic company DeCode has become a world leader in the study of DNA. Their study of the population of Iceland, a country which has remained more or less isolated from the rest of the world since it was first settled by the Norse some 1100 years ago, has shown that a very significant portion of the people there have traces of British blood; the explanation being that the Vikings who settled in Iceland were the product of relationships between what we might call 'true' Vikings and girls from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. How many of the girls were willing partners in this arrangement is a moot point, but their offspring, whatever their mixed bloodstock, continued to be culturally Vikings in the exclusively Scandinavian environment of Iceland.

In most of the British Isles, however, the Vikings were not the dominant culture, and their way of life was destined to disappear. For many areas the way in which the process of assimilation worked, and how long it took before the last traces of their Scandinavian heritage had been lost, is not clear. The story of the British Isles was to take on a completely new direction with the Norman Conquest, and historians both then and now have found little time to contemplate the fortunes of the Vikings and their descendants who lived peacefully within the English kingdom *post* 1066; in simplistic terms, it is almost as if anyone who was not a Norman had now, by default, become a Saxon. It is reasonable to suggest that the process of cultural merging varied according to local and external political circumstances and the relative proportions of Scandinavians and natives in each community. Most of these variables are unknown to us and consequently we must attempt to form some sort of picture from the little evidence we have. However, the significant influence of Scandinavian words and speech patterns on our modern language, particularly in the north of England, should provide a clue that we ought to be looking for a significant Norse and/or Danish impact on the total population, certainly in a cultural if not in a racial sense.

The devastation of the holy island of Lindisfarne in 795 reverberates down the centuries as the overture to the Viking Age in Britain, and the image of this totally unexpected bolt from the blue is a very powerful one. It is, however, events in Ireland during the following century which have the most relevance to western Cheshire. Without going into details Ireland endured, in microcosm, the whole Viking experience shared by western Europe during the ninth century. Against a constant background of opportunistic raids from the sea there were fights and occasional major battles between the native Irish and those Vikings who had gained a foothold in the island and were attempting to settle. At the same time confrontation was tempered with truces, marriages and alliances between the two peoples, further confused by the presence of two broader groupings amongst the Vikings who were distinguished by the Irish, for reasons which time has obscured, as the *White Foreigners* (the Norse) and the *Dark Foreigners* (the Danes). It would, however, be wrong to dismiss the Viking influence on Ireland as totally negative; after all it was they who founded the first towns on the island; Limerick, Cork, Waterford, Wexford, and above all Dublin. They also intermarried with the Irish to create the dynamic hybrid culture which we call Hiberno-Norse. Many of these people found their way northwards to take part in the pioneering settlement of Iceland.

In Ireland there was to be no conclusive victory for either side; the Irish were obviously more numerous, the Vikings were the more formidable fighters, and on average the two factors cancelled each other out. One of the difficulties which all their opponents found when dealing with the Vi-

archaeology today, our thanks are due to the enthusiasm of the metal detectorists who have discovered and brought these objects to our attention.

A beautiful gold ring made of twisted wire—a typical Viking type—was found about ten years ago to the north of the Broxton roundabout below the Peckforton Hills. This is the second of these rings to be found in the area; a similar one was discovered in St Werburgh's Street, Chester in the nineteenth century. Then there is a small hoard of silver pennies found five years ago near the River Gowy at Waverton, south-east of Chester. With the coins were a number of strange bronze rings, some of them with traces of silvering, which have been tentatively identified as the remains of a chatelain. The hoard was deposited in about 970, and the owner is more likely to have been Viking than Saxon. About two miles south of Chester and about half a mile south-west of Heronbridge, another small hoard has been found which is clearly Viking—it includes a silver ingot and a soapstone spindle whorl. This is currently being studied by the British Museum. Finally the enigmatic site of Heronbridge itself is currently being examined by the Chester Archaeological Society in a series of summer excavations, and as a result of the first season's work Dr David Mason believes that the earthwork which is the principal visible part of the site is most likely to be a Viking fortified riverside enclosure.

Insofar as any precise dates are available for Viking Age objects from western Cheshire it will be noticed that the period 970–980 has come up regularly; for the Castle Esplanade and Pemberton's Parlour Hoards in Chester itself, and for the Waverton Hoard to the south-east. It is known that a new wave of Viking raids began at this time after a long period of relative quiet, and it seems reasonable to suppose that these deposits were all made in these troubled times. The Heronbridge fortification may also fit into this picture. The circumstances of the loss of the gold ring at Broxton are unknown, but it is clear that none of these discoveries can be used as evidence for Scandinavian settlement in the west Cheshire countryside.

On the other hand there are a number of place-names, all of them minor, which give support to the view that there was some sort of percolation by Scandinavians into the area. Before going on to discuss this evidence it may be helpful to spend a moment making a more general comment on Dodgson's approach to the derivation of place-names. Old Norse and Old English are closely related Germanic languages and have many words in common. Dodgson was understandably wary of classing any element as Norse if it might be English where both languages used the same word. Although he does not specifically state his reasons for this, it was presumably on the grounds that it is safer to choose the more common derivation where the word's origin is uncertain because the odds are that it belongs to the less exotic language. At first glance this seems a fair course to take, but unfortunately it leads to its own distortions. If every word which might be English is judged to be English, the effect must be to make the distribu-

tion of English-derived names more predominant and widespread than they actually were, and the reverse is true for Old Norse names. Unfortunately it is easier to identify this problem than to correct it, but it is worth bearing in mind that the law of averages suggests that some place-names adjudged to be English are in fact Old Norse.

Along the western edge of the county Dodgson notes Scandinavian fieldnames in Farndon, Caldecott and Maccfen. These are:

Wivercote in Maccfen = *Viddfari's* cot;

Routlothefeld; 'field at the red hollow'; a field name in Farndon from *raudr* and *laut*;

Braderfitlond; 'land with a wide marsh'; field name at Caldecott near Shocklach, contains *fit* = grassland on the bank of a river.

Elsewhere we find:

Schraytefeld; 'field at a land-slip'; a field name at Cotton Abbots from *skreidd*;

Twerslondes; 'athwart land'; field name at Newton-by-Chester from *thvers* (but suggested to be post-Scandinavian);

Horn Nips < **Horn gappes**; field name in Rowton from *horn* and *gappe* 'gaps in a fence at a projecting piece of land'. All examples of this name except this one lie in or near areas of Scandinavian influence;

Far and Near Swartins; field names in Wervin from *svatr* = black

And *rein* as 'a boundary/ploughland strip' only occurs as a dialect word in Wirral and Broxton hundreds (i.e. the western edge of Cheshire), as opposed to English 'land'.

What are we to make of this? We might suggest a model where second and later generation Viking settlers from the Wirral or Chester moved into the Cheshire countryside as they married into local families or purchased land, part of the process of absorption and assimilation which was ultimately to lead to the eclipse of their culture. Their numbers were not sufficient in any one place to have any impact on major place names, but just enough to subtly alter the character of the population and add some of their words to the local vocabulary.

There is possibly one tangible trace of the Vikings in the west Cheshire countryside. The village of Shocklach has a church which stands completely on its own overlooking the River Dec. It is clearly very old indeed, and there are the remains of an ancient cross just outside. The church is dedicated to a St Edith. Unfortunately there are two St Ediths; but the later one, Edith of Wilton, who died in 984, has no obvious connection with the area. The earlier one, known as Edith of Polesworth or Tamworth, was the sister of King Aethelstan. In 925 she married Sihtric Sytriggsson, Viking King of Dublin and York. The marriage took place at Tamworth in Staffordshire, the political and ecclesiastical centre of north-western Mercia in whose sphere Shocklach lay. Her stepson was Olaf Sihtricsson, King of York and Dublin who was defeated at the Battle of Brunanburgh in 937. So

Evidence from outside Chester

So far this discussion has been limited to the walled area of the city, but Dodgson also reports a number of Norse names in the suburbs which extend the area of Scandinavian influence considerably. These are:

Weram Slacke 1582: 'a close to the south of the Boughton highway outside the Bars, probably on the slope down to the River Dee' = *slakki* 'small shallow valley';

Gorse Stacks = *stakkr* 'stack';

Land bounded by Queen Street, Foregate Street, Hoole Lane and Brook Street was known as **Arkeleswall** and **Herkin's Wellfield** = *Arnkell's well* (5:1:i:73);

Flookersbrook could be from *flokari*, 'one who catches flukes [fish]';

Across the River Dee in the southern suburb of Handbridge and its vicinity are:

Gorse Stacks in Handbridge Lane = *stakkr*;

Stack Field in St Bridget's extra-mural parish (east of Handbridge/south of river) = *stakkr*;

Edgar's Field was originally **Ketles Craft** = *Ketill's croft*;

Overleigh/Netherleigh may be from *hlidd* [Anglo-Saxon] or *hlidd*, both meaning a slope or hill;

Newbold (a lost name, across the river somewhere near Bottoms Lane) = *bol*, dwelling, homestead;

Grymesdiche Haye, also recorded as **Grymesdyche Garden**; possibly a field in Handbridge = *Grimr's ditch*;

Uluesdale in Claverton = *Ulfur's dale*.

What is sadly missing in this evidence is any sense of date. It would be easy to assume in looking for traces of the Scandinavians in Chester that all the place names are the product of a single influx of people over a distinct period, a generation or two. A much more plausible model is that the newcomers integrated into the local scene socially and maritally over many centuries, and as part of that process personal names (and perhaps other precious particles of Norse culture) survived through several generations beyond the point at which the language itself was lost. So, whereas the elements like *bol*, *stakkr*, *flokari* etc. imply that the place names containing them were given by Norse speakers, the personal names *Ketill*, *Ulfur*, etc., could have belonged to men who were in every way middle English but who came from families with Norse ancestry. To illustrate the point, a modern parallel can be made with the descendants of Polish refugees who came to Britain during the Second World War, now some sixty years ago. Although they are otherwise completely anglicised and may not even be able to speak the Polish language, they still proclaim their heritage with names such as Valdek and Kristina.

While we cannot bring the survival of Norse names in Chester so far into the Middle Ages as we can for the Wirral, there are hints that the Scandinavian population was preserving some part of its own cultural identity for many years beyond the Norman Conquest. In particular a grant of land adjoining St Olaves' church dated to 1230-4 mentions Hugo *Ulf* and Nicholas *Ulf*, and a witness John son of *Ulfkell*. Given our understanding of the main area of Scandinavian settlement in Chester, the location should come as no surprise.

If we now return to the tenth century when the Scandinavian enclave in Chester was being formed, how was the city functioning at this period? Militarily and politically it was a Mercian barrier to further Norse expansion from the Irish Sea, and a wedge between the Welsh and the northern Vikings based in York. But it was also an economic gateway for trade with the Viking world. Not just round the shores of the Irish Sea but north to the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland, the Faeroes, and on to Iceland; from the 980s there was also Greenland, and from 1000 Vinland—America. To bring home the connection between Chester, the Wirral and these more exotic outposts in the far north and west, it is worth pointing out that the solitary ring-headed pin found at L'Anse aux Meadows, the only certain Norse site in North America, is a type of dress fastener which is typically Hiberno-Norse. Several of these pins have been found in Chester and at Meols, raising the faint possibility that one of the first Europeans to set foot in the New World may have been from Cheshire.

It is difficult to establish the relationship between the settlement in the Wirral and the Scandinavian presence in Chester. There is every reason to believe that both groups were Hiberno-Norse in origin but we lack the evidence to say that they operated as one cultural community. Indeed the obvious acceptance by the Saxon authorities of the Scandinavian settlers in Chester, of whom some at least were clearly very wealthy and influential, might suggest to us that there ought to have been some distinction between them and their country cousins on the Wirral who had an unfortunate history of attacking the city. On the other hand, the existence of a number of stone carved crosses in Chester, the Wirral and Flintshire belonging to the Hiberno-Norse tradition and which has been called 'the Chester school' suggests a free interchange of craftsmanship and patronage throughout the region.⁷

The two areas of Scandinavian settlement which have been discussed so far are relatively well known, but slowly there are signs emerging that the Vikings can also be found in that part of Cheshire which lies to the south of Chester. Firstly it is necessary to mention a number of significant stray finds which have come up in recent years, although, as will be seen, they do not advance the argument for settlement. As in so many other areas of

on the slope between the old Roman south gate and the river frontage. One piece of the jigsaw is the existence of the tiny church of St Olaves in Lower Bridge Street, which was already in existence by 1119. The dedication could only have been made by a Scandinavian community because it celebrates Olaf Haraldsson, a typically bloodthirsty Viking who became King of Norway and who converted his country to Christianity at the point of the sword in the early years of the eleventh century. He was killed at the Battle of Stiklestad in Norway on 29 July 1030. Although Olaf was not canonised until 1164 there was already a St Olaf's in York by 1055, so Chester's church may be equally early. As well as St Olaves there was once another church with a Norse dedication, this time more clearly showing a connection with Ireland—St Brigit's, which stood near the Roman south gate. Another St Brigit's still exists at West Kirby on the Wirral, but the Chester church was demolished almost two centuries ago.

Excavations in the 1970s found the remains of a typical Scandinavian timber house dating to the tenth century on Lower Bridge Street. Inside it was a small stone mould used for making silver ingots, a typically Viking object. Confirmation comes from the type of stone from which it is made, for it originates from north-west Scotland, an area under Viking control at this period.³

Moving on to the documentary evidence, a number of place-names, many of them now lost, point to the southern part of Chester and its riverside as an area of Scandinavian settlement.⁴ Next to the relatively modern Newgate, built in 1934 through the south-eastern part of the City Walls, the small portal of the older Wolf Gate still survives. This is the earliest gate into this part of the city; the 'wolf' part is a corruption of *Ulfhildr*, a Norse woman's name. From the Wolf Gate the route down to the river is Souters' Lane, from *sutari* = shoemaker. The word could also be Saxon, but given its position a Norse derivation is more likely.

Lost names in the area are:

Clippe Gate (from *Klyppr*); it existed before Domesday; its location is unknown but was probably on the riverside.

Shippgate St: Ormerod quotes 'a way for a horse and a man that went to a gate in the walls of the said city, the which way was called Shippgate'. The description seems to make it clear that a road is being referred to, not a gate, so perhaps the name = *skipgata*.

Caple Gate; a postern gate opening onto the river east of Bridgegate (from *kapell* = a horse, nag); also **Caple Lane** leading to it.

So far we have looked at the evidence for Viking settlers in the southern quarter of the city, which might give the impression that they were kept separate from the rest of the population in some sort of ghetto. While there certainly seems to be a concentration of Viking occupation in this area, there are clues that the Saxon and Norse communities were intermixed in other parts of the city. Crook Street today leads off Watergate

Street, but actually the 'Crook' element of the name has moved; it used to be Crook Lane, which ran at right angles to the present street at its northern end. Despite appearances the 'Crook' part is not English, it is *Krokr*, a Norse personal name. Also in the northern part of the old Roman fortress a fine tenth-century Viking brooch in the Jellinge style was found in a ruined Roman building on Hunter Street. Further to the south Commonhall Street was called Normans Lane in 1295, which probably means 'the Norwegian's Lane'.

No mention of Chester at this period would be complete without mentioning the mint, which was at the peak of its production in the early tenth century; indeed during the reign of Aethelstan Chester's was the biggest mint in England, surpassing even London.⁵ The silver pennies it produced were largely used for trade with the Viking world, but interestingly many of the men who made them were Scandinavians too. We know this because Saxon coins bore on the reverse the name of the moneyer, the man who actually made them. Up to a quarter of the names on Chester coins of this period are Norse, e.g. 'Thurmod' = *Thormaddr*. One of the moneyers in the early eleventh century was *Krokr*, and it is possible that he was the person mentioned earlier who gave his name to Crook Street. The system was rather like a modern franchise, in that the moneyer paid the king 'up front' for the right to produce coins. Since these franchises were being given to Scandinavians in Chester, it follows that they must have been wealthy men; it also follows that they must have been socially acceptable to the Saxons amongst whom they lived and to the English government who commissioned them. It is not known where the coins were being made because the minting process was essentially domestic rather than industrial in scale, although the silver ingot mould from Lower Bridge Street might be a clue to the location of one of the mints.

The best-known find connecting the Vikings with Chester is the Castle Esplanade Hoard, one of the most important late Saxon coin hoards from Britain.⁶ It was found in 1950 only a few yards from the Grosvenor Museum. A small pot contained something like 500 silver pennies – the number is imprecise because the circumstances of their discovery make it is far from certain that all the coins in the hoard were recovered. There were also silver ingots and pieces of chopped up silver jewellery (*hacksilber*) which add up to a minimum value of 1300 pence – an enormous sum for the period. The way in which the jewellery was chopped up makes it certain that the hoard belonged to a Viking, presumably a trader. The date of deposition is somewhere around 970, the site just outside the Roman fortress walls. Another, smaller hoard of silver pennies was found at Pemberton's Parlour on the northern stretch of the walls; this hoard dates to about 980.

kings was that if things became too uncomfortable for them they just melted away—only to reappear somewhere else.

One of these recurring down-swings in Viking fortunes came in 902 when they were driven out of their own town of Dublin by the Irish. The Dublin Vikings scattered to wherever they could find a home. The Irish and Welsh annals tell us that one of them named Ingimund took his ships and followers to Anglesey. How short or long a period he stayed on the island is a matter for debate; the discovery of the site at Llanbedroch in recent years has given fresh impetus to looking for Viking settlements on Anglesey, and it is beginning to seem possible that the long-accepted impression that the Vikings had only a passing interest in the island is mistaken.

The story continues with Ingimund being driven out of Anglesey by a Welsh prince and having to approach Aethelfleda, ruler of the Mercian Saxons, for somewhere to settle; she then grants the north-western part of the Wirral to him and his followers. These events and the subsequent Hiberno-Norse settlement of the Wirral has been well documented, most accessibly in the books of Stephen Harding, although arguably the nature and extent of the settlement are less well understood. Meols may well have been the point of arrival for the original colonists, and subsequently provided a link with the other Norse communities around the Irish Sea. A disturbed Viking burial has already been identified amongst the material from Meols, which is currently being studied at Liverpool Museum prior to a definitive publication of the material from this important site.

Place names on the Wirral show that connections with Ireland and the Isle of Man were strong, as we would expect. One particular name, *Raby* 'the border village' gives a good indication that there was a formal limit to Scandinavian territory, and the existence of a *Thingvollr*— 'parliament field' at Thingwall shows that this was an independent self-governing community.

The settlement obviously flourished and was to survive with its own customs and character well into the Middle Ages. The most striking evidence for Norse cultural survival occurs on the southern margins of the Wirral, some distance outside what we believe was the original Scandinavian settlement area. Rental records housed in Chester Cathedral for the year 1398 give us the names of tenants in two parishes. These names are: Richard *Hondesson*, (which at first glance might pass as English), then Agnes and Johanne *Hondesdoghter* in Great Sutton, and then Mabilla *Raynaldesdoghter* in Childer Thornton. Here we have the old Viking way of naming children, still observed in Iceland today. Sons and daughters are named after their father's first name followed by *-son* or *-dottir*. Mabilla's father had a good Norse name too, *Ragnald*. These people were still using Norse names and the Norse way of forming names nearly five centuries after the settlement of the Wirral.

But there is evidence for the Vikings in other parts of west Cheshire too, and especially at the old Roman fortress at Chester which lies just a few miles south-east of the Wirral settlement. The site re-emerges from the Dark Ages in the year 893, when a Danish army overwintered in Chester (it is note-worthy that they were operating in greater numbers and in a rather better-organised manner than the western Vikings were capable of); the pursuing Saxons effectively starved them out, and the Danes moved off into Wales in the next spring. It is interesting to note that Chester is reported to have been deserted.

Only ten years after this date Ingimund's settlement took place. Soon after they were established in the Wirral—but exactly how soon we don't know—his men launched an attack on Chester. Without information about the strength and motivation of Ingimund's force it is difficult to judge whether this was an opportunistic raid in true Viking fashion or part of a larger scheme aimed at territorial expansion. What is significant is that by the time of their attack on Chester the city was well defended, and, as often happened when the Vikings attacked a defended site, they were unsuccessful.

We know that Aethelfleda of Mercia built a new Saxon *burgh* at Chester in 907; the easiest way to make sense of the reference to Chester being defended at the time of Ingimund's attack is to say that it came *after* the founding of the *burgh*, i.e. some five years after the initial settlement. It then becomes possible to offer another possible motive for Ingimund breaking his treaty with Aethelfleda—instead of making an unprovoked attack, he was forced to act by the establishment of the *burgh*. If he allowed it to remain, he was effectively caged in the Wirral peninsula with no hope of ever expanding to the south or to the east. The entry in the Irish Annals says that other Viking attacks followed the first; so were these acts of desperation, because the stakes were bigger than just the capture of Chester?

Within a very few years of the foundation of the *burgh* Chester had grown rapidly into a thriving trading port. If we can rely on the report that the city was deserted at the end of the previous century it follows that all the inhabitants must have come from elsewhere. What is difficult to understand, given the recent history between the English and Ingimund's people, is that a significant number of the new settlers were Norse; it is clearly impossible, then, for us to make any sweeping assumptions about the attitudes of Saxons and Vikings to each other. Given that Chester was a royal foundation, we can go even further and say that the Norse settlers were tolerated, if not encouraged, at the highest level. Some concrete evidence of this will be mentioned later.

Evidence from Chester

Archaeological and documentary evidence leads us to think that the Scandinavian population of Chester was concentrated in the south of the city,

there is a possible Viking connection between the dedication and the church itself.

Within the church, tucked away in a corner near the bell-tower, is a small carved stone, approximately 30cm (12in.) square. Although it is now inside the church it displays signs of weathering, so it has been brought from elsewhere at some time. It depicts a single rider on a horse; he leans slightly backwards, and carries a shield and perhaps a spear. He also appears to be wearing a conical hat. The horse has its head lowered. There is no question that only a single man on a single horse is being represented, but the horse clearly has more than four legs. The exact number is open to interpretation because the detailing on the stone is not good, and its position in the church makes it difficult to apply artificial lighting in order to see it more clearly. At a minimum the horse appears to have two front legs and four back legs; the front two are exceptionally thick, and if there had once been a medial line on each of them it could easily have weathered away. If this were so then the horse would once have had four front legs and four back legs. Only one horse in the world was so fast that it needed eight legs – Sleipnir, the foal born of Svadilfari and Loki, the personal mount of Odin. So is this a representation of Odin, greatest of the pagan gods, inside a Christian church?

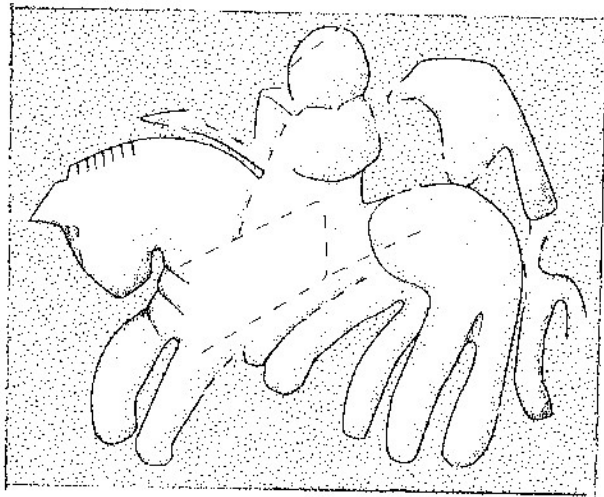


Illustration 1 – The Shocklach horseman

In the process of creating this sketch it became apparent that there appears to be something on the horse's rump—could this be a bird: in other words, Odin's Raven? (Original drawing by Cheryl Quinn of Chester Archaeology).

It has already been mentioned that the stone is weathered, and that there are the remains of a cross outside the church. What is left of the cross is

just a stump; it has been thoroughly 'tidied up', presumably by the Victorians. Might the carving once have been part of the original ancient cross which once stood outside—combining Christian and pagan imagery as so often occurs on the crosses of the north of England and particularly the Isle of Man during the Norse period? If we have the right St Edith for the dedication, then there is a possibility that we have some sort of Scandinavian presence at Shocklach. The small number of Norse field names in the vicinity may be part of the same picture.

The purpose of this paper has been to suggest that the Viking settlement of west Cheshire, with its origins almost certainly in Ireland, should not be seen as confined in time to the tenth century, nor limited in space to the Wirral and Chester. It has been written in the hope that it will prompt others to look for the evidence which will either support or refute the theory.

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