

As the world's largest longship arrives in Merseyside DEBBIE JOHNSON investigates our Nordic heritage

THE journey of the 115-foot long Draken Harald Harfagre has been tumultuous – losing its mast when a huge wave knocked it overboard and forced the vessel to dock at the Shetland Isles.

It arrived in Wallasey after a challenging journey from Norway.

And Merseyside's own Viking past is no less exciting – leaving a rich legacy that is still seen around the region today.

The Vikings were expelled from Dublin in AD 902, and, initially led by Norwegian Viking Ingimund, they made their way to the Wirral.

The Norsemen and the Danes would have landed their own boats (without the back-up motor that the Draken Harald Harfagre is blessed with!) along the north Wirral coastline, probably around what is now the lighthouse at Lingham, Hoylake, Meols and West Kirby.

Although there were Viking raids in Chester, they appear to have settled peacefully in Merseyside – spreading throughout the area, and meeting regularly at Thingwall to discuss law and policy.

Although the traditional image of the Viking raider is a justifiably terrifying one, reflected by the recent History Channel series *The Vikings*, they were also farmers, fishermen and traders – and gave us many of the place names we know today, such as Croxtheth, Toxteth, Kirkdale, Aigburth, Aintree, Crosby, Heswall, Thingwall, Tranmere, West Derby and Childwall.

Professor Steve Harding, Wallasey-born Viking expert who is based at the University of Nottingham, has extensively researched the genetic legacy of the Vikings in the area. Focusing on the Wirral and West Lancashire, and backed up by archaeology and place name clues, his team tested old established families for their ancestry – with amazing results. They found that around 50% of the people they tested had Norse roots.

There have also been treasure hoards and weaponry found in the area, and there is compelling evidence that one of the most important battles of the era – the Battle of Brunanburh in 937 – actually took place in what we now know as Bromborough.

Even football team Tranmere Rovers has Viking heritage, and its own supporters' club in Norway!

Professor Harding, who has two new books coming out soon – *Viking Tranmere* and *In Search of Vikings in North-West England* – is passionate about the role the Vikings played in the region.

He says: "Merseyside is steeped with Viking tradition and the whole area is stuffed full of Viking place names on both sides of the Mersey – even our sporting venues can't escape from them. Aintree is from Old Norse 'ein-tre' meaning one tree,



■ Steve Harding at one of the four Thingwall signs he instigated

Have we all got a bit of Viking in us?

Tranmere is from Old Norse 'trani-melr' – cranebirds or herons at a sandbank; and outside Anfield Stadium we find Walton Breck Road – Breck is from 'brekka' – slope on a hillside.

"The area has some impressive archaeology, particularly on Wirral, including what appears to be weaponry from a Viking burial at Meols, two Viking hogback tombstones (at West Kirby and Bidston), some fantastic cross fragments at Neston (including a replica reconstruction showing the touching image of a Viking couple embracing) and evidence

of two Viking houses at Irby and Lingham/Moreton."

We also have our own genuine Viking saga – the Story of Ingimund, the man who led the first settlements in AD902.

Professor Harding adds: "Many people have heard of Tynwald in the Isle of Man where the Vikings had their 'Thing' or Assembly, but we have two on Merseyside – Thingwall on Wirral and Thingwall Hall near Ken Dodd's old jam butty mines at Knotty Ash, showing just how substantial the Viking presence here once was.

"And our DNA survey showed

that the Vikings are still here – with up to 50% of the DNA of men from Wirral and West Lancashire being Scandinavian in origin. I think it's a heritage that we can be truly proud of."

The Draken Harald Harfagre is at Wallasey Docks until August 3, where it will be repaired before her return voyage. You can also join the 18-mile St Olav's Day walk, which starts in West Kirby on July 28 and finishes in Chester the next day, marking our Viking heritage.

To see Professor Harding's Viking Research, go to <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/>

Who do you think you are?

WHO were your ancestors?

Do you think that you could be a descendant of the Vikings? Or do you have an interesting family history that has often left you wondering about your genetic make-up? Is there an old family story that locates your roots back to another continent? We have teamed up with Roots for Real ([http://](http://www.rootsforreal.com/)

www.rootsforreal.com/) and leading geneticist Dr Peter Forster to offer three ECHO readers the chance to find out more about their heritage. Using a simple home test, they will then analyse the results and provide a genetic profile – along with a totally individual map, showing where in the world you have matches, to

estimate the location of your ancestral origins.

To enter, write and tell us your story – and why you would like to know more about your ancestry – including your name, address and daytime phone number, by July 29 to: Vikings, c/o Janet Tansley, Liverpool Echo, PO Box 48, Old Hall Street, Liverpool L69 3EB.