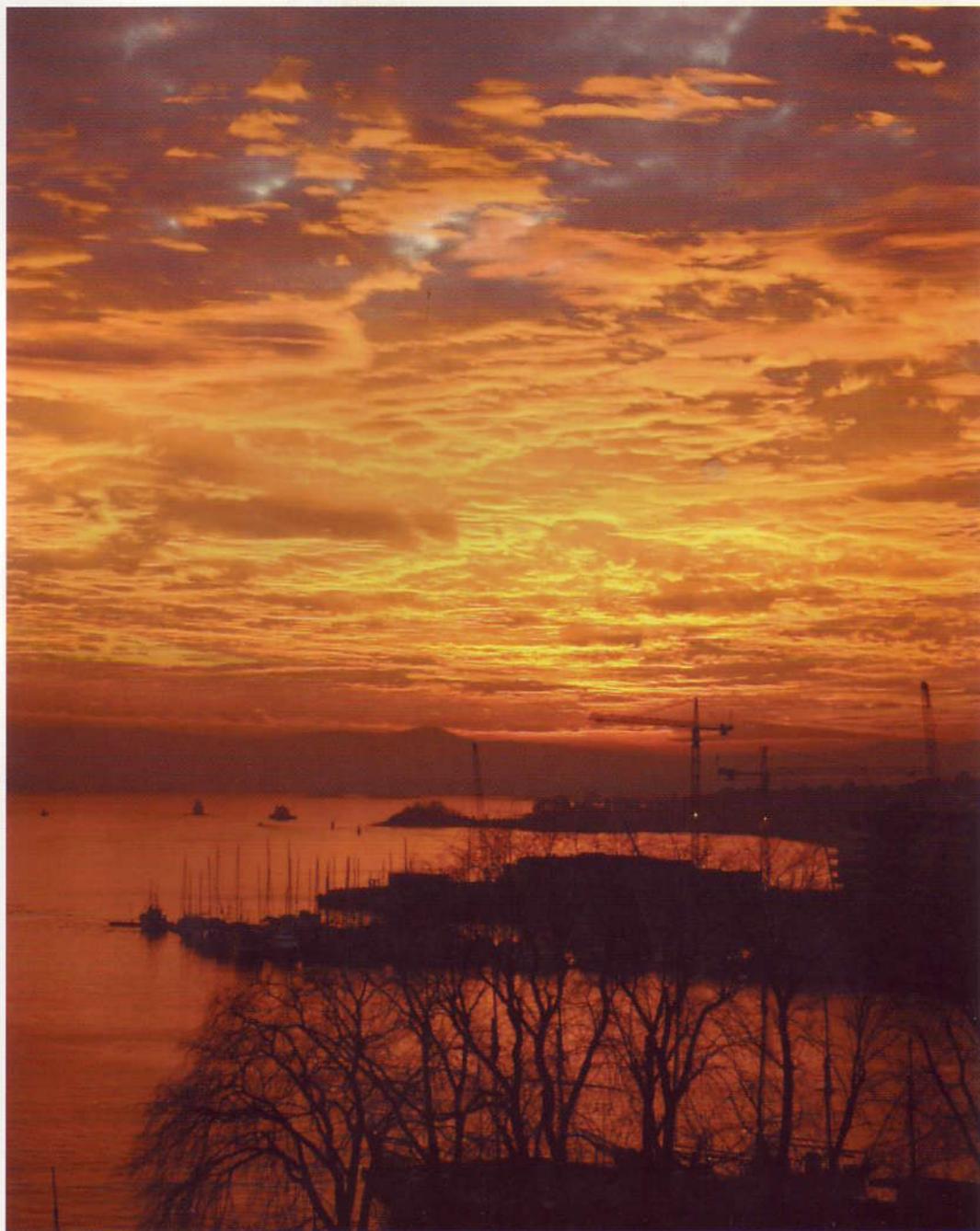


THE NORSEMAN

No. 1 – 2009

“Look to Norway”

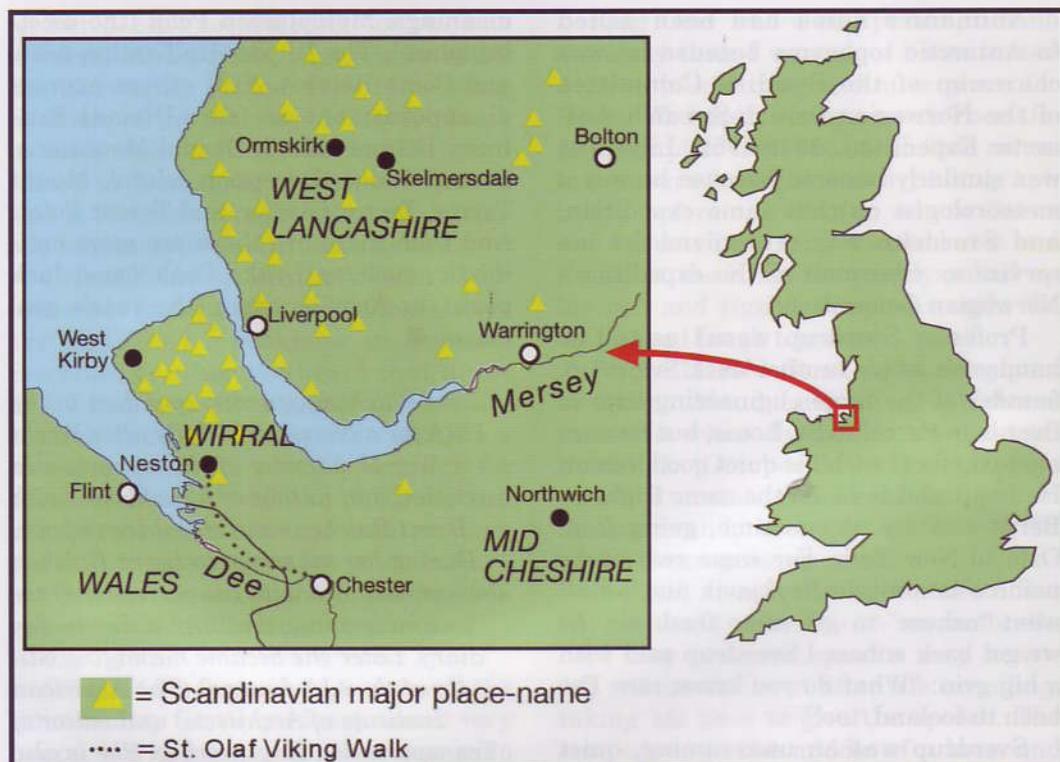
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St. Olav's Viking Walk



MAP COURTESY OF PROFESSOR MARK JOBLING AND JOHN HARDING

Map of part of north-west England showing Wirral and Chester in relation to other places in the area. West Kirby and Neston are also marked

An annual walk—in which readers of *The Norseman* may participate—has been established in northwest England to commemorate both the Viking heritage of the area and the life of Norway's patron saint.

The Wirral is a peninsula reaching out into the Irish Sea. Its western shore looks across the River Dee towards Wales, while to the northwest lie the River Mersey and Liverpool. Over a

thousand years ago Wirral became home to a large colony of Norse refugees who had been expelled from Ireland. As part of a treaty they made with the English Queen Aethelflaed in A.D. 902, the settlers had to stay within a defined boundary and the English built fortifications at Brunanburh (the old name for Bromborough) and at Chester towards the south of the peninsula to keep them in check. The Vikings had their own parliament, or "Thing," at Thingwall, their own sea-

port at Melr or Meols on the northern shore, and their own leaders. The first of these, according to ancient Irish annals and Welsh records, was Ingimund.

Soon after the Wirral settlement had been established, the Vikings also formed a thriving community in the southern part of Chester, where they played a major part in creating one of the most successful trading towns in England through the tenth and into the eleventh centuries. They also built a church dedicated to St. Olav, the Norwegian warrior and saint, in Lower Bridge Street. A church is known to have stood here since at least the twelfth century, and it is possible that some parts of the present building may date back to the original. A recent genetic survey has shown that a substantial proportion of the DNA of the old population of Wirral and neighboring West Lancashire appears to have been passed down from these Norsemen. Local people are now very aware and proud of this heritage: St. Olav has provided a way for them and the many visitors who come to the area, to the beautiful Wirral peninsula and to the historic city of Chester, to celebrate this Nordic heritage.

King Olav Haraldsson (995-1030) is credited with converting Norway to Christianity. He was a Viking in his younger years, but converted to Christianity after being exposed to it during his time abroad, particularly in France and England. After being crowned King of Norway he set about Christianizing the Norwegians. He died in battle for his faith and was sanctified as a martyr. The shrine of St. Olav in Nidaros



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS

The present St. Olave's Church in Chester. This photograph was taken in 2002. Sadly, owing to structural problems, the base wall is currently supported by girders. The road parallel to the church is "St. Olave's Street"

Cathedral, Trondheim, became the major destination for pilgrimages in the Nordic countries. After Olav was designated a saint in August 1031, his cult spread like wildfire throughout the Nordic countries, to the British Isles and the Hanseatic towns along the Baltic, and also found adherents in the Netherlands, Normandy, and as far away as Spain, Russia and Constantinople. The oldest surviving picture of Olav was painted on a column in the Church of the Nativity in Bethle-

St. Olav's Viking Walk



PHOTO: HARRY T. CLEVEN

Street scene from beautiful Chester. The city, famous for its half-timbered houses from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, still has its ancient city walls, some of which date back to Roman times

hem. The maritime links to the countries around the North Sea were strong. Thus some pilgrims came by ship to Nidaros from Ireland and England, the Isle of Man, Scotland, the Faeroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland. Around 1075 the learned scholar Adam of Bremen wrote:

The Norwegians' capital is *civitas Trondemnis*, the city of Trondheim, which is now adorned with churches and visited by a great many people. In this city rests the body of

the very holy King and Martyr Olav. At his grave, the Lord even today works wondrous miracles, so that the many who hope to be helped by the good deed of this holy martyr flock there a *longinquis regionibus*, from distant lands.

There are many churches dedicated to St. Olav throughout northern Europe, including one at Thingvellir in Iceland. Seventeen remain in Norway and sixteen

Facing page: Sculpture of St. Olaf on the façade of Nidaros Cathedral, Trondheim

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS





PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS

Above, Pastor Kjell Skartseterhagen conducting the service at St. Olave's Church, 2002. Below, At the Church of St. Mary and St. Helen, Neston, Wirral. Organizers Steve Harding and Dan Robinson are far left and second left. Photo from 2008

in the British Isles including York, Kirkwall on the Orkneys, Waterford in Ireland and four in London. Throughout the old Viking lands the festival of St. Olav (*Olsok*) is still celebrated on the days nearest the anniversary of his death on July 29, 1030.

The main Olsok Festival in Trondheim is celebrated well into August and includes pilgrimages along the old pilgrim routes to Trondheim.

In August of 2002, the St. Olav pilgrim chaplain from Trondheim, Kjell Skartseterhagen, visited the





PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS

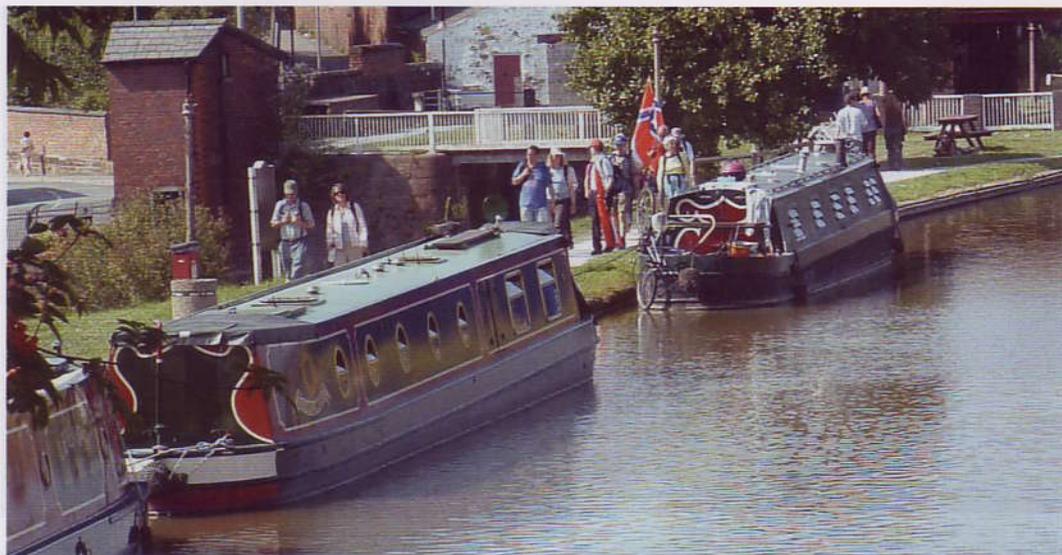
Norwegian Consul of Liverpool Peter Copland and his dog Morgan lead the way (2008)

area to celebrate the 1100th anniversary of the arrival of the Norsemen in Wirral, and attended a special conference on the Viking settlement of the area held in Chester's Grosvenor Museum. Kjell then led a service in Norwegian and English at St Olave's Church. The event was attended by many local dignitaries including no fewer than three mayors from local districts which share a Viking ancestry. Since that time we have struggled to find another mechanism to keep our area's Norse heritage in the public eye—until, that is, the idea of an annual St. Olav Viking Heritage walk or “mini-pilgrimage” came up, to start from a suitable point in Wirral and finish at St. Olave's in Chester, and to be held on a Saturday as close as possible to the day of St. Olaf, July 29.

After much deliberation and some

energetic trials on the ground it was decided to start the walk at the Church of St. Mary and St. Helen at Neston in Wirral. This spot was considered appropriate for a number of reasons. For one thing, Neston—a former seaport on the Dee Estuary has an old Norse name, “ness-tun,” meaning the settlement at a promontory; for another, Helen is the saint associated with Norse settlers who came to Wirral from Ireland; also, the church houses some outstanding fragments of Norse ring-headed crosses, including a remarkable piece of what appears to be a Viking couple embracing each other. Most important, Neston to Chester appeared to be a manageable distance.

Initially, we had thought of walking the entire length of the peninsula beginning at West Kirby (old Norse *vestri*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS

Above, the Pilgrims enter Chester at the canal. Facing page, final destination, St. Olave's Church

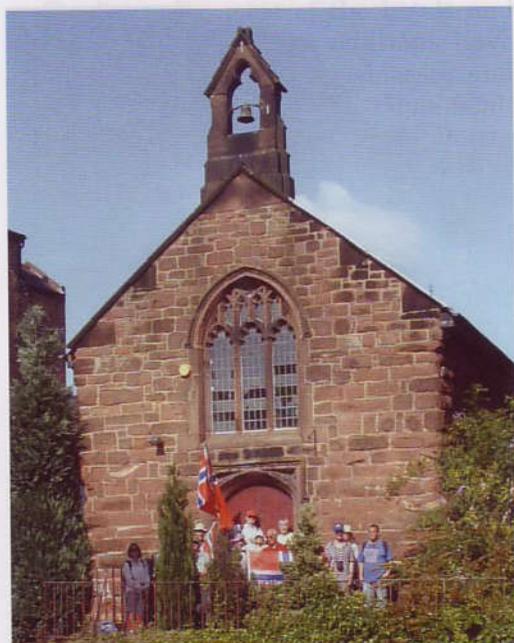
kirkjubyr—the western village of the church), where there is another church founded by the Norse settlers who came across from Ireland—St. Bridget's, with its famous hogback tombstone. Such a long walk was considered to be too far for most of our participants. However, St. Bridget's Day is observed on February 1—possibly an excuse for another pilgrimage?

Thus, the first pilot walk took place on July 26, 2008, starting at Neston and finishing at Chester. Nearly 20 walkers/pilgrims made the trip, including the Norwegian Consul of Liverpool and his dog Morgan, on a gloriously sunny day.

A second walk is scheduled to be held on July 25, 2009. The Wirral to Chester Olsok walk/pilgrimage is approximately

20 kilometers in length, although it is possible for walkers to do only part of the walk if they wish. The route cuts through the beautiful Wirral countryside, crossing the border into Wales and then back again into England as we approach the historic city of Chester, where the route takes us along the canal and around the old city walls, passing the ruins of the Roman amphitheater and ending at St. Olave's in the old Viking sector of the city.

Those who would like more information, or who wish to take part, should contact Steve Harding at Steve.harding@nottingham.ac.uk. A link to the website for the walk can be found on <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~sczsteve> and some background information about



the region's Norse heritage can also be found there, along with links to various publications. Everyone is most welcome to join us on our next pilgrimage. It should be a most rewarding experience. As one highly experienced St. Olav pilgrim walker, Stein Thue of Trondheim municipality, editor of *The Pilgrim Way to Trondheim* (Tapir Akademisk Forlag 2008), has written:

Going on a pilgrimage brings people together in a special way. The pilgrim will find recreation and peace of mind in nature. Historical and cultural interests will be revitalized.

This is certainly true of the Wirral-Chester St. Olav's Viking walk. ■

Steve Harding is a Professor of Biology at the University of Nottingham. He comes from two old Wirral families and is author of the popular books Viking Mersey and Ingimund's Saga: Norwegian Wirral, as well as a number of scholarly publications on the subject and runs a web site <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~sczsteve>. Dan Robinson is retired Keeper of Archaeology at the Grosvenor Museum in Chester with an expertise in the Roman and Viking periods: the Grosvenor Museum has several fascinating Viking exhibits including a hoard of treasure found nearby at Huxley. The authors thank Stein Thue for his help in producing this article.

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