

Stephen Harding's

VIKINGS

PART ONE

Can you tell us a little bit about your background, and how you became involved in researching Wirral's Viking history?

I was born and brought up in Wirral, and come from two old Wirral families: the Hardings and Whartons. My Mum's side, from Moreton, Meols and Hoylake, go right back to the Stanleys of the 14th century – Master Foresters/Knights of the Garter, of Storeton Hall.

In the 1960s, I went to school at Overchurch, Liscard and Wallasey Grammar – but we learnt nothing about the Vikings other than that they were “baddies” who Alfred the Great rescued us from! I had an aunt who lived in one of those big houses near the Bassett Hound pub at Thingwall, Auntie Millie, who was also Grandmother to well-known local author Kevin Sampson. Even then, when we used to visit as youngsters, there was a special feel about the place – confirmed much later when I learnt about the Viking connection.

I was lucky enough to get a place at Oxford to study Physics. One day, I was in my college library (this was way back in 1976 when I was 20) revising for final exams, but desperate for some relief from all these equations (this was pre-Brian Cox: Physics then was pretty tough going...), and I spotted a new book, *Scandinavian England* by F.T. Wainwright, on a nearby shelf. Randomly, I looked at it, and was astonished to find that nearly half the book seemed to be about Wirral and the escapades of a Norse leader, Ingimund, who settled there. And it gave a long list of all the place names in Wirral with Scandinavian roots – loads of them, including Thingwall (which means “Assembly field”, the place of Assembly or Parliament) and Tranmere, which means the sandbank (melr) with the cranes – not the sort found at Cammel Lairds, but the birds – or herons (trani, or plural trana). As I have been a huge

Forty generations ago, Wirral was home to a thriving Viking population, with its own language and customs, parliament, and even its own seaport. Today, as the only place on mainland Britain with documented evidence of Norwegian Viking settlers, Wirral has a unique heritage to be proud of, as Wirral-born expert **Professor Stephen Harding** explained to *Waiting*.

See page 37 for our special pull-out featuring Stephen's Viking Trail.



Steve with Tranmere scarf by his Thingwall sign “My Auntie Millie would be proud!”

Tranmere Rovers fan since the age of five, this was red rag to a bull, and I have been fascinated by Wirral and the North West's Viking history ever since.

Although my subsequent career has been in Science (Physics, Biochemistry and Genetics), research into Vikings has now become very interdisciplinary, although Archaeology and History are still the lead disciplines. Scientists like me can now make an important contribution (radar, isotope analysis, polymer science, DNA, etc.), so it's great to have been able to be involved. My main research at the moment is the Saving Oseberg project, working with conservators and fellow scientists at the Viking Ship Museum in replacing heavily disintegrated and decayed wood with specially tailored natural polymers. And I am about to take up a joint appointment with the University of Oslo.

Why should the people of Wirral be excited by the area's links to the Vikings?

Liverpool has The Beatles, Chester has the Romans... but we have the Vikings, and in a big way! Two decades ago few people on Wirral knew about our great Viking heritage, in terms of the historical records, place names, archaeology, and even our language. Nowadays, most people are at least partially aware, and indeed it's something we can be really proud of. And remnants and reminders from this great age are popping up all the time. Recently, the foundations of two

Viking houses have been discovered at Irby and at Lingham (both Viking names, by the way!); and a mini-Viking hogback tombstone appeared in someone's back garden in Bidston. We don't know what will pop up next! And with all the Viking DNA which seems to be in people from old Wirral families, they are still here with us in many ways.

How did the Vikings end up on the Wirral peninsula? How long did they remain in the area, and why did they eventually leave?

Cherchez la femme: it goes back to a woman, of course – and, believe it or not, a Harding woman! In the 9th century, Norway consisted of a lot of smaller ‘mini-kingdoms’. A young king of one such mini-kingdom took a fancy to a young woman in another, who said that only a king of all of Norway would be fit enough to marry her. This was Gyda, a “Harding” (from the Hardanger area of Norway).

The young king was Harald Hårfagre (meaning literally “hair-beautiful”) who rose to the challenge, united Norway and gave everyone a choice to join him or clear off. It seems many chose the latter, and this became one of the main drivers behind the great migrations from Norway.

The Scandinavian Sagas tell us of how a great many peoples came across to the Scottish Isles (settling in the Orkneys, Shetlands and Hebrides), then down the Irish Sea – settling in the Isle of Man and then establishing Dublin as their main base in the Irish Sea region.

Then ancient Irish Chronicles tell us of how in the year AD902 there was a huge battle between the Irish and the Norsemen, and how the Vikings were then driven from Ireland. Led by their leader, Ingimund, they tried to settle in Anglesey but got driven out of there too. And then, after

some deal with the Queen of the Mercian English, Aethelflaed (daughter of Alfred the Great), these Vikings were allowed to settle in Wirral.

We are not sure why. Maybe some money/treasure changed hands; maybe there was even some romance involved; we don't know. But the deal was they settled peacefully and did not attack Chester. >





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They settled, then, in the northern end of the peninsula, with their southern boundary being marked by Raby (a Viking name meaning "boundary settlement") and Thingwall at the centre; Meols (yet another Viking name, meaning "sandbanks") was their main seaport. The area became an autonomous, Viking mini-state with its own language, Assembly and leader.

From the genetic evidence (which points to up to 50% of the DNA of the old Wirral population being Scandinavian in origin), it appeared the Vikings stayed put, although any autonomy they had would have been removed by the time of the Norman conquest in 1066 - and the re-allocation of land ownership to Norman barons.

Their influence remained strong through the centuries that followed, particularly from the dialect. For instance, there's the persistence of certain words in local field and place names, like *carr* (marsh), *holm* (dry area in a marsh), *rake* (lane), *slack* (cut-through), *breck* (slope on a hillside), *intake* (enclosure for animals), *arrowe* (pastureland away from the farmhouse), *heskeths* (race track for horses), and *skerry* (rocks).

There's also rental records showing people with surnames such as Hondesson, Hondesdoughter and Raynaldesdoughter - meaning the "son" and "daughter of Hondes, Raynald" etc. (which is the Viking way of naming women, as still used in modern Iceland).

Also we can look to literature, like the famous 14th century poem 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', where much of the action takes place in Wirral. In fact this is a poem which is strongly associated with Knight of the Garter, Sir John Stanley of Storeton Hall (Storeton - "the large farmstead"), who is believed to have been the patron of the unknown poet (or even have been the poet himself!). What is amazing about this poem is it contains a large number of dialect words of Scandinavian origin and reflects what sort of language would have been spoken in the area even 300-400 years after the Viking Age had finished. So, yes, they haven't really gone away.

Why do you think there is such interest in the UK generally concerning the Vikings compared to other historical peoples? And given Wirral's significance, do you think enough is being done to promote this history locally?

The Victorians - those great Romantics - were the ones who got us all interested in the Vikings. And Wirral was no exception, with the legend of Thor's stone at Thurstaston (Thurstaston is a Viking name but nothing to do with Thor by the way!). And there was even a "Canute chair" constructed in the early 19th century at Leasowe Castle to commemorate the famous - and unsuccessful - event where the King commanded the sea back. (My Mum was brought up next to Moreton Shore and, like all the other places there, it used to flood regularly, so you can see how the legend on Wirral could have spread.)

Today, everyone is impressed with the Viking's great skills as craftspeople, boatbuilders and seafarers, but it is their spirit of bravado and adventure which has really captured people's imagination. In terms of promoting this locally, things take time to sink in, but I think, at last, the Council is promoting things locally. They have worked with us, for example, with the four Thingwall "dual-language" signposts and the Viking information boards at the Bassett Hound in Thingwall (and that wonderful mural inside the pub) - and another Viking board at Meols Park.

But, yes, there is a lot more to be done, although we respect the fact that public money is not so readily available to fund projects - that's why we were so delighted that United Utilities agreed to pay for all the Thingwall signs. We are also working with Tranmere Rovers in the Community to help promote our great Viking Heritage, so, yes, things are starting to move now. And now, with *Waiting Magazine*, the Viking Trail! 

Read Part Two of Stephen's interview in our next issue. The Viking Trail can be found over the page.



To read more of Stephen's research, and to purchase one of his many books, visit www.waitingmagazine.co.uk/vikings.