

# Stephen Harding's

# VIKINGS



PART  
TWO



Stephen in Thingwall

**The Vikings had a reputation for their violent and unruly behaviour, yet we understand that this is not a completely accurate reflection when it comes to their time on Wirral. Can you tell us a little more about that?**

Well, according to ancient Irish Chronicles, the condition of the Vikings settling on the Wirral (in a deal struck with the Queen of the Mercian English, Aethelflaed – daughter of Alfred the Great), was they did this peacefully, and we have good evidence that for the first few years at least this was the case. Evidence suggests that they settled here as farmers (from the 'arrowe' place names) and fishermen. Besides Arrowe Park, there are a lot of field names in the 19th century tythe maps with 'arrowe'

Forty generations ago, Wirral was home to a thriving Viking population, with its own language and customs – and its own seaport in the form of Meols! Today, as the only place on mainland Britain with documented evidence of Norwegian Viking settlers, Wirral has a unique heritage to be proud, as Wirral-born expert **Professor Stephen Harding** explains, in the second part of his interview with *Waiting* – this time focusing on stereotypes, stolen boats, hidden treasures ... and Tranmere Rovers!

in – this has nothing to do with Robin Hood but comes from the terms erg or aergi, which means 'pastureland away from the farmhouse'. It comes from a type of farming (still used in Norway) called transhumance, where, during the summer, the cattle graze on fields away from the farmhouse, preserving the fields nearby for winter fodder. Seems pretty peaceful!

Unfortunately, five years in from the first settlements, the Irish Chronicles tell us that the Vikings became unhappy (probably through overcrowding and the constant flooding of the northern end of the peninsula) and that their leader Ingimund held an emergency meeting of the Norse and Danish chiefs, planning an attack on Chester to try and secure more room. This meeting probably took place at the Thing (assembly field) at Cross Hill, Thingwall. The Chronicles tell us of the attacks and the amazing measures by the English to repel the Vikings – and the equally amazing



countermeasures used... But we are not told the final result.

We do know eventually the Vikings became established in the southern end of the city, centred around St. Olave's Church. St. Olav, the 'Christian Viking', is the patron saint of Norway, and on or around his day (29th July) the Norwegians have a major pilgrimage to his shrine at Trondheim. For the last nine years, we have been having a mini-pilgrimage (20 miles split over 2 days) from St. Bridget's West Kirby to St. Olave's. Anyone wanting to join next year's event, please get in touch!

### **Do you have a favourite story about Wirral's Vikings, either based on factual information or local legend?**

After the Vikings established themselves on Wirral, and starting thinking about expanding (the Chester attacks are one example), there is a story (I'm afraid I cannot vouch for its authenticity lasting back any more than 15 years!) that they looked across the Mersey and thought about settling over there too. So they sent an exploratory party across on a boat; it moored up alongside what is now the Pier Head. They went off and when they came back, their boat had gone - someone had nicked it! Although they got back across the Mersey somehow they weren't impressed. After they had calmed down, they went over again... but this time they anchored the boat firmly down. They went off, and when they came back, sure enough the boat was there... but the oars had gone!

### **There are a number of artefacts and clues relating to the Vikings dotted around Wirral. What are some of the best examples of these?**

I've mentioned (last issue) the two remains of Viking houses that have been found. The Irby one is particularly interesting in that the archaeologists from Liverpool Museum originally thought they'd found the remains of a Roman house - until they noticed the foundations were elliptical or boat shaped: a trademark feature of the Vikings. So what they had in fact found was a Viking house with Roman pottery in it! When they found the second house in Lingham/ Moreton (down, appropriately, Digg Lane...) there was no such problem.

In fact Wirral is blessed with a whole range of Viking artefacts, including the hogback tombstone at West Kirby - another Viking name: the 'West Village of the Church' (to distinguish it from Kirkby - the old name for Wallasey Village). The Church referred to here is St. Bridget's, founded by the Vikings.



Another Viking hogback is at Bidston, and there are Viking or 'hiberno-Norse' crosses at Woodchurch and Bromborough, plus fragments of at least three Viking crosses at St. Mary & St. Helen's church at Neston. These fragments (presumably they had been smashed up at the Reformation or during Cromwell's period) are absolutely fascinating, and include the image of a priest (remarkably like the image of a pilgrim at the Stave Church at Urnes in Norway) and the touching image of a Viking couple embracing. The cross with this image, the 'Viking Lady' cross, has been reconstructed using laser technologies and painted up and displayed - it really is fantastic.

But there have been many other Viking age discoveries, such as ring-pins and an axe head, a bent spearhead and a shield boss (centre piece from a shield), which may have marked a Viking burial, discovered off the coast at Meols at a very low tide. Finds seem to be cropping up regularly: a special mention for the metal detector enthusiasts who do a great job working with the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

### **Is there anything more to learn about Wirral's Vikings? Is there anything in particular you would like to see discovered?**

The great prize would be to discover a Viking boat or ship off the coast of Meols, the old seaport. Underneath the coastline at Meols is blue clay which would preserve any buried wood - the same sort of clay in which the famous Viking ships in Norway were discovered.

There is, of course, the ancient boat still buried under the Railway Inn at Meols, which we 'rediscovered' nine years ago using ground penetrating radar (working with the police force's top expert). We still have no idea though exactly how old that is, other than it is very old, and it would cost millions to excavate. What we can - and indeed are now planning to - do is get a small >

sample of wood and have it dated (probably using my contacts at Oslo) using 'carbon-14' and related methodologies.

Although the boat is clinker (overlapping planks) – a style coming from Scandinavia and which is a feature of all Viking shipping – ours appears to have a more rounded end, whereas classic Viking vessels tend to be tapered: it may be as late as the 12th/13th centuries and of a style special to the region. The end of the Viking Age in the Irish Sea region is considered to be the Battle of Largs (1263). If the boat is dated earlier than that I will be very happy! Maybe there are others waiting to be found out there somewhere in the blue clays of Meols.

**One of your other big loves is Tranmere Rovers, but which came first, your love of the Vikings or your love of TRFC?! And can you tell us a little about the connections between the two?**

Since the age of five, when my grandparents took me to Prenton Park, I've always been a huge Tranmere supporter. I became a regular on the 77 bus from Overchurch – then, when we moved, the 11 bus from Liscard; as a youngster, I even went to their reserve games. Now, half a century on, two of my lads are also big Tranmere supporters and we have 'long-distance' season tickets, and we sit in the Johnny King stand around the place I used to stand with my Grandad in the 1960's when my hero was George Yardley.

As I said last issue, it was unbelievable when I realised the Viking link with Tranmere as a place name; it was one of those moments in life that you never forget. At every opportunity I would tell everyone that Tranmere is unique in being the only team in the Football League with a Norwegian Viking name. You have also Derby, Grimsby and Scunthorpe but these are Danish in origin. So what happened? We got relegated out of the League, but hopefully we'll be back soon: the club gets fantastic support in the National Conference (something like 5500 average last season, easily more than most teams in Leagues One and Two, and even more than one of the teams that were promoted into the Championship).

We have a growing supporters club in Norway, but what is really interesting is that the official LFC supporters club in Norway – with 30,000 signed-up members – have shown a great interest in their lille-brør ("little brother"). I think that a lot of them, when they come over to watch Liverpool, will come to our games too if the timings of the

games are right. I'm a good friend of their Chairman, Thomas Larsen Bergheim; and I recently wrote a book in Norwegian about Liverpool and Wirral's connections with Norway with Stig Vaagan, another LFC reds fan, so all this helps the cause. There are Tranmeres (or "Tranmaels") in Norway, and Norway's most famous politician was Martin Tranmael. Every reason why all Norwegians should support Tranmere! Maybe we can one day attract a wealthy Scandinavian to invest – we still wait...



**Finally, you've published a number of books about the Vikings. Do you have anything new in the pipeline that you can tell us about?**


The brand new 3rd edition of *Ingimund's Saga: Viking Wirral* became available after the Hakon Hakonsson lecture at the Largs Viking Festival in September. This lecture series was founded by the late, great Magnus Magnusson, who wrote the foreword for the 1st two editions of *Ingimund*, and the new edition has a short tribute to him. The new edition includes the DNA material (mentioned last issue) and the latest on the Battle of Brunanburh. The first two editions sold thousands, so fingers crossed about this one! It's also just gone out to all schools on Wirral, to be used for Key Stage 2/3 in conjunction with the 'Vikings in Wirral Schools' website

–visit [www.wirral-education.org.uk](http://www.wirral-education.org.uk).

There's also *Viking Tranmere: Scandinavian Tranmere and Wirral*, produced with Tranmere Rovers in the Community (available online and through the club shop), *Viking DNA: The Wirral and West Lancashire Project* (with Turi King – of Richard III fame), *Viking Mersey and Wirral and its Viking Heritage* (a scholarly text! – with colleagues Judith Jesch and Paul Cavill), which have all recently been reprinted. Finally there is *In Search of Vikings* – a volume I edited with Dr. David Griffiths (from Heswall, now Reader in Archaeology at Oxford University) and Liz Royles (from Meols, now at the Grosvenor Museum, Chester). ■■■



**Stephen's Viking Trail from our last issue can still be found in our digital edition – see our website.**

 Stephen's books are available from local bookshops, or can be purchased online via links at [www.waitingmagazine.co.uk/vikings](http://www.waitingmagazine.co.uk/vikings).