

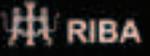
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Astrid Kähler is a Norwegian freelance writer who contributes to British and Norwegian magazines and newspapers. She tells *Heswall Magazine* about a yearly walk celebrating St Olav's death and ensuing sainthood which goes through beautiful Wirral-Norse landscape towards Chester.



Church and St Olave Street

What is special about the small, quite insignificant-looking building on the corner of Lower Bridge and St Olave streets in Chester? Bearing, but not showing the name of the patron saint of Norway, St Olav, who took on the kingship of Norway exactly one thousand years ago.

Nothing, it would seem, judging from its inconspicuous appearance, modestly situated just within the Chester city walls. Ramshackle scaffolding has long been skirting its foundations, and the terrace outside the main entrance is littered with beer cans as well as an interesting selection of substances most of us would prefer to stay well clear of.

As most people in the 11th century preferred to stay clear of Olav Haraldsson, as St Olav was initially called. His youth was spent happily and unrestrainedly roaming and plundering east and west, scaring the wits and wealth out of people here and establishing alliances there.

In 1014 he was baptised in Rouen and thereafter embarked on the ambitious goal of becoming the king of Norway at the expense of powerful earls and farmers.

In the process, and as a means of obtaining his aims, he worked with zeal, conviction and, in the face of resistance, with the sword, to convert the heathens to the Christian faith. For this he has been credited for having christened Norway.

The colourful and resourceful Viking badass gone good (at least Christian) died by the hands of the opposition in the battle of Stiklestad, Norway, in 1030. According to the legend, the king's body was carried to Nidaros and secretly buried in a sandy hill by the river Nidelva. A year later he was reinterred, and when the casket was opened "his cheeks were rosy, and his hair, beard and nails had grown". A Viking king was dead, but a fully fledged (and bearded) saint was born.

These and other alleged miracles lead to extensive adoration and far-reaching awe, wholeheartedly encouraged by a local, marked oriented clergy, attracting worshippers from near and far. They all made their way to Olav's grave beneath a modest church that would, in time, grow into the Nidaros Cathedral in what is now Trondheim. Here the pilgrims would pray, seek repentance and forgiveness, as well as cure for illnesses.

The news of the miracles spread across borders and over seas, and churches dedicated to St Olav sprang up everywhere, from Novgorod in the east to Istanbul in the south. On the British Isles alone, there are records of no less than 57 churches. One of these is the aforementioned, obscure looking little sandstone church in Chester.

Looks, however, can be deceiving. The church is situated in an area which bears a multitude of silent, but undisputable testimonies of a past teaming with Norse activity. Old records and Norse place names tell their own tales, as do Scandinavian traits like blue eyes, blond hair, as well as other hidden genetic attributes identified by recent DNA studies of people in the area.

Yes, many of the Vikings were wild and ill-mannered, to say the least. Yet, incidents of rape, pillaging and uncivilised language aside, the Norse (Scandinavian people before the Christianisation of Scandinavia) entry into this particular Anglo-Saxon territory is also a story of peaceful trade and settlement. This resulted not only in intermarriage and genetic mixing but also mutual exchange of both ideas, crafts and physical objects, often yielding novel inventions and unique artistic expressions. A fascinating example of the latter are the hogback stones – Viking grave markers exclusive to the British Isles.

Looking at it this way, our history and culture have a common denominator, and our past is an example of how immigration and successful integration can lead to development, growth and a richer and enhanced life for all parties involved.

Fortunately, many are aware of the importance of preserving our joint heritage, in this case The St Olave church of Chester. Fearing for the future of the building, a small group in 2008 literally picked up the pilgrim-stick and started a yearly walk, taking place on July 29th, a day in in many North European countries of celebrating Olav's death and ensuing sainthood. The walk goes through beautiful Wirral-Norse landscape towards Chester. People with a variety of different backgrounds take part, making it an interesting and inspiring venture on many levels.

The aim of the walk is to create awareness, interest and subsequently funds, not only to preserve, but to infuse new life into the building, hopefully reviving Viking/Norse traditions for the public to see and experience, complementing already well-documented and presented Roman and Anglo-Saxon eras in the historic gem that is the city of Chester. And, at the same time, rekindling tales and enhancing travel, trade and team spirit across the North Sea.