Viking Wirral, its Legends and Lost Settlements in Heswall and Barnston

by Greg Dawson

Vikings raided the coasts of Europe mainly between years 800 and 1100 A.D. Danish Vikings raided and settled mainly in England and Norwegian Vikings or Norsemen as they were called, raided and settled mainly in the North and West of the British Isles. For 300 years Norsemen dominated the Irish Sea and its coastal trade centred on Dublin, their stronghold and base for raiding and slave trading. During the ninth and tenth centuries, large numbers of Norsemen settled in the North West of England and by the year 901 there were twelve Viking settlements in Wirral. In 902, Dublin was overrun by the Irish King Caerbhall and many Vikings fled Ireland. One band led by Hingamund (or ‘Ingmund’) took to their boats and sailed east, many with Irish wives, children and slaves. After being driven from Anglesey, they sailed to the Dee Estuary and landed in Wirral. Ethelflaed of Mercia, King Alfred’s daughter, granted Ingmund land in Wirral and more settlers arrived. When Ingmund saw all the wealth in the Anglo-Saxon city of Chester and the rich farmland surrounding it, he became envious and demanded more and better land. Ethelflaed could see that the Norse settlers had become a threat, so she strengthened Chester and increased the garrison to protect her lands. In about 907, Ingmund assembled (possibly in Thingwall) all the leaders of the Norse and Irish-Norse and Danish settlements in the area and they agreed to help him seize Chester. The story of the battle, part fact and part legend, tells us that the Anglo-Saxons attacked the Vikings outside the city, then feigned a retreat, allowing a large number of Vikings to pursue them into the city. Then they closed the gates where a host of their best warriors were waiting in ambush and cut the Vikings to pieces. The remaining Vikings tried to break into the city, protecting themselves from spears and arrows with a roof of wooden hurdle frames, held up with posts and covered with hides. The Anglo-Saxon defenders dropped water and ale onto the Vikings, but still they would not give up. Then, all the beehives in Chester City were dropped onto them and they were so badly stung that their limbs became numb. Even after this defeat the Norsemen remained a threat and over the years there were more attacks. Ethelflaed kept Chester well fortified and also built a fort at Runcorn. This was to cow the Norsemen in Wirral and to control the Wirral in 993. Who gave the assembly hill in Thingwall the religious name of Cross Hill? Was it Olaf in thanks for his victory over Alfvene? In 995, Olaf became King of Norway. He was fanatically religious and forced his subjects everywhere to become Christians on pain of death. He made many enemies and died in the naval battle of Svolder in the year 1000, fighting against a large combined fleet of Danes, Swedes, rebellious Norwegians and Wends. He fought to the last aboard his ship The Long Serpent and to avoid capture jumped overboard and disappeared. The names of some of the many Viking villages in Wirral end in ‘by’ which comes from the Scandinavian ‘byr’, meaning farm or settlement. ‘Penniby’ (Pensby), which means ‘hilltop village’ was in the Kylemore Drive area, and ‘ireby’ (Ireby) means village of the Irish. Not all Viking villages ended in ‘by’; others have different meanings such as ‘Nesse’ (Nesse), a headland and ‘Calders’ (Caldy), cold ears or cold arse. Over the years the Scandinavian population in Wirral continued to grow, maintaining close links with the Norsemen in Dublin, the Isle of Man, Wales and North West England, both in kinship and from trade through the port of Meols. Some Wirral settlements had Norse-Irish names such as ‘Arwe’ (Arrow), a shieling, and ‘Knockyrm’ (Noctorum) dry hill. There are also several fields and many roads with Scandinavian names such as ‘carr’ (marsh), ‘holm’ (island or high ground in a marsh), ‘dale’ (valley), ‘slack’ (a hollow), ‘ithewaite’ (clearing) and ‘rake’ (sloping cow path), to name a few. A number of Norse settlements in Wirral have been ‘lost’. Their names are kept alive in field names which are over 1,000 years old. There are two lost settlements in our local area, Warmby, possibly meaning warm