

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

by Greg Dawson



Heswall born and bred Jayne Gardiner, nee Evans, visiting the Ting Mound or Thing Moot in Little Langdale, one of only three Norse parliaments in North West England, the others being Thingwall, Wirral and Thingwall in Knotty Ash, Liverpool.

Vikings raided the coasts of Europe mainly between years 800 and 1100 A.D. Danish Vikings raided and settled mainly in Eastern 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 'Ingimund') 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. Eventually, the Saxon Princess, Ethelflaed of Mercia, King Alfred's daughter, granted Ingimund land in Wirral and more settlers arrived. When Ingimund 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, Ingimund = assembled (possibly in Thingwall) all the leaders of the Norse, 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 rocks and beams from the city walls and poured cauldrons of boiling 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 Norse settlers in Wirral and to control the Rivers Dee and Mersey, so to prevent the Danes in the east from joining forces with the Wirral Norsemen. Norsemen from Ireland continued to pour into North West England, building more farms and settlements. Meetings and parliaments of the Norse community in Wirral were held at 'Thingvollr' (now Thingwall), which means 'assembly or parliament field'.

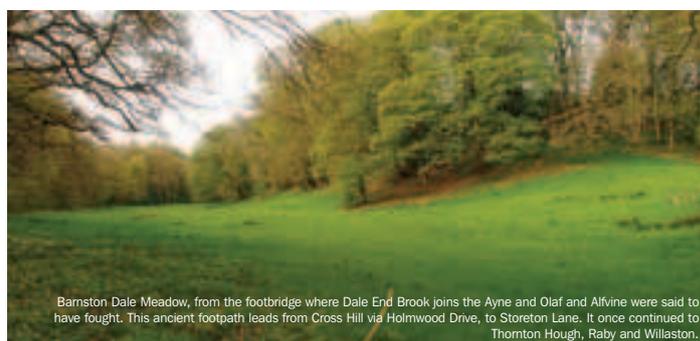
In 937, a large Norse fleet assembled in Dublin. They sailed and joined forces with the Scots and Strathclyde Britons to invade Northern England and take York. The Anglo-Saxon army under Athilstan completely routed them at the battle of Brunanburh and slaughtered thousands more as they fled. The site of the battle has never been proven and no remains or quantities of weapons have been found. Some historians believe the battle was fought near Bromborough and the Norsemen were cut down as they tried to reach their ships anchored somewhere along the Mersey. Others think the battle was fought near Burnley, by the River Brun, as the Norsemen tried to reach their ships in the River Ribble. Professor Charles Arnold-Baker, author of *The Companion To British History*, writes that the Dublin fleet landed in the Solway where they joined their Cumbrian Norse allies, Scots and Picts. To me, it seems unwise for the Norsemen to have left their fleet in Wirral, within half a days march of the Anglo-Saxon garrisons at Runcorn and Chester.

There were safer anchorages nearer to their allies and to York. The usual route from Dublin to York was via the Ribble. But, I'm sure that wherever the ships were, some Norsemen from Wirral would have been amongst them.

According to legend, Olaf Tryggvesson had strong links with Wirral. Olaf was born in the Orkney Islands in 963, where his mother Astrid had fled after her husband the King of Viken was murdered. Olaf grew up to be a fearless warrior and commander of King Vladimir's men at arms in Kiev. He left Vladimir's service and went raiding, during which time he met and married Geira, a Wendish Princess. When Geira died, Olaf went raiding again and landed in the Scilly Isles where he visited a hermit. The hermit prophesied that he would survive a mutiny and become a great king. Some of his men did mutiny and nearly killed him, but he recovered from his wounds, was baptised by the hermit and sailed for England. Local legend has it that Olaf landed in Wirral and went to a 'Thing' (assembly) called by Gyda, known as the Lady of Wirral. Gyda was the widowed sister of the King of Dublin. She had lands in Ireland and was looking for a new husband. The Thing was believed to have been held on the hill in Thingwall which became known as Cross Hill and many men came from Viking lands all around the Irish Sea. Gyda looked at all the men assembled around the hill and chose Olaf as her new husband. A Viking leader called Alfvine, from a village across the Mersey wanted Gyda's hand and challenged Olaf and his men to a Viking duel or 'holmgang'. It was said to have been fought in Bramston Dale Meadow, possibly at Dale End, where two brooks meet and where Gyda could watch from the high ground. The two leaders, each with twelve men from their ship's crew, all faced one another and fought in single combat. Olaf and his crew won every duel, but nobody was killed. Alfvine's men were spared but he was banished. Olaf and Gyda were married and legend has it that he added to his domains in Ireland and Wendland in Northern Germany, by becoming king of Scandinavian 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 Alfvine? 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, rebel 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. 'Pennisby' (Pensby), which means 'hilltop village' was in the Kylemore Drive area, and 'Irrebyr' (Irby) means village of the Irish. Not all Viking villages ended in 'by'; others have different meanings such as 'Nesse' (Ness), 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' (Arrowe), a shieling, and 'Knoctyrum' (Noctorum) dry hill. There are also hundreds of fields and many roads with Scandinavian names such as 'carr' (marsh), 'holme' (island or high ground in a marsh), 'dale' (valley), 'slack' (a hollow), 'thwaite' (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



Barnston Dale Meadow, from the footbridge where Dale End Brook joins the Ayrne and Olaf and Alfvine were said to have fought. This ancient footpath leads from Cross Hill via Holmwood Drive, to Storeton Lane. It once continued to Thornton Hough, Raby and Willaston.