

Topic: A local case study

Information for parents and teachers

Bidston, Wirral

In 1994 a piece of Viking Age stone sculpture was discovered in a garden at School Lane Bidston, near the parish church of St Oswald's. The sculpture is now in private ownership. This small but elaborately piece of carved sandstone seems to have been quarried locally. It is 47.5cm long and 26.5cm wide. On both sides there is an carving of two beasts facing each other with open jaws and raised paws, between them is an interlace pattern seemingly emerging from the mouth of one of the animals. Beneath the heads of the creatures on one side is a pattern of interlinked knots, and on the other (more worn side of the sculpture) there are naturalistic shapes representing plants or animals. Stylistically, the sculpture may be dated to the tenth century, It can be classified as a stone fragment. It seems too small to be a standalone monument. The incomplete decoration at the base of the stone denotes that some of the monument is missing. The confronted pair of animals is a common motif in early medieval Insular art. There is very little direct influence from Scandinavian art on the Viking Age sculpture of the Wirral, but its sculptures fit within an Irish Sea cultural milieu. From the creative fusion of art styles from Britain, Ireland, and further afield, new distinctive localized art forms emerged. Viking Age sculpture is also found at other sites in Merseyside including West Kirby, Neston, Bromborough, Walton and Childwall.

The circular shape of the church grounds at St Oswald's, Bidston suggests that this may have been the site of an early medieval church before vikings arrived in the Wirral. On Bidston hill, there are rock carvings including a range of graffiti, a horse head and two separate. In local folklore the two figures are thought to have been carved around AD 1000 to represent a sun goddess and a moon goddess. The carvings are not of Viking Age style though, and the interpretation seems to be a recent invention. This type of folklore shows an ongoing creative relationship between local people and the viking past.