

Topic: Vikings in Merseyside

Information for parents and teachers.

The ‘Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’ reports that a viking army gathered from East Anglia and Northumbria stormed Chester in the year 893. The site was referred to as a ‘deserted settlement on the Wirral’. This either suggests that the site was hardly occupied at this time, but it is more likely that the inhabitants had fled the settlement on news of an impending viking attack. The vikings may have hoped to occupy the settlement as an important port for trade. It is interesting to note that a contingent of vikings left Dublin in 893 and they may have intended to support or link up with the group that had seized Chester. The local Mercians burnt the fields around Chester and drove away the cattle which deprived the viking army of sustenance and they were successfully driven out.

In 902 viking leaders were expelled from Dublin. One contingent under Ingimund attempted and failed to settle in north Wales and instead travelled along the coast and settled on the Wirral. According to the late ‘Fragmentary Annals of Ireland’ the land was granted to them by Aethelflaed of Mercia when her husband was ill. Vikings later tried to take Chester and the ‘Fragmentary Annals’ preserves an exciting account of the event. It claims that the vikings attempted to build a siege engine from hurdles to reach the base of the Roman walls, the defenders threw boulders, then boiling ale and water, and finally bee hives over the wall to deter the attackers. The text also claims that Aethelflaed divided the enemy by winning the allegiance of the Irish who had travelled across with the vikings, and so Chester was saved. The ‘Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’ records that Chester was ‘restored’ in 907. It was at this time that the walls were repaired and extended.

Viking settlement north and south of the River Mersey is evidenced from the early tenth century through archaeological and place-name evidence. Merseyside had a mixed population in the early Middle Ages and there are place names of Old English, Welsh, Irish, as well as Old Norse. Some common place name elements from Old Norse (the language of Scandinavia from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries) include -by (from *býr* meaning ‘settlement’) as found in Formby and Crosby, rake (from *rák* meaning ‘lane’ or ‘track’) as found in Bromborough Rake, and Meols (from *melr* meaning sandbank). Some names can tell us about viking society, like the name Thingwall found in West Derby and the Wirral which comes from the Old Norse words ‘assembly field’ meaning some sort of parliament was held at these sites. We cannot be certain that if a place name contains Old Norse elements that it was coined in the Viking Age. Words from Old Norse may have entered the local dialect to be used to name places in later centuries. For example, the celebrated fourteenth century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is thought to have been written in the Wirral and it contains Old Norse words which are not found in modern English. The Scandinavian influenced place names show the long term cultural impact of Old Norse speakers in the region.

Many archaeological finds relating to the Viking Age have been discovered from the Wirral. The most abundant sites has been Meols on the Wirral which appears to have been used as a seasonal trading site from Roman times until the later Middle Ages, but it seems to have flourished after viking settlement in the area. More recently some tenth century finds have been recovered from a site near Bromborough in the Wirral. While Merseyside was brought under the control of English rulers in the early tenth century, the area seems to have

retained a distinct cultural identity due to its links across the seas and Hiberno-Scandinavian settlement.