



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

# BATTLE OF LARGS

THE LAST VIKING BATTLE ON ENGLISH SOIL

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# The Battle of Largs

## Introduction

On the 2nd of October 1263, on the banks of the firth of Clyde in what is now North Ayrshire, the last Norse Viking army to invade mainland Britain was defeated by the Scots. The age of the Vikings was over! The Viking's last battle on British soil.

### The battle of Largs. 1st and 2nd of October 1263

This battle is deemed by many historians as being inconclusive. As with many medieval battles and virtually all battles which involved the Vikings in Britain, precise details are unknown as is the actual location.

The battle most likely took place in an area called Gogo waters, but this isn't known for sure and as usual, no artefacts from this battle have been discovered.

The history between the Scots and Vikings is a huge and complex subject which is too large to include in this short history, but they had fought each other, fought as allies and their cultures had blended, particularly in the far north, in Caithness, the Orkney's and the Shetlands. The western seaboard and the western isles were also areas where the Norse had gained supremacy and where their legacy still survives today.

### The battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066

The battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066 had effectively terminated the threats from the Vikings in England and Wales but parts of Scotland would remain under Norse rule for much longer. Argyle and Bute and the inner and outer Hebrides remained under Norse control as did the far north but increasing Scottish power and a determination to wrest the land from the Norse became increasingly aggressive.

The Scots had conducted two campaigns in 1221 and 1249 respectively. The campaigns were failures and a status quo continued until 1261.

The Scottish King Alexander the 3rd sent an embassy to the Norwegian Court of King Haakon IV in 1261 with an offer to purchase the outer Hebrides. The offer was refused and the ambassadors were detained. Their fate is unknown.

In 1262, Alexander sent an army to Skye under the command of the Earl of Ross. Details of the campaign are scant but the Norwegian King reacted by raising an army and a fleet to attack the Scottish King and to restore Norwegian rule.

### July 1263

In July 1263, the Norwegian fleet with King Haakon leading them, sailed from Bergen, with a fleet of between 120 and 200 ships. This fleet was capable of carrying between 6000 and 10000 men but actual numbers are not recorded.

Haakon collected warriors from Orkney and the Hebrides on his way to the western Scottish seaboard.

Only one Scottish Lord refused to submit to him, namely one Ewan MacDougall but he was easily defeated and Norse then occupied the island of Great Cumbrae.

Haakon sent a large force to attack Lennox in Dumbartonshire whilst another contingent attacked Bute and Rothasey Castle, which surrendered without resistance.

The Scots attempted to negotiate a peace treaty but this was just a delaying tactic in an attempt to buy time for their army to assemble at Ayr.

### 1st of October

On the 1st of October, a storm caused a large number of Norse ships to break from their moorings on Great Cumbrae. They were carried onto the beach just south of Largs. Haakon sent a rescue party to repair and retrieve the ships, thus dividing his army further.

The Scottish army were already on their way.

With part of Haakon's army ravaging Dumbartonshire and another contingent occupied rescuing the ships, the King decided to land outside of Largs. His force must have been drastically reduced and he may of only had a few thousand men with which to confront the Scottish army, maybe even less.

The size of the Scottish army is unknown but it likely outnumbered the Norse considerably. What is known, is that it is recorded that the Scots deployed 1500 cavalry, though this seems highly improbable. The Scottish army was commanded by one Alexander Stewart.

## Records of the battle

The records of the battle, as usual, are confusing.

It appears that the rescue crews sent to recover the lost ships were attacked first, by archers and slingers from the Scottish vanguard. Haakon sent reinforcements and the Scots disengaged.

A group of some 200 Norse took control of a strategic hill. They were led by one Ogmund 'crows dance'. The fighting petered out and the Norse made camp for the night. This skirmishing took place on the 1st of October.

The following morning, the 2nd of October, Haakon arrived at the hill top camp. The main Scottish army now appeared from the south and the vanguard immediately resumed their attack against Ogmund, who still held the hill.

Ogmund was forced to retreat. Initially he held his troops in good order but the Scots were relentless in pressing home their attack and the Norse began to break.

The main Norse army, who were now on the beach, saw Ogmund's troops fleeing from the hill and became nervous. They were then attacked by the Scottish cavalry and some fierce fighting took place in which the Norse suffered heavy casualties. Many of the Norse then began to retreat to their ships.

## It's unclear how the fighting ended.

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Some sources state that the Scots slaughtered hundreds of Norse as they fled to their ships whilst another source tells of ferocious Norse resistance on the beachhead which inflicted huge casualties on the Scots who were forced to retreat.

This source states that the Norse then camped on the beach that night before departing in their ships on the morning of the 3rd of October.

Either way, the Scots had achieved a strategic victory if not a tactical one and it was the Norse who evacuated the area without making any further attacks elsewhere.

Haakon took his fleet to the Orkney Islands where he died at Kirkwall in December 1263.

In 1266, the new Norwegian King, Magnus IV, accepted payment for most of the western islands and ceded them to the Scottish King. The Isle of Mann also now came under the control of the Scottish Crown. These agreements were ratified under the treaty of Perth.

And so, the age of the Vikings finally came to an end in the British Isles.

It would be many years though before control was actually exercised by the Crown and in the interim period, control was seized by the McDonald clan, whose leaders, partly Norse, continued to call themselves the Lord of the Isles.

Prince Charles still holds this title today.

The Viking wars were over but for the Scots a new threat was coming.

Edward Plantagenet, born in 1239, was 24 years old at the time of the battle of Largs. He would become King of England in 1272 and would become known as the 'hammer of the Scots'.

Few people connect Edward with being alive when the last Viking battle took place.