WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY COMMUNITY INTEREST COMPANY

THE CASE FOR
THE DINGESMERE
ON
THE WIRRAL

A remnant of Bidston marsh today.

A salient and critical factor in discovering the site of the battle of Brunanburh will be the identification of the Dingesmere, a formidable area of marshland which played a significant factor in the escape of the surviving Norse, Scottish and British of Strathclyde following their defeat in the battle.

Whilst the location of the battle is not known and given that many individuals favour differing locations, Wirral archaeology tender a theory based on a belief that the battle was fought on the Wirral. We are actively looking for the battlefield and have based our search on Professor Michael Livingston's assessments contained within the book 'The battle of Brunanburh, a casebook.

We have recovered items that are contemporary with the period which were recovered from an area identified by Professor Livingston. We acknowledge that we cannot or do not claim to have found Brunanburh and that there is much work to do. This is a work in progress and is very much in the early stages of what will be a prolonged and scientific led investigation. We are assembling an academic research group and have instigated the scientific examination of artefacts which are being conducted by Nottingham University.

The history of the Norse on the Wirral

We know that in 902, that a Norse Chieftain called Ingimundr and his followers were driven from Dublin by the Irish We know that Ingimundr tried to settle on Anglesey at a place called Maes Ros Meilon. Details are scant but it appears that Ingimundr was attacked and defeated by the Welsh and that he and his followers were forced to flee the island.

They landed in Wirral and begged Aethelflaed, the Lady of Mercia, for permission to settle. She let them occupy the northern part of the Wirral. Why? We don't know but it was possibly a shrewd move on Aethelflaed's behalf to allow trade via the port of Meols.

Meols is known to have been a port from pre-Roman times and is likely to have become an important trading centre and military base during the Roman occupation.

The Vikings controlled the Western seaboard and whilst there were piratical Vikings, most were traders and access to goods and extra revenue by way of taxes would have been an attractive proposition to increase the wealth of Mercia.

Mercia's only access to the sea, was via the Mersey or the river Dee. That meant that goods coming in from all the other Kingdoms likely incurred high importation taxes. If the Hiberno-Norse on the Wirral could attract trade with their Kinsmen then Mercia would benefit economically and could also export goods to Ireland, the Isle of Man and the rest of the western seaboard, without having the Welsh or Northumbrians taxing them for moving goods through their territory. It's only a theory, but there must have been some mutual advantages for both the Hiberno-Norse and the Mercians.

A serious event occurred in 907. Ingimundr led an attack on Chester. He was comprehensively defeated. We don't know as to why this occurred and can only guess at what catalyst pre-empted this event but there is currently no quantifiable evidence that can be verified. Simply, we don't know as to why the Norse attacked Chester.

FT Wainwright believed that the Norse population of the Wirral was of some considerable size but he believed that any attack was likely supported by Norse contingents from what is now Lancashire and possibly from Ireland. *('Scandinavian England'. FT Wainwright 1975)*

It appears that Ingimundr probably survived and the Norse settlers on the Wirral certainly did. We do not know if they were subjected to any severe punitive measures, but they were still inhabiting the Wirral, when Anlaf Guthfrithson arrived in England some 30 years later.

Three years after the attack on Chester, In 910, Northumbrian Vikings attacked Mercia in conjunction with the Danes from the eastern Danelaw. The invasion culminated in a disastrous defeat for the Vikings at Tettenhall, near to modern day Wolverhampton. A certain Ingimundr died in the battle. He may even have been captured and then executed by Aethelflaed. She was usually willing to offer clemency. The clue may be that if it was the Ingimundr from the Wirral that died at Tettenhall, then she wasn't of a mind to spare him as he'd betrayed her for a second time. We can't know with any confidence but it may have been a possibility.

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The Wirral is now favoured by many academics and historians as being the most likely place where the battle took place. *(Michael Livingston. 'The battle of Brunanburh: A casebook'. Sarah Foot. 'Aethelstan').*

It is favoured because it was within easy reach of Dublin, it already had Hiberno- Norse settled on the northern coastline and it offered a direct route into the heartlands of Mercia without the difficulties of having to negotiate any routes across mountainous areas or being presented with impassable rivers.

A well planned military expedition into Mercia could have been conducted and prosecuted with devastating effect had that course of action been the aim of the Norse -Celtic alliance.

Given that there is no evidence that the coalition did make any efforts to cause maximum disruption by raiding deeply into the Cheshire plain, where they could have wreaked economic and physical damage by terrorising and displacing the local populations, driving refugees southwards to the main Anglo-Saxon military strongholds and therefore causing widespread panic, there is a presumption that the invaders had a secure base with ready access to the sea and a supply line that kept the army in the field.

Did the invading force await the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in an area that afforded them a secure defensive position and an easy escape route to the sea if necessary? Was the aim of the coalition to strike a deal with Athelstan without a fight?

There is some evidence within a number of the contemporary sources which state that Athelstan was criticised for not immediately responding to the threat.

Was Athelstan faced with a force that seriously threatened the very existence of the embryonic English state and did he delay in order to ensure that he was able to meet them with overwhelming critical mass? Sources state that Athelstan did eventually agree to negotiate with the Norse led coalition if they agreed to stop harrying the land which we understand that Anlaf the Norse leader agreed to do.

The question is, which areas were being subjected to punitive attacks from the invaders? The records are not specific. If indeed, the Norse invaders had landed on the Wirral, was it the settlements of Anglo-Saxon occupied South Wirral who were attacked or did the invaders range further in order to provoke a response from Athelstan?

It is hard to understand as to why the coalition would not have struck into the Mercian heartlands if no major Anglo-Saxon army was in the field as subjecting the local populations to acts of violence would often result in bringing the other side to the negotiating table.

It is true that Chester was well defended and that there was a burh at Eddisbury Hill, near Delamere and that a number of Burhs stretched eastwards in what is now called the Mercian wall, but the garrisons were not strong enough to meet an army in the field.

Burhs were situated at such places as Runcorn. The burh at Runcorn was obviously situated in order to guard the lowest crossing point on the Mersey whilst Eddisbury guarded a major land route.

In 909, an Anglo-Saxon army comprising Mercians and West Saxons(Wessex) had crossed the Mersey and invaded Northumbria and ravaged it for some five weeks. The following year, the Viking King of York counter attacked and crossed the Mersey. His forces ravaged the land as far as the river Avon before they were destroyed by an Anglo-Saxon army at Tettenhall.

These crossing points on the Mersey were now firmly impressed upon the Anglo-Saxons, and the lady of Mercia, Aethelflaed refortified these key points in order to negate any invasions from the north. There were defensible positions at the river crossings at Thelwall (pool by a plank bridge, and first fortified by Edward the Elder in 923) and Latchford (ford over a stream) in Warrington, which could be forded at low tide. Manchester, an old Roman fort, called Mamucium, had also been rebuilt and fortified by Edward the Elder and was named as Mameceaster. By fortifying these sites, it seems eminently clear that Viking Northumbria was perceived as the greatest threat to the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms and that not only did this

Mercian wall function as a first line of defence, but it would also act as a buffer to ensure that the East Anglian Danelaw was contained both by the northern defensive chain as well as the one that protected eastern Mercia.

In 924, The Saxon King, Edward the Elder campaigned in Cheshire and the Northwest putting down a rebellion of disgruntled Mercians, Welsh and possibly local Norse. Chester was the centre of this rebellion and whilst it is not known with any certainty, a major factor may have been fiscal, namely West Saxon reeves, in the name of the King, may have been engaged in extortion and illegal profiteering, thus provoking a revolt.

If this was indeed the case, is this evidence of the Wirral's Norse settlers and the area's Anglo-Saxon population having integrated enough to have a common interest and to fight alongside each other?

Could the Dingesmere have been on the North Wirral coast?

The following is a generic explanation of a theory and not a scientific one. It is known that large areas of the Wirral was marshland and it is recorded as having been so in numerous sources. The name the Wirral is a direct merging of the Anglo-Saxon words 'Wir', which means myrtle as in the plant bog myrtle (Myrica gale) and 'heal' which is interpreted as slope or corner, hence Wirheal.

Bog Myrtle; a shrub which once covered the Wirral.

Etymology of the settlements surrounding the Bidston marsh.

The case for the northern coast of the Wirral being the Dingesmere is supported by the etymology of the settlements of the area.

Wallasey, surrounded by water at high tide was the 'Isle of the Welsh'.   Walha is Germanic for foreigner or stranger and when the suffix 'ey' is added it becomes the Isle of the stranger.

Upton is recorded in Domesday book as Optone and in 1086 it is recorded that the settlement was required to pay a tribute of 1000 eels to King William. Its Anglo-Saxon name was Up Tun, meaning high or hill farm. Today, Upton is some 2.3 miles, as the crow flies, from the present coast.

The population of Upton at the time of the census is recorded as being 11 households, so the population was small. Was the obligation of the 'eel rent' the responsibility of the whole settlement or were there a few families who were fishermen? Upton's parish church was at nearby Overchurch which derives from the Anglo-Saxon, Ofer Cirice, the church on the shore.

Given the proximity of Overchurch, it would appear that Upton was very close to water, and the indication is that this was the great mere that covered a large area of the north Wirral, and which may have stretched as far south as Storeton.

Moreton, much of which still lies a metre below sea level, was called Moreton cum Lingham in the medieval period. Its etymology derives from two languages; Lingham in old Norse means the heather on the marsh whilst in Anglo-Saxon or old English, More means marsh whilst Tun means settlement or farm, hence marsh town or marsh farm.

Leasowe derives from the direct Anglo-Saxon word for Meadow pastures, namely 'Leasowes'.

Bidston village faces onto the ancient Bidston Moss to its north and west whilst behind the village, Bidston Hill, rises above it. The area has been occupied since the Mesolithic period. Rock carvings on Bidston Hill have been identified as being Norse. In particular one is known as the Sun goddess, which is believed to have been carved by the Hiberno-Norse in the early 10th century. There is also a lesser known rock carving known as the 'moon goddess ' again believed to be Hiberno-Norse.

Rock carving on Bidston Hill

There is some dispute as to whether or not that the carvings on Bidston Hill are Hiberno-Norse Several local historians advocate that they are but it is difficult to quantify the exact origins of these rock carvings. The possibility that they are may indicate that the area had some holy significance.

Rock carving on Bidston Hill

Another name for Brunanburh is Weondune, or Holy hill. Whilst there is no quantifiable evidence as yet, the Norse carvings suggest that to them at least, Bidston Hill had some religious significance and they may well have considered it to be a holy place.

The etymology of Wirral place names is very well documented. The northern part has many settlements which are conclusively Norse. This Norse enclave stretched to the area around Raby village, which takes its name from the old Norse, Ra-byr, which means boundary.

The highest concentration of Carrs and Rakes, in the country are all to be found in what was the area apportioned to Ingimundr and his followers. Carrs or Kjarrs are all old Norse for marsh. Rake is derived from the old Norse, rak, meaning a lane. They inhabited an area that was predominately marshland.

Preliminary studies by Wirral archaeology, based on data of tidal levels during the months of September and October 937, strongly indicate that the north Wirral coastline was a tidal salt marsh. Lidar imaging showing the various degrees of flooding by using differing tidal levels supports both the etymology and writings covered in later historical reports.

Events on the Wirral after the battle of Tettenhall

After the disaster at Tettenhall, there are no records of conflict between the Wirral's Norse settlers and the Anglo-Saxons. It is likely that they were becoming integrated. How could they not? The Wirral Norse were predominately farmers, fishermen and traders. Very few amongst them would have been high status warriors.

In 937 everything changed. The warlord Anlaf arrived from Ireland and was joined by the Scots and the British of Strathclyde. A battle ensued, Brunanburh. The Anglo-Saxons won and it was heralded as their greatest victory since they settled the land of Britain. The reality was that it was a Pyrrhic victory. A few

years later, Athelstan was dead and Anlaf was back and in control of the five Boroughs, namely Derby, Lincoln, Nottingham, Leicester and Stamford. It would take Athelstan's successor, Edmund, some time and a lot of effort to get rid of both Anlaf and the Hiberno-Norse.

We do not know how the Wirral's Norse population reacted to Anlaf and his army landing in their territory. I suspect that they were impotent and caught between the hammer and the anvil, so to speak. A few may have thrown their lot in with Anlaf but I suspect the rest realised that they were in a precarious position and wanted no part in Anlaf's great adventure.

The name Dingesmere relates to a mere, which is Anglo Saxon for a marshy area. The importance of the Dingesmere cannot be understated. We know that the defeated Norse and their allies retreated to this marshland. The Brunanburh poem tells of the slaughter of many Norse as they floundered in the marsh but more importantly, Anlaf and many of his men escaped and made it back to their ships, Why didn't the Anglo Saxons pursue them to their ships and slaughter them? Why didn't the Anglo Saxons capture or burn Anlaf's fleet?

To flee the battlefield and retreat to the ships on the same day surely indicates that the distance was not great, maybe just five or six miles. Were the Norse able to block a narrow passageway across the marsh, thus allowing many warriors to get back to the ships? Did they delay the Anglo-Saxons long enough for the high tide to arrive and therefore make pursuit impossible?

The river Mersey gives access to Wallasey pool, (much different a thousand years ago than it is today). The Birket and the Fender empty into Wallasey pool. Before the rivers were channelled they would have sprawled across the countryside and overflowed their banks in the Winter or after heavy rainfall. They were surrounded by marshland and they meandered through it for miles.

Ariel view of Wallasey pool today. All the green space is reclaimed land.
Historically it was all marshland.

The old dykes on the Leasowes.
The confluence of the rivers Fender and Birket, channelled in the early 19th century.

Bidston Moss was a place feared by locals until relatively recently. In the far past, it was positively dangerous for people who were not familiar with it.

The rivers were channelled and diverted in the early 19th century during the construction of the Wallasey and Birkenhead docks but much of the marshlands remained until the construction of the M53 and even today for those who care to explore the area, large pockets of marshland remain.

The fact is that Anlaf and a substantial part of his army did get away. They disappeared for some six months before they invaded Donegal and captured an Irish King. Anlaf's defeat had not diminished his reputation nor affected his leadership.

Dingesmere? The noisy sea as some say? The mere under the Thing? Cross Hill in Thingwall was the assembly ground for Wirral's Norse population. Disputes and legal issues would be discussed there. Even today, from the top of the hill, it looks down onto the low-lying mid-Wirral valley. Upton is only 2.68 miles away. Thing in old Norse is pronounced Ding. From the Ding you would clearly see the marshlands; the Dingesmere?

Wirral Archaeology CIC hope to collate as much scientific and historical information about this possibility. It's a work in progress and will take time. We believe that the theory has credibility and is a real possibility. We do not claim this to be quantified.

We have studied the other potential sites throughout the country. None have either the etymology or the topography that the Wirral has. None of the contenders have proximity to an area where you could get back to ships from a nearby battlefield within a few hours.

In summary

The marshlands and the potential landing areas for the Norse fleet are within an achievable and realistic distance from the likely area of the battle.

1583 version of Christopher Saxton's map of 1577 (part of a map of the whole of Cheshire).
This is probably the first detailed map of the Wirral.

John Speed's map of the Wirral 1611.

The etymology of the north Wirral coast strongly suggests that a large marsh spread from the coast and reached as far as the present-day Upton Village. It is likely that it spread down the central Wirral corridor as far as Noctorum.

There is a potentially 'Holy hill' at Bidston, which has 10th century rock carvings of a Norse goddess and god.

Noctorum is old Irish for the dry hill. Cnocc Tirim. Why was it called this? Did it look down onto marshland? The river Fender runs below it today. Back in 937, this river would have been much larger than it is now and it would have been flanked by reed beds.

From Dublin to the Wirral shore is little more than a hundred nautical miles; a day's sailing with a short distance across the open sea. To sail to the Humber, in September, would risk the loss or dispersal of the Norse fleet. The journey would be 1000 nautical miles. A Norse ship of the period would likely cover between 80 to 100 nautical miles per day, depending on sea conditions, prevailing winds and other natural factors. Passing by Cape Wrath in September or October was always a risky business. Look what happened to the Spanish Armada in 1588, and they passed through the Pentland Firth in July or August!

As a historical point, there are actually no sources that claim the Anlaf made his way to York before the battle.

If Anlaf had wanted to go to York, he could have landed on the river Ribble. His army could have then reached York in three or four days, crossing land who's occupants were likely to be amenable towards him. Much of the population was Norse.

The Wirral afforded easy access into the Mercian heartlands had Athelstan not responded to the invasion. Anlaf could have easily avoided the Saxon defensive positions if he decided to move south. The defended sites did not have sufficient troops to meet an army in the field. Anlaf could have wreaked havoc and then retreated into Northumberland or back to his ships once he became aware that the Saxon army had mobilised and deployed.

The complete absence of Bog Myrtle on the Wirral; a mystery to be solved

Ness gardens believe that Bog Myrtle is now extinct upon the Wirral. We intend to ask them if they would like to research this and if they would like to become involved in our research and investigation.
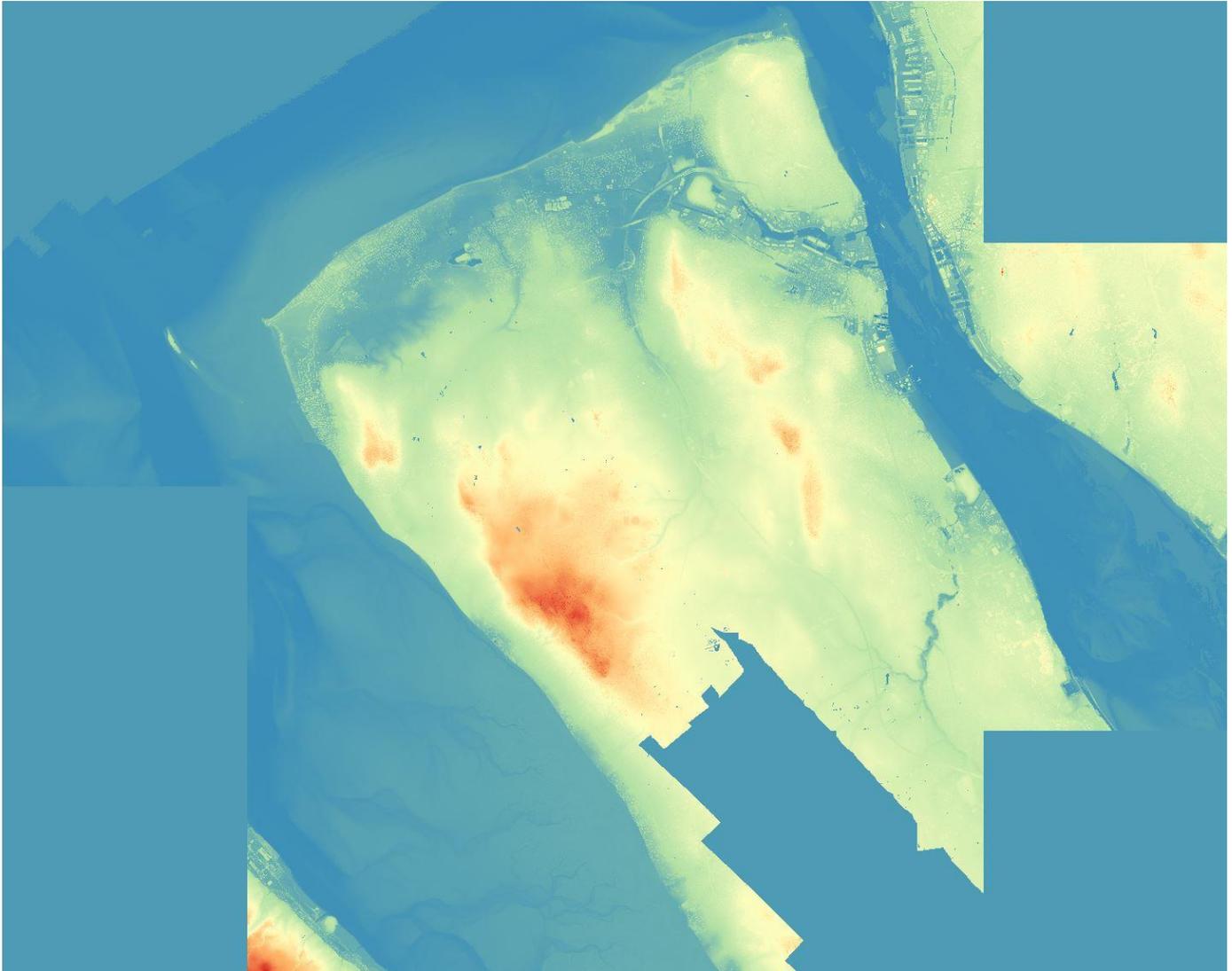

The Wirral coat of arms

The Wirral coat of arms displays two sprigs of bog myrtle either side of the crown. An ancient memory of the plant that the gave Wirral its name is thus preserved.

Information being collated and analysed in relation to identifying the Dingesmere

We have procured the tidal charts for 937 prepared by a Royal Naval hydrographer, supplied by Chas Jones, so we know that before the formulation of the sand dunes in the 12th to 13th centuries, the area flooded extensively.

Simulation of effects of an 8 metre tide on the North Wirral.

Another marker to consider is an ornithological one, namely, that Tranmere is derived from the old Norse meaning 'Crane sandbank'. The European crane is extinct in the Wirral but when they were common, they would congregate on sandbanks. Yet they were not so gregarious when nesting and usually you will only get four breeding pairs per square kilometre. This suggests that if they were numerous enough to congregate on sandbanks in large numbers, then their nesting grounds must have been extensive. We think that marshland possibly stretched as far down towards Stanlow on Wirral's eastern coast.

The Norse Kjarrs and Rakes extend beyond the supposed Raby border which may indicate an eventual merging of Saxons and Norse. A list of Norse moneyer's names from the 1086 Doomsday assessment clearly shows that integration and that they held a high status occupation. The events of 910, 924, 937 and 980 appears not to have resulted in the destruction or dissolution of the Wirral's Norse community.

The etymology clearly shows that in the later medieval period there were pockets of marshland in places such as Bromborough and Eastham. For instance, we have a 'Howley marsh' in Higher Bebington (Beba's farm). We have in old English, ' gehaeg Mersc polfeld' - the mill by the big marsh or pool, which was In Bromborough. There was also recorded in 1412, in Middle English 'Moraldefeld', the field by the marsh spring. The Saighs (ME) derived from AS saege (a swamp). Latheregestfeld, (1412 ME) derived from AS 'Leiwulfr' the field of the unwanted wolf.

At Capenhurst was there a lookout tower? The etymology suggests that there was. In 1235 the settlement was called' Capinhurst'. In OE a hyrst was a wooded hill. In OE, 'Cape' means a lookout place whilst 'capian' means to look upwards. Capa means 'He who looks out'. 'Capianhyrst'?

In the 12th century, at the site of the present day Poulton bridge, the place was called Tokesford. This is derived directly from the Norse name Toki and the word 'forda' for ford. Toki's ford. Was Toki charging a toll for crossing into what is now Wallasey?

The etymology of the field names also hint to the fact that in 937, much of the Wirral was a wilderness.

The Brunanburh poem mentions that the dead were left for ravens, white tailed sea eagles and the grey beast of the forest to feast upon. Well for sure, had the area been well cultivated, then predators such as wolves would have been eliminated, yet many of the ancient field names suggest a memory of the wolf.

There are a number of examples. For instance, in 1370, in Upton a field was known as 'wylfen graefe' - the field near the she-wolf's wood. In Neston, there was a Woefy Lane, derived from the old English 'Wulf halh, namely 'wolf corner'. There are more. The wolf is believed to have become extinct in England during the reign of Henry VII, 1485 to 1509. English monarchs persecuted them so the population must have been in decline for centuries. Folk memory recalled the wolf, so again the question, did wolves live on the Wirral at the time of the battle of Brunanburh or was the poem using poetic licence?

Given that three physical locations are derived from an etymological connection to wolves it would appear that folk memory recalled a time when wolves did indeed live on the Wirral.

In Wallasey, in 1278, it is recorded that there was once a wood called Blodgreueland, which means the 'bloody wood'. An echo from the time of the battle? We will never know.

Given that Chester was a Burh per se, it is likely that Bruna's Burh was a local Thegn's personal stronghold, which would have been an adequate centre to keep an eye on the local Norse population. A series of beacons could have been utilised as an early warning system along with a possible 'pony express' system as back up. Why not? The Roman army had operated that very system, possibly used on the Wirral too, from the fourth century when the area started to experience piratical raiding from Ireland and the north Western seaboard.

Bruna's stane, is referred to in a number of sources as are other boundary markers. A number of ancient standing stones or large boulders must have been used for those purpose. Maybe the one on the Brackenwood golf course was used as such.

In 1086, Domesday Book states that 405 family heads resided on the Wirral which indicates a population of 2 to 2200 people.

The 1545 subsidy roll for the Wirral put the population at about 4000 people.

It appears that the population had been consistently low from the early Middle Ages and the population of Birkenhead in 1800 only numbered 110 people. It's not until the mid-1800's and the industrial revolution, that the population of the Wirral saw a rapid expansion.

We know that during a period between 1120 and 1123, Earl Ranulph Le Meschin converted the Wirral into a hunting forest and that it contained boars and deer. Peasants would have been aware of the strict rules of Forest law with which they had to abide, and they would have been forbidden to hunt any beast of the

chase within the Forest. The formation of such a hunting ground must have seen much farmland revert to wilderness.

Back to Ireland

Realistically, there was never a great threat of Invasion from Ireland, the Norse simply didn't have the capability to mount a cohesive invasion of England because the Irish tribes were too hostile and would have exploited the absence of a large number of fighting men and also because the Norse factions in Ireland could not be unified. Many Norse were also 'turning native' as their culture merged with that of the indigenous Celts.

The event of 902 must have remained in the Dublin Norse's psyche!

Brunanburh came about because in the minds of the Northern peoples of Britain, Athelstan's overlordship was too great to bear. The Hiberno Norse of Dublin saw an opportunity to join a coalition that may have been able to achieve success, something that they could never achieved on their own.

Additional information supporting the case for the Dingesmere.

- NB. Google - BIDSTON CHURCH, c. ! 18 5 o - The Historic Society of Lancashire. Download the PDF

- Rideout's Orographical map of the Wirral. https://www.hslc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/74-6-Rideout.pdf

- https://www.hslc.org.uk › 74-...PDFWeb resultsOROGRAPHICAL MAP OF WIRRAL. The main watershed shown by ... (https://www.hslc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/74-6-Rideout.pdf)

The link above, pertaining to Bidston church contains several interesting references to the Bidston Moss and refers to locals catching eels in 'bog holes' in the 1700's and also details a number of murders which took place within the Parish boundary in the 14th and 15th centuries.
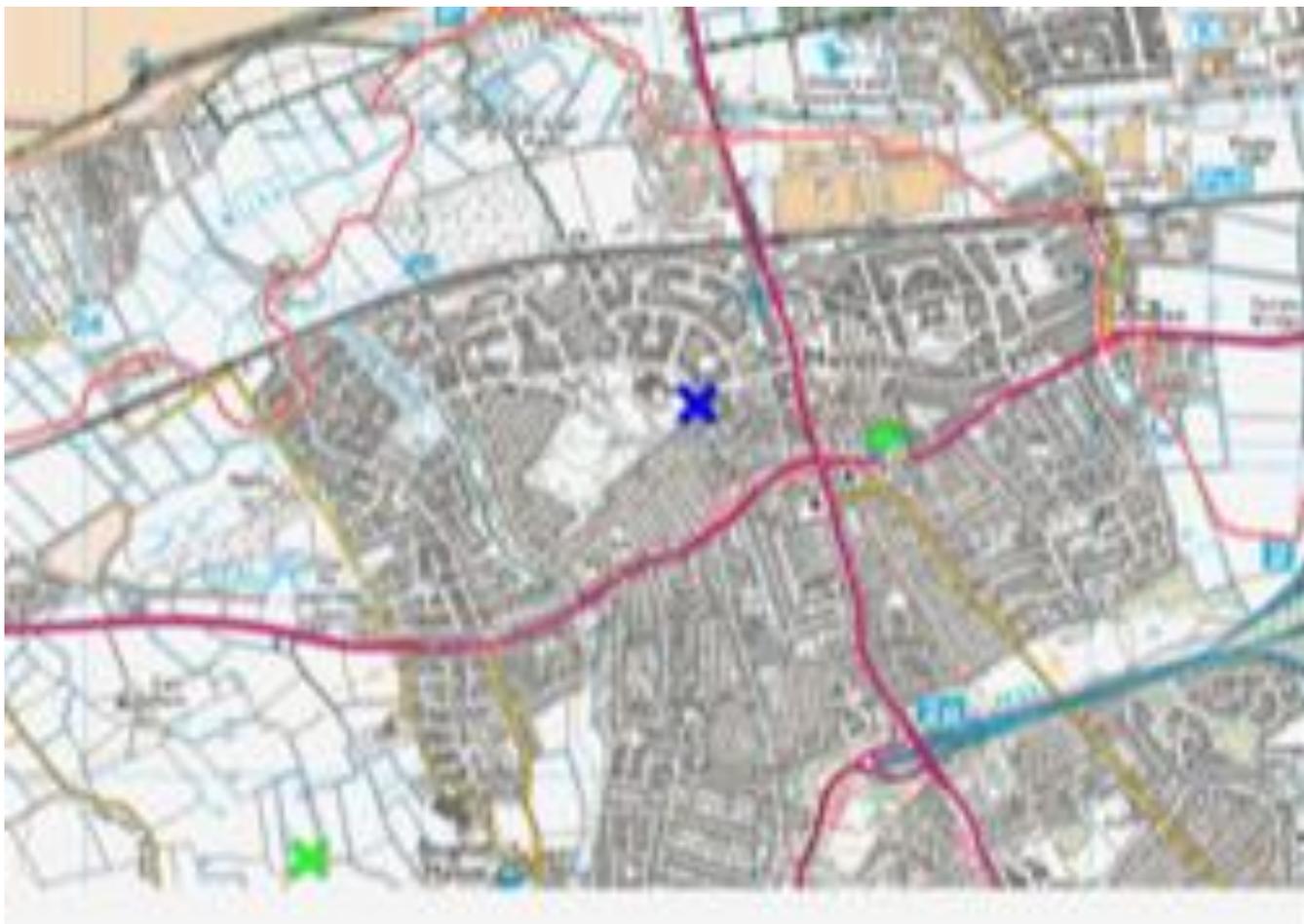
If we can put forward a case for the Dingesmere being here it enhances the case for the battle. As Dave Capener, (author of 'Brunanburh and routes to the Dingesmere') has said, the other candidates cannot match the circumstantial evidence that we have.

Below. Extract of archaeological excavations of two 'Norse 'style houses and other sites of early medieval settlements.

The below was provided by Dave Capener and Andy Quick.

The elevated positions of these settlement sites implies that they were chosen in order to avoid the effects of flooding which is still an issue in Moreton today.

These positions overlooked the extensive marshlands and were located on elevated sites which indicate that small islands of arable land or land suitable for livestock rearing and the accompanying habitations were purposefully selected to minimise risk from flooding and that they were possibly stockaded to protect from wild animals or even human enemies.

Key :

- Saughall Massie. Barnarce Lane. Marked with a green cross.
  Evidence of early medieval ploughing. Field is 11 m above sea level.

- Moreton. Digg Lane. Marked with a blue cross. Capillary well. This is 10 m above sea level.

- 240 - 246 Hoylake Road. Marked as a green house. Excavated by D Griffiths and reports done by R Phillpott. 9 - 11th century (but more likely late 10th) Grubenhaus-type building. Site is 11 m above sea level.

- Bidston. 9 School Lane. Marked as a green house. Bow sided building. Dated to 9 - 11th century. Site is 11 m above sea level.

- 19 School Lane. Hogback. Dated to early 10th century. Stylistically similar to Yorkshire hogbacks.

- Red line. This is the 5 m contour line. As you can see these early medieval sites are all on an elevation of 10 - 11 m. I've used the 5 m contour as a guide to how far above the high water line and also the limit of any seasonal flooding the inhabitants of the area around Bidston Moss would have constructed their homes and cultivated their land.

Later history - In þe Wyldrenesse of Wyrale

In the 14th century, an extract from the Middle English chivalric tale of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight records in lines 698 to 702.

"alle þe iles of anglesay on lyft half he haldez
and farez ouer þe fordez by þe forlondez
ouer at þe holy hede til he hade eft bonk
in þe wyldrenesse of wyrale wonde þer bot lyte
þat auþer god oþer gome wyth goud hert louied".

Translation.

He kept the Isles of Angelsey on his left, and fared over the fords by the forelands
at the Holyhead hill, until he landed in the wilderness of the Wirral.
Few that lived there loved God or man with a good heart.

In the tale, the Wirral is a wild and ungodly place populated by wild animals such as wolves and even wilder men, known as Wodewoses.

Wodewose from a medieval manuscript.

Bidston Moss and its relationship to smuggling and the Wallasey wreckers

The Wirral remained a backwater until the construction of the Birkenhead docks in the 1840's. The population was small and isolated. Wallasey consisted of a number of small hamlets and much of the area consisted of small holdings.

Liscard moor was used for keeping sheep and this area stretched down towards what are now the playing fields near to the present Mosslands school.

A path led across the Bidston Moss which was considered to be dangerous because of the marsh itself and because it was the haunt of thieves and smugglers. To enter the marsh, one crossed Warrington's bridge which was marked by the jawbone of a whale, set upright in the ground. This landmark was visible until the 1840's.

The history of the Wallasey wreckers is well documented as is the Bidston marsh which spread across Leasowe, Bidston, Moreton and as far as the Newton Carr, marshland south of Hoylake.

The wreckers would lure ships onto the beaches and loot their cargos. There are many inferences that many crewmen were murdered. Even in the early 1800's ships were still being lured onto the beaches or rocks.

A poem written by the reverend Richard James in 1636 describes the great mere and the people of Wallasey.

> *"Austin's voice is true,*
> *Empire condignly was to Romans due.*
> *Our waves are Guelph's of dirt and mire which none scarce*
> *ever passe in summer without moan:*
> *Whilst theirs through all ye world were no less free*
> *Of passage then the race of Wallisee,*
> *Ore broken moore's,deep Mosses, lake and fenne,*
> *Now works of giants deem'd not arte of men".*

A tavern stood on what is now Egremont promenade. It was demolished in 1974 and a nursing home stands on its site. Built in 1595, it reached its peak of notoriety in the late 18th century when the landlady, known as Old Mother Redcap, real name Poll Jones, turned the place into a hub of criminality with smugglers and privateers operating out of her premises.

Contraband would be taken across the Bidston Moss. The route would cross the 'jaw bones' bridge and skirt past a moated farmhouse near Wallasey pool and on towards Bidston, where another tavern called the 'Ring o Bells' stood, now the site of Stone farm, to the west of Bidston church. A packhorse track then went southwards at the foot of Bidston Hill to Noctorum and then across today's Roman road, and across the site of the Prenton golf course, through Storeton and onto Willaston and beyond.

A popular saying in the late 1800's went like this.

> *Wallasey for wreckers*
> *Poulton for trees*
> *Liscard for honest men*
> *And Seacombe for thieves.*

It is said that the wreckers of Wallasey would await a storm and that they would then mount a light on a hobbled donkey and walk it along the shoreline. This simulated a rocking lantern on a masthead and lured the ships onto the beach or rocks.

There is even a record pertaining to the Rector of St. Hillary's church being involved with the wrecking teams and that he would store looted goods within the old Tudor period tower.

These are the names of some of the ships that fell victim to the Wallasey wreckers.

Cunlifee. 1757
Nonpareil. 1775
The Pelican. 1793
Martha Dunn 1802
Mary Betsy 1820
Earl of Moira 1821
The Sally. 1821

These are just a few, but it appears that this practice had been going on from the 17th century and possibly earlier.

Records exist of three Welshmen having been wrecked on the Wallasey Sandhills, where they died of starvation.

How so? If they'd made it ashore there, then the hamlets that made up Wallasey were within easy reach. Did they die of exposure or were they murdered?

Other references are made to similar events. It appears that the residents of Wallasey were so hostile that they would not offer any help and they simply left people to die.

The truth probably lies somewhere in between and it is likely that some half drowned seamen were murdered, likely because dead men tell no tales.

In 1839, there was a huge storm. A number of ships were driven onto the land and wrecked. They fell victim to the plunderers of Wallasey.

The ships were the Pennsylvania, St. Andrew and the Lockwoods. Although some people were rescued by local fishermen and the lifeboats, which were then in operation, reports followed of hundreds of dead people being stripped of everything as they lay dead on the beaches between Hoylake and Wallasey, and of cartloads of goods being removed.

The outrage following these events was the catalyst for the authorities coming down hard on the wreckers and looters and many were arrested and convicted. The reports were harrowing. They described dead men, women and children littering the beaches and that their bodies were being looted. Police officers were also reported to have been attacked when they tried to intervene.

In 1832 a ship called the Grecian was wrecked off Meols. The captain, a man called Salisbury was one of the people who drowned. His body was washed up on the beach. His body was stripped and his finger was cut off in order that the thief could take his ring. A woman from the ship was washed up onto the beach and she too was stripped and every possession taken. A woman from Moreton was later arrested and she admitted having bitten off the dead woman's ears in order to obtain her earrings!

The history of the wreckers of Wallasey is too big a subject to cover in depth within this paper but it does give credence to the fact that the area was a lawless and wild place until the industrial revolution. The character of the people of the area was very much defined by their isolation and their environment. Was the Bidston Moss the remnants of the Dingesmere? There is a compelling argument that it really could be - however much more work remains to be done.

Two water mills stood on the Moss near to Wallasey pool, until the mid-19th century. The tidal flow was powerful enough to let them operate for 14 hours per day.

Given the above, and these are only selected examples, there is clear evidence that the Wirral was considered a backwater and a dangerous place for outsiders. Literature selected from the 14th, 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries amply demonstrates as to how the area was viewed over a period of 500 years.

Further information is now being compiled from the entries of Domesday Book

I am confident that the evidence demonstrates that the Anglo-Saxon and Norse communities were integrated by the time of the Norman conquest.

The survey shows that prior to the conques, 28 manors were recorded in the Wirral. The Lords of 12 of these had Norse names. All Saxon and Norse Lords had lost their land by the time Domesday was conducted.

Note.
These are the names of the 12 Norse named former Lords of the Manor from the Wirral.

All of them lost their manors after Hastings as did the AS Lord. They were:- Arni, Gamel, Gunner, Osgot, Ragenald, Ravenswart, Thored, Toki, Ulf, Ulfkel, Ulfketel and Winterlet.

Another example suggesting strongly that Anglo-Saxons and Norse had integrated is demonstrated by Domesday's listed moneyers recorded in Chester in 1086.

Arngrímr (recorded in Domesday Book as Haregrim, Aregrim), Árni (Erne, Erni) - possible the same Árni of The Arno in Oxton), Arnkell (as Archil) , Ásgautr (as Ansgot, or Osgot - of Hargrave Hall), Beollán (Belam), Björnúlfr (Bernulf), Brunn (Brun), Frani (Fran), Gamall (Gamel), Grímkell (Grinchel), Grímr (Grim), Gunningr (Gunninc), Gunnarr (Gunner), Gunnvör (Gunnor), Guðleikr (Gotlac), Hákon (Hacon, Hacun), Hókun, Hálfdan (Halden, Alden), Hásteinn (Hasten), Hrafn (Rauen), Hrafnkell (Rauechel, Rauenchel, Rauecate), Hrafnsvartr (Rauesuar, Rausue), Hundingr (Hundingr, Hundin), Hundólfr (Hundulf), Karl, Karli (Carle), Ketill (Chetel), Kolbeinn (Colben), Loðinn (Loten), Morfari (Morfar), Ormr (Orme), Ragnaldr (Ragenal), Sigríðr (Segrid), Steinkell (Steinchetel), Steinn (Stein), Steinólfr (Stenulf), Tóki (Tochi), Úlfkell (Ulchel, Ulchetel), Úlfr (Ulf), Vetriðr (Wintrelet), Þjóðólfr (Dedol, Dedou), Þórðr (Toret, Toreth)

Fargrímr (as Fargrim), Kolbeinn (recorded in Domesday as Colben), Kolbrandr (Coalbrand), Krókr (Croc), Húskarl (Huscarl), Svartkollr (Sweartcol), Svertingr (Swertinc), Sveinn (Swegen), Þóraldr (Thorald), Þormóðr (Thurmod), Hrafnsvartr (Ravenswart), Hundólfr (Unnulf), Raenulfr (Raenulf), Sunnúlfr (Sunoulf), Þorbjörn (Thurbern).

Examples of Wirral land Holdings being put under the Lordships of Normans and displacing Saxon and Norse landlords following the Conquest.

Prenton wood, mentioned as the great wood in some sources for Brunanburh still existed in 1086. Domesday states :

- Walter of Vernon (A Norman) holds in the hundred of Wirral , Prenton.
- Wulfgeat, Edric and Luvede held it as 3 manors. They were free. 1 1/2 hides paying tax. Land for 3 ploughs. In Lordship 1, 2 ploughmen. 2 small holders.
- A mill which serves the court. Woodland 1 league long and 1 league wide. The value was 7 shillings, now 5 shillings.

So three more Saxons removed from the land. Walter of Vernon also held land at Wellington in Eddisbury from Earl Hugh, a Norman noble.

Prenton wood therefore would have taken an hour to walk either its length or breadth if you didn't have to walk through the trees.

In 1086, William son of Nigel (Normans) held Raby (ON) for border. Traditionally, Raby was the furthest southern extent of the Dublin Norse settlers who Aethelflaed had allowed to settle on the Wirral. In 1086 in was held for William by one Hardwin (AS).

Pre-conquest it had been held by one Arni (Norse) who had also held land in Neston and Capenhurst. Arni was obviously another Anglo-Norse landowner who lost his property after the conquest.

- Nigel holds Storeton. Dunning held it. 2 hides paying tax. Land for three ploughs. In Lordship. Half a plough. 1 slave. 5 villagers and 3 small holders with 1 1/2 ploughs. Value before 1066. 15 shillings. 1086 value now 20 shillings. It was waste.

Nigel also held land in Greasby. Nigel is a name of Irish origin but was probably used in Celtiberian Spain originally. It means 'Champion'. Dunning is an Anglo-Saxon name. Looks likely that Dunning lost his land following 1066. Was Nigel a Norman? Yes, we know that he was one Nigel de Burcy.

The population is clearly tiny. The value of the land rose by 5 shillings between 1066 and the census of 1086. It was waste? A result of the harrowing of the North between 1069 and 1070? Had Dunning been a victim of the Norman punitive actions? Killed or displaced.

Storeton derives from the old Norse Stor Tun, meaning great farmstead but it appears that pre-conquest it was under the control of an English landowner.

Briefly looking at census records from 1086, evidence clearly shows that Norse-named people held property and land within the Wirral alongside neighbouring areas held by English named people. Integration is clearly demonstrated though many of both ethnic groups seem to have been displaced from their land between 1066 and 1086. It also seems that several areas were also deemed to be waste.

Meols was held by one Leofnoth (AS), Wallasey was held by one Uhtred(AS), Eastham was held by Earl Hugh, known as Lupus,(the wolf) the Norman Earl of Chester. (The manor at Eastham had been held by Earl Edwin, the brother of Earl Morcar)

Mollington was held by one Lambert (Norman) on behalf of Earl Robert of Rhuddlan who had displaced the previous owners, Gunner and Ulf, two Norse freedmen.

Woodland, meadows, fisheries, number of slaves, tax paying hides, number of ploughs etc are all recorded. It appears that descendants of Norse settlers were thriving on the Wirral until the post-conquest period.

- Meols. Earl Robert of Rhuddlan holds two holdings in Meols.
  William (Norman) holds on his behalf.

- Leofnoth (Saxon) held it. 1 hide paying tax. Land for 1 1/2 ploughs. 1 rider. 3 Villagers and 3 smallholders have one plough. Value before 1066. 10 shillings. Later 8 shillings. Now 12 shillings.

- 2nd Holding.
  Leofnoth held it. 1 hide paying tax. Land for 3 ploughs. 1 rider. 3 villagers and 3 smallholders have one plough.
  Value before 1066. 10 shillings. Later 8 shillings. Now 12 shillings.

It appears that the two parcels of land were worked by the same people.

Leofnoth, yet another displaced Saxon.

Earl Hugh of Chester (Norman) held Eastham in 1086.

Earl Edwin(died 1071). Earl of Mercia and brother of Morcar, Earl of Northumbria had held it.

The brothers had both fought against Harold Hardrada at Fulford in 1066.

As neither fought at Hastings and because they were influential in the respective counties, William let them retain their lands and they swore fealty to him. Both would revolt against King William. They supported the Atheling Edgar in the revolt that would lead to the 'Harrowing of the North'.

- Eastham. 22 Hides paying tax. Land for many ploughs. In Lordship, 2 ploughs. 4 slaves. 14 villagers. 10 small holders with 6 ploughs.
  A mill, 2 riders and a priest.
- Munster holds 2 hides of this manor's land, Hugh 2 hides, William 1 hide, Walter 1/2 a hide, Hamo 7 hides, Robert 1 hide, and Robert 1/2 a hide.
- In Lordship 4 ploughs and 8 ploughmen.
- 22 villagers, 11 smallholders, 5 riders and 2 Frenchmen with 8 ploughs.
- Total value of the manor before 1066 £24, later £4, now the value of the Earl's Lordship £4, of his men 112 shillings.

This clearly demonstrates that pre-conquest, the manor at Eastham was both large and valuable. It would appear that the decline in value was expedited by Edwin's part in the rebellion against William in 1068.

Notes.
OE = Old English
ME = Middle English.
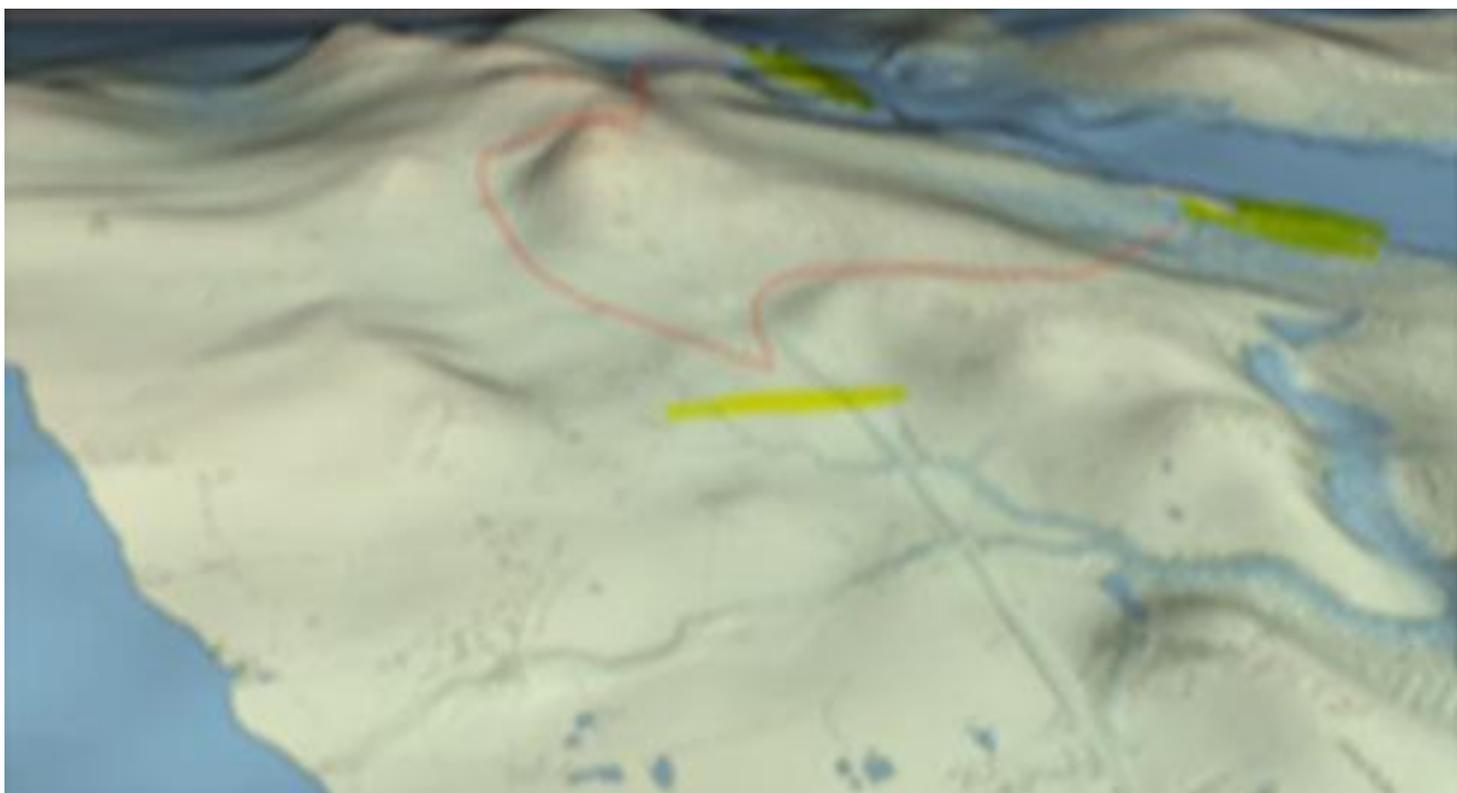ON = Old Norse.

 * NB.
Two oxen were needed to pull a plough over light soil.
Eight oxen were required to pull a plough over heavy soil.
Most farmers would have had only two oxen so would have to utilise neighbour's oxen at ploughing time.

(Above sourced from the Doomsday book 26. Cheshire. History from the sources. John Morris. 1978).

The above is the generic opinion of Wirral Archaeology's belief that there is a viable case for the Dingesmere having been situated on the North Wirral coast and that its association with the Dublin Norse and its easy access to Dublin and the Norse-dominated western sea lanes made it a real option for Anlaf Guthfrithson's landing place for the Hiberno-Norse alliance.

Exaggerated Lidar image of North Wirral.
The yellow lines mark the possible battlefield. The red lines are possible escape routes for the Norse with the North-running line the most likely candidate.