Battle of Brunanburh AD937

Taken from the Wirral and West Lancashire Viking Research Page

Nottingham scholars - Paul Cavill, who runs the English Place-Name Society, Steve Harding, a scientist, and Judith Jesch, a Viking studies lecturer - have identified Wirral as the site of what was described as the bloodiest battle to have taken place in England. Five British kings and seven earls were killed on the Celtic side as were numerous Saxons, including two of Athelstan’s cousins.

The researchers base their conclusion on analysis of two place names - Brunanburh itself and Dingesmere - mentioned in the 73-line Chronicle. The former, meaning "Bruna's fort", has been assumed by many scholars to be the old name for Bromborough, where a well-established Scandinavian colony existed at the time of the battle, making it a sympathetic base for northern raiders.

If Dingesmere could be identified as being near by, then that would provide confirmation. But the origin of that place name was puzzling - until Professor Harding suggested it might be related to the Old Norse word for a place of assembly or Thing, as in Mans Tynwald or Iceland's Althingi. And indeed just such a parliament, known as Thingwall, used to be held in Wirral. The Thing field itself is thought to be at Cross Hill, off the A551; the word would have been pronounced Óing by local Viking folk who had picked up a Celtic accent.

The researchers then realised that Dingesmere derived from the Old Norse for "marshland of the Thing". The place-name served to warn travellers of the dangerous marshland of the Dee, particularly when attending the Thing.

Professor Harding said they had solved one of the "important loose ends" in the story of the Battle of Brunanburh. A paper explaining the theory has been published in the Journal of the English Place-Name Society.

from The Independent, 8th December 2004  Text for audio link

BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH AD937

The Battle of Brunanburh was one of the most defining battles in the history of the British Isles and, as described by BBC Broadcaster Neil Oliver in History of Scotland it determined whether Britain would become one imperial power or stay as separate identities. Although the Northern Alliance of Scots, Strathclyde British and Norsemen from Ireland lost the battle against a combined Anglo-Saxon army from Mercia and Wessex - with heavy losses on both sides - the strong resistance proved decisive in what was to follow.

The Battle of Brunanburh is recorded as a contemporary (or near contemporary) poem in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle, and almost certainly took place on Wirral. Compelling arguments had earlier been made for other locations, notably in Lancashire, Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Northants and SW Scotland. However the weight of scholarly opinion is now heavily on Wirral – the debate now seems to be where on Wirral – and how did they get there. And internationally respected author Bernard Cornwell appears to have little doubt the battle took place on Wirral as is clear from his new novel The Empty Throne:

The Wirral peninsula and Chester had not long earlier witnessed another major battle between "the armies of the Norsemen and the Danes" and the Mercian English – AD987. Chester was also the place where the Anglo Saxons had one of their earlier crushing and most significant victories against the British - AD613. Brunanburh was the old name until about 1732 for Bromborough. The poem also gives the location of the coastal point of escape as Dingesmere – which has now been satisfactorily explained as the "Things – mere or – marr", the wetland or marshland associated with the Thing – the Viking parliament, at Thingwall on Wirral (see cutting from the Independent above).

The Anglo-Saxon poem, in its translated version from William of Malmesbury reads as follows (see Campbell, A. The Battle of Brunanburh, London 1938 and Hamer, R., London 1938 and Hamer, R. A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse, Selected, with an Introduction and a Parallel verse translation, Faber and Faber 1970)

Cookies help us to give you the best experience on our website. You can change your cookie settings if you wish. Otherwise we'll assume you're OK to continue. OK See our policy
King Athelstan, the lord of warriors,  
Patron of heroes, and his brother too,  
Prince Edmund, won themselves eternal glory  
In battle with the edges of their swords

Round Brunanburh; they broke the wall of shields,  
The sons of Edward with their well-forged swords  
Slashed at the linden-shields; such was their nature  
From boyhood that in battle they had often  
Fought for their land, its treasures and its homes,  
Against all enemies. Their foes fell dead,  
The Scottish soldiers and their pirate host  
Were doomed to perish; and with blood of men  
The field was darkened from the time the sun  
Rose at the break of day, the glorious star,  
God the eternal Lord's bright candle passed  
Across the land, until this noble creature  
Sank to its resting-place. There many men  
Lay slain by spears, and northern warriors  
Shot down despite their shields, and Scotsmen too,  
Weary, with battle sated. The West Saxons  
Throughout the whole long passing of the day  
Pressed on in troops behind the hostile people,  
Hewed fiercely from the near the fleeing host  
With well-ground swords. The Mercians refused  
Hard battle-play to none among the fighters  
Who came with Anlaf over rolling seas,  
Bringing invasion to this land by ship,  
Destined to die in battle. Five young kings  
Lay dead upon the battlefield, by swords  
Sent to their final sleep; and likewise seven  
Of Anlaf's ears, and countless of his host,  
Both Scots and seamen. There the Norsemen's chief  
Was put to flight, and driven by dire need  
With a small retinue to seek his ship.  
The ship pressed out to sea, the king departed  
Onto the yellow flood and saved his life,  
Likewise the wise old Constantinus came,  
The veteran, to his northern native land  
By flight; he had no reason to exult  
In that encounter; for he lost there friends  
And was deprived of kinsmen in the strife  
Upon that battlefield, and left his son  
Destroyed by wounds on that grim place of slaughter,  
The young man in the fight. The grey-haired man  
Had little cause to boast about that battle,  
The sly old soldier, any more than Anlaf;  
They could not with their remnant laugh and claim  
That they were better in warlike deeds  
When banners met upon the battlefield,  
Spears clashed and heroes greeted one another,  
Weapons contended, when they played at war  
With Edward's sons upon the place of carnage.  
The Norsemen left them in their well-nailed ships,  
The sad survivors of the darts, on Dingesmere

Over the deep sea back they went to Dublin  
To Ireland they returned with shameful hearts.  
The brothers also both went home together,  
The king and prince returned to their own country,  
The land of Wessex, triumphing in war,  
They left behind corpses for the dark  
Black-coated raven, horny beaked to enjoy,  
And for the eagle, white-backed and dun-coated,  
The greedy war-hawk, and that grey wild beast  
The forest wolf. Nor has there on this island  
Been ever yet a greater number slain,  
Killed by the edges of the sword before this time,  
as books make known to us, and old  
And learned scholars, after hither came  
The Angles and the Saxons from the east  
Over the broad sea sought the land of Britain,  
Proud warmakers. Victorious warriors,  
Conquered the Welsh, and so obtained this land.

THE CONNECTION DINGESMERE = THINGS MERE?

This connection was made 3rd April 2004. Steve Harding - who made this connection - says the following: "I remember pausing to stare at a slide at a talk I gave – on Brunanburh – at the Thurstonan Visitor Centre, 3rd April 2004. It was a 1732 slide of Wirral showing "Tingwall" and "Brunburgh" close by. I said to myself "hang on, this has been staring us all in the face for all these years and Dodgson and everyone has missed it!" – and made the connection. I rang Dr. Paul Cavill (English Place Names Society) the following Monday with my suggestion saying surely it was too obvious to be true & he said "well actually Steve you may be right". We both worked on a paper "Revisiting Dingesmere" in conjunction with another colleague Dr. Judith Jesch, and this was published in October 2004 by the Journal of the
English Place Name Society. The Revisiting Dingemere article concluded by placing the "Things mere" as either the Irish Sea, the Dee Estuary or wetland at the coast: "We would like to suggest that the ding of dinges mere in the Old English poem of Brunanburh refers to the ping of Thingwall. There can be little question that the mere refers to a water feature, and we further suggest that the name refers to water overlooked or controlled by, or associated with the ping. This might be the Dee Estuary and the Irish Sea. But the name probably derives ultimately from the hybrid Norse-OE pings-mere 'wetland by the thing', or possibly from a pure Norse compound, pings-marr 'marshland by the thing'. In our view this name was spoken with a Gaelic inflection and heard by a speaker of English". Steve says "So my original idea, backed up by Paul's and Judith's expert contributions, seems to have solved the mystery! I thought of the Thingwall most nearest the only known definite Brunanburh place name as the most likely – the Thingwall on Wirral, and that is still the case, although of course this is open to correction! I am well aware there are 3 other known Thingwall's in the Irish Sea region my suggestion could also possibly apply to: Thingwall Hall in SW Lancs, Tynwald in the Isle of Man or Tinwald in Dumfriesshire. If it turned out that my suggestion of "the Things mere" actually applied to Tynwald or Thingwall Hall, rather than Thingwall on Wirral, that would still be perfectly consistent with a Wirral location for the battle. If someone proved it was Tinwald in Dumfriesshire or another Thingwall type of place name – if one ever existed – near the North Sea coast however it would certainly be less likely! I pointed this out in correspondence with colleague and distinguished Historian Michael Wood in November 2010, who favours a Yorkshire location for the battle. Maybe - although unlikely - Dingemere refers to more than one Thing, i.e. "Mere of the Things".

**HOW DID THE BATTLE END UP ON WIRRAL?**

The options seem to be:

1. The Norse navy from Dublin arrive and moor in the friendly Norse territory of Wirral (Meols or Wallasey/Tranmere Pool), meet up with their Scottish and Strathclyde British Allies and take on the Wessex and Mercian forces coming from the South at Brunanburh (near Bromborough). They escape from Dingemere "The Things mere" – the River Dee back to Dublin.

2. The Norse navy arrive and moor up on the banks of the Ribble (friendly Norse territory of what is now W. Lancs) and meet up with their Scottish and Strathclyde British Allies. They go marauding deep into Mercia and then get surprised by the speed at which the combined English armies assemble and move - outflanked they are forced into the Wirral where at least they have friends and they know that there at least some vessels there (at Meols) in case the leaders & others need to escape. The battle takes place at Brunanburh – near Bromborough (Higham model).

3. The Norse arrive and moor up on the banks of the Humber (friendly Danish territory) and meet up with their Scottish and Strathclyde British Allies. They move through the old Daneslaw territories recruiting Danes into their armies. Then they go marauding deep into Mercia but then get surprised by the speed at which the combined English armies assemble and move - outflanked they are forced into the Wirral where at least they have friends and at least there are some vessels (at Meols) in case the leaders need to escape. They fight at Brunanburh (near Bromborough) and escape from Dingemere "The Things mere" – the River Dee. This is our suggested "consensus" model – a modified form of the Higham model. A Humber entry point was suggested by John of Worcester, but written over 200 years after the battle. If he was correct then this would seem to be the likely scenario, otherwise (the Humber is not mentioned in the 10th Century records) either “1” or “2” would seem possible.

The Wirral and Chester had not long earlier witnessed another major battle between "the armies of the Norsemen and the Danes" and the Mercian English – AD907. Chester was also the place where the Anglo Saxons had one of their earlier crushing and most significant victories against the British - AD613:

"...as books make known to us, and old
And learned scholars, after hither came
The Angles and the Saxons from the east
Over the broad sea sought the land of Britain,
Proud warmakers. Victorious warriors,
Conquered the Welsh, and so obtained this land"

---

**Recent Academic Papers & Book**

**Academic Papers**


- **Revisiting Dingemere**: Journal of the English Place Name Society, October 2004, volume 36, pages 25-38. Article by Paul Cavill, Stephen Harding and Judith Jesch suggesting a solution to a mystery concerning the Battle of Brunanburh – the identification of Dingemere as the "Things – mere or – marr", the wetland or marshland associated with the Thing – the Viking parliament, at Thingwall on Wirral.

- **The Wirral Carts and Holms**: Journal of the English Place Name Society, December 2007 volume 39, pages 45-57. Article by Steve Harding on the distribution of the *carts* (ON *kljarn*) and *holms* (ON *holmr*) in Wirral - old Norse names associated with marshland - and their significance in terms of dialect (and in relation to the total absence of corresponding English names for the same features) - and possible relevance to the Battle of Brunanburh.

Recent Book


Popular Broadcasts

- Magnus on Brunanburh (1980)
- BBC North West Tonight, 20th December 2004, News Item by Abbie Jones on the Battle of Brunanburh.
- BBC1 Scotland (and BBC2 all UK) – Neil Oliver gives the Scottish perspective and emphasizes its crucial importance for Britain (2008). Describes the battle "on the banks of the Mersey".
- Direct link to the BBC1 Scotland piece.

**** LISTEN TO THIS DISCUSSION ON BBC RADIO 4 BETWEEN STEVE HARDING AND MICHAEL WOOD ****

- BBC Radio 4: The Great War - the Battle of Brunanburh, Tuesday 31st December 2013, 3pm (13 minutes)
  BBC Presenter Michael Wood and Scientist Prof Steve Harding discuss the possible location of this lost Battle site. In case of difficulty click here.

Amateur/Schools

- Brunna's Fortress - one of two suggested sites on Wirral (2005)
- Brunanburh (Battle of) - where on Wirral? (2005)
- Dingesmere - escape to the Thing's mere or marr (2005)
- Brunanburh – from Wirral Schools Viking site introduced by Wirral's cultural Ambassador Mike McCartney (2006)

Popular Newspaper Reports

- The Times (2004)
- Liverpool Daily Post (2009)

Local Magazine article

"King" Mike introduces Brunanburh

1732 map of Wirral showing possible escape route

Bebington Heath today – main site on Wirral for the battle?

Heswall Point today

Mool today
Possible sites of Bruna's burh: Bromborough Court House (L) & Poulton Hall (R) – home of the Lancelyn Green family since 1093

Group of enthusiasts trace a possible route from Poulton Hall ... and several hours later ... to Heswall point

Sunset over Heswall Point shortly after: "The ship pressed out to sea, the king departed. Onto the yellow flood and saved his life".

Link: Centre for the Study of the Viking Age, based at the University of Nottingham