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The Wirral Ship Fellowship – Wirral Vikings

# THE INHABITANTS OF WIRRAL

The different classes of inhabitants of Wirral

V1.0 – 25.10.2021

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Did they really want to live in peace as farmers and fishermen or were they trying to find somewhere safe to live whilst they plotted what to do next.



**Ingimundr, also known as Hingamund, Igmunt, Ingimund, was a tenth century Viking warlord. In 902, Irish sources record that he and his followers were driven from Dublin.**

He is recorded in the Fragmentary Annals of Ireland to have led an abortive settlement of Norsemen on Anglesey, before being driven out. He appears to have then led his followers to the Wirral peninsula, where Æðelflæd, co-ruler of Mercia allowed him to settle with his followers.

There is no English source that corroborates such a grant but some of Æðelflæd's continental contemporaries were certainly involved with strategically settling Vikings in estuarial regions.

It is though that Ingimundr settled his followers on the Wirral between the Dee and Mersey estuaries and struck a deal with Æthelflæd in which he was bound to safeguard the surrounding region from unwelcome Viking activity.

We do not know the makeup of Ingimund's followers. We can imagine some were warriors due to his exploits which got him kicked out of Dublin. Did they bring family and followers as well? What were their plans when they came to Wirral.

There is an abundance of place name evidence on the Wirral peninsula, that attests to a significant Norse colony in the region.

We do know they lived peacefully until they decided to attack Chester with a combined Irish and Danish force on 907 but in the periods of calm how did they survive on viking Wirral. It is this daily life that we portray.

## viking inhabitants

### The various peoples of the Wirral

Life during this period was harsh. The rich farmlands near Chester once worked by retired Roman soldiers were now desolate and overgrown.

People eked out a living farming the few strips of fertile land or fishing off the coasts of Wirral or on the inland tides that caused large parts of Wirral to be flooded daily.

This would have been a bleak existence with everyone trying hard to survive. If you wanted to survive, you worked.

Everyday life was hard although the area around Meols did act as a major trade route to Jorvik and other areas of the Danelaw.



## Social classes

The Viking Class system could be split into three main areas - earls, free men (and women), and slaves.



## Free men

Most people in Viking society fell into the second social class: free men (Old Norse karlar, singular karl).

Most free men were farmers. Fishermen and crafts people. Some farmers owned and worked their own land, while others laboured for the wealthier farmers. They would often do this in exchange for permission to farm a portion of their employer's land.



## The earls

(Old Norse jarlar, singular jarl) were at the top of the social hierarchy. Traditionally the earls were chieftains, warlords or leaders who had won great wealth and a following of loyal warriors through their successes in battle and raiding.

Later in the Viking Age, when the first kings rose to power in Scandinavia, the earls became aristocrats who were subordinate to the kings and held land for them at their pleasure.

Some free men would be fishermen making a living off the sea or what they could catch from the inland waterways of the Wirral. Fishing would have been a substantial way to make enough food to survive the harsh winters.



In 1066 (after the time we portray) Upton had to pay a request for 1000 eels per year tax, to be paid to the Normans so it can be seen that even a supposedly inland, landlocked area like Upton must have had access to Eels either via the inland marshes or special eel ponds.



The final group of freemen would have been the warriors.



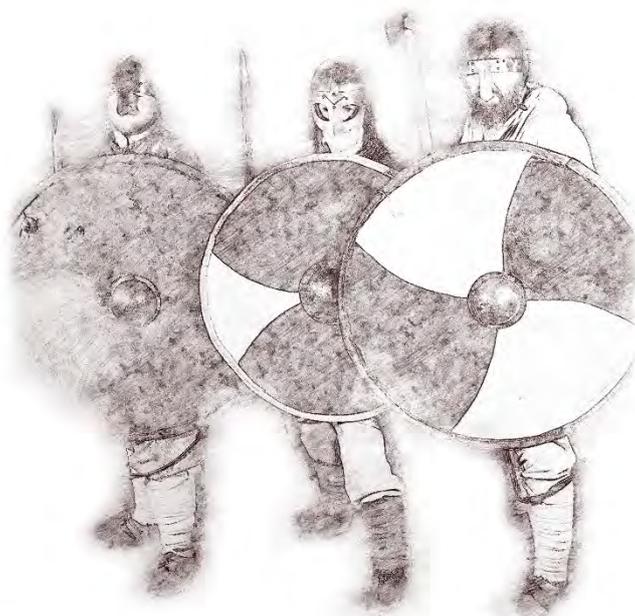
Some free men were craftsmen or merchants, making a living from what they could make or sell. Meols was an important trade route meant that the area would have had craftsmen and merchants that related to the ongoing trade.

In times of crisis all freemen would have been expected to heed the call and fight. These warriors would be armed with basic weapons like two handed spears.



The Earl might have had a small retinue of retained warriors. He would have to feed and pay them so maybe most of the warriors became farmers as well with just a small guard for himself.

Some were blacksmiths making weapons and also making nails and parts for the boats on the shores.



The farmers would have traded the wool they could have sheared from their soay sheep reared on the damp rich pasturelands of the inland seas.



Viking warriors primarily came from the class of free men. They tended to be young men who had little wealth to their names, and who went raiding in order to acquire some, whether in the form of allotted land to farm, or portable wealth like silver.

They were generally unmarried, and so had no duties tying them down to a farm and domestic life in general.



**Slaves** (Old Norse þrælar, singular þræll) made up the third and lowest part of Viking society.

They were usually either used for farm work or sold, sometimes within the owner's home region and sometimes abroad in the slave trade that flourished throughout Europe and Asia at the time.

There were various ways to become a slave in the Viking Age. The first was simply to be born to a slave, since the children of slaves were also slaves.

The second was to be captured in battle. The way of thinking meant that anyone captured in battle and whose life was spared had been given a gift of his life, which he had to pay back with his freedom.

The third way to become a slave was to go bankrupt. An extremely poor but free person could give up his freedom to a better-off person in exchange for having his material needs taken care of. This was especially common when the poor person had gotten that way due to debts, in which case his freedom was the only thing he had to offer to repay that debt.

Inheritance customs in the Viking world typically meant that the older a son was, the more he could expect to inherit from his father, so Viking raiders might also have been disproportionately younger sons who hadn't inherited much from their fathers.

These men might have been dissatisfied with their life in their home countries and wanted to better themselves and as they were free and not slaves, they had the ability to do so.

Free men enjoyed the protection of the laws unlike slaves who had only limited rights.



## The clothes of Wirral

The different inhabitants of Wirral, their social classes and trades are all represented by Wirhalh Skip Felagr. The following images represent a mere fraction of the everyday lives portrayed by Wirhalh Skip Felagr.



### Jarl

Our Jarl is all his finery. The leader of our group. His bright clothes represent his wealth. They have been overdyed many times to achieve the bright colours he wears.



### Jarl hearthguard

The Jarl's hearth guard. Loyal protector of the Jarl.



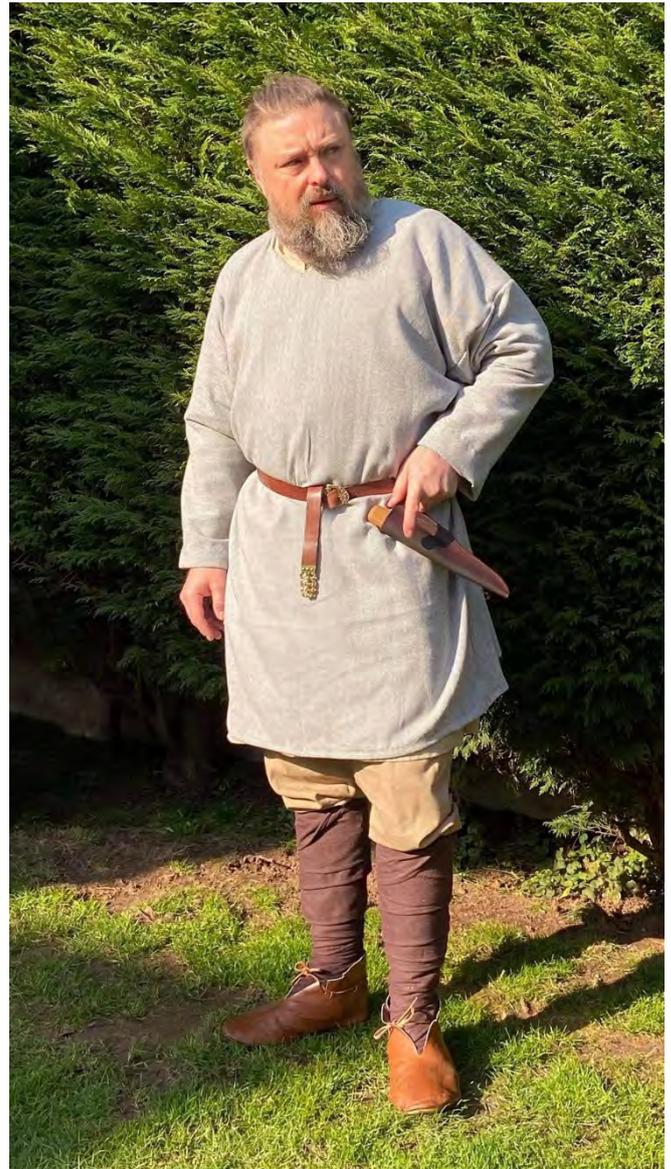
## warriors - viking

The viking and anglo-saxon warriors were quite close in the clothing of their warriors. The cost of mail meant that only the closest warriors to the Jarl, His guard would have mail.



## warriors - anglo saxon

The Anglo Saxon warrior would carry similar weapons and armour but would also carry a Seax, a long bladed knife worn on the belt.



## Freemen

The freemen, the local farmers fishermen and hunters could still have skills needed in everyday life as well as on the battlefield. Sometimes the hunters had talents that would be used on the battlefield to 'snipe' at specific targets.

## Freemen

Local men would be called to fight in the fyrd. Spears would be there typical weapon. Either 9ft maybe without a shield or a 6ft single handed spear with a shield for defence.



## Freeman

Our Freeman could have a varied style of clothing depending upon their wealth and occupation. From the warrior on the far right. A member of the Welsh next to them and then the poor fyrd and richer fyrd members to the left.



## Farmer

The farmer with his day kit off to tend his local Soay sheep. His pack would contain all the items he may need for the day. Including food, knives, rope, water, food and a sleeping roll in case he had to stay out overnight

## monk of st benedict

Even though the Vikings and Saxons of the time lived in relative piece locally. The Church kept a watchful eye over them all. It seems a strange coincidence that when Ingimundr arrived on the Wirral in 902AD the ministry built a church looking over the viking enclave.