

From Cilgwri to Westernesse - Wirral in Medieval Legend

By Gavin Chappell

Medieval Wirral was ‘the wilderness of Wirral,’ appearing in legend as a semi-mythical place with Arthurian connections. Sir Gawain rode through Wirral, a traitor knight fled here in the tale of *Libeaus Desconus*; even in Celtic legend, King Arthur’s knights visit Wirral while aiding Culhwch in his quest to win the hand of the fair Olwen. Yet the legend that seems most closely linked with the peninsula is one that might shed light on Wirral’s lost history.

Celtic Legend

The earliest reference to Wirral in medieval legend comes from the collection of tales named the *Mabinogion* by their nineteenth century translator, Lady Charlotte Guest. It appears in the tale of *Culhwch and Olwen*, preserved in *The Red Book of Hergest*, written about 1400, now kept in the library of Jesus College, Oxford.

The story itself is thought to have been composed much earlier, in the tenth century, and it is held to be one of the earliest surviving prose tales of King Arthur. It tells the story of young Culhwch, a cousin of Arthur, who asks the king for aid in his attempt to win the hand of Olwen, daughter of chief giant Yspaddaden. Arthur agrees, and sends his best men to aid Culhwch. Yspaddaden lays numerous obligations upon Culhwch; the youth cannot marry Olwen without fulfilling them. One involves hunting the boar *Twrch Trwyth*, which cannot be achieved without the aid of Mabon son of Modron, who was “...taken from his mother when three nights old, and it is not

known where he now is, nor whether he is living or dead.” (Lady Charlotte Guest’s translation).

In their quest for one who knows of Mabon’s whereabouts, Arthur’s men question a series of wise animals. They

...came to the Ousel of Cilgwri. And Gwrhŷr adjured her for the sake of Heaven, saying, "Tell me if thou knowest aught of Mabon the son of Modron, who was taken when three nights old from between his mother and the wall."

And the Ousel answered, "When I first came here, there was a smith's anvil in this place, and I was then a young bird; and from that time no work has been done upon it, save the pecking of my beak every evening, and now there is not so much as the size of a nut remaining thereof; yet the vengeance of Heaven be upon me, if during all that time I have ever heard of the man for whom you inquire. Nevertheless I will do that which is right, and that which it is fitting that I should do for an embassy from Arthur. There is a race of animals who were formed before me, and I will be your guide to them."

So they proceeded to the place where was the Stag of Redynvre...

(Ibid).

An ousel is a blackbird; Cilgwri is the Welsh name for Wirral. So Arthur's men came to Wirral seeking wisdom from an elderly local blackbird!

Sir Gawain

The next Arthurian story to mention Wirral comes from a manuscript roughly contemporary with the Red Book of Hergest.

In *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight* Sir Gawain rashly accepts a challenge one New Year from a giant green knight who rides into Arthur's court. The Green Knight says that he will let anyone strike him with an axe on the condition that he can give a return blow in a year's time. Gawain decapitates the giant, but the headless body picks up its head which tells Gawain to meet him at the Green Chapel in a year to fulfil the agreement.

Ten months later, Gawain rides north from Arthur's court. He enters North Wales, where

*...All the isles of Anglesey on his left hand he holds,
and fares over the fords by the forelands,
over at the Holy Head, till he regained the shore
in the wilderness of Wirral – lived there few
that either God or man with good heart loved.
And ever he asked, as he travelled, of any he met,
if they had heard any noise of a knight in green,*

*in any place thereabouts, of the Green Chapel;
and all answered him no, that never in their life
had they seen a stranger of such hues...*

(Author's translation)

Eventually, Sir Gawain reaches the Castle Hautdesert where he stays for Christmas with its owner, Sir Bercilak. Here he learns of the Green Chapel's location, where he faces his final test.

Various clues suggest that the anonymous poet of *Sir Gawayne* came from the vicinity of Wirral. The poem itself is written in the medieval dialect spoken in Cheshire, and it is noticeable that the picture of Arthur's kingdom is vague until it reaches North Wales and Wirral. And after leaving Wirral, a place the poet seems to have held with distaste, Gawain rides back into the world of Arthurian legend.

A theory has been put forward that the poet was Sir John Stanley, brother of Master Forester Sir William, a general ne'er-do-well, sometime outlaw, sometime Knight of the Garter, who joined his brother in terrorising the people of Wirral during the fourteenth century. If Sir John was the poet, his description of the peninsula as a place whose inhabitants were unloved by God or Man seems more than a little ironic.

The Fair Unknown

Medieval Wirral also appears in a poem about Gawain's illegitimate son Guinglain, *Libeaus Desconus*.

Guinglain grows up in the forest, his mother an elf-maiden, his father (and indeed his own name) unknown. He becomes a knight at Arthur's court, and is given the name Libeaus Desconus, the Fair Unknown. Shortly after, a damsel and a dwarf ride in to tell Arthur that the Lady of Sinadon has been imprisoned by sorcerers. To the damsel's anger, Arthur gives the quest to the new-made knight. Despite the doubts of the damsel, Libeaus soon proves himself by defeating a series of giants and similar antagonists. These include a traitor knight, who the dwarf identifies him as Sir Otis

...that served my lady some while

seemly in her hall.

When she was take with guile,

He fled for doubt of peril

West into Wirral.

(Author's translation).

The implication seems to be that Wirral is a haunt of outlaw knights. Perhaps this is a reference to the Stanleys. Guinglain defeats Sir Otis and his men in a "green forest" – is this the Forest of Wirral? It seems that he is unconsciously retracing his unknown father's footsteps.

This poem is to be found in a manuscript (MS Cotton Caligula A.ii), preceding Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal. Libeaus Desconus'* author is unknown, but some scholars suggest that Thomas Chestre also wrote it. Although Chestre wrote in the dialect of the southeast Midlands, his surname suggests that his ancestors came from

the vicinity of Wirral. The peninsula's appearance in the poem is unexpected, not to say bizarre, but the poet's opinion seems to agree with that of the Gawain poet.

King Horn

The fourth and final medieval poem to describe Wirral never refers to it by name.

However, scholars such as WH Schofield (in *The Story of Horn and Rimenhild*) are sure that Westernesse, main location of the poem *King Horn*, is Wirral – its translation being 'peninsula in the west.' The name may be familiar to readers of Tolkien; he borrowed it from the medieval poem.

Horn is the son of the king of Suddene, an island identified with the Isle of Man, which during his youth is attacked by Saracen pirates. He and his companions are set adrift in a boat by the Saracen leader, who refuses to kill them outright because he is impressed by Horn's bravery. The boat drifts ashore in Westernesse, a land ruled by King Ailmar. Horn comes to Ailmar's court where he falls in love with the king's daughter, Rymenhild. The Saracens attack Westernesse and Horn defeats them, becoming a hero. However, although his love for Rymenhild is requited, Horn has a rival, the steward Fikenhild who poisons Ailmar against him, resulting in Horn's exile. Horn departs, telling Rymenhild that if he does not return within seven years, she is free to marry another.

He joins King Thurston in Ireland and fights for him for seven years, during that time meeting the Saracen leader, who he kills in combat. Soon after, Horn

is downcast to hear news of Rymenhild's imminent marriage to King Modi of Reynes (identified by Schofield as Furness in Cumbria). He returns in disguise to find the marriage has already taken place. When Rymenhild learns that Horn still lives, she tries to kill herself in despair: she has no love for King Modi. Horn and his men attack the castle and fight Modi and the wedding guests, killing them. Ailmar agrees to the marriage between Horn and Rymenhild, but Horn refuses to marry until he has freed Suddene from the Saracens. After many more adventures, Horn and Rymenhild become king and queen of Suddene.

If Westernesse is to be identified as Wirral, as WH Schofield suggests, when exactly is the story set? The poem itself dates from the thirteenth century but it seems to refer to earlier times. The Saracens are clearly an anachronism; no Islamic corsairs were to be found in these waters before the Barbary Pirates, centuries later. However, pagan pirates of another denomination were a significant feature in the ninth to eleventh centuries, and it is generally believed that the Saracens of King Horn were originally Vikings. The Norsemen settled in Wirral, as is well known, and many place names of Norse origin prove this. But is there evidence of an attack like the one in King Horn?

In the year 980, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the Vikings renewed their attacks on England, raiding not only Southampton and Kent, but also Cheshire. The *Life* of St Werburgh states that the Vikings ravaged Wirral and describes them as 'subreguli' – under-kings. They seem to have been the Vikings known to the Welsh Annals as the Black Host. Led by Gudrod Haraldsson, king of the Hebrides, these raiders terrorised the lands around the Irish Sea throughout the 970s and 980s. Gudrod

seems to have had connections with the Isle of Man and he may have fought a battle there in 987; furthermore, he was killed in Ireland in 989. Could he be the inspiration for the Saracen leader in *King Horn*? The Saracen who attacked Suddene (the Isle of Man) and Westernesse (Wirral), and died fighting in Ireland?

If so, could the story of *King Horn* have its basis in fact? Perhaps it sheds some light on life in Wirral during the tenth century. Although Wirral's Viking settlement in the early 900s is chronicled, history otherwise remains silent until the Norman Conquest. Maybe the events of *King Horn* fill some of that gap. As for the name Westernesse itself, it represents an Old Norse original, *Vestrnes*. Perhaps this represents the Viking name for Wirral.

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