



St Olave's Church  
in Chester

# CHESTER'S VIKING KING

*Norwegian writer Astrid Kähler reveals the  
history of Chester's St Olave's Church*

IT may not look much but a small church in Chester has a fascinating history which connects the city with an ancient king of Norway. Olav was crowned king a thousand years ago and the church, which stands just inside the city walls, is one of 57 in Britain which have been named in his honour.

Scaffolding has long been skirting the foundations of the small, quite insignificant looking building

on the corner of Lower Bridge and St Olave streets but efforts are being made to preserve the church and to celebrate British-Scandinavian connections.

Olav Haraldsson, as St Olav was initially called, spent his youth in the early 11th century roaming and plundering east and west, scaring the wits and wealth out of people here and establishing alliances there.

In 1014 he was baptised in Rouen and thereafter embarked on the ambitious goal of becoming the king of Norway at the expense of powerful earls and farmers. In the process, and as a means of obtaining his aims, he worked with zeal, conviction and, in the face of resistance, with the sword, to convert the heathens to the Christian faith. For this he has been credited for having christened Norway.

Olav died in the battle of Stiklestad, Norway, in 1030. According to the legend, the King's body was carried to Nidaros and secretly buried in a sandy hill by the river Nidelva. A year after, he was reinterred, and when the casket was opened 'his cheeks were rosy, and his hair, beard and nails had grown'. A Viking king was dead, but a full-fledged (and bearded) saint was born.

These and other alleged miracles attracted worshippers from near and far to Olav's grave beneath a modest church that would, in time, grow into the Nidaros Cathedral in what is now Trondheim. Here the pilgrims would pray, seek repentance and forgiveness, as well as cures for illnesses.

News of the miracles spread, and churches dedicated to St Olav sprang up everywhere, from Novgorod in the east to Istanbul in the south. One of these is the obscure looking sandstone church on Lower Bridge Street in Chester.

Looks, however, can be deceiving. The church is situated in an area which bears a multitude of silent, but undisputable testimonies of a past teeming with Norse activity. Old records and Norse place names tell their own tales, as do Scandinavian traits like blue eyes, blond hair, as well as other hidden genetic attributes identified by recent DNA studies of people in the area.

Yes, many of the Vikings were wild and ill-mannered, to say the least. Yet, incidents of rape, pillaging and uncivilized language aside, the Norse

(Scandinavian people before the Christianisation of Scandinavia) entry into this particular Anglo-Saxon territory is also a story of peaceful trade and settlement. The resulted not only in intermarriage and genetic mixing, but also the mutual exchange of ideas, crafts and physical objects, often yielding novel inventions and unique artistic expressions. A fascinating example of the latter are the hogback stones; Viking grave markers exclusive to the British Isles.

Looking at it this way, Norwegian and British history and culture have a common denominator, and our past is an example of how immigration and successful integration can lead to development, growth and a richer and enhanced life for all parties involved.

Fortunately, many are aware of the importance of preserving our joint heritage, in this case the St Olave Church of Chester. Fearing for the future of the building, a small group in 2008 literally picked up the pilgrim-stick and started a yearly walk, taking place on July 29th, a day in many northern European countries of celebrating Olav's death and ensuing sainthood. The walk goes through the beautiful Wirral-Norse landscape towards Chester. People with a variety of different backgrounds take part, making it an interesting and inspiring venture

on many levels.

The aim of the walk is to create awareness, interest and subsequently funds, not only to preserve, but to infuse new life into the building, hopefully reviving Viking/Norse traditions for the public to see and experience, complimenting already well documented and presented Roman and Anglo-Saxon eras in the historic gem that is the city of Chester. At the same time it is hoped to rekindle tales and enhance travel, trade and team spirit across the North Sea. ♦



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