

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Domini Thorpe, Vikings

Domini Thorpe gave a talk about the Vikings to the January meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall which was well illustrated by artefacts that were passed around the audience.

The talk began with a review of key events in the history of the Vikings in England. The first contact was made when the Vikings attacked the monastery at Lindisfarne in 793. They killed a number of monks and stole many treasures. This began a period of raids around the coast of Britain where the Vikings spread fear by murder and pillage. Eventually, in 865 the Vikings formed the Great Heathen Army which aimed to take land from the four Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Northumbria, East Anglia, Mercia and Wessex, so that they could settle in England. In 869 the Vikings killed King Edmund. The exact site is uncertain but it is thought to be near Thetford which became an important Viking settlement. Edmund was made a saint and remained the patron saint of England until 1350 when he was replaced by St George.

Viking expansion in England was halted by Alfred, King of Wessex, in 878. England was divided into two areas. To the north of a line roughly from London to Chester, Danelaw was established. The land to the south of this was controlled by the Anglo-Saxons. England was united into one kingdom in 954 after the defeat of the Viking King of Northumbria, Eric Bloodaxe. Unfortunately, Viking raids continued and the English king, Ethelred, was in turn replaced by the Viking Sweyn in 1013. He was succeeded by his son Canute and his grandsons until 1066 when William the Conqueror, who had Viking ancestors, established Norman rule. The Viking raids ended.

Domini Thorpe gave an insight into aspects of Viking warrior life through a variety of objects. All of these gave the impression that Viking warriors were very strong. Men wore linen tunics which were topped by a woollen shirt before putting on chain mail which weighed about 10kgs. The head was protected by an iron helmet which over time became increasingly conical in shape so as to deflect blows. A nose piece offered further protection but restricted vision. Shields were made from oak and they too were heavy. Vikings fought using a shield wall. Their main weapons were swords, daggers, axes and spears. A long axe had a shaft which documents indicate created sufficient force to cut through a rider and a horse. Spears were used for stabbing against enemies and were a common weapon as they were cheap to produce as the major cost was the small iron tip.

Drinking vessels were made from animal horn which could also be flattened out to form plates. However, it is a myth that Viking helmets had horns. Antlers were used for knife handles and buckles, along with useful tools such as axes to excavate for flints.

The Vikings were a religious people and the ultimate aim of a warrior was to die in battle so that in his afterlife he could enter Valhalla and enjoy feasting. This tended to exclude women and it is possible that Christianity eventually replaced the old gods because it offered the prospect of heaven to both men and women.

The presentation reflected the detailed knowledge that Domini Thorpe has of the Viking age and her enthusiasm for participating in re-enactments.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be on Wednesday 28 February at 7.30pm at Rickinghall Village Hall when Tony Diamond will be speaking about the Mona Lisa. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website at www.heritagecircle@onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy