

ART. VII – *The West Seaton Viking Sword*

BY B. J. N. EDWARDS, B.A., F.S.A.

At the April 1903 meeting of this Society, held in the Art Gallery at Tullie House Museum, Carlisle, a recently discovered Viking sword was exhibited by the Revd C. T. Phillips, Vicar of West Seaton or North Side. The text relating to this in *Transactions*¹ reads as follows:

This sword, which had been dug up recently, during the making of a new road about 80 yards north of the river Derwent, upon a gravel ridge known as Oysterbanks, was found in two pieces, one 19 inches long and comprising the pommel, guard, and part of the blade, complete though greatly rusted; and the other a bent-up part of the blade, including the point. This part when straightened out would be 12½ inches long, making a total length (if nothing is missing) [of] 31½ inches. The total weight is 3lb. 4oz. The pommel is of the large size common in Viking Age swords, measuring 2¾ inches in length, 2 inches in breadth, and 1½ inches in height; dome-shaped, but too rusted to show detail. The grip is 3¼ inches in length; the breadth of the tang where it joins the guard is 1¼ inches; its thickness ⅝ inch. The guard is straight, 5¼ inches long; narrowest where it joins the blade, but widening out to 1⅝ inch, and apparently holding the remains of a knob or button, as seen in Viking swords. There is only one limb of the guard; the other seems to have lost its knob. The blade is 2 inches wide and ¼ inch thick at the guard. At 2¼ inches from the guard there is a sudden thickening, which seems to be the mounting of the scabbard, and the thickening continues more or less to the point, which is greatly enlarged, apparently from the rusting of the scabbard tip to the blade point. Above this, on the concave side of the bend, the ridge of the blade is visible . . . The breaking and crumpling suggest that the sword was buried with its dead owner, but no signs of an interment are reported from the place where it was found.

It will be noted that nothing is said here about what was to happen, or happened, to the sword after the meeting at which it was exhibited. In effect, as far as the archaeological community was concerned, the sword disappeared. As a result of this, when Cowen published his survey of the evidence for Viking burials in Cumbria,² and when the present writer collected the evidence for Viking artefacts in North West England,³ the brief description of this sword had to end with the forlorn word “Lost”, though Cowen added “(?)”. He also glossed the find-spot as “67 yards south of West Seaton vicarage” (misquoted by the present writer as “south-west”). The site is marked on the 25 in. to the mile O.S. map as “*Viking Sword found A.D. 1901-2*” at a point on the eastern margin of New Bridge Road (now the A597) 88 yards south-east of North Side Vicarage. The NGR is NX/NY 000 296.

So the matter rested for very nearly a century until publicity in the *Cumberland News*⁴ drew attention to the fact that the sword was to be on display for a limited period in the Helena Thompson Museum, Workington, during the summer of 2002. Since the limited period referred to had by that time almost expired, some rapid arrangements had to be made, and, with the agreement of Mr Philip Crouch, Heritage and Arts Manager for Allerdale Borough Council, it was possible to see, sketch and photograph the sword, though under less than ideal conditions. The process, to some extent, was further overshadowed by the fact that the owner of the sword at that stage did not wish his name to be generally known, and even the person whose research had led to its rediscovery, though named in the press, was

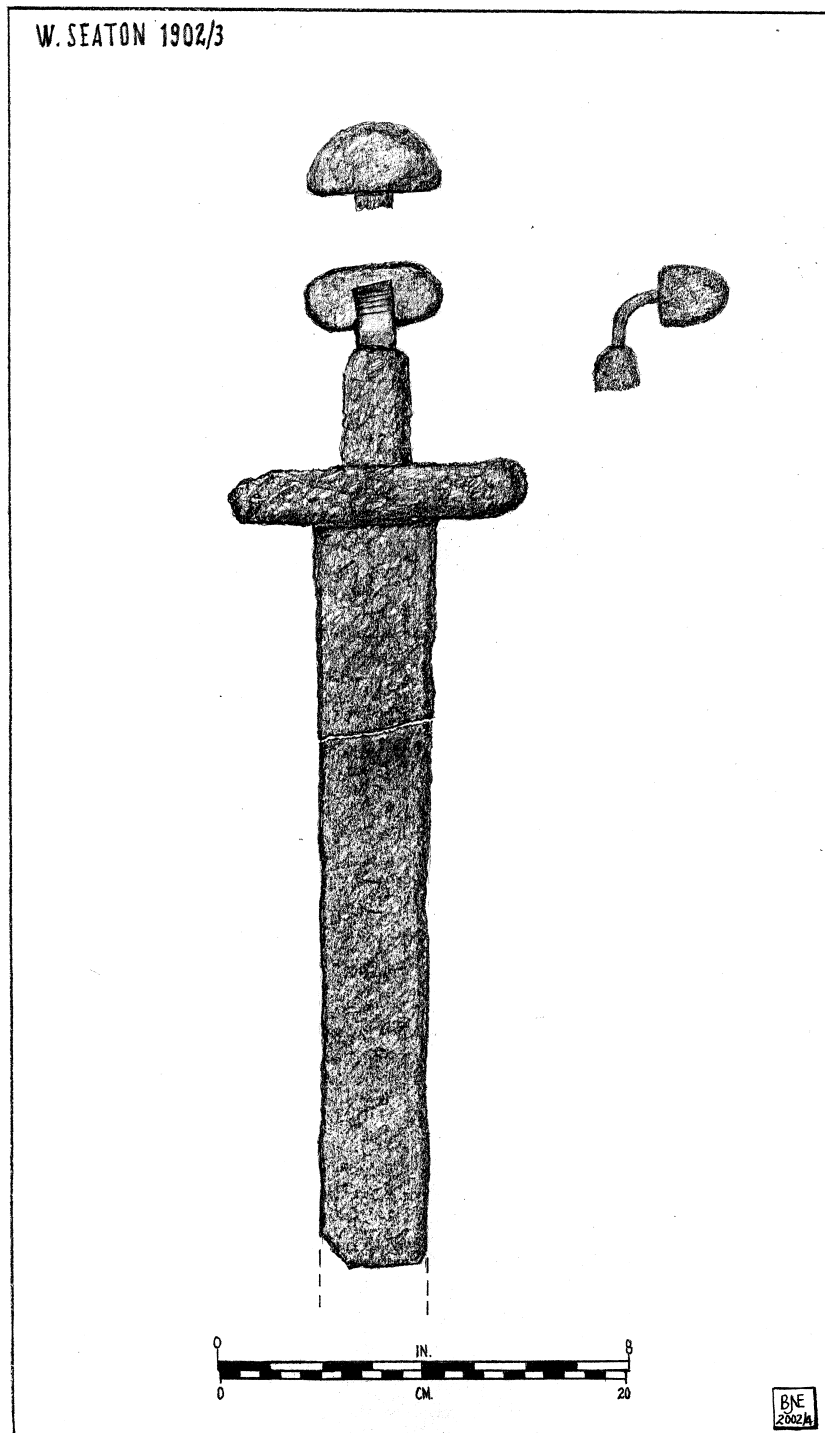


FIG. 1. The West Seaton Viking Sword.

not contactable. It should be said that this somewhat curious situation did not last and has been completely explained.

During the period in which the sword was in the guardianship of Allerdale Borough Council, it was, with the owner's agreement, submitted to the conservation laboratory at the Department of Archaeology in the University of Durham – the resulting report is quoted below (see Appendix I).

The manner in which the sword “disappeared” after the 1903 meeting has been to some extent explained by the researches of Mrs Pat Coyle. She, having, over a number of years, followed various possible avenues in order to discover the sword's whereabouts, eventually decided that, in the context of Workington in the early years of the twentieth century, the most probable clue lay in the influence of the Curwen family. It transpired that the sword was indeed in the keeping of the Curwen family in an apparently purpose-made case of wood and glass in the eponymous late eighteenth century house on Belle Isle, Windermere, which was bought by the Curwen family in 1781 (see Appendix II). It is, nevertheless, strange that the presence there of the sword does not seem to have been known, for example, to W. G. Collingwood, who quoted in his 1923 inventory of Cumberland the 1904 reference to its having been exhibited at Tullie House, but gave no current location.⁵ This is particularly curious because it is almost certain that the account in “Proceedings” of the 1903 meeting was contributed by Collingwood, then the Editor of *Transactions*, as was the very similarly-worded passage which, in his capacity as District Secretary, he presented to the Viking Club for inclusion in its *Saga-Book*.⁶ Mrs Coyle further tells me (*in litt.*) that the sword was on display at Tullie House until 1907, and that it was, according to museum records, “returned to its owner, the Rev. C. T. Phillips”, in 1910.

Of the remains from the 1902 find, there are now eight substantial pieces of iron corrosion products with varying amounts of metallic iron still present. Five of these were submitted to the Durham conservation laboratory, and were given the letters A to E. A is a 26 cm length of blade and has an accurate join to the lowest edge of B, which consists of the pommel, hilt, and guard, together with about 10 cm of the blade (Plate 1). Together these clearly represent the 19-inch portion reported in 1903 (Fig. 1). Any slight discrepancies in measurements are almost certainly the result of the fact that the top of the hilt and the pommel of the sword are bent at right angles to the long axis of the sword and are also twisted somewhat in an anti-clockwise direction, which makes the “length” of this portion of the sword to some extent a matter of opinion.

Item C is a fragment some 20 cm in length, bent into a curve about 18.5 cm across the chord. This, together with three fragments not submitted to Durham and totalling about 11 cm in length, presumably represents the other 12½ inch portion of the original report. There are present, however, yet two more fragments, which were labelled D and E at Durham. The X-ray examination made there, however, suggested that fragments C, D and E were unlikely to have formed parts of the sword. Fragment C, as the conservator suggests, is too thick to have formed part of a sword blade, though its identity with the curved portion reported in 1903 is supported by the fact that it is clear even today what was meant by “The ridge of the blade is also distinguishable in the concave side of the bent part”.⁷

Fragments D and E appear to join, and the X-radiographs reveal both the

presence of a void such as might be the haft-hole of a hammer, and also what appears to be the shape of an end to a hammer-head in plan view (Plate 2). It has to be said, however, that the radiograph of the side view of the two fragments D and E (Plate 3) is much less convincing in identifying them as a separate artefact, and, *pace* the conservator's report, they do seem more likely to be a closely bent-up portion of blade.

What is certainly not traceable today is either "the mountings and tip of the sheath [which] can be traced by thickenings in the mass of rusted iron"⁸ or "the remains of a knob or button such as Viking swords often carry",⁹ whatever exactly that may mean. As far as can be seen today, the sword is a straightforward example of Petersen's type W.¹⁰ Any greater precision is prevented by the state of corrosion which was clearly already present when the sword was found.

That the sword represents a burial is highly probable. If, as seems likely, the blade was bent or folded, this probability is increased. Collingwood, if it were he, quoted both in *Transactions* and the *Saga-Book*, du Chaillu¹¹ for an example of a sword bent up in its sheath, which is described in *Transactions* as being of iron. For bent swords in burials one needs go no further than to Hasket¹² or Ormside:¹³ but, as the conservation report says, scabbards were normally of mixed organic materials, not iron.¹⁴ It should be noted, however, that the mineralised insect pupae identified at Durham do form strong support for the inclusion of the sword with a burial. It is, apparently, the case that carrion-feeding insect larvae tend not to pupate on the body, but migrate to nearby objects, and thus, within the confines of a burial, are often found on subsidiary objects such as swords or spears. The possible presence of mineralised organic matter derived from a scabbard would be of great interest if it could be demonstrated. Reddish fibres visible on the sword derive from the base of its case, this being apparently of red velvet (or more strictly velveteen, for velvet is silk-based), now reduced over the course of a century to the ?cotton base fabric with very small areas of pile surviving.

It remains to consider the significance of the "rediscovery" of this sword. To the extent that, from the first publication of its original finding, it has always been held to be evidence for a burial, the picture has not changed. We do now know, however, what type of sword was involved, and indeed that the original identification of it as a Viking sword was correct; this relied previously on the opinion of the experts of 1903, though, as they included W. G. Collingwood, it was always unlikely that they were wrong. However, what has changed since that date is our perception of the likely significance of the location of the burial. Collingwood noted that the mouth of the Derwent, to the north of which the burial lay, was "a great port, with Roman and pre-Norman remains",¹⁵ an opinion which he elaborated in the *Saga-Book*¹⁶: "It [sc. Oysterbanks, where the sword was found] is opposite the pre-Norman site of St Michael's Church, containing interlaced monuments of the middle and later pre-Norman period. Derwentmouth was the port from which the Lindisfarne monks embarked with the body of St Cuthbert, to escape from the Danes, between 870 and 880 A.D., and must always have been one of the chief harbours of the coast".

The "interlaced monuments" to which Collingwood referred were four sculptured fragments found in 1887.¹⁷ Five more fragments were found in 1926, but these have all subsequently been lost.¹⁸ It is in recent years, in the course of an excavation following a fire in 1997, that much more evidence has been discovered

for Viking period activity in and around the church. This evidence includes a copper alloy buckle and strap-end; a jet spindle whorl; a gold ring; and 22 fragments of stone sculpture.¹⁹

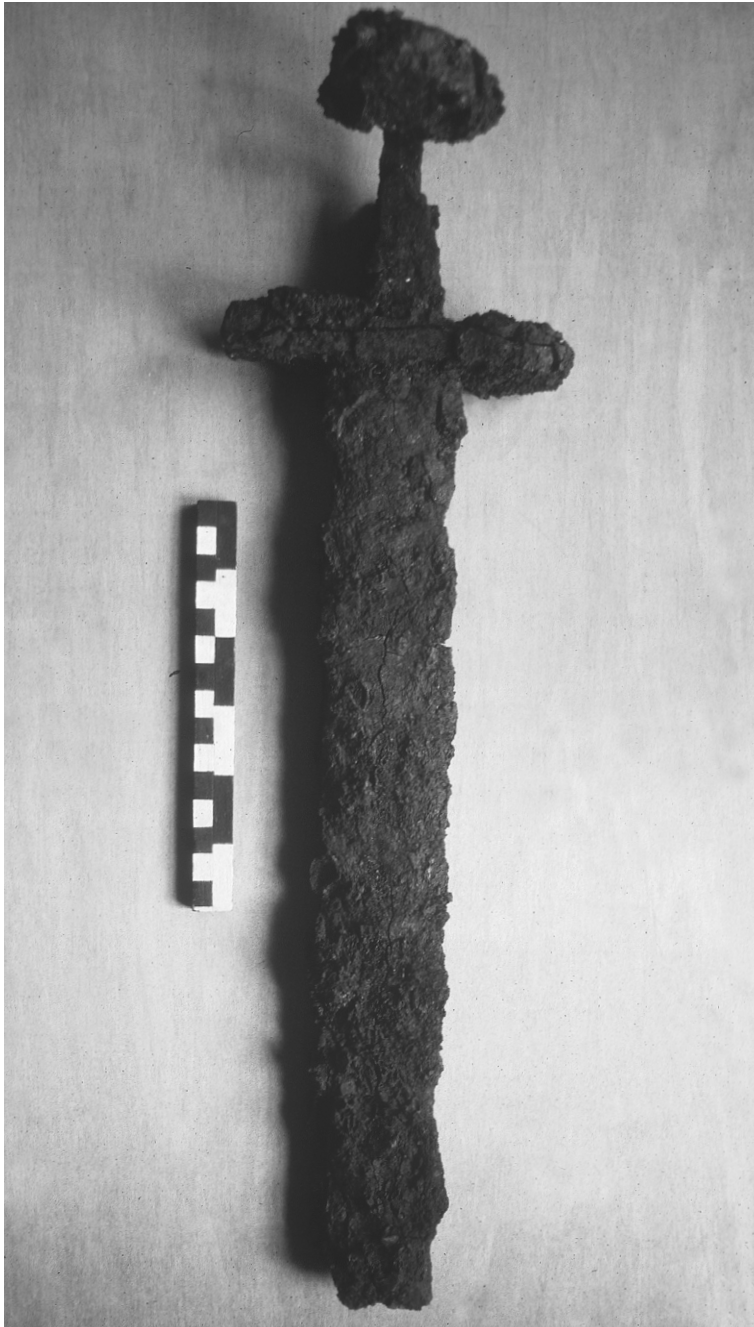


PLATE. 1. The West Seaton Viking Sword.

APPENDIX I – REPORT ON EXAMINATION AND X-RADIOGRAPHY

By Jennifer Jones, Department of Archaeology, University of Durham

Examination and condition

Five pieces of ironwork were examined, including part of the blade and the hilt of a sword. These two pieces have a convincing but damaged join between them. All five pieces are highly corroded, with longitudinal cracking of the surface corrosion products, lamination and loss. Visual examination of the sections at the breaks revealed no evidence of remaining metal in the core of the objects. There are large and small areas of surface corrosion loss, especially around the sword pommel. Surface corrosion products are very uneven, and their dark colour suggests that some or all of the surface has been treated with ?wax at some time in the past. Examination under x16 magnification showed that the ?wax on the blade surface had attracted a lot of dirt/hair and other microscopic debris which is now adhering to the corrosion surface.

Amongst the corrosion products on the sword blade are mineralised insect pupa cases, suggesting that the sword came from a burial. As the mineralised pupa cases are on the surface of the visible corrosion products, this also suggests that there was originally organic material on the sword blade, perhaps a scabbard, into which the eggs were laid. Scabbards were constructed of a combination of materials such as leather, wood and fleece, but no direct evidence was observed as to which of these were present on this sword blade. A more detailed examination of the blade surface and some investigative conservation work would be necessary to confirm the presence of mineralised organics and to attempt an identification of any mineralised organic material found.

X-Radiography

The ironwork was X-radiographed in both plan and side views to assess the condition of the metal and to look for possible pattern-welding of the sword blade and decorative metal inlay on the hilt or pommel. The blade of the sword (A on XRs) is highly corroded and shows no evidence of pattern-welding having been used in its manufacture. The hilt and pommel (B on XRs), which is relatively heavy, still has a lot of metal remaining, but the X-radiographs show no evidence of decorative inlay.

Examination of the XRs of the other three pieces (C, D and E) suggests that they are not after all part of the sword. The thickness of the remaining metal core of the bent piece (C) is much greater than that of the sword blade, and has an oval hole, which can be seen in the XR of its side view. Close examination of this XR shows this to be a perforation through the metal and not a void created by laminated corrosion products. The end of the object closest to the hole can be seen to be rounded and is probably complete. It is suggested that this is part of a tool or weapon (?axe or ?hammer), the perforation being for the insertion of a wooden handle.

The surface appearance and form of the iron corrosion products is fairly similar

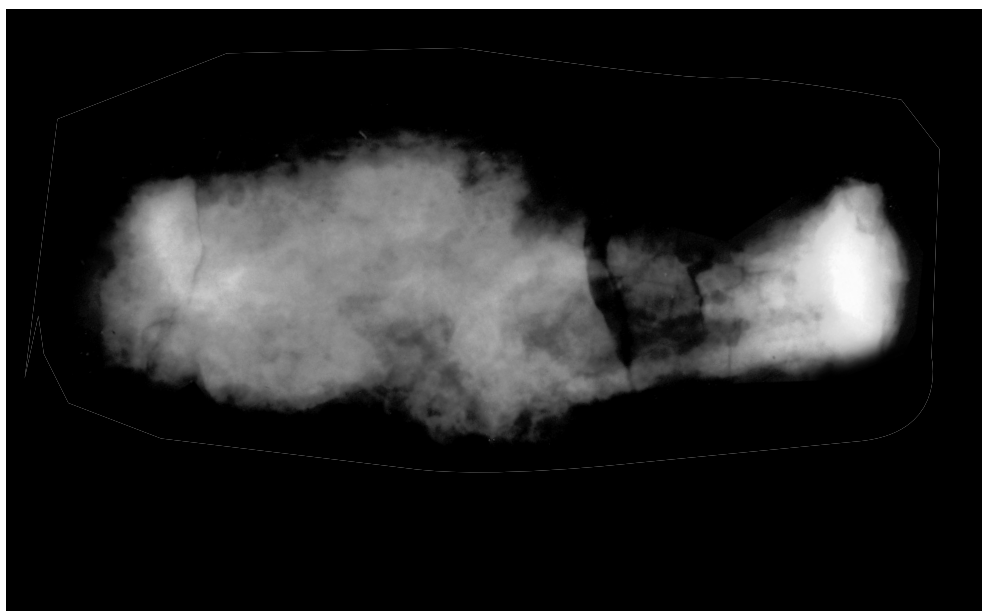


PLATE 2.

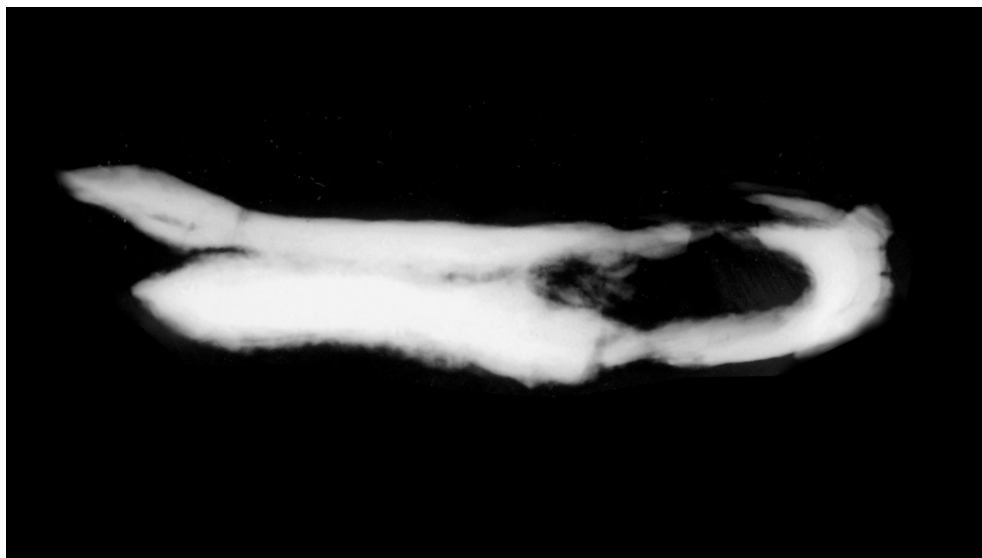


PLATE 3.

PLATES 2 and 3. Plan and side views of fragments D and E from West Seaton.
X-radiographs by courtesy of the Department of Archaeology, University of Durham.

on all the fragments, though the interior of D and E had a reddish hue which was not observed on the other items. From their appearance it is not impossible that all the objects originally came from the same deposit.

APPENDIX II

BACKGROUND TO THE “REDISCOVERY” OF THE SWORD

This Appendix summarises the enquiries as a result of which the sword came to light.

Mrs Patricia Coyle of Workington was the main agent who made the 2002 exhibition of the West Seaton sword possible. It was the culmination of sustained inquiry and research carried out over many years. Mrs Coyle’s first awareness of the sword resulted from her days as a Workington Grammar School sixth-former, pupil of Mr George Scott. Some years later, Mrs Coyle took up tracing the sword as a personal quest, having noted from *Transactions* that it was “lost”. She searched available sources, obtained O.S. co-ordinates for the find-spot, and found a lead in a handwritten book on the history of Workington by Mr Valentine, a well-known local historian, who had included a photograph of the sword, taken at the time of the discovery. Mr Valentine described the sword as “broken and bent as in burial”.

When continued searches in local records, public and private, proved fruitless, Mrs Coyle looked further afield. She discovered that Tullie House records contain an entry noting the display of the sword there in 1907. Another entry records that in 1910 the sword was “returned to the owner, Reverend C. Thompson Phillips”. Mr. Phillips was the vicar of North Side church, Workington. *Crockford’s Clerical Directory* provided information which led to Kendal and the town’s census returns, where Mrs Coyle hoped to trace the vicar’s descendants.

However, it was at this point that Mrs Coyle decided to approach Mr Edward Curwen, descendant of the Curwens of Workington Hall. Mr Curwen, in reply, referred to a rusty sword in a glass case in the house on Belle Isle; he invited Mrs Coyle to visit him to examine the sword; Mrs Coyle accepted the invitation and took with her Mr Valentine’s photograph. It matched the sword, producing what Mrs Coyle, in her letter to me, has described as “one of the more exciting moments in my life”.

On Edward Curwen’s death, the sword passed into the keeping of the present Mr Curwen. It was he who permitted the exhibition of the sword at the Helena Thompson Museum in Workington during the summer of 2002.

After “finding” the sword, Mrs Coyle felt there was still work to do. A local history interview brought her into contact with an old man who remembered the discovery of the sword, mentioned that it was found “in a funny bit o’ ground” and revealed that, about seven years earlier, a skeleton had been found there. “Could this have been the Viking who owned the sword” Mrs Coyle wondered? Searches in Camerton parish registers provided no clues about a re-interred skeleton. Mrs Coyle then contacted the local coroner, Mr Gough, who explained that in such cases a coroner exercises discretion, and if a skeleton was clearly ancient, an inquest might well not be held. Further enquiry produced the name of the policeman for the area

of the discovery and Mrs Coyle hoped that his notes might refer to the finding of the skeleton. Here, however, luck ran out; for police records for 1890-1905 had been destroyed in a fire. Searches in newspaper archives in Carlisle, however, produced a short report that a skeleton had been unearthed in the vicinity of North Side Vicarage in 189? Mrs Coyle also tracked down another mysterious burial in the same area, but she was sworn to secrecy on the details. She has inevitably wondered if this second instance in fact was linked with the other in some way. It is to be hoped that further light will be shed on this matter.

Acknowledgements

This account was made possible through the efforts of a number of people. Firstly, thanks must be given to the Curwen family, and particularly Mr Eldred Curwen, for sanctioning the exhibition, examination and publication of this important sword. Mrs Pat Coyle of Workington, a well known local historian, carried out sustained investigation, made the crucial breakthrough which established the location of the sword, and prevailed upon the owner to permit its exhibition. Mr P. Crouch, Heritage and Arts Manager for Allerdale B.C., has been very helpful to the writer in facilitating vital contacts and exchanging information. Dr J. Jones of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Durham has kindly permitted the reproduction of her report. A debt of gratitude to Mr Jeremy Godwin is acknowledged, for it was his inclusion of a relevant newspaper cutting, in material sent to the editor of this Society's *Newsletter*, which led to the writer's awareness of the exhibition of the sword at the Helena Thompson Museum, Workington. Finally, thanks are due to the editor of this Society's *Newsletter*, Margaret Edwards, the writer's wife, for help with photography and the presentation of this paper.

Notes and References

- ¹ "Proceedings", *CW2*, iv, 335.
- ² Cowen, J. D., "Viking burials in Cumbria", *CW2*, xlviii, 73-76.
- ³ Edwards, B. J. N., "The Vikings in North-West England: the Archaeological Evidence", 43-62 in Graham-Campbell, J. (ed.), *Viking Treasure from the North West; the Cuerdale Hoard in its Context* (Liverpool, 1992).
- ⁴ Friday 14 June 2002.
- ⁵ Collingwood, W. G., "An Inventory of the Ancient Monuments of Cumberland", *CW2*, xxiii, 206-276 at 249.
- ⁶ "Reports of District Secretaries", *Saga-Book of the Viking Club*, 3 (for 1901-1903), 302-303.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 302.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Petersen, J., *De norske vikingsverd* (Christiana, 1919).
- ¹¹ du Chaillu, P. B., *The Viking Age* (1889), I, 137.
- ¹² Hodgson, C., "An account of some antiquities found in a cairn, near Hesket-in-the-Forest, in Cumberland, in a letter from Mr. Christopher Hodgson to the Rev. John Hodgson, Secretary", *AA1-2* (1832), 106-109.
- ¹³ Ferguson, R. S., "Various finds in Ormside Churchyard", *CW1*, xv, 377-380.
- ¹⁴ For a diagram of a Viking scabbard of organic materials, see Bersu, G. and Wilson, D. M., *Three Viking Graves in the Isle of Man*, Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph Series, No. 1 (1966), 53, fig. 33, from Ballateare.

¹⁵ Collingwood, 'Proceedings' as n. 1, *supra*.

¹⁶ *Saga-Book*, 303.

¹⁷ Bailey, R. N. and Cramp, R. J., *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, Volume II, Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire North-of-the-Sands* (Oxford, 1988). Workington Nos. 1-4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Nos. 5-9.

¹⁹ Objects on display at St. Michael's church and documents held there. The excavation has not yet been published.