

## **Intro (In front of exhibition)**

Jacquetta Hawkes famously wrote that ‘Every age gets the Stonehenge it deserves’, by which she meant that Stonehenge has been a Druid temple, a landing site for flying saucers, or an astronomical calendar, according to the interests of the times. The same could be said of our stories about Vikings. They have been alternately, noble savages, raiders, marauders and ravagers, peaceful traders, entrepreneurs, explorers, early democrats, socialists, or IKEA sales personnel, according to what we want them to be. This tour of The Museum’s Viking exhibition invites you to get inside the world of the Victorians through their interpretation and writings on the Vikings. The Victorians enthusiasm for the old world of the Norse created a Viking Revival, influencing everything from music and poetry to shipbuilding and Empire.

From the first recordings of the Old Norse society in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the raiders from the North were considered brutal pagans, savage warriors who killed, looted, and turned their back on the face of God, until they converted to Christianity, learned the error of their ways and became “civilized” into the rest of Europe. From the late 18th century, however, Vikings began to become fashionable precisely because they were considered barbarians. Vikings and other early medieval cultures provided indigenous European examples of Rousseau’s ‘Noble Savage’. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, however, the Vikings transformed into not savages but early entrepreneurs, explorers and technological innovators.

In many ways the Victorians invented the Vikings. Great writers such as Sir Walter Scott, Anthony Trollope, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Tennyson all were captured by the Sea Kings. There were works written for all conditions of men, some conditions of women, and quite a few conditions of children.”

Follow me on our journey into the Victorian world. All the material used for this tour comes from Victorian sources, and I will tell you the story from the lips of Victorian men and women. The Victorians created the modern museum as we know it, and their obsessions with archaeology, folk culture, anthropology Empire, and natural history resulted in 'cathedrals to science'. As we enter the exhibit you may find a number of the qualities which once attracted Victorians to the Vikings disturbing, showing extreme prejudice, but others that remain stubbornly seductive ... Follow me.

## **1. Legend of the Vikings –shaping the history of Europe –contact, conquest, settlement**

That Great Britain belongs to the North only, and that she was wrong when in any period thinking herself belonging to the South, we can certainly state as beyond all doubt! There is something rather Victorian in the concept of efficient transport, not to mention empire building, be that through domination and war or social integration, and perhaps that's why there came in recent years to be such an interest in Viking culture with its great ships and fighting explorers. Several archaeological sites bringing new intelligence to light, with runic inscriptions leading on to contemporary interpretations of the old Icelandic sagas.

We Victorians long to draw connections between our Norse Ancestors, and ourselves. I will tell you a secret. Since our glorious Queen Victoria has ascended the throne and married her German cousin, Prince Albert, there has been much concern of the Hanoverian Royal Family's ties to the German race and a great fear of the "Germanizing" of our country, God forbid! Let us look back to our connection to the North Lands, and see it is not our German roots which have made us triumph in this great age, but our ties to the Legends of the great Sea Kings, the Vikings! Why, it was even claimed that Queen Victoria is descended from a certain Ragnarr Lodbrok who had once been a famous Viking chief. Indeed many believe she has the blood of the great Odin himself in her veins.

Odin "Was a mighty Scythian leader who had once challenged the tyranny of Rome. Can he now act as a role model for ambitious Victorian young achievers? I believe it is so.

Let me introduce myself, I am Elizabeth Jane Oswald, a great explorer and writer who has been to Iceland and written travelogues, novels, and translations focusing on the Vikings. As a professor of Kings College London stated in 1861. The Vikings were like our great Victorian Britain: fifty years before all the rest of the world with her manufactories, and firms and five and twenty before them with her railways. The Victorians and the Vikings were foremost in the race of civilisation and progress; well started before all the rest had thought of running. No wonder, then, that both won. Richard Burton accuses many of us of having Iceland on the Brain, that we romanticise these great Sea Kings. But I assure you, this is not the case! For we are a scientific age!

I am here to tell you the Great Story of the North, which should be important to our history in the future when the change of the world makes our race nothing more than a name of what has been — a story too. Perhaps we can learn from this history, the future of Great Britain.

## **2. Quotes of Ships –going to Vinland Vikings as travellers**

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Look at this glorious quote of the great explorers of the sea, the Vikings! Now, the term 'Viking' only really came into common use at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the Norsemen and their sagas became a source of interest in lectures, poems and novels. The word has its original source in the travels that the Norsemen made, when leaving their homes and setting out to go 'a viking' in other lands, sailing fast and efficient boats to search for new trade or spoils of war.

Those ships fill me with romance. The brides of the Vikings would become Queens of the Sea, with mad waves and winds for her true subjects. So much of modern life is restrictive. We have lost the true meaning of living with our politeness, our respectability, and our social duties. I would it were possible to see those Viking ships, the great water dragons of the world, swimming with the black raven standard waving on the mast and their decks glimmering with arms rather than fish. To be a Queen of the Sea amongst Sea Kings, living and laughing through the world, and smiling when I quit it. But I digress, let us make our way to the next exhibit.

### **3. Viking Homelands –Sweden, Denmark, Norway**

When I have been in Norway, or Denmark, or among Scandanavians, I have felt something like a cry of nature from within, asserting my nearness to them. In Norway, I have never felt as if in a foreign country: and this I have discovered is a very common experience with British travelers. We are in this country a royal race; descended from no common lot of colonists, but people of a high stamp. As I sat upon the terrace in Oslo... and watched the British squadron quit the harbor... the early history of Norway came home distinctly to my memory, in which was learnt that the Vikings, Norsemen, Danes and other nations of that race, by victories at sea gave kings to neighbouring lands. Britain is one such land, our naval powers show our inheritance from the Sea Kings. Modern day Liverpool has much in common with 10<sup>th</sup> century Norway.

The Victorians are travel mad. Cooks tours are making it easier to travel afar, however, a true Victorian longs to be more than a tourist. Why, with the recent travel to the Arctic and lady travelers such as Gertrude Bell upon the deserts of the Sahara, we long to prove our mettle as intrepid explorers. You must go a long way for romance in these days of steam travel. It is why the true Victorian adventurer seeks out Iceland. It is important, however, to bring along not just your travel attire and tent, but also your collection of the Sagas. Iceland may be a land, dreadful with grinding ice, but there ‘mid the grey grassy dales score scarred by the ruining streams lives the tale of the Northlands of old and the undying glory of dreams?”

However, for all the talk about “manly” Vikings, Iceland has attracted a number of well-informed and hardy women travelers, like myself, The odious William Collingwood (of course he’s a disciple of the known misogynist John Ruskin, look at how he treated his poor wife, such a scandal!), stated uncharitably that we were “English old maids globe trotting,” But I tell you this is not the case. I am not singular in my experiences as a woman traveller, Mary Disney Leath was a great traveller and writer inspired by the Vikings. If you want to read a book of heroines rather than heroes, read of my delightful travels “Of Fell and Fjord”, where I, and two other maiden ladies, hastened to Iceland for a year’s journey. We went to see the very places where events so familiar in books occurred in reality and we found it that the belief was true. For every touch of human interest in the sagas, pastoral, romantic or sublime -there was, and still remain, a landscape setting no less sweet, or strange or stern.

However, a word for the wise, modern hygiene has not reached Iceland, so Women travellers are warned to take their own saddles and not to forget their inflatable rubber baths.

#### **4. the Sound of Icelandic Voices in Old Norse –language**

Listen to the beauty of the language. Ingenuity displayed in the framing and beautifying of every word. These are the external and truly Indian characteristics of Odin's language."

"Icelandic is almost identical with the language in which those bold Vikings expressed their thoughts a thousand years ago. Those Vikings to whom Englishmen owe most of their dash, their love of enterprise, their frankness, their liberty; a race whom their admirers compare the Spartans in deliberate valour and mother wit, and with the Athenians daring and genius."

Proof of how close we in Britain are to our Norse ancestors, William Collingwood spoke to an Icelandic fisherman in broad Newcastle, and was understood! Perhaps the North of England is indeed populated by the bold Viking warriors of old! Was there not some curious in finding that a rough untutored native of the interior of Iceland, where ages almost glide by and bring no change, where the language spoken is so old a Danish, that it might be the same as our English in olden times. Was it not curious that they could communicate in such a fashion?!

#### **5. Raiders and Invaders –devastating the monasteries**

In the past, the Vikings were associated with wickedness and daring villainy...murders, massacres, pyracies, invasions. However, it was the want of knowing the Northern Languages, that occasion'd this unkind Prejudice towards them: which some have introduc'd out of Rashness, others have taken upon Tradition."

We must see these circumstances from the Sea King's point of view, not solely from the voice of Christian monks. A Sea King, was a chief, generally of royal birth, who had no kingdom to inherit at home, and therefore sought one on the waters. How is this not a parallel to our current men who work in the vast shores of our great Empire? So many of them are second sons, bound not to inherit titles or fortunes at home, so seek their fortunes in far lands. Victorian Britain is bringing to life the great Sea Kings of old. I see in your eye that you are thinking about the people of the lands they seek to conquer? Just as you read this quote from the monk who obviously is in some distress. Well, I am here to show you today how despite the terror and bloodshed of many an English, Scottish, or Irish family, or monastery, or town, or kingdom, during the Viking period, you must think of the long term benefits such invasions give to those conquered, and doubt no more. Let us move on to Fear and Slaughter.

## **6 Fear and Slaughter –Scotland religious communities sacked (I think right next to Raiders and Invaders)/ Fame and Fortune –Returning with treasure and riches“the Sea**

The Sea Kings of the North, as I mentioned before, were a race of beings whom Europe beheld with horror. But let us look at not their brutality, but their fearless valour and intrepid search for fame and fortune. They were men without a yard of territorial property, without any towns or visible nations, with no wealth but their ships, no force but their crews, no hope but from their swords, the sea-kings swarmed on the boisterous ocean, and plundered.

What indomitable rugged energy they had! Silent, with closed lips, as I fancy them, unconscious that they were specially brave; defying the wild ocean with its monsters, and all men and things! Progenitors of our own Blakes and Nelsons! Hrolf or Rollo the Duke of Normandy, the wild Sea King, has a share in governing England in this hour.

I am proud to call myself a Barbarian, a Goth, thank God. I am a daughter of the old dames of Norway, who could send their lovers to battle with a smile, and slay them with their own hands, if they returned with dishonor. My lover must scorn the mockeries by which our degraded race strive for distinction, or must practice them only in sport, and in earnest of nobler dangers. No whale striking, bird nesting favourite for me; any lover must be a Sea King, or what else modern times may give that draws near to that lofty character.

## **7. Archeology –artifacts**

Darwin has made a passion for the study of many things, including archeology. Many an amateur archeologist has sought the sites and burial grounds in Iceland, Norway and Britain in their passion for proof of evolutionary knowledge.

While poets and students meet to read Old Norse songs and poems in British drawing rooms and pubs, they look to archaeology for a Viking Age that can be displayed. Burial mounds are obvious man-made features and targeted for investigation. After the Lewis Chessmen were discovered in 1831, search and discovery of such objects of the Viking history in Britain and Scandanavia became increasingly of interest. If one could find such treasures on the shores of the sea, who knows what secrets lie in the earth. Archeologists opened new sites across Scandanavia, finding royal burial mounds, a glorious ship burial find, and, a virtual treasure trove at the Island of Birka where they excavated over 1,000 graves. Many a Victorian traveler can go and visit an archeological site, bringing back to Britain some of their finds as keepsakes. Look at these artifacts, they are the proud objects of these pioneering archeologists.

## **8. East Anglia and the Vikings**

There has been some interest recently in the history of the Celts in our land. However, I caution you, as I do many, to know your history, and the significance of Viking influence on not just our land, but our blood. I recollect my ignorant nephew complaining about his need to study the Sagas, reproaching me that “it was not very reasonable to be angry with him for admiring antiquities of his own country more than those of Harolds, Harfeger, and Hacos, as

he ungraciously referred to them as, that I am so fond of.” But I told him, “Why these, sir, these mighty and unconquered Goths, *were* your ancestors. The bare breeched Celts whom they subdued and suffered only to exist like a fearful people in the crevices of rocks, were but their slaves and serfs.” No I remain solely interested in our great Norse ancestry.

## **9. New Lands –explores Britain and Ireland**

The rich relationship between the Vikings and Britain has drawn increasing interest over the century. There is perhaps more of Norse blood in your veins than you know of, whether you be English or Scotch; for these sturdy sea-rovers invaded our lands from north, south, east and west many a time in days gone by, and held it in possession for centuries at a time, leaving a lasting and beneficial impress on our customs and characters. We have good reason to regard their memory with respect and gratitude, despite their faults and sins, for much of what is good and true in our laws and social customs, much of what is manly and vigorous in the British Constitution, and much of our intense love of freedom and fair play, is due to the pith, pluck and enterprise, and sense of justice that dwelt in the breasts of the rugged old seakings of Norway! Many societies in London now triumph this Viking heritage. Of Odin’s mead let draught in England now be quaff’d.

If you long to travel to Norway or Iceland to see the Viking realm, but find you cannot afford the expenditure to these distant lands, do not fear! For the Lake District holds much of Iceland in it. Read the sagas and gambol through the glorious lakes. Indeed, many saga stories published in recent years are set in the Lake District, drawing more connections between Britain and the Northlands every day. The enterprising Cooks Tour has profited on this, making custom made trips to the Lake District to satisfy our public’s thirst for all that is Viking.

## **10. A way of life –Viking settlement and integration with Britain**

Our inheritance of the Vikings is in our industrialism and progress. It is not their blood in our veins, but the Viking spirit in Victorian minds. The Goths’ wildness of imagination transcended the bounds of the existing world. The Goth were only barbarians in the eyes of their opponents. What we need to learn from Viking sagas, poems and mythology is not the characteristics of blind and brutal barbarism, but rather their generosity of spirit.

Indeed from a female point of view, there is much we can learn and gain from Viking freedoms. Who is so free as the woman that left her man at a word, taking the portion that belonged to her, and quitting herself of all ties—and none blamed her? We should praise the relative ease Viking women and men could obtain a divorce, and the full property rights given to women – similar provisions in late Victorian Britain might liberate a good many couples.

## **11 The hammer and the cross –new religion –old religion and influence of their old religion on art, imagery, and story telling even after it was no more**

Many sites in Britain have been examined in recent years drawing connections between Old Norse traditions and Christian imagery. There have been crosses with Norse imagery, and much more of a combining of the two religions than previously considered. As the great archaeologist, Hardwicke Ramsey wrote about a cross found in Cumberland: “We are not wiser than the seers of Old, Our fathers –they twelve hundred years ago, Hewed from its silent place this prophet stone, And bade the sacred Yggdrasil uphold, A Balder-Christ whose triumphs should be told in pagan picture –here the battle won by Horn’s blast; there the Horse with Death thereon cast down for years whose coil is endless rolled. Preacher of Christ, stone-lipped, and not in vain, Preacher of Women’s love to help her Lord, By faithful tendance, yea, though earth should quake, for lo! Her feet upon the buried snake, here Mary stands beside the Christ in pain! Then Loki’s queen prevents with cup the poison poured!

In my travels, I learned to visit each lonely barrow, I knew where the sacrifices were made of yore to Thor and to Odin –one what stoned the blood of the victims flowed, where stood the dark browed priest –where the more distant crowd looked on in awe or in terror.

## **12. Fashion -Viking Influence**

the Vikings were friends of every elegant art, and useful science. This art has been taken up in recent years by William Morris and the PreRaphaelites. By novelists and poets and illustrators. So the glorious art of the Vikings may finally achieve the importance they deserve.

## **13. Saga and Legends**

If you delight in the gigantic, but pale forms which float on the mist, and darkly whisper of the world of spirits, and of the vanity of all things save true honour —then I must refer you to the saga-stored world of the North, where Vala chanted the key tone of creation.

One area of pride for the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the abundance of new translations of little or unknown sagas in English. There were none before 1750, now there are hundreds of translations and adaptations of the Sagas. Our children now grow up to the stories of Thor and Odin, rather than only those of Odysseus and Achilles.

The many translations into English of the Sagas, attempt to render from Icelandic, a language spoken by only about 60,000 or 70,000 people, all told, into English, spoken as it is by a kindred people, a race numbering over one hundred millions, whose maritime enterprise followed by settlement and colonization derived apparently from the Norsemen, have given them the dominion of a great part of the earth. Any failings of translation should not deter

you from seeing the significance in your study of Icelandic stories. Listen closely and contemplate the glories of imperial conquest.

Of even greater importance is the sagas to our Victorian sisterhood! The women in the Sagas are represented as brave and true, and as willing to lay down their lives in a just case as the men. Vindictive and merciless to their foes, yet intensely affectionate and true to their friends, they were worthy of high respect in which they were held, and of the love of heroes.”

#### **14. Tent –good place to perform a bit of Frithers saga**

“There is, a wondrous book of Legends in the Old Norse tongue, of the dead kings of Norway. Legends that once were told or sung in many a smoky fireside nook, of Iceland, in the ancient day, by wandering Saga-men or Scald. Listen on to the story I now begin. I tell you the Saga of Fritiof. This story is little known in your time, but was the most famous saga of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; told and retold in story, opera, and ballad. One of the finest testimonies to the poetic life and its mental vitality. They even wove Queen Victoria into one version of the saga.

A story of star crossed lovers, Fritiof of Sognefjord and the lovely Ingebjorg whose cruel brothers did everything in their power to separate the pair, believing Fritiof unworthy of their sister. They used cruel deception to send Fritiof off on a Viking ship and forced their sister to marry King Hringr.. The valiant Fritiof sailed the lands, becoming a powerful Viking captain and proving his mettle in battle with sea witches and invaders. But he remained sad for the loss of Ingeborg.

Better felt soft kisses from my Bride with Balder/Than, as here I stand, to/ Taste this up-thrown brine./ Better was to encircle/Ingeborg’s waist so slender-/Than, as here, tight-clasping/ This hard Rudder-bar!”

On one of his travels, by chance, Fritiof rescued Ingeborg and King Hringr from falling through the ice. Though tempted to kill the King, the noble Fritiof restrained and threw himself on the mercy of the King, confessing his sad story and undying love for Ingebjorg. Hringr feeling pity for the lover, consents to divorce his bride and let the couple marry and rule his lands in his stead, leaving Fritiof becomes a King with Ingeborg by his side.

There is much of romance in the saga, but it triumphs in how it brings to life the Viking ships and men who sailed the seas:

Dragon shap’d it lay on the sea; full high o’er the waters

Rose its proud head, while its wide throat flam’d with red gold thickly cover’d

Curv’d its strong knit tail, in a ring all scaly with silver.

Black were its wings, with edgings of gold; when each one was full stretch’d. Flew



Widely renown'd was this Ship, of ships most choice in the Northland.

## **15. The Viking Empire**

The news of this part of the exhibition always makes me, and others of my time shudder with dread. If it was expansion that made it hard for the Great Norsemen unable to hold onto their newly fought gains, what might become of us. There is a great fear in our inheritance. Is our empire doomed to fall as the Viking empire did? We have sought the prediction of the end of the Old Norse empire in this famous passage from Voluspa

Brothers shall fight together,

And be one the other's bane;

Sister's children

Their kin shall kill.

Hard is't with the time,

An axe age, a sword age,

Shields are cleft.

A wind age, a wolf age.

Ere the world stoops to doom.

We have heard the stories of the Vikings, and look what happened to them. Could Victorian energy and enterprise also fade away?

## **16. Sea Ship –another little performance space**

Let us hope our tour today of this glorious world may alleviate some of the troubles of modern life. My travels into the Viking realm give me relief from my own world. I wanted to see with my own eyes some of the places where the scenes of the Sagas and legends are laid. I belong to a nation arrived at a very high state of civilisation, artificial in the extreme [...]. And somehow this very modernism begets a desire for reverting now and then to old things, old people, old ballads, old customs – something fresh, and rare, and vigorous. I want to look for a bit at the rock from whence we were digged."

Our resurrection of the Folk tradition, of myths, arts and crafts of old is in part a legacy of our industrial age. The smoke stacks of the factories in Newcastle, Manchester and Yorkshire, the great exhibitions in London showing technological advancements, the railroads, all these

signs of Progress make us lose connections with the traditions of old. As we stand on this ship, travelling across the seas swifter than ever before, I feel us growing more distant from the wonders of the past. Do you not hear the pipes of Pan dying mournfully away in the distance? Do you not see the light of Valhalla glimmering fainter and fainter afar off? Do you not feel the rustling garments of the old deities, as they rush past and vanish forever, like frightened ghosts, into the gloomy recesses of oblivion... The ancient gods are dethroned, as Saturn by his sons, and the realm of poesy shall know them no longer For whom will you sing now? Whose deeds will you chant? When Balder is gone, who is there left to praise? I can only sigh with you over the tarnished splendour of the ancient myths.

66. Þar kemr inn dimmi dreki fljúgandi,  
naðr fránn, neðan frá Niðafjöllum;  
berr sér í fjöðrum, - flýgr völl yfir, -  
Niðhöggr nái. Nú mun hon sökkvask.

66. From below the dragon | dark comes forth,  
Nithogg flying | from Nithafjoll;  
The bodies of men on | his wings he bears,  
The serpent bright: | but now must I sink.

## **17. Legend of Vikings in future (END CONCLUSIONS)**

All generations retell history to suit their current needs. We Victorians reshaped Old Norse mythology and archaeological evidence to match our goals. But the Vikings remain popular in your time. Why do the Vikings hold so much interest? As we see here other generations have used the Vikings for darker purposes. How do you think of them in your time? What values of your present do you transpose upon the great Sea Kings of old?