

## **Meols, Wirral: an ancient port**

In 1846 the Revd Abraham Hume was visiting the parsonage in Hoylake, Wirral. He noticed some ancient artefacts, including a Roman brooch on the mantelpiece. Hume asked how they got there and learnt that local fishermen had found them on the shore at Meols. Realising the importance of the finds, he made efforts to recover further objects.

Meols, on the north Wirral coast, is now seen as one of the most significant ancient sites in the north west of England. For thousands of years, people had made use of a natural harbour called the Hoyle Lake. This gave its name in modern times to Hoylake, the town which grew up nearby. During the early 19th century storms and high tides had progressively washed away occupation deposits from a succession of settlements along the north Wirral coast. In less than a hundred years the shore-line retreated nearly 500 metres at Dove Point. Metal items from these layers were deposited on the beach where they were later found.

The objects range from the Neolithic through to the 18th century. There is a strong emphasis on the later medieval period but also a remarkable group of Roman, Saxon and Viking artefacts. After Hume began to publicise the finds in the 1840s, the site came to the attention of antiquarians who competed for the 'produce of the Cheshire shore'. Many amassed considerable collections. It is estimated that over a fifty-year period well over 5000 objects were found. A selection of the finest were published by Revd Hume in 1863 in his remarkable book, 'Ancient Meols'. Over 3000 objects, including some illustrated by Hume, still survive in modern museum collections, spread between no fewer than six institutions.

Meols' importance through the ages was due to its coastal location beside the Hoyle Lake, a haven on the Irish Sea coast. The objects show that the port began to develop about 2400 years ago, during the Iron Age. Finds such as a silver tetradrachm (a coin) of Tigranes I of Armenia, minted in Syria in the 1st century BC and bronze coins of Augustus, suggest that there had been contacts with France and even the Mediterranean before the Roman occupation of Britain. It is probable that a major item of the trade was salt from the brine springs of southern Cheshire.

Reassessment of the Roman finds suggests military activity at Meols in the pre-Flavian period before the foundation of the fortress at Chester and perhaps a market function afterwards. During the Roman period, the port grew to be the largest settlement in Merseyside. Over 70 Roman brooches and 120 coins have been found. This shows that Meols was a busy trading community. Ships sailing up the west coast of Britain would have stopped off to pick up goods or raw materials and trade pottery and other items. The local people may have lived in circular wooden houses, as the remains of such houses were found on the shore in the late 19th century.