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» such as bird's-foot trefoil and the glorious purple common spotted orchid abound.

A few strides north you'll also meet a grand old Douglas pine and an exotic-looking specimen known as a Pacific madrone. On a sunny afternoon, its rich orange-red bark betrays the fact that this is a native of the California coast. Drift south to strike out on to an expanse of heath and gorse, ablaze with explosions of pink bell heather – one of the few areas of heath on the peninsula. The way the shifting light plays here, it can seem like there are thousands of different shades of green. But be sure to keep a lookout for the massive emperor dragonflies that patrol the canopy and the peacock butterflies that flutter by.

Further along the trail, as the kestrel hovering overhead well knows, is a ridge of sandstone with clear views west to the farmland and estuary spread out below. At the viewfinder atop this, the highest part of Thurstaston Common, you can also look north-east to Liverpool and its imposing Anglican cathedral. This is a great spot for a picnic. Once you're done, amble down the slope to Thor's Rock. Emerging from the bush like a miniature version of Uluru in Australia, this house-sized sandstone outcrop was once thought to be a site where Vikings made blood sacrifices to their god of thunder. That legend was likely a Victorian flight of fancy, but it's great fun to clamber over and explore. From here, another path follows an old sandstone wall north, back toward Royden.

### Winding lanes and rural charm

Beyond the delights of woodland and coast, the Wirral is still, for the most part, a rural landscape – a patchwork quilt of fields given over to mixed farming, horticulture and paddocks. The winding country lanes and hedgerows occasionally give way to garden centres and pretty villages such as Caldy – where millionaire footballers live in red-sandstone mansions. Mostly, though, west Wirral's towns and villages have coalesced



- 5 Were the ancient red sandstones of Thurstaston Common once the scene of Viking blood sacrifices? The Victorians thought so
- 6 The short-eared owl is a regular winter visitor to the Wirral's reedbeds
- 7 Eurasian oystercatchers use their bright bills to prise open mussels and other shellfish
- 8 The marine lake at West Kirby is a protected stretch of water popular with sailors, windsurfers and walkers

into long suburban corridors, which just about cling on to their character in the face of identikit incursions. Still, with the coast never far away, places such as West Kirby, Hoylake and Heswall remain attractive places.

On a fine day, you will enjoy more estuarine treasures as you head down Station Road, off the A540, which winds its way past a beautiful old parish church before straightening out. You soon arrive at the visitors' centre for Wirral Country Park, a short stroll from grass-topped cliffs and golden-ish sands.

From here I have often cycled along the Wirral Way, which follows the abandoned railway line along the coast for 12 traffic-free miles all the way from Hooton, near Chester. For all the abuse Dr Beeching has taken over the years I, for one, am glad that this branch line was cut. I wouldn't otherwise have the wind-in-the-face contentment wrought by dodging chaffinches and tits as they dive between hedges. But you can also take the steps, or a nearby slipway, down to the shore and walk the entire route in bare feet.

Whenever you go, if you allow yourself to be swept down the coast, you'll see its changing character, as sandy shores and mudflats give way to salt marshes thick with maritime grasses. As they sway, I'm »

### Wirral's Viking past

The area has a Norse heritage that still resonates today

One thousand years ago, the Wirral was home to a thriving community of Vikings, mainly of Norwegian descent. These Norsemen arrived in 902AD after being expelled from Ireland and Anglesey. There were no bloodthirsty battles, though. Instead, they secured an agreement from Aethelstaf, Queen of the Merclan English, to settle the peninsula.

They established a port at Meols, where spear- and axe-heads have since been dug from the sands, and a government at Thingwall. This was Britain's first parliament; so what is now a simple field at Cross Hill saw our first political debates.

Don't expect to see ruins there, though. A better reminder of the Vikings' presence is the names they left behind. Thingwall, for



example, means 'assembly field', while Meols means 'sandbank'. And DNA analysis of old Wirral families reveals the Vikings' real legacy – as much as half of their DNA is of Norse origin.



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