



Andrzej Szkościł/Rex Features

Blood of a Viking

At weekends Dr Glyn Walsh, senior lecturer, programme organiser (dispensing) and registered optometrist at Glasgow University's Department of Vision Sciences, often goes by the more imposing title of Magnus the Viking.

Alex Thomas reports

Swapping the laboratory and lecture theatre for a 9th century outdoor lifestyle, Dr Glyn Walsh is a member of the Glasgow Vikings, a re-enactment group who portray Vikings of various periods from the 9th century Hiberno Norse (the original Viking colonists of Ireland and Scotland) to the last Viking invaders of mainland Britain in the 13th century.

'It's a sort of educational theatre,' explains Dr Walsh. 'We put on shows to try to portray an accurate account of day to day Viking life as well as warfare to try to entertain and educate school children and tourists'. These events can vary in size from small performances in schools to week-long events.

The highlight of the society's re-enactment calendar is Largs, an annual festival commemorating the

eponymous battle of 1263, part of the last Viking invasion of the UK. Dr Walsh explains that during the nine-day spectacle a village of wooden huts covered in conifer branches is created on the sea-front which the re-enactors live in for the whole nine days. They spend their time running the village, eating period food or putting on performances.

With Vikings a major part of the primary school history syllabus, parties of school children attend the festival to learn about the Dark Ages from the re-enactors. While many of his fellow Vikings have developed elaborate histories with which to regale the public, Dr Walsh explains that Magnus simply spends his time creating medieval items from wood, while participating in the odd battle. Other re-enactors run blacksmiths shops or cook period food such as oatcakes and potage (a medieval soup).

There are also many minor skirmishes during Largs between around a dozen participants, although the main battle on the Saturday night features around 150 warriors and according to Dr Walsh follows a very specific script. Despite the fact that the Dark Age weapons such as axes and swords used by the re-enactors are blunted, those taking part must train regularly to minimise the risk of accident. Yet despite meticulous planning, things can go wrong. Dr Walsh remembers one such incident involving a Viking longship from Norway. 'I remember Vikings jumping off the ship in their chainmail to attack the coast, but the water was too deep so they were up to their necks in it in full chain mail,' he recalls.

Party animals

While he is interested in Viking history, Dr Walsh explains that the social aspect of the society is the principal attraction for him and his family. 'We just go along for the party as much as anything else, it's just good fun and people party and drink,' he says, adding that when the tourists leave for the day is when the beer emerges.

Dr Walsh has also been involved with other re-enactment groups. He has played the part of a musketeer at English Civil War events and he was a member of a Tudor society. 'They used to be deeply into the fancy food and it was very genteel indeed, without any battles.' He also did woodworking at these events and played other period instruments but he had to give up the Tudors owing to the difficulty of travelling from Scotland with his children.

It was through his wife, who originally trained as an archaeologist that Dr Walsh became involved in re-enactment. 'I didn't really have a great interest in Viking history. My wife was doing a lot of medieval period archaeology at the time, so the Dark Ages were always of interest to her, but I had no real interest in anything like that until she talked me into it,' he says.

Yet it was through re-enactment that Dr Walsh discovered his love for creating medieval artefacts from wood. 'I principally make toys using a knife and axe. I've made a few hobby horses, lots of dolls, I then give them away to other members of the group,' he says. Dr Walsh also builds and plays medieval string instruments. 'I've got dozens of them, lutes, violas, a rebec (a violin-like string



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instrument), a citole (a large string instrument), although I build them better than I play them,' he laughs. However, Largs is the only Viking event in which Dr Walsh can indulge his pleasure in medieval instruments. 'I don't have any instruments that are from before 1200 and Largs is the only significant event that happens after that time that we do a proper show for,' he reveals.

While his historical hobby appears to contrast sharply with the scientific nature of his profession, Dr Walsh can see similarities between the two. 'I'm mainly interested in the history

of industrial technology. A lot of my work is on the "think up, design and build" side of academia and making kit (historical items) is a natural progression. I've been building and repairing musical instruments since my early teens and building optical ones since my mid 20s, the first was the world's first objective aberrometer. I'm also educating people like I do at work,' he says.

Clearly proud of his Viking alter-ego, Dr Walsh jokes: 'I'm not noted for my dress sense anyway and my eating habits are pretty medieval most of the time.' ●



Duncan Holmes

Dr Glyn Walsh in costume as Magnus the Viking