COLOURS FROM THE WIRRAL

Colours from the Wirral is a project started in 2015 by members of WSF with the aim of reproducing dyes that could have been used by people living on the Wirral in the 9th and 10th centuries to colour their clothing.

The Colours from the Wirral Project is intended to have 4 stages. It is planned that all 4 stages will be completed by autumn 2018 so that at the end of the project we will have a evidence of the range of colours that "could" have been available to the people living on the Wirral.

In the main, only plants that would have grown on the Wirral are used in the project although other types of plants (i.e. madder, woad) that would have been traded from other parts of England and Ireland have also been used.

Some chemicals were used and these were, as far as practicable, kept to those chemicals that the Norse and Mercians who lived on the Wirral would have had access to. The chemicals used were iron, copper and alum[1]. These were used both as mordants and modifiers.

Mordant = A substance that is used to fix the dye on to the material being dyed.
Modifier = This is the mordant added to the dye in order to obtain different colours.

Evidence for coloured cloth on the Wirral.

There have been no textile finds from any of the Norse or Anglo Saxon sites excavated on the Wirral. However, some artefacts have been unearthed that indicate both wool and linen were being prepared in Chester.

Excavations at Hunters Walk in Chester unearthed 3 spindle whorls and a fragment of a glass linen smoother. This makes the positive identification of a particular colour being preferred by the population of the Wirral very difficult and so the project can do no more than say this colour was available but we have yet to find evidence of its use.

[1] Alum can be obtained from certain species of moss and lichen. As many of these species are protected it was decided that where alum was used a modern substitute would be used instead.

Stage 1.

- To identify plants that would have been available to the 9th - 10th century population of the Wirral and use them to produce dyes.

- Modern British wool was used in order to provide a consistant base material that the plant dye could fix itself to.

- During this stage no attempt was made to regulate the amount of plant material or mordant used to produce the dyes. We were attempting to gain as wide a range of colour as we could.

- Some of the wool dyed with nettle and blackberry was used to provided patches of colour on one of the tunics used by the group. This was to check on how quickly the colour would fade when being used on everyday clothing.

Plants used.

Nettle: leaves and stems.
Dandelion: leaves and flowers.
Ivy: leaves.
Blackberry: fruit, leaves and branches.
Daffodil: flowers.
Seaweed:
Oakgall:
Madder: root.
Woad: leaves.
Weld: leaves and flowers.

These 3 plants are likely to have been brought from other areas of Britain or even Ireland.

Mordants used.

Iron
Copper
Alumn

Note:
A modern alumn mordant was used throughout the project.

Alumn can be obtained from some species of lichens. However, some of these species are classed as protected in the UK and so it was decided that the project would not use any species of lichen for any of the stages of this project.

Picture1; Results from Stage 1.

Stage 2.

- Use the same dye material as in Stage 1.
- Use more measured and controlled quantities of dye materials, mordants and modifiers.
- Modern British wool is used in this stage.
- Attempt to obtain a consistent colour from the dye material.

Stage 3.

- Spin our own wool using wool from rare breed sheep.
- Use the dye results from Stage 2 to dye this wool.
- Use the wool dyed in this stage to decorate some of the clothing used by the group.

Stage 4.

- Use the dye and wool from stages 2 and 3 to dye larger pieces of wool cloth.
- Turn the cloth into clothing that can be worn by group member.