



CULTURAL MIX: The members of new Nordic band Samling, centre, at the Cooish were, from left, Naomi Harvey from Scotland, guitarist Tom Oakes from Devon, and Anne-Sofie Ling Vadal from Norway. They seek to combine traditional music from Norway, left, with Gaelic music from the Hebrides, right. Anne-Sofie told me: 'It truly was a great experience for me personally to come to the Isle of Man, with all its links to Norway! I will definitely come back and spend a bit more time there to explore both the musical, history and culture links'

Nu-Nordic band Samling give taste of our past

THERE was a taste of a new genre of music at this year's Cooish concert – although it was also a reminder of ancient links which, though forged long ago, continue to have resonance in Manx culture and politics.

Nu-Nordic music seeks to compare and combine the folk traditions of Scandinavia with those of the British Isles, and as well as Samling other groups forming part of the movement include the Auvo Quartet, Baltic Crossing, Boreas and Fribo. It is a concept which may initially seem strange until you consider the major impact that Norse and Danish settlement had on large parts of Britain a little over 1,000 years ago.

The first Viking voyaging and raiding in the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries left a liberal scattering of Scandinavian placename elements down Britain's coasts – including Milford Haven, Lundy and Hartland Point. During the late 800s, King Alfred the Great of Wessex was forced to divide England in two, with the northern half being called Danelaw and ruled from Scandinavian-held York.

There were so many Danes living in southern England by the early 11th century King Ethelred the Unready ordered ethnic cleansing in the St Brice's Day Massacre, in which the English were ordered to turn on their Danish neighbours. By the mid-11th century, however, King Knut – now remembered mainly for trying to turn back the tide – managed to gain control of England as

by **Simon Artymiuk**

part of an impressive Scandinavian Atlantic empire stretching from Denmark to Greenland. Even the Normans who took control of England after the Battle of Hastings in 1066 were descendants of Danish raiders living in France.

In the west and north of the British Isles it was Norwegians who were the principal Scandinavian raiders and settlers. In Shetland and Orkney the language used for centuries was a now extinct Norse dialect called Norn, with similarities to today's Faroese and Icelandic. In the Northern Isles links with Scandinavia have continued to be important – from providing Shetland with a special form of fiddle playing to the wartime 'Shetland bus' smuggling boats that helped the Resistance in Nazi-occupied Norway in the 1940s.

Gall-Gaels

Where the Norse interacted with the Gaelic-speaking Celts of the Hebrides (or Sudreys – the 'southern isles' that became known as Sodor), the Isle of Man and parts of Ireland, the Scandinavians took Celts as wives and servants and fathered descendants who became known as Gall-Gaels – Gaelic-speaking foreigners. In Ireland they laid the foundations for most of the Emerald Isle's cities, including Dublin, Cork and Wexford, and, when periodically expelled, colonised the Lake District and Wirral, leaving Scandinavian placenames with Gaelic flourishes.

The sagas indicate that the Norse took Irish and Hebridean servants with them when colonising Iceland and Greenland – and in the Faroe Islands there is a tradition that their first set-



NORDIC PAST: A traditional Norwegian willow flute, left, and a Viking sword, right, from the Manx Museum

tleers came from the Isle of Man. In Man and the Hebrides, during that long period from Godred Crovan's victory at the Battle of Sky Hill, near Ramsey, in 1079 to Norway's handing over of the islands to the Scottish king Alexander III in 1266, there was probably a hybrid Norse-Gaelic language spoken – something to which Phil Gawne appropriately referred when introducing Samling, as their unique speciality is comparing and combining Norwegian and Scottish Gaelic song traditions.

First, however, concert-goers were treated to some rousing Manx music by the support band, The Reeling Stones, led by indefatigable young fiddle player Tom Callister and also featuring Paul Rogers on banjo, Cairistiona Dougherty on flute and Luke Melvin on bodhran, and the were also joined by David Kilgallon of King Chiaullee. The audience were treated to tune after superb tune.

As well as the group playing as an

ensemble, there was also a real treat when Australian-born singer Sophia Dale sang a solo Manx Gaelic song accompanied by Tom. She explained that on her visits to the island some years ago she had often encountered on Port Erin beach a little boy who every year seemed to become more and more proficient at playing the fiddle – none other than Tom is his younger days – and this duet was a reminder of that.

When Samling came on stage they treated us to possibly the most unexpected opening number that a Manx audience is likely to hear: Anne Sofie Ling Valdal (also of Fribo) singing a loud and piercing series of tuneful yodels – a traditional Norwegian cow call. I must admit, though, that it reminded me of an incident recorded in the Viking Greenland Saga when Erik the Red's daughter Freydis is said to have frightened away an attack on some of the first Norse settlers in Vinland (Labrador, Canada) by the Skraelings (either Native American warriors or Inuits) with a wild shrieking and wailing.

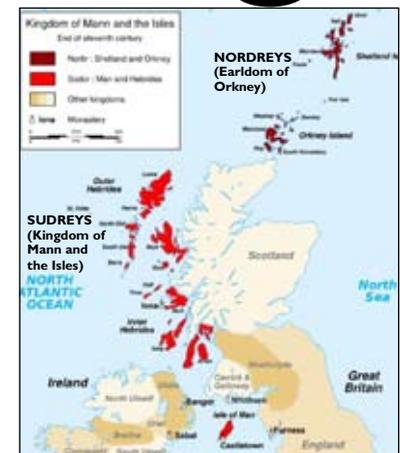
Themes

The band's other songs sought to bind together similar Norwegian and Gaelic tunes on particular themes, some working songs, some cheerful in theme and some downright tragic.

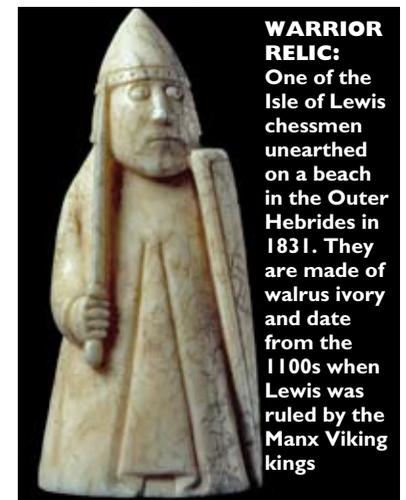
Anne Sofie would start with the Norwegian song and then halfway through Scottish bandmate Naomi Harvey (also of band Lurach) would begin the Gaelic version. Sometimes they sang in unison – an effect a bit like the school favourite London's Burning when sung in a round – and sometimes separately. For many of the tunes they were accompanied by the third bandmate to make it over the water, guitarist Tom Oakes. Each of the trio introduced the songs in a lively and humorous way.

Sadly the fourth member of the group, fiddle player Jon Bews, had been unable to come to the island at the last moment, so for one of the songs the girls tried to replicate the sound of fiddle playing with their voices. Luckily the deficiency was made up by the appearance of island favourite the ever modest but superb fiddle player Katie Lawrence, who also performed an instrumental duet with Tom Oakes.

A real revelation was Anne Sofie's Norwegian willow flute, which looked a bit like a short walking stick with a hole in the top into which the player blows and then a hollow end by which the tune is produced with just a couple of fingers. She explained that although



NORSE EMPIRE: A map, above, of the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles and the 'Nordreys' of Orkney and Shetland



WARRIOR RELIC: One of the Lewis chessmen unearthed on a beach in the Outer Hebrides in 1831. They are made of walrus ivory and date from the 1100s when Lewis was ruled by the Manx Viking kings

traditionally made of willow or birch, such flutes only last until the wood dries out, so nowadays, she joked, they are 'traditionally made from plastic'. It was interesting to compare the sound of this instrument with Naomi's Celtic versions of tin whistle and recorder.

At the end of the concert the Samling band members asked the audience if there was anyone prepared to sing the island's national anthem or a traditional Manx song to give them another taste of our own musical traditions.

After a bit of a pause an impromptu group including Phil Gawne and Professor Brian Stowell obliged with an excellent rendering of the goodnight song Arrane Oie Vie, earning much applause from the audience.

The next day I heard Phil Gawne talking in a radio interview about how he had been able to hold a long conversation with a Highland Gaelic speaker from the Isle of Skye, each speaking their own language but each able to understand one another.

Such is the Norse-Gaelic legacy in two parts of what was once, centuries ago, the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles.



STAR SUPPORTS: Reeling Stones members on the night included, from left, Luke Melvin, Cairistiona Dougherty, David Kilgallon (of King Chiaullee), Tom Callister and Paul Rogers