

Offa's Dyke Journal



A Journal for Linear Monuments,
Frontiers & Borderlands Research

Volume 6

Edited by Howard Williams

Aims and Scope

Offa's Dyke Journal is a peer-reviewed venue for the publication of high-quality research on the archaeology, history and heritage of linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands. The editors invite submissions that explore dimensions of Offa's Dyke, Wat's Dyke and the 'short dykes' of western Britain, including their life-histories and landscape contexts. *ODJ* will also consider comparative studies on the material culture and monumentality of land divisions, boundaries, frontiers and borderlands from elsewhere in Britain, Europe and beyond from prehistory to the present day. We accept:

1. Notes and Reviews of up to 3,000 words
2. Interim reports on fieldwork of up to 5,000 words
3. Original discussions, syntheses and analyses of up to 10,000 words

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Front cover: Photograph of the excavated ditch of Offa's Dyke, Chirk, north-facing section (Ian Grant, CPAT Photo 4565-0134)

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Chester

The Short Dykes of Mechain

Richard Hankinson

The article considers a group of short dykes which were examined as part of a study of this monument type, carried out by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust on behalf of Cadw, between 2000 and 2006. Various interesting points came out of the study, particularly regarding how short dykes in general fitted into their local landscapes. Their poor defensibility if viewed as monuments designed to impede or block access was also noted and this gave rise to an unease with this conventional interpretation of their function. Five of the dykes examined during the project, about a quarter, were dated by organic material which had been sealed beneath their bank at the time of construction and dates covering the period from the mid-fourth to late eighth centuries AD were obtained.

A group of six short dykes centred on the town of Llanfyllin in northern Powys were identified during the study, all of which lay close to the boundary of the medieval Welsh cantref of Mechain, as defined by Melville Richards. This implied that they might have been used to identify parts of this boundary and the acquisition of two radiocarbon dates collectively covering the period from the fifth to early eighth centuries AD from one of these dykes (Clawdd Mawr) was seen as being significant in perhaps showing that the cantref was based on an early medieval political entity. An analysis of the Mechain dykes will attempt to prove that they form a coherent group and have the potential to point further research of the site type in a more productive direction.

Keywords: boundary, cantref, dykes, Mechain, Meifod, Powys, radiocarbon

Introduction

The article considers a group of short dykes in close proximity to the medieval cantref of Mechain in northern Powys which were examined as part of a study of this monument type carried out by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust on behalf of Cadw between 2000 and 2006 (Silvester and Hankinson 2002; Hankinson 2002, 2003, 2005 and 2006). Various interesting points came out of the study and one of the key aspects was the dating of five dykes by organic material which had been sealed beneath their respective banks at the time of construction. A series of radiocarbon dates covering the period from the mid-fourth to late eighth centuries AD were obtained and reported on by Hankinson and Caseldine (2006). Further radiocarbon dates to those listed in 2006 were subsequently obtained in 2011 from samples taken during the original study, as listed below in Table 1.

Some of these radiocarbon dates seem very early if the short dykes were all features of Mercian origin, in which respect they have often been seen as some form of defence against alleged Welsh/British incursions; it is simply untenable to consider that Mercia had sway in mid-Wales during the fifth and sixth centuries, and questionable whether

a seventh-century context this far west can be affirmed in the light of Capper's (2023) analysis of Mercian borders. By way of an example of this early reasoning, Aileen Fox (1949), in her summary of the Early Christian Period in Nash-Williams, had described the border dykes as 'all being Saxon work' and notes '...in the first phase they are designed locally to pen the Welsh back to their hills...'. However, one of the key observations from the fieldwork study concerned the way in which these earthworks fitted into their local landscapes and particularly their poor placement if viewed as monuments designed to impede or block access; many of the dykes were found to just stop at points which were not readily defensible. A line of reasoning that has sometimes been used to explain this kind of anomaly is that a dyke would have terminated at impenetrable woodland (Fox 1955: 207–211), but this was not supported by the results of the sampling, which, for example, indicated the presence of ericaceous vegetation at Clawdd Mawr (Hankinson and Caseldine 2006: 268), denoting an upland heath landscape.

Table 1: Dykes from which radiocarbon dates were obtained

Short Dyke	NGR	Laboratory No.	Calibrated radiocarbon date from 2006 (Intcal 98) to two sigma (95%) probability	Calibrated radiocarbon date from 2011 (Intcal 04) to two sigma (95%) probability
Clawdd Mawr	SJ 061 213	Beta-211075	AD 630–710	
		Beta-290092		AD 420–610
Crugyn Bank	SO 101 857	Beta-212487	AD 650–780	
		Beta-290091		AD 610–690
Giant's Grave	SO 044 860	Beta-186676	AD 340–530	
Short Ditch	SO 187 746	Beta-223798	AD 410–590	
		Beta-290093		AD 430–620
		Beta-290094		AD 400–540
Upper Short Ditch	SO 194 872	Beta-212488	AD 540–660	
		Beta-290095		AD 660–780

Other dykes were found to have been positioned in the landscape in such a way that they are overlooked when there seems to have been no need to cede a strong defensive position to any alleged attacker, particularly if we hypothesise that a ruler of greater importance is most likely to have been responsible for their construction. More significantly perhaps, common features in the siting of short dykes include the tendency for them to provide links between natural landscape features, such as small incipient streams on opposite sides of a ridge or prominent landmarks, a good example being the Two Tumps Dyke I (HER No 4034), part of the composite Double Dyche, which crosses the Kerry Ridgeway near the source of the River Teme. The suggested implication of this is that these linear earthworks may have acted as features designed to verify a

boundary over which there was some doubt. Examples of the verification of boundaries by commonly understood and named features can be found in written records from the post-medieval period: the Radnor Forest being a notable example going back to the sixteenth century (National Library of Wales Harpton Court 341). There is a potential comparison with defensive earthworks, however, in that the arrangement of a typical enclosure bank and ditch would have the ditch as the external feature, facing away from the defended area; this idea might have been generally accepted to apply to individual dykes if a group of them collectively represented a boundary.

The cantref of Mechain and the short dykes

One group of dykes were found to correspond very broadly with the boundaries of the medieval Welsh *cantref* of Mechain and it is this possible correlation which is explored in this article. It should be understood at this early stage that the discussion here is not intended to be a comprehensive academic review of the history of the cantref, all the mid-Wales dykes and their origins, or even of this specific group of dykes. Rather it is the product of a growing understanding over a number of years that field observations had a part to play in the understanding of this site type. The choice of this group reflects the opportunities to illuminate the relationship between linear earthworks and early medieval settlement or community formation, and in turn to suggest a relationship with the consequent administrative units of the region. It is hoped that this initial attempt will provide the impetus for more scholarly research and hopefully also, further field investigations including scientific dating.

It should be appreciated that only one of the dated dykes (Clawdd Mawr at AD 630–710 and AD 420–610) might be related to Mechain and although an early medieval date seems to be assured by the two dated samples, the difference in their dates is curious. One possibility is that the old ground surface sealed by the bank might have been of more than one phase, (cf. Short Ditch, where two peat layers were readily identifiable in the excavated section at the base of the bank). The constraints of the excavation at Clawdd Mawr meant that the section through the dyke was excavated in two parts with the samples being obtained from either side of the bank (see Figure 5) and therefore not directly related by observation.

These five short dykes are collectively centred around the town of Llanfyllin in northern Powys and all lie close to (within 1.2km of) the boundary of Mechain, as defined by Melville Richards (1969: 290; Figure 1). These dykes are individually known as 'Clawdd Mawr'; 'Clawdd Llesg'; 'Ty Newydd'; 'Aber Naint'; and 'Bwlch y Cibau', and there is also a sixth, called 'Bwlch Aeddan', which lies a little further distant (2.3km) from the boundary. Although the latter is morphologically distinct it has been included here for comparison, and its potential interest. If the correlation between the cantref boundary and these five dykes is valid, the radiocarbon dating of short-lived charred plant material on the old ground surface below the bank of Clawdd Mawr between the fifth and early



Figure 2: Llys Farm, Llanfechain in the centre foreground with the cropmark single-ditched enclosure thought to be the court site outlined in red in the centre clearly overlapping an earlier double-ditched enclosure (CPAT 84-c-0188)

and became a borough in the 1290s, when a weekly market and annual fair were granted to the Lord of Mechain. It is believed that the church in the town was an early medieval foundation, with the origin of the name 'Mylling' being a Welsh version of the name of an obscure Irish saint, Moling, dating to the seventh century (Silvester 1992: 91). There is evidence, in the form of remnants of a sub-circular churchyard, which supports this as being the site of an early Christian settlement, or 'llan', though when this became a focus for settlement is unknown.

A number of factors support the likelihood that the centre of the cantref when it was functioning would have been what is now the village of Llanfechain, nearly 5km to the east. Although it has a church with a similarly early foundation (dedicated to the much better known St Garmon), this is also the site of the medieval motte and bailey castle known as 'Domen Gastell'. The motte and bailey, occupying a central location in the valley of the Afon Cain (the heart of the cantref), was considered by J.E. Lloyd (1939: 247) to have been the site of the court (llys) for the cantref but more recent work (Silvester 2015: 33–34) indicates that there was most probably an earlier llys about 1km to the north-west. This lay on the north side of the valley at SJ 1791 2083, where cropmark evidence of a D-shaped enclosure close to the farm still known as 'Llys' is thought to indicate its location (Figure 2).

Mechain also appears in the name of the village of Llansanffraid-ym-Mechain, where a pre-conquest date has also been attributed to the religious site, the name indicating that it fell within the bounds of Mechain at some point in its history. The original sub-circular churchyard and its location, as well as the dedication to St Ffraid all point to the establishment of a church or chapel here well before the Norman Conquest in the 11th century. However, precise information on this early phase and the settlement's development in the subsequent medieval centuries is absent. As 'Llansanfret', it first appears in the Norwich Taxation of 1254 (Silvester *et al.* 2012: 102).

In a religious sense, the most significant settlement in the cantref was Meifod, in the adjacent vale occupied by the Afon Efyrynwy/River Vyrnwy, of which the Cain is a tributary. The earliest religious site there is said to have been built by St Gwyddfarch in c. 550 and later Meifod became the cult centre of his more famous pupil, St Tysilio (Silvester 1992: 129). With its large sub-circular churchyard, reputed to have once contained multiple chapels, it is widely believed that Meifod functioned as a mother-church with a *clas* community in the early medieval period, with Davies (1946: 72) describing it as a *clas* church and J.E. Lloyd (1939: 218) as 'the old ecclesiastical metropolis of the district' and 'the premier church of Powys (J.E. Lloyd 1939: 248). Meifod was the subject of a praise poem to St Tysilio composed by Cynddelw in the mid-twelfth century, in which its churchyard was lauded as the burial place of kings, also noting that its archdeacon Caradog acted as priest to the inhabitants of Powys, thereby possibly implying spiritual authority over the entire kingdom (Pryce 1995: 63).

If some predecessor of Mechain existed as a land division in the mid-sixth century or later, the presence of Meifod within it would have given the inhabitants an elevated importance and this would have carried certain privileges, no doubt giving the ruler of the area primacy over his neighbours in that regard and allowing him the right to set his boundaries (see Jenkins 1986: 126–128 for why that would be the case). St Tysilio's position as a member of the royal family of Powys may also have been significant as his cult centre might indicate both the symbolic and administrative importance of Mechain for Powysian royal power and authority.

Mechain itself appears a number of times in medieval records, firstly as early as 1069 (Jones 1952: 15–16), when the Battle of Mechain was won by the forces of Bleddyn ap Cynfyn, a character who as Prince of Wales was involved in modifications to Welsh Law. It was noted by J.E. Lloyd (1939: 683) that Llywelyn ab Iorwerth of Gwynedd had support from the rulers of Mechain in the early thirteenth century, and by the middle of the thirteenth century the cantref was divided between three brothers: Llywelyn, Owain and Maredudd ap Llywelyn (J.E. Lloyd 1939: 709). Despite their seemingly weak position it appears that the rulers of Mechain still retained their holdings when much of the surrounding area was in the sole possession of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd of Gwynedd in the 1270s (J.E. Lloyd 1939: 748), something which might suggest that, despite its limited extent, the cantref retained some kind of residual importance or influence, though this would require further research.

The morphology of the dykes

Analysis of the dykes in the vicinity of Mechain has been undertaken, to see if they have features which assist in enhancing our understanding and which perhaps suggest a degree of coherence to their form and location. The dykes are arranged by their record number (PRN) as given in the Historic Environment Record but are identified by name on the relevant maps. In the following plans showing the various dykes, different elements are identified by colour, with ditches being blue, banks green and scarped slopes red.

Clawdd Mawr Dyke (PRN 54; Figure 3)

Dated to AD 420–610 and AD 630–710 (Table 1). The earthwork runs from SJ 0615 2138 to SJ 0646 2170 (0.49km) and lies approximately 700m north of the suggested north-western boundary of Mechain (Figure 1). The dyke faces north-west, away from the core of Mechain, having its ditch on the upslope (north-west) side of the adjoining bank. While it crosses a ridge (see Figure 3), the layout is not readily defensible in terms of blocking access and could have been easily improved if that had been its function. The dyke is, however, a prominent landscape feature, visible from many parts of the cantref, and was probably close to its highest point (Figure 4).

The bank follows a broadly north-east/south-west alignment and is steeper on the north-west face than the south-east with a flat crest about 1.5m wide. The last 70m or so at the south-west end of the earthwork also has a lesser ditch on the south-east side. At its north-east end the earthwork stops at the crest of a steep north-facing slope, where a small streamlet flows down the slope to its confluence with a larger stream, though whether this was intentional is unclear.

Seven auger samples were taken in the vicinity of the dyke in 2004. The modern profile across the bank and ditch at SJ 0630 2146 was compared with the corresponding auger results and showed that the bank had covered a band of peat which represented the pre-dyke ground surface. A partial section (Figure 5) was then excavated across the earthwork at the auger location, revealing a V-shaped and partially rock-cut ditch. As constructed, the ditch was approximately 6.3m wide, with its base lying 2.1m below the original ground level. The surviving bank at this location was up to 7.5m wide and 1.8m high. Palaeoenvironmental samples taken at the time of the excavation were radiocarbon dated to AD 420–610 and AD 630–710, with their locations depicted on the section drawing referring to information in Table 1. These dates were obtained from short-lived charred plant remains recovered from the peaty former ground surface underlying the bank.

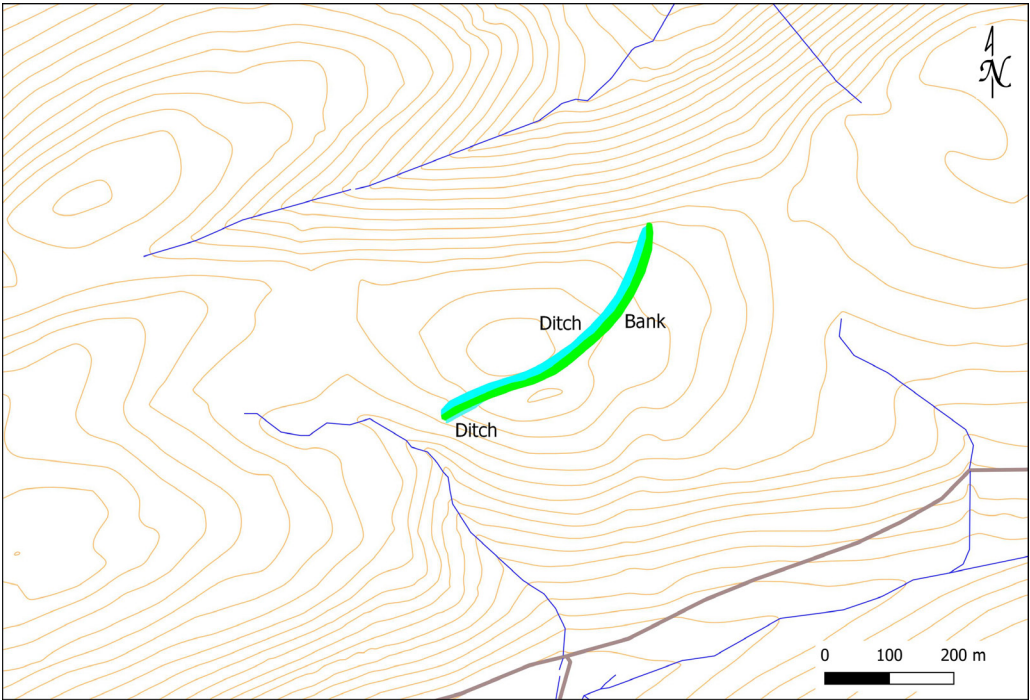
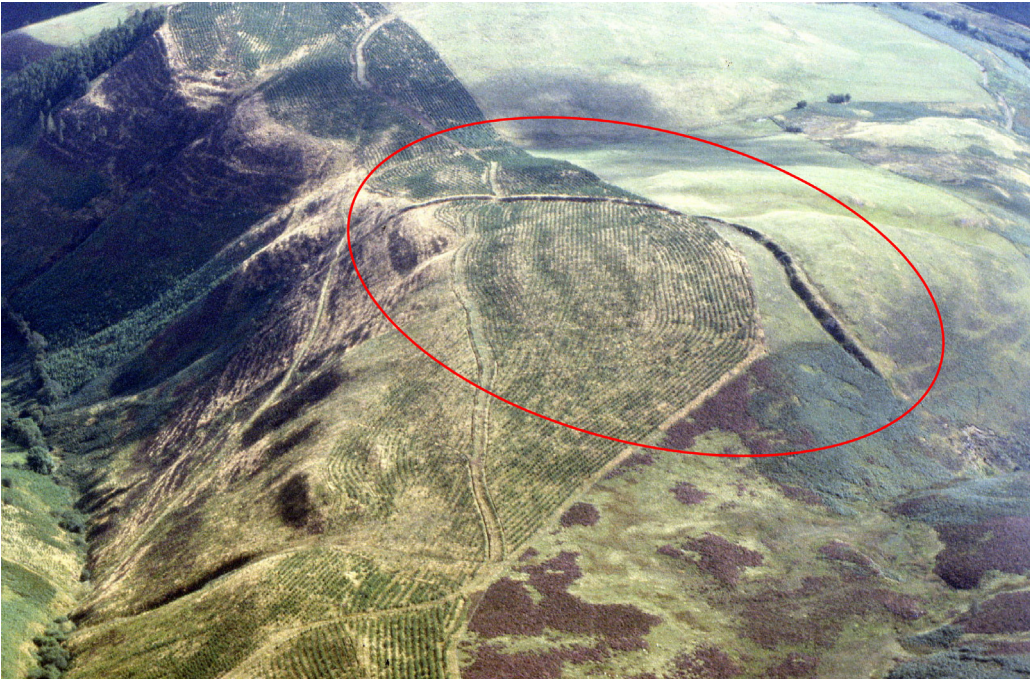


Figure 3 (above): Clawdd Mawr Dyke (Background mapping © Crown copyright and database right 2022). Note: here and in subsequent maps, blue indicates 'ditch', green indicates 'bank' and red indicates 'scarp'

Figure 4 (below): Aerial view of Clawdd Mawr (outlined in red) from the west (CPAT 81-c-0241)



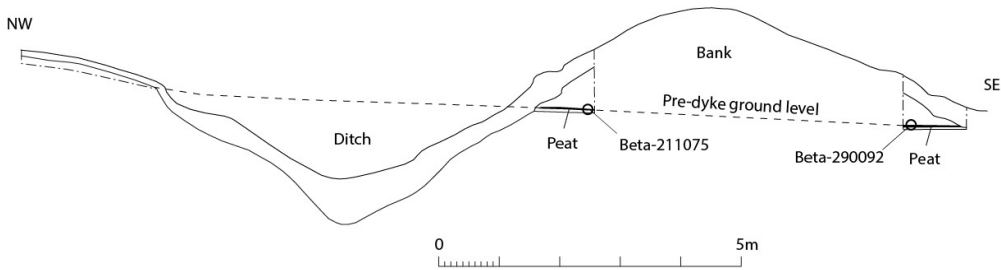


Figure 5: The partial section excavated through Clawdd Mawr, showing the location of dated deposits

Bwlch y Cibau Dyke (PRN 64; Figure 6)

This monument has not been dated. The earthwork runs from SJ 1780 1638 to SJ 1860 1713 (1.35km) and lies approximately 1.0km north-west of the suggested south-eastern boundary of Mechain; it faces south and east, away from the core of Mechain. The dyke is a complex linear earthwork, its form varying from a simple scarp to a more typical bank and adjacent ditch, with its most elaborate form being a multivallate section on the east.

Commencing at its west end at the base of a steep spur near Pen-y-boncyn (meaning 'head of the bank'), the earthwork is mainly a single bank and ditch or an enhanced scarp, up to 4m high and facing south. It is interrupted at Ty-newydd by farm buildings, but beyond this point continues in similar fashion with a ditch at the base of the scarp until SJ 1853 1668, where the morphology of the dyke undergoes a radical transformation and changes abruptly into a triple bank with two intervening ditches. There is no evidence that this complex form ever extended any further to the west than it does at present. The complex section runs east initially, then the earthwork turns north-east and the lower bank and ditch end, perhaps as a result of these having been levelled in the more recent past. The remaining earthworks continue to the north but are interrupted at the house known as 'Bitffald', beyond which preservation is variable, though there is evidence for the continuation of the double banked form to the end of the dyke, where it meets the valley of the Ceunant Mawr stream.

There has been some previous suggestion (from aerial photographic sources) that the dyke may have continued to the north of the Ceunant Mawr valley, but there is now no surface trace of any continuation and it seems that the cropmark evidence matches the alignment of a former field boundary, although this does not preclude the possibility that it represents a levelled section of dyke. There has also been a suggestion that the more complex section of the earthworks was originally part of a defensive enclosure, but the nature of this section suggests this is unlikely. Auger samples were taken along the dyke in 2004 at four locations but no evidence of a buried ground surface containing datable organic material was revealed.

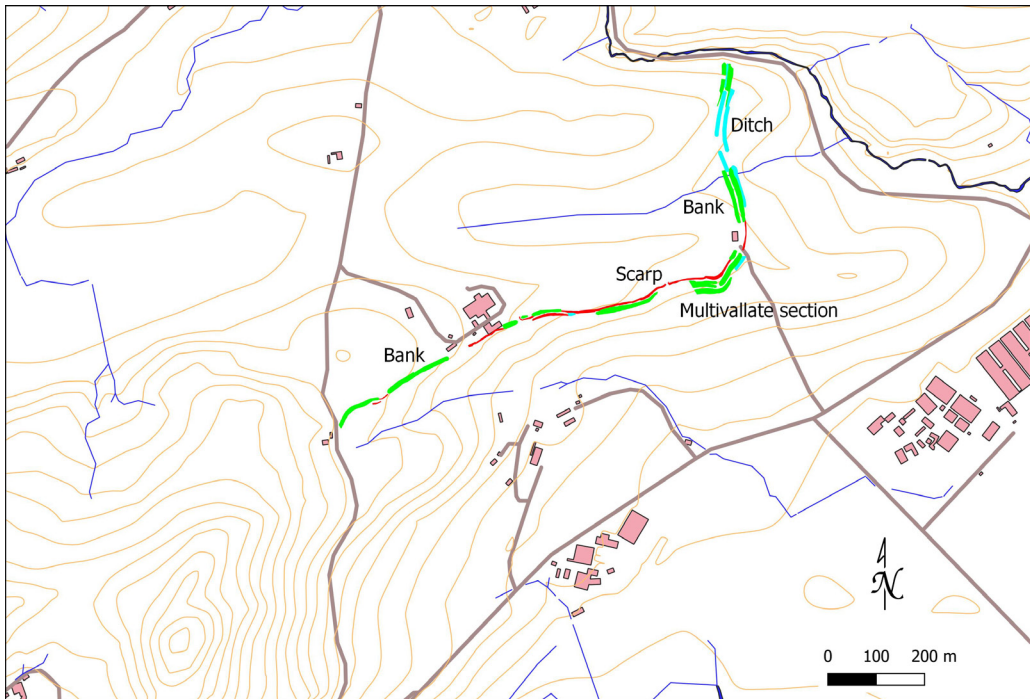


Figure 6: Bwlch y Cibau Dyke (Background mapping © Crown copyright and database right 2022)

Bwlch Aeddau Dyke (PRN 77; Figure 7)

Again, this linear earthwork is undated. The earthwork runs from SJ 1727 1064 to SJ 1690 1050 (0.42km) and lies approximately 2.3km south-east of the suggested south-eastern boundary of Mechain. The dyke faces north-north-west, towards Mechain, from the direction of slope of the simple scarp which defines it; this scarped appearance seems to be original and is different in nature to the scarped sections of the other dykes considered here. The dyke links the head of a stream with the crest of a ridge, indicating a possible use to define a boundary otherwise represented by natural features. Its course and the direction in which it faces suggest that it is more likely to have been constructed to define an area adjoining Mechain to the south; by the medieval period it fell within the commote of Ystrad Marchell. The origin of the personal name Aeddau for this earthwork is uncertain but a character by the name of Aeddau ap Blegywryd is recorded in the Welsh chronicles as being killed in 1018, and W.V. Lloyd (1889: 296) noted that it was a name used by Powysian princes.

The earthwork commences on the west-south-west at the base of a steep spur and runs east-north-east to a road cutting where a section of the dyke has been lost. It recommences on the other side of the road and runs along the north side of a ridge before it is again cut. The surviving parts of this section consist of a north-facing scarp, 3m–3.5m high, with an artificial terrace below. Further to the east-north-east the dyke

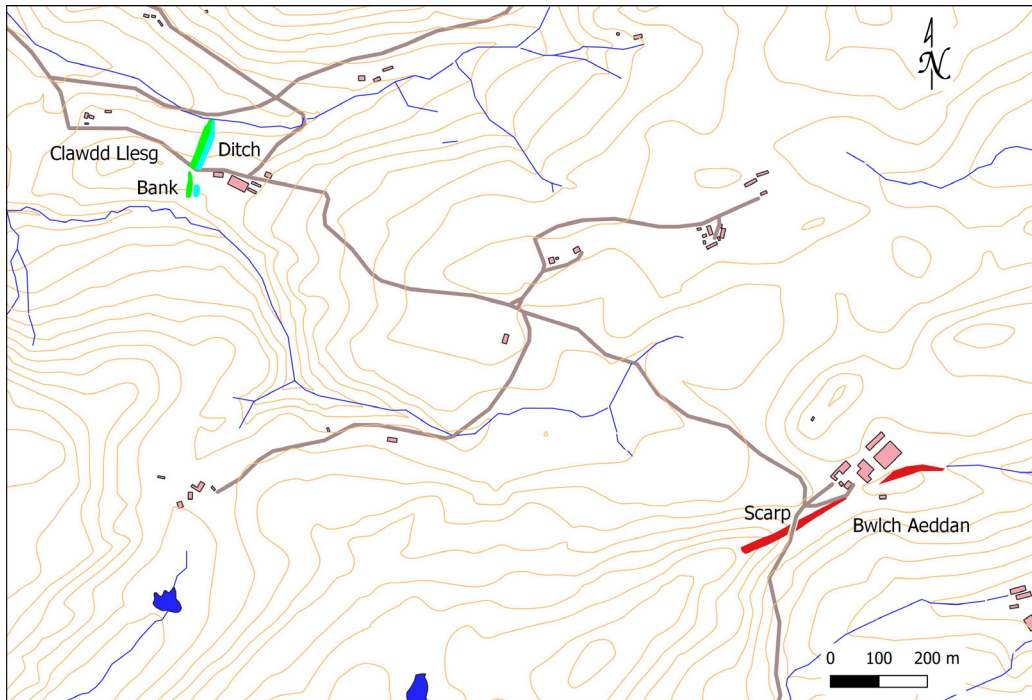


Figure 7: Clawdd Llesg and Bwlch Aeddau Dykes (Background mapping © Crown copyright and database right 2022)

has been removed by agricultural activity, recommencing beyond in a similar form to the previous one, but with a maximum scarp height of 4.2m. In the final section the dyke changes alignment to run east and also loses the lower terrace, ending where it meets the head of a stream valley.

Clawdd Llesg Dyke (PRN 78; Figure 7)

This undated earthwork runs from SJ 1573 1119 to SJ 1577 1136 (0.17km) and lies approximately 900m south-south-east of the suggested south-eastern boundary of Mechain. The dyke faces away from the core of Mechain towards the east-south-east, having its ditch on the upslope side of the bank as with Clawdd Mawr. It crosses an interfluvial ridge, appearing to link the two streams which define its terminals, though only a short distance downstream these join anyway. The morphology of the dyke comprises a low broad bank with a similarly broad ditch on its east-south-east side. As with Clawdd Mawr, the siting could have been improved if it was intended to be a defensive feature and it may be significant that a hypothetical continuation of its line to the north-north-east points in the direction of a defended enclosure. Clawdd Llesg is particularly interesting as it appears to be opposed by the Bwlch Aeddau Dyke, 1.4km to the east-south-east and it is tempting to see these dykes as identifying a buffer zone between two adjacent polities.

The personal names (Llesg = Eliseg and Aeddan), perhaps relating to previous Powysian personages and subsequently given to the dykes may also be significant in making them easier to identify (see Seaman's (2019) suggestions, above).

Seven auger samples were taken from the dyke in 2005–2006. No evidence of a sealed layer of organic material was recovered from any of the auger samples taken from the bank, although a few flecks of charcoal were found in what was thought to be a trampled layer, 1.2m below the crest of the bank, at SJ 1575 1132. Charcoal was also found in the ditch at this location. The only other layer of interest in the ditch was a mottled black, red and grey burnt clay, 1.05m to 1.2m below ground level at SJ 1573 1124. Comparison between the auger results and the profile of the earthwork suggested that at SJ 1576 1134, the ditch was originally excavated to an approximate depth of 2m with a width of 7m. Although the slope of the ground at this point may mean that the dimensions are not typical of the dyke as a whole, this section is the best-preserved portion of the dyke. The dyke retains some potential for radiocarbon dating owing to the presence of the charcoal, which might perhaps be used to date a phase of activity at the dyke, though not necessarily the dyke itself. Some caution is needed, however, as the small size of sample derived from the augering makes it impossible to determine the amount of datable material that may be available.

Ty Newydd Dyke (PRN 1478; Figure 8)

The next earthwork to be considered, also undated, runs from SJ 1294 2327 to SJ 1368 2346 (0.83km) and lies approximately 1.2km north of the suggested northern boundary of Mechain. The dyke faces generally north, away from the core of Mechain, and largely comprises a bank with a ditch on its north, downslope, side. As with many dykes it could have been easily bypassed if it had been intended to be a defensive feature. Curiously, this earthwork faces in the same broad direction as the Aber Naint Dyke, about 1.4km to the south, and this is difficult to explain unless perhaps it formed a successor or predecessor to Aber Naint; it would be interesting to know how the dates of the two earthworks compare, should the opportunity arise.

The dyke is set on a sloping hillside, terminating at a stream on the east and at the foot of a hill on the west. The earthwork was shown as an 'entrenchment' by the Ordnance Survey at the end of the nineteenth century and might have been one of a group of such named features mentioned by Thomas Pennant in the late eighteenth century (Pennant 1991: 362). The west end of the dyke is visible as a slight scarp on the steep north-north-east-facing slope, continuing to the east beyond Garth-ucha as a scarp up to 2m high that eventually gains a ditch on its north side. Further east the scarp is gradually replaced by a substantial bank, up to 2m high, where the overall width of the bank and ditch is generally 13.5m. To the east of a road there are intermittent sections of earthworks between 4.5m and 7.5m wide by 1m high as far as Ty'n-y-clawdd house. The dyke recommences beyond the house heading north-east as an embanked scarp with

a ditch on its north-west side, ending at the Nant Engyll stream. Five auger samples were taken in the vicinity of the dyke in 2004 but no material thought to be worthy of excavation and radiocarbon dating was identified.

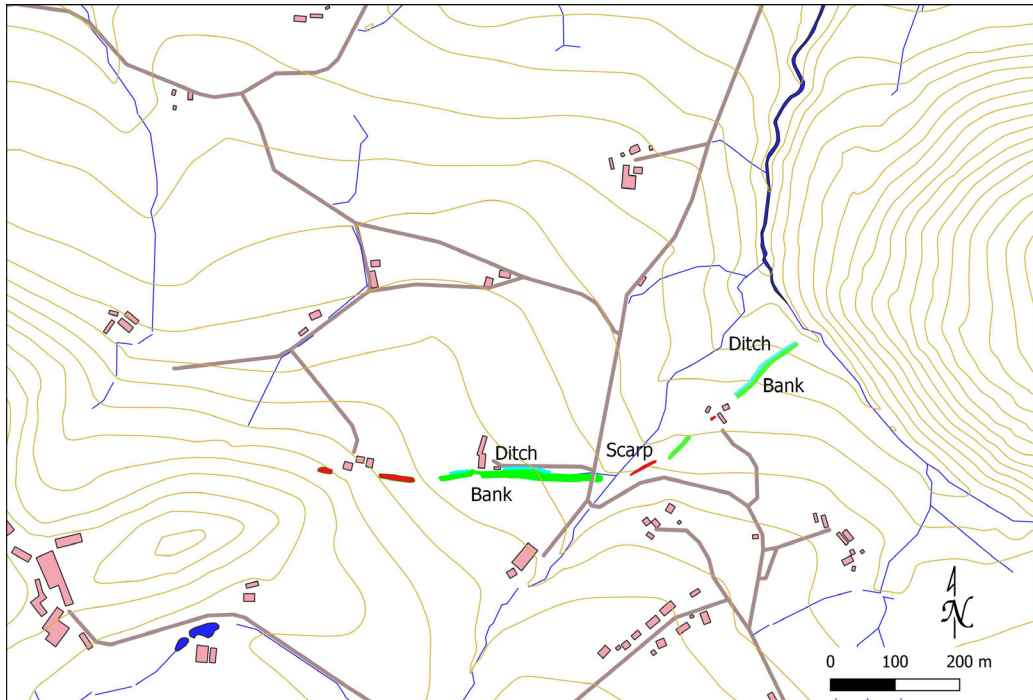


Figure 8: Ty Newydd Dyke (Background mapping © Crown copyright and database right 2022)

Aber Naint Dyke (PRN 1479; Figure 9)

Running from SJ 1269 2171 to SJ 1228 2202 (0.54km) and adjoining the suggested northern boundary of Mechain, this undated dyke faces north-east. The ditch is on the upslope side of the bank and crosses an interfluvial ridge, appearing to link the two streams which define it, in the same fashion as Clawdd Llesg. As with other dykes here, the siting could have been improved if it was intended to be a defensive feature. Strangely, the separation between this and the Ty Newydd dyke, at 1.4km, is the same as between Clawdd Llesg and Bwlch Aeddan, though here the dykes face in the same direction so it is less likely that they were intended to identify a buffer zone between polities.

The earthwork comprises a bank aligned broadly north-west to south-east on a slightly curving course with a ditch on the north-east (upslope) side along most of its length. The height of the bank is around 4.0m and the ditch 2.0m deep and up to 7.0m wide (Figure 10).

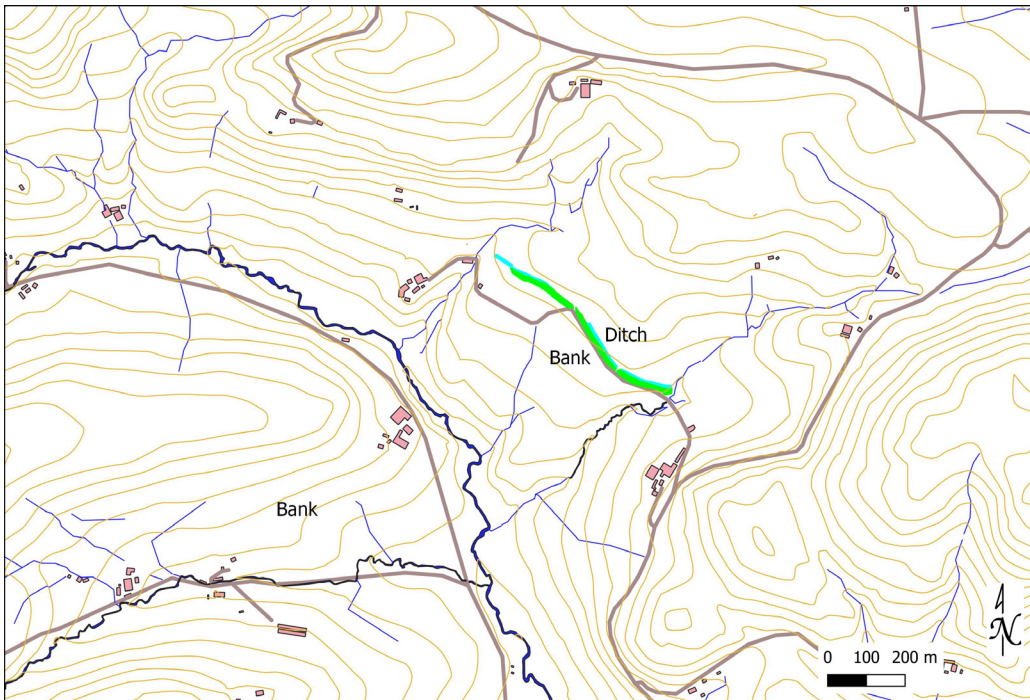


Figure 9: Aber Naint Dyke (Background mapping © Crown copyright and database right 2022)

Discussion

While it is the five dykes within 1.2km of the suggested cantref boundary that are considered to potentially represent a predecessor to Mechain, the sixth (Bwlch Aeddan) could also have significance in our interpretation. There is a possibility that this dyke, with Clawdd Llesg, may identify a buffer zone between Mechain and Ystrad Marchell (or a predecessor) or that a time came when Ystrad Marchell was sufficiently important to set its own boundary. Without proof of dating it is impossible to be sure of this, but the foundation of Strata Marcella Abbey in 1170 by Owain ap Gruffydd, prince of southern Powys and lord of Cyfeiliog (Thomas 1997: 3), would have perhaps tipped the balance away from Meifod as a religious centre (and by extension Mechain), though that would imply a date for Bwlch Aeddan as late as the twelfth century. What is notable is the obvious difference in the nature of Bwlch Aeddan in comparison to the other local dykes, this being defined throughout by an artificial scarp with no trace of an accompanying ditch. The likelihood that these two, potentially opposing, dykes are both named after what may be historical personages could be significant given Seaman's (2019) arguments regarding the use of names to make boundaries more memorable (see above).

For the other five dykes, all are either completely, or have significant portions, formed by a bank and ditch, and in each the ditch is on the 'outer' side of the boundary if it is



Figure 10: The north-western part of the Aber Naint Dyke from the east, with the ditch in the foreground and bank beyond (Photo CPAT 2110-0043)

assumed that they define an area broadly equivalent to Mechain. Other factors which have been mentioned in general terms are the tendency of short dykes to link streams or prominent landscape features and these traits are found at the ends of all dykes in this area (Table 2).

All told, the boundary of the cantref of Mechain according to Richards (1969: 290) covers a linear distance of about 64km, while the relevant dykes total about 3.4km in length. Although this seems to be a very small amount in comparison, much of his identified boundary of the cantref appears to have been defined by watercourses which would have been obvious and easily remembered features, allowing them to be more reliably followed. The mapped cantref boundary actually only coincides with one dyke (Aber Naint) but the others are sufficiently close to be posited as boundary markers, when it is considered that Richards' delineation of the cantref boundary depends on imprecise evidence, so exact comparisons cannot be expected. There are some places where landscape features are lacking but there is always the possibility that rather more ephemeral landmarks were used in defining the boundary where there was no dispute; that existing artificial features such as hillforts and defended enclosures were employed; or that other dykes, which were once present, may have been removed in later times. It

is also true that there was a considerable length of time between the construction of the single dated dyke and the emergence of the cantref later in the medieval period, in which time the original boundary may have been adjusted – this is something suggested by the curious siting of Ty Newydd and Aber Naint, where the former may have been the successor to the latter, if its origin was as a result of a phase of later expansion.

Table 2: Common siting/morphology themes (* = mostly comprised of, ¹ = one end, ² = both ends)

<i>Bank and ditch</i>	Clawdd Mawr*, Clawdd Llesg*, Ty Newydd, Aber Naint*, Bwlch y Cibau
<i>Ditch on outer side of suggested boundary</i>	Clawdd Mawr, Clawdd Llesg, Ty Newydd, Aber Naint, Bwlch y Cibau
<i>Upslope ditch siting</i>	Clawdd Mawr, Clawdd Llesg, Aber Naint
<i>Scarped slope</i>	Bwlch Aeddan*, Ty Newydd (part), Bwlch y Cibau (part)
<i>Dyke ends at or near a watercourse</i>	Clawdd Mawr ² , Bwlch Aeddan ¹ , Clawdd Llesg ² , Ty Newydd ¹ , Aber Naint ² , Bwlch y Cibau ¹
<i>Dyke aligned with a natural or artificial landscape feature</i>	Bwlch Aeddan ¹ , Clawdd Llesg ¹ (possible), Ty Newydd ¹ , Bwlch y Cibau ¹

If the dykes can be credited with forming parts of the boundary of a predecessor to Mechain, then it seems worth attempting to define the most likely course of that boundary to initiate debate and this is given on the following plan (Figure 11). There are some illogical deviations, notably the section to either side of the Bwlch y Cibau Dyke, though there are natural features and pre-existing earthworks which may have stood for the boundary there. How, or indeed why, the boundary would have crossed the valley to the north-east of Meifod when it seems easier and simpler to follow the course of the River Vyrnwy is not known, though there are cropmarks (PRN 4610) by the Vyrnwy that may indicate where the crossing was. Further to the north-east of Bwlch y Cibau the boundary may have been formed by a group of hillforts/enclosures and possible linear earthworks, as a return to the Vyrnwy would seem to have also been illogical. The siting of Llansanffraid-ym-Mechain village outside this boundary is also curious but can be explained by the settlement post-dating the early boundary and indicate that the cantref had expanded beyond the original boundary on which it was based.

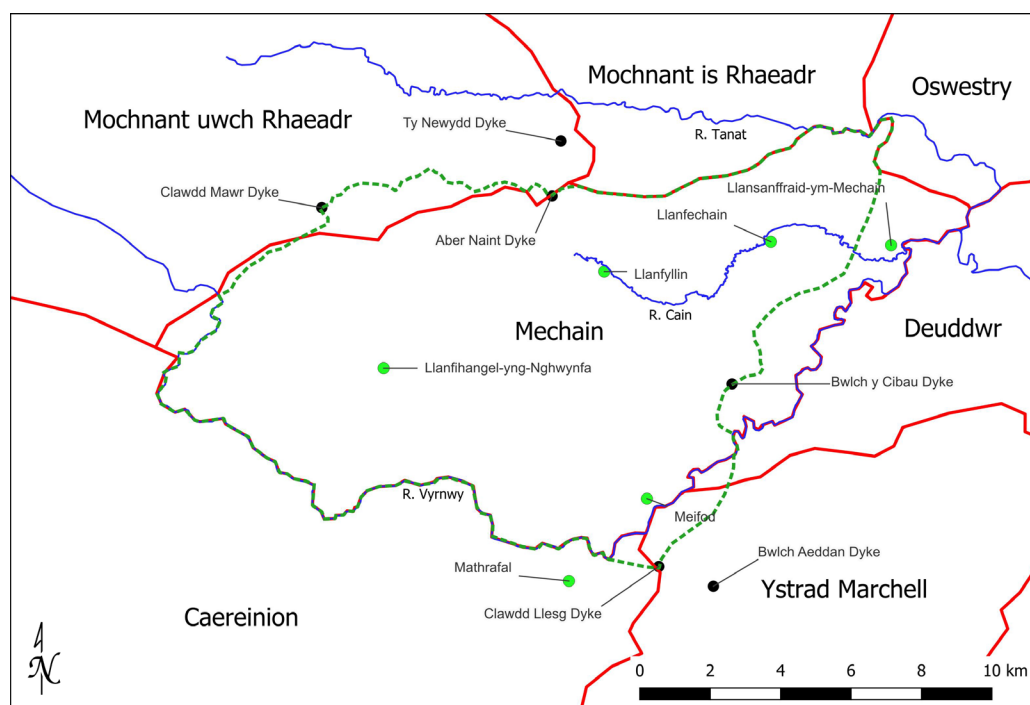


Figure 11: A conjectural boundary (in green) for the alleged predecessor to Mechain, utilising the dykes, natural features, and earthworks known to have been present in the landscape in the early medieval period, such as defended enclosures

Many questions remain to be answered, but if there is a correlation between the suggested pre-cantref boundary whose area later came to be identified as Mechain and the five dykes including Clawdd Mawr, then it appears that the boundary was in place by the end of the period covering the radiocarbon dates (AD 420–610 and AD 630–710), and perhaps even somewhere around the time when Meifod is thought to have become the cult centre of St Tysilio in about AD 600; it may even have been delineated in relation to and formalising that development. The accuracy of this assertion is difficult to judge based on the current lack of dating evidence for the other dykes in this area but there are morphological similarities between Clawdd Mawr, Clawdd Llesg and Aber Naint which suggest they were constructed in the same manner and with the same thinking so they could perhaps be contemporary. Techniques have also moved on in the time since the Cadw project was completed and the advent of Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL) dating brings with it the possibility of dating earthworks which do not have a relationship with organic material. The technique has proven its value in relation to Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke in more recent times (e.g. Malim and Hayes 2008; see also Belford *et al.* 2025). A programme of OSL dating covering the dykes discussed here could potentially resolve the issue of whether the five dykes are part of a contemporaneous border and if so perhaps refine the dating of that border.

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