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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Today's Offa's Dyke: Heritage Interpretation for Britain's Longest Linear Monument

Howard Williams

How is Offa's Dyke interpreted for visitors and locals in the contemporary landscape? The article considers the present-day heritage interpretation of Britain's longest linear monument: the early medieval Mercian frontier work of Offa's Dyke. I survey and evaluate panels, plaques and signs that follow the course of the surviving early medieval linear earthwork from Sedbury in Gloucestershire, north to Treuddyn in Flintshire, and along stretches away from the surviving earthwork and north to Prestatyn, Denbighshire along the line of the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail. Critiquing for the overarching narratives and envisionings of Offa's Dyke the first time, I identify how anachronistic ethnonationalist narratives pervade its interpretation: pertaining to the origins of both England and the English, and Wales and the Welsh. As such, the article provides a baseline for further research into the contemporary archaeology and heritage of Offa's Dyke and affords insights of application to other ancient linear monuments in today's world. I conclude with reflections and recommendations for future heritage interpretation of the monument in relation to the national trail, the border and borderlands identities.

Keywords: borderlands; heritage interpretation; linear earthworks; Offa's Dyke

Introduction

Offa's Dyke is both famous and infamous; it remains enigmatic whilst powerful in the British landscape. It has often been seen as the singular agency, and reflecting the political agenda, of the eighth-century Mercian ruler Offa, variously considered as articulating his power, authority, territorial, military, economic and symbolic control of his kingdom's frontier with the polities of western Britain (Fox 1955; Noble 1983; Hill and Worthington 2003; Ray and Bapty 2016; Williams 2023a; Williams 2025a). Less considered until now is how Offa's Dyke operates as a monument in the contemporary Anglo-Welsh borderlands of the twenty-first century? This article evaluates for the first time the heritage interpretation of Britain's longest ancient linear monument, focusing on the eclectic 'authorised heritage discourse' (Smith and Waterton 2012) which seeks to mark and explain to the public, and to commemorate, the surviving presence and legacy of the early medieval monument. Despite the binding thread of the Offa's Dyke Path and Knighton's Offa's Dyke Centre, in contrast to the 'Frontiers of the Roman World' UNESCO World Heritage Site which for Britian incorporates both the Hadrianic and Antonine frontiers (see Witcher 2010a and b; Collins 2020, 2022; Jones 2020; Woodward *et al.* 2022), Offa's Dyke has no coherent and structured heritage interpretation along the course of its surviving traces and at associated heritage sites, museums and landscapes. Furthermore, it is starkly separated from the nearby Wat's Dyke and other borderland monuments. This evaluation is thus a timely intervention

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soon after the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail which saw the opening of a brand-new heritage interpretation of the monument at the Offa's Dyke Centre in Knighton (Williams 2021). Moreover, I complement this discussion via a companion article where I expand the consideration beyond heritage interpretation to evaluate a wider range of other monuments, installations and material cultures associated with the earthwork, national trail and border (Williams 2025b).

Background

On a global scale, there have been contemporary archaeology and heritage debates regarding linear monuments of our time, from the Iron Curtain to the Peace Walls of Northern Ireland, which have sought to explore their varying roles in constituting heritage and in negotiating identities (see McWilliams 2013; McAtackney 2020; McAtackney and McGuire 2020). The legacies and powers of ancient walls in politics, economy and society have also been considered from a host of perspectives, from the Great Wall of China to Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Frontier, and how they are used in discourses about migration, borders and walls in the contemporary period (e.g. Billingham 2020; McAtackney and McGuire 2020). Yet, to date, there has been limited dedicated consideration of Offa's Dyke as a monument of our time despite the flurry of research on the monument's early medieval significance (e.g. Ray and Bapty 2016; Belford 2017; Ray *et al.* 2021; Ray 2000, 2022; Delaney 2021; Humphreys 2021).

Some key contributions to considering the contemporary nature of Offa's Dyke have, however, taken place. The conservation and management of the monument as a part-scheduled and thus protected heritage asset is one key area of recent reinvigorated attention (Haygarth Berry Associates 2018; Upson and Davies 2024). The book-length consideration of the monument by Ray and Bapty (2016: 373–376) addressed its ambivalent contemporary perception and significance, while Belford (2017) recognised the monument's role in a deep-time permeable borderland down to the present day. Ray (2020) built on these considerations to tackle how the monument continues to play an active part in contemporary cultural and political discourse (see also Williams 2020a). Also, Fitzpatrick-Matthews (2020) tackled Offa's Dyke as a focus of fantastical and pseudo-archaeological misrepresentations including false and spurious claims the monument was either a prehistoric canal or Roman frontier. In terms of tangible landscape iterations, Williams (2020b) explored the materiality and absent-presence of the monument in the contemporary landscape via its citation in place-names for settlements, roads and residences. Together, this work shows the complex and varying roles of Offa's Dyke in the twenty-first-century landscape of the Anglo-Welsh borderlands, as well as in popular imagination as a past divide that continues to influence national, regional and local identities.

The immediate precedent for this review took this considering of linear earthworks as heritage in fresh directions. John Swogger's work is key here in encouraging new ways

of envisioning and interpreting the past for communities and, specifically, for rethinking linear earthworks in relation to contemporary borderlands (Swogger 2019a and b). In a parallel survey evaluating Wat's Dyke's heritage interpretation, including both tangible and digital dimensions (Williams 2020c) and the potential for future heritage interpretation being recognised and explored, focused on fresh art/archaeological collaborations (see also Swogger and Williams 2021; Williams and Swogger 2021; Williams 2023b). However, while providing invaluable context and insights into the preservation, uses and significance of Offa's Dyke today in its modern borderland context, to date, the heritage interpretation and public archaeology of Offa's Dyke has escaped focused evaluation. Certainly, a consideration of both 'authorised' and planned installations to direct and mark Offa's Dyke, and commemorate its significance, as well as those that informally and by happenstance have become landmarks and features connected to it, has hitherto not taken place.

Method

The survey presented here aims to redress the limited critical investigation of Offa's Dyke in the contemporary world by drawing on field observations made during walking Offa's Dyke and the Offa's Dyke Path at different times between 2016 and 2024 (Figure 1). By making digital photographic records of key signs and installations on the line of the Dyke and the Path, an extensive visual dossier has been created to inform this evaluation. In this fashion, I explore themes regarding how the signs, installations and monuments that constitute the assemblage of Offa's Dyke which have emerged as a composite of past and recent components, some with explicit commemorative and mnemonic dimensions, others which serve to bolster the monument's significance to locals and visitors alike. While my previous evaluation of Wat's Dyke also covered key publications and digital media (Williams 2020a), as did my discussion of the 'Walking with Offa' project (Williams 2023b), to maintain a focus on the embodied experience of engaging with lines in the landscape, this review will focus exclusively on the real-world landscape itself rather than publications and digital media. Certainly, the 'digital Offa's Dyke' is here considered an important subject of potential future enquiry, including the artistic and literary media involving it and assisting in its heritage interpretation (music, poetry, books, comics, drawings and paintings, for example; but see Swogger 2019a and b; Swogger and Williams 2021; Williams and Swogger 2021; Hall *et al.* 2023). Furthermore, although bilingual signs and heritage interpretations are noted, the Cymraeg dimensions of Clawdd Offa are only touched upon briefly but deserve further and future consideration and evaluation.

Taking on board these limitations in the parameters of the survey, I proceed by exploring 'Today's Offa's Dyke' by evaluating seventeen heritage locales in geographical sequence from south to north, considering the main heritage boards and plaques a visitor encounters as one travels northwards (Figure 1). This allows readers to navigate easily and shows the eclectic nature of the heritage interpretation as they appear in the present-day landscape. For each heritage interpretation panel I consider the text, focusing on the themes and story told, as well as its accuracy in relation to the latest

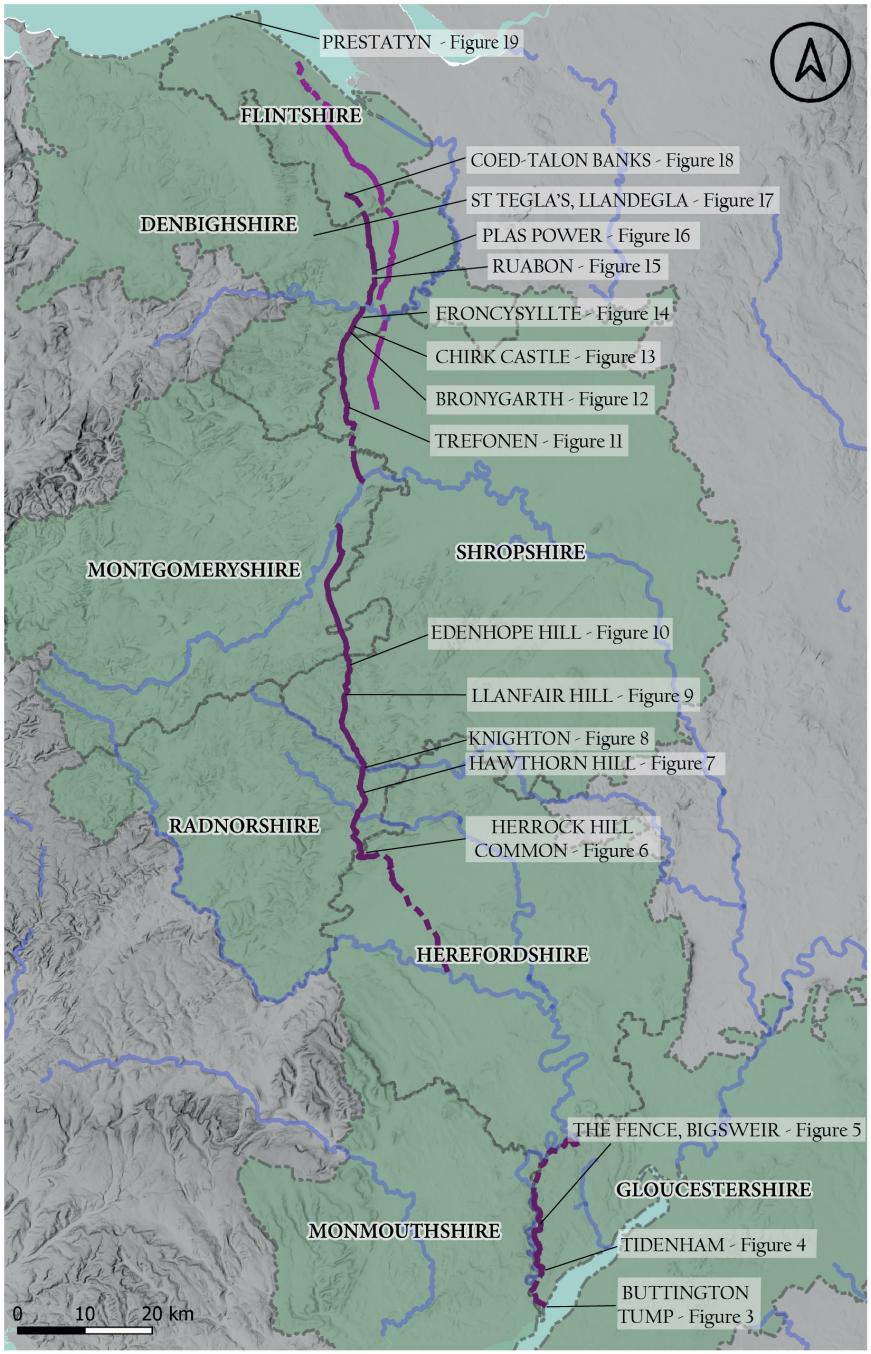


Figure 1: Map of the heritage interpretation panels/clusters of heritage interpretation addressed in this study and visited at various times between 2017 and 2024. The extant line of Offa's Dyke is marked in dark purple. The line of Wat's Dyke to the east and north of Offa's Dyke is marked in light purple. Pre-1974 historic county names and borders are shown (Map design by Lena Delaney)

research. Regarding images, I again focus on the themes and narrative but I also point out misleading or inaccurate elements.

This survey is more than a 'snapshot' since it has enabled the identification of aspects of the ever-changing nature of the assemblage that is Offa's Dyke in today's world either side of the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020/2021. Equally though, there is no claim to an exhaustive identification of every feature that has been associated with Offa's Dyke in modern times. As such, I present a short-term early twenty-first-century window onto an evolving picture which affords the basis for future recommendations. Moreover, my blogging via *Archaeodeath* and the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory website has documented and critiqued these heritage interpretations in a more piecemeal fashion, as well as feeding forward into new heritage interpretations, such as those augmenting the signs and waymarkers at Chirk Castle. As such, it provides further detail and context to this article and readers are referred to the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory blog for further details and examples.

Further heritage dimensions are considered in a subsequent article when they pertain to other archaeological, historical and nature-related themes, as well as to the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail. I conclude by proposing future avenues for public engagement which connect these tangible heritage dimensions of Offa's Dyke that challenge anachronistic and ethnonationalist readings of the borderlands past and present.

Offa's Dyke as an assemblage of three linears

Today's Offa's Dyke is constructed from sections of surviving early medieval linear earthwork braided with two other prominent linear features of the modern era. First, 'Offa's Dyke' refers to sections and traces of an early medieval linear earthwork resurrected for our time through its identification by antiquarian and archaeological research, in most places comprising (to varying levels of survival) of a bank and ditch (together with sundry hints of additional possible-related features) and afforded varying degrees of heritage protection under law (Fox 1955; Noble 1983; Hill and Worthington 2003; Ray and Bapty 2016). It runs through what are now (from south to north) Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Powys, Shropshire, Wrexham and Flintshire, although archaeologists remain unclear whether it was originally continuous and whether it did originally run from 'sea-to-sea' (for recent debates on this point, see Ray 2020; Ray *et al.* 2021).

Second, Offa's Dyke exists via the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail (see Figures 7 and 9), which follows the linear monument but only along significant stretches in the south, along the Wye Valley from Sedbury Cliffs to Welsh Bicknor (Ray and Bapty 2016: 50: Ray *et al.* 2021: 38–50). It rejoins the monument at Rushock Hill in Powys and follows it for large parts of its route, northwards for c. 81km as far east as Froncysyllte on the south side of the Dee Valley on the Llangollen Canal towpath (noting the gap where the line of Offa's Dyke disappears at the River Severn). Here, the Offa's Dyke Path departs significantly from the remaining course of Offa's Dyke, instead heading via Trevor Rocks, Llandegla and the Clwydian Range to Prestatyn on

the coast of the Irish Sea. Therefore, where the dyke is no longer visible (or perhaps may have never existed in a form similar to its survival elsewhere), or in order to follow public rights of way and dramatic beautiful landscapes on its course, the Path stands as its proxy and extension in contemporary experience and imagination, providing a physical and conceptual thread from 'sea-to-sea' for an earthwork that has yet to be empirically demonstrated to have originally done so. In other words, in the contemporary popular imagination of locals and visitors alike, the Dyke and Path merge and coincide regardless of their precise spatial and material association. Thus, they are both conceptually 'Offa's Dyke' in the contemporary landscape even though only a fraction of the Offa's Dyke Path follows the surviving traces of the monument (less than 68km of 197km as the crow flies from Sedbury Cliffs to Prestatyn, no more than c. 29% of the total distance. To put it another way, half of the surviving monument is followed by the line of the Path (Upson and Davies 2024).

Third, Offa's Dyke exists in the imagination and in language as a metaphor for the modern political border between Wales and England which was formalised in the Laws in Wales Act of 1535 (see also Figures 1, 7 and 9). Again, the border coincides with the Dyke and Path in only restricted areas, notably in the Wye Valley, the Vale of Montgomery and the area to the south of Bronygarth (Williams 2020a: 11–15). Ray (2020: 128) estimates one-tenth of the surviving monument coincides with the modern border. There are road signs marking the entry into Wales and England, some associated with the Dyke and Path as in Knighton and Llanymynech (in each case where Shropshire and Powys meet), but otherwise this is an invisible border tied to Offa's Dyke in rhetorical and discursive fashions in popular culture. Wales and England's border is often referred to as Offa's Dyke in a vague and conceptual, rather than tangible and specific, sense.

Through these interconnections, Offa's Dyke operates as a borderline and a route, and as a result it operates as a zone or space in its own right: a shorthand reference to the borderland region. Thus, Offa's Dyke embodies the present-day political, cultural and historical division of Wales and England but it simultaneously operates a space apart: neither England nor Wales. While all three lines, or perhaps more appropriately 'zones' – that is, the modern border, Path and Dyke – coalesce and become confused in the popular imagination and use, only in a very few places do we find all three linears run in close proximity or contiguously, notably in the Wye Valley in Gloucestershire, and for three shorter stretches in the Vale of Montgomery: for c. 6.4km from Little Brompton to the Camlad; c. 1.2km from the River Vyrnway through Llanymynech; and c. 4km from Orseddwen north to Bronygarth (Williams 2020a: 12). Moreover, the border also crosses the course of Offa's Dyke on multiple occasions at Lower Harpton (Powys), Knighton (Powys), on the Kerry Ridgeway (Shropshire) and Brompton Hall (Shropshire) (Figure 1).

'Offa's Dyke' today is manifest on the ground and in the imagination, mediated by a triad of entangled lines in the landscape. But my point here is that the 'glue' that binds together these three 'strands' is not a coherent strategy of authorised heritage interpretation mediated by a single authority, although the Offa's Dyke Association

provides an enduring contribution. Instead, a host of contemporary material cultures and monuments beyond authorised heritage interpretation articulate the monument's identity in the landscape and augment the bank and ditch, path and (to a far lesser extent) the borderline. This multi-stranded line has hotspots of presence, long stretches of faintness and absence, and (as stated above) is braided. Moreover, its edges are fuzzy, since material representations and traces of this assemblage can be found miles away from the line of the Dyke and Path and rarely on the modern border line itself. I propose that this assemblage operates to configure and mediate with a host of audiences and residents in the contemporary landscapes, through not only the early medieval linear earthwork itself but also the long-distance footpath and associated heritage installations, signs, art and monuments constructed for a variety of purposes and functions.

Heritage interpretation

Before we chart where Offa's Dyke receives heritage interpretation, it is important to recognise the many potential spaces where it is not provided on the ground. Indeed, there are a striking number of prominent heritage sites upon, or close to the line of, Offa's Dyke where the monument is ignored or very difficult to discern. Until recently, this applied to National Trust Chirk Castle although efforts have been made to improve this situation (see below). Other striking absences are the lack of reference to Offa's Dyke at the Cadw heritage sites of Chepstow Castle, Tintern Abbey and Montgomery Castle: all intervisible with the line of Offa's Dyke and yet lacking references to it. For Chepstow and Tintern, both are situated within sight of the linear earthwork's postulated and demonstrated line following the tops of the west-facing scarps of the east side of the Wye Valley, and yet at each location Cadw's heritage interpretation ignores Offa's Dyke in any substantive discussion of their prehistory and early history. Farther north, the same criticism applies to Montgomery Castle despite it affording vistas over a large stretch of Offa's Dyke crossing the Vale of Montgomery to its east.

Likewise, there are other key locations on the line of the Dyke where information could readily explain the location and character of the Dyke, but the opportunity is missed to do so, as at Highbury Wood National Nature Reserve where the Path is noted on the map but not the monument, which is described only as an 'Earthwork' without explanation. Likewise, the 'Clun' heritage board explaining the 'Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme' makes no reference to the monument even though it is right beside it. Also in the Clun Forest, the halfway point waymarker and plaque for the National Trail is situated right next to prominent traces of the Dyke's bank, and yet there is no reference to the monument in the text when discussing the Path. Another notable absence is the Pontcysyllte World Heritage Site: while Offa's Dyke runs through its hinterland from Chirk Castle to Ty Mawr, and the Llangollen Canal cuts its line, a heritage interpretation panel omits the linear earthwork completely (Figure 2a). The same applies to Chirk town itself, where the heritage interpretation map omits the dyke despite the accompanying text mentioning its presence (Figure 2b). Chirk Castle still includes maps that omit the

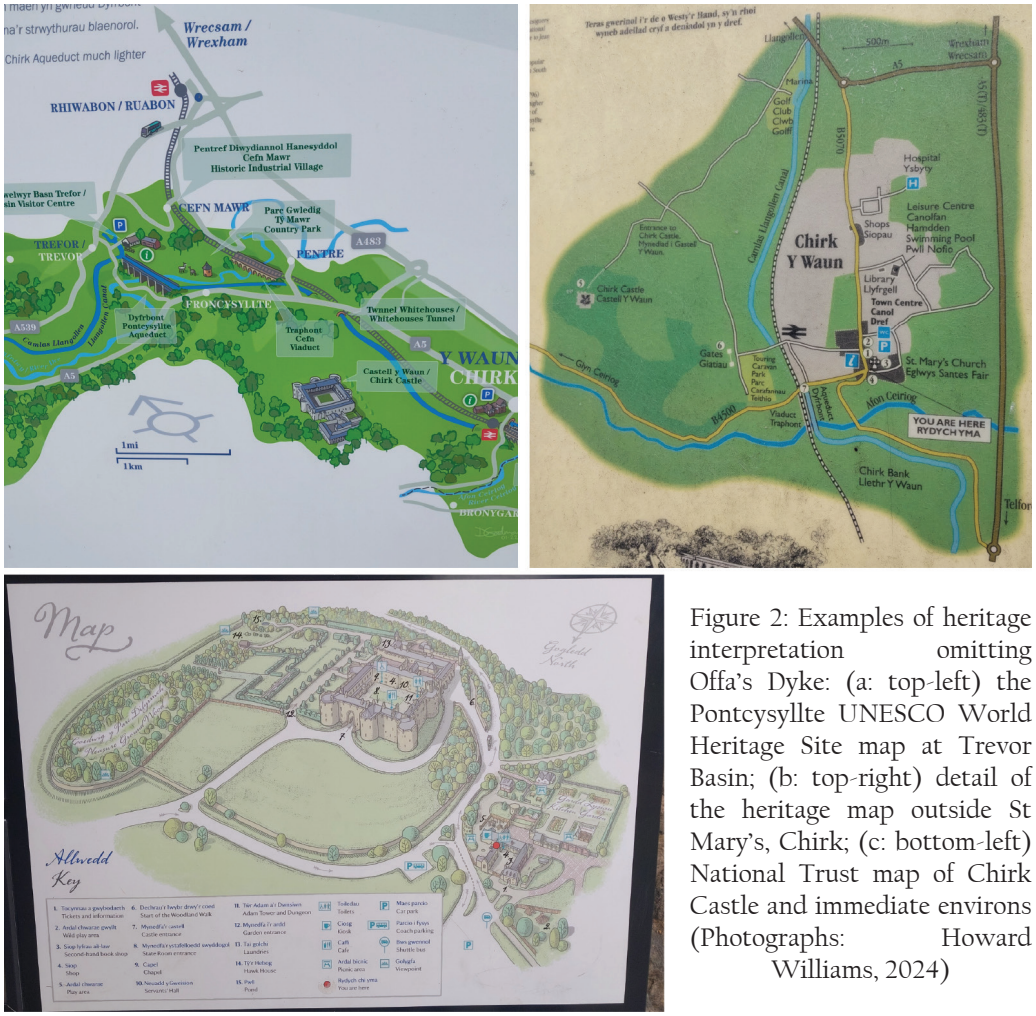


Figure 2: Examples of heritage interpretation omitting Offa's Dyke: (a: top-left) the Pontcysyllte UNESCO World Heritage Site map at Trevor Basin; (b: top-right) detail of the heritage map outside St Mary's, Chirk; (c: bottom-left) National Trust map of Chirk Castle and immediate environs (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2024)

monument (Figure 2c) although others do denote the monument (Figure 2d). A final and northernmost missed opportunity is to adequately interpret Offa's Dyke at Coed-talon Banks (see below). In each of these instances, the restricted or absence of reference to the monument partly reflects rigid periodisations of Britain's heritage sites, but also tensions regarding the potentially divisive story of the monument for twentieth and twenty-first-century audiences. Also, it reflects the impact of national organisations and rhetorics on telling authorised heritage accounts. In turn, the situation also reveals confusions in both the heritage discourses and popular culture regarding what and where Offa's Dyke runs, but also how it is situated, physically and conceptually, in relation to the story of the Welsh Marches. This long-term circumstance of 'forgetting' Offa's Dyke is compounded by heritage interpretation on the line of the Offa's Dyke Path that implies the presence of the Dyke where it is not confirmed, as at Prestatyn (see below).

Certainly, the situation reveals the lack of coordinated and planned heritage interpretation for the monument itself and its hinterland. Still, there are a selection of key locations along the monuments, charting from south to north, where interpretation panels occur, either situated as stand-alone structures or smaller versions appended to waymarker posts. I identify seventeen instances to present and critique (see Figure 1).

'Ancient Defences': Sedbury Cliffs (Gloucestershire)

Farthest south, we have a small waymarker post interpretation panel at Sedbury Cliffs installed by the Offa's Dyke Path with funding from Natural England and Gloucestershire County Council (ST 5521 9283) (Figure 3). Accompanied by an image of a band of early medieval warriors (whose identity is ambiguous: are they supposed to be Irish, Pictish, Welsh, Saxon or Scandinavians (Vikings)?) arriving by boat, one with arms outstretched as a sign of aggression or victory, it tells the story of the Beachley Peninsula. The text argues that Offa conceded the peninsula to 'Welsh hands' and speculates at the presence of a Welsh-owned fishing village and ferry. It then postulates Buttington Tump (the name for this section of Offa's Dyke) probably 'pre-dates the Dyke' and might reflect defences against Irish, Scottish and Gallic raiders in the fourth to fifth centuries AD, none of which have a specific connection to this part of the borderland landscape. There is no map or broader explanation regarding the date, function or significance of the monument. This is overall confusing: simultaneously the interpretation defines the earthwork as a pre-Offan monument *and* as a territorial strategic decision by Offa himself to demarcate and concede the peninsula to the Welsh! This is complemented by a second waymarker titled 'Congratulations!' stating that 'you've nearly made it' and thus encouraging you to walk the final stretch to Sedbury Cliffs and explaining that 'you are standing on Offa's Dyke, an eighth-century earthwork that defined the border between Anglo-Saxon Mercia and the kingdoms of the Welsh Princes' (Figure 3). So, the southern terminus of Offa's Dyke is marked as a 'border' between Mercia and various Welsh territories, but this narrative is contradicted by a proximal waymarker post suggesting this earthwork had pre-dated Offa's Dyke. The absence of any reconstruction or mapping of the monument is another stark omission. The web-link is accurate but does not provide a connection to the podcasts promised.

'To the Devil's Pulpit and Beyond…': Tidenham (Gloucestershire)

The second heritage interpretation zone comprises a cluster of heritage interpretation associated with the section of the monument in the care of English Heritage (Figure 4). There are a perfunctory pair of English Heritage signs titled 'Tidenham Section' describing the 'earthwork built by Offa, the powerful Anglo-Saxon King of Mercia (757–796 AD) to establish a frontier between his kingdom and the Welsh'. The geographical span of the monument is misleadingly defined as 'from the River Severn to the Dee' which oddly mistakes the presence and significance of the Wye Valley itself.

Figure 3: The Sedbury Cliffs heritage interpretation panel, Gloucestershire (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2017)

The signs are complemented by a larger heritage interpretation panel located away from the Dyke itself, 1.5km to the east of the Devil's Pulpit beside the English Heritage car park at Tidenham Heath (ST 5584 9927), on the B4228 between Sedbury and St Briavels. The board was funded by the Heritage Lottery, National Trails, English Heritage and other partners. While situated some distance from the monument, it is titled 'To the Devil's Pulpit and beyond...'. It has a map showing the route of the Dyke, images of ponies, walkers and the Path, plus a thirteenth-century manuscript illustration of Offa, an aerial photograph of Tintern Abbey, providing a sense of the landscape to be experienced by walkers.

A key component of this panel is the artist's drawing (by Alan Duncan) of the eighth-century landscape of Offa's Dyke. This is a distinctive birds-eye view, providing a sense of how the monument utilised the natural topography and divided up a populated and farmed landscape. Although one might question details of the representation's vision of

Figure 4: The Tidenham section heritage interpretation, Gloucestershire: (top-left) two signs beside the Dyke, (top-right) the Visit Wales bilingual folklore sign beside the Devil's Pulpit, (bottom) the panel beside the Tidenham Heath car park (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2017 and 2020)

the eighth-century landscape and a hypothetical settlement represented on the banks of the Wye, it does engage visitors with the likely multi-functional character of Offa's Dyke as a frontier work in peace and war, dominating and managing movement across and along the river (see also Ray and Bapty 2016; Williams 2023a).

The text works well in relation to the art: describing Offa's Dyke as an 'impressive and striking feature in the landscape' taking an aerial perspective looking north-east across the monument at Tintern. The tourism along the Wye and the popularity of the Devil's

Pulpit is complemented by a description of the monument as a 'keep out' sign: a 'potent symbol of Offa's power and authority over his frontier as well as a formidable obstacle to any invaders. It was designed to impress, with the surrounding trees cleared to ensure it was highly visible in the landscape. It has had a lasting impact on the way people living either side of it define their cultural identity'. The political, military and symbolic significance of Offa's Dyke is thus made apparent and the agency of the Mercian king is prioritised: a theme we will repeatedly encounter. The 177-mile Offa's Dyke Path National Trail is also recognised and its symbol displayed (Figure 4).

The final heritage interpretation of this section of the Dyke is the small fingerpost folktale of the formation of the Devil's Pulpit in relation to Tintern Abbey explaining the folklore surrounding the name of this prominent rock on the line of Offa's Dyke overlooking Tintern Abbey (ST 5429 9953). The bilingual sign focuses on the monks of Tintern being preached to by the Devil to tempt the monks of Tintern from their 'holy path'. A QR code affords a link to online information: a series of podcasts describing the monument, although the link defaults to a discussion of the Clun Forest section of the monument, not the Wye Valley.[1] Whilst in England, the site is funded by the Welsh government presumably because of the iconic view of Cadw's Tintern Abbey afforded from the Devil's Pulpit on the English (eastern) side of the Wye (funded by Croeso Cymru/Visit Wales) (where, notably, Offa's Dyke is not mentioned). Strikingly, there is no explanation of the monument itself at this location or near the Devil's Pulpit. The result is an odd disconnect and tension between the heritage interpretation of the later medieval Tintern Abbey and the presence of Offa's Dyke: they exist in the same landscape in different chronological phases but they are not allowed to touch each other in an historical narrative about the landscape.

'The Ancient Border of England and Wales': The Fence, Bigsweir (Gloucestershire)

The third location for heritage interpretation on Offa's Dyke is at the southern end of Cadora and Bigsweir Woods at The Fence (SO 5440 0557) (Figure 5). Commissioned by The Woodland Trust and titled 'the ancient border of England and Wales', the board was in a state of disrepair at the time of my visit (2017). Here, the text explains that the monument was 'one of the great engineering achievements of the pre-industrial age' and comprises 129km of earthworks 'along many parts of the Welsh border' and that it was built to 'show the power of King Offa of Mercia'. It poses the question 'was it for defence or just to mark a boundary or did it have some other purpose?'. As at Tidenham, an explanation is made regarding the Offa's Dyke National Trail and there are links to the web addresses of Clwyd Powys Archaeological Trust and the Offa's Dyke Centre (the former at the time of writing now automatically redirects to Heneb's website, the latter now defunct). A black-and-white artist's reconstruction drawing effectively affords an impression of the monument during construction, with a speculative but reasonable inference that a wooden

[1] https://www.shropshiresgreatoutdoors.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Walk-1-Climb-to-the-Edge-of-the-Kingdom.mp3

Figure 5: Heritage interpretation at The Fence, Gloucestershire (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2017)

fence topped the bank. The Dyke is shown from the English (eastern) side surmounted by the chest-height fence in construction. A second panel discusses the walks and wildlife (not illustrated) but the same map marks the course of Offa's Dyke where it survives on this panel too. Here, a sense is given of how the monument might have appeared, its identity considered an articulation of Offan power, and its status as an engineering feat is outlined. Offa's Dyke's potential multiple functions are considered yet it is misleadingly and anachronistically merged with the idea of a single 'Welsh border'.

'Offa's Dyke': Herrock Hill Common (Herefordshire)

Having explored Offa's Dyke's surviving lengths for the rest of the Wye Valley sections and across Herefordshire, there is no extant heritage interpretation. Therefore, we have to jump far north of the Wye Valley to find our next heritage interpretation panel (Figure 6). Described as a 'good stretch of Offa's Dyke' without clarifying what this means, the monument is interpreted on the heritage interpretation board on Herrock Hill Common, Powys (SO 282 593). It is mentioned only briefly alongside discussions of grazing, conservation and wildlife: the panel is the work of Wildlife Trusts and other nature conservation partners including Natural England. Offa's Dyke is referred to in a descriptive fashion as an eighty-mile long earth bank and ditch marking the 'historical boundary between England and Wales', followed by claiming its origins and functions are 'shrouded in mystery' as there

Figure 6: The Herrock Hill heritage and natural conservation panel, Powys (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2017)

are no written records to tell us 'how or why it was built'. Still, its placement is described as 'strategy' and 'looking towards Wales'. The anachronistic explanation that it defined a boundary between England and Wales is the defining issue. The accompanying map effectively shows the line of Offa's Dyke upon the Common, and the contrast with the line of the Path, but not how the monument may have once appeared.

'Offa's Dyke, the Backbone of these Breathtaking Borderlands': Hawthorn Hill (Powys)

Close to some striking upland stretches of the monument, upon Hawthorn Hill, between Presteigne and Knighton in Powys, there is an expansive bilingual board beside the layby of the B4355 between Knighton and Presteigne. It is funded by the Offa's Dyke Path and partners (SO 282 688) (Figure 7). Here there are three striking images of the monument, and a map showing the relationship to the Dyke, roads and footpaths, as well as the Sir Richard Green Price monument. This attempt to map the monument in relation to other historic landmarks is notable.

An inset black-and-white drawing imagines Offa, hands on hips, with the construction of his monument proceeding behind him. Versions of this same image with different backgrounds will be subsequently encountered through the middle section of the Dyke to the north (Figures 10, 11 and 15). The text describes the monument as a 'symbolic border' of the Mercia and the Welsh princes in the eighth century and describes Offa as a 'powerful

Figure 7: The Hawthorn Hill heritage interpretation panel, Powys (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2021)

king and statesman'. It poses the question: '[d]id he build the earthwork for defence, to control trade or to mark the edge of his kingdom? There are many theories. Whatever his reasons, the Dyke is a lasting monument to his wealth and power'. It is thus described as an '80-mile long marvel of Anglo-Saxon engineering'. It suggests that it may have augmented earlier earthworks and that despite his power waning it 'helped create the modern border' thus 'changing the landscape and the culture of its people forever'. This is the most sustained attempt to explain the monument through text, images and maps upon the monument's line outside of Knighton and the anachronisms found elsewhere are carefully avoided (see also St Tegla's church on the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail).

'The Most Impressive Work of the Old English Kings' and 'A Window on early medieval Britain': Knighton, the Offa's Dyke Centre and Park (Powys)

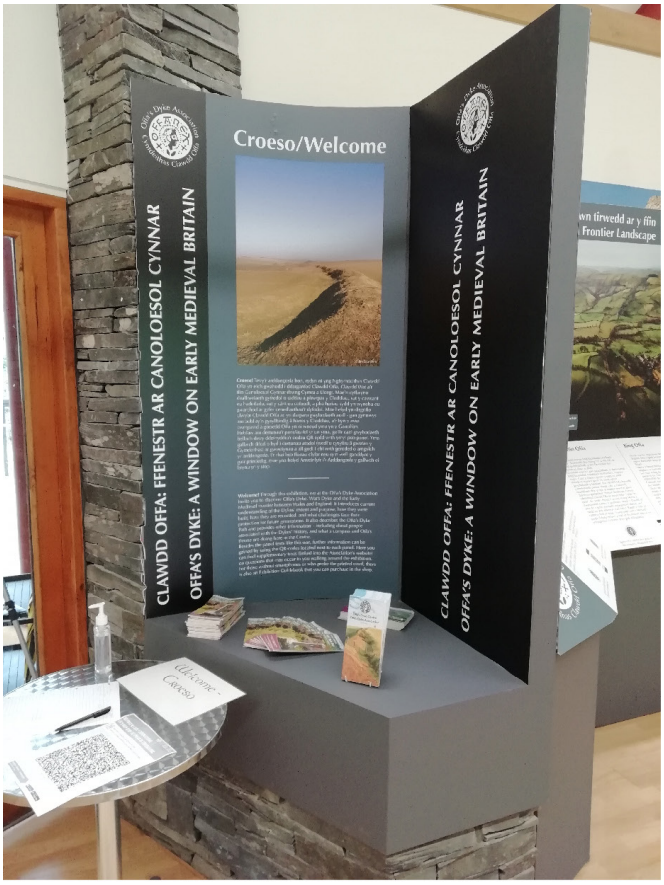
As previously considered regarding place-names (Williams 2020b), Knighton (Tref-y-Clwdd: the town on the dyke) is a distinctive memoryscape via an assemblage of citations to the triad of Dyke, Path and borderline (Figure 8). It constitutes the core focus of authorised heritage comprising the Offa's Dyke Centre, the Offa's Dyke Play Area, waymarkers for the Offa's Dyke Path and Pinners Hole. In this last location there is a surviving stretch of the monument framed by a plaque fixed to a concrete block commemorating 'the most impressive work of the Old English Kings' raised by the Offa's Dyke Association in 1971, and a monolith with a pair of plaques from 1971, one

commemorating the opening of the Offa's Dyke Park, the other commemorating the opening of the Path. As well as waymarkers, there is a recently added (2021) panel with paintings and poetry linked to Hall's 'Walking with Offa' project (Hall *et al.* 2021, 2023) and a new canopied heritage interpretation panel (Figure 9).

There are other related commemorative monuments linked to Offa's Dyke, including a stone by the car park commemorating William Hatfield (1859–1947) 'whose bequest to the town ensured the completion of the recreation and riverside park for all to use and enjoy' (1979). Nearby are Dyke-related road-names (Williams 2020b) and the bilingual road signs describing Tref-y-Clawdd/Knighton as 'Y Dre far y Clawdd'/'The Town on the Dyke' and brown signs directing visitors to the Offa's Dyke Centre. By the riverside, there are not only waymarkers for the Path and a picnic bench carved to commemorate Offa's Dyke, but the concrete bridge affording photo opportunities claiming that 'The line behind is the exact border between Wales and England. Please place your feet in two separate countries'.

Inside the Visitor Centre are not only maps, books and visitor information, but also an extensive indoor heritage interpretation designed by Professor Keith Ray (Williams 2021: 8). While the details of the panels are outside the remit of this review, it is fair to say that a wide range of visuals – maps, photographs and diagrams – help explain the monument's story to visitors, from its early medieval creation, functions and significance through to its use today on a transnational scale, as well as serving as a heritage hub for the Knighton community. This provides the gold standard and flagship exhibition to interpret Offa's Dyke in its chronological, geographical, historical, archaeological and heritage contexts (Figure 8).

In terms of open-air heritage interpretation, however, particular attention might be paid to the Dyke's most recent additional heritage interpretation panel by Powys County Council coordinated by Dave McGlade of the Offa's Dyke Association. It further shows the emergent nature, through construction and accumulation, of Knighton as a memoryscape tying together border, Path and Dyke in a contemporary conception of a living landscape. Drawing on the latest fieldwork, the bilingual text explains the scale and location of the monument, supported by two archaeological sections and a map which helpfully shows the surviving and projected line of the monument in relation to the modern Offa's Dyke Path and modern county borders. While no artist's impression of the monument is included, this board is unique in being the only place where Offa's Dyke is represented using archaeological field recording techniques. The interpretation reflects the monument's significance as an expression of power, showing the mobilisation of a labour force required to build it, and demonstrating its function to control customs and duties, as well as marking the sphere of direct Mercian control in a 'loosely drawn frontier'. The interpretation panel is also significant in explaining the results and implications of the Offa's Dyke Conservation Project (Figure 9).



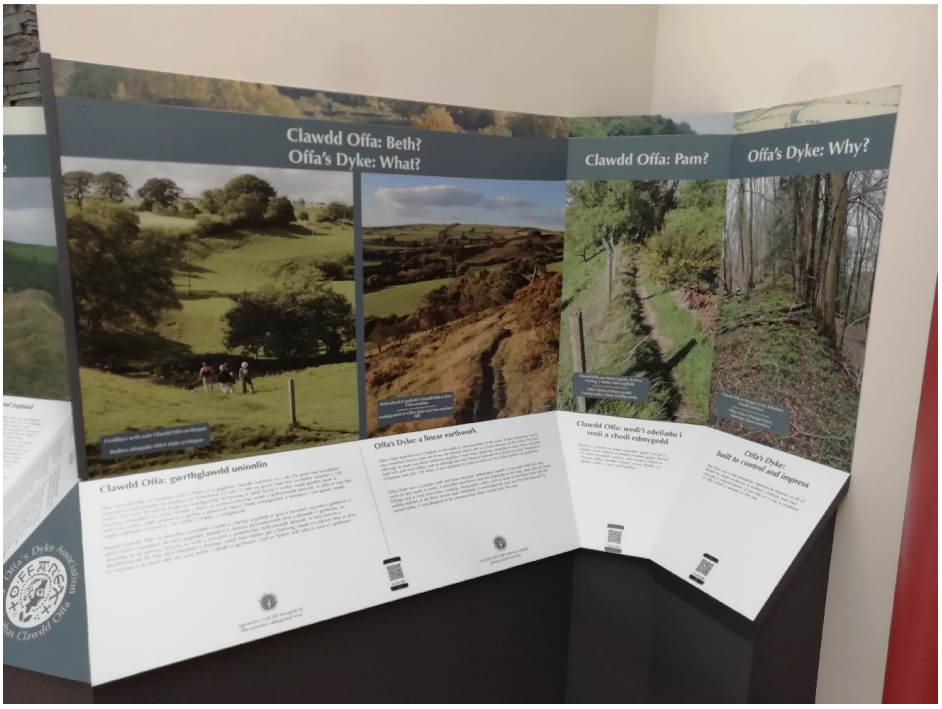


Figure 8: Elements of the indoor Offa's Dyke Centre exhibition commissioned by the Offa's Dyke Association on the story of 'Offa's Dyke: a window on early medieval Britain' authored by Keith Ray (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2021)

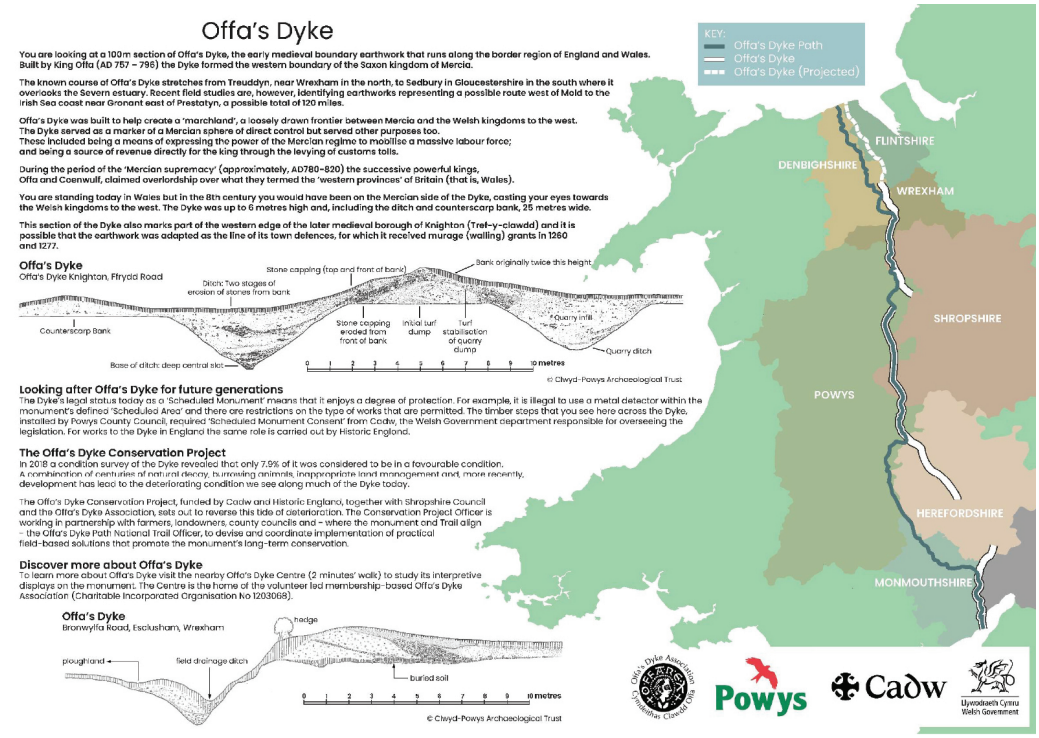


Figure 9: (top) The English-language half of the new heritage interpretation panel at Pinners Hole, Knighton, installed in 2024 (reproduced with the kind permission of Dave McGlade of the Offa's Dyke Association and Powys County Council); (bottom) photographs of the new management and interpretation space with the panels installed (Photographs: David McGlade, 2025)

'About the Earthwork': Llanfair Hill (Shropshire)

In contrast to the urban concentration of indoor and outdoor heritage interpretation at Knighton, the next panel to be discussed is one appended to a waymarker in a fairly isolated location on Llanfair Hill in the Clun Forest of Shropshire, located to the north of Knighton (SO 256 783) and coinciding with an iconic stretch of the linear earthwork.

Figure 10: The heritage interpretation panel at Llanfair Hill, Shropshire (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2021)

Funded by the European Union (via LEADER funding) and Welsh Government, the Offa's Dyke Association have funded this panel. The image is the same hands-on-hips Offa that appears at Hawthorn Hill. As at Herrock Hill, we are told the length of the monument (80 miles, 129km) and that it was built by the 'great Anglo-Saxon king' Offa to 'mark his border between Mercia and his enemies, the Princes of Wales' (Figure 10). Again, it repeats the theory that Offa constructed it to link together earlier dykes and it repeats the question from Hawthorn Hill about its function: 'Did he build it for defence, to control trade, or to show off his power? There are many theories. What do you think?'. A QR code links to the Offa's Dyke Path (the same link to that available at Tidenham). In the landscape with the monument in plain sight, the artist's reconstruction serves to side-step the demand to represent the completed monument and address un-answering questions about its precise appearance, whilst also visually articulating the arguments regarding the scale of the endeavour and its royal authorship and direction.

Figure 11: The heritage interpretation panel at Edenhope Hill, Shropshire (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2021)

'About the Earthwork': Edenhope Hill (Shropshire)

The second heritage interpretation locale in the Clun Forest is on Edenhope Hill (SO 262 882) and is identical to that on Llanfair Hill (Figure 11). Both Llanfair and Edenhope have the same funders' logos. They are situated upon well-walked and accessible stretches where the monument survives and can be appreciated. In this context, the absence of maps of the monument might not have significant impact on the effectiveness of the heritage interpretation. Furthermore, this modest-sized heritage interpretation affords the agency, once more, to King Offa in directing first-hand the construction of the monument, for whatever purpose. The QR code links to the same podcast as before.

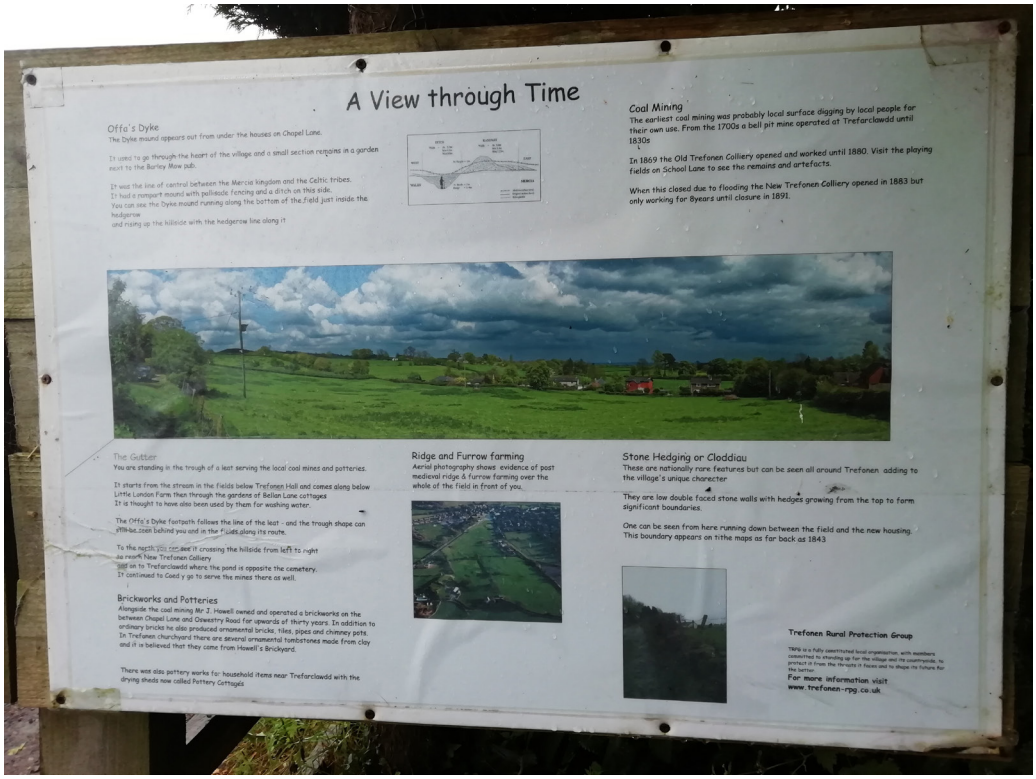


Figure 12: The Trefonen heritage interpretation panel (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2020)

'A View through Time': Trefonen (Shropshire)

The heritage interpretation panels discussed thus far are produced by various heritage and conservation organisations, but we now come upon a locally produced (by the Trefonen Rural Protection Group) heritage interpretation panel upon the line of the Path looking east over a field towards the line of the monument (SJ 258 269). What is distinctive here is less upon the interpretation of the monument itself and instead in trying to understand how the monument fits into the historic landscape (Figure 12). Thus, as well as a panorama photograph, aerial photograph and discussions of other dimensions of the historic landscape (ridge and furrow, coal mining and stone hedging) the line of the Dyke is explained and a section of the monument is reproduced. The preferred interpretation of the linear is as a 'line of control between the Mercian kingdom and the Celtic tribes', suggesting it had a palisade on the bank and a ditch to the west. While the term 'Celtic tribes' is inaccurate and potentially problematic, the attempt – to connect the monument into the landscape history of medieval farming and post-industrial mining connects the grand history of the monument to local people and place – deserves merit, as does the inclusion of a section drawing through the monument itself to show its profile.

'Warfare in the Valley': Bronygarth (Wrecsam/Shropshire)

A more recent heritage interpretation panel, replacing an older, much-worn and monolingual version, again connects Offa's Dyke to the locality, but in a different fashion to the Trefonen heritage panel. At the intersection of the Ceiriog Trail and the Offa's Dyke Path to the south-west of Bronygarth (SJ 260 370), there is a long-established location for an heritage interpretation panel next to striking surviving stretches of the Dyke, as it drops into the Ceiriog Valley with views north to Chirk Castle.

The earlier heritage board included a photograph of the Dyke's bank and described the monument as the Mercian construction of a 'boundary between the Saxon kingdom and the independent kingdoms of Wales (Celts)' (Figure 13a). The claim that the Dyke's bank can be up to 8m high is a stark exaggeration, presumably based on a confusion of imperial for metric measurements, since '8 feet' is a widely cited height for the bank (Hill and Worthington 2003: 48; see also below). The panel mentioned other theories: suggesting Offa's Dyke was of prehistoric origins as a trackway or a later Roman wall, neither of which are evidenced by archaeology or history. The association of the monument with a discussion of the Battle of Crogen and Chirk Castle is notable, thus the panel contextualises the Dyke in relation to a longer-term contested landscape.

The second heritage board picks up and updates this story of conflict through time in the locality (Figure 13b). This is a striking visual structure articulating itself as the second of nine panels constructed for the Ceiriog Heritage Trail, and with a cut-away section of the Dyke showing it traversing the valley with Chirk Castle in the distance. Offa is portrayed via its coin portrait. While stylised and thus misleading, particularly regarding the scale and shape of the bank and ditch, as well as the impression it navigates the landscape in a sinuous fashion, the visualisation of the monument serves to afford an impression for visitors regarding what Offa's Dyke was in the early medieval past. Together, with a trio of maps, there is a succinct text that describes the monument as an 'obstacle against raiding and a huge land grab by the dominant lord of the anglo-saxon [sic] kingdoms, Offa of Mercia'. Offa's Dyke is thus contextualised in relation to a borderlands landscape including the Battle of Crogen and the construction of Chirk Castle, although the positioning of the bank, facing upslope and northwards, is counter-intuitive for one trying to use the panel to interpret the landscape around them.

'Marked the Border': Offa's Dyke at Chirk Castle (Wrecsam)

As mentioned above, Offa's Dyke was neglected at Chirk Castle but this has been partly rectified with a new heritage interpretation panel (funded by the National Trust and added at Home Farm) located beside the monument where the path to the herb garden cuts across it (SJ 266 382). An aerial photograph in snow helps visitors to Chirk Castle NT appreciate the fact that Offa's Dyke straddles the parkland and cuts across the Ceiriog Valley, although this feature, and its relationship with the line of the monument visible in the distance at

Figure 13: Successive panels at south of Bronygarth at the intersection of the Ceiriog Heritage Trail and Offa's Dyke: (top) the earlier, faded, interpretation panel (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2015), (bottom) the new interpretation panel (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2023)

Figure 14: Heritage interpretation for Offa's Dyke, Chirk Castle: (above) beside the squash court, (below-right) on the path to the Castle, (below-left) at Home Farm (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2024)

Bronygarth, might not be apparent at all to the untrained viewer (Figure 14). The bilingual text is inaccurate to the core: claiming that the 'large linear earthwork' ran for 176 miles (the full distance of the Offa's Dyke Path and described explicitly as between Sedbury and Prestatyn) and demarcated the 'border between England and Wales': a starkly anachronistic statement. The dimensions and date of the monument are articulated and again it is claimed to be a 'border between [Offa's] kingdom and the Welsh kingdom of Powys: very much an argument promoted by Hill and Worthington (2003). Elsewhere in the grounds, including on the main walking path up to the castle, we encounter the estate map upon which the Dyke is marked but not interpreted. Together, the monument is situated in relation to the later medieval and modern-era castle and its designed landscape.

'Engineering Marvels Meet': Froncysyllte (Wrecsam)

Located at the final point of intersection between the Offa's Dyke Path and Offa's Dyke, on the tow path of the Llangollen Canal, is a bilingual dual-direction pair of signs appended to a waymarker post (SJ 202 408) (Figure 15). Offa, hands on hips yet again, directs the building of the monument against a different backdrop: distinct from the upland locations where this image was used at Edenhope, Llanfair and Hawthorn, to show Offa's Dyke traversing a valley and large river. Produced by the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail by the same funders (EU LEADER funding/Welsh Government), this is misleading in the geographical context since the Dyke, in fact, runs down to the Dee from south to north, but does not continue on the other side. Instead, it follows the Dee downstream before continuing northwards downstream and around two bends of the river (Williams 2023a). Still, in crude terms the image responds to the local topography and thus helps to explain the monument's placement in the landscape, running perpendicular to the later canal. The text persists in the narrative identified earlier of Offa's Dyke as a marvel of engineering and is entitled 'engineering marvels meet' to identify the crossing of the canal of the Dyke. Once more, it is argued that the Dyke was to 'mark' Offa's 'border' with his enemies, the 'Princes of Wales'. Again, it asks the tripartite question regarding the significance of the linear boundary as being either for defence, controlling trade or as a means of displaying power: 'There are many theories. What do you think?' An identical link is provided to the podcast located on the Llanfair Hill and Edenhope Hill sections, now defaulting to a recording discussing the Clun Forest section.

'Special Offas and Clearance Deals?': Ruabon (Wrecsam)

Located beside Tatham Road, overlooking the Dyke by Tatham Farm (SJ 298 444; Figure 15), is a heritage board that has been through two iterations in the duration of my visits, both times as part of the Ruabon Heritage Trail work. The older board I only witnessed in a faded state, the last time in 2020, and no clear photograph of its original contents could be obtained (Figure 16, top). Most unintelligible of all is the now heavily faded black-and-white drawing of the Dyke from an aerial perspective. Next to this was

Figure 15: The English-language panel of a pair of interpretation panels appended to a way-marker post east of Froncysyllte (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2020)

a map which shows the heritage trails linking Gardden Hillfort to the Dyke and town. The text is a bilingual essay, framing Offa's Dyke as the successor to Wat's Dyke, and asserting that it was a continuous monument from Prestatyn to Chepstow. It situates it as built following the last recorded Welsh attack of AD 784. It speculates that the bank may have been topped by a palisade and explains its similarity to urban defences of the time.

The 2022 replacement board (Figure 16, bottom) reflects changing ideas, describing the proportions of the monument and presents a lack of surety regarding the relationship with Wat's Dyke. In this regard, it can be considered a fully up-to-date heritage interpretation in which the monument is considered to have functioned for 'surveillance, communication and to assert control over the Welsh', and is no longer interpreted as continuous from sea-to-sea. In doing so, it responds to both the work

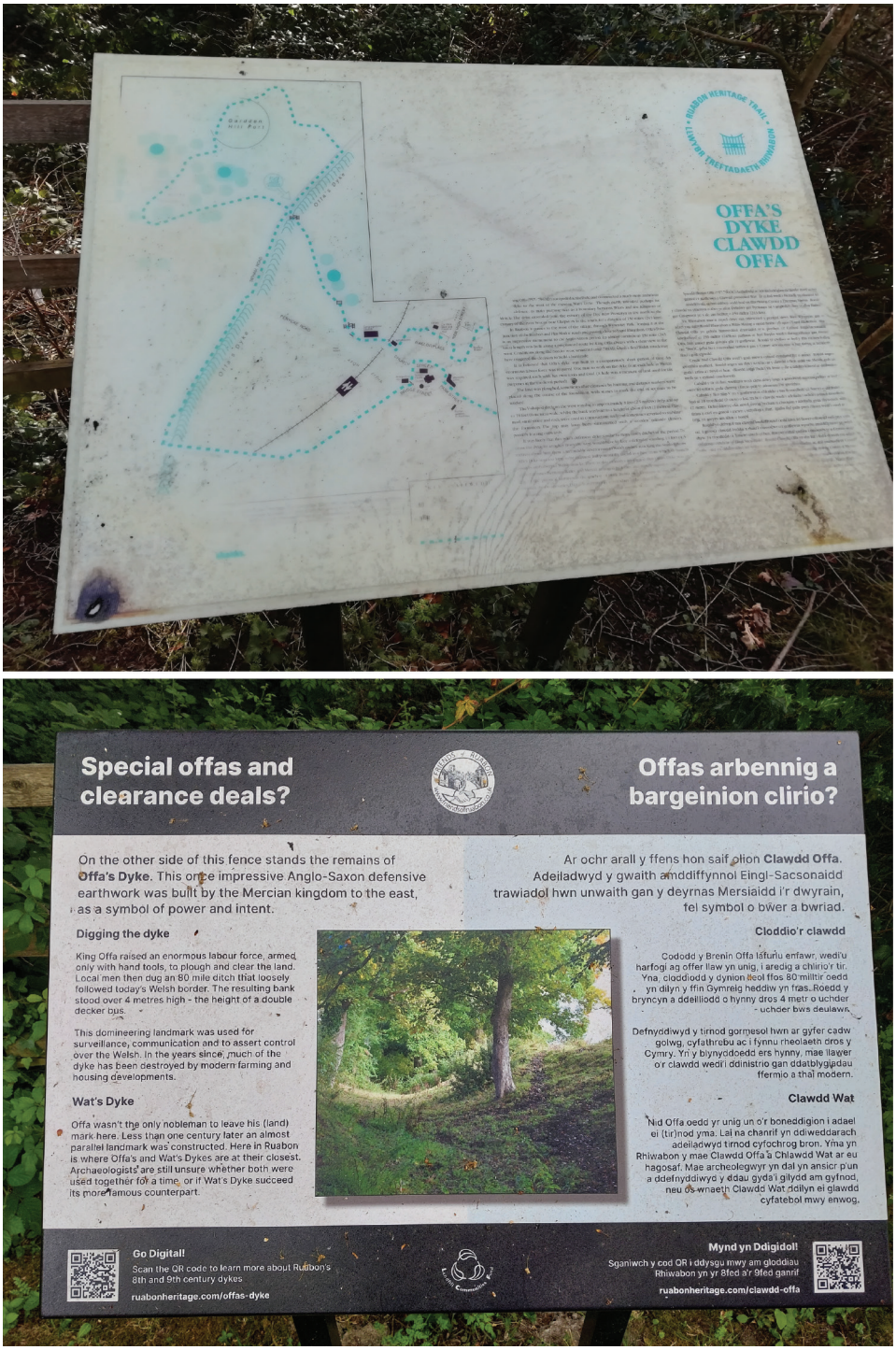


Figure 16: The Ruabon heritage interpretation panel, old (top; 2020) and new (bottom; 2023) (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2020 and 2023)

of Hill and Worthington (2003) and Ray and Bapty (2016; see also Williams 2023a). Explaining it as a 'symbol of power and intent', the text adds the inference that 'local men' dug the monument: a point over which we still have no direct evidence to either support or dispute (Figure 16). Describing Offa's Dyke as a 'domineering landmark' is evocative and useful, but describing the scale of the bank as 'over 4 metres high – the height of a double decker bus' is misleading and exaggerated (unless the height refers to the elevation of the bank above the bottom of the ditch). This is the only location where Offa's Dyke's relationship with Wat's Dyke is articulated 'at their closest', making it clear that archaeologists are 'still unsure' regarding their relationship. The QR code links to a website (ruabonheritage.com) that was sadly already inoperable and has been since as early as eighteen months after the heritage interpretation panel was installed!

'Welcome': Plas Power (Wrecsam)

In the woodland trails alongside the Afon Clywedog at Plas Power, east of Nant Mill (SJ 297 495), there is a tree sculpture associated with a nearby heritage interpretation panel (Ray and Bapty 2016: 367; Figure 17). Other signs have existed up and down the woodlands which cite the monument's presence and course. Portraying Offa pointing west into Wales, the monument and its excavation by workers are represented sculpted upon the tree, surrounded by floral ornamentation. This was carved in 2012 by Simon O'Rourke. A heritage board had been established to explain the art but it is no longer in situ, but when in place it had described the Plas Power section of the monument as 'impressive' and stated that the Dyke was either a 'defensive structure' or a 'boundary marker'.

In addition to the art, there is now a repositioned older bilingual heritage board by The Woodland Trust and dating from 2008. This had not been located beside the monument for many years, as based on personal observation. However, upon last visiting (2024), the panel was laid loose on the ground beside the dyke (Figure 17). The map shows the line of Offa's Dyke crossing the Afon Clywedog and the text states it was constructed 784–796 by Offa, King of Mercia, to 'limit growing Welsh incursions', a task apparently completed by Offa's 'local princes'. It then evokes the tradition of Offa dying in Rhuddlan (which is far from established) and mistakenly describes the Dyke as running from Treuddyn to Caerleon! So, inaccurate and misleading in regards the monument's function and course, this board takes a somewhat old-fashioned militaristic vision of Offa's Dyke but again promotes the agency of the king himself.

'An Enigma of the Welsh Border Landscape' and a 'Masterpiece of Dark Age Survey': St Tegla's Church (Denbighshire)

This is the first of two sites (the other being at the northern end of the National Trail at Prestatyn) that I will address beyond the demonstrated line of Offa's Dyke, but which lie upon the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail. Located within a church (SJ 195 524), the

Figure 17: Two of the heritage interpretation panels with maps showing the line of Offa's Dyke crossing the Clywedog, Plas Power: (above) near Bersham Mill, (below) an old heritage interpretation panel redisplayed upon the bank of Offa's Dyke (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2024)

indoor bilingual heritage interpretation at St Tegla's, Llandegla, tackles the monument's interpretation (Figure 18). The Offa's Dyke Association provided a graphic of a cross-section through the Dyke (this had been on display in a far larger form within the Offa's Dyke Centre) and there are two textual discussions. The first addresses 'What is Offa's Dyke?', referring to it as an enigma and quoting Asser's *Life of King Alfred*. As such, it is connected to Mercia's expanding territory resulting in driving the 'native British' into the 'mountainous land that we now call Wales'. This is the closest I have observed to an accurate and informed description of the historical circumstances surrounding the construction of Offa's Dyke (see Ray and Bapty 2016), when so many other heritage interpretation panels resort to anachronistic ethnonationalist descriptions being back-projected onto its building, function and impact. The second section focuses on how the monument was built, calling it a 'masterpiece of Dark Age survey' and a 'stupendous feat of engineering'. Explicitly referencing the work of Hill and Worthington (2003) and Ray and Bapty (2016), it states that it was built of long straight stretches and 'cleverly' follows the contours of the land in order to make it stand out when seen from the west. The estimate of '4 million man hours' is proposed for Offa's Dyke's construction. The Dyke is, however, misleadingly described, as we have seen elsewhere, as an 8-m high bank above a 6ft-deep V-shaped ditch: thus exaggerating the dimensions of the bank and mixing imperial and metric measurements together. A full-panel map designed by the Offa's Dyke Association and the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail shows the relationship between the Path, Dyke and border, as with the other graphics matching the design of the Offa's Dyke Association's displays in the Offa's Dyke Visitor Centre before its most recent redisplay.

'Offa's Dyke' at Coed-talon Banks (Flintshire)

We now return to the line of Offa's Dyke, and to the outdoors, at the northernmost point where Offa's Dyke can be traced with certainty in the landscape under the Treuddyn to Llanfynydd (B5101) road (Fox 1955: 30–31). Whilst this is not a heritage interpretation panel or plaque, it needs discussing as an abrupt (arguably botched) attempt at heritage interpretation (Figure 19). This brown sign, visible to those travelling south where the road mounts the surviving monumental bank, was installed following funding from Cadw and Treuddyn Community Council (SJ 266 577). Far removed from the Offa's Dyke Path, it marks the northernmost officially recognised extant section of Offa's Dyke upon which the B5101 now runs. Without further explanation, the bold statement 'Offa's Dyke/Clawdd Offa' is not comprehensible regarding the age, significance and location of the monument unless one already knows the road is situated on top of the bank of the monument. This information might be obtained by expert academic literature or online historic environment resources, but it would not be readily apparent to an uninformed visitor to this setting (Fox 1955; Ray and Bapty 2016). As a result, the sign renders the monument present, and yet frustratingly absent: a cenotaph of sorts in the Flintshire landscape.

Figure 18: Six of the panels explaining Offa's Dyke with graphics supplied by the Offa's Dyke Association, St Tegla's, Llandegla (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2025)

Figure 19: The 'Offa's Dyke' brown sign at Coel-talon (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2025)

'Helping define the Welsh nation': Prestatyn (Denbighshire)

Our final location is at the northern terminus of the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail. Beside the 'dechraua diwedd' (beginning and end) monument, overlooking the Irish Sea, there is a sign board explaining the significance of the Path in relation to the monument. Commissioned by the Arts Council for Wales, Denbighshire County Council and Prestatyn Town Council, and installed in 2009, together with seating, it claims to symbolise the sun and thus commemorates the start or finish of the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail, either evoking the rising sun for those starting their trek south, or the setting sun for those completing their journey in the north (Figure 20). While it makes clear that the Path diverges from the Dyke 'in the north', it repeats the anachronistic idea that the monument was built between two pre-existing entities known as 'England' and 'Wales' in the eighth century. Neutrality regarding

Figure 20: Drechraua diwedd, Prestatyn: (left) the monument, (right) the English versions of the explanatory texts (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2023)

the function of the Dyke is maintained beyond asserting it was built by the 'Mercian' ruler Offa: 'people have debated the purpose of the dyke for many years'. It then gives the options of 'boundary' or 'custom barrier'. As well as questioning how it worked, they pose the claim that it 'played a part in helping define the Welsh nation'. There is no artist's impression of the monument during construction or use. Instead, the map bears a single red line which perpetuates an equation of Path and Dyke. Offa's Dyke is here a modern and ancient single line defined by Path, border and Dyke.

Discussion

These heritage interpretation panels comprise the authorised heritage discourse on Offa's Dyke for the twenty-first century. These panels, plaques and signs sit in variable landscape situations and relationships with the monument, national trail and other footpaths, the modern border and further heritage destinations and landmarks (Table 1, columns 1–3). They were installed in contrasting circumstances, at different times, by varying agencies and organisations. Of the seventeen, seven are instigated by the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail and the Offa's Dyke Association, two by the Woodlands Trust, the Tidenham set of signs largely by English Heritage. Yet almost half, at least six, while involving national funding and organisations to varying degrees, can be considered local initiatives (Table 1, column 4). They vary in form and design, as well as content, considerably. As such, these locales comprise a sparse and eclectic set of heritage interpretations which reflect partial and evolving understandings of the monument.

Table 1 (next page): Comparing the visual dimensions of the seventeen heritage interpretation boards, plaques and signs critiqued in this article, arranged from south to north. The information lists their spatial proximity to the surviving traces of the monument, National Trail and Welsh/English border, their principal commissioners, and the different types of images incorporated in their most recent iterations

In terms of visual material (Table 1, columns 5–11), there is little consistency and some stark omissions. Of the seventeen panels or plaques under consideration, three are associated with art installations, two abstracted, only one representing the Dyke and King Offa (Plas Power). Only five locate the overall line of Offa's Dyke in relation to the Anglo-Welsh borderlands, with six deploying local maps to help orientate visitors to the monument's location and course in the landscape. Notably, only two panels do both (Hawthorn Hill and Bronygarth). Thus, most do not even attempt to adequately position the monument in relation to the wider landscape, let alone its specific placement in any given locality and topography. In regards the nature of the monument, past or present, six represent photographs showing the landscape in which the monument is situated, two of which deploying historic photographs (Tidenham and Hawthorn Hill), meaning that, again, only a minority illustrate the physical appearance of the monument as it has survived. Archaeological sections are deployed twice to assist in explaining the monument's current dimensions and character, and only twice elsewhere are artistic schematics used to illustrate the cross-section and (in one of the two instances) afford an impression of how the monument was placed in the contemporary landscape. Artist's reconstructions appear seven times, in six cases showing the monument. In only one case, however, the birds-eye-view at Tidenham represents a completed monument envisioned in an early medieval landscape. Of the five remaining instances, an impression of the complete monument's form and function is implied once (The Fence, Bigsweir). The remaining four images are versions of the same one; foregrounding King Offa as 'author' whilst affording a vague impression of the scale of the monument and its placement in the landscape during construction, crossing either hills (Hawthorn Hill, Llanfair Hill, Edenhope Hill) or valleys (Froncysyllte). In no cases do artist's impressions attempt to adequately envision how the monument might have appeared when in use.

There remain key interpretative issues regarding the basic questions of 'what, where, when, why, how and who' about the monument, concerning the texts of the panels' considerable time-lag in presenting older arguments and ideas, perhaps with the notable exceptions of the newest panels at Knighton and Ruabon (see Hill 2020). Analysing the texts (Table 2), first, only twelve of the seventeen are bilingual (in both Cymraeg and English) reflecting those located in Wales or on the precise national border, and hence subject to Welsh legal requirements for bilingual public signage. The most common framing of interpretation is that Offa's Dyke was a 'border', 'frontier' or 'boundary', with its role in dividing ethnic groups and nations, often anachronistic references to the 'Welsh' and/or 'English', or indeed more starkly, to 'England' and 'Wales', which dominates the narrative. Hence, the concept of Offa's Dyke as a predecessor to the

	Offa's Dyke proximity	National Trail proximity	Border proximity	Commissioner	Art installations	Borderlands Map	Local Map	Archaeological sections	Schematics	Artist's impressions	Photos
Sedbury Cliffs (Gloucs.)	X	X		Offa's Dyke Path National Trail	X					X	
Tidenham (Gloucs.)	X	X	X	English Heritage			X			X	X
The Fence, Bigsweir (Gloucs.)	X	X	X	Woodlands Trust			X			X	
Herrock Hill (Herefords.)	X	X	X	Herefordshire Wildlife Trust							
Hawthorn Hill (Powys)	X	X		Offa's Dyke Path National Trail		X	X			X	X
Pinners Hole, Knighton (Powys)	X	X	X	Offa's Dyke Association, Powys County Council		X		X			
Llanfair Hill (Shropshire)	X	X		Offa's Dyke Path National Trail						X	
Edenhope Hill (Shropshire)	X	X		Offa's Dyke Path National Trail						X	
Trefonen (Shropshire)	X	X		Trefonen Rural Protection Group				X			X
Bronygarth (Wrecsam/ Shropshire)	X	X	X	Ceiriog Heritage Trail		X	X		X		
Chirk Castle (Wrecsam)	X			National Trust			X				X
Froncysyllte (Wrecsam)	X	X		Offa's Dyke Path National Trail						X	
Ruabon (Wrecsam)	X			Friends of Ruabon							X
Plas Power (Wrecsam)	X			Woodland Trust	X		X				
St Tegla's, Llandegla (Denbighs.)		X		Offa's Dyke Path National Trail		X			X		X
Coed-talon Banks (Flints.)	X			Cadw, Treuddyn Community Council							
Prestatyn (Denbighs.)		X		Arts Council for Wales, Denbighshire County Council and Prestatyn Town Council	X	X					

	Languages	Border/Frontier/Boundary	Ethnic divider (English/Welsh)	Military barrier	Symbol of power & authority	Public work or engineering Marvel	Trade barrier	Dominerring or impressive scale	Built from earlier dykes	Relationship with Wat's Dyke	Later history, legacy and/or folklore
Sedbury Cliffs (Gloucs.)	E		X								
Tidenham (Gloucs.)	E	X	X	X	X						X
The Fence, Bigsweir (Gloucs.)	E	X	X	X	X	X		X			
Herrock Hill (Herefords.)	E	X	X	X							
Hawthorn Hill (Powys)	C/E	X			X	X	X		X		
Pinners Hole, Knighton (Powys)	C/E	X			X	X	X				
Llanfair Hill (Shropshire)	C/E	X	X								
Edenhope Hill (Shropshire)	C/E	X	X								
Trefonen (Shropshire)	E	X	X								
Bronygarth (Wrecsam/ Shropshire)	C/E	X		X							X
Chirk Castle (Wrecsam)	C/E	X	X								X
Froncysyllte (Wrecsam)	C/E					X			X		
Ruabon (Wrecsam)	C/E	X	X	X	X			X		X	X
Plas Power (Wrecsam)	C/E		X	X				X			X
St Tegla's, Llandegla (Denbighs.)	C/E	X	X			X					
Coed-talon Banks (Flints.)	C/E										
Prestatyn (Denbighs.)	C/E	X	X				X				X

Table 2 (previous page): Comparing the texts of the seventeen heritage interpretation boards, plaques and signs critiqued in this article, arranged from south to north. As well as recording the languages employed (E = English, C/E = Cymraeg/English), ten interpretative themes are set out, listing their spatial proximity to the surviving traces of the monument, National Trail and Welsh/English border, their principal commissioners, and the different types of images incorporated in their most recent iterations

modern border, framed in ethnonationalist terms, and giving all the agency to the proto-English Mercian kingdom and its king, is ubiquitous. Indeed, two panels only (Tidenham and Prestatyn) accurately frame its legacy as creating Wales and the Welsh, and nowhere is a Welsh perspective on the Dyke's construction or use articulated (cf. Swogger and Williams 2021). In this regard, there are parallels between the celebration of Offa and his agency comparable with the emphasis, only starting to be rectified, of Edward I and his architect and subjects, in the heritage interpretation of medieval castles in Wales. It also mirrors the emphasis on Romans over 'natives' in the heritage interpretation of Hadrian's Wall.

Having said that, many panels and plaques are not categorical in their interpretations and the narratives sometimes actively highlight the boundary's enigmatic nature, presenting alternative readings of the monument's functions. This plurality of interpretation is a strength, not a weakness, and this is clearest at Llandegla, where its role for defensive purposes, as a boundary, and as an expression of power and status, are all entertained before postulating a combination of these functions was the case. Its role in military defence or 'strategic' positioning is referenced surprising few times by comparison: references to the monument's role as a symbol or expression of power and authority; as serving a possible role in controlling trade and tolls; or simply, as a public work/engineering feat, are more commonly highlighted in interpretations. Two panels allude to the idea that it might have 'joined up' earlier earthworks, and there is one panel referencing its association with Wat's Dyke. Notably, the later landscape histories for the localities are cited in a significant minority (just six instances). Unfortunately, the equation, directly or inadvertently implied, of the monument as an ethnic and political 'border' – and built on the direct instruction of King Offa and reflecting Mercian supremacy – is persistent. This is because, while Offa's agency and Mercian landscape dominance are key themes in current scholarship, this narrative is overly simplified and out-dated in disregarding multiple potential functions and the landscape context of Offa's Dyke as a frontier work and its relationships with topography, prehistoric, Roman and sub-Roman land-use, settlement and monuments. It also neglects the monument's afterlife down to the present day (Ray and Bapty 2016; Williams 2023a).

As the analysis demonstrates above, few panels and plaques are fully up-to-date in regards academic research, with Ruabon and Knighton standing out as exceptions: unsurprisingly, they are the newest installations. Furthermore, only some panels and plaques explicitly respond to the local context of the monument, in relation to

topography, history and archaeology. Still, regardless of the detail of their contents in regards to text and images, together, with the Offa's Dyke Centre in Knighton's new displays, the boards serve to punctuate and engage visitors and walkers, and provide a platform from which best practice can begin to be discerned, and a basis upon which future projects can build a more coherent and creative strategy for heritage interpretation. The Offa's Dyke Association have contributed to the heritage interpretation of a selection of installations, where they coincide with the National Trail, and so there is a cohesion in interpretation for Hawthorn, Llanfair, Edenhope and Froncysyllte, even if elsewhere along the line of the Offa's Dyke Path (as at Trefonen and Bronygarth) and north of where the path departs from the Dyke (Ruabon and Coed-talon Banks), local heritage initiatives have created a range of attempts to interpret the monument with fluctuating success and accuracy. While few signs effectively explain key dimensions of the monument's form, placement and landscape context, and artwork is often misleading, this diversity can also be considered, in part, a strength, as they often respond to their respective localities in considered fashions, addressing specific themes and topics, rather than replicating a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. A key further observation is the yawning geographical gaps of coverage (Figure 1), particularly in the Wye Valley, Herefordshire and southern Powys, and between the Clun Forest and Trefonen through both Shropshire and Powys, where there is simply no heritage interpretation, even in close proximity to other heritage sites and historic buildings.

In summary, this review of the heritage interpretation panels presents a stark contrast to the coherent range of heritage interpretation presented on Britain's Roman frontiers by English Heritage, the National Trust and Northumberland National Park, which have actively involved local stakeholders and communities (see Collins 2020) with public engagement, education and place-making strategies. This coordinated outreach scheme has involved museums and heritage sites, art exhibitions, sculptures, murals and playparks, as well as community projects and a project linking the theme of diversity past to newcomers today (Jones 2020; Collins 2022; Woodward *et al.* 2022; Mills and MacDougall 2024; McMorrow 2024; Mountain and Alberti 2024; Shaw 2024). In many ways, one could argue that Offa's Dyke's strength is the eclectic nature of the current interpretation, as no single narrative needs to dominate – a democratisation of interpretation. Still, the monument lacks coherent and up-to-date heritage interpretation outside the Offa's Dyke Centre in Knighton. As highlighted, along and around much of the surviving early medieval earthwork's line and the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail, heritage interpretation is sparse and eclectic or else absent. Notwithstanding the many merits of these varied and local heritage interpretation initiatives, some designed and installed by communities themselves, and the fact that variability is only to be expected when funds and opportunities for heritage interpretation emerge at varied times and circumstances, there is a glaring need for a systematic strategy moving forward. This might include installations and/or digital resources, that relate to key points along the line of the monument pertaining to places where critical aspects of the monument's form, placement and landscape context relate to up-to-date archaeological interpretations of

the monument (see Bapty and Ray 2016; see Williams 2020c for a similar discussion for Wat's Dyke). Key points of intersection between other heritage destinations and Offa's Dyke could also be better highlighted in any strategy going forward, including prehistoric, Roman, modern, post-medieval and industrial heritage sites and museums, building on the potential identified for St Tegla's, Llandegla and Chirk Castle. First and foremost, it requires a 'heritage trail' approach to allow the integration of multiple locales along, around and beyond the surviving traces of the linear earthwork, incorporating – but not prioritising – the National Trail. Hence, I present the following recommendations for future heritage interpretation of the monument, that aim to tell its story as part of a complex borderland story of significance to people today, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity or origins:

- there is a tangible need for a systematically funded overhaul of heritage interpretation for Offa's Dyke, ideally with a coherent bilingual presentation along the monument, in both England and Wales;

- I recommend this takes the form of a formalised 'heritage trail' discrete from, but overlapping with, the Offa's Dyke Path;

- textual interpretations, images and maps need to explicitly differentiate between the Offa's Dyke Path, Welsh/English border and ancient monument known as Offa's Dyke and, in doing so, avoid simplistic anachronistic ethnonationalistic narratives and, in particular, incorporate more Welsh and international perspectives to counter the current Anglocentric biases;

- heritage interpretation needs to target areas without existing panels and signs in the first instance, focusing on locations where local people and visitors alike might benefit from up-to-date explanations of the monument, including in deprived areas;

- where possible and appropriate, heritage interpretation should facilitate engagement with the monument's interaction with landscape and the broader landscape history of the environment, including heritage sites and museums of different periods and character, as well as locations that illustrate specific aspects of the monument's form, placement and interaction with the broader landscape;

- rather than simply update and augment heritage interpretation panels, however, there is considerable benefit in supporting these prominent heritage interpretation panels with more simple and modest waymarkers to provide basic information and QR links to online resources;

- linked to the former point, a kay aim should be to augment heritage interpretation with integrated digital resources, building on the precedent set by the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory website and that of the Offa's Dyke Association;

- updating other open-resource online information on wikis and other interactive mapping software, such as Google Maps (see Welham *et al.* 2015) and ArcGIS StoryMaps, are further substantive ways of enhancing the digital on-site heritage interpretation. There is also considerable potential for fresh online, Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) mobile technologies;

- supporting these endeavours with fresh maps and artwork is essential, together with diversifying the media and community engagements deployed. Projects might include original art installations, nature and heritage-focused community projects and other sustainable strategies to explain the functions and significances, past and present, of the monument, borderlands and frontiers, to visitors and locals alike.

Conclusion

This evaluation has identified the strengths of localised responsive and tailored heritage interpretation but also the out-dated, misleading, inaccurate dimensions and the glaring gaps in coverage for heritage interpretation. Setting out clear recommendations for improvements is one task: the need for a revitalised and coherent, planned top-down 'heritage offer'. Yet, simultaneously, the converse dimensions need evaluation: the wider range of happenstance, cumulative and emergent materialities by which Offa's Dyke exists as a late-modern feature of the borderlands landscapes of Wales and England. In order to fully appreciate and understand the contemporary assemblage that constitutes Offa's Dyke, we must thus look beyond authorised and semi-authorised heritage discourse of these interpretation panels to explore the wider quotidian material assemblage that constitute today's Offa's Dyke in the borderlands landscape (Williams 2025b).

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