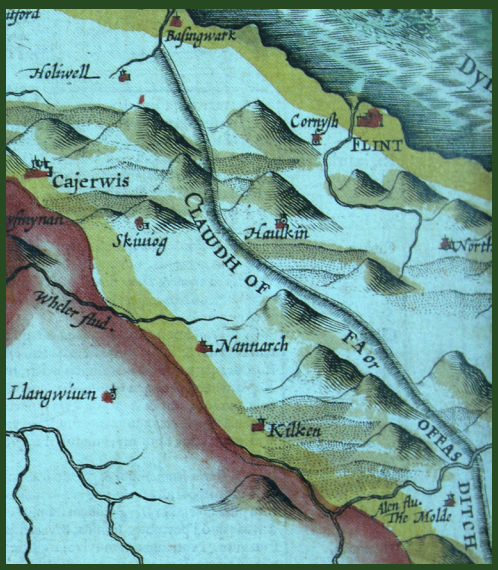
Offa's Dyke Journal



A Journal for Linear Monuments, Frontiers & Borderlands Research

Volume 7

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: Detail of John Speed's map of Flintshire from 1610 showing the earliest cartographic depiction of Offa's Dyke (private collection)

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The Great Dykes of the Welsh Borderlands on Early Cartography

Robert Silvester

Offa's and Wat's Dykes make comparatively few appearances on historic maps pre-dating the Ordnance Survey era, normally because of their lack of relevance to the primary purposes for which the maps were created. This short paper examines the published county maps that do scribe their courses through the Welsh borderlands. A preliminary attempt is presented to identify manuscript maps where the earthworks are featured. Collectively they add little to our existing knowledge of the dykes themselves, but they do contribute to their historiography.

Keywords: Offa's Dyke, Wat's Dyke, published map, manuscript map, folklore

Introduction

As Cyril Fox's great study of Offa's Dyke illustrates, Ordnance Survey mapping from the nineteenth century onwards has invariably provided the baseline for the serious study of Wat's and Offa's Dykes, the two great linear earthworks running through the Welsh borderlands. Prior to the early 1800s, other types of maps, some engraved for publication some manuscript and all delivered at varying scales, offered opportunities to visualise the dykes in their geographic context. Past commentaries on the dykes have generally overlooked their existence in favour of the documentary sources. Fox, for instance, compiled a list of source material with the assistance of Wales's great historian Sir John Lloyd, ranging from the early authorities through to twentieth-century publications, without referencing a single map (Fox 1955: 295), and maps are either absent or only fleetingly referenced in recent authoritative works (Ray and Bapty 2016: 60; Williams 2019). The only serious observations of the dykes' appearance on maps come from Margaret Worthington Hill, with the two dykes considered on different occasions (Hill and Worthington 2003: 39; Worthington Hill 2019).

Not that there are many maps pre-dating the Ordnance Survey which display the dykes. County and lordship or manorial maps, the former reproduced in quantity, the latter usually though not exclusively in manuscript form, offer greater potential than their vastly more numerous estate counterparts. With county maps this was not because the earthworks were thought to be particularly significant in establishing a region's character, rather that for entirely pragmatic reasons they provided space fillers in emptier areas on a map; and commercially their inclusion held an appeal for the well-educated gentlemen with antiquarian leanings who formed the upper levels of county society and who were perceived as the likely purchasers.

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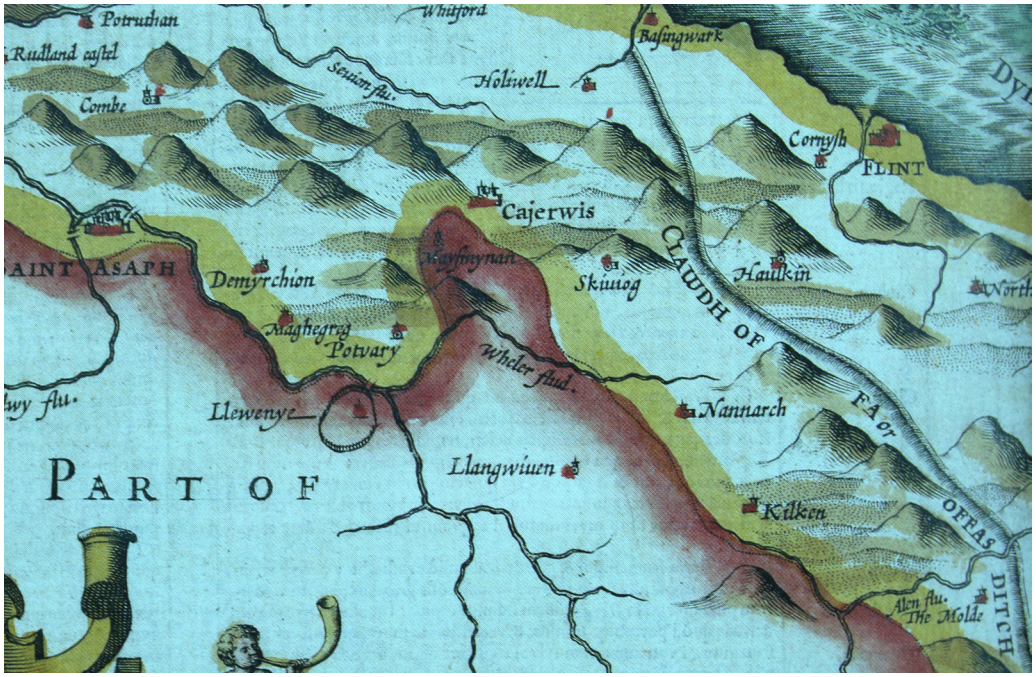

Figure 1: John Speed's map of Flintshire from 1610 (detail), showing the earliest cartographic depiction of Offa's Dyke (private collection)

The earliest maps of the dykes from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries

Christopher Saxton published the earliest complete set of county maps in 1579. Not surprisingly, the dykes did not figure. Antiquities of any age were almost non-existent in Saxton's list of display priorities and the county maps that he turned out were drawn against a rigid template. It comes as more of a surprise that John Speed, his successor in the publication of county atlases and renowned for incorporating town plans on his maps, depicted Clawdh Offa or Offas Ditch on his depiction of Flintshire in 1610. Printed at a scale of around 1:120,000 or about half an inch to a mile, Speed's map showed the earthwork running the entire length of the county from Basingwerk on the coast, between the church settlements of Ysceifiog and Halkyn, then inaccurately to the east of Mold, before threading a course into Denbighshire and finally terminating at a tributary of the river Clywedog south of Wrexham (Figure 1). The companion map of adjacent Denbighshire, however, omitted Offa's Dyke entirely, but then other symbols were already densely incised on its engraved plate. Much of Speed's mapping was collated from earlier sources, not just Saxton but other cartographic material where available (Delano Smith and Kain 1999: 72). With commercial success a priority he embellished the map of Flintshire with three insets, two town plans and a sketch of St Winefride's Well at Holywell, all of them indisputably his own work derived from site visits (Nicolson and Hawkyard 1988: 241) and Offa's Dyke may well result from

some personal observation guided perhaps by information from local inhabitants, its course sketched rather than surveyed. As a contrast it has been claimed that one version of his text for Radnorshire alludes to Offa's Dyke (Longueville Jones 1856: 3), but the accompanying map of the county shows no sign of it. The presence of the earthwork in Flintshire was already well known in the early seventeenth century, the cartographer simply being the first to convert the written word into a geographically defined format. Elsewhere in the British Isles Speed seems to have avoided showing known linear earthworks and this tends to reinforce the impression that in Flintshire the earthwork was not much more than a space-filler, compounded by the fact that it was omitted from his general map of Wales which was published at a much smaller scale. One final point should be made. In his desire to define the entire route through Flintshire he followed earlier commentators in amalgamating the two linear earthworks into one: from the Greenfield valley by Basingwerk to the hinterland of Mold he was actually depicting Wat's Dyke, only melding it with Offa's Dyke on the journey further to the south (for which see Ray and Bapty 2016: figure 1.3). It was more than another century and a half before the confusion was resolved by John Evans (see below).

Through the century that followed if a single trend stands out it is that both Saxton's and Speed's maps were recycled by other commercial producers, some adding to or modifying the contents though never significantly. With Cornwall a solitary exception new large-scale county surveys (i.e. larger than 1:100,000) failed to materialise until the third decade of the eighteenth century and then only in very small numbers. Fortunately, one of these brought the counties of Flintshire and Denbighshire together, the only new large-scale study of any region of Wales until the end of the century. Dated to 1720/1, William Williams's publication is known from only three copies representing two versions of the map, with only one of them in a publicly accessible archive (Silvester and Hawkins 2020).[1] The scale nominally registered at one inch to the mile (1:63,360) is actually closer to one inch to 1.2 miles (1:76,200). Williams depicted both Wat's Dyke and Offa's Dyke (Figure 2), an improvement on Speed certainly yet still far from accurate by modern standards. Watt's Dike [sic] is shown starting at Flint, and on an unbroken line passes to the east of Mold, just to the west of Wrexham, and southwards into Shropshire. Offa's Dyke from a starting point in the Greenfield valley passes west of Mold, through the parklands of Chirk Castle and into Shropshire west of Oswestry. Williams embellished his map with some historical and contemporary details including elevations of the churches at Wrexham and Gresford, a prospect of the castle and town of Denbigh, another of the recently constructed Gadlis lead works at Bagillt, and textual equivalents on the past history of Rhuddlan and of Bangor on the River Dee, the massacre of whose monks at the Battle of Chester (usually dated to c.616) was reported by the Venerable Bede. Neither of the dykes though illustrated merited a textual explanation on the map.

[1] The National Library of Wales's copy is available online at https://viewer.library.wales/1445618

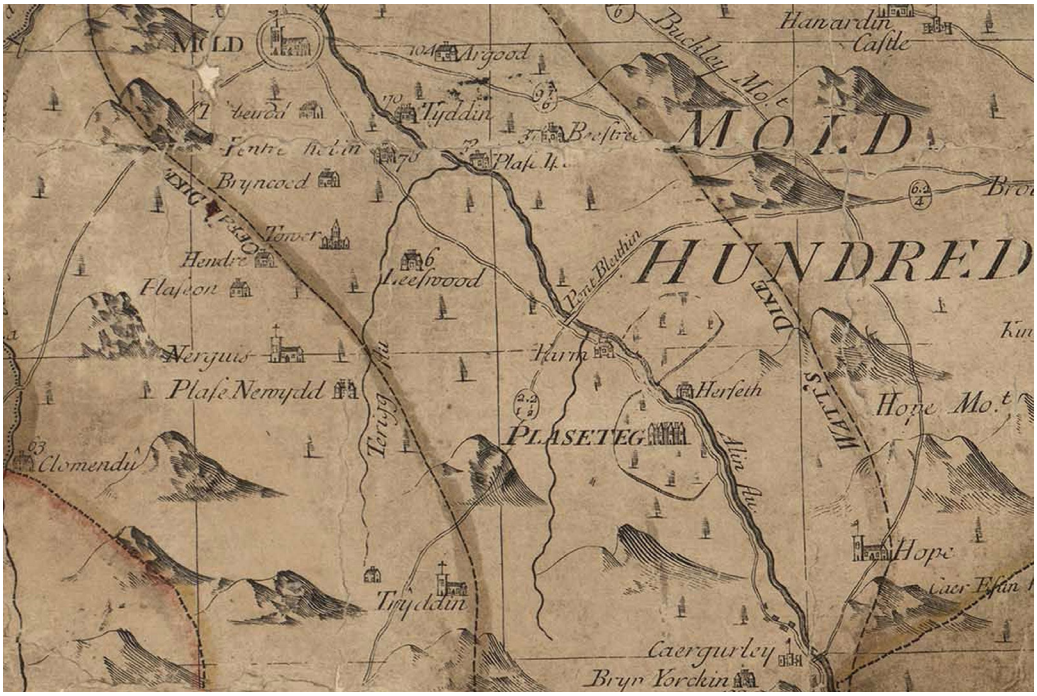

Figure 2: That part of William Williams's map of Denbighshire and Flintshire (c.1720) showing the parallel courses of Offa's and Wat's Dykes south of Mold. NLW Map 5455. Reproduced by permission of Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru/The National Library of Wales

The final map in this muster of pre-Ordnance Survey cartographic depictions of north-east Wales is that by John Evans who in 1795 published a nine-sheet map of north Wales, scaled at c. 1:80,640.[2] Evans will have been very familiar with Offa's Dyke, living at Llwynygroes outside Llanymynech on the Montgomeryshire/Shropshire border and no more than a mile from the earthwork. Termed a 'gentleman amateur cartographer' about whom little else is known (Walters 1968: 140) we can assume his antiquarian interests if only because he was a correspondent of that leading Welsh traveller Thomas Pennant (who included Evans's proposal for his North Wales map in the earliest, 1778 edition of his own Tour in Wales). And according to a recent detailed assessment he was probably the individual who resolved the confusion over the two linear earthworks at Basingwerk (Constantine 2024: 62).

Evans's map showed Wat's Dyke starting from the Greenfield valley and following the course accepted today as far as the park of Wynnstay where Evans faded it, before picking it up again, though intermittently, through the hillfort of Old Oswestry before finally disappearing just south of Oswestry. Likewise, Offa's Dyke is shown starting south of Treuddyn (Flints), and with one or two apparent breaks running southwards

[2] The map in its entirety is accessible on the National Library of Wales's website as https://viewer.library.wales/4997843.

before fading out to the south of Llandrinio (Monts), and then picking up again at Buttington as a continuous line to the Montgomeryshire border and into Shropshire, west of Bishop's Castle. The overall impression is that by the end of the eighteenth century the course of Wat's Dyke and much of the more northerly section of Offa's Dyke were known to antiquaries and it was inevitable that John Evans with his interests should include both on his remarkable map. With the mapping of John Evans, we can discern that the dykes in the north of the country had evolved from historical concepts into physical entities that could be mapped as earthworks.

Moving southwards into Shropshire, the earliest county maps offer no hint of the presence of the earthworks, nor do the strange so-called 'distance-line' maps by John Adams from c. 1677 and Basil Woodd in c. 1710 (Silvester 2022; Silvester and Cavill 2021). Next in succession is the county map prepared by John Rocque in 1752. Rocque, considered by modern authorities the foremost commercial surveyor and mapmaker of his generation, unsurprisingly was based in London. He worked across the southern half of England and in Ireland, and he is renowned in particular for his large-scale plans of London (in 1746) and other cities and towns. That he turned up in the West Midlands was due to a large estate contract in Shropshire for the Newport family; sensing an opportunity he extended his remit to the whole county (Silvester forthcoming). It says much about how some surveyors travelled considerable distances to earn a living.

His Shropshire map was published in four sheets at a scale of c. 1:63,360, and can be viewed online.[3] Wat's Dyke was ignored but his depiction of Offa's Dyke follows a continuous course across the county. Coming into Shropshire across the river Ceiriog, he shows it passing west of Oswestry, through Montgomeryshire where it was unbroken across the Severn plain, along Long Mountain and west of Chirbury and then southwards through Clun Forest, passing out of the county near Knighton.

Two features stand out about Rocque's mapping. The unbroken line of the dyke in a sinuous sweep from north to south emphasises Rocque's sketching rather than the measured survey of its general line across the county. This approach chimes with his stylised depiction of other mapped features such as areas of cultivation which bore little resemblance to the varied field layouts that actually existed, an issue apparently of some debate in the 1970s (Delano-Smith and Kain 1999: 88). Subsequent Shropshire mapmakers – Robert Baugh in 1808 and Christopher Greenwood in 1827 – were more precise in defining the breaks in the line of Offa's Dyke where fieldwork had yet to establish its presence. Local knowledge was paramount. Like John Evans, Baugh lived in Llanymynech and indeed had been the engraver of Evans's map of North Wales. In contrast Greenwood, a much travelled surveyor based in London, was unable to map Offa's Dyke across the upland of Clun Forest, picking it up only on its ascent out of the Clun valley and onto Llanfair Hill, an upland much favoured by photographers today

[3] https://www.e-rara.ch/bes_1/content/structure/28788804

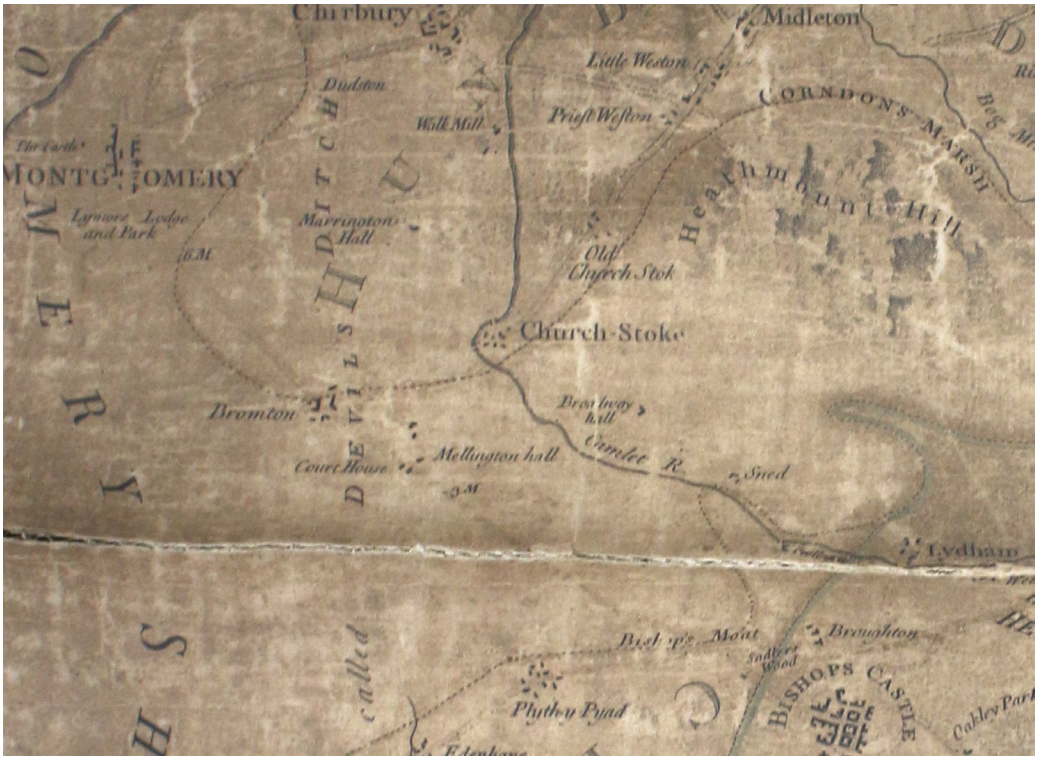

Figure 3: Part of John Rocque's map of Shropshire (1752) showing the Devil's Dyke. Reproduced by permission of Shropshire Archives

for the dominant presence of the earthwork, as the cover illustration on the first volume of this journal in 2019 revealed (Williams 2019: figure 2). Six years previously, in 1821, Charles Mickleburgh of Montgomery, the local surveyor/mapmaker retained by the Powis Castle Estate, had mapped the Earl of Powis's extensive landholdings in Clun Forest and the Dyke was much more prominently marked on his manuscript map, now in the Shropshire Archives.

Staying with Llanfair Hill takes us to a second feature of Rocque's map. This stretch of the Dyke carries a label, Offa Dike commonly called Devils Ditch, the only time that the earthwork is so named (Figure 3). The wording signals a folkloric tradition that must have been communicated to Rocque or his assistants. Unlike similarly termed earthworks in Cambridgeshire and other counties further into England, Rocque's labelling reflects only a local tradition that ultimately petered out. Unfortunately, no contemporary explanation is available as to what the Devil was trying to achieve on Llanfair Hill, although the renowned nineteenth-century Shropshire folklorist Charlotte Burne claimed that local people believed the earthwork to be 'a furrow turned up by the Devil in a single night with a plough drawn by a gander and a turkey' (Burne 1883: 622).

Other than on Rocque's map, this daemonic tradition makes only one other cartographic appearance. In 1763, John Probert, the leading surveyor/mapmaker in the central Welsh borderlands, compiled a set of sale maps for the Walcot estate near Bishops Castle, and now held in the British Library (Probert 1763; Silvester 2001; 2023). Included was a manuscript map prepared in the previous year of the hundreds of Clun and Purslow and the manors belonging to the owner of Walcot. It displays churches and their settlements, several castles, no less than four hillforts and Offa's Dyke which is labelled in precisely the same way as on the Rocque map. Probert was well aware of the earthwork for he had identified it twice on surveys of small landholdings in 1760, one of them in Mainstone in Clun Forest, the other in Llanfair parish (Probert 1760). His line for the Dyke further north across Clun Forest is certainly more accurate than Rocque's suggesting Probert's greater attention to ground observation, but the resemblance in the labelling on the two maps points to Probert deploying some of the information provided by Rocque's plan of the county. One final point: Jeremy Harte (2022: 46) remarks that Offa's Dyke was known in the 1890s as the Devil's Ridge or Devil's Dyke, where it runs across St Briavels Common in Gloucestershire, and Cyril Fox made much the same point in his magisterial volume (1955: 190). Nor is this the only documented association. Alfred Palmer told of his meeting with an old labourer at Ruabon near the Dee valley who was adamant that Wat's Dyke had been thrown up by the Devil, while a contributor to the Byegones section of the *Oswestry Advertizer and Border Counties Herald* recalled being told that two devils were the makers of the Dyke in the Ruabon area.[4]

South of Shropshire there is little useful published mapping at least as far as the present writer has been able to determine. Radnorshire is arguably the most under-mapped county in Wales, while the course of Offa's Dyke beside the lower Wye, seemingly well-known in some parts of Gloucestershire by the time the Ordnance Survey were at work, escaped the attention of county mappers. Neither Isaac Taylor's one inch to the mile map of 1777 nor the later maps of Andrew Bryant (1824) which was half as large again, and Christopher Greenwood (1823), give any hint of the earthwork.

Estate mapping

Identifying linear earthworks in the Welsh borderlands on estate mapping is a serendipitous occupation, for as with almost all types of antiquity, land surveyors paid little attention to their presence. There are many thousands of manuscript maps for Wales and the border counties ranging in date from the end of the sixteenth through to the later nineteenth centuries. Only for Herefordshire has a comparatively complete catalogue been published and even this cannot be assumed to be comprehensive for there will always be maps that are inaccessible in private archives and muniments or have remained uncatalogued in public collections. Most county repositories have catalogues of their own holdings, many though not all of them online, and even then there can be

[4] Byegones, 12 August 1874: 98

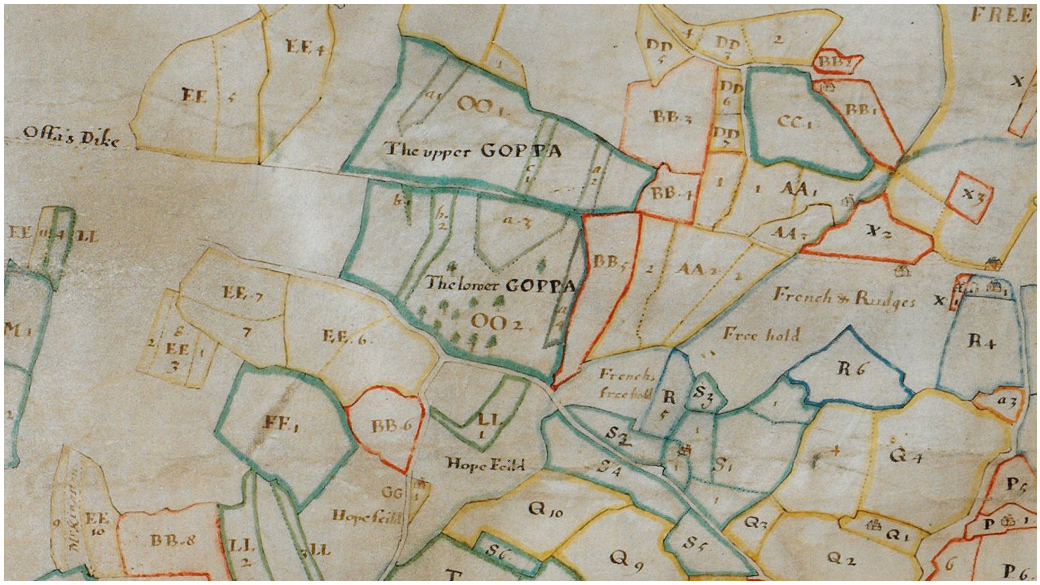

Figure 4: Part of William Fowler's manuscript map of Long Mountain (1663), with the line of Offa's Dyke running just above centre. NLW Map 7485. Reproduced by permission of Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru/The National Library of Wales

no certainty that a cataloguer will have noted a linear earthwork on a particular map. Voiced in other terms, the only certain mechanism for determining an earthwork on an estate map is by examining the map itself, and the accompanying schedule which might allude to an earthwork in the list of field names.

This said, the estate map holds more potential than its engraved counterpart if only because of the scale at which it was drawn. There is no such thing as an 'average' scale in estate mapping, but a significant proportion of surveys were drawn up at 4 or 5 chains to 1 inch, i.e. 1:3168 or 1:3960. These large scales should allow the representation of modifications to, or removal of, the earthworks, assuming that the surveyor chose to include them, sadly not something that can ever be relied on.

In broad terms prior to the mid-eighteenth century, some surveyor/mapmakers were more capricious than others in what they incorporated in their drawings. Largely known for his mapping of the Earl of Bridgwater's extensive estates in Shropshire, the Staffordshire surveyor William Fowler in 1663 prepared a map of Sir Richard Corbett's Leighton estate on the western slopes of Long Mountain on the opposite bank of the River Severn from Welshpool (Fowler 1663). Clearly the line of Offa's Dyke as known to us today was as evident to those who guided William Fowler during his survey in the seventeenth century, and on the map from the vicinity of Hope Farm in the north through to the edge of Kingswood in the south he named it three times (Figure 4). Much later, for Robert Corbett, the owner of the estate in 1791, Samuel Botham's mapping also named Offa's Dyke

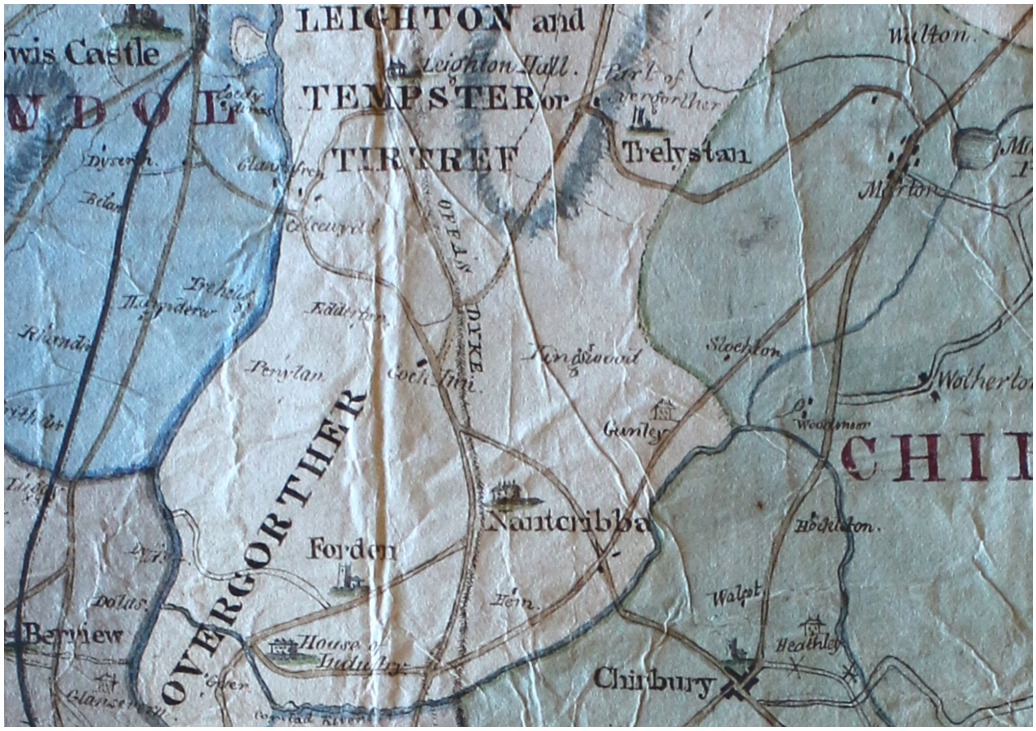

Figure 5: Part of the Powis lordship map of 1820 with Offa's Dyke running from north to south down the centre of the map. NLW/ Powis Castle/M269. Published with the kind permission of Viscount Clive and the Trustees of Powis Castle Estate

as it ran from Buttington towards Forden, while Powis lordship maps from 1801 and 1820 named the Dyke near Forden (Botham 1791; Powis Lordship 1801, 1820; Figure 5). Taken at face value, Botham's estate map suggests that in the vicinity of Leighton short stretches of the earthwork had been erased by the time the Ordnance Survey's large-scale plans were published towards the end of the nineteenth century.

With the passage of the eighteenth-century estate mapping became more standardised, surveyors increasingly focussing on those elements of the agrarian landscape that were important to their employers's estate management. Unless they were integrated into a farm's layout, subsidiary and miscellaneous landscape features generally went unrecorded (Silvester 2024). The most recognisable example is the Offa's Dyke alignment running through the arable lands where it diverges from the Severn Valley to the east of Montgomery. By Lymore Park, the earthwork functioned as county, parish, park and landholding boundary for nearly two miles. Lymore had long been part of the Earl of Powis's estate and its lands frequently feature in its rich collection of estate maps, with the Dyke clearly depicted as an extraordinary boundary on many of them. It is, though, rarely named: its importance lay solely in its presence as a boundary. Nevertheless, in such a vast array of cartographical material available the dykes are bound to put in occasional

appearances. The work of John Probert has already been alluded to above: his inclusion of Offa's Dyke on maps of the 1760s can perhaps be attributed to his antiquarian interests which primarily manifested themselves in the collection of material that he built up at his home in Shrewsbury and which included a Roman lead pig from Lydham parish and the fine Rhyd-y-gorse (Aberystwyth) shield of Bronze Age date now in the British Museum (Silvester 2001: 169). Further south however, in Radnorshire (as mentioned above, the most poorly surveyed county in Wales) and Herefordshire, manuscript map references are currently absent.

The early published maps as considered here are not likely to offer fresh insights into the courses of the great borderland earthworks. The smaller scales at which they were engraved and circulated and the tendency for cartographers to 'fill in' missing lengths militate against any conclusions on their presence or absence. Rather it is the broader conception that benefits. Manuscript maps have far greater potential, even if the primary aim of estate surveys was to define and picture current rather than past land use. The big linear dykes take their place with other earthworks – hillforts, castles, Roman military installations, burial mounds – as optional extras which a surveyor might choose to include but much more often did not.

Conclusion

Historic mapping contributes to the general historiography of the dykes. In the era pre-dating the Ordnance Survey, published maps reveal through visualisation antiquarian progress, gradual as it was over a span of two centuries, in perceiving the nature and the magnitude of the two dykes in a way that no amount of words could match. And in addition to the accretion of knowledge over time, they reflect how mapmakers uncritically incorporated the work of their predecessors into their own commercial enterprises, as well as how fragments of folkloric tradition, now largely lost, had become embedded in their story.

Acknowledgements

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Robert Silvester, Visiting Professor, University of Chester
Email: r.silvester@chester.ac.uk