

# 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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University of  
Chester

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# The Contemporary Archaeology of Offa's Dyke

Howard Williams

*This article evaluates the present-day material cultures of Offa's Dyke, Britain's longest linear monument. Having previously considered how Offa's Dyke is constituted in today's landscape through road and residence signs (Williams 2020), artistic heritage trails (Williams 2023a) and heritage interpretation panels (Williams 2025), here I consider the broader assemblage of art, material cultures, monuments, waymarkers and local landscape features between Sedbury (Gloucestershire) to Prestatyn (Denbighshire) that together constitute a variegated landscape-scale assemblage we can define as 'today's Offa's Dyke'. While elements are designed to support the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail, other components have accrued by happenstance to waymark, interpret and commemorate Offa's Dyke both along the surviving line of the monument, following the path, but also in locations disconnected from either. Today's Offa's Dyke is a late-modern hybrid of embodied practice and diverse materialities. This perspective invites reconsideration of the monument's role within the contemporary landscape. It offers recommendations for enhancing heritage interpretation in the Welsh Marches, with attention to the complex interplay of landscape, monument, and borderland identities.*

*Keywords:* art, contemporary archaeology, heritage, landscape, memory, Offa's Dyke

## Introduction

Contemporary archaeology is the study of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries through archaeological theories, methods and practices (Harrison 2011, 2016). It can provide a method for interrogating and critiquing our contemporary world using an archaeological lens. Characterising and evaluating the twenty-first century phases of Offa's Dyke's life-history for the first time, this article tackles Britain's longest linear earthwork as a subject of contemporary archaeology. Here, I consider Offa's Dyke as not primarily or exclusively an early medieval linear earthwork, but as a present-day, landscape-scale, emergent hybrid assemblage of monuments and material cultures through which social memories of, and experiences of place and borderland identities, are constituted for communities, localities, regions and nations.

In previous work I have explored how Offa's Dyke constitutes a memoryscape through road and residential signs (Williams 2020a), paintings and poetry (Williams 2023a) and intermittent heritage interpretation panels presenting varied envisionings and stories, in varied forms and intermittent locations (Williams 2025). Set against this backdrop, this article reviews and evaluates how an eclectic range of twentieth and twenty-first century material cultures, representations, installations, architectures and monuments operate, sometimes by design, often by cumulative and emergent happenstance, to configure the entity we might call 'today's Offa's Dyke'. Binding traces of an early medieval linear

earthwork, a contemporary long-distance walking trail and modern Welsh/English border, this assemblage of materialities interact with intangible dimensions of the contemporary landscape and heritage dimensions on or proximal to the line of Offa's Dyke. Certainly, the Offa's Dyke Path and Knighton's Offa's Dyke Centre provide key elements of today's Offa's Dyke's heritage, enhanced following the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the Offa's Dyke Path which saw the opening of a brand-new heritage interpretation of the monument at the Offa's Dyke Centre in Knighton (Williams 2021a). Yet this survey considers a range of further, hitherto overlooked, materialities to Offa's Dyke in the twenty-first century, from signs and heritage interpretations, to benches and trees. Offa's Dyke's contemporary identity is shaped no less by the remnants of its early medieval earthwork (Williams 2023b) than by varied heritage interpretations and contemporary material cultures encountered by visitors and locals both along and beyond its original early medieval course (Williams 2025).

This approach builds on relatively modest consideration of Offa's Dyke in the contemporary landscape (Ray and Bapty 2016: 373–376; Belford 2017; Haygarth Berry Associates 2018; Ray 2020; Upson and Davies 2024) in the context of broader work on contemporary archaeologies of prehistoric, ancient, medieval and modern frontiers and borderlands as both physical divides and conceptual spaces tackled through embodied experience (see Mullin 2011a and b; Nesbitt and Tolia-Kelly 2009; Witcher 2010a and 2010b; McWilliams 2013; McAttackney 2020a and b, 2024; McAttackney and McGuire 2020). In particular, this approach draws on a range of work investigating the material agency of memory mediated by a range of ruins and traces in the contemporary world (see e.g. Holtorf and Williams 2006; Olsen 2013). For linear boundaries in late modernity, we can consider them invested with material and symbolic power to divide and define contemporary societies and a specific fixation of our times (see Jones 2020). Walls and other linears become enduring zones of latent and performed memory work (McAttackney 2020b) and which demand archaeological scrutiny on a global scale (McAttackney and McGuire 2020). In this context, this study hopes to reveal how Offa's Dyke and other ancient linear monuments can be considered as contemporary monumental assemblages which constitute and perpetuate powerful and contested memories and social identities. For Offa's Dyke, these memories and identities have not been enshrined as UNESCO world heritage until Britain's Roman frontiers, and they are thus more eclectic and happenstance (see Williams 2025). Indeed, they are often carefully muted, rarely discursive and relate to both zones where the Dyke survives as a monument, places where it is only imagined rather than apprehended, as well as locales far beyond its attested early medieval course. Yet, Offa's Dyke's many ancient and modern traces together have endured and imbued the Anglo-Welsh borderlands for centuries after the Dyke's (likely brief) life as a Mercian frontier zone. Ancient dyke, national trail and modern borderline wend their way in dialogue with each other. From this perspective, we are prompted to consider Offa's Dyke afresh as constituting present-day affinities between people and place with the Welsh Marches. This involves consideration of how the triad of linears (borderline, path and dyke) navigate distinct but

related narratives and tie together nested sets of borderland local, regional and national identities and senses of the past: social memories. As such, this article is an immediate successor to this author’s earlier considerations of naming practices and consideration of both ‘authorised’ and deliberate installations which 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 (Williams 2020a, 2023a, 2025). In pursuing this evidence, the discussion here moves beyond the fragmented and selective nature of authorised heritage interpretations along this monument to tackle a range of further landmarks and material cultures that together comprise ‘today’s Offa’s Dyke’.

## Method

This study applies contemporary archaeology to examine a prominent linear earthwork in the present-day landscape, employing established methods for recording ‘surface assemblages’. Walking and recording via digital photography serves to invert traditional conceptions of Offa’s Dyke as an early medieval monument defined by its surface features, most often its bank and ditch, primarily and exclusively (e.g. Harrison 2011; McAttackney 2024; Stewart *et al.* 2018). This provides a personalised, contextual engagement with Offa’s Dyke as contemporary archaeology, building on my personal experience and research activities in relation to the monument (see Williams and Delaney 2019; Williams 2020b, 2021a, 2023c). Encountering the Offa’s Dyke Path far removed from the ancient monument, the Dyke dislocated from the Path, and the county and national borders interacting with each separately and both together, has combined with an awareness of how digital discourses have shifted and enhanced their interleaving significance on international and national scales as well as for specific regions and localities (e.g. Williams 2020b).

In practical terms, the article is based on field observations and digital photographs taken whilst walking Offa’s Dyke and the Offa’s Dyke Path between 2016 and 2024. I set up a disciplined strategy of noting and recording how signs, installations and monuments, as well as natural features, together with road and residential names and heritage interpretation panels, constitute the material assemblage of today’s Offa’s Dyke. This approach echoes other ‘surface survey’ approaches by contemporary archaeologists, focusing on rapid digital walking methodologies, but here focusing on temporally contrasting materialities (cf. Harrison 2011; McAttackney 2024). The evidence presented here is inevitably selective, but by presenting a series of photographic montages of select examples, the rich variety of components of ‘today’s Offa’s Dyke’ can be revealed. Still, readers are referred to the Offa’s Dyke Collaboratory blog for additional case studies and further details.<sup>1</sup> During my fieldwork, I followed a crude typology although inevitably some material cultures and installations span multiple

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<sup>1</sup> <http://offaswatsdyke.wordpress.com/>. The first reflection on contemporary material cultures on Offa’s Dyke was posted on the signs and memorials on Offa’s Dyke from Panponton Hill to Cwm-sanahan Hill (Williams 2017).

categories. I begin with (a) reprising previous discussions of naming practices as material citations (for further details see Williams 2020a), (b) outlining how heritage interpretations provide a partial punctuation of the monument and national trail (for further details, see Williams 2025), before surveying the eclectic range of installations and monuments, signs and waymarkers, vernacular architectures and natural features linked to and comprising Offa's Dyke, through the counties of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Powys, Shropshire, Wrexham, Flintshire and Denbighshire. I conclude by presenting a synthesis of how Offa's Dyke is a construction of the contemporary past as well as providing recommendations for future management and enhancement of this modern-era assemblage in dialogue with traces of an early medieval linear monument.

### **Naming practices as material citations**

Place-names are not merely oral and textual references to the presence, or absence-presence, of Offa's Dyke, they are also material citations in the landscape. In a previous survey I identified two settlements and eighty-one dwelling names associated with Offa's Dyke along its route from Spital Meend in Gloucestershire to Llanfynydd, Flintshire (Williams 2020: 104–110; although I missed at least one dwelling; The Clawdd, Figure 1b). Spatial referencing and movement was shown to be articulated through street names as well as residential names, with thirty-five identified in total from Mercian Way in Sedbury (Gloucestershire) to Ffordd Clawdd Offa in Prestatyn (Denbighshire), thus commemorating both the Dyke and the national trail (Figure 1f–g). The monument is also cited in the names of schools, public spaces and businesses, such as the Offa's Dyke Hotel, Broughton, Flintshire (Williams 2020: 118–119; Figure 1e and 1h). In specific areas, these residential, street and other names cluster in close association, forming localised memoryscapes, notably Sedbury (Gloucestershire), Knighton (Powys), Four Crosses (Powys) and Johnstown (Wrexham) (Williams 2020: 128–130). Particularly where the Dyke does not survive as a monument, these individually and collectively populate a mnemonic void and enhance a borderlands identity mediating between the tangible and the intangible (Williams 2020: 137). As a form of public heritage interpretation of a monument, and a legendary, semi-historical figure, the naming practices and their material citations in the forms of signs have the potential of mobilisation as part of a memoryscape for Offa's Dyke more broadly: a linear place-making strategy, albeit cumulative rather than planned by any single group or human agency.

### **Heritage interpretation**

There are two key results of the survey of seventeen heritage interpretation panels, plaques and signs (Williams 2025). First, there are huge gaps where Offa's Dyke is not interpreted in the landscape at all; critical absences where the monument resides as mute and yet monumental. Hence, there are many missed opportunities where the monument coincides with other heritage sites and attractions, both along stretches where the monument survives close to or coterminous with the Offa's Dyke Path and in stretches



Figure 1: A montage of street signs, residential signs and businesses citing Offa’s Dyke. 1a: Maes Offa, Four Crosses, Llantysilio, Powys. 1b: The Clawdd, Craignant, Shropshire. 1c: Bryn Offa, Four Crosses Llantysilio, Powys. 1d: Offa’s Way, Llanymynech. 1e: Offa’s Dyke Hotel, Broughton, Flintshire. 1f: Offa’s Dyke Road, Four Crosses, Llantysilio, Powys. 1g: Heol Offa, Knighton (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2020–2024)

where it survives away from the national trail, as in Herefordshire south of Rushock Hill or north of the Dee through Wrexham County Borough into Flintshire. The most glaring omission is perhaps the absence of Offa’s Dyke and the national trail from the map of the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct and Canal World Heritage Site: a choice that might be in part practical (as the national trail does not follow the line of the Dyke here) and political (given that, for many, Offa’s Dyke is an awkward and uncomfortable reminder of Cymric/English conflict). In other words, while the Offa’s Dyke Path follows the canal through the World Heritage Site it is perhaps this local divergence of Dyke and Path that influenced the omission (Figure 2). Still, it remains the case that despite the fact that the monument can be visited at both Chirk Castle, where the Dyke runs through the castle estate and a footpath follows the monument southwards towards the Ceiriog, and from the canal at Froncysyllte, Offa’s Dyke receives limited sustained and coherent heritage interpretation.

The second key finding was that, where heritage interpretation panels do occur, they are often inaccurate or misleading. Despite deploying often striking visuals and maps, they rarely adequately envision or explain the monument’s function, placement and significance. Anachronistic ethnonationalist framings of the monument abound as do uncritical equations



Figure 2: The Trevor Basin map of the Pontcysyllte World Heritage Site excluding both Offa's Dyke Path and the line of the surviving early medieval linear earthwork between the Ceiriog Valley and the River Dee (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2023)



Figure 3: The statue of King Offa as part of the 'Circle of Legends' in which he is described as building the Dyke as a 'frontier with Wales' (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2020)

of the monument as a ‘border’. These criticisms apply to varying degrees to almost all heritage panels and references, and many are in a state of disrepair (Williams 2025).

Despite these limitations, the heritage interpretation panels between Gloucester and Denbighshire, both upon and detached from traces of the linear earthwork, serve to create a mnemonic chain of heritage interpretation linking the Offa’s Dyke Path National Trail to the linear monument and, more diffusely, the modern Welsh/English border. These panels, plaques and signs tell the monument’s story in a range of contrasting localities as well as help afford it a uniform identity linking early medieval past to contemporary communities and visitors. Hence, heritage interpretation and material citations via street and residential names are components of the contemporary archaeology of Offa’s Dyke that together help constitute, albeit in fragmentary fashions, a modern-era material assemblage.

### Art and monuments

Beyond signs and heritage interpretation, there are an eclectic range of art installations and monuments of different dates and subjects, punctuating the triad of braided linears that comprise today’s Offa’s Dyke. They manifest in many forms, some upon, some proximal to the surviving Dyke, some overtly commemorative of Offa and his monument. First, there are those in areas where the linear earthwork survives and which reference the Path and Dyke. From the south, the Tintern Station sculpture ‘Circle of Legends’ features King Offa among a host of mythological, legendary and historical personages linked to the borderland’s story and contemporary reception (Figure 3). Here, Offa is characterised as a stern military figure who, through might, defined a frontier against the Welsh.

Moving north along the Dyke and Path, we have further art installations established at different times and interacting with the past and borderland in contrasting fashions. Notably there is the metal sculptural panorama on Llanymynech Hill which features the coin portrait of King Offa (Figure 4c and d). Other installations connect the Dyke to the landscape, as with the Panorama pillar on Llanymynech Hill beside the golf course and close by surviving traces of the Dyke’s bank (Figure h and i). A wooden sculpture of a mushroom has been installed upon the Dyke at Craig Forda in the woodlands south of Oswestry Old Racecourse (Figure 4e) thus punctuating the walkers’ path and perhaps prompting engagement with the natural landscape rather than any specific allusion to the past. Still, the interactive Oswestry Old Racecourse ‘Janus Horse’ sculpture cites the historical use of the hilltop as Oswestry’s racecourse but also, by ‘looking both ways’, it reflects on the borderland positioning and liminality of the space: encouraging visitors to sense the liminality of the borderlands, simultaneously connected to Wales to the west and England to the east (Figure 4f and g).

The northern terminus of the Path is monumentalised by a sculpture by the beach at Prestatyn (see also Williams 2025) and a stone akin to the southern terminus at Sedbury Cliffs (Figure 5). These stones explicitly evoke the Path and Dyke as well as the wider borderland identity of the location and region they bookend (Figure 4j and k).



Figure 4: A montage of images of art installations associated with Offa's Dyke and the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail. 4a and b (top): Dan Llywellyn Hall's 'Walking with Offa' project (see Hall *et al.* 2023). 4c and d (middle-left and middle-centre): metal art on Llanymynech Hill. 4e: mushroom sculpture at Craig Forda. 4f and g (bottom-left): 'Janus Horse' sculpture. 4h and i (middle-right): the Panorama pillar on Llanymynech Hill. 4j and k (bottom-right): Drechrau diwedd, Prestatyn (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2023–2024)



Figure 5: The stone marking the southern terminus of the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail at Sedbury Cliffs with the bank of Offa's Dyke seen to the rear (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2017; left image) and the stones marking the northern terminus of the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail at Prestatyn (Photograph: Paul Parry 2020; right image)

Dan Llywellyn Hall's 'Walking with Offa' project is the most recent artistic installation to have augmented the Offa's Dyke Path along its route. It interacts with the Dyke to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary (see Hall *et al.* 2021). The project brought art and poetry to the trail and the monument and reflects on legend, history, archaeology and landscape (see also Williams 2023a) (Figure 4a and b). The Offa silver coin used by the Offa's Dyke Association and marking the National Trail also appears on multiple buildings and art installations in and around Prestatyn.

There are more explicitly commemorative monuments, both of the Dyke and its historic relationship with the borderland and, more recently, with the Offa's Dyke Path. South of Knighton, on Hawthorn Hill, is a nineteenth-century milestone commemorating Offa's Dyke (Noble 1981: 42; Figure 6). At Pinner's Hole, Knighton, memorial stones commemorate each end of a section of the Dyke's bank and ditch and each is located close to the line of the Path. These are part of the 'memoryscape' of Offa's Dyke at Knighton (see also Williams 2020), positioned in close proximity to Offa's Dyke Park and the Offa's Dyke Centre visitor attraction and established to coincide with the opening of the Offa's Dyke Path in 1971 (Noble 1981: 13–14). Today these monuments are connected to a hub of memorialisation of today's Offa's Dyke together with other signs, spaces and road and residential names, as well as the name and signs for the town itself (Figure 7; see also Williams 2020).

The Cragnant Tower (Noble 1981: 53), connected to an estate boundary wall on the modern Welsh/English border, is the second Victorian era monument commemorating, and placed upon, the line of Offa's Dyke. This folly celebrates the border and borderland via a medievalist theme, binding past and present (Figure 8). The nearby Selattyn Tower



Figure 6: The nineteenth-century milestone on Hawthorn Hill (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2020)



Figure 7: A montage of images of the stone and monolith commemorating Offa's Dyke, the opening of the Offa's Dyke Park, Pinners Hole, Knighton (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2021)



Figure 8: The nineteenth-century tower and wall marking Offa's Dyke, Craignant, Shropshire/Wrexham (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2017)

might also be explicitly commemorating the early medieval history of the borderland (Figure 15; see also Williams 2021b). The most recent overt representation of King Offa and the work of building the Dyke is a tree sculpture beside the Clywedog on the Plas Power Estate. This evocative work cites the Dyke, Offa and the contested borderland (Figure 9). Others sit away from the Dyke but cite it through association with Offa, as with the district of the city of Wrexham named 'Offa' which has its own commemorative stone and community noticeboard combined with a sheep sculpture (one of a series installed around Wrexham County Borough) (Figure 10).

Augmenting these art installations and memorials that explicitly reference Offa's Dyke itself, directly or indirectly, there are a host of further memorials, sculptures and installations which were created for a disparate range of functions and significances in proximity to both Dyke and Path. To the north, the Hawthorn Hill nineteenth-century obelisk, commemorating Sir Richard Green Price (1803–1887), is proximal to the Dyke and Path (Figure 11). Upon Herrock Hill, Herefordshire, there is a memorial cairn with two plaques and a nearby adjacent memorial plaque at ground level next to a rudimentary log operating as a bench (Figure 12). Far from the linear monument but adjacent to the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail, there are two striking modern-era memorials on the Clwydian range at Moel y Gelli and Penycloddiu (Figure 12). Overlooking Knighton is a memorial cairn in remembrance of the Chairman of the 1970



Figure 9: The 2012 sculpture depicting King Offa and Offa's Dyke's construction, Plas Power, Wreccsam (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2019)



Figure 10: The map, bench, monolith and sheep sculpture commemorating the Offa district of Wrexham (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2023)



Figure 11: Obelisk commemorating Sir Richard Green Price (1803–1887) on Hawthorn Hill, Powys (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2017)

Society on Panponton Hill adjacent to a memorial bench (Figure 13; see also Figure 32). These memorials reveal the integrated connections of the living and the dead to the line of the path and the monument.

There are also non-commemorative monuments and ruins associated with the Dyke and Path. We have the multiple trig points along the route of the Path and Dyke, including the Cwm-sanaham Hill and Llanfair Hill Triangulation pillars (trig points) (Figure 14). Meanwhile, the ruins of Old Oswestry Racecourse buildings punctuate the route of the Dyke and Path. Similarly, the Selattyn Hill Bronze Age cairn with a folly built over it in the nineteenth century, seemingly to evoke the legendary early medieval history of the region and just east of the line of Offa’s Dyke on the hilltop, comprises a further prominent ruin tied to the early medieval dyke and the national trail (Figure 15). Furthermore, the course of Offa’s Dyke runs close to or incorporates a series of earlier ancient monuments that constitute part of its twenty-first-century character, including Spital Meend and Symonds Yat (Gloucestershire), Burfa Camp, Castle Ring and Beacon Ring (Powys), Breidden Hill



Figure 12: Top and middle: memorial cairn with two plaques appended to it (above) and a log bench and memorial plaque, all on Herrock Hill (Herefordshire) close to the line of Offa's Dyke which enwraps the hilltop. Bottom-left: the memorial to Arthur Roberts MBE on the northern slope of Penycloddiau. Bottom-right: rebuilt section of drystone wall used as a memorial backdrop to a plaque and wooden sculpture commemorating Robin Mitchell (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2025)



Figure 13 (left): Memorial cairn in remembrance of Roy Waters, Chairman of the 1970 Society, on Panponton Hill (Shropshire) (see also Figure 32 for adjacent memorial bench) (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2021)



Figure 14 (below): Triangulation pillars as contemporary waymarkers and monuments on the line of Offa’s Dyke: Cwm-sannaham Hill, Shropshire (left) and Llanfair Hill, Shropshire (right) (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2017 and 2021)

(Shropshire), Llanymynech (Powys) and Gardden Lodge (Wrexham). Proximal to the Dyke are the medieval castles of Chepstow, Montgomery, Knighton, Brompton Hall and Chirk (in the last case the Victorian Home Farm, dovecote and squash courts are proximal to the linear earthwork), and monastic ruins at Tintern and Valle Crucis.

Further prehistoric, medieval and post-medieval monuments and structures are disconnected from the Dyke’s traceable path and yet become enmeshed with the story of the borderline through



Figure 15: Two historic ruins of the grandstand of Oswestry Old Racecourse and the nineteenth-century belvedere (Selattyn Tower) atop a prehistoric cairn, both close to the line of Offa's Dyke (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2021)



association with the Path. Examples including the Llangollen Canal, Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, the prehistoric hillfort and medieval castle of Castell Dinas Brân, as well as the Bronze Age barrows at Moel Llêch and nearby the trail at Moel y Plâs. To these we might add the prehistoric cairn at the summit inside the Iron Age hillfort of Moel Fenlli, the early nineteenth-century neo-Egyptian Jubilee Tower on Moel Famau commemorating the Jubilee of King George III, the hillfort and summit cairn of Moel Arthur, and the later prehistoric hillfort and internal reconstructed Bronze Age burial mound at the summit of Penycloddiau (Figure 16). Individually and together, these monuments are connected to the Dyke and the Path.

Other associated material cultures might be incidental and eclectic but acquire significance individually and collectively as part of the material assemblage that is the Dyke. These



Figure 16: Clwydian Range prehistoric and historic memorials incorporated into the course of the Offa’s Dyke Path National Trail. Top-left: the walker’s cairn atop a Bronze Age burial mound at the summit of Foel Fenlli. Top-right: the ruins of the neo-Egyptian Jubilee Tower commemorating fifty years of George III’s reign on Moel Famau. Middle-left: the summit of Penycloddiau: the walker’s cairn and reconstructed Bronze Age burial mound. Middle-right: the memorial plaque commemorating the 2010 reconstruction of the Penycloddiau burial mound. Bottom: the two prehistoric burial mounds either side of the Offa’s Dyke Path National Trail at Moel Llêch (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2017–2025)

include the wreck of a vintage mid-twentieth century car (possibly an Austen 7), near Brompton in the Vale of Montgomery, and the vintage plough discarded in front of the Dyke on Llanfair Hill. Also on Llanfair Hill is a former fairground installation but apposite in marking the historic frontier work: a red dragon serving as an emblem for Wales. Another distinctive incidental installation includes an Irish place-name finger-post relocated to the Dyke in the Vale of Montgomery, chiming with the widespread Offa’s



Figure 17: Incidental monuments and installations along the line of Offa's Dyke. Top-left: a vintage car wreck, Vale of Montgomery (Powys). Top-right: the plough on Llanfair Hill (Shropshire) with Offa's Dyke behind. Bottom-left: the fairground red dragon in front of Offa's Dyke on Llanfair Hill (Shropshire). Bottom-centre: Irish place-name finger-post from County Cork beside Offa's Dyke in the Vale of Montgomery (Powys)/Shropshire). Bottom-right: where the Welsh/English border, Offa's Dyke Path National Trail and Offa's Dyke coincide: a pair of flag poles flying Y Ddraig Goch and Union flags in the Vale of Montgomery (Powys/Shropshire) (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2021–2023)

Dyke Path waymarkers (see below) and a pair of flagpoles with national flags at a location marking the triad of linears: Welsh/English border, trail and Dyke (Figure 17).

### Walking material cultures

Waymarkers take many forms, from significant heritage attractions themselves, as for the borderline on the Path, close to the surviving traces of the Dyke and beside the Teme at Knighton (Figure 18a) and significant signs marking where the Path and Dyke cross county and national borders and enter settlements (Figures 18b–d). Striking locations where the Dyke might not be immediately visible but where the monument intersects with roads and borders can be recognised at Llanymynech (Powys) and Coed-talon Banks (Flintshire); in both instances the modern road mounts the Dyke (Figure 18e–f). Linking closely to the Dyke and the Path are other locations where they coincide and intersect both national and county boundaries as with the 'Welcome to Shropshire' signs in the Vale of Montgomery (Figure 18d) and Croeso I Gymru/Welcome to Wales



Figure 18: Road and walking signs marking national and county boundaries on Offa’s Dyke and the Offa’s Dyke Path National Trail. 18a (top-left): Knighton. 18b (top-right): Knighton (Powys/Shropshire). 18c (middle-left): Knighton (Powys). 18d (middle-right) Vale of Montgomery (Powys/Shropshire). 18e (bottom-left): Llanymynech (Shropshire/Powys). 18f (bottom-right): Offa’s Dyke, Coed-talon Banks (Flintshire) (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2017–2024)



Figure 19: A range of waymarkers and finger-posts in different materials along the Offa's Dyke Path (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2017–2024)

signs at Knighton (Figure 18b), as well as the roadside Wrexham County Borough sign at Craignant in front of the Victorian medieval folly inscribed 'Offa's Dyke' (Figure 8).

Added to these exceptional instances are the many thousands of signs, symbols and material cultures constituting waymarkers along footpaths, lanes and roadsides. Bearing texts and images connecting them to the Dyke and Path, they are far more numerous than the



Figure 20: Patinas, wear, damage and erosion associated with waymarkers and finger-posts on the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2017–2024)

combined number of place-names and their signs, heritage interpretation panels, and the eclectic range of monuments and art installations referenced so far. Whether coinciding with Offa's Dyke or just the Path alone, they evoke and facilitate walkers' embodied experience of the monument as a contemporary landscape feature. Thus, fifty years of evolving material cultures have emerged to demarcate and commemorate the Path and its relationship with the Dyke. Whilst individually they are modest material, symbolic and textual citations to Offa's Dyke, together they materialise the monument in the landscape.

The varied detail of these waymarking signs require further discussion. These comprise of signs directing walkers and waymarkers with their diagnostic acorn logo and texts (in Wales, via bilingual signage). These exist in a range of locations and forms (notably, either situated on or beside fence lines, posts, gates or stand-alone finger-posts – both those with short and/or long fingers) and designs and materials that have evolved and been replaced over time (wood, metal, concrete, plastic short finger-posts and plastic



Figure 21 (left): Cumulative waymarker discs on the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2017)

Figure 22 (below): World War I Centenary Trail on the line of the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail beside Offa's Dyke, Trefonen, Shropshire (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2020)



discs and so on) (Figure 19). Many wooden finger-posts have bilingual names (in Wales) or are written in English only (in England). The place-names on each render them unique permutations of the theme, whilst patina, lichen and moss afford them with a distinctive sense of wear and others are in various states of disrepair and damage as well as fostering erosion around them (Figure 20). The biography of their repair is

sometimes visible: for instance, the plastic disc waymarkers sometimes show evidence of being replaced, with the earlier discs visible underneath them (Figure 21). In others, one can see their successive replacement in different styles. As such, the history and biography of the path is materialised through the finger-posts and other waymarkers.

Waymarkers can have explicitly memorial dimensions, such as the Woodland Trust memorials along the line of Offa’s Dyke near Bigweir (Gloucestershire), as with the centenary trail, part of which follows the Path and Dyke north of Trefonen (Shropshire). Walking is thus a medium of memorialisation integrated into experiencing the Dyke in the borderlands landscape (Figure 22). Heritage commemoration pertaining to the line of Offa’s Dyke, but not of the Dyke itself, is a further feature: examples include the folklore at the Devil’s Pulpit, Tiddenham; the Clun ESA (Environmentally Sensitive Area) heritage board; the English Civil War Battle of Montgomery near Hem; Darwin’s visit to Llanymynech and the sign for Selattyn Hill; and the plaque commemorating the Battle of Crogen on the bridge over the Ceiriog (Figure 23). The heritage panels beside the Oak of the Dead, as well as the heritage panels for Moel Arthur and St Tegla’s Well, punctuate the Path beyond the line of Offa’s Dyke itself, affording examples of the wider borderlands heritage connected to the national trail (Figure 24). A further aspect of heritage commemoration is the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the Offa’s Dyke Path National Trail itself, marked by special commemorative discs (Figure 25). Another commemorative dimension is the Offa’s Dyke Path halfway post on the northern slope of the Clun Valley (Figure 26).

Augmenting these are some specific waymarkers, including the two bespoke wooden and glass sculptures framing the approach to Trefonen along the Path and in proximity to, if not upon, the surviving traces of the Dyke (Figure 27). Furthermore, waymarkers integrate the monument into broader walking trails, including both other linear and circular trails, such as the Jack Mytton Way, Oswald’s Trail and the Shropshire Way (Figure 28). In addition to waymarkers, we encounter local authority- and landowner-maintained instances to encourage walkers to shut gates and stay on the correct path, local diversions and road signs, which are all experienced when traversing the Path and line of the Dyke (Figure 29).

In addition, there is investment in fences, hedges, gates (kissing gates and standard swing gates), stiles, steps and bridges support and demarcate the national trail along the early medieval monument and beyond. They subtly afford it a distinctive identity, and serve to consolidate and extend the identity of the monument via the trail. Some have distinct place-names afforded to them to help walkers navigate sections of the path. Again, as with waymarkers, we see an evolving character and materiality (wood, metal and concrete) and many, for instance, are augmented with acorn symbols and waymark discs (Figure 30). There are also private gates that relate to the monument and Path throughout their courses, usually farm gateways, but also sometimes for private residences, as at Ruabon where the back gardens of houses run up to the bank on its eastern side (Figure 30). Examples of disrepair and redundancy also feature in multiple locations where fences and/or hedges are no longer maintained but the stiles remain as relict material culture (Figure 31).



Figure 23: A montage of heritage panels and plaques on the line of Offa's Dyke and the Offa's Dyke Path National Trial (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2019–2024)



Figure 24: Heritage panels on the course of the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail beyond the line of Offa's Dyke. Top-left: St Tegla's Well, Llandegla, Denbighshire. Top-right: Llandegla village heritage panel. Below: Moel Arthur hillfort, Denbighshire (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2025)



Figure 25: An example of the fifty-year anniversary waymarker discs on the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail, here beside the Llangollen Canal, Wreccsam (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2021)



Figure 26: The Half Way Post, Clun Forest, Shropshire (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2021)



Figure 27: The bespoke waymarkers of wood and glass marking the line of the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail at either side of Trefonen village, Shropshire (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2021)



Figure 28: Four examples of waymarkers for multiple walking trails (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2016–2023)



Figure 29: A montage of formal and informal, permanent and temporary, road and footpath signs associated with Offa's Dyke and the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail (Photographs: Howard Williams 2017–2024)



Figure 30: Montage of the gateways and bridges that comprise the contemporary archaeology of Offa's Dyke (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2016–2024)



Figure 31: Relict stiles and gates on Offa's Dyke. Top-left: Trefonen, Shropshire. Top-right: Llanfair Hill, Shropshire (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2021). Relict stiles on the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail away from the early medieval linear monument. Bottom-left: north of Llandegla, Denbighshire. Bottom-right: Moel y Gelli, Denbighshire (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2025)

### Seated memories

A specific category of installation requires separate treatment as they are simultaneously waymarkers and often memorials to, and are permanent and distinctive dimensions of, the material assemblage of today's Offa's Dyke. Given its association with a long-distance walking trail, Offa's Dyke is constituted by embodied acts of pedestrian engagement with the landscape more so than cycling, motoring or using public transport. Still, it is important to recognise the importance of seats and sitting in embodied practices of remembrance for the monument. As with many contemporary environments, benches feature at a range of specific locations accessible to local people and day walkers, as at multiple positions along the monument and national trail. A good example is at, and south from, Oswestry Old Racecourse, including many benches remembering local people and their affinity with the place during their lifetime, whilst others mark the path without appended memorials.

Some add a further memorial dimension to the line of Offa's Dyke, as beside the Llangollen Canal at Froncyllte, and on Panponton Hill above Knighton. The latter is



Figure 32: A bench as memorial, seat and waymarker on Panpumont Hill, Shropshire (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2021)

in such a striking location with vistas over the town and River Teme, commemorating Dave Cadwallader 1941–2010: ‘he loved this view’. This particular bench has multiple functions and significances: it commemorates its inscribed subject but it also serves as a waymarker. Indeed, it is appended with waymarking plastic discs and it is adjacent to a memorial cairn (see below) (Figure 32).

Other benches commemorate the monument itself, notably a new heritage interpretation bench at the National Trust site of Chirk Castle, strikingly carved, and its orientation and placement marking the line of Offa’s Dyke through the car park and beside the café near the entrance: here, the bilingual bench carvings articulate the monument as a territorial



Figure 33: The National Trust bench placed on the denuded bank of Offa's Dyke, considering the monument as a borderline between Wales and Mercia, Home Farm, Chirk Castle, Wreccsam (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2024)

borderline between Wales and Mercia (Williams 2021c; see also Williams 2025; Figure 33). Finally, there are picnic benches, including at Knighton and Llanymynech Heritage Area marked by the now defunct website <http://www.trailsmidwales.com/> promoting walking trails in the borderlands. In sum, benches are part of the contemporary memoryscape and material assemblage that constitutes today's Offa's Dyke (Figure 34).

### Rural things and structures

To these authentic heritage dimensions we might also mention a further eclectic range of agricultural equipment and material cultures that append to the Dyke along its path, some of which are very temporary, such as stacks of hay bails, but some are semi-permanent waymarkers in their own right, from abandoned wheelbarrows, various animal feeding stations and water troughs.

To these farming-related material cultures we might add domestic traces, and we might also add a range of ephemeral walking material cultures accidentally abandoned and subsequently displayed items of clothing. There are also more deliberate markers such as graffiti on trees beside the trail, a long-term suspended boot on a stile near Craignant,



Figure 34: One of a series of picnic benches on the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail, here at Llanymynech, Powys/Shropshire (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2022)

and occasional feathers stuck in the tops of fence posts (Williams 2019a). The Dyke being subsumed within the disused railway embankment south of Cadwgan Hall (Wrexham) is a further example of incidental but significant connections between the Dyke and more recent human-made features (Williams 2019b).

### Natural presences and traces

There is no space to explore the full range of fields, lanes, roads, farms, hamlets, villages and towns that interconnect with Offa's Dyke as linear earthwork, national trail and border. Yet there are distinctive 'natural' features that comprise further distinctive dimensions of the assemblage. There is no singular Offa's Dyke equivalent to the cherished (and now mourned and commemorated) Sycamore Gap tree on Hadrian's Wall, cut down in an act of vandalism on the night of the 27/28 September 2023 (Leatherdale 2025). Still, including individual and groups of trees and distinctive rock outcrops are significant and recognised elements of Offa's Dyke's line and landscape for walkers and locals (Gordon 2022). A good example of both is the yew and rock at the Devil's Pulpit, and the 'pulpit' itself (Figure 35a–b). Meanwhile, the oak known as the Tree at the Gate of the Dead is connected to the legendary burial site linked to the Battle of Crogen in 1165 following the attribution of the location by antiquarian Thomas Pennant (RCAHMW 2017). In regards the distinctive arrangements of woodland and trees, one might also mention the thick woodland between Devil's Pulpit and Lippets Grove (Figure 35c), the oaks near Yew Tree Farm, Discoed (Figure 35d), distinctive line of larches near Pentre Hollow, Clun Forest (Figure 35e) or the isolated hawthorn on Llanfair Hill (Shropshire) (Figure 35f). Seemingly 'natural', these trees are cultural landmarks associated with border, Dyke and Path (see also McBride 2021). In addition to rocks and trees, we must



Figure 35: A montage of distinctive natural landmarks (stones and trees) on the line of Offa's Dyke. 35a and b (top): Devil's Pulpit, Gloucestershire. 35c (middle-left): Lippets Grove, Gloucestershire). 35d (middle-right): Yew Tree Farm, Discoed, Powys. 35e (bottom-left): Pentre Hollow, Clun Forest, Shropshire. 35f (bottom-right): Llanfair Hill, Shropshire (Photographs: Howard Williams 2017–2021)

remember that even the lines of erosion from footfall augment and create connections between people, the Path and the Dyke. Offa's Dyke emerges from, and merges with, the borderlands landscape.

## Discussion

From its inception, Frank Noble considered the Offa’s Dyke Path to be an integral part of its landscape, for while sometimes the Dyke ‘stretches continuously’, elsewhere, ‘there are also fields, farms and forests, castles, churches and old houses, villages and market towns, and people who are pleased to pass the time of day with a stranger’ (Noble 1981: 9–10). Thinking beyond the traces of early medieval bank and ditch to consider the diverse material cultures, structures and monuments that interact with and mediate the Dyke and Path within this wider borderlands landscape, I here consider Offa’s Dyke as an emergent contemporary archaeological assemblage. ‘Today’s Offa’s Dyke’ is created by a range of human heritage and sociopolitical agencies which are all trying to afford meaning to a ‘ruin’ that, for many, embodies the identity of Wales, England and, more specifically, the Anglo-Welsh borderlands that straddle the national border. The Dyke today can be conceptualised as human-made and yet augmented and adapted through interaction with many natural and human-made features, including trees, streams and farmland, housing and streets, art and heritage installations, that all interact with traces of the linear bank-and-ditch as well as operating in areas where it is intangible and perhaps never confirmed to have had once been. Together, these create distinctive materialities that have enduring agencies to affect people’s sense of borderlands place and identity. Indeed, many of these operate *in lieu* of inapprehensible traces of the linear earthwork to non-specialists or where it is completely absent and its course unconfirmed and thus ‘lost’.

The assemblage of ‘today’s Offa’s Dyke’ is thus constructed by the interaction of material traces and intangible ideas and between authorised heritage place-making, and informal, localised and cumulative practices that construct and constitute meanings and significances for Offa’s Dyke in the contemporary landscape, binding past to the present (see McAttackney 2024). As with far more overtly contested landscapes, by approaching Offa’s Dyke as contemporary archaeology allows us to give attention to not only intended and authorised practices, including perceiving Offa’s Dyke as somewhat synonymous with the national trail, despite their divergences (see Noble 1981: 10), but to also consider both the unintended dimensions of authorised heritage as well as the unsanctioned and informal dimensions, too. In doing so, we can be more attentive to the agencies of local people and non-professionals, as well as the roles of heritage organisations, academics and government (cf. McAttackney 2024: 397). By various attempts at authorised heritage design and cumulative practical happenstance engagement of people with place and landscape guided sometimes in part, sometimes not at all, by heritage interpretation and management strategies, Offa’s Dyke is more than an archaeological monument and the name afforded to a long-distance walking path: it is a contemporary medium of memory work, crafting past in the present through embodied practices and commemorative materialities.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Offa’s Dyke is thus a work of late modernity: a material assemblage that constitutes a material memory connecting

deep-time past and recent history to present-day lived experience for locals and visitors. Prehistoric cairns and hillforts, Roman settlement sites, medieval castle ruins and historic churches, villages, farms and fields are all integrated into this blurry triad of lines: earthwork, Path and border. This article has done little more than scratch the surface of these mnemonic dimensions to the monument as an assemblage of (largely) modern material cultures, and this survey has not fully identified all the networks of material and spatial citations to other borderland heritage sites, monuments and landscapes from the Bronze Age to the industrial era. Yet by rethinking today's Offa's Dyke in these terms allows us to begin to think about the monument as a living entity, more than the sum of its parts, interacting with living communities and their sense of place, but also challenging its perceived status and value as a heritage attraction and a linear landscape feature and the often simplistic nationalistic discourses that are wrapped around it.

Despite the efforts of the Offa's Dyke Association and the Offa's Dyke Path in providing cohesion for long-distance walkers in locating the Dyke in relation to the path and border, the contemporary identity of the Dyke itself lacks a coherent heritage interpretation let alone recognition of its embodied engagement (see also Witcher 2010a and b). To some extent, as this article has shown, this is not only inevitable but part of the distinctive identity of the monument in today's world. Its absence and frequent inapprehensible nature are key to its identity as an elusive spectre of the Welsh Marches: simultaneously serving as an ancient symbol of the Cymric/English political and cultural divide by stalking the landscape; seemingly everywhere and often nowhere to be seen. At one level, to try and render coherence from this eclectic assemblage misses the point. Yet, the concluding recommendations of Williams (2025) for improving its public heritage interpretation were aimed at not shutting discussion down, but instead to celebrate and render discursive today's Offa's Dyke and its many significances in today's world. The ninefold recommendations for heritage interpretation thus deserve repeating, as they recommended:

1. a systematic overhaul of bilingual presentation along the entire length of both Dyke and Path;
2. a 'heritage trail' discrete from but overlapping with the Offa's Dyke Path;
3. explicitly differentiate between the Offa's Dyke Path, Welsh/English border and ancient monument known as Offa's Dyke to critique nationalist discourses of interpretation and management;
4. targeting both heritage 'hotspots' and stark gaps;
5. emphasise explanations of the monument's placement and landscape context alongside its form and function;
6. deploy numerous cheap heritage plaques appended to waymarkers linked to more extensive digital resources;

7. digital resources that allow map-based interaction and explanation regarding the monument and its complex interactions with, and the story of, the borderlands landscape;
8. updated online resources to supplement the physical and digital heritage trail and develop new digital engagements including AR and VR technologies;
9. fresh maps, artwork and art installations to help interpret the monument in the landscape and online.

Targeting specific locations where Offa’s Dyke interacts with other heritage attractions, such as the Pontcysyllte UNESCO World Heritage Site and the National Trust site of Chirk Castle, are promising nodes for enhanced heritage interpretation, as are the Cadw heritage sites of Chepstow Castle and Tintern Abbey in the Wye Valley and Montgomery Castle, as well as the existing locus of heritage interpretation at Knighton. Yet there is also considerable potential through art and waymarkers of connecting together the monument beyond these heritage hubs, including Trefonen (Shropshire), Ruabon and Johnstown (Wrexham) and Ffrith (Flintshire). In such locations, rather than substantial and expensive heritage interpretation, low-cost plastic signs appended to waymarkers and bite-sized bilingual information linked to digital resources might extend the interpretation of the monument for visitors and locals alike. Yet to do so, we must identify and evaluate, as this article has attempted, Offa’s Dyke as not only fragments of an early medieval earthwork to be encountered and explained (cf. Williams 2023b and c), but also as a vibrant and ever-evolving diversity of materialities that interleave with each other and constitute ‘today’s Offa’s Dyke’ as an emergent contemporary material assemblage. Walking along and visiting Offa’s Dyke and its associated path is a form of memory work by which borderland memories and identities are negotiated, constituted and reproduced. Engaging with this new definition of Offa’s Dyke promises to better understand and share, engage and contribute towards, its story for people today and in the future. Fine-grained analyses of localised memoryscapes and the agencies that create and perpetuate them (see also Williams 2020a) will serve in identifying how these different materialities operate to create different ‘Offa’s Dykes’ in different places and locales in the contemporary world. This is surely a clear priority for future research on Offa’s Dyke in the twenty-first century, alongside a fresh and strategised heritage interpretation of a monument that was constructed in the Early Middle Ages but endures in our world.

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