Offa's Dyke Journal

Volume 1

Edited by Howard Williams and Liam Delaney

Aims and Scope

Offa's Dyke Journal is a venue for the publication of high-quality research on the archaeology, history and heritage of frontiers and borderlands focusing on the Anglo-Welsh border. 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 frontiers and borderlands from elsewhere in Britain, Europe and beyond. We accept:

1. Notes 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

ODJ is published by JAS Arqueología, and is supported by the University of Chester and the Offa's Dyke Association. The journal is open access, free to authors and readers: http://revistas.jasarqueologia.es/index.php/odjournal/.

Print copies of the journal are available for purchase from Archaeopress with a discount available for members of the Offa's Dyke Association: https://www.archaeopress.com/

Submissions: odj@chester.ac.uk

Front cover: Drone photograph of Offa's Dyke on Llanfair Hill, looking north (Photograph: Julian Ravest). Cover and logo design by Howard Williams and Liam Delaney, with thanks to Tim Grady and Adam Parsons for critical input.

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Making Earthworks Visible: The Example of the Oswestry Heritage Comics Project

John Swogger

The example of the Oswestry Heritage Comics *Project demonstrates how the use of informational comics can raise awareness of heritage which, though highly visible, can be readily overlooked. This has particular implications for linear earthwork monuments which vary in their surviving monumentality and accessibility, including Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke, where poor public understanding can contribute to their vulnerability. Comics have the potential to make these monuments better understood, and thus more visible to – and potentially more valued by – the communities which live alongside them.*

Keywords: borders, art, comics, heritage, Oswestry, Shropshire, Wat's Dyke

As an archaeologist and an archaeological illustrator with over twenty-five years' experience in the field, outreach is an essential component of my work. As an illustrator, it is essential I make sure that the drawings and paintings I produce explain sites effectively; from an archaeological perspective it is important that good explanations of archaeological evidence help to build meaningful relationships with research colleagues, community stakeholders, official bodies and funders, all of which can impact public involvement with research, but also access to sites, project logistics, budgets and research outcomes.

Nevertheless, specialist archaeological visualisation methods, such as finds illustration and even some reconstructions, can require considerable explanation and interpretation in order to 'make sense' to non-specialist audiences. Informational comics are capable of communicating research about the past in an effective and engaging way to public and specialist audiences alike (Atalay 2012: 192). This in part is due to the fact that comics allow for the close and integrated use of both text and image within a single composition. In informational comics, visual context and text-based explanation are combined, meaning the specific qualities and strengths of each can be exercised, as well as reinforced by the qualities and strengths of the other (Swogger 2000: 148). This combination approach creates a composition which informs on multiple levels: both visual and semantic, left-brain and right-brain, passive and active (Shanks 1997: 78). This, in turn, reinforces readers' connections to the material under discussion, and can improve rates both of comprehension and retention (Hosler and Boomer 2011). In this article, I explore the specific potential for informational comics in engaging communities with the heritage of borderlands, of which linear earthworks and other natural and human-made frontiers are an integral part, focusing on the *Oswestry Heritage Comics.*

Offa's Dyke Journal volume 1 2019
Manuscript received: 29 May 2019
accepted: 10 September 2019

Figure 1: Two strips from the Oswestry Heritage Comics series – (a) *Bringing Heritage to Life* (Swogger 2019a: 7), (b) *Oswestry Castle Exvations* (Swogger 2019a: 13)

Comics and archaeological information: the *Oswestry Heritage Comics* project

Between 2016 and 2018, I wrote and illustrated two separate series of comics about the archaeology, history and heritage of the Anglo-Welsh borderlands market town of Oswestry (Shropshire). Funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF 2017), *Oswestry Heritage Comics*[1] were published weekly over eighteen months in the *Oswestry & Border Counties Advertizer* newspaper, as well as online on Facebook, on the website of Oswestry Community Arts, and on the author's own Wordpress blog (Figures 1 and 2).[2]

[1] https://johngswogger.wordpress.com/tag/oswestry-heritage-comics/page/2/. 'Oswestry Heritage Comics' was the title of the HLF-funded project. 'Oswestry Heritage' was also the main title to each strip referred to here collectively as the 'Oswestry Heritage' comics. The title of the anthology (to which all references refer) was 'The Oswestry Heritage Comics'.

[2] The first series of the comics ran in the Advertizer June–September 2016, and the second series June 2017–June 2018. There was a series of A5 poster-versions of the comics posted between September 2016–June 2017 (some of these are still up in Oswestry Library at the time of writing (June 2019).

Figure 2: Two strips from the Oswestry Heritage Comics series (a) The Llwyd Eagle (Swogger 2019a: 14), (b) Learning From the Past (Swogger 2019a: 19).

Through both digital and physical dissemination, the comics became highly visible within the community of Oswestry and its environs, and, judging from comments from readers both online and, in person, often whilst writing and drawing the comic in town, caught the attention of people who otherwise would not necessarily visit museums or have any other involvement with their local heritage (Swogger 2019a: 23).

The comics were able to introduce a wide range of heritage subjects to their audience: ranging from prehistory to the Napoleonic war, covering themes from transport to family history, and both current archaeological excavations as well as new research by local historians. Their short format and condensed style meant that they could quite happily shift temporal and thematic focus from comic to comic, or even panel to panel. This allowed each subject to be placed within an historical context, and also demonstrated how local heritage is not confined to a single time, or place. The *Oswestry Heritage Comics* aimed to present geology, industry and tourism, ecology, archaeology and social history as equal components of our local past.

Importantly, covering a broad range of heritage, in conjunction with a focus on *who* is interested in these subjects, means that local heritage can be made relevant through the interest and involvement of local enthusiasts and researchers. This then allows the discussion of how that interest and involvement makes heritage visible and relevant for others (Swogger 2019a: 12, 13, 34, 40). The comics have also been an excellent way to highlight the work of local community-based heritage organisations. In Oswestry there is, for example, the Oswestry & Border History and Archaeology Group, an active organisation since the excavations at Rhyn Park Roman marching camp in 1977 (Swogger 2019a: 5). The comics are able to support their investigations on the historic environment by signposting their work, as well as shining a light upon the ongoing challenges that each faces with regards conservation and awareness (Swogger 2019a: 48, 50).

The aesthetic, style and a narrative context of comics can also effectively convey unfamiliar concepts through the use of a decluttered explanatory structure. The layered relationship between image and text within comics allows for plenty of complexity within the content. Even a diversity of new information – archaeology, history, rambling, footpaths, folklore and community stewardship – can be combined in such a way that, even within a small space, feels both natural and complementary (Swogger 2019a: 78, 11).

Establishing this connection between site/monument/place and people then allows one to explore different kinds local engagement with heritage. Once this connection is made, it also provides a basis for exploring scholarly interest in the local past, and to demonstrate the national and international context for other local research projects, whether community based, or lead by professional scholars (Swogger 2019a: 19, 34, 42).

Having introduced the idea that there are many ways to engage with information about local history, heritage and archaeology, the comic can then help demonstrate how there is heritage all around us, hidden in plain sight; revealing the unexpected and the extraordinary that can be found in our everyday landscapes and places. This embedding of heritage and heritage research within the community then invites discussion of what the past means to us in the present: how heritage can be more than just dates and names of kings, but how it can be about the ordinary and the everyday. In this context, such discussions inevitably raise questions of how heritage will be safeguarded for future generations, and prompt suggestions for how 'non-specialists' can get involved in local heritage (Swogger 2019a: 44, 48, 50).

Comics can produce these results by employing two different key mechanisms. First, by combining text and image, they reinvent the idea of 'show and tell'. In a comic, visual context and narrative explanation are not just close at hand, or side-by-side, they are interdependent and inter-related. Each does what it does best, but each does so as part of a 'team effort' (McCloud 2006: 128 ff.) (Figures 3 and 4).

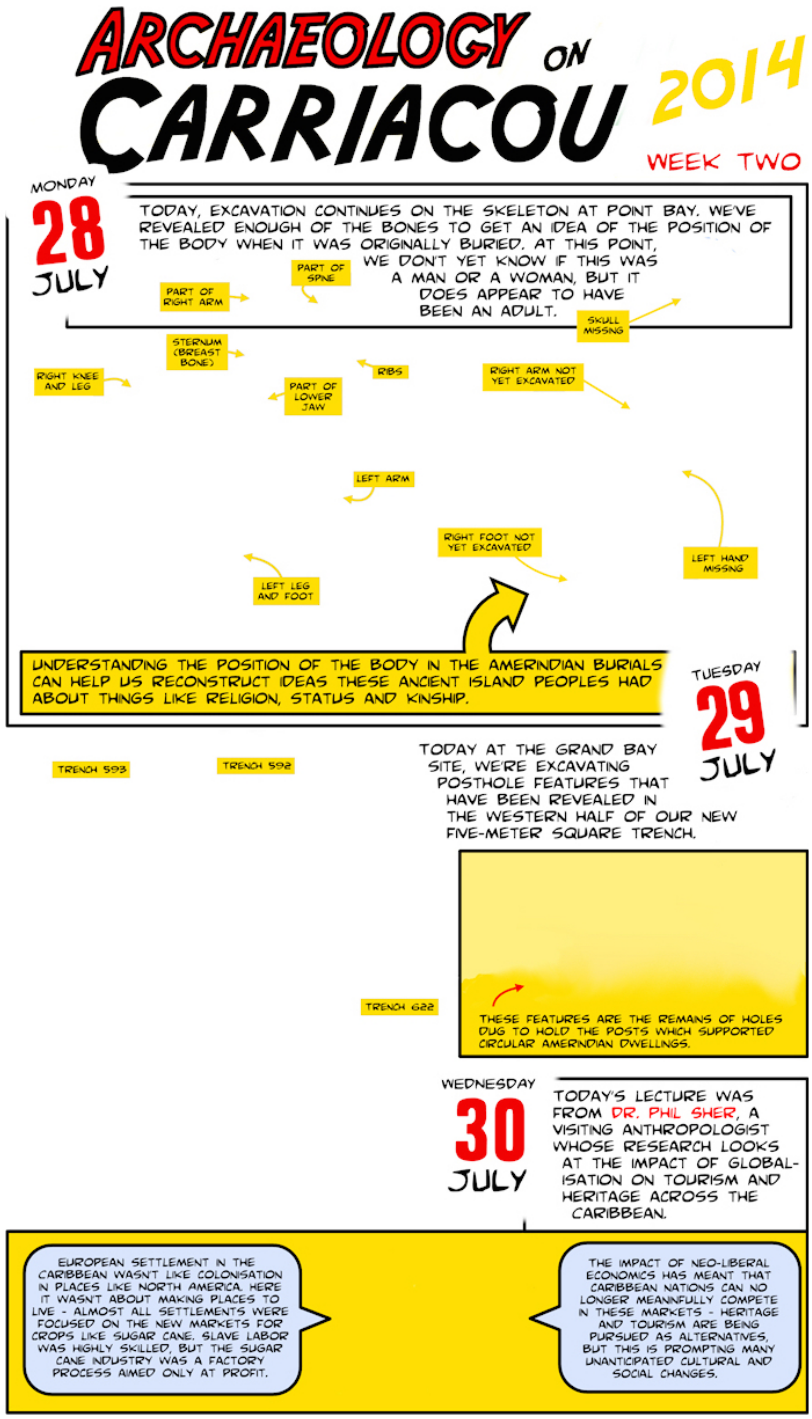

Figure 3: An 'excavated' page from a comic to show the text without the images, from *Archaeology on Carriacou 2014*, University of Oregon/University College London. Poster in Hillsborough, Carriaciou, 2014

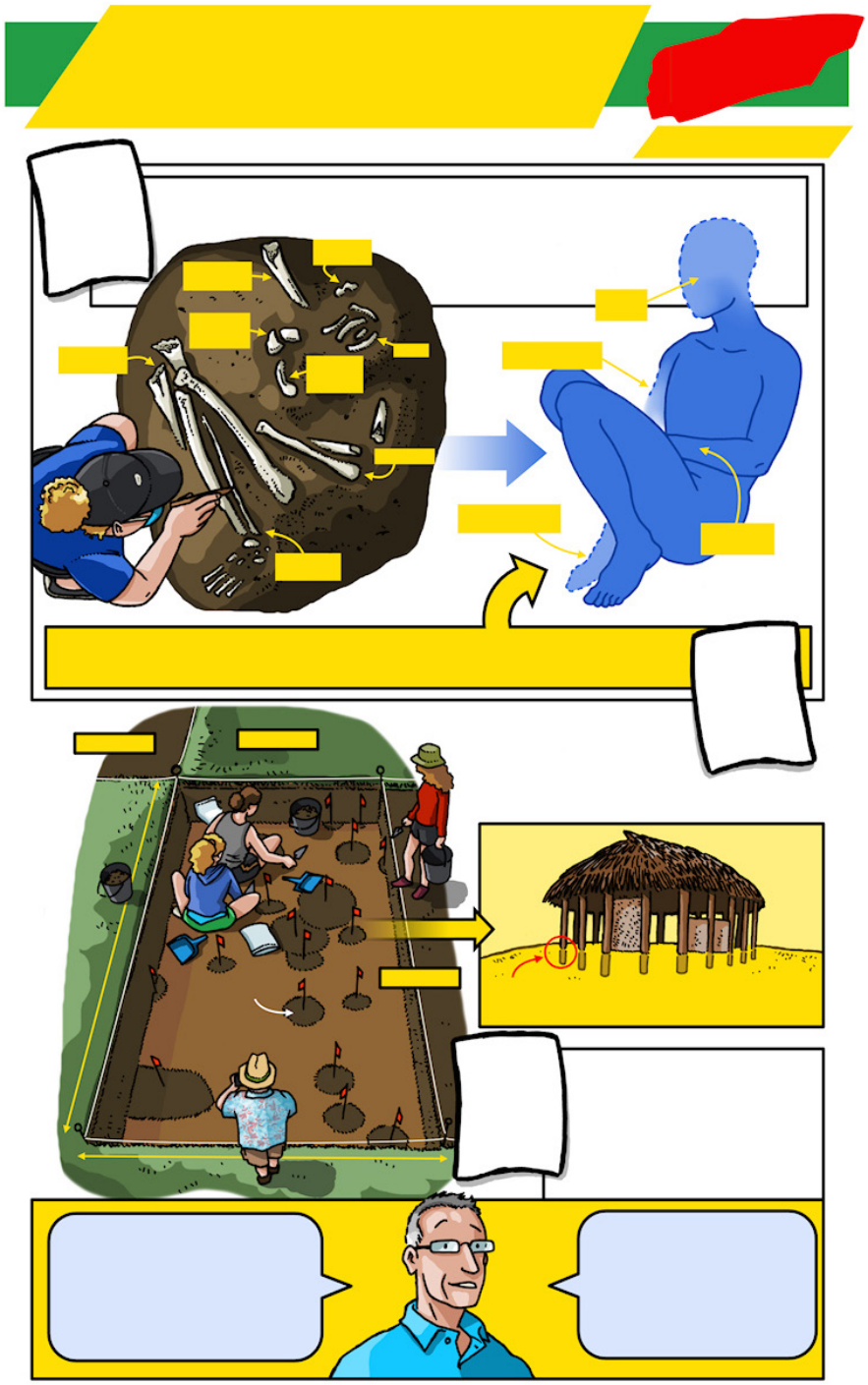

Figure 4: An 'excavated' page from a comic to show the images without the text. Together with Figure 3 it shows the different kinds of information conveyed by image and text. *Archaeology on Carriacou 2014*, University of Oregon/University College London. Poster in Hillsborough, Carriaciou, 2014

Second, this multi-layered approach to presenting text and image together allows an informational comic to both serve as an introduction and a reminder. Familiar images reinforce unfamiliar knowledge, while unfamiliar images invite the reader to revisit known facts. This multi-layered approach to information which serves to show and tell, introduce and remind, means that audiences do not necessarily have to come to the comic with any prior knowledge. It de-complicates without dumbing down; simplifies without making simplistic. Importantly, is not a reductive mechanism, but an additive one: individual elements such as captions, pictures, speech-balloons and panels are pieced together by the reader one by one. As a result, learning might occur as a literal step-by-step process, which means that readers are actively engaged in constructing their own knowledge of the subject (an explicit example of this being the US Army engineering/maintenance comics of Will Eisner: Campbell 2011; see also McCloud 1993:60 ff., 2006: 14 ff.).

This approach ensures that comics are both accessible and engaging. In the case of the *Oswestry Heritage Comics*, this has resulted in them being widely read and broadly shared. Their publication in the local newspaper meant that they were seen by eighteen thousand people every week in print, reaching approximately 40% of households in Oswestry itself. Each comic was also read by an average of three thousand Facebook readers online, who had shared and re-posted the comic via blogs and social media for an even wider distribution. Establishing formal metrics for the impact of comics can be problematic, since they are often used to communicate with audiences in spaces where collecting feedback becomes difficult. However, a recent online survey for the *Oswestry Heritage Comics* project suggested respondents (n = 1% of Facebook readers) found the comic not only entertaining and informative, but easier to process than text-based outreach and more likely to prompt onward engagement with heritage. Indeed, over a third of the survey respondents indicated that they had become more actively involved in heritage as a result of reading the comics. While these results could not measure specific impacts on comprehension and information retention, they do at least chime well with other studies into the effectiveness of comics both as a way of imparting information, and as a way of changing attitudes among readers (cf. Hostler and Boomer 2011, McNicol 2017, Swogger 2019a: 24).

However, such quantitative measures are – in this case – imprecise tools. They provide a snapshot only, and do not adequately give a picture of broader and longer-term impacts; understanding the legacy of an outreach project is at least as important as understanding its immediate reception. In the case of the *Oswestry Heritage Comics*, qualitative, anecdotal measures of impact have provided me with a much more complete understanding of the value of the project and of comics as a communication medium for heritage. Such feedback can be difficult to record, however. Chance conversations in pubs and coffee shops gave me a real sense of what people actually thought about the comics and how enhanced their appreciation for or interest in local archaeology and history, but such conversations generally pass by unrecorded – except, perhaps, when they happen during a radio interview:

> I knew a bit about Saint Oswald – but I've learnt more in four pictures and a bit of writing – you've made me read that. I've actually read *that*, as opposed to it being in a long [newspaper] column… You could see people *actually* reading that – young and old, and it's gone in… It's amazing. It's very, very good.
>
> Eric Smith, BBC Radio Shropshire, 8 September 2017 (BBC 2017)

A more concrete form of feedback is to look at what a project like the *Oswestry Heritage Comics* leads to: in other words, whether other local heritage organisations also start to regard comics as an effective and engaging form of outreach for their own projects. Since June 2018, when the *Oswestry Heritage Comics* finished in the Oswestry Advertizer, I have been commissioned for three new local comics projects. The first was a two-part, half-page comic about a First World War heritage project run by Qube called 'Homefront Heroines' (Swogger 2019c), looking at the roles of local women during wartime. The second is a series of twelve full-page informational and outreach comics in the Oswestry Advertizer as part of the 'Old Oswestry Discovery Project', a Heritage Lottery Funded project. The third, in production during 2019–2020, is an informational comic book about the life of King – later Saint – Oswald, who gave his name to the town of Oswestry, to be distributed during the 2020 Saint Oswald's Festival in town. Beyond Oswestry, the four-panel heritage comic model developed during the *Oswestry Heritage Comics* project was explicitly referenced by clients for two non-UK based comics projects. Firstly, by the Heritage Research Group Caribbean when they commissioned in 2018 a series of ten four-panel comics about the heritage of Grenada, and secondly by a British Council project commissioned for 2020 for comics about heritage on the island of Soqotra, off the coast of Yemen. All this suggests a high degree of confidence among clients as to the effectiveness of comics as a communications medium for history, archaeology and heritage. In particular, the organiser of the Saint Oswald's Festival – an event which is being backed by the Town Council and the Rotary Club – explicitly cited the 'around town' reception of the comic about St. Oswald from the *Oswestry Heritage Comics* series (Swogger 2019a: 11) in commissioning the comic book biography, and is using the *Oswestry Heritage Comics* strip in advance publicity for the festival at this year's Heritage Open Days.

Additionally, interest among local heritage groups in hearing more about the use of comics as outreach has remained consistently high. Between 2016 and summer 2019 I was invited to give more than a dozen talks on the *Oswestry Heritage Comics* and related comics projects to WI groups, library learning clubs, local and not-so-local museum and archaeology societies (travelling as far as Stoke-on-Trent to do so), as well as presenting papers about the project at archaeology conferences (TAG, the Society for American Archaeology and the American Anthropological Association), comics conferences (Comics Forum UK, the Applied Comics Network), and even being invited as a guest panellist to San Diego Comic Fest in 2018 and the much larger San Diego Comic Con in 2019 to talk about comics and community heritage.

Though the above is difficult to quantify, onward projects clearly based in an evaluation of the impact of the *Oswestry Heritage Comics*, and continuing interest from the broader heritage community demonstrate that both groups feel comics are of interest and of value in communicating local heritage. Indeed, a direct example of this makes its way into one of the *Oswestry Heritage Comics* strips (Swogger 2019a: 23). Mark and Rachel were typical of the kind of people who read the comic but were unlikely to complete an online survey or a questionnaire handout. They found the comics engaging and interesting – enough so that when they found an unusual carved stone in their garden, they approached me for more information about it, and were delighted when I asked if their story could be turned into one of the comics in the series. Mark and Rachel's engagement illustrates very well the sort of appeal, interest and value the comics have inspired – and does so, in my opinion, far better than any quantitative metrics. Indeed, it may be the case that anecdote is the only way to effectively measure and understand the impact of such comics.

Comics and earthwork monuments

Earthwork monuments can sometimes be difficult to understand. At least with a ruined castle or other stone construction identifiable architectural components such as wall-faces, turrets, windows, doors, and steps survive which audiences can imagine being used by people in the past. Earthworks can often become eroded, dismantled, forgotten or even erased; the borders and frontiers they relate to those of vanished people and polities, or transient cultural and political distinctions. Offa's Dyke is at once on the border between England and Wales (Hay-on-Wye to Monmouth), then in England (as at Oswestry) and then in Wales (as at Llangollen) at different points along its length, making talking about it as a 'frontier' complex. Even when an earthwork like Offa's Dyke survives, it can be difficult to see precisely because of the larger-than-human scale, becoming overlain by vegetation and obscured by other land-uses. Overcoming this lack of visibility and contemporary resonance presents a challenge to those visualising such monuments. We may be familiar with earthworks as flood defences or landscaping, but we are not necessarily familiar with them as military monuments or as frontier markers. A reconstruction drawing of an earthen bank and ditch may give little clue as to its true impact at the time of construction.

The way comics present information may be able to give earthwork monuments a different kind of visibility and significance by presenting the monument alongside its changing (or changed) cultural or temporal context. Readers of a comic might be able to find something familiar in the monument not based on how it once looked, but through being shown how it was originally made and used – or, indeed, how it is used (or mis-used) today. Outreach about earthwork monuments like Offa's and Wat's Dyke, can show the ancient monument and its original function while at the same time discussing contemporary meaning and place, inviting people to get involved, understanding how heritage can be 'hidden in plain sight', and emphasising the collective contribution of

local researchers, community groups and heritage professionals. The panel-by-panel structure of comics can then be used to layer this diverse information within a sequential narrative, perhaps based around the monument's construction.

Figure 5 is an equivalent to the phase drawings or plans used in archaeology all the time, but the comic embeds the missing narrative element, interrelating the necessary 'other half' of the story and making the sequence accessible for non-specialists. A visual rebuilding of Offa's Dyke by process, through time, framed by a narrative explanation, situated in an inhabited historical context might enable those unfamiliar with both earthwork construction in general and the dyke in particular to 'see' it; and having 'seen' it as a thing in the past, to understand its current state in the present.

Given the damage already suffered by earthwork monuments through ignorance and oversight, presenting outreach like this in local newspapers and local online communities becomes particularly important. The *Oswestry Heritage Comics* series featured short comics about both Offa's and Wat's Dyke and offers an example of the way different kinds of information can be effectively presented within even the relatively small amount of space available in a local weekly paper.

The Wat's Dyke comic started by explaining the possible origins of the earthwork's name, featured a panel briefly considering the construction of the dyke, then looked at both its past and present context (Figure 6). The level of information was kept relatively general, as it was discovered prior to writing the comic that many local readers had never heard of the monument, and those that did principally wanted to know why it was called 'Wat's' Dyke. Here again, 'showing and telling' allows the comic to provide a visual context for an explanation about the monument's name, purpose and origins. It both introduces readers to the possibly unfamiliar past, and, through its narrative approach, links local engagement to issues as diverse as historical research and economic impact. Lastly, the visual incorporation of people walking the footpath sets an inclusive tone, explicitly connecting present-day inhabitants with their ancient counterparts. In the space of four images and a mere 100 words, past and present, contemporary and ancient are both made visible and treated as equally important. This mixing together of elements subsequently set the tone for commentary and contextualisation of the comic in the anthology publication of the *Oswestry Heritage Comics* series:

> People sometimes ask 'What is Wat's Dyke for?'. Borders can be both physical as well as symbolic: the red line at Passport Control, behind which you have to stand before being called forward to the desk, for example. It's not a defensive wall, but it is certainly a border in both legal and psychological terms. Step over that line and there will be consequences. Both Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke fall into this kind of category – yes, they were banks and ditches, but they were respected because people understood the consequences in terms of trade and tax - and military

Figure 5: *Building Offa's Dyke*, 2018

Figure 6: Oswestry Heritage Comic: *Oswestry's Other Border* (Swogger 2019a: 8).

> retribution. The name 'Wat's Dyke' is a reference to the old English hero Wade (also written Wadda or Wat). Wade was a hero connected with water, so perhaps the fact that Wat's Dyke starts right at the water's edge in Holywell has something to do with this identification. And Wade himself would make a great hero to identify with such a curious construction as the Dyke, snaking its way down the Welsh border. Who but a hero with his magic boat, descended from Wayland the Smith, would make such a thing? I think of Wade – with his semi-divine ancestry, his knack for solving problems and defeating monsters, and his magic travelling machine – as sort of halfway between Thor and Doctor Who. Now there's an idea for a comic! (Swogger 2019a: 8).

Offa's Dyke makes an appearance in two comics. In the first (Figure 7), it features briefly in a discussion about Oswestry's place in the borderlands between England and Wales.

In the second, the Dyke features more centrally in a discussion of the work of the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory (Figure 8).

In this comic, the combination of image and text allowed me to give the research group a human face; the purposes and objectives of the group can be introduced alongside visual and explanatory reminders about its focus; both the local and broader connections of that research can be made explicit, and an inclusive invitation extended to the readership. A comic such as this not only makes the dyke visible, but it makes the process of research and the researchers themselves visible, too. As with those strips in the series which focused on issues of conservation and management at Old Oswestry Hillfort (Swogger 2019a: 3, 12, 19 35, 44, 50) so too could further comics about Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke have discussed the monument as a locus for volunteer engagement and community-based stewardship.

The adaptability and flexibility of the medium ensures that even a short-format strip-can have a significant digital and real-world footprint. The ability to promulgate real information about archaeology in a way which is both 'information rich' and yet friendly to modern digital media and vernacular publication is both significant and valuable. It is the reason why, despite still doing plenty of 'traditional' archaeological illustrations, I continue to find new uses for comics within archaeology. This has led me to explore ways in which the broader ability of comics to increase visibility of monuments, research and issues can move beyond public outreach and into the practice of scholarship. Comics used to bring visibility to aspects of scholarship can do all the same things that comics do in public outreach: they add visual context to explanation, introduce and de-complicate subjects, locate specific information within broader frameworks, make connections and links with other research, and even invite participation. Comics can be used to ground and humanise both research and interpretation, something which becomes important if one wishes to present models of past social practice as dynamic, and past landscapes as living places.

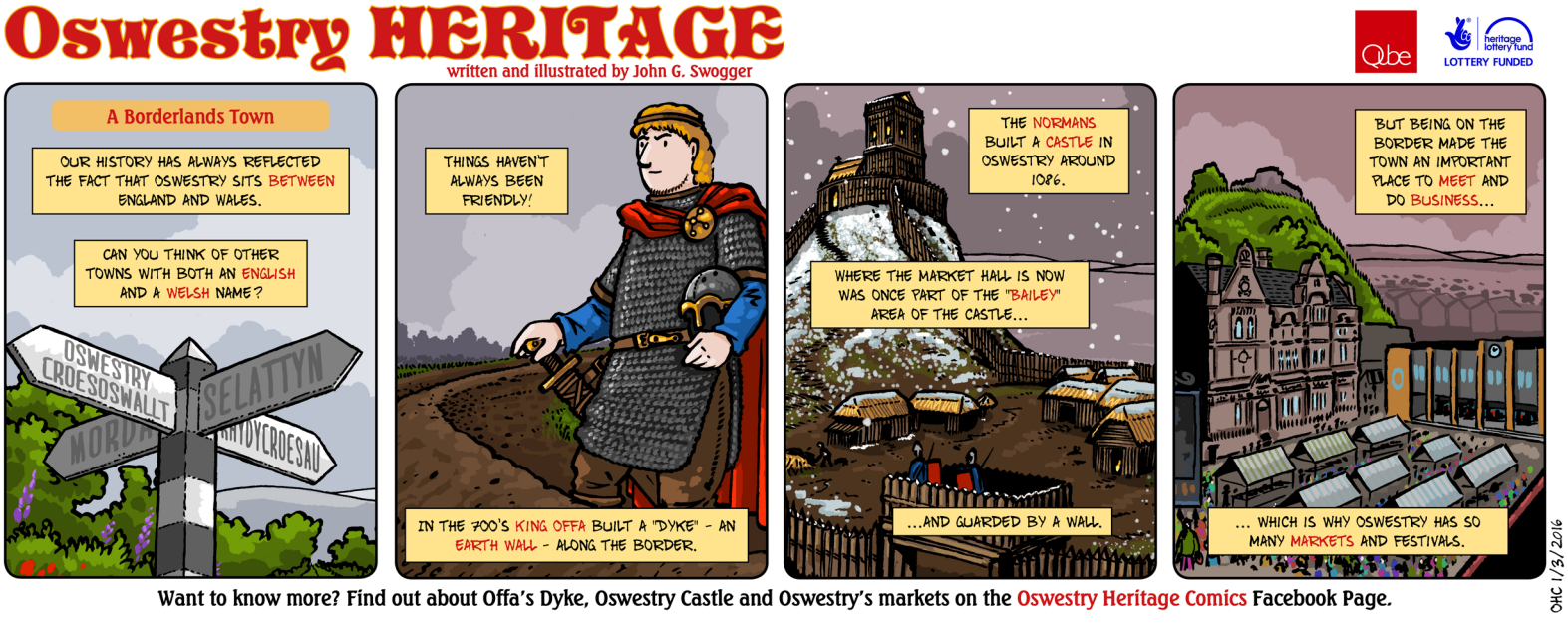

Figure 7: *A Borderlands Town* (Swogger 2019a 33).

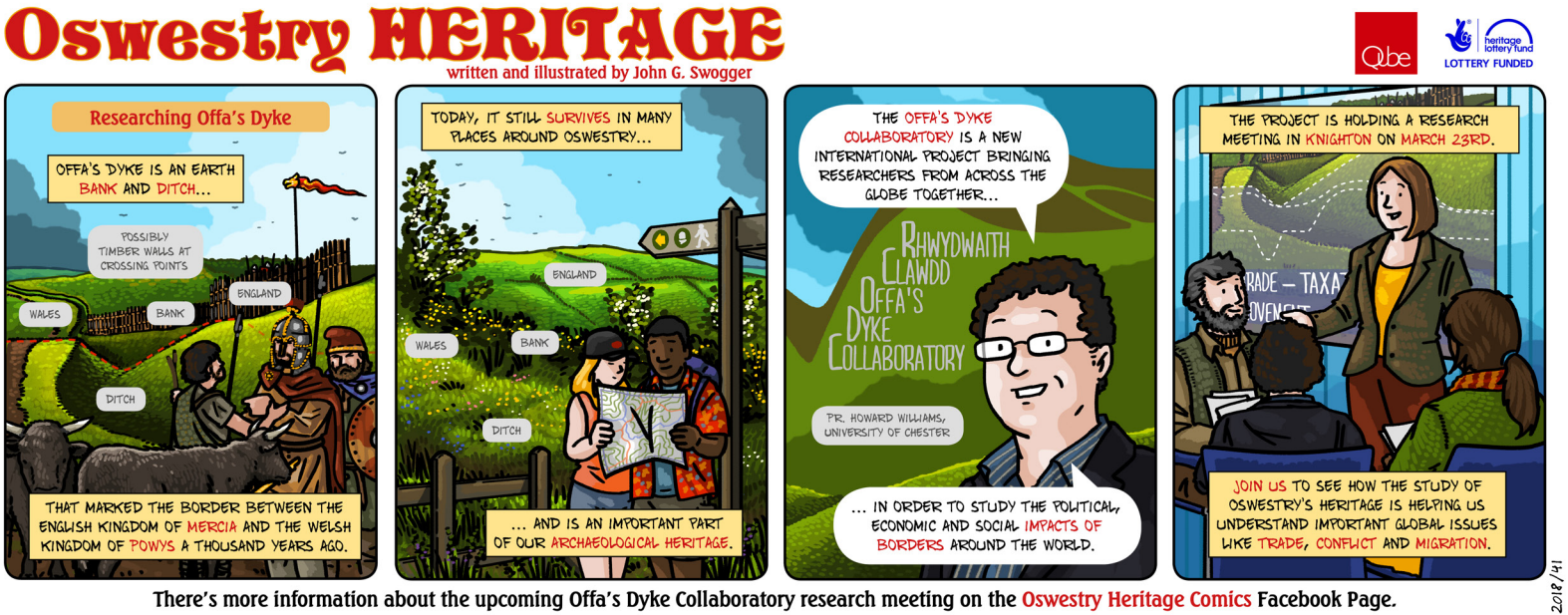

Figure 8: *Researching Offa's Dyke*. (Swogger 2019a: 42).

Alternative approaches to visualisation can be particularly important in presenting disputed and historically contingent interpretations in archaeology. For example, discussions of the past purpose of Offa's Dyke often consider its implications as a social frontier, as a materialisation of a borderlands between cultures, of a space between Mercia and Powys, between 'Englishness' and 'Welshness", and as a meeting point shaped by the rivalries of power and kinship (e.g. Ray and Bapty 2016: 103; Hill and Worthington 2003: 108; Zalukyj 2011: 187). Such interpretative discussions can lose their impact in text alone. After all, when we talk about marriage or hostage-taking, even wealth or trade, we are talking about events and situations that impact individual lives at the level of emotion: of love, jealousy, ambition, greed and pride. Dispassionate, objective and remote academic text is somewhat unsuited for this kind of discussion. Such interpretations might more successfully frame arguments about how intermarriage or mercantile rivalry might drive Mercian foreign policy, early medieval economics or Anglo-Welsh culture, and thus how they might be reflected in historical and archaeological data if they were rendered in such a way as to highlight their passionate, subjective and intimate nature.

In even a short comic focusing on these things, we can bring to such interpretations historical and cultural grounding, a narrative flow, and a sense of emotional depth, all things which are actually meaningful in the contexts of such discussion (Figure 9).

Such works need be no more than a single page; they need not end up veering away from data towards drama; and it is not necessary to go all *Game of Thrones* in order to make good use of comics in this context. What is needed, however, is recognition that academic text can render significant aspects of our interpretations invisible and thus un-examinable; comics, however, can contribute an important kind of visibility. Such works could act as windows into data and interpretative assumptions and as access points for interdisciplinary collaboration. This might more easily allow economic data, osteological data and survey data to be brought together with anthropology, ethnography and psychology, and make interdisciplinary links more visible by exploiting the way comics utilise narrative and represent temporality. As such, comics have a role to play in an 'intelligently imaginative' borderland between scholarly investigation and creative engagement (cf. Swogger 2019b), 'relaxing our conceptual hold' (Rowland 1976:48) on interpretative and disciplinary structures. Such interpretative presentations can be rendered as easily for academic publication as for popular dissemination, usefully stimulating parallel discussions with different audiences. Affording a different kind of visibility to such interdisciplinary discourse might enable it to reach different kinds of audiences in different ways; the making of comics as a research method in its own right is something which archaeology might benefit from exploring (cf. Sousanis 2015).

Conclusion

The *Oswestry Heritage Comics* provides a model for how it might be possible to increase the visibility of Offa's and Wat's Dyke by using comics. Such an approach could present

Figure 9: *Achtweligu*, 2018

the dykes within a broad and connected local heritage context, explore contemporary meaning, understand how monuments can hide in plain sight, link with a range of local stakeholders, and connect with research. Such an approach could also operate within a dynamic print and online distribution framework through local news and social media communities. The *Oswestry Heritage Comics* suggest how this reinvention of show and tell could introduce and de-complicate specialist information about Offa's and Wat's Dyke, connecting them with wider historical themes, and signposting ways for the public to become involved in their conservation and management.

Significantly, comics as objects: as comic books, graphic novels, even newspaper strips, are highly portable, meaning the information contained within them can be accessed and re-accessed, read and re-read by audiences without having to make repeat visits to specialist spaces. Unlike interpretation panels, displays or models, they are capable of — literally — staying with their audiences; as 'outreach' they genuinely 'reach out', extending the impact of their informational content beyond the forty-five minutes spent in a visitor centre, or the forty-five seconds spent in front of an on-site interpretation board. Whether aimed at school students or undergraduates, long-distance walkers or museum visitors, academics or council officers, this kind of outreach can be an effective way of taking detailed information on earthwork monuments beyond the museum and the visitor centre.

But the use of comics within archaeology represents a new field of practice and enquiry for the discipline. As an illustrator, I can only take the medium so far. To explore the true potential of comics, to understand its role within public outreach and research, and to evaluate its impact will require more specialist collaboration with and input from other archaeological and heritage professionals. The *Oswestry Heritage Comics* and the examples of comics about Offa's Dyke represent the 'tip of the iceberg': some first steps taken to both explore and shape this medium. Recent and ongoing comics projects continue to suggest new potential in terms of subject matter, approach and audience: *Journeys to Complete the Work* and *Trusting You See This As We Do (*Atalay *et al.* 2017; 2019) address the issue of NAGPRA repatriations and are written and produced in collaboration with Native nations and communities; *Unlocking the Past: Radiocarbon Dating* and *Unlocking the Past: Archaeometallurgy* seek to de-complicate lab-based archaeological science and invite school-age audiences to consider it as a career option (Hunt and Swogger 2016, Hunt *et al.* 2017); *Juigalpa Museum Comics: Exploring Our Indigenous Past* (Geurds and Swogger 2019) actively aligns archaeological investigation of prehispanic Nicaragua with celebration of indigenous culture. *Footprints of the Ancestors* (Napolitano and Swogger 2019) presents soil-science findings from a National Geographic-funded survey and excavation project in the Pacific for a local, community audience.

All these projects are using comics to undertake outreach outside traditional venues for archaeology, science and heritage presentation, bringing information about specific aspects of research into interdisciplinary and non-specialist spaces in order to widen

the reach and extend the impact of that information. This kind of outreach can have a transformative impact on not just community-based learning, but community-lead efforts to support archaeology, value science and protect heritage. With the right kind of outreach, 'being interested' can be transformed into a rallying cry for action. There can be a strong connection between information and activism in comics storytelling, giving the medium a unique polemical (and political) role in community-based archaeology and heritage and science communication (Atalay *et al.* in press).

There are, as yet, no long-form graphic works on linear earthworks; there are no studies showing the impact of a series of newspaper comics about Offa's and Wat's Dyke has on community engagement with the monument; no metrics – or, indeed, collections of anecdotes – to help us understand how comics change people's attitudes towards the preservation and study of these monuments. But the work done with comics so far in other contexts strongly suggests that there should be. Even though informational comics are a new medium for archaeological information, there are strong suggestions that they could have an important role to play in outreach. What is needed is for community archaeologists, heritage professionals, researchers and others to engage actively and critically with the medium, testing its potential and discovering both its virtues and its limits.

Comics are not intended to replace any of the existing ways in which we communicate archaeological knowledge, but they do seem to be an effective and meaningful way to talk about aspects of the past which are paradoxically both elusive and highly present. Comics could do more than simply raise awareness about Offa's and Wat's Dyke and other linear earthworks: they could make the complex nature and histories of the monuments themselves, as well as the work of the research communities engaged with them, much more visible.

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