

# Offa's Dyke Journal



Volume 2

Edited by Howard Williams and Liam Delaney

## 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 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 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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Volume 2 for 2020

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## Volume 2 for 2020

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# Grim's Ditch, Wansdyke, and the Ancient Highways of England: Linear Monuments and Political Control

Tim Malim

*Published first in 2007, Tim Malim's review of Grim's Ditch and Wansdyke provides a valuable synthesis and exploration of key issues of wider application regarding the relationship between linear earthworks, movement, territoriality and politics in the later prehistoric and early historic societies in Britain. The author provides a new introduction, while the article has been revised to the format of the Offa's Dyke Journal by the editors.*

*Keywords:* Grim's Ditch, Wansdyke, linear earthworks, routeways, Icknield Way, Ridgeway, movement, political control

## Introduction to the 2019 reprint

This article was first published by the Clifton Antiquarian Society in 2010 (Proceedings, Volume 9: *Early Medieval Enquiries*) in hard copy only. With the launch of the new e-publication, the *Offa's Dyke Journal* allows this study to reach a much wider audience and I am grateful to the original editors (Abby George, Donovan Hawley, George Nash, John Swann and Laurie Waite) and the Clifton Antiquarian Society for their help in facilitating this.

My analysis of Wansdyke and the many Grim's Ditch monuments, and their relationship to ancient routeways, complements previous studies I have made of the linear earthworks in the Welsh Marches and the Cambridgeshire Dykes. The comparison of these types of monument from different parts of the country has been instructive in establishing what characteristics they hold in common, and whether their superficial appearance of similarity can extend to a coherent interpretation of their conceptual design and function. Variation also occurs, not only between these linear earthworks, but also within the record for discrete investigations along different parts of what is ostensibly the same monument. One reason for some variation may well be due to the date of construction and duration of the earthworks' uses, over which time maintenance and remodelling might have been needed. Hence, an imperative for future investigations must be to ensure a suite of techniques are employed to establish the dates of phases within the deposit sequence of both the banks and ditches of linear earthworks.

Although several interesting radiocarbon dates were obtained by Jonathan Erskine during his investigations of West Wansdyke, neither part of Wansdyke has had sufficient samples taken for a series of scientific dating techniques to provide a valid independent substantiation of its construction date and period of use. However, an

important contribution on the probable date of (East) Wansdyke has been made from documentary, place-name and historical analysis (Reynolds and Langlands 2006: 36–37) which I should have included in my original article, and therefore wish to draw attention to it in this introduction instead. In addition, more detailed information (including pottery evidence) on the Berkshire Grim's Ditch can be found in an article detailing the survey and fieldwork undertaken in the 1980s (Ford 1982), and I am grateful to both Andrew Reynolds and Steve Ford for sending me offprints and discussing the subject with me. I should also mention here a useful discussion by Bruce Eagles and Michael Allen, in which they examine the excavated evidence for East Wansdyke and refer to previous research by Tony Clark which suggested that worm action buried artefacts at a rate of 4cm over 10 years, thereby providing a useful indication of the very minimal duration of time between earthwork and Romano-British pottery deposition (Eagles and Allen 2018: 95–6). Their analysis, however, diverges from Clark's conclusions, and suggests both prehistoric origins and later remodelling of the earthwork.

I hope the re-publication of my paper on Wansdyke, even without revision to include the above publications or any more recent relevant work, is accepted as a welcome step to make the article more easily accessible to support future research.

### Preamble to the original 2009 publication

In the last volume of this journal I presented a paper examining the origin and design of the linear earthworks of the Welsh Marches: in particular Offa's Dyke (in its various manifestations) and Wat's Dyke (Malim 2007). During that study, the name Wansdyke was often encountered, and, although not relevant to a study of the boundary dykes within the Welsh Marches, it became clear that the Wansdyke monuments were of great similarity in concept and design to those along the Marches. This volume provides an opportunity to compare and contrast Wansdyke with a range of other linear monuments as defensive structures, territorial boundaries, and barriers to control routeways. The previous paper started with the fact that it was over fifty years since Fox's seminal publication on the linear earthworks of the Welsh Marches (Fox 1955), and that it was time for a review of his survey and conclusions in the light of fresh investigation. This paper can start from a similar point, in that it is both fifty years since Aileen Fox's and Cyril Fox's survey and study of Wansdyke (Fox and Fox 1959) in which they reviewed previous fieldwork and presented fresh interpretation, and O.G.S. Crawford's (1953) publication *Archaeology in the Field* which included linear earthworks and an appendix devoted to Wansdyke. Since then there have been a number of substantial investigations of Wansdyke and other linear monuments such as Grim's Ditch, and thus time is due for a synthesis and reassessment.

### Introduction

The enigmatic monument known as the Wansdyke (West and East) has been subject to detailed study by eminent archaeologists such as Pitt Rivers, Crawford and the

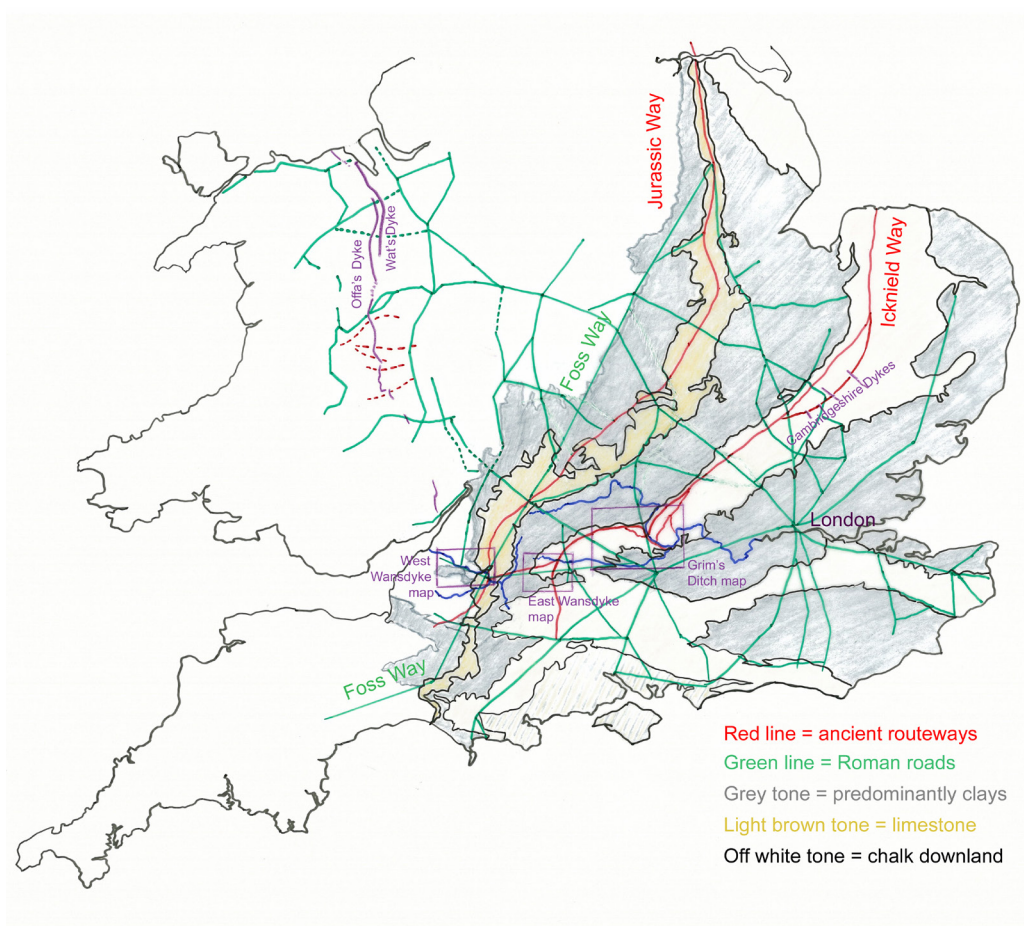


Figure 1: General location map showing predominant geological formations, ancient highways and locations of dykes and ditches as discussed in text (based on the Geological Survey of Britain 5<sup>th</sup> ed. 1969 25 miles: 1" scale; OS Roman Britain 5th ed. 2001; Grimes 1951)

Foxes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their surveys have helped establish a corpus of information supplemented by other investigations, which have formed a foundation for much constructive debate in recent years, so much so that there is now a web-site dedicated to Wansdyke and like-minded studies.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between the various parts of Wansdyke with estate boundaries and major routeways, their presence in charters and significance to battles, and the dating of them as short-lived strategic structures associated with specific historical events, has been the main focus for interpretation. Their similarity or difference with other linear monuments that are located either within the bounds or adjacent to the Wessex heartland, and also with those much further away, is a more ambitious and wide-ranging research project yet to be undertaken. This article is a preliminary step in assembling and analysing available

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wansdyke21.org.uk/wansdykehomepage.htm>

data to look at these monuments in order to assess whether they were a product of local circumstance, regional co-operation, or state-inspired endeavour.

Wansdyke as a name derives from its association with Woden (ON: Odin), the supreme god of the Anglo-Saxon and Norse mythology (Gover *et al.* 1939). Large earthworks often lose remembrance as to their origins, who built them and why, and so become known as the Devil's work, such as Devil's Dyke, or Grim's Ditch. East of the eastern part of Wansdyke lie other linear earthworks, in Berkshire, Oxfordshire, and Wiltshire, each known as Grim's Ditch, and common to both sets of monuments is the fact that they intersect some of the great thoroughfares of ancient times, the Icknield Way and Ridgeway routes following the limestone and chalk upland that runs in a south-west–north-east orientation through southern and central Britain.

### Geological and topographic background

A look at a geological map for the area west–east across England from the Avon Gorge at Bristol to the Wash shows a series of rock formations with a broad orientation south-west–north-east. Oolitic Limestone and Cornbrash laid down in the Jurassic runs in a band from Crewkerne and Yeovil in Somerset, via Bath and the Cotswolds, through north Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire, and Lincolnshire to the Humber (Figure 1). West of this lies the Lias clay formation, and east of the limestone lies the clay belt (Jurassic Oxford and Kimmeridge Clay) that replicates the alignment of the limestone plateau, stretching from east of Yeovil, through Chippenham and Oxford, to Milton Keynes, Huntingdon and the Fens. Further east, the land rises again following the Chalk and Greensand formations of Cretaceous age, which stretch from the coast in Dorset through Salisbury Plain and along the Chilterns, to south Cambridgeshire, Newmarket and the central uplands of Suffolk and Norfolk.

### Communications: the ancient routes to the south-west

These geological formations and topographic relief laid the foundations for the way in which people would tend to access and move through different regions. Use could be made of the dry upland routes to travel away from centres of settlement and rich agricultural lands which might have cause for impediment to movement, especially if droving stock. On the other hand, the lowland routes along river valleys and the clay lands between the Limestone and Chalk hills would have provided good summer paths with access to water, and often would have permitted fast travel via boat along a network of water-courses that were once navigable, certainly at the western and eastern sides of the country.

By the late Anglo-Saxon period, there were four principal roads in the united English kingdom granted special royal protection: the Fosse Way, Watling Street, Ermine Street and the Icknield Way (Beldam 1868: 23). Watling Street ran east–west from



London through Wall to Wroxeter and on to Wales, and Ermine Street was the Great North Road from London to Lincoln and on to York; but it is not these roads that concern this article. The Fosse Way and the Icknield Way, however, are pivotal to the focus of the present study.

The Jurassic Way was largely a ridgeway route that followed the Limestone belt from Lincoln to Bath and beyond 'the junction of the Lias and the Oolite' (Grimes 1951: 144). In essence, it runs along those parts of high land that formed watersheds for major river valleys, as between the Welland and the Nene, and the Avon and the Thames, passing Banbury and Rollright, through Stow on the Wold and Cirencester, Old Sodbury and Bath, on its way to Wells and Glastonbury. The Roman Fosse Way replicated much of the more ancient Jurassic Way with a more formal and direct road.

The Icknield Way was the major route that connected the Severn Estuary to East Anglia and the Wash, following the chalk escarpment. In the west this route is better known as The Ridgeway. Within the Icknield Way zone, there are several routes including turn-offs to service areas to the south as it proceeded on its main direction south-westwards; as described by Beldam it 'commenced on the Norfolk coast, ... passed through the country of the Iceni, ... to Royston, where it was crossed by the Erming Street... (then) Dunstable near to which it was crossed by the Watling Street; from thence it continued to follow the great chain of chalk hills which traverse the country in a south-westerly direction, throwing out parallel lines at different stages of its course; and, here and there, being checked or defended ... by dykes and fortified camps' (Beldam 1868: 24).

It was these ancient routes, the Icknield, Ridgeway and Foss, that served Anglo-Saxon and later Danish armies as they advanced westwards into the country. Crawford refers to documentary sources that record the Wiltshire Ridgeway also as the *herepath* (OE), a name also used in a charter dated AD 963 for a route through West Wansdyke (Crawford 1953: 253, 258). This name is Old English and implies a route along which armies could have moved.

## Location, characteristics and names of linear monuments

### *Grim's Ditch*

Grim's Ditch is the name given to a linear feature found in both South and North Oxfordshire (as well as elsewhere), but the two are separate monuments. The southern monument is a discontinuous bank and ditch that winds along the dip slope of the northern edge of the Chalk escarpment between Ardington Down, 4km south-east of Wantage, and Moulsoford (Figure 2). Grim's Ditch from Ardington to Aston Upthorpe Down has a ditch to the south and a bank on the north side, ranging in altitude from 200m–150m AOD. Although a discontinuous line is now visible, investigations and cropmark evidence have shown that a ditch can be found connecting sections of the

## Grim's Ditch



A. Ardington Down, B. Aston Upthorpe Down, C. Mongewell, D. Ashampstead, E. Aldworth, F. Streatley. ■ = Excavations.

Figure 2: Grim's Ditch in South Oxfordshire and West Berkshire: topographic and geographical location (based on Google Maps 2009 Tele atlas terrain)

surviving earthwork, strongly suggesting that the monument was envisaged and constructed as a continuous linear feature well below the crest of the hill (Oxfordshire HER) and following the grain of the landscape. Parish boundaries follow this monument and it is noteworthy that the current county boundary between Oxfordshire and Berkshire follows the twists and straight sections of Grim's Ditch within this section of the monument. Although a product of local government reform in 1974, it remains a statement to the significance of the monument, geographically, topographically and structurally, that it was chosen in modern times (because of its historical connection with parish boundaries) to form part of a new administrative boundary: i.e. Grim's Ditch has presence in the landscape even now (Figure 3). There is a gap in the line of the monument as the land drops eastwards to the Thames at Moulsoford, but two lengths of earthwork called Devil's Ditch along the Moulsoford Downs could form an extended part of the monument. Field observation of Grim's Ditch within this downland landscape shows that it runs roughly parallel to the north of the Ridgeway, and is positioned two-thirds of the way down-slope from it to the north (Figure 4). With a ditch to the south



Figure 3: Aston Upthorpe Grim's Ditch looking west



Figure 4: View from the Ridgeway at Aston Upthorpe Down looking north to Didcot and Thames valley. Grim's Ditch runs parallel downslope from this location



Figure 5: Mongewell Grim's Ditch looking north-east

and a bank thrown up on the downhill part, it seems that Grim's Ditch would have been tactically unsound as a defensive feature, and so its purpose must have been as a socio-political boundary.

Five kilometres further north lies Wallingford, a Saxon *burh* and important crossing point for the Thames. Across the river from here, at Mongewell Park, a long straight section runs 5.5km eastwards with evidence of continuation from earthworks at Hayden Farm and Highmoor Trench, ranging in altitude from c. 90m–125m AOD. The ditch lies to the north and a substantial bank has been formed of chalk to the south (Figure 5). From thirteenth-century documentary sources recording a Grim's Ditch running in from the west and along New Street to join the Thames again at Henley, the total length of this monument would have effectively defined an undulating territory of chalkland to the south contained within a loop of the Thames. Both the Icknield Way and Chiltern Ridgeway run north-east–south-west through the straight stretch of this monument, so that the Icknield Way crossed the Thames to the south of South Stoke and Moulsoford, at Goring and Streatley, and the Ridgeway crossed at Whitchurch–Pangbourne (Crawford 1931: map, 1953: 185) (Figure 6). The Berkshire Ridgeway then runs parallel to the south of Grim's Ditch at Upthorpe Down and Ardington, as it progresses westwards through the Chilton Downs with wide-ranging views over the Thames Valley to the north.



Figure 6: Grim’s Ditch in Berkshire and the Chilterns (from Crawford 1931) (see also Bell’s Figure 1, this volume)

Other earthworks also called Grim’s Ditch are found on the west side of the Thames, north-west of Reading, but these appear discrete linear monuments with local functions such as to command and control access south-eastwards along the Roman road from Dorchester on Thames to Reading (Crawford 1931). Examination of 1:50,000 OS mapping for the area and reference to the Historic Environment Record for West Berkshire show these as comprising one section that heads west for 1km from the Thames south of Streatley, with the eastern end forming the parish boundary between Streatley and Basildon; there is then a gap of 2km before a second stretch is visible for 2km to the south of Aldworth. A third section of these Grim’s Ditches can be seen 1.5km south, to the east of Ashampstead, and was probably located to control one of the Ridgeway routes (Crawford 1931) that is now followed by the road from Aldworth to Upper Basildon. These monuments appear to cross the grain of the landscape rather than follow conspicuous topographical features, with the western parts at c. 130–140m AOD, and Streatley dropping from 80m–50m AOD. They have been surveyed in 2003–2004 as part of a monument management programme by West Berkshire Heritage Service

and these surveys have added considerable detail to description of the existing visible monuments; multiple banks and ditches have been plotted in Foxborough Wood, Aldford, which explains why the bank and ditch have been observed facing in different directions by different people (Greenaway and Woodage 2003, 2004).

When examined on the ground by the author, the southern part, at Ashampstead, had a slight bank with a ditch to north that was exaggerated by a drop in ground level as it sloped to the north. This was to the west of the present road, and on the east side no trace of an earthwork could be found, but instead a wet area was seen in scrub. The Aldworth section on both sides of the road at De la Beche Farm showed a chalk-built bank on the north side of a substantial ditch (Figure 7) (apparently contrary to Crawford's description (1931: 162), but note also Greenaway's and Woodage's survey of multiple banks and ditches for this section which might account for confusion) and a wet area lay to the west of the road. Within the woodland further east, where Grim's Ditch is found on either side of the Aldworth–Basildon road, the ditch appears to swap sides; to the west the ditch is to the south with low bank to north (in continuation of the section from De la Beche Farm), but on the east side of the road a substantial bank exists with a deep and wide ditch to the north (Figure 8). In this area woodland banks can also be seen as lesser features running beside the road, but there is also another substantial bank and ditch of similar proportions to Grim's Ditch, that runs south, with the ditch to the east; this diverges from the woodland bank about 100m south of its juncture with Grim's Ditch (Figure 9). Chalk and flint nodules were visible as part of the composition of this southern extension to Grim's Ditch. Crawford also noted this southern arm to Grim's Ditch (in Foxborough Copse) and he described the Aldworth–Basildon road as the 'Ridgeway coming from Hungerford Green' (Crawford 1931: 162).

The Streatley section was observed by the author at both its western and eastern ends, at Stichens Green (west) and beside the road from Goring to Pangbourne (A329) (east), where it rises steeply westwards with a ditch to the north. At the west end a massive ditch was found on the north side with a large bank of flint and chalk to the south, hidden amidst many yews and other trees, whereas at the east end a smaller bank and ditch was observed on a very steep descent towards the Thames (Figures 10 and 11); this is argued to have been erected to control access south along the Dorchester–Silchester Roman road (Crawford 1953: 185). From my observations, however, it was evident that the west end was constructed half-way down a steep slope southwards, and thereby would seemingly have had no defensive advantage, as the ditch cut into higher land to the north.

The North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch is not connected with the other parts, except by name (Crawford 1930). It is the name given to a series of ditch and bank features near to Charlbury, extending into Ditchley and Blenheim Parks north of Woodstock (Figure 12a). It would appear from examination of OS mapping that these features seem, in part, to be located in order to control passage along Roman Akeman Street on its way west to Cirencester, and partly they seem to be defining the boundary of a territory, perhaps



Figure 7: Aldworth Grim's Ditch: chalk bank and ditch looking west (east side of road at De la Beche Farm)



Figure 8: Aldworth Grim's Ditch: bank and ditch looking west (east side of road at Foxborough Copse)



Figure 9: Aldworth Grim's Ditch: southern extension bank and ditch looking south

Figure 10: Streatley Grim's Ditch: chalk and flint bank and ditch in yew trees looking east (at Ash Hill)



Figure 11: Streatley Grim's Ditch: western terminal at dry valley and junction of roads (at Ash Hill)



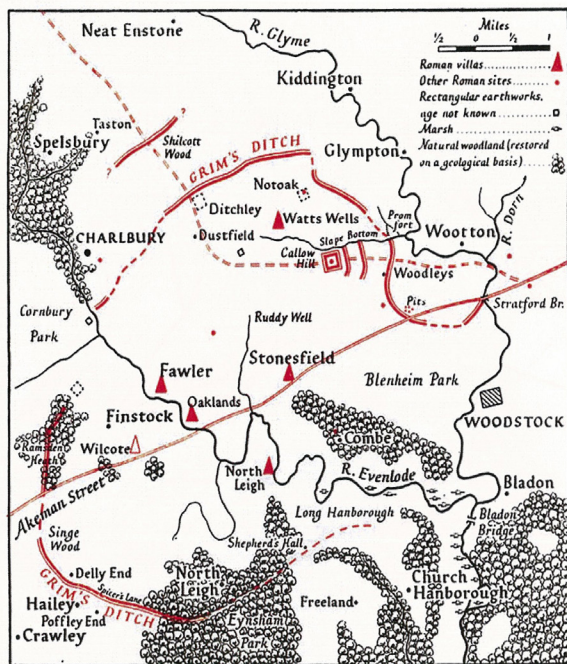


FIG. 1. THE WYCHWOOD DISTRICT, SHOWING COURSE OF GRIM'S DITCH

an estate (Figure 12b). This monument is not discussed further in this article, but a recent study of it can be found in Massey (1999).

### Wansdyke

Wansdyke is divided into two parts, known as East and West Wansdyke. East Wansdyke extends for 11 miles (c. 18km) from Morgan's Hill at 260m AOD (4km south-east of Calne) to Savernake Forest at 190m AOD (south of Marlborough) (Figure 13), following the north-facing crest of the Chalk escarpment and the Avon–Stour and the Thames–Kennet valley watersheds (Fox and Fox 1959: 1). Crawford's description provides an atmospheric summary 'This is by far the finest section of the whole earthwork. It runs along the back of the downs behind the Vale of Pewsey escarpment in almost undiminished magnificence ... there could be no better beginning for a field archaeologist than to walk along Wansdyke from Morgan's Hill to near Marlborough .... no finer downland in the whole of England, though no doubt it is

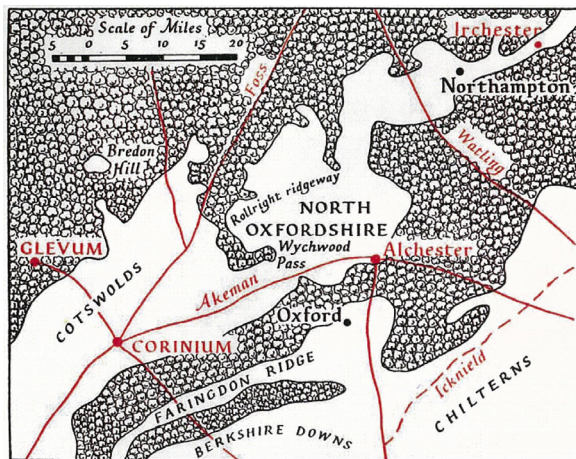
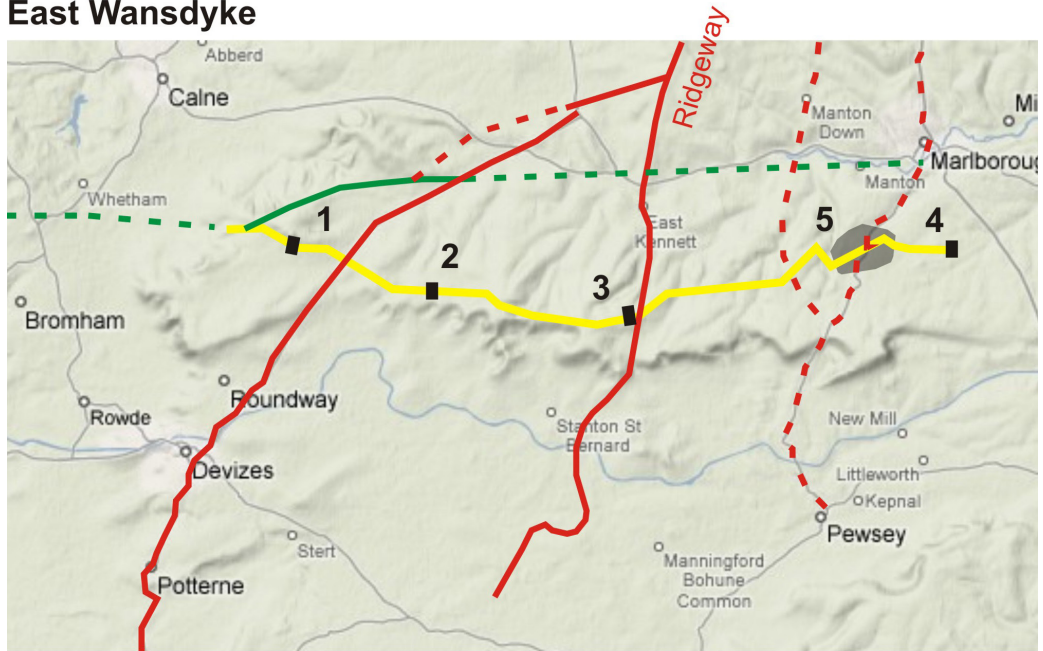


Figure 12: North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch a) detailed location b) Roman roads and woodland (from Crawford 1930)

doomed, like the rest, to be turned into arable' (Crawford 1953: 254). This was an area he knew well, having explored it as an errant schoolboy to escape from more mundane activities at Marlborough College! This section of Wansdyke consists of an impressive bank and ditch rampart with the ditch on the northern side (Figures 14 and 15). It is

## East Wansdyke



Excavations by:

1. Pitt Rivers 1889, 2. Pitt Rivers 1890, 3+4. Green 1970, 5. Fowler 1999

Figure 13: East Wansdyke: topographic and geographical location (based on Google Maps 2009 Tele atlas terrain)



Figure 14: East Wansdyke on Morgan's Hill with view west to the lowlands



Figure 15: East Wansdyke at Shepherds Shore crossing the Devizes–Avebury road looking east

crossed by several arms of the Ridgeway, including a main southern route along Hackpen Hill through Overton and East Kennet to Alton Barnes and Woodborough; at its western end it meets the western end of the route that heads westwards from Hackpen Hill via Avebury, continuing as the Roman road known as *Verlucio* (Sandy Lane) to Bath (now a holloway Figure 16), which had its origins at *Cunetio* (Mildenhall, Marlborough). A visit to the sections of Wansdyke at Morgan's Hill and the Devizes road brought home to the author the massive nature of the construction employed and the careful siting of the earthwork to utilise the topography of the ground to exaggerate the scale of the dyke; commanding views to north and south, west and east, are provided by Wansdyke's location on Morgan's Hill. A number of sections have been excavated through it over the past century or so.

West Wansdyke runs for 10.5 miles (c. 20km) from Maes Knoll hillfort overlooking and running parallel to the Avon valley at Bristol on its route to Horsecombe at Odd Down, South Stoke, where it connects to a southward turn in the River Avon (Figure 17). It consists of a bank and ditch, with the ditch on the north side; its route runs through two hillforts (Maes Knoll, Stantonbury). The geological formation is varied, and the Dyke rises and falls between 30–300m AOD as it traverses Oolitic hills and small river valleys for tributaries draining north to the Avon. Although occasional stretches run along

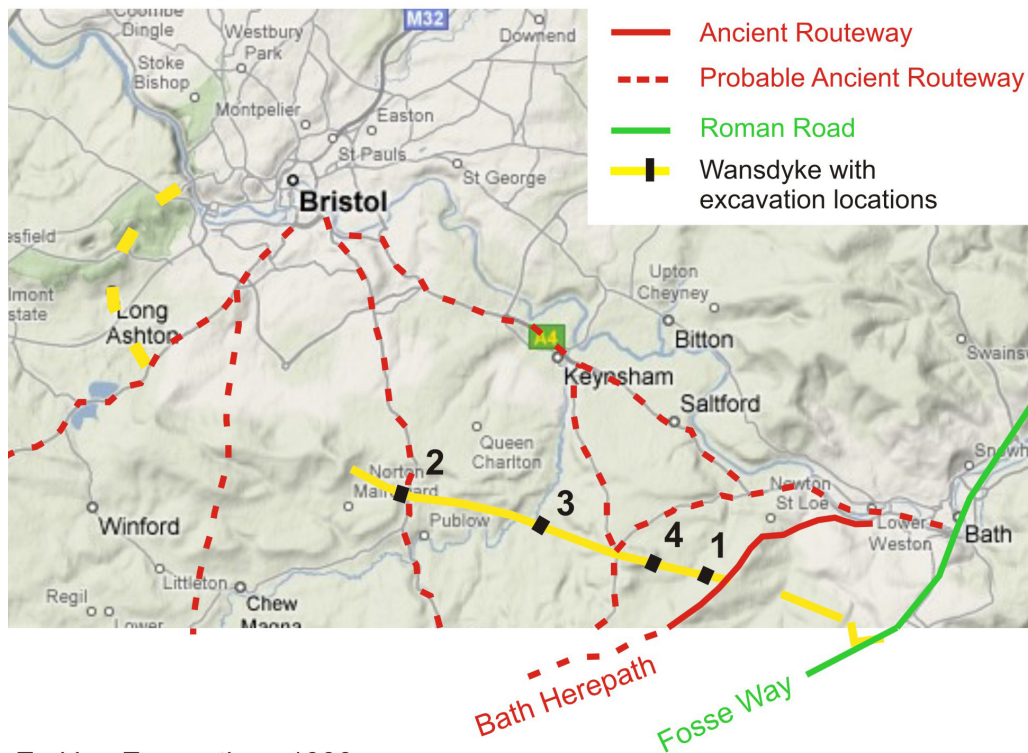


Figure 16: Roman road to Verlucio as Holloway at western end of East Wansdyke, looking west

existing roads, most lines of communication appear to be cut by the monument, including the Bath *herepath* (Crawford 1953: 253) and the Fosse Way at its eastern end. In essence it runs against the grain of the landscape, and a field visit by the author emphasised how the monument did not have long views or commanding locations, although where the earthwork survived the dyke was of substantial proportions (Figures 18 and 19).

It has also been suggested that the monument continued to the west, from the heights of Dundry down a steep descent at Highridge Common to Yanley Lane, and from there via Aston Court to Stokeleigh Camp/Burwalls on the southern edge of the Avon Gorge (Gardiner 1998 (this line has been dashed on Figure 17)). Antiquarian fieldwork had reported lengths of linear embankment, local place-name evidence which connected Yanley Lane with Wansditch, and documentary evidence from the Ashton Court estate that contained fourteenth-century land deeds referring to 'Wondesdich Lane'. Gardiner's argument was that it would have made poor military sense to leave Ashton Vale unprotected, allowing easy access to high-status sites further south, and that the whole of West Wansdyke might have been the product of a polity based at Cadbury (Congresbury) – 'Cad Cong' – a northern bastion of the Dumnonii.

## West Wansdyke



Erskine Excavations 1990s

1. Park Farm
2. Blackrock Lane
3. Compton Green
4. Binces Lane

Figure 17: West Wansdyke: topographic and geographical location (based on Google Maps 2009 Tele atlas terrain)

### Physical description from survey and excavation

Several excavations have been conducted through Grim's Ditch and East Wansdyke in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as part of both research excavations and works associated with pipeline construction. West Wansdyke was the subject of an integrated research programme using documentary study, field survey, geophysical survey and excavation by the Avon Archaeological Unit during the 1990s. Comparative data from excavation though all these monuments is presented in Tables 1–3.

#### *Grim's Ditch*

Along the Chiltern section of Grim's Ditch several excavations have taken place in recent times, some as part of research investigations, but many because of pipelines.

Table 1: Grim's Ditch excavations

| Location                              | Bank Details |       |         |           | Ditch Details |                 |       |         | Other Details                         |               |   |   |   |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|-------|---------|-----------|---------------|-----------------|-------|---------|---------------------------------------|---------------|---|---|---|
|                                       | Material     | Width | Height  | Revetment | Berm          | Shape           | Width | Depth   | Fill phases                           | Counter scarp | Dating  | Excavator   | Notes   |
| Mongewell                             |              | 9.1   | 2       | No        | No            |                 | 7.3   |         |                                       |               |   | 1959 Oxoniensisia 24  |   |
| Mongewell SU67879                     |              | 5     | 0.7     | No        | No            |                 |       | 2.1     |                                       |               | 1A pot  | Hinchliffe 1965   | 3 inhumations in bank; 1 burial S of ditch                                |
| Site C40                              | Chalk Rubble | 10    | 1.75    | No        |               | V               | 3     | >1.5    | Powered chalk                         |               |   | Southern Feeder gas PL 1984 p. 44                                     | V-shaped ditch 6m to S 2.1 x 1m   |
| Ginge Down E                          |              |       | 1.5-1.8 |           |               | On south side   |       | 1.2     |                                       |               | BA pot  | 1984 Oxoniensisia 48  | Posthole beneath bank   |
| Tile Barn, Ginge Down                 |              |       | 1       |           |               |                 | 9     |         |                                       |               | 1A, RB & Saxon pot                            |   |   |
| Chilton Plantation W                  |              |       |         |           |               |                 | 4.5-6 |         |                                       |               | BA pot adjacent                               | Ford 1982   | Bank - hedgerline; Ridgeway in proximity                                  |
| Betterton Down                        |              |       | 12      |           |               | On south side   | 10    | 0.9-1.2 |                                       |               | RB pot adjacent                               | Ford 1982   |   |
| Aston Upthorpe Down Site C33          |              |       |         |           |               | U on south side | 3.2   | 1.16    | 2 phases chalk rubble, clay w/ flints |               | BA pot; RB pot                                | Ford 1982; southern Feeder gas PL 1984 p.50, Network Archaeology 2006 | Recut ditch   |
| Churn Gallops Deans Bottom 3 trenches |              |       |         |           |               |                 |       |         |                                       |               | EBA 8 <sup>th</sup> -5 <sup>th</sup> C BC pot | Ford 1982   | Ditch aligned on Long Barrow; Celtic field system incorporates Grim Ditch |

Table 2: East Wansdyke excavations

| Location                         | Bank Details      |       |        |           | Ditch Details |             |       |       | Other Details |               | Notes   |  |   |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|-------|--------|-----------|---------------|-------------|-------|-------|---------------|---------------|---|--|---|
|                                  | Material          | Width | Height | Revetment | Berm          | Shape       | Width | Depth | Fill phases   | Counter scarp |   | Dating                                 | Excavator   |
| Red Shore<br>SU117648            | Clay w/<br>flints | 9.5   | 2      | No        | slight        | V           | 10    | 3.9   | 3 phases      | Yes           | Cuts Celtic fields and estate boundaries; 1 <sup>st</sup> C AD pot  | H. S. Green 1966-70 (Green 1971)       | Intersection with Ridgeway; buried soil, pollen pastureland |
| New Buildings<br>SU193665        | clay              |       |        |           |               |             |       |       |               |               | Follows prior estate boundaries; Samian 1 <sup>st</sup> C AD; Savername ware late 1stC AD; RB pot; iron penannular brooch | H. S. Green 1966-70 (Green 1971)       | Buried soil; pollen, woodland in vicinity                   |
| Shepherd's<br>Shore<br>Section 1 |                   | 10    | 2.28   | No        | No            | U           | 10    | 3.9   | 3 phases      | Yes           | 600 Roman coins, RB pot, knife, nails   | Pitt Rivers 1888 (Pitt Rivers 1892)    | Old Ground Surface  |
| Brown's Barn<br>Section 2        |                   | 9     | 2.13   | No        | No            | U with slot | 10    | 3.9   | 3 phases      | Yes           | Prehistoric & RB pot, sandle clear, nails   | Pitt Rivers 1890-91 (Pitt Rivers 1892) | Old Ground Surface; earlier enclosure respected by Wansdyke |

Table 3: West Wansdyke excavations

| Location                                 | Bank Details   |         |          |           | Ditch Details |                       |       |       | Other Details   |               |  |                                 |   |
|--|--|---------|----------|-----------|---------------|-----------------------|-------|-------|---|---------------|--|---------------------------------|---|
|  | Material   | Width   | Height   | Revetment | Berm          | Shape                 | Width | Depth | Fill phases   | Counter Scarp | Dating   | Excavator                       | Notes   |
| Binces Lane East, Stanton Prior ST686637 | Limestone and stony soils                                      | 12.5    | Ploughed | No        | No            | U                     | 3.5   | 1.7   | 3 phases, primary silt, rubble, mixed deposit with revetment stones | Yes           | Prehistoric & RB pot   | J. Erskine 1990s (Erskine 2007) | Terminal, entrance through dyke   |
| Binces Lane West                         | Stony material   | c. 5m   | Ploughed | No        | No            | U with trench at base | 6     | 2.4   | Primary rubble from revetment stones                                |               | Cl4 of BA bone tool; worked flint, RB pot  | J. Erskine 1990s (Erskine 2007) | Palisade trench to rear of bank   |
| Compton Green, Compton Dando, ST632646   | Clay marl & imported yellow clay                               | 13      | 0.8      | Yes       |               | V                     | 5.8   | 2.8   | 3 phases  | Yes           | Prehistoric pot and flint flakes   | J. Erskine 1990s (Erskine 2007) | 2 phases of bank construction   |
| Blackrock Lane, Publow ST620653          | Complex sequence of clays and sandstone 3 layers of silty-clay | 12.5    | 1.7      | Yes       | Yes           | V with trench at base | 4.8   | 2.7   | Broad sequence of natural fills                                     |               | Cl4 of oak charcoal in buried soil early 1 <sup>st</sup> millennium BC; flint tools & flakes | J. Erskine 1990s (Erskine 2007) | 3 phases of construction, 2 stabilization layers; cultivated land, later scrub regeneration |
| Park Farm, Newton St. Loc ST698633       | Small stones   | 10      | 0.4      | No        | Yes           | V                     | 5.5   | 2.4   | 3 phases  | Yes           | None   | J. Erskine 1990s (Erskine 2007) |   |
| Fairy Hill, Compton Dando                | Multi-phase  | 12.5-14 |          |           | Yes           |                       | 6.5   |       | Stones  |               | RB pot   | J. Erskine 1990s (Erskine 2007) |   |





Figure 18: West Wansdyke bank at Blackrock looking east



Figure 19: West Wansdyke and Fosse Way intersection looking north

At Ginge Down, Ardington, the bank stands up to 1.8m in height and the ditch is 6 m wide; it was excavated in 1982 and had a post-hole beneath the bank (Oxfordshire HER12093). At Churn Gallops on Aston Upthorpe Down, excavation of an area without standing remains as part of the Southern Feeder Pipeline revealed a U-shaped ditch with steep sides that had been recut. It was 3.2m wide by 1.16m deep. It contained two deposits which showed distinctly different in-fill episodes: a clay and chalk rubble primary phase, and secondary one consisting of ‘dark clayish loam with flints’ (Oxfordshire HER9113). At Chilton, a section of the monument was excavated and recorded a ditch 4.5–6m in width (Oxfordshire HER7741), whereas at Betterton Down, Lockinge, two sections were excavated revealing a ditch 3m wide by 0.9–1.2m deep, and a bank 1.2m high (Oxfordshire HER7739, 12091).

At Mongewell Park, various investigations have been recorded, in 1907 as well as in the 1970s for road widening and pipelines. The bank was recorded as having been 9.1m wide and the ditch 7.3m wide; a length of bank surviving to 2m in height was also found (Oxfordshire HER8900). Hinchliffe suggests a berm with a possible timber revetment fronting the bank, and describes the ditch as U-shaped, 2.5–3m deep and 4m wide (Figure 20) with sides at a 50% angle (Hinchliffe 1975); his bank, however, only survived to 0.7m in height and 5m width.

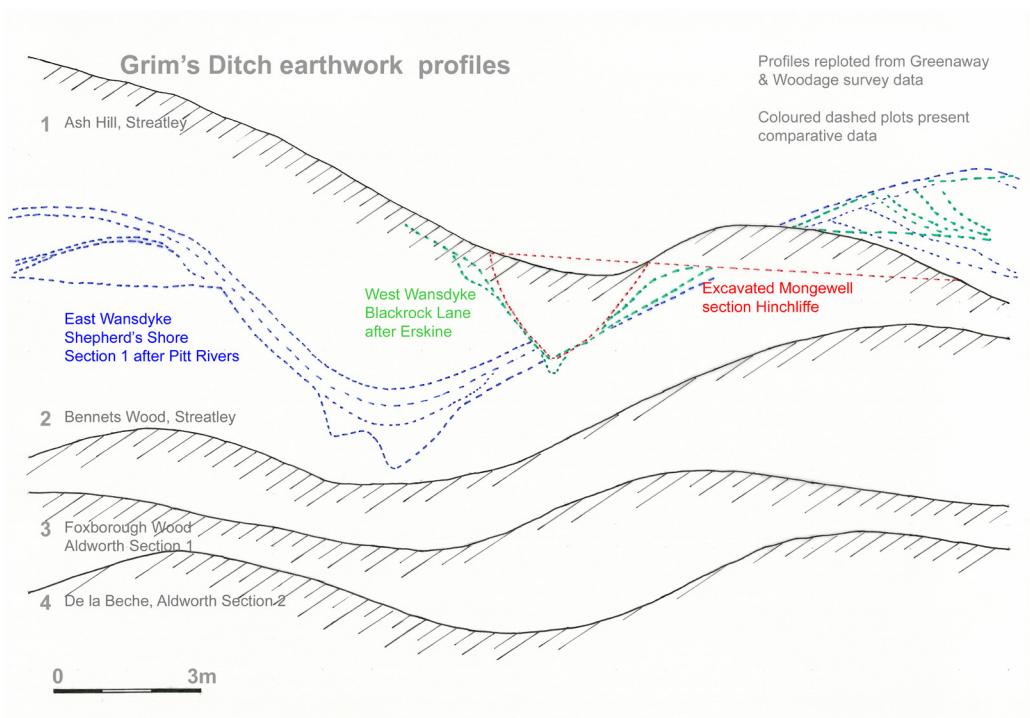


Figure 20: Grim’s Ditch and comparative profiles from Wansdyke (after Greenaway and Woodage 2003–2004)

At Mongewell Woods a V-shaped ditch was found on the south side, as well as the ditch to the north of the bank, when cut for a gas pipe in the 1980s. The bank had a core of chalk rubble and its dimensions overall was 10m wide and 1.75m high, with a V-shaped ditch to the north 3m wide and over 1.5m deep, another V-shaped ditch to the south of lesser proportions (2.1m wide x 1m deep) (Oxfordshire HER8900).

At Aldworth, the Grim's Ditch was excavated in c. 1980 as part of investigations of the linear earthworks on the Berkshire Downs by Steve Ford, and a first-century AD date was given to the smaller of two parallel ditches, the second ditch being slightly later based on Roman pottery. The main ditch to the south is described as V-shaped, ranging in size from 0.6–1.2m deep and 8m wide, with a bank 0.7–1.7m high and 3–8m in width. In addition to the dating evidence an unmortared wall of flint nodules was recorded by the Berkshire Field Research Group (RCHME excavations index; West Berkshire HER1482). Monument survey in 2003 showed a multiple ditch and bank system, with ditches to north and south and banks internal, with a c. 15m-wide plateau between the banks (Greenaway and Woodage 2003). This survey also provided profiles for various sections of the Aldworth and Streatley earthworks (Figure 20).

### *East Wansdyke*

East Wansdyke was excavated by Pitt Rivers in 1896, and more recently by H. Stephen Green over several seasons between 1966–1970. Peter Fowler also investigated the dyke through field survey at Boreham and West Woods, Overton, in 1997.

Pitt Rivers excavated at two locations, at Old Shepherds Shore (near to Morgan's Hill and the juncture of the dyke with Roman roads), whilst the main excavation 2 miles to the east included a trench through the monument at what he called Brown's Barn (Pitt Rivers 1892). At both locations, the bank was 10m wide and c. 2.2m high and the ditch was U-shaped (with a possible ankle-breaker in the base), 10m wide and 3.9m deep (Figure 21) with a counter-scarp bank to the north. At these two locations he found Romano-British artefactual evidence to provide a *terminus post quem* for construction. He also established that an earthwork enclosure on the north side of Wansdyke at Brown's Barn pre-dated the monument. Crawford comments that several cross-ridge dykes are also cut by Wansdyke; assuming the cross-ridge dykes are prehistoric, then stratigraphically Wansdyke would be Roman or post-Roman in date (Crawford 1953: 254).

Green excavated at Red Shore, where he confirmed that the Ridgeway runs through the dyke on a causeway that had been left intact (Green 1971). At Red Shore, his results revealed a bank 9.5m wide and surviving to 2m in height, with a V-shaped ditch to the north that was 10m wide and 3.9m deep (Figure 21), and a counter-scarp bank beyond. Green's interpretation was that the bank was constructed with a core of clay with flints, and tips of chalk and flint above, on top of which a layer of turves were placed to provide stabilisation. This suggested a sequence of ditch excavation whereby some material was

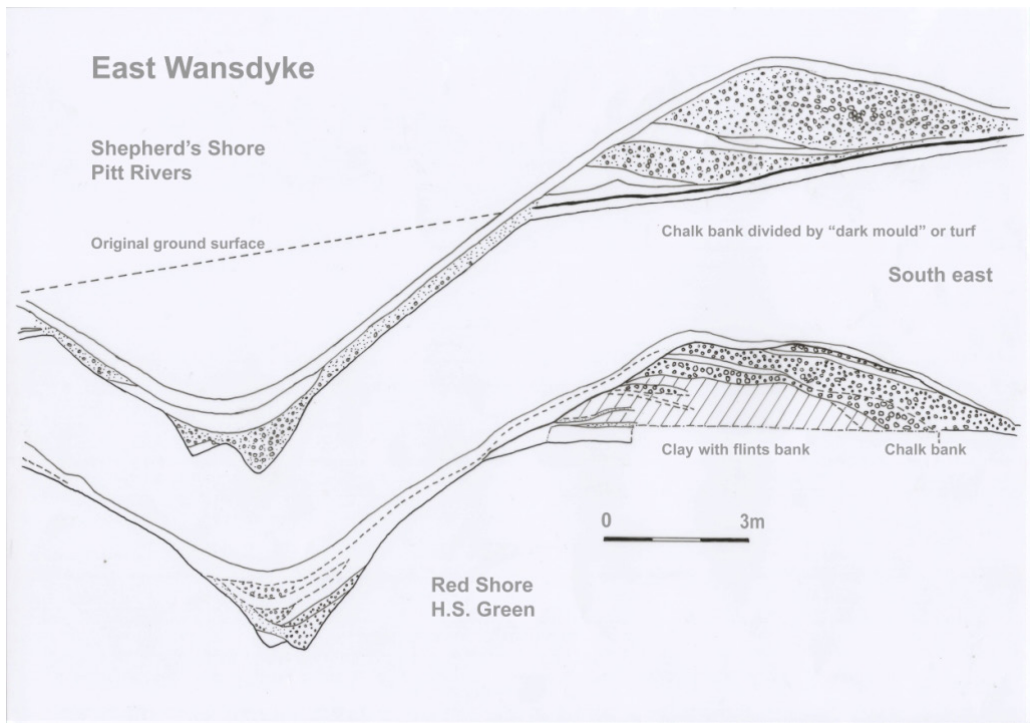


Figure 21: East Wansdyke section drawings (after Pitt Rivers 1892 and Green 1971)

used from directly in front of the bank, whilst other material was used from the ditch further east, to build the bank to the required height, before the turf taken from the original surface of the ditch was laid on top of the bank and sides. He also identified three phases to ditch infill, a primary infill due to weathering, a secondary one with flint nodules topped by soil accumulation and rain-washed material, and a tertiary one also of flint nodules topped by rain-washed silts and soil accumulation. These latter two phases he interpreted as evidence for the short-lived nature of Wansdyke and attributed the deposits to flints encountered during ploughing which were thrown into the ditch. Green also confirmed that the Ridgeway ran along a causeway angled through the dyke, demonstrating that this access point or gateway had been part of the original design.

He also investigated a small part of the monument at New Buildings, west of its terminus on the edge of Savernake Forest. This small investigation at New Buildings only excavated part of the bank, which he found here to consist of clay dumped over a core of re-deposited topsoil. The finds here and at Red Shore were of Romano-British origin, providing a *terminus post quem* for construction.

Fowler's survey was conducted between the two locations excavated by Green and covered a 4.74km woodland section of Wansdyke from Woden's Dene to Clatford Bottom (Fowler 2001). He identifies 10 original openings through Wansdyke and

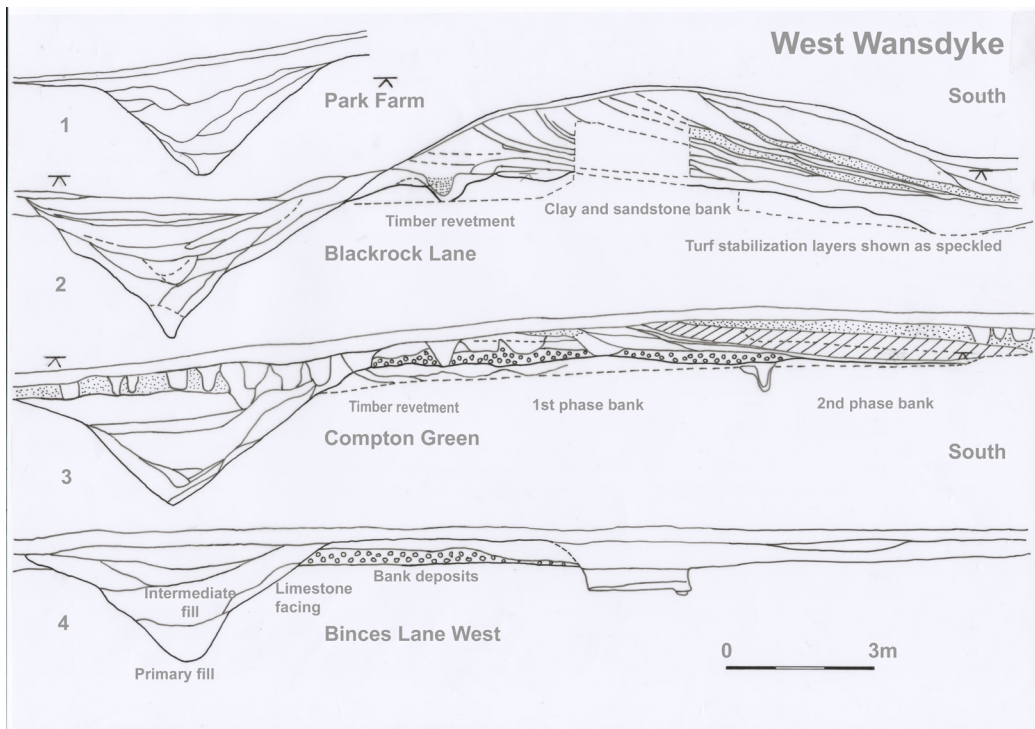


Figure 22: West Wansdyke section drawings (after Erskine 2007)

relates most of these to ancient through routes connecting the Ridgeway with the Vale of Pewsey. The 'gateways' are equidistant at 0.5 Roman miles apart, and the earthwork was constructed by excavation of quarry pits along a marker line, with spoil thrown southwards to form a bank formed of a series of dumps. The final joining up of the pits and then deepening to form a steeply inclined ditch which ran up to the top of the bank, completed the structure. Fowler's interpretation was that this followed a Roman military design akin to Hadrian's Wall, and that the positioning of the dyke made use of local topography and fields of view to provide strategic sense. Fowler also believed that the earthwork was unfinished and presumed this was due to the threat having receded, and therefore a diminished need to continue with the Wansdyke project.

### *West Wansdyke*

Little excavation had taken place at West Wansdyke until the 1990s when a campaign of investigations using field survey, geophysical survey, and excavation was implemented by the Avon Archaeological Unit funded by English Heritage. From 11 excavations, five produced results worthy of publication (Erskine 2007).

Erskine's conclusions were that the ditch and bank were consistent in dimension and technique of construction throughout the length of West Wansdyke, consisting

of a ditch to the north between 5–5.4m wide and c. 2.2m deep (Figure 22). It was of V-shaped design with a trench at the base. A counterscarp bank was discernible at some locations to the north, and to the south a small berm was present in which a palisade trench was constructed at two locations. A revetment of timber is interpreted from this evidence, whereas for other parts of the bank a revetment or facing of stone was used, interpretation based on the evidence of limestone slabs that have fallen as cohesive sections into the ditch. The bank was built of ditch material, limestone and soil dumps some 2–3m in height and up to 10m wide at the base. The sides were angled at 20°, and the technique of construction involved a timber frame or structure to retain the bank material, into which the stone rubble and soil from the ditch was dumped; working was probably from west–east (e.g. at Blackrock: Erskine 2007: 97). The bank consisted of several phases and some sections were complex, whereas the ditch infill sequence was simpler, although also consisting of three phases.

### Dating and previous interpretation

#### *Grim's Ditch*

Artefactual or scientific dating has not provided a secure date for any of the various sections known as Grim's Ditch. Historical association can be seen from the proximity of the monument to various 9<sup>th</sup>-century battles, particularly the battle of Ashdown on the 8 January 871, and the location for this battle and that of Reading, would have related to the strategic importance of the Ridgeway and Icknield Way routes. The proximity of the Blowingstone on Blewbury Down, Aston Upthorpe, and its traditional role in summoning warriors was reputedly used by Alfred before the battle of Ashdown (Sullivan 2019: 29).

The Aston Upthorpe Down section has had more than one investigation, but with conflicting results. At Churn, the evidence was strongly in favour of a Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age date from worked flint and pottery, whilst excavations as part of the Chalgrove–Ilsley pipeline recovered four sherds of Roman greyware from the ditch, and a later recut. Roman pottery was also found during excavations through the ditch at Betterton Down. The Bronze Age date was also attributed to a section excavated at Ginge Down in 1982, but another section at Tile Barn had fragments of Iron Age, Roman and possibly Saxon pottery (Oxfordshire HER).

The Mongewell section was investigated in connection with the Wallingford bypass in 1987–1988. *Aterminus post quem* was given by an Iron Age or Roman field boundary beneath the bank and a *terminus ante quem* was provided by twelfth or thirteenth century pottery found in the ditch fills. This is supported by the documentary record for Henley on Thames which names Grim's Ditch from the thirteenth century (Oxfordshire HER8920, 7720).

The Aldworth–Streatley sections have been dated from pottery found in excavations in early 1980s which gave a late first-century AD *terminus ante quem* to one ditch, and a

slightly later Roman date to a second ditch. The pottery came from the final infill of the ditches, and the dating therefore suggests their construction is of Iron Age, or earlier, origin (West Berkshire HER1468, 1484).

George Lambrick, writing in 1998, suggests that the Grim's Ditches may well be a product of the political situation in the later Iron Age when the area between the Cherwell and the Thames at Wallingford formed the centre to a number of tribal groups. To the east lay the Catuvellauni, to the south were the Atrebates, and on the west the land was Dobunni territory. He describes the North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch at Woodstock/Charlbury as defining a territory within this zone, and other enclosed areas were at Abingdon, Big Ring (Cassington/Eynsham), Dyke Hills (Dorchester on Thames), and the territory between the Mongewell–Henley Grim's Ditch within the loop of the Thames south of it. Lambrick notes that Roman rule ended the overt enmity between these tribes, but that in the post-Roman period and Anglo-Saxon times this zone again became a frontier, with early settlement by the *Gewisse* in the fifth and sixth centuries, and Mercian forays by Penda in the seventh century, before the rise of Wessex in the eighth and ninth centuries AD.

### *East Wansdyke*

Roman pottery was found in the bank make-up by Pitt Rivers' excavation at Brown's Barn, Bishop's Cannings, as well as 600 coins (some of fourth-century emperors), a knife and nails (Pitt Rivers 1892). From this he concluded that the construction was post-Roman or late Roman, and that its form was inspired by Roman military design.

Stephen Green also found Roman pottery at both parts of the Wansdyke that he investigated, in addition to an iron penannular brooch (Green 1971). He noted that the western part of West Wansdyke, located in moorland along the chalk escarpment, cut a Celtic field system and earlier estate boundaries which became parish boundaries; with logical deductive reasoning Desmond Bonney (reproduced in Green) suggested that if the Wansdyke had pre-dated them, then the territorial boundaries of estates and parishes, would have been placed along it. As this was not the case (they in fact follow the Roman road from *Cunetio* (Mildenhall) which is blocked by, or meets with, the western end of Wansdyke, and the onward extension of the road to Bath), and is also true of West Wansdyke, he argued that the monument must post-date them.

Green uses Myres' reference to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle to suggest that the most appropriate historical date was the late sixth century when the kings of Wessex defended their land against a strong attack from Thames Valley Saxons, and in particular to Ceawlin. Green reckoned that the most plausible date for a temporary military defence such as Wansdyke was the Battle of *Deorham* (Dyrham north of Bath) in 577 when Ceawlin is reputed to have defeated three British kings (Gloucester, Cirencester and Bath). In response, Cerdic constructed a barrier south of the lost lands which acted as the focus for the final battle and Ceawlin's defeat at *Wodnesbeorg* in 592, a location and

name which forms part of the landscape dedicated to Woden, from which Wansdyke has gained its name.

In contrast, the eastern part of East Wansdyke is built on a less massive scale and runs across a wooded tract of clayland; pollen evidence showed that the dyke had been built in open land, but that woodland lay close by (Green 1971: 142). This part of East Wansdyke is interpreted as a political boundary rather than a military obstacle.

Fowler came independently to the conclusions reached by Pitt Rivers and Trelawney Reed: that Wansdyke followed a Roman military design epitomised by Hadrian's Wall (Fowler 2001: 196). He quotes Reed as having believed Wansdyke was a boundary built by Ambrosius around 365 (–390) AD, and certainly within the period 365–515. In contrast, he refers to Andrew Reynold's suggestion that both parts of Wansdyke were a product of a short-lived political boundary agreement between Wessex and Mercia in the eighth or early ninth centuries (Reynolds and Langlands 2006: 37), but dismisses this on the grounds of its pagan name. Fowler's own interpretation is that Wansdyke was built in the mid-490s as a response to the threat of Anglo-Saxon attack along the Ridgeway, and was unfinished due to the resounding British victory at Mount Baden (possibly Liddington Hill 15km north-east of the West Woods section of Wansdyke).

### *West Wansdyke*

There is little definitive dating evidence for West Wansdyke. Erskine's excavation produced few finds in secure stratigraphic contexts, but there were very small sherds of Roman pottery from one bank and one ditch section, providing a *terminus post quem* for the monument in its latest phase. Artefacts from earlier periods were also found, showing that the dyke must have run through a well-populated landscape. Environmental evidence showed that the dyke was constructed through cultivated land in at least two locations, but that scrub woodland may have developed after this event. Erskine suggests a late or sub-Roman origin for West Wansdyke and likens it to the Antonine Wall; he argues that the dimensions of the ditch and physical form follow the criteria set out by Vegetius in *Epitoma Rei Militaris* and also refers to Gildas' mention of a turf wall which was not successful in its purpose; the contention made by Erskine (following Higham) is that Gildas would not have been familiar with Hadrian's Wall, and thus Wansdyke might have been a more probable source for his reference (Erskine 2007: 101–104). The possibility for precursor prehistoric ranch boundary ditches beneath Wansdyke is also made by Erskine.

The Avon and West Wansdyke zone forms a potential frontier region between three tribes: to the north the Dobunni in Gloucestershire and north Somerset, to the east the Durotriges in south-east Somerset and Dorset, and to the south the Dumnonii in west Somerset, Devon and Cornwall (Gardiner 1998). This seems a similar situation to Lambrick's description (noted above) for the Oxfordshire Thames and Grim's Ditch, that this was also a frontier zone between three tribes. Gardiner contends that the



West Wansdyke might therefore have formed a defensive barrier along the heights overlooking the real boundary of the Avon, and have been a product of the Dumnonii, perhaps in the fifth or sixth centuries AD.

Aileen and Cyril Fox saw Wansdyke as a Pagan Saxon monument due to its name *Wodensdic* in late Saxon charters (Fox and Fox 1959: 44–45). Their interpretation of chronology was that East Wansdyke was probably of West Saxon origin, built by Ceawlin of the Gwissae against the middle Thames Saxons after his defeat in AD 584. The Foxs' chronological interpretation for West Wansdyke was that it was 'a West Saxon construction built by King Cynegils on a line imposed by Penda of Mercia after AD 628' (Fox and Fox 1959: 45).

The conclusions from their survey and reconsideration of Wansdyke (Fox and Fox 1959: 44–45) were that West and East Wansdyke were separate monuments, and that the Roman road from *Cunetio* to Bath via *Verlucio* had been wrongly interpreted as part of greater Wansdyke; instead the earthwork was purely the *agger* of the road itself. The name Wansdyke indicated that both parts were Pagan Saxon in origin, and that West Wansdyke was associated with a probable heathen sanctuary and barrow at *Wodnesbeorge*. They saw East Wansdyke as divided into two parts. It was perceived as a military barrier along the chalk downland between Morgan's Hill and Shaw Farm 'byre' to prevent ingress from the Ridgeway to the Pewsey Vale and Salisbury Plain. Meanwhile, the eastern part of East Wansdyke across claylands to Savernake Forest was a territorial boundary located in woodland unsuitable for warfare, and possibly of secondary construction to the western part. West Wansdyke was interpreted as a discontinuous monument with woodland in-filling the gaps, and that the purpose of the earthwork 'was to control traffic and incursions from the Cotswolds and lower Avon valley, proceeding south-west principally by the Fosseway Roman road'.

## Discussion

Comparative data are shown in Figures 20–22, 24 and 25, and in Tables 1–3. From this it is quickly apparent that there is a large degree of similarity in design between the monuments described above, the most notable difference being the larger scale of construction for the ditch at East Wansdyke, and its two-pointed basal profile which suggests a recut. In addition a counter-scarp bank existed at both East and West Wansdyke, but is not recorded as such at Grim's Ditch. Most ditch sections in all monuments are V- or U-shaped (as opposed to the distinctive flat base that characterises the Cambridgeshire Dykes (Malim *et al.* 1996). Construction technique for both parts of Wansdyke seems to have involved work gangs digging quarry ditches, throwing the rock material behind them and then stabilising with turf, and sometimes with timber revetment (Green 1971, Fowler 2001 and Erskine 2007).

It has been unfortunate for the present study that I have been unable to source in time section drawings from excavations through Grim's Ditch, but a reconstructed profile

based on Hinchcliff's excavation data is superimposed over the earthwork surveys undertaken by Greenaway and Woodage in Figure 20. Their survey of the Aldworth Grim's Ditches identified some sections constructed as multiple systems of bank and ditch. This phenomenon is more typical (in my experience) of prehistoric boundaries than of Anglo-Saxon ones. The study of the Cambridgeshire Dykes included Mile Ditches, a triple-ditch feature crossing the Icknield Way, of probable Iron Age date as opposed to the more massive surviving dykes further east which were Anglo-Saxon (Malim *et al.* 1996). Bedfordshire evidence also suggests prehistoric dates for such features (Dyer 1961), whilst the dating for the Suffolk and Norfolk dykes/ditches is ambiguous.

Evidence for timber revetments have been found at both the Mongewell Grim's Ditch and along West Wansdyke, but a berm between bank and ditch seems only to have been found at West Wansdyke. Ditch in-fill sequences suggest three phases for both Wansdykes (and possibly re-cuts in the base of East Wansdyke ditch), and at least two discrete phases in bank construction have been identified for West Wansdyke, Compton Down, and three phases for Blackrock Lane if the turf stabilisation layers are valid. This evidence runs contrary to Fowler's interpretation of Wansdyke in West Wood which he saw as 'an unfinished earthwork for a non-event', as it shows that West Wansdyke, and East Wansdyke along the downland ridge, were maintained or reused over a long period of time.

The earliest origin for construction is provided by Bronze Age pottery in connection with the Ardington–Aston Upton Grim's Ditch, and evidence for Iron Age origin to Grim's Ditch (all parts) and West Wansdyke comes from pottery, stratigraphic relationship to field systems, and radiocarbon dates (Table 3). East Wansdyke has convincing evidence for a post-Roman origin due to the large number of artefacts found during excavation. Roman pottery was found from two locations at West Wansdyke in a very abraded condition, suggesting the pottery had been incorporated in cultivated ground and ploughed over a long period of time before construction of the dyke. Arable cultivation was suggested by palaeoenvironmental evidence for Blackrock Lane, West Wansdyke, whilst pastureland surrounded the downland part of East Wansdyke, and wooded conditions were current in the local landscape prior to construction of the eastern end of East Wansdyke (Table 2).

Documentary and place-name evidence show the pagan origin for the naming of the monuments, and that late Anglo-Saxon charters refer to Wansdyke; perhaps surprisingly Grim's Ditch is not mentioned in Anglo-Saxon charters but is found, however, in other medieval documents. Estate boundaries and parish boundaries do not follow many lengths of the monuments, but are found partially using them, especially in relation to the eastern end of East Wansdyke, parts of West Wansdyke, and parts of the Streatley Grim's Ditch. The argument that such administrative boundaries can be used to help date construction (i.e. that the dykes must post-date them if they are not used for those administrative boundaries) has logical reasoning. However, it is inconsistent with evidence elsewhere: for example this line of reasoning would presume unconvincingly



Figure 23: Mongewell Grim's Ditch west of Ridgeway crossing, looking east showing commanding views to north side of monument

that Grim's Ditch must be later than the creation of estate and parish boundaries in the sub-Roman or Anglo-Saxon period. In Cambridgeshire, by analogy, the Roman road of Ermine Street is very selectively used as an administrative boundary, but there is no assumption that those parts of the road that are not used as parish boundaries must date to Anglo-Saxon or later times! Similarly Erskine's presumption that Gildas is more likely to have been familiar with Wansdyke than Hadrian's Wall in his writings, because of his proximity to the south of England, can be countered by the theory he was born in Strathclyde or, in a recent publication, of his potential birthplace in Arclid, northern Cheshire (Breeze 2008); Breeze agrees with Erskine, however, in that Gildas' knowledge of geography is better for southern Britain than the north.

The various parts of Grim's Ditch reviewed above suggest that the name has been generously shared about for unconnected, although superficially similar, monuments. The two largest sections, the Ardington to Aston Upthorpe Down stretch and the Mongewell Grim's Ditch, have ditches facing in opposite directions. The first is sited in a defensibly impossible location with ditch uphill to south, whereas the latter follows the topography and has a commanding bank with ditch to north, with potential defensive capability and clear control over the Ridgeway and routes southwards (Figure 23). In my opinion, the Ardington and Aston Upthorpe Grim's Ditch is a territorial, and

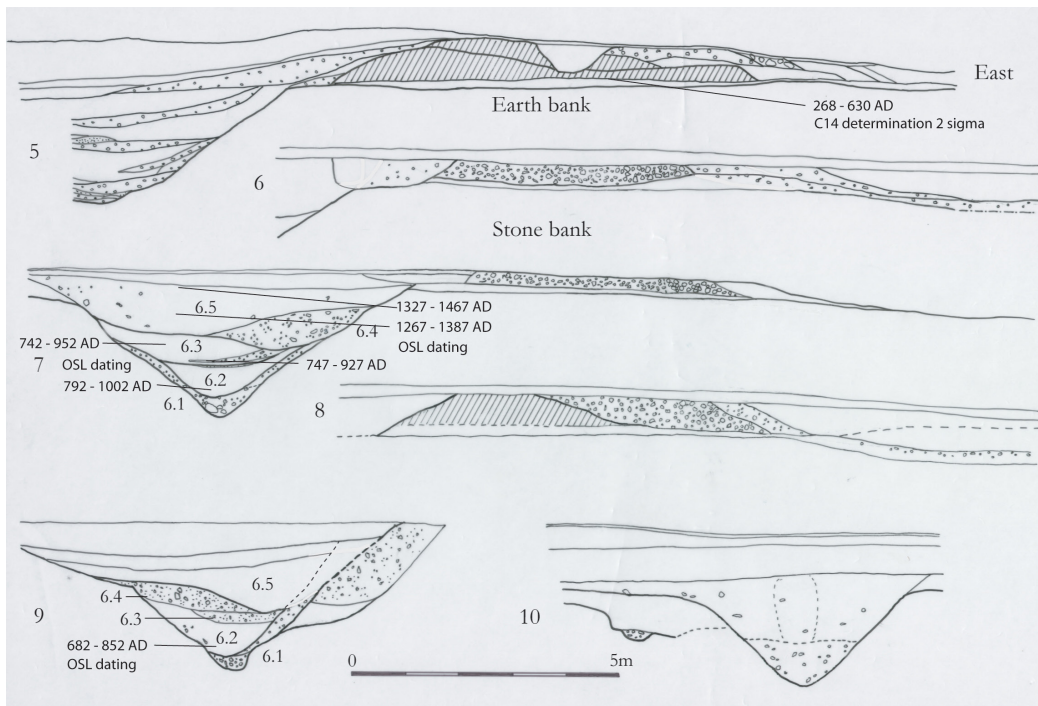


Figure 24: Wat's Dyke section drawings (after Malim and Hayes 2008)

perhaps a political boundary to the north of the Ridgeway that respects the neutrality of the ancient routeway zone, similar to the Chiltern Grim's Ditch (Hamden and Berkhamstead) (Figure 6 and Crawford 1931). Conversely the Mongewell Grim's Ditch is clearly constructed across the Ridgeway/Icknield Way zone, impeding free access along it. This type of barrier is found in many places east of Wallingford, throughout the Icknield Way zone in Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire. Some of these dykes or ditches have been dated or interpreted as prehistoric (e.g. Crawford 1931, Dyer 1961; for the Mile Ditches: Malim *et al.* 1996), and others as Anglo-Saxon.

At Aldworth, Streatley and Ashampstead, the direction in which the banks and ditches face vary, and whether they were, as suggested in the past, built to control access along Roman roads, or built for other purposes such as territorial boundaries (as suggested by the multiple ditch nature of the Foxborough Wood length) remains an area of debate. The place-names of the area have a strong echo of the Anglo-Saxon land use, with tree and woodland-clearing names (-ley) well represented. Current land use shows that woods still cover a good amount of ground, and lanes are narrow, sometimes deep cut, and with woodland banks in evidence. Aldworth, on the other hand, refers to an ancient (important/defended) enclosure, and possibly some of the woodland banks, including parts of Grim's Ditch, are in fact estate boundaries; this would be particularly relevant to the interpretation of the banks at Aldworth, with ditches on opposing sides. The section from Stichen Green to Streatley is similar to the main Grim's Ditch at Aston

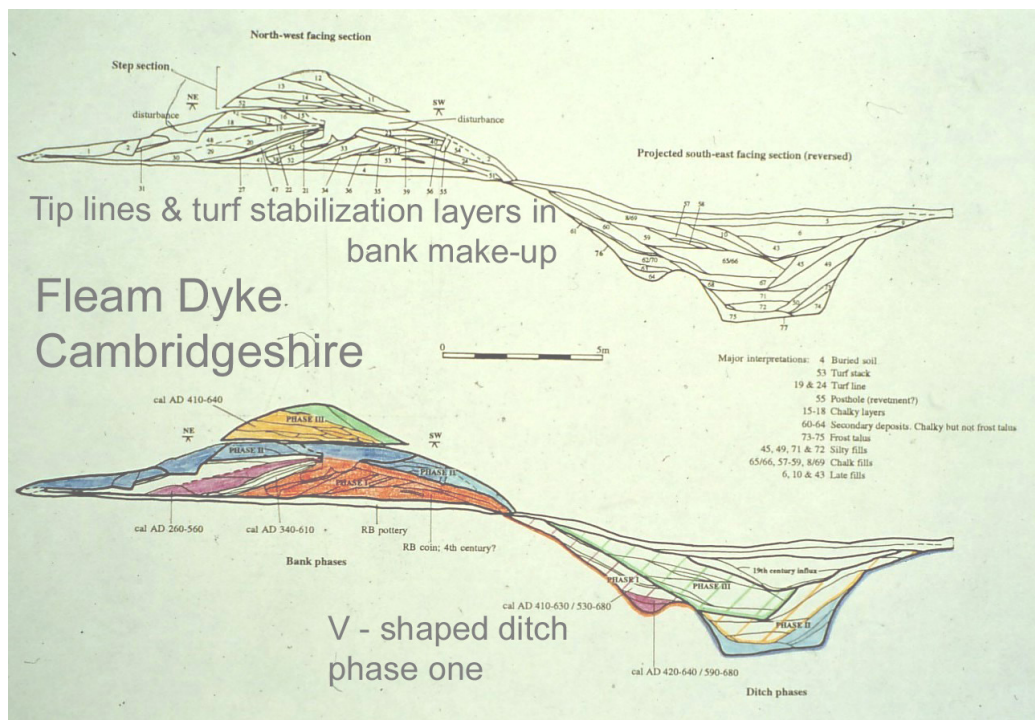


Figure 25: Fleam Dyke section drawing (after Malim *et al.* 1996)

Upthorpe Down, because the ditch and bank, though built in massive form, are sited with the ditch uphill on a steep descent from the north: an ostensibly poor defensive position, and thus more a candidate for a socio-political and territorial boundary.

A counter argument can be presented, however, one that is similar to that suggested by Lethbridge many years ago to explain what he thought might have been the origin of the Cambridgeshire Dykes (Lethbridge 1958; Malim *et al.* 1996: 114). As a physical barrier to horses, and therefore cavalry, the Streatley Wansdyke would have been very effective, especially if the horses were cantering downhill and their riders would see the enemy on the bank, but perhaps not see the ditch until too late to avoid tumbling into it. Dykes as defensive earthworks may be difficult to accept, as they could not have been continuously manned along their entire lengths, but if they are regarded as physical barriers, impediments to horse and wheeled vehicles, then their strategic function can not be doubted. Their physical presence channelled such traffic through a restricted number of causeways or 'gateways'.

East Wansdyke can be seen, by a simple comparison between excavated sections, to have been built on a massive scale, although Erskine's records of West Wansdyke show that it was not much smaller than its namesake further east. The possible ankle-breaker type feature in the base of the ditch can be seen in both of the main East Wansdyke sections, but not in the West Wansdyke sections. This feature is also evident in Wat's

Dyke, but not for example, in the Cambridgeshire Dykes. If the presumption is that this feature is following in Roman military tradition, and hence provides some chronological framework for construction, a fuller analysis of its use on dykes that have widely different dates needs to be explored. In addition, the presence of counter-scarp banks along both parts of Wansdyke, but not Grim's Ditch, requires some further discussion. Counter-scarp banks have not been found in connection with the Cambridgeshire Dykes, nor at Wat's Dyke (Malim and Hayes 2008). They are sometimes found associated with Iron Age defensive enclosures and hillforts, as well as in post-medieval fortifications. Their function has been interpreted as a device to increase exposure of an attacker to a defender's missiles because the enemy would have to rise up over the counter-scarp in full view before he could rush down the ditch and scale the main defensive bank beyond (Hartley 1957: 11). What does this feature imply for dating Wansdyke? Is it an original element integral to the design, and does it suggest active defence of the ramparts, or is it a secondary feature produced from recutting, or clearing out, of the ditch?

Pitt Rivers' entrenchment at Brown's Barn is intriguing. As with the West Wansdyke's Iron Age forts, here the East Wansdyke seems to have linked into, and respected, a former earthwork, though one on a much reduced scale. On this occasion, however, the Wansdyke alters course to connect with the southern part, thus effectively forming a redoubt with the remaining earthwork projecting into alien territory. Why was the northern line of the earthwork not utilised as part of Wansdyke, as this would surely have made more tactical sense? This concept seems similar to what was followed with the forts along West Wansdyke. Pitt Rivers' comments on the dating of the earthwork are also of interest. The trenches he excavated inside it produced no evidence for pitting, and although Roman artefacts were found, there were not any coins; on this basis he states 'that the Entrenchment was not long occupied before it was destroyed by the formation of the Dyke.' The entrenchment was triangular, approximately 168m long by 6.10m at its widest (east) end. The ditch was 3.35m wide and 1.22m deep, and bank was 0.76m high by 3.35m wide approx. It does not appear to be a typical Roman design. Therefore, the assumption can be made that this might have been a camp, either as a precursor to the linear boundary, or possibly as a base for some of the men who constructed Wansdyke. Erskine discusses the need for accommodation for a work force and suggests that the Iron Age forts along West Wansdyke might have provided such camps.

The consistency in design of West Wansdyke as reported by Jonathan Erskine certainly suggests that the existing earthwork was conceived and constructed as a single entity following a template design. The fact that buried sections of West Wansdyke have been detected by geophysical survey and other techniques in some of the gaps between earthwork sections shows that it was a largely continuous monument, that ran up hill and down coombe, linking Iron Age forts en route and linking in to a natural watercourse at its eastern end. The west-east alignment of the monument with ditch to the north, must have been intended to act as a barrier to ingress from the north, and thereby acted

as a control by channelling access through a number of routes such as the Jurassic/Fosse Way (as it progressed uphill along Odd Down from Bath) and the Bath *herepath*. But why is it located back from the line of the Avon? The suggestion has been made that this was because those who built West Wansdyke could not choose the Avon as their frontier, and therefore had to set the barrier further south. Another interpretation, however, could be similar to that for the Ardington–Aston Upton Grim's Ditch, that it defined the edge of a neutral territory, a communication route that was open to all, the Ridgeway. For West Wansdyke this neutral zone for communications could have been the Avon valley.

Erskine's interpretation of its date is based on the finding of Roman pottery, Roman military tradition and parallels, and historical events. He ascribes a fifth-century date to Wansdyke, and convincingly presents writings from sources such as Gildas to illustrate how such turf constructions, and the way they operated, would have been familiar in that period.

This dating is certainly plausible, but there are, as always, different degrees of emphasis that can be put on the various strands of evidence, and other parallels to compare with West Wansdyke. Although Erskine took samples for scientific dating at Blackrock Lane, Publow, these in fact produced Bronze Age and Early Iron Age dates, and thus were interpreted as representing earlier features cut by the monument when it was constructed. Flint flakes were also found in the bank and ditch deposits, but no pottery, and the stratigraphic sequence suggested three phases of construction and two phases of inactivity during periods when turf layers accumulated. If only this section had been cut through West Wansdyke the evidence for a prehistoric date would have been fairly compelling, and indeed it might be that this section of the dyke is Bronze Age in origin. Further credence to a potential prehistoric predecessor to the existing West Wansdyke could be given by its direct relationship connecting Iron Age forts and linking into their defences. The forts demonstrate a previous strategic importance to this zone and the makers of Wansdyke could have re-instated at a later, post-Roman, date. The handful of Roman pottery that has been found in excavation is described as very small, abraded sherds which could not be assigned to any century, or even an early or late Roman date. Their size and state of preservation would argue that they had been in the soil and damaged (through ploughing?) over a long period of time, a line of argument that could be used to support an Anglo-Saxon date for construction.

Comparison to other linear earthworks can also be instructive. The design and dimensions described by Erskine as of Roman military type, are mirrored for another great earthwork, Wat's Dyke, which runs for 65km along the Welsh Marches from the Dee estuary at Basingwerk, Holywell (Flintshire) to the River Morda at St Winifred's Well, Maesbury, Shropshire, where an artificial watercourse probably forms the final length of the monument (Malim and Hayes 2008). This monument is very similar in concept, running from estuary to river, up and down valley sides, and using a series of hillforts as focal points along its length. In addition, the bank and ditch of Wat's

Dyke is of similar proportion and design (with a trench in the base of the ditch in the style of Roman ankle-breaker defences) to the sections published by Erskine for West Wansdyke (Figure 24). Optically Stimulated Luminescence dating of the silts beneath the bank and within the ditch fills of Wat's Dyke, however, demonstrate that it was constructed and used during the early ninth century AD (Malim and Hayes 2008).

At Fleam Dyke in Cambridgeshire, the bank and ditch formed a complex stratigraphic series of deposits, with three or more phases to the bank and turf stabilisation layers on two or three occasions (Malim *et al.* 1996), similar to the interpretation given to West Wansdyke's Blackrock Lane section (compare Figures 22.2 and 25). The first phase ditch at Fleam was V-shaped, but had been largely removed by the massive later Anglo-Saxon ditch. A suite of seven radiocarbon dates from the fill of the first phase ditch and from sealed contexts within the bank deposits were mathematically modelled to provide a refined date-range of construction for the original monument between cal. AD 330 and 510 (92% confidence). Although the various episodes of ditch cutting, cleaning out, and bank dumping carried on until the seventh century, the late Roman and sub-Roman date of the first phase of the surviving Fleam Dyke could perhaps provide a valid comparison to West Wansdyke, albeit the direction in which Fleam faces would argue for the fact that it was built by the migrant Anglo-Saxon settlers against British counter-attack, rather than British defence against other tribes or Anglo-Saxon marauders.

Bill Branson in *Notes from a Small Island* (1995) wrote about the Cambridgeshire Dykes in the following manner: 'Devil's Dyke ... has a kind of menacing, palpably ancient air, but also a feeling of monumental folly. It required an immense commitment of labour to construct, but it didn't take a whole lot of military genius to realise that all an invading army had to do was go around it'. This could apply equally to West and East Wansdyke, and even more obviously to the various entities that are called Grim's Ditch. However, the length of both Wansdykes show that they were conceived as barriers that extended far beyond simple blocks to individual roads, and their terminal points must have had significant reasons for forming the ends to these barriers. Their physical presence across the roads and surrounding countryside would have prevented the movement of horses, stock and wheeled vehicles, except where such ingress was permitted. The eastern ends of West and East Wansdyke were set in a deep river valley (Horsecombe Brook and River Avon) and thick woodland (Savernake Forest) respectively. The western end of East Wansdyke lies at just west of the high point of Morgan's Hill, where it intersects with the Roman road, Ridgeway and Herepath from Marlborough and Avebury to Bath; this must imply that access was encouraged along this route as it descended into the valley to the west, although any movement along it would have been under the control of the Wansdyke guards. The western end of West Wansdyke was at Maes Knoll hillfort after which the land rises to the heights of Dundry with its commanding views over land to north and west towards the Avon gorge and the Severn estuary. Gardiner's hypothesis that there must have been a western extension to Wansdyke that would have protected the coastal lowlands by linking Dundry Heights with the



Avon Gorge at Stokeleigh Camp, Ashton Court, requires hard archaeological evidence: investigations by Cotswold Archaeological Trust which tested this theory in Ashton Court failed to locate any archaeological trace of it (Richard Sermon pers. comm.). Even if this extension had existed, the problem of why a long stretch of undefended land lay between it and Maes Knoll, is not adequately addressed by Gardiner. The ridge from Dundry eastwards is high and overlooks the Avon valley to the north, and perhaps this was sufficient for the purpose of guarding the area. Although at least one route is believed to have run north-south over this ridge (Williams 1992) (and providing the derivation for the Dundry place-name *draeg*) arguably connecting Roman villa sites, limestone and lead mines, with the port at *Abona* (Seamills), possibly the construction of an earthwork was unnecessary because its topographical dominance was enough to provide defensive qualities and presence in the landscape for any approaching enemy. It is perhaps worth noting that the church at Dundry is dedicated to St Michael, the most important Guardian Angel, who is associated with high places, and who protects against enemies from the north, and perhaps this dedication served in the minds of those who built West Wansdyke, as a means of additional defence for this zone.

Mercian and Wessex re-conquest of land occupied by the Danes relied on a policy of military success followed by consolidation and construction of strongholds to act as stops to further incursions by mobile Viking field armies. Their strategy of developing defensive burhs at strategic crossing points of the Thames, places such as Wallingford, allowed the Wessex kings to launch offensive campaigns from behind the security of the political barrier formed by the River Thames. Such strategic thinking could be similar in concept to the idea behind construction of the dykes, defensive banks and ditches from behind which troops could be assembled and then disgorged through access points to carry the attack into enemy-held lands. The relationship with major routes such the Fosse Way, Ridgeway and Icknield Way, allowed the dykes to act not only as control points for long-term trade and inward access (to tax traders and levy charges on the movement of stock), but also as highways along which field armies could be launched to strike rapidly into enemy territory. Such an interpretation offers a fresh slant to understanding the concept and historic circumstance behind construction of these monuments. This scenario would not see them as the consequence of a vulnerable people desperately building a final defence against conquering hordes from the north and east. Instead, it would suggest they were the product of a carefully planned and well-resourced strategic policy that was intended to display the power of the state and to control and tax valid economic activities. These monuments could prevent external mobility and raiding. They could also act offensively as occasion demanded by allowing the assembly of warbands behind the barrier, from when they could be disgorged through gateways along the *herepaths* or ancient routeways across which these earthworks were built.

To advance future research into the origins of these great earthworks it is imperative that we gather well-excavated, stratigraphic sequences through the banks and ditches

that can provide a series of samples for scientific dates from a variety of locations. With this data we can then work in best archaeological tradition from the known to the unknown. With a good series of stratigraphically robust scientific dates and the use of Bayesian modelling, it would then be possible to establish a firm chronology into which the historical context can be fitted, rather than the more uncertain approach that has been followed previously of trying to slot the physical monuments into historical events. It is now time for a fresh campaign of investigation!

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