

# Offa's Dyke Journal



Volume 3

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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# Offa's Dyke Journal

Volume 3 for 2021

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University of  
Chester

# What's wat's Dyke?



## A Comic Heritage Trail for **Wat's Dyke in Wrexham**

Howard Williams and John G. Swogger

# What's Wat's Dyke?

Wrexham Comic Heritage Trail

Text and Design by  
Howard Williams and John G. Swogger  
Illustrated by  
John G. Swogger

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## Welcome to the What's Wat's Dyke? Wrexham Comic Heritage Trail!

We hope this comic heritage trail for Wrexham helps introduce you to Britain's third-longest ancient monument.

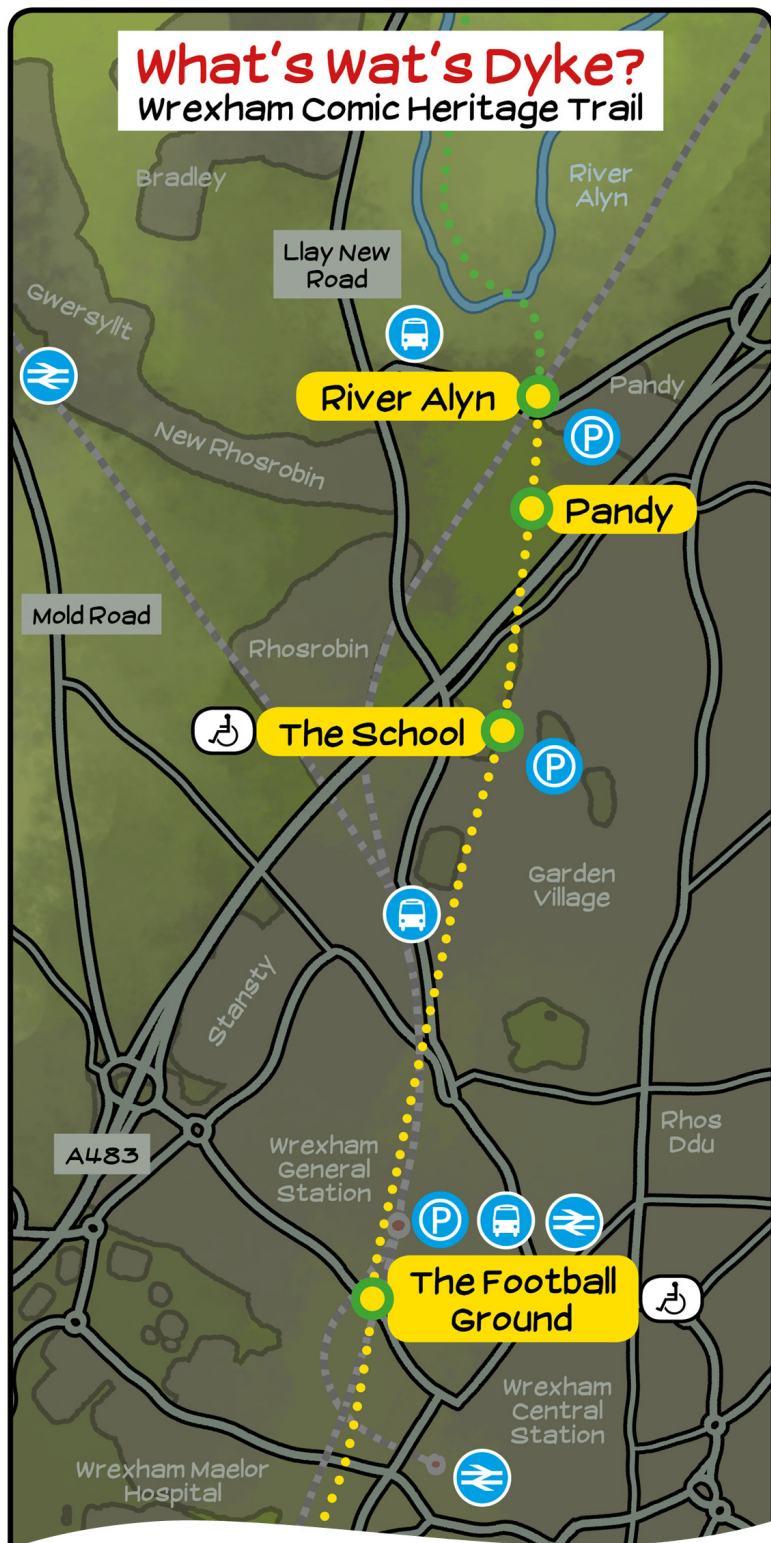
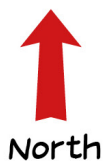
Wat's Dyke was built in the early medieval period (most likely between the late 7th and early 9th centuries AD). Today, it is a fragmentary bank and ditch surviving in varied states of preservation. When newly built, it was most likely designed as a continuous construction by the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia to dominate and control its western frontier with Welsh rivals. It runs over c. 64km from Basingwerk (Flintshire) to Maesbury (Shropshire).

The map on the next two pages shows you where can visit the monument today, and the comic panels tell the story of Wat's Dyke at each location.

And if you'd like to know even more about Wat's Dyke and other similar monuments, there are suggestions for further reading as well as online links to recent research at the end of this booklet.

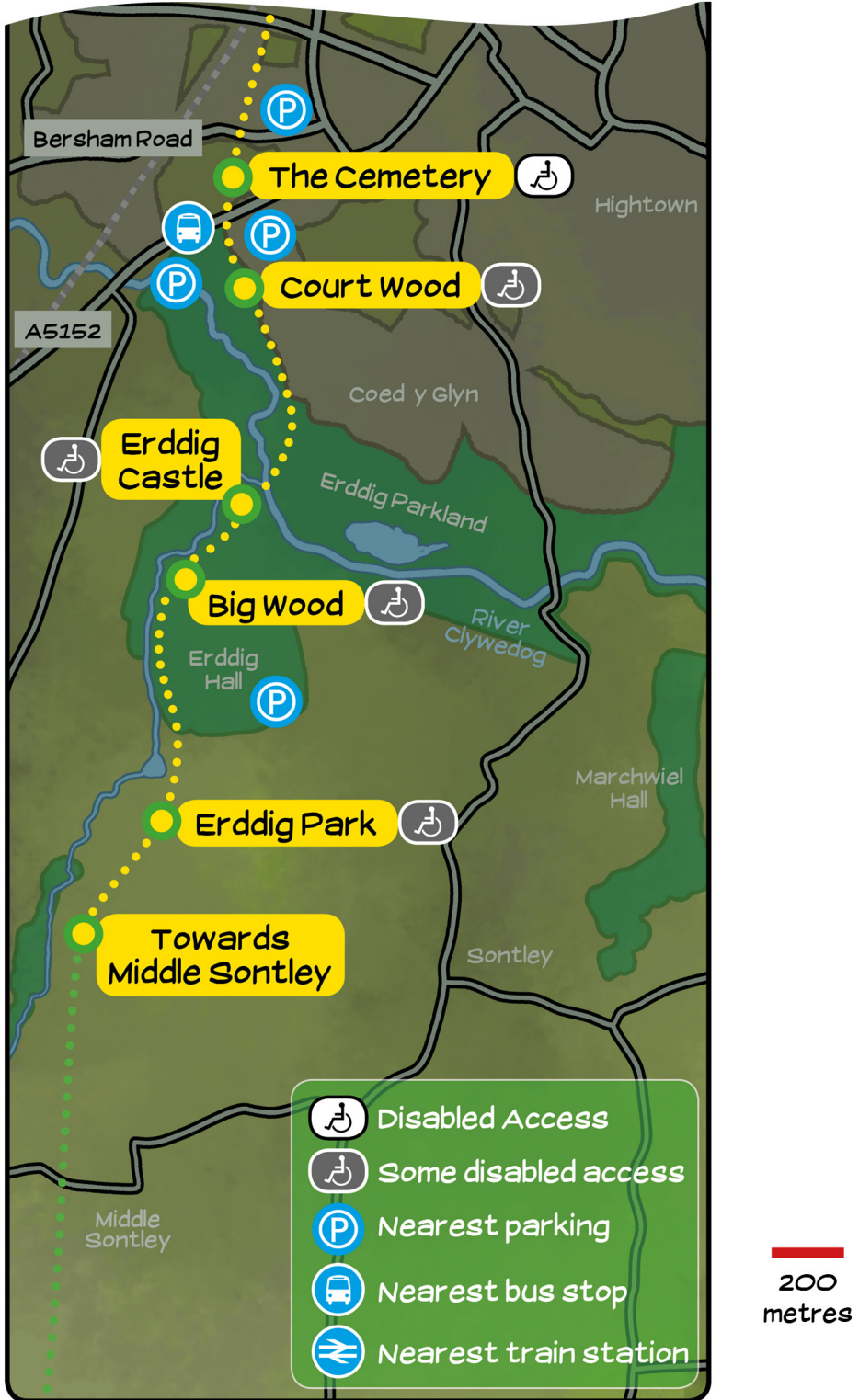
HOWARD WILLIAMS





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Can you imagine standing at the junction of Plas Acton Road and Blue Bell Lane in Pandy north of Wrexham when Wat's Dyke was newly built by the Mercian kings, over 1,200 years ago during the Early Middle Ages?

Britain's third-longest ancient monument, Wat's Dyke commanded the western slopes and scarps of the River Alyn for about twelve kilometres south from Mynydd Isa to augment the already ancient ramparts of Bryn Alyn Iron Age hillfort.

At Bryn Alyn, Wat's Dyke reused the west-facing defences of the hillfort, which had been built at least 1,000 years earlier. The interior of the hillfort was reoccupied either as a fort or a seasonal assembly place. The reuse of the hillfort meant that the loop of the River Alyn around a strategic peninsula was well-guarded.

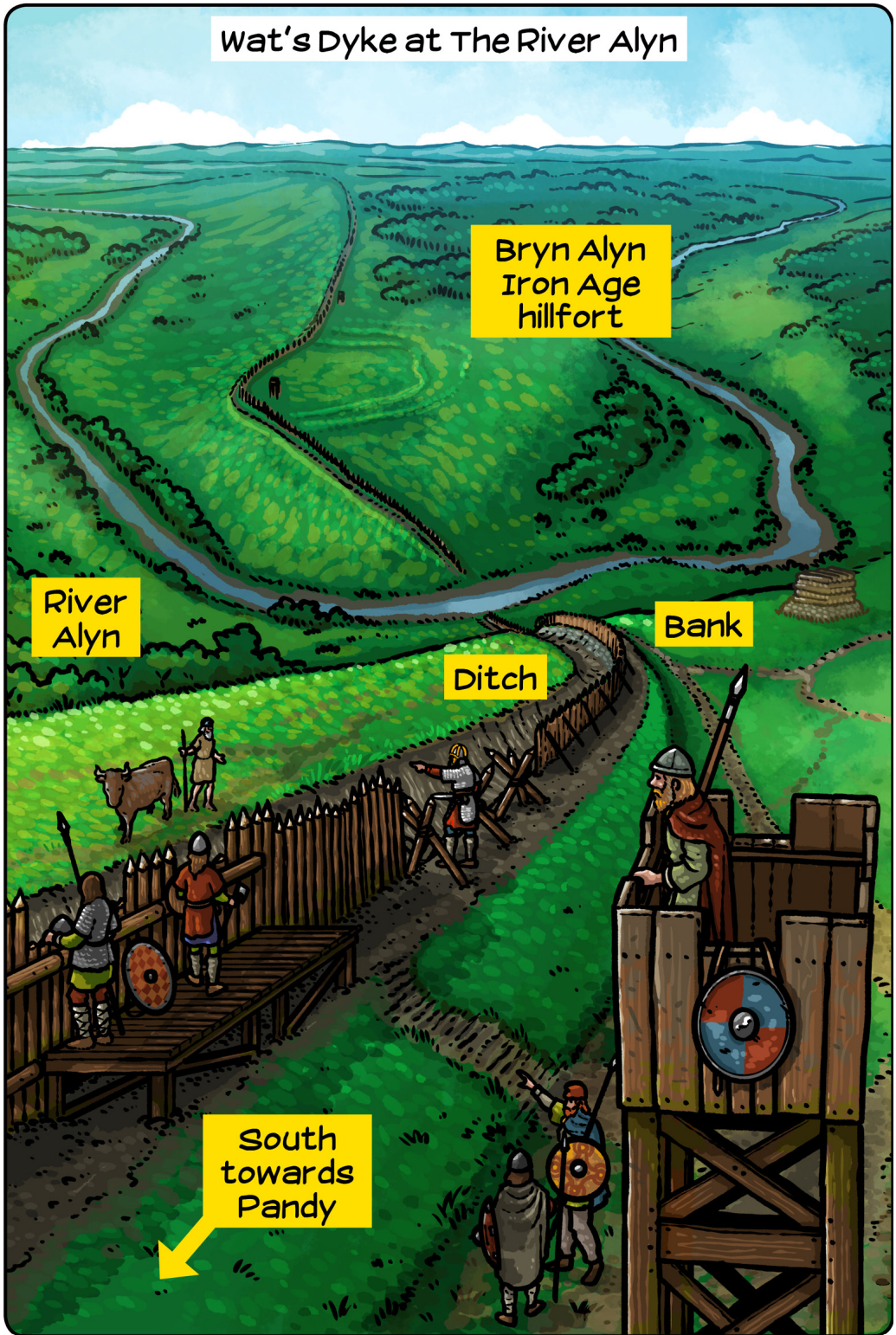
The Dyke then dropped down from the hillfort following the river cliff. The Alyn itself may have been blocked with chains. The line of the Dyke is lost as it once climbed the steep, now-wooded slopes through Wilderness Wood to where you now stand.

Excavation would help us further understand precisely what the monument looked like, where it went and why.

In this image we give an impression of the newly dug ditch, the bank topped with a palisade. Wat's Dyke is shown garrisoned by Mercian warriors and supported by beacons and watch towers. Was it guarded seasonally or all year round? Was it short-lived or fortified over many decades? Archaeologists are still unsure...

### Access

On foot: via Blue Bell Lane. West over the railway bridge, you can walk down a footpath opposite Plas Acton Cemetery to the River Alyn although no traces of Wat's Dyke survive here. There is no bicycle or mobility scooter access down this footpath. Bryn Alyn hillfort is situated on private land.



**Wat's Dyke rubs shoulders with Wrexham's industrial heritage at Pandy close to the former Gresford Colliery.**

The Dyke is lost where destroyed by the Wrexham-Chester railway line at the junction of Plas Acton Road and Blue Bell Lane. Yet, we encounter it surviving in the fields to the south where the public footpath forms part of the long-distance walking trail: the Wat's Dyke Way. To the south, it has been destroyed by the building of the A483 and Ty Gwyn Lane.

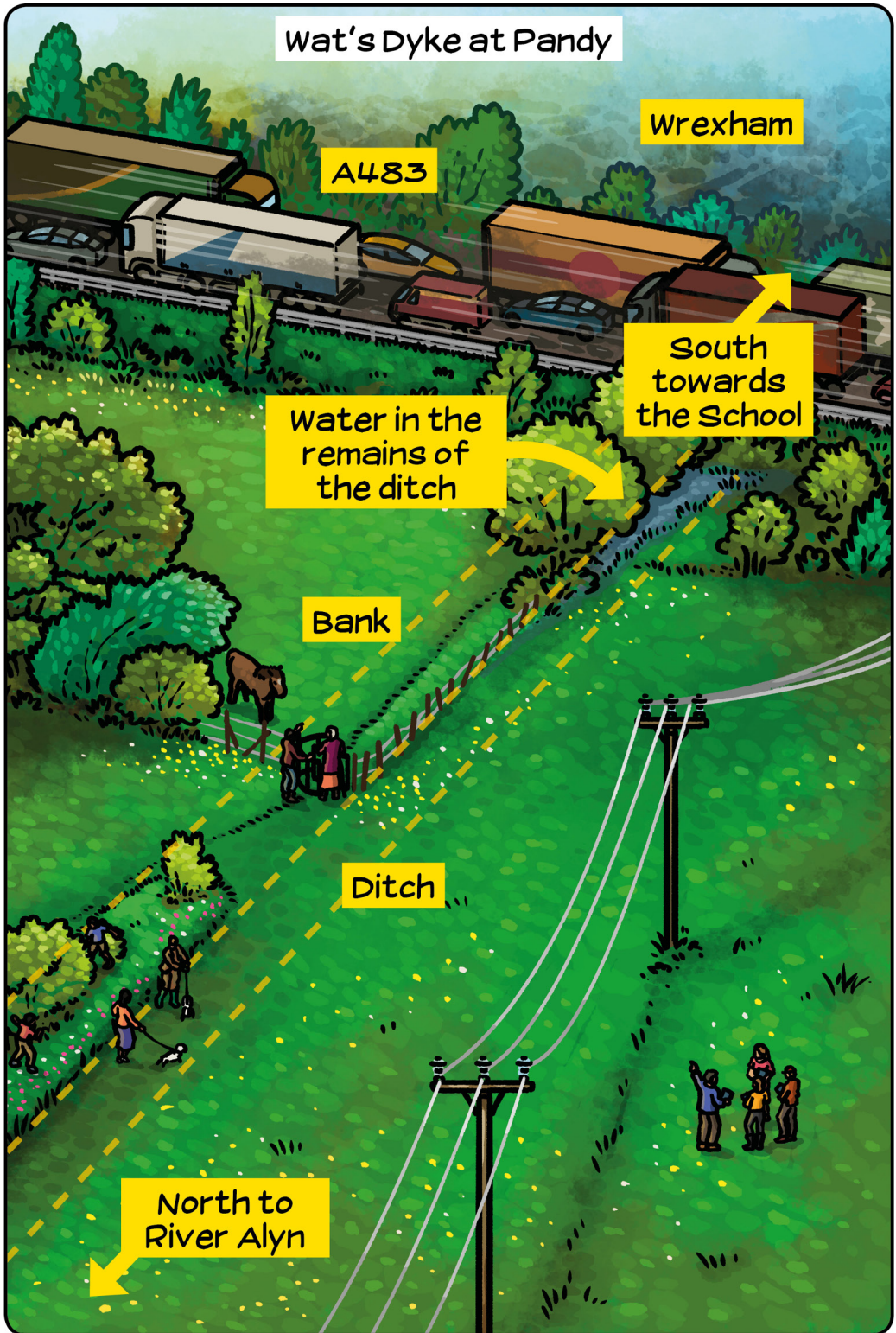
Local people are shown walking their dogs along Wat's Dyke here, but do they spot the traces of the early medieval linear earthwork?

In many places around Wrexham, Wat's Dyke has been damaged or destroyed by later roads, buildings and construction. Sometimes only the bank survives, sometimes the ditch, sometimes neither. Despite this damage, archaeologists refer to Wat's Dyke as a 'linear earthwork' because originally the bank was made of packed earth and stones, and it ran in a long, continuous line.

### Access

On foot: via Blue Bell Lane and footpath. No bicycles or mobility scooter access.

By car: parking on Blue Bell Lane, 500m walk on grass.



## People live and learn on Wat's Dyke!

Wat's Dyke was incorporated into Wrexham's northern suburbs when Garden Village was built in the 1930s. You can follow it in the fence lines of the gardens south of Ty Gwyn Lane and west of Wats Dyke Way. At the top of the hill it separates the Garden Village Playing Field from Wat's Dyke Primary School.

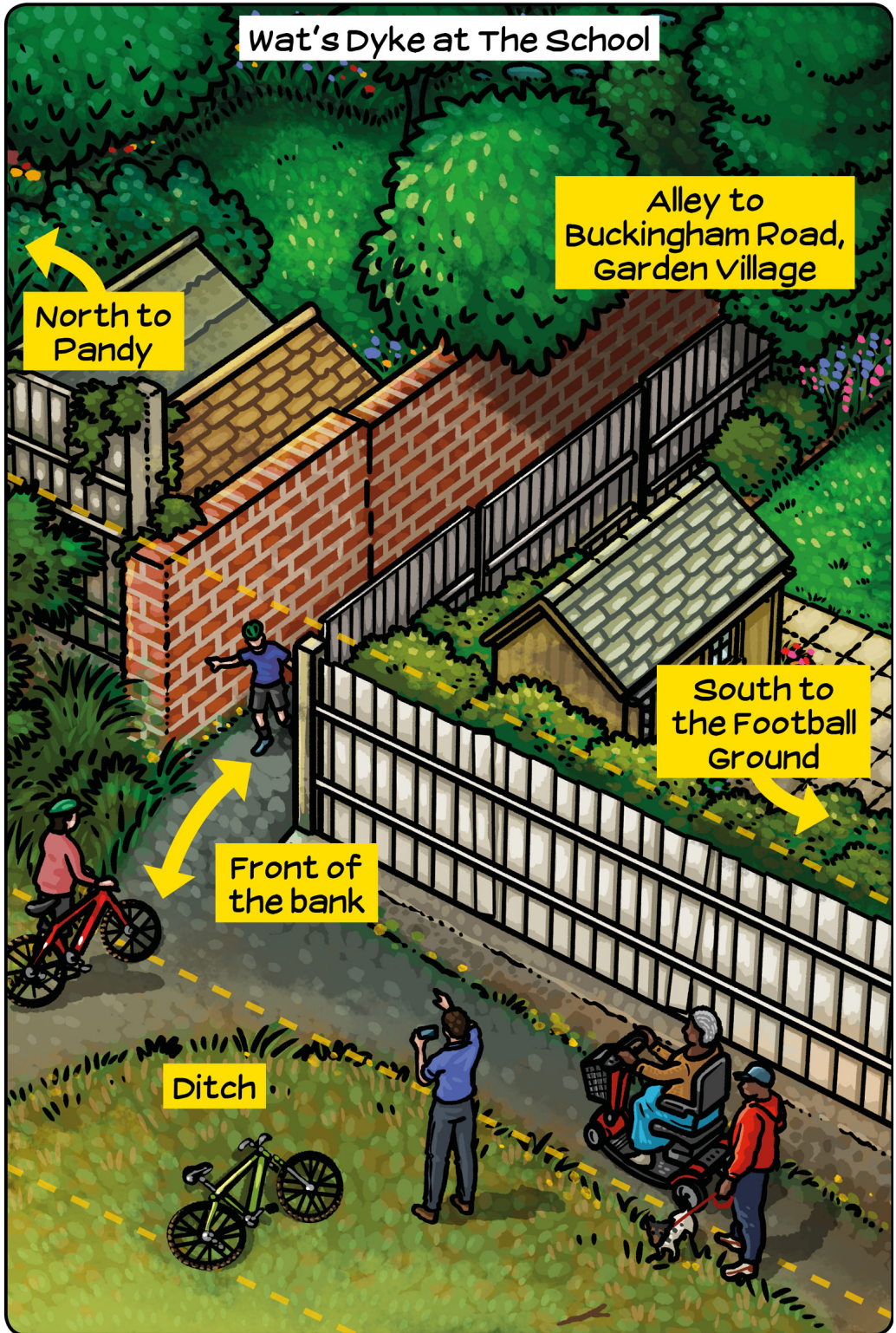
Heading downhill, the dyke then survives under property boundaries at the back of Buckingham Road before being lost beneath houses closer to Wrexham town. Here we see the bank of the Dyke surviving in the slope from an alley running from Buckingham Road.

These boundaries remind us that Wat's Dyke was likely originally part of the frontier between early medieval Welsh kingdoms to the west and the territories of the Kingdom of Mercia to the east.

### Access

On foot: by bicycle or mobility scooter via alley from Buckingham Road.

By car: parking on Buckingham Road, 100m walk on paved surface.



People attend lectures, play tennis, watch football and catch their trains beside Wat's Dyke in central Wrexham!

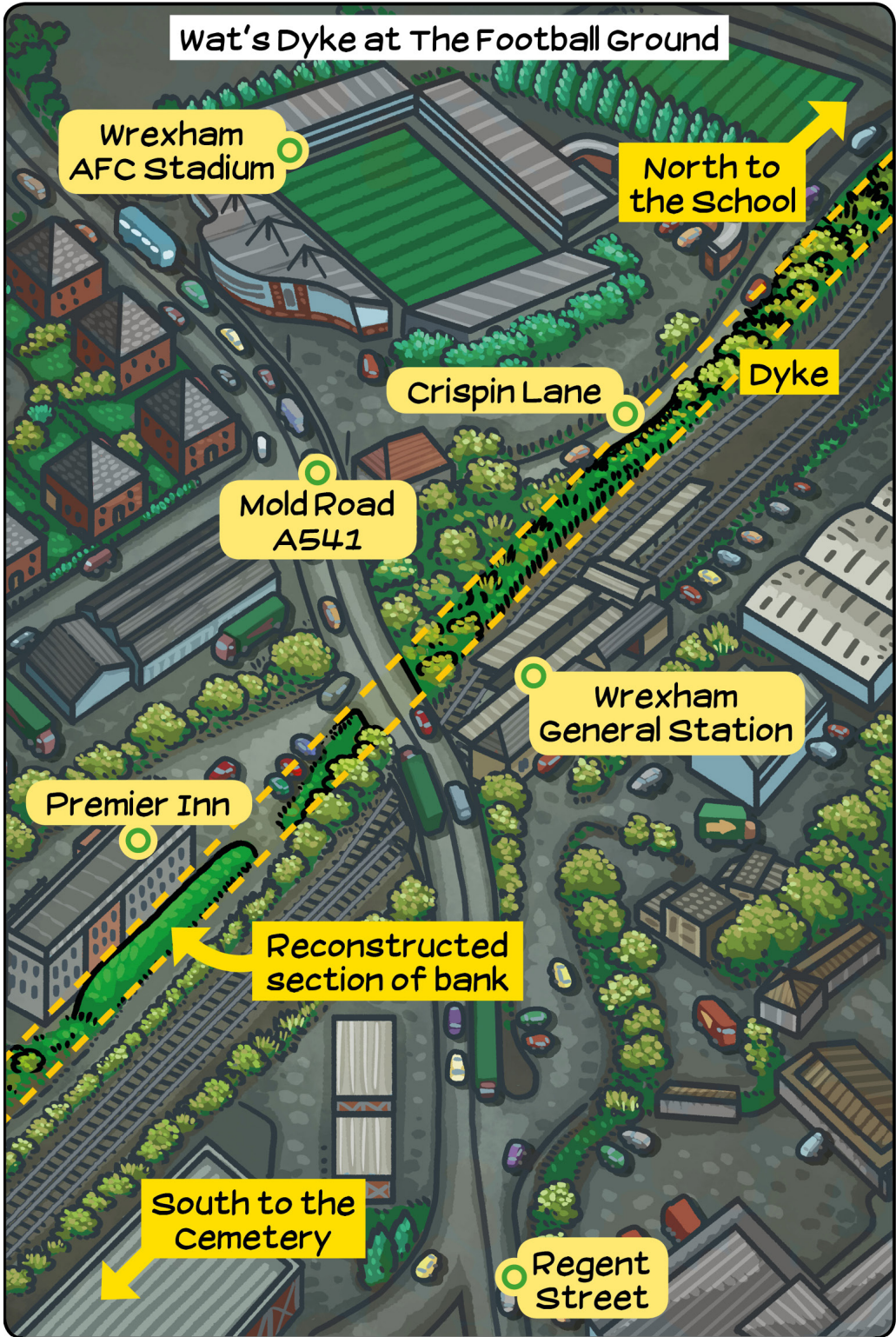
You can see the dyke close to Glyndŵr University campus, Wrexham Tennis Centre and Wrexham Racecourse Ground, home to Wrexham A.F.C. There are also some badly damaged sections of Wat's Dyke surviving between the railway lines and Crispin Lane. Archaeologists are always searching for other surviving sections of the dyke that may still be hidden.

While the ancient dyke has been largely destroyed at Wrexham General railway station, a reconstructed section can also be seen between the railway line and the Premier Inn Hotel on Jacques Way. Reconstructing ancient monuments like Wat's Dyke can be a good way for archaeologists to figure out what construction methods were used to build them, and how much effort and time building it would have taken.

### Access

On foot, by bicycle and mobility scooter: Along pavements between Crispin Lane, Wrexham General and Jacques Way.

By car: various car parks and on-road parking.





Wrexham people shop, go to college, grow vegetables and even bury and commemorate their dead along Wat's Dyke!

The Dyke runs south from Morrisons supermarket between allotments and houses to the east and Coleg Cambria to the west. It then served as the original western boundary of Wrexham Cemetery, opened in 1876.

Today, Wat's Dyke can still be seen running through the middle of the burial ground, the ditch marked by a path, and a striking array of late Victorian tombs on top of the bank. The Dyke provided a suitable landscape feature in a Victorian garden cemetery.

Two cemetery paths cross the dyke and its course is today marked with bilingual markers. Archaeologists and historians are interested in the different ways the dyke is remembered in different places. Why is it marked here on the cemetery sign and on the paths, but not where Wat's Dyke runs past Morrisons or next to the allotments?

## Access

On foot and mobility scooter: enter via Bersham Road or Ruabon Road gates  
Bicycles must be walked through the cemetery, not ridden.

By car: on-road parking at Bersham Road entrance, 500m walk on paved surface;  
limited parking at Ruabon Road entrance, 50m walk.



In Court Wood, part of the National Trust's Erddig Park, you can walk along Wat's Dyke where it joins and follows the top of the scarp above the Clywedog Valley. Fence lines of private houses are on top of the bank, but the ditch and front of the bank remains to be seen along two stretches.

Now eroded away, Wat's Dyke originally dropped down to cross the valley floor at the confluence of the Clywedog and the Black Brook before rising up steep slopes again at Erddig Castle. Just as at the Alyn River below Bryn Alyn hillfort (panel 1), here the Dyke would have blocked passage and visually dominated the Clywedog valley.

The river's steep natural scarp together with the bank-and-ditch (perhaps supported by watch towers, beacons and controlled gates) provided a complex frontier work. The Dyke curtailed and controlled the movement of people with their animals and goods; farmers and traders could be protected and directed to pay tolls during peacetime, just as raiders could be observed and intercepted in times of war.

Here, a Mercian thegn on horseback and his warriors intercept farmers bringing their cattle to market.

### Access

On foot: 300-700m walk on steep narrow footpaths around the Erddig parkland clearly marked and accessible from both Wrexham and Erddig Hall. No bicycle or mobility scooter access.

By car: park in the layby of the A5152 opposite Wrexham Cemetery, or else use the National Trust car parks at Felin Puleston Outdoor Centre or Erddig National Trust main car park.



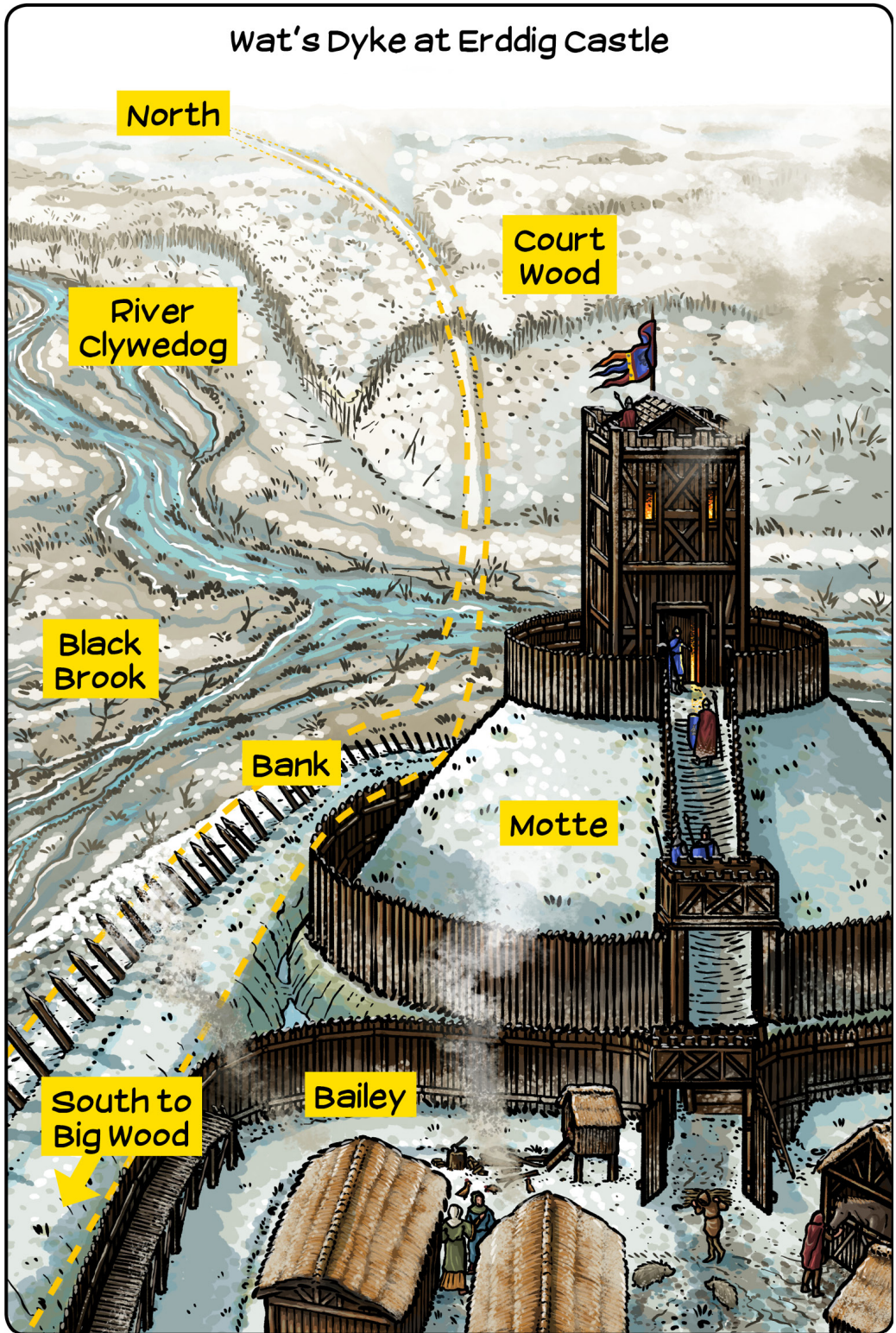
Wat's Dyke crossed the Clywedog at its confluence with the Black Brook. This strategic location endured, and the promontory south of the valley overlooking both brook and river was selected as the site of an Anglo-Norman castle in the late 11th century, possibly built by Hugh de Avranches, earl of Chester.

Despite being constructions for contrasting times and built centuries apart, both Wat's Dyke and Erddig Castle made use of the topography to control and dominate the Anglo-Welsh borderland. Are they both stages in the colonisation of the landscape: first by the Mercians, later by the Normans?

### Access

On foot: 750m+ walk from Erddig Hall. No bicycle and partial mobility scooter access.

By car: park at Erddig National Trust main car park.



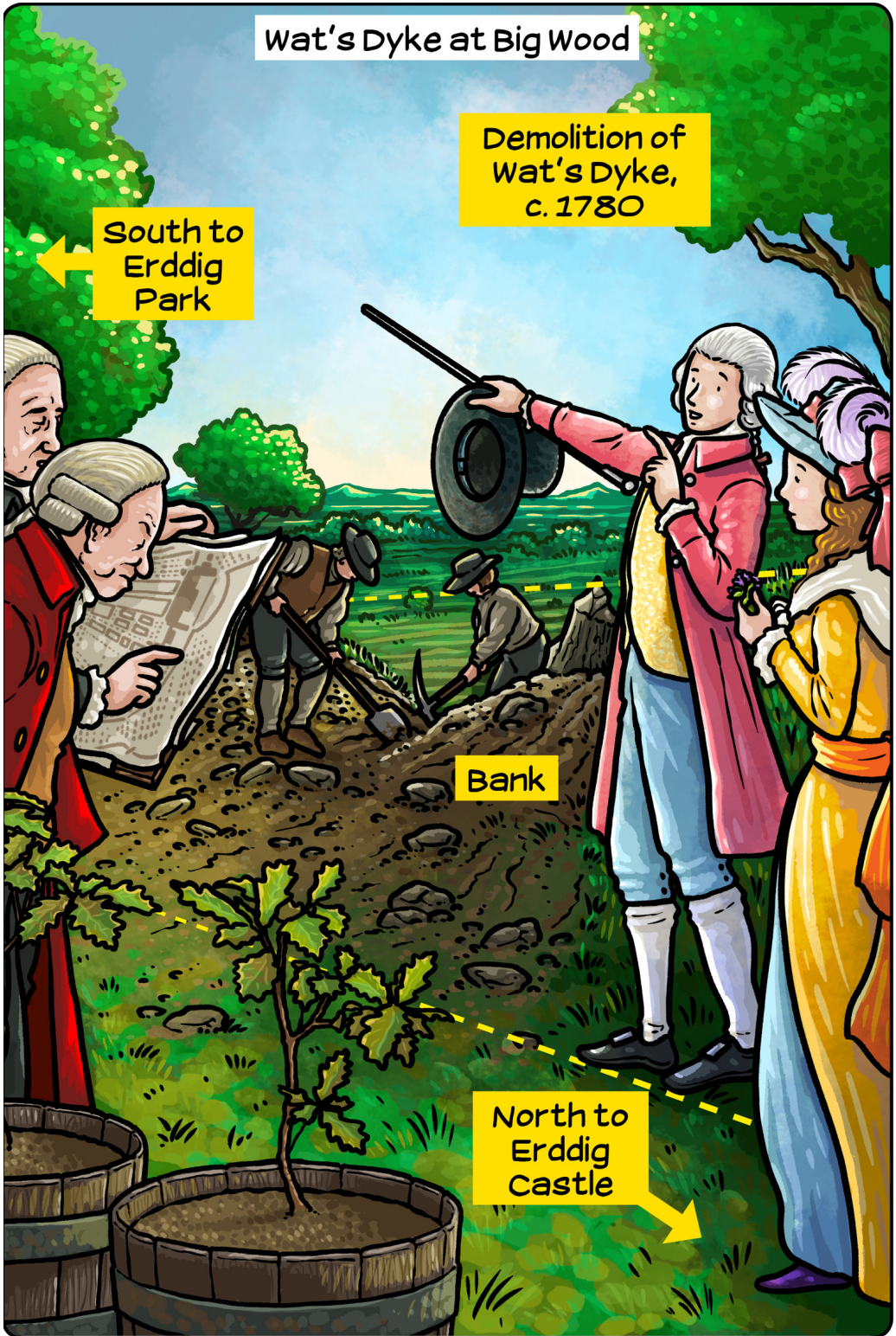
Visitors to the National Trust property of Erddig will struggle to appreciate that Wat's Dyke once ran along the top of the ridge overlooking the Black Brook right in front of where Erddig Hall was built in the 1680s and then refurbished and enlarged in the 1720s. Wat's Dyke was removed in this location during one or more stages of work around the hall, perhaps when Philip Yorke I commissioned William Emes to design the formal gardens between 1768 and 1780.

The industrial revolution was under way and the ironworks at Bersham was already well-established but the collieries of Bersham and Hafod have yet to mark the skyline. Yorke and his architect Emes observe the destruction of a section of Wat's Dyke at the edge of Big Wood.

## Access

On foot: 650m walk from Erddig Hall. No bicycle and access via off-road mobility scooter only. Check accessible routes on Erddig Country Park website.

By car: park at Erddig National Trust main car park.





Sir Cyril Fox first explored Wat's Dyke in a systematic way as part of his broader project investigating Offa's Dyke. In the summer of 1932, he surveyed the well-preserved section at The Rookery south of Erddig Hall.

Small-scale excavations into Wat's Dyke took place through the 1970s-1990s led by David Hill and Margaret Worthington, including a dig in Erddig Park. Then, an important large-scale excavation at Gobowen (Shropshire) in 2006 by Tim Malim and Laurence Hayes explored and dated Wat's Dyke through radiocarbon (C14) and optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) which together suggested an early 9th-century AD date.

More information was gathered in 2018; Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust conducted excavations at multiple locations in Erddig Park. Their work has confirmed the line and character of the dyke in places where it wasn't clear whether it was ever built in the first place! Also, new scientific dates confirm Wat's Dyke was an early medieval monument. However, precisely when it was built and for how long it was used remains unclear.

We must ask: was Wat's Dyke a one-phase construction? Or instead, were different sections of Wat's Dyke built by successive Mercian rulers, maybe for contrasting purposes and over a longer duration? Perhaps only more investigations will answer these questions!

### Access

On foot: via footpath from Erddig Hall (500m), footpath from Felin Puleston Outdoor Centre (1.7km) or footpath from Coed y Glyn (2.1km). Access via off-road mobility scooter only. Check accessible routes on Erddig Country Park website.

By car: parking in car park at Erddig Hall, in layby on Ruabon Road or in carpark at Felin Puleston Outdoor Centre.



Wat's Dyke was most likely built by one or successive kings of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia during the late 7th-early 9th century AD. Like the longer Offa's Dyke, it was a monument built for war and peace: a statement of political ideology, power and authority, a military frontier work for attack and defence, and a structure to control trade and exchange and the landscape itself.

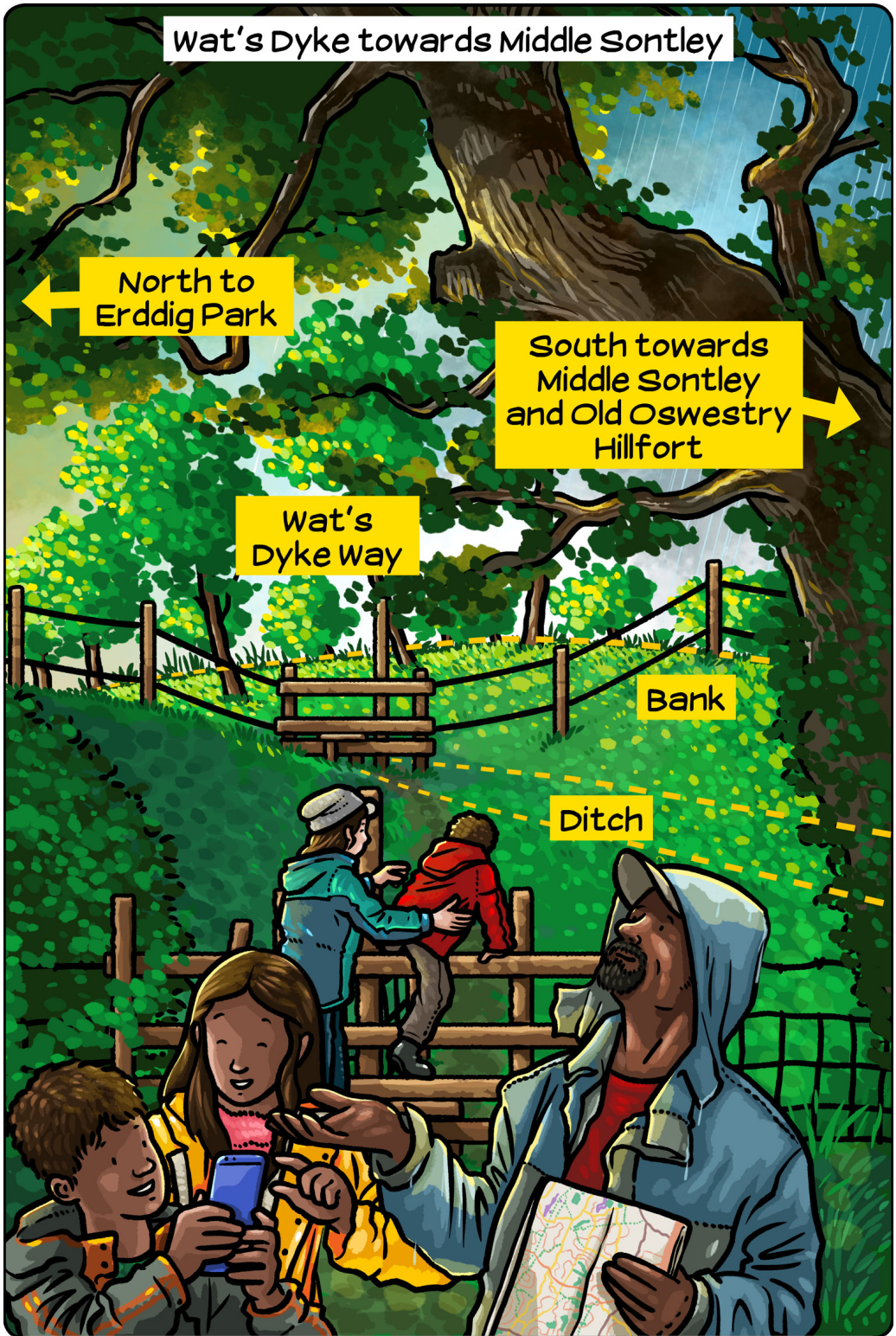
The work of David Hill and Margaret Worthington, investigating the monument as part of the Offa's Dyke Project, built on the work of Sir Cyril Fox and suggested that Wat's Dyke ran continuously from Basingwerk on the Dee Estuary to south of Maesbury in Shropshire: 64km!

Heading south out of the Erddig Estate, a fine section of the bank and ditch can be seen within the current field boundaries. Why not enjoy the rural countryside of Wrexham by following the Wat's Dyke Way south from Erddig to Middle Sontley and beyond?

### Access

On foot: via footpath from Erddig Hall (700m), footpath from Felin Puleston Outdoor Centre (2km) or footpath from Coed y Glyn (2.2km). Check accessible routes on Erddig Country Park website.

By car: parking in car parks at Erddig Hall, Coed y Glyn or Felin Puleston Outdoor Centre.



# What's Wat's Dyke?

## References and Resources

The story of Wat's Dyke doesn't end here. There is much more to discover and learn about the history, archaeology and heritage of this fascinating monument.

We've collected some references and resources on the following page if you're interested in learning more about Wat's Dyke, other linear earthworks, and Britain during the early medieval period.

And because the whole story of Wat's Dyke has not yet been written, we have included links to websites where archaeologists and historians discuss current research about Wat's Dyke and other early earthwork monuments. Some of the things you will find here include reports on recent archaeological work, articles about dating Wat's Dyke and discussions about how and why it was built.

We also recommend a visit to the Offa's Dyke Centre in Knighton, Powys, run by the Offa's Dyke Association. Offa's Dyke is an early earthwork monument very similar to Wat's Dyke, but much longer. The Offa's Dyke Association sponsors and supports research into Wat's Dyke as well as Offa's Dyke, and their new exhibition at their visitor centre now includes information about both monuments. For opening times and more information, please visit: <https://offasdyke.org.uk/>

The University of Chester runs undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in which you can explore early medieval archaeology. For more information, please visit: <https://www1.chester.ac.uk/departments/history-and-archaeology>

## Books

Ray, K and Bapty, I. 2016. Offa's Dyke, Landscape and Hegemony in Eighth-Century Britain. Oxford: Windgather Press

Gleave, K., Williams, H. and Clarke, P. (eds) 2020. The Public Archaeologies of Frontiers and Borderlands. Oxford: Archaeopress.

Malim, T. and Nash, G. (eds) 2020. Old Oswestry Hillfort and its Landscape: Ancient Past, Uncertain Future, Oxford: Archaeopress.

## Journal Articles

Belford, P. 2019. Hidden earthworks: excavation and protection of Offa's and Wat's Dykes, The Offa's Dyke Journal 1: 80-95.

Hill, D. 2020. "Offa's and Wat's Dykes". The Offa's Dyke Journal, Vol. II, pp. 141-159.

Swogger, J. 2019. "Making Earthworks Visible: The example of the Oswestry Heritage Comics". The Offa's Dyke Journal, Vol. I. pp. 137-156.

Worthington Hill, M. 2019. "Wat's Dyke: An archaeological and historical enigma". The Offa's Dyke Journal, Vol. I, pp. 58-79.

## For Younger Readers

Swogger, J. 2018. The Oswestry Heritage Comics. Oswestry: Qube.

Williams, B. 1995. History of Britain: The Saxons & Vikings. London: Heinemann.

## Online Resources

The Offa's Dyke Collaboratory - A Research Network for Offa's Dyke, Wat's Dyke and Early Medieval Western Britain:  
<https://offaswatsdyke.wordpress.com/>

The Offa's Dyke Journal: <http://revistas.jasarqueologia.es/index.php/odjournal/index>



# What's Wat's Dyke?

The "What's Wat's Dyke" comic heritage trail is a great introduction for all ages to one of Wrexham's best-kept heritage secrets: Britain's third-longest ancient monument!

Discover the past, the present and even the future of this fascinating medieval earthwork. Follow its story from the early Middle Ages, through the Norman conquest, the Industrial Revolution, the Victorian Era right into the present day, and see how Wat's Dyke has helped shaped Wrexham and its history.

You can also view the comic trail online:

<https://offaswatsdyke.wordpress.com/whats-wats-dyke-wrexham-comic-heritage-trail-by-john-g-swogger-and-howard-williams/>

