Offa's Dyke Journal

A Journal for Linear Monuments, Frontiers & Borderlands Research

Volume 7

Edited by Howard Williams

Aims and Scope

Offa's Dyke Journal is a peer-reviewed venue for the publication of high-quality research on the archaeology, history and heritage of linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands. The editors invite submissions that explore dimensions of Offa's Dyke, Wat's Dyke and the 'short dykes' of western Britain, including their life-histories and landscape contexts. *ODJ* will also consider comparative studies on the material culture and monumentality of land divisions, boundaries, frontiers and borderlands from elsewhere in Britain, Europe and beyond from prehistory to the present day. We accept:

1. Notes and Reviews of up to 3,000 words
2. Interim reports on fieldwork of up to 5,000 words
3. Original discussions, syntheses and analyses of up to 10,000 words

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Submissions: howard.williams@chester.ac.uk

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

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Rhwydwaith Clawdd Offa's Dyke Collaboratory

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Flags and Frontiers: Linear Monuments Research in 2025

Howard Williams

Providing context and introduction to this seventh volume of the Offa's Dyke Journal *(ODJ), this article reviews the contents as well as select recent related research published elsewhere on linear monuments. The introduction also reviews the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory's activities during 2025. The context of Britain's ongoing public discourse focused on migration and its perceived threats to British and English identities is recognised, with the flag fervour of the summer of 2025 illustrating the ongoing need for academic critiques and comparative research on linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands. Specifically, it argues for the need for resesarch to take into account ephemeral material cultures, signs and symbols as well as monumental architecture in considering how divisions and demarcations are established and perpetuated in landscapes past and present.*

Keywords: flags, frontiers, linear monuments, territory

Introduction

Today, the relics of prehistoric and early historic walls and earthworks track their way across our hills and valleys. From China's Great Wall to Hadrian's Wall, they are curios and identity markers for local people, fabulous and exotic tourist destinations and ancient and enigmatic marvels to many. Amidst these present-day uses and perceptions, they are active foci for ongoing historical and archaeological investigation and interpretation.

What do these linear monuments mean for people today? They might seem to be archaic relics of former times when barriers were negotiated and enforced. From such a view, looking back from a world of global communications and international travel, such divisions appear to be echoes of long-redundant strategies and practices. Alternatively rather than vestiges of an earlier stage in a social evolution of division and demarcation, they might be seen by many as very familiar. Looking at our age of large-scale migration and genocides in which walls and boundaries frequently hold prominent and strategic military and political use, from the conflicts in Sudan to Gaza (e.g. Garman 2024; Soy 2025), linears are readily perceived as part of a continuum of human claims to land and assertions of control over the mobilities and lives of others. In other words, such ancient linears are often regarded as mirrors of our world that continues to be divided and demarcated with property boundaries, control lines and national borders (see McAtackney and McGuire 2020). Which is it? Are our definitions and defence of modern boundaries, borders and borderlands extensions of these earlier land divisions and linear constructions, or something completely different for our modern age? In other words, when we see past linears, do we perceive an otherness and disjuncture between us and them, or a familiarity and continuity between past and present?

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As a researcher of linear monuments, but also acutely aware of their significance and use in today's political discourses, popular culture and heritage sectors, one can see both the alien and similarities in the functions and significance between past and present. The enduring materiality of past frontier works continues to operate in dialogue with contemporary walls and borders, even if their functions and meanings might differ considerably (see Hanscam and Buchanan 2023; see below). We cannot escape the past in tackling our present-day landscapes, and we cannot avoid parallels made between today's uses of linears in our interpretations of the past. Rather than try to escape or deny this dialogue between linears past and present in our interpretations, perhaps our task is to make this recursive relationship pivotal to our dialogues with the public and our research questions, aims and objectives (see also Ray 2020: 118–124).

Taking forward this aspiration of connecting linear monuments past and present, I here introduce *Offa's Dyke Journal* 7. In particular, I would like to start by considering how ephemeral material cultures aim to enhance the territorialisation of our modern landscapes. Following a presentation of the journal's rationale and review of the volume's contents, I review new related publications exploring the significance of linears and their landscape contexts before outlining the main endeavours of the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory since the publication of volume 6 (see Williams 2025a).

Britain's frontiers and flags in 2025

Divisions in the landscape can be lines drawn in signs, symbols and materials as well as via architecture and monuments. By way of example, this past summer, the UK has experienced a rash of flags (Union and St George) raised and placed in public places without permission. This was characterised as 'Operation Raise the Colours', describing themselves as a 'grassroots movement for unity and patriotism' (Mackie and Somerville 2025; Lawson and Jefford 2025). Outside of Northern Ireland, this marks a fundamental departure in the popular public use of flags in the UK. Moving from occasional private displays of flags and specific short-duration public celebrations such as royal coronations, flags are now widely displayed on street furniture in many districts of mainland Britain for the first time. This has been, in large part, a thinly veiled strategy of far-right political protest, exploiting broader senses of disillusionment, to territorialise suburban landscapes and stoke hatred, fear and division under the guise of patriotism (Mulhall 2025; Williams 2025b). These practices have built from, and overlapped with, protests involving displays of flags at asylum seekers' accommodation (Mackie and Somerville 2025). Tragically, this phenomenon led to the death of one of the flag-raisers, Bristol City fan Paul Lumber, who had been a fundraiser seeking to raise flags for his local area and who fell from a lamppost while hanging flags (Cork 2025).

A November 2025 YouGov poll confirms that, regardless of what motives inspired the original groups to raise flags, most adults surveyed (including those who identify as 'white') regard the widespread raising of the St George's flag (69% of all adults, 67% of white adults, 75% of ethnic minority adults), and to a lesser extent the raising of the

Union flag (63% of all adults, 63% of white adults, 64% of ethnic minority adults) on lampposts and other public locations as (mostly or partially) related to an anti-migrant or anti-ethnic minority message (Smith 2025). However, the YouGov poll questions were posited about abstract symbols and their meanings rather than any contextual appreciation of their impact on specific landscapes. Indeed, the poll only queried the distinction between flags raised on private property and those in public spaces, and makes no distinction between parts of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Also, it is clear that perceptions vary widely, depending on ethnicity and voting choices.

A host of societal anxieties underline this movement, including diffuse questions and concerns regarding what it means to be 'English' and 'British' in today's world, to more specific fears and hatred inspired by conspiracy theories of white replacement and immigrant criminality. The result is that English and British flags, and also Welsh and Scottish flags, are now emblazoned in many public spaces and residential areas across the UK.

I would contend that flag-raising and flag-removal has particular connotations for the Anglo-Welsh borderlands (see also Williams, this volume). An ingredient of the flag raising protests so far has been the use of English flags to assert identities in Wales. This is part of an ongoing English tradition of complaining about Welsh flags (Y Ddraig Goch) and the Welsh language appearing on public signage whilst demanding England's flag should fly! Painting St George's flags on Welsh roundabouts were an additional feature of the 'Raising the Colours' protests (e.g. Evans 2025; Hill 2025).

Welsh people's reactions have been varied. One extreme reaction has been anti-English graffiti daubed on roundabouts in response to the English flags appearing (e.g. Evans and Ferguson 2025). An alternative reaction in some Welsh communities has been the forging of community identity through participation in the clean up of English nationalist vandalism (Buckland 2025). A distinctive strategy was taken in Pontllanfraith near Caerphilly where a road bridge was afforded with flags of all nations served as a strategy of resistance and counter-protest (Johnson 2025). In the Flintshire and Wrexham areas, I witnessed how English, Welsh and Union flags were raised rapidly on road bridges close to the modern borderline but then they were swiftly removed by authorities or others. This short-lived 'flag war' along the English/Welsh border makes it difficult to track their frequency and impact, but it does reveal that the most intensely contested locations for flags will not retain them for long.

The scale of these 'flag wars' seems to have abated (as of December 2025), in part due to the change of the seasons and the focus shifting to Christmas decorations on homes and lighting installed on lampposts. Still, this phenomenon reiterates an argument I made about the Welsh/English border before, namely, the latent potential of borders, including ancient linear earthworks perceived as such, to be co-opted into modern political discourses and protests by being appended or associated with new symbols and signs. As 'sleeping giants' (or dragons), these ancient monuments can be rapidly

awoken as powerful means of articulating symbolic violence alongside other simplified narratives of national identity and national origins rooted in the deep-time past. The choices of major road intersections, as well as housing estates, to install flags, bearing symbols of faith and fantasy rooted in the medieval past, reveal the role of ephemeralia in contested attempts to territorialise the Anglo-Welsh borderlands (Ray and Bapty 2016: 369; Ray 2020; Williams 2020a). Following the summer 2025 'flag wars' along the border, it is notable that two areas where Welsh flags have been maintained without removal each coincide with the lines of the early medieval 'great dykes': Wat's Dyke along the A541 at Y Cae Ras, and Offa's Dyke along the A539 at Plas Madoc, Ruabon. Whether consciously or not, the difficult, contested histories of these localities, so long simmering and avoided by authorised heritage discourse, are brought to the surface by those raising Y Ddraig Goch (Ray and Bapty 2016: 375). While this spatial association might be purely coincidental, and it should be noted that there is a wider inverse relationship between where flags endure and where they are most contested between different groups along the modern border thus are rapidly removed (cf. Howell 2020), at these locations the Welsh flags serve as symbols of resistance to English flag fever, set in the heart of Welsh communities close to the modern border and in spatial association with traces of far older linear monuments. Notwithstanding this specific association, the ongoing popular anxieties and debates about anti-immigrant and anti-minority politics illustrated by flag-raising shows how important our robust academic discussions of the interplay between walls and dykes past and present are to ongoing public conversations about history, archaeology and heritage in today's world (Ray 2020; Hanscam and Buchanan 2023).

Rationale and review

This sets the stage for the motivation and continued importance of this open-access publication venue on linear monuments, frontiers, borderlands. A peer-reviewed academic publication venue for interdisciplinary research on linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands, *Offa's Dyke Journal* is edited and produced under the auspices of the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory supported and funded by the University of Chester and the Offa's Dyke Association. Published online without charge to authors or readers by JAS Arqueología and with paperback copies sold and distributed by Archaeopress, the journal is supported by an expert editorial board. Each article is peer-reviewed by multiple specialists (bar Introductions and 'classics revisited' articles), although here we adopt alternative editorial strategies for a report and interview (see below). *ODJ* here reaches its seventh volume aiming to provide a venue for researchers, scholars, students and the general public to learn about the latest work on frontiers, borderlands and linear monuments.

Volume 7 contains this Introduction plus seven further contributions: original articles, interim reports and a structured interview. First, we publish an updated evaluation of fieldwork on the Danevirke by Tummuscheit and Witte. Building on their earlier article in the pages of this journal (Tummuscheit and Witte 2019), they reinterpret

the monument's eighth-century phases 4 and 5: the Palisade Rampart and Fieldstone Wall. Next, Ravest and Williams present interim observations on a drone photographic survey on critical sections of Offa's Dyke, suggesting new interpretations of its design, placement and landscape context. Clarke presents an original investigation for localised clusters of metal-detected finds in the Anglo-Welsh borderlands, which might reveal important locales in the early medieval landscape. Building on these new investigations of early medieval dykes, volume 7 presents the first-ever evaluation of Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke on early maps by Robert Silvester. Shifting to twentieth-century receptions of early medieval linear earthworks, a 'classics revisited' article by Bode evaluates Offa and Offa's Dyke in the poetry of Geoffrey Hill. The review of the contemporary archaeology of Offa's Dyke is presented by Howard Williams who considers the Dyke to be a modern-era assemblage of traces and material cultures, installations and monument. Finally, Downham and Sherman consider the Wirral peninsula as a liminal landscape; it was an early medieval frontier zone as well as operating as a distinctive locality between nations in today's world. Together, the contributions illustrate the interdisciplinary breadth and dynamism of research on frontiers, borderlands and linear earthworks connecting the disciplines of archaeology, history and heritage studies.

New research on linear monuments

While *Offa's Dyke Journal* is a unique open-access journal dedicated to linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands, but it is important to recognise the many other strands of new research tackling this theme published in other venues. This section surveys a selection of this work published in recent years, augmenting previous annual reviews and illustrating themes connected to the work of the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory and the contents of volume 7.

Dating multi-phased linears: the Darband Wall of southern Uzbekistan

Stančo *et al.* (2025) conduct a new investigation of the 1.1km-long Darband Wall in southern Uzbekistan. Fortified by towers and adapting its trajectory in response to the local topography, it straddles the watershed between the valleys of Kichik Ura Daray and Sheradbad Darya/Machay Darya and thus guards a critical pass between the historic regions of Sogiana and Bactria. Ten new radiocarbon dates inform their argument that it was likely first constructed in the early or middle third century BC under Seleucid or early Greco-Bactrian rule. In this first phase it was a stone wall on top of a pakhsa platform, further fortified by a fore-wall and ditch. Crucially, the investigation reversed the likely original orientation of the monument – it was built to be defended from the west (Sogiana) against those approaching from the east (Bactria). It was then later rebuilt in two successive phases in the first and second centuries AD, perhaps associated with the expansion of the Kushan Empire. These constructions augmented the stone wall with a mud brick construction, seemingly reversing the orientation of the monument to face westwards with the original ditch in-filled. While the precise

historical circumstances for the building and rebuilding remain elusive, the projects shows the necessity of integrating dating programmes with stratigraphic excavation data rather than relying purely on morphological and construction styles for dating linear monuments. While clearly a military structure in part, blocking a major transport route between territories, the precise circumstances of creation, use and reuse of this wall remain unclear. This requires us to be sceptical of equating this monument to a sustained militarised border without considering its biography of use, including phases of disuse, as well as anticipating multiple and shifting functionalities and significances.

Digging and dating linears, their associated infrastructure, and their afterlives: the Long Walls of Mongolia

Considering the complex 'Medieval Wall System' (MWS) of tenth to thirteenth-century northern China and parts of Mongolia, Hanks *et al* (2024) re-date the 'Northern Line', which runs for 737km, to the tenth to early twelfth century Kitan/Liao Dynasty, earlier than the twelfth to early thirteenth century Jin (Jurchen) dynasty as previously thought (Shelach-Lavi *et al.* 2025: 866). Hypothesising they were built to control the movements of nomadic groups within the steppe, they investigate clusters of enclosed features deploying pedestrian survey, archaeological geophysics (fluxgate gradiometry and ground penetrating radar), soil augering and targeted excavation (Shelach-Lavi *et al.* 2025). The research revealed evidence of intensive occupation and a possible military function to the structures. Excavations of the trench line of the monument elsewhere revealed the composition of the wall – made of earthen walls and trenches (Shelach-Lavi *et al.* 2025: 855). As well as noteworthy for the integrated methodology which challenges previous assumptions that these enclosures had been corrals for animals, the research also shows an awareness of the need for interdisciplinary research and considering the potential multifunctional roles of linear monuments as symbolic and choreographing movement of people and their herds through the steppe (Shelach-Lavi *et al.* 2025). They also identify the repeated use of the ruins as a place for burial in the post-Mongol period, suggesting they 'continued to be imbued with meaning across generations' (Shelach-Lavi *et al.* 2025: 865). This project is therefore innovative in both its theoretical approach to the function and biography of frontiers and in the field methodological approaches applied to linear monuments and their associated features and structures.

Mapping linears: the River Suck-Hind tochailt

Moving to Ireland, a new study charts the line of a mid-twelfth-century earthwork described in the *Annals of Tigernach* for 1139 (Curley and Timoney 2024). They argue this *tochailt* traversed 2.17km of a c. 5.8km course. The authors postulate that it was one of a series of territorial fortifications built by Irish ruler Toirrdelbach Ó Conchobair. It aimed to flood the landscape between the rivers Suck and Hind as a royal project in communal labour comprising three lengths of earthworks between the rivers and turloughs to create what I would call a 'hydraulic frontier' (see Williams 2021). Charting the possible link of the *tochailt*, the study suggests that, by linking water courses, it afforded a response to raids from rivals, Torrdelbach Ó Conchobair

was aiming to defend and monitor mobility into and out between the traditional territory of the kings of Connacht and southern Roscommon. It may have also had a secondary function as a water course between the rivers (Curley and Timoney 2024: 91–93). The study illustrates the need for detailed field observation and careful consideration of multiple forms and functionalities linked to hydrology when interpreting linear monuments.

Rethinking linears as magical thresholds: The Walls of Benin

In rethinking acts of royal power to control mobility through the landscape, we next turn to a reconsideration of the Walls of Benin, Nigeria, drawing on hitherto unpublished excavation data (Evans 2025). Heavily damaged by subsequent urban development in the Nigerian city, we are reliant on the work of South African archaeologist A.J.H. Goodwin who investigated the linear earthworks of Benin City in 1954–1956. This data is used to advance the interpretation of earthworks and their elaborate gateways found across West Africa between the mid-first millennium BC and late second millennium AD. Evans regards these monumental works as multifunctional thresholds associatd with both towns and territories. He argues the walls could serve as defenses, to regulate mobility for tax and trade, but also were deployed over generations to afford magical protection to communities from spiritual dangers.

Applying these ideas to the Benin and Ishan earthworks, amounting to around 16,000km of linear monumentality in total, Evans (2025) argues that they were organised in cellular clusters. Their scale was enhanced with thorny hedges and sacred trees/groves. As Goodwin's preliminary excavations reveal, they were connected to shrines and symbolically charged with shrines and ritual deposits affording spiritual protection. In this fashion, the Benin earthworks controlled access to land and people and may have held complex cosmological significances through their military construction and use. Moreover, it seems the earthworks are attributed to social memories, including perceptions that they were magically bolstered thresholds, and resulting in the deeds of famed past rulers. In this way, linear monuments accrete social memories for their inhabitants and visitors alike. Evans provides us with yet another example where we cannot differentiate between religious and military interpretations, indeed to do so might be unhelpful and misleading, and imposing a Western rational intentionality on complex monuments built over time for various purposes and significances. Their work inspires our interpretations of the multifunctional and overlapping significances of linear earthworks. As Evans states: these walls were 'heterogeneous, incorporative, generative compositions of art and architecture that played a number of closely interconnected and evolving roles in the livies of Bini communities, past and present' (Evans 2025: 329).

Linear ritual practices: Monte Sierpe

Linear monuments take many forms. This particular example is a 1.5km-long segmented alignment of c. 5200 holes, between 14 and 22m wide, in the foothills of the Andes from Mont Sierpe, on the north side of the Pisco Valley, southern Peru. Dating from the eleventh to early sixteenth centuries AD, its study shows the effective application of

both drone reconnaissance (see also Ravest and Williams this volume) and sedimentary analysis to understanding a cumulative monument linked to accounting and exchange (Bongers *et al.* 2025). The holes resemble local *khipu* – Inca knotted-string devices used for record-keeping – and this monumental version might have resulted from its use as a barter marketplace and for tribute collection.

The study is a solid example of the application of field methodologies to rule out alternative explanations in terms of defence, water collection, fog capture, burial or mining. The landscape context and data from excavation points in favour of recognising the monument as a node in the coast-highland and north-west/south-east valley-connecting trade routes. Here, lined holes were used to deposit goods for exchange and/or tribute in highly ritualised practices. Their regular arrangement and segmentation might have assisted in counting and sorting goods. Each section may have been connected to specific social groups. In addition to the methodological implications, I would add the potential of considering further the mnemonics of this linear monument: as it developed it not only facilitated social and economic integration through the exchanges taking place, it monumentalised and recorded the history of these exchanges.

Linear heritage: Hadrian's Wall and the US/Mexican border

For our final review, we shift our consideration to the heritage and public archaeology of linear monuments. Hanscam and Buchanan (2023) pick up the challenge we set in 2020 by pointing out the limited development of a 'public archaeology of frontiers and borderlands' (Clarke *et al.* 2020). Disappointingly, the article does not address many of the key insights and themes for public archaeology explored in that collection (e.g. Ray 2020). Still, they focus on criticising the often uncritical comparison of hard borders past and present mediated by their materiality.

Hanscam and Buchanan (2023) identify how the popular perception and political evocation of Hadrian's Wall constitutes an archetypal frontier work removed from the complexity of scholars' narratives on the monument and its landscape context. Likewise, they point out that the messy reality of the US/Mexican border is not reflected in its iconic, simplistic and divisive use in political discourse and popular culture. They contend that the materiality of ancient linears help to perpetuate these modern fantasies about the power and durability of 'hard borders'. They argue that archaeology has power to challenge these misconceptions, including by shedding light on the humanitarian impact of frontiers, but also to challenge wider narratives of borders, frontiers and borderlands. Still, part of the limitation is the fixation on Roman frontiers as single-phase constructions. Another is the retention of a fixed ancient-modern dichotomy that prevents consideration of work done on later prehistoric and early medieval linear monuments, as well as those frontiers, borderlands and linears from other times and places with longer biographies of use and reuse, to help problematise and complicate the seductively familiar and simplistic notions of linears as 'hard borders'. Here, fictional materialities might also be more help than

hindrance, as I have addressed for *The Walking Dead* (Williams 2020b). The authors segue into a discussion of the need for archaeologists to be politically informed and active, if not activist, and this certainly applies to the archaeology of linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands. Indeed, this issue has been a repeated theme addressed in this and previous Introductions to the *Offa's Dyke Journal* (e.g. Williams 2020a; see also Ray 2020).

Collaboratory activities, 2025

The Offa's Dyke Collaboratory supported research and knowledge transfer for linear earthworks, frontiers and borderlands through 2025 by creating this open-access academic journal and by maintaining the Collaboratory website and blog (see below). In addition, the Leverhulme Trust funded 'Making the March' project continued to involve fieldwork and analysis of the early medieval Anglo-Welsh borderland including two co-convenors of the Collaboratory: Andy Seaman (Cardiff University) is Principal Investigator supported by (among others) Keith Ray as Senior Research Fellow (Ray 2025a). A further critical development is a new heritage interpretation for Offa's Dyke at Pinner's Hole, Knighton, near the Offa's Dyke Centre and developed by co-convenor Dave McGlade as Chairman of the ODA (Offa's Dyke Association) (McGlade 2025; see also Williams 2025c). The initiation and development of the first research agenda for the early medieval frontier including Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke is a further important Collaboratory-instigated development for the ODA (Ray 2025b).

Frontier conferences and events

Academic conferences in 2025 involved Collaboratory members and convenors presenting their research. For example, a four-session theme on 'The Making of the Early Medieval Frontiers: Contesting Lands in the Early Medieval Frontier' took place in July 2025 at the Leeds International Medieval Congress, organised by Collaboratory co-convenor Andy Seaman and Collaboratory member Charles Insley (IMC 2025). Twelve presentations explored fresh archaeological and historical investigations of early medieval frontiers from Britain and across Europe. Howard Williams addressed the significance early medieval linear earthworks when he presented at the National Monuments Service Eighth Annual Archaeology Conference at Trinity College, Dublin, on 18 October 2025. The conference theme tackled Within/Without: the Archaeology of Partitions. Williams presented a talk titled 'Dykes as deeds? Re-evaluating linear earthworks from early medieval Britain' (Williams 2025d). Also, his work on the public archaeology of Offa's Dyke (showcasing the work of charities, heritage practitioners and local enthusiasts along the Anglo-Welsh borderlands, plus the art of Dan Llewellyn Hall, John G. Swogger and others) was presented at the Theoretical Archaeology Group conference at the University of York, 15 December 2025 in a talk titled 'Walking Lines and Marking Times through the Linear Earthworks of the Anglo-Welsh Borderlands' (Williams 2025e).

In addition to these academic venues, an open day to facilitate coordinating efforts and fund raising for the conservation of the early eighteenth-century Trevor Chapel next to Trevor Hall, Garth, Llangollen took place on 20 September, organised by Suzanne Evans. Given the chapel is situated near the line of the Offa's Dyke Path and close to the northernmost intersection of Path and Dyke, Howard Williams was invited to present a talk at this event on the topic 'Offa's Dyke: Past and Present'. He highlighted the potential of Offa's Dyke and the national trail to connect up sites like the chapel to the deep-time story of the Anglo-Welsh borderlands from prehistory to the present (Williams 2025f; see also Ray 2020).

Digital dykes

As mentioned above, in addition to producing this journal, the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory uses digital media in the form of a website with information, resources and a blog, to help sustain reflections and critiques about linear earthworks, frontiers and borderlands research. In 2025, via the Collaboratory blog, posts have addressed public archaeology and heritage interpretation along the Anglo-Welsh borderlands, offering critique and constructive recommendations. The heritage interpretation of prehistoric burial mounds on the line of the Offa's Dyke Path was evaluated for Bwlch y Parc, Llanarmon-yn-Iâl and commended (Williams 2025g). Focusing on the contemporary archaeology of Offa's Dyke, a further post addressed the miscellaneous material cultures that accrue along the line of the Path and Dyke between Craignant and Bronygarth (Williams 2025h) and another considered a distinctive personal memorial created upon a fragment of dry stone wall beside the Offa's Dyke Path (Williams 2025i). A stark critique of the neglect of the Pillar of Eliseg and Offa's Dyke (as well as arguably Wat's Dyke too) in the UNESCO Pontcysyllte World Heritage Site was presented (Williams 2025j). The potential strategic importance of Melverley for the Mercian frontier was considered (Williams 2025k). Finally, a pair of posts tackled the heritage interpretation of Wat's Dyke: 'excavating' an old panel, formerly part of the Ruabon Heritage Trail, near Wynnstay Park (Williams 2025l) and critiquing the new attempts at heritage interpretation by the National Trust at Erddig (Williams 2025m).

Conclusion

Linear monuments of different scales and characters are but one among many interleaving strategies by which people past and present have subdivided and transformed their world. Built, used, discarded and reutilised over time, they tell us about both changing strategies of landscape organisation, control and experience in past times, as well as present perceptions and concerns with dividing the land. Shedding fresh insights on the evolving spatial and temporal diversity of linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands, and their significances in today's world, the *Offa's Dyke Journal* now comprises fifty-seven articles spread over seven volumes. In this way, the journal brings new research on some of our most extensive, monumental and yet enigmatic monuments to scholars and students as well as to the wider public attention and for public benefit.

Peer-review statement

All articles in previous issues of the *Offa's Dyke Journal* have been subjected to rigorous and critical evaluations by multiple peer-reviewers each with relevant disciplinary expertise in history, archaeology and heritage with the exception of the Introductions and 'classics revisited' articles. Likewise, for this volume, the articles by Pauline Clarke, Robert Silvester and Howard Williams were subjected to full peer-review, with Kate Waddington of the Editorial Board who generously served as stand-in editor to handle the peer review and evaluation of the article by Howard Williams. The remaining five articles were subject to different editorial approaches in response to their character and context as follows:

- The Introduction received invaluable feedback from Pauline Clarke and Meggie Reid.
- Astrid Tummuscheit and Frauke Witte's contribution is an interim review of fieldwork first published in a German archaeological magazine, translated by the authors and subject to fresh review and revisions by them in response to feedback from the Editor and one member of the Editorial Board, Clare Downham.
- Julian Ravest and Howard Williams composed an interim fieldwork report, here subject to open review by Lena Delaney;
- Christoph Bode delivered a 'classics revisited' essay, re-titled re-edited and revised by the author following feedback from the Editor;
- Clare Downham and Paul Sherman contribute a structured interview, recorded, transcribed and revised by the Editor and augmented with images and citations provided by the authors.

For each article, the Journal's proof-reader, Siobhan Wordingham, provided constructive feedback and invaluable insights.

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Howard Williams, Professor of Archaeology, University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester CH1 4BJ, UK
Email: howard.williams@chester.ac.uk

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New Results and Considerations regarding the Fieldstone Wall of the Eighth-Century Danevirke

Astrid Tummuscheit and Frauke Witte

The article examines the origins and development of Danevirke, a monumental border fortification in what is now the area of Schleswig in northern Germany. Archaeological evidence shows that its origins date back to the fifth/sixth century AD and that the complex was expanded several times. Particular attention is paid to the Fieldstone Wall, whose construction and dating provide new insights into the transfer of knowledge and political relations between the Danes and the Carolingians. The results show that the expansion of Danevirke was closely linked to the power struggles and threats of the time.

Keywords: Danevirke, Fieldstone Wall, linear fortification, early Middle Ages

Introduction

The Royal Frankish Annals report for the year AD 808 that after destroying the emporium of Reric, Godfrey, King of the Danes, returned to Hedeby and established a fortification at the border of his kingdom. This is the oldest written testimony of what we know today as the Danevirke:

He [Godfrey] along with the entire army, went by ship to the harbour/port of Sliesthorp [Hedeby]. He stayed there for several days, and decided that the borders of his realm towards Saxony were to be fortified with a rampart in such way that from the eastern sea, which is called Ostarsalt [the Baltic Sea] to the western sea [the North Sea], along the entire northern bank of the River Eider, a wall should be constructed with only one gate through which wagons and riders could leave and enter. After giving this task to his commanders, he returned home (ARF 88, authors translation).

Godfrey's decision to build this monumental structure is thus mentioned in written sources. It has, however, been difficult to find a corresponding construction phase in the archaeological record (Figure 1).

Based on archaeological research we know for certain that the origins of the Danevirke – the 30km long defensive structure crossing the Isthmus of Schleswig – date back much further than its first mention in AD 808. Through analyses of various archaeological excavations carried out between 1861 and 2024, it is now possible to gain detailed insights into the history of the Danevirke and its gradual expansion which is characterised by a centuries-long, highly complex and, in some cases, still unexplained construction history, which spans from the period between the Late Roman Iron Age/

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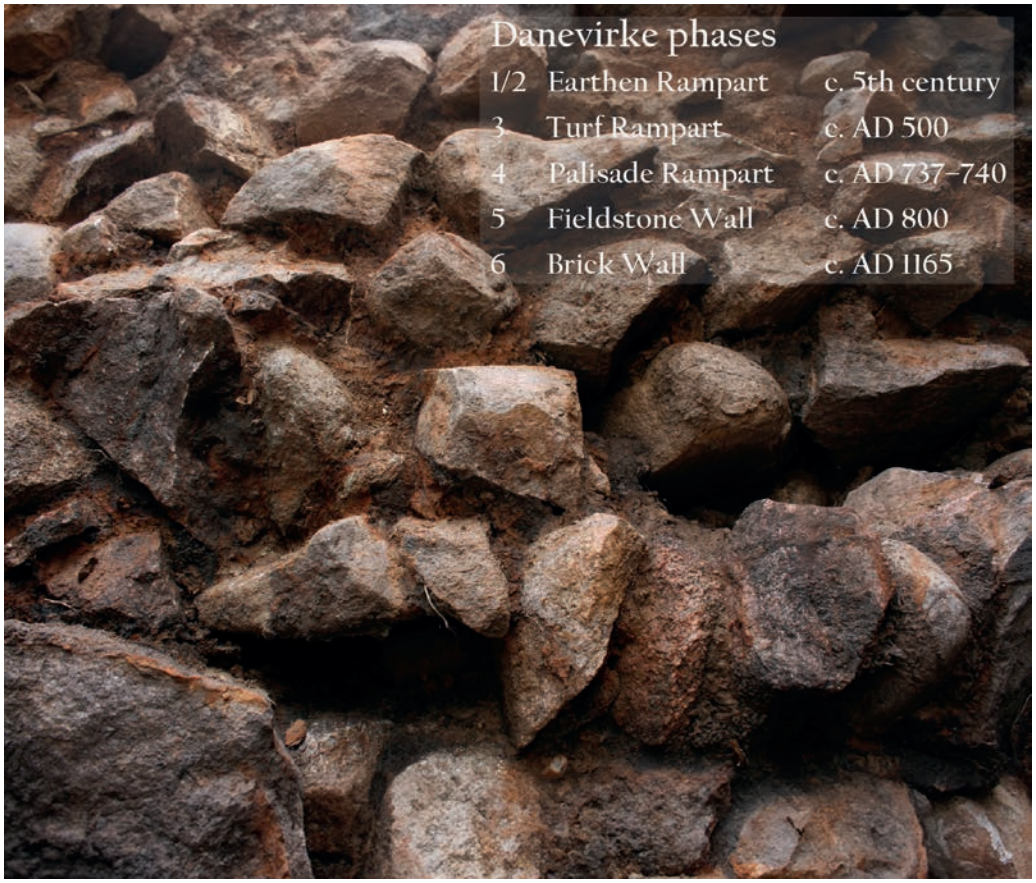

Figure 1: A section of the rear of the Fieldstone Wall in Dannewerk-Rothenkrug during the 2013 excavation. The fieldstones often show signs of having been worked and are set in locally sourced yellow clay (Photo: ©ALSH, Astrid Tummuscheit). The phases of the Danevirke overlain

Migration Period (fifth and sixth centuries AD) through the Early Middle Ages/Viking Age to the High Middle Ages. This sequence was outlined in an earlier article in this journal (Tummuscheit and Witte 2019; see also Tummuscheit and Witte 2025).

The background: An eighth-century AD palisade of timber (and stone)

Following its initial fifth-century construction, after a long period of inactivity and decay, the Danevirke was expanded and reinforced in the eighth century to an unprecedented extent. The main rampart, originally an earthen fortification which was partially destroyed by erosion at that time, was strengthened with a massive free-standing frontage of oak timbers. The northern and eastern ramparts were added to the now significantly longer Danevirke system and built in the same palisade style. Where lowlands had to be crossed, large box-shaped structures of oak were built as a foundation to cope with the marshy terrain. Finally, a narrow passage of the Schlei (a 42km long inlet of the Baltic Sea) at the

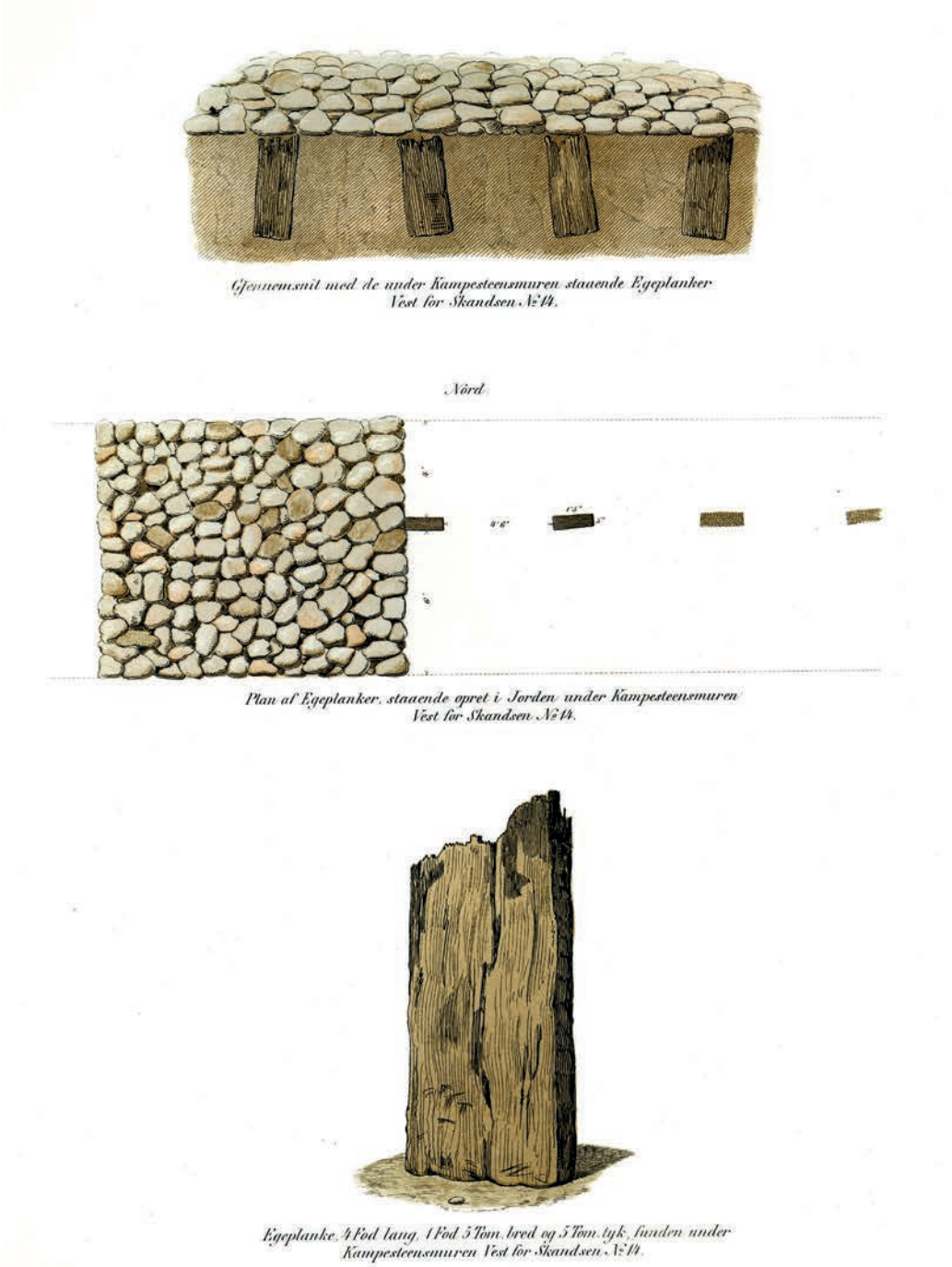

Figure 2: Oak planks beneath the Fieldstone Wall. The posts of the Palisade Rampart in the documentation of an excavation west of Redoute XIV. The drawing is a lithograph by Jakob Kornerup from 1861, plate IV, and originally contained more than these three plate illustrations. (It is published in black and white in the form shown here in Andersen 1998, 41, fig. 19)

Figure 3: On the single-phase Northern Rampart of the Danevirke, H. H. Andersen found remains of stone paving together with the post holes of the Palisade Rampart as early as 1971. Scan from the report by H. H. Andersen 1971 (photos accompanying report FHM 1677)

Reesholm peninsula was protected with an offshore work or 'sea barrier' in the form of a 1.6km-long structure consisting of a series of 4.5 by 5m wooden boxes.

Due to the good preservation of wood in occasionally waterlogged environments, dendrochronology was used to determine that the trees used were felled between AD 737 and 740 (Kramer 1984: 347) and were then certainly used in construction during this period or very soon afterwards. Within a few years, towards the end of the AD 730s, a massive wooden fortification consisting of several sections and measuring a total of 8.5km in length was erected – the so-called palisade rampart (Figure 2)

In areas where the timber palisade had decayed – apart from few burnt remains of the outer planking – mainly indirect traces of the load-bearing palisade posts were documented during various excavations. At intervals of about 2m, post holes about 1.5m deep were found, in which oak posts, wedged with stones, originally stood. This constructional trait was also found on the Northern Rampart and as early as 1971 H.H. Andersen discovered in connection with it remains of a stone paving (Andersen 1971; 1998: 97–107; Madsen 1976: 12–19) (Figure 3). Due to its poor state of preservation and the lack of comparative

Figure 4: The Fieldstone Wall during excavation in Dannewerk-Rothenkrug in 2013, viewed from the northwest. The exceptionally good preservation of the rear side is due to its covering by the older rampart of heather turf sods (black-grey material) behind it and the filling of the rear wall construction pit with sheer yellow clay (on the right in the section). (Photograph: ©ALSH, Astrid Tummuscheit)

examples, the interpretation of the stone pavement had yet to be achieved. It was only when similar stones were found under the Fieldstone Wall during excavations in 2013 that their function could be determined more than 40 years later.

Solving the puzzle – a stone pavement beneath the Fieldstone Wall

During the excavation in 2013, parts of the very well-preserved backside of the Fieldstone Wall (to be described below) were also uncovered down to its base (Figure 4). It was a top priority to avoid undermining, which could have led to the collapse of the wall. Therefore, we dug vertically down the wall surface, supposedly to the lowest layer of stones. It is thanks to the attentiveness (and curiosity!) of an employee that it did not remain at that, because when he probed into the black heather sods under the wall, there were far more field stones that lay deeper, slightly further inwards and therefore not initially visible.

Closer examination revealed that these stones belonged to a slightly recessed, neatly laid pavement beneath the later wall (Figure 5). Like those of the Fieldstone Wall, the stones were placed in a layer of unfired clay, which, however, was not yellow, but blue-grey (Tummuscheit and Witte 2019: 96). This finding corresponded very well with the stone paving described above, which was discovered by Andersen on the Northern Rampart in

Figure 5: In 2013, traces of a stone pavement were found in the Main Rampart, together with large post holes. The pavement was later covered by the Fieldstone Wall (Photograph: ©ALSH, Astrid Tummuscheit)

1971, and – as there – can be seen in connection with the older wooden palisade. Since the neatly laid stones have so far only been found north i.e. 'behind' the row of posts, it is likely to be a fortified walkway behind the actual palisade.

Further evidence of this feature was discovered in 2024 by the authors, approximately 250m south-west of the gate excavation, also in the main rampart of the Danevirke. During a re-excavation of the trenches of Herbert Jankuhn and Günther Haseloff from 1936 (Jankuhn 1937), the same recessed stones were found under the Fieldstone Wall. They were also set in blue-grey instead of yellow clay. They also represent the remains of the paved walkway belonging to the wooden palisade of the AD 730s, which later served as the basis for the construction of the Fieldstone Wall.

This structure was previously unknown at the Danevirke and changes our understanding of this construction phase in the early eighth century. It is a new discovery that is also unknown from other sites. Furthermore, we have no information from written sources regarding who was responsible for this reinforcement. This major expansion demonstrates, however, a strong authority that must be seen in connection with the development of royal power in Denmark.

The Fieldstone Wall

It is difficult to determine how long the wooden palisade of the AD 730s remained in use. The archaeological record shows that the Fieldstone Wall, an even more ambitious construction project made of stone, replaced the palisade. This clearly referred to the wooden predecessor, as the oak posts, at least some of which were still standing, were integrated into a wall approximately 4km long, 3m wide and equally high, consisting of an estimated 20 million field stones, whose central longitudinal axis was formed by the older row of posts. The wall consisted of two well-built vertical stone façades while the interior was built throughout of clay and rubble ('shell wall'). Mortar made from unfired clay served as a binding agent. On the front and the back of the wall, the stones were laid repeatedly in a herringbone pattern *(opus spicatum)*. This was probably used less for aesthetic reasons than for structural reasons. A survey of the stone material showed that several of the stones had been dressed into specific shapes, giving them protrusions, projections and points. Presumably, this treatment was intended to give the rather rounded glacial erratics better grip in the wall structure. In addition, on some occasions longer carved stones had been inserted as a means of stabilisation, acting as wall anchors between the outer shells and the wall interior. Finally, during a number of excavations, several post holes were found along the wall-front, suggesting a wooden revetment ('Holzverkleidung') of the south-facing façade. However, it was only during the excavation of the gate at Dannewerk-Rothenkrug that it was shown that these had been added later. This could mean that it only became apparent later on that the unfired clay mortar could not withstand the weather conditions in these latitudes and had to be protected by wooden cladding.

On both sides of the gate (Figure 6), in front of the Fieldstone Wall, there was a sloping embankment made of densely packed fieldstones set in an artificial clay bed. This construction is believed to date from the same period as the Fieldstone Wall and was probably intended primarily to visually enhance its monumentality.

The dating of the Fieldstone Wall

The stratigraphy of the Main Wall shows that the Fieldstone Wall was younger than the wooden palisade of the AD 730s and not – as previously assumed – a contemporary component of the same construction. The fact that these were two separate structures built at different times is further emphasised by the situation on the Northern Rampart, where the same palisade post holes were found with the stone paving, but no Fieldstone Wall.

At the Main Wall, the fieldstone phase referred to its predecessor in several aspects. For example, the old row of palisade posts became the central axis of the Fieldstone Wall and, where it still existed, was integrated into the wall. In several places, oak timbers that were still standing left cavities in the masonry after the wood had decayed. In at least one case, field stones laid on top sealed an older, already filled post hole. The

Figure 6: The ruins of the Fieldstone Wall, which were particularly badly looted at the front, seen from the southwest across the gate opening. In the background is the modern road Am Ochsenweg, which crosses the Danevirke here (Photograph: ©ALSH, Astrid Tummuscheit)

palisade post must have already decayed or been removed. The fact that the builders of the Fieldstone Wall based their work on the older structure can also be seen in the adoption of the northern(rear) edge of the stone paving belonging to the palisade. Although the Fieldstone Wall protrudes about 20cm out of the paving at the points examined, its alignment with the older structure is unmistakable. The Fieldstone Wall, i.e. its components made of glacial deposits and unfired clay found in the surrounding area, cannot be dated by itself. It is undoubtedly younger than the wooden palisade, which dates back to the AD 730s. At the same time, the direct reference to and orientation towards the older structure makes it seem impossible that there could be too great a time gap (of centuries) between the two. For a comparable palisade rampart, the older Olgerdige from around AD 30–130 near Tinglev (Denmark), about 60 km north of the Danevirke, for example, maintenance measures have been recorded for at least 100 years (Christensen 2023: 38). Based on the lifespan of the oak wood on the Danevirke and regular maintenance of the palisade, it can be concluded that the construction of the Fieldstone Wall could have taken place a few decades later at the earliest. At present, however, its precise date within the eighth century remains uncertain.

An unique monumental stone structure in the North

Until the eleventh century AD, there was no tradition of building with stone in the Danevirke area. Houses, fences, bridges, and fortifications were built exclusively with timber. There were no known constructions like the monumental Fieldstone Wall in the surrounding region.

In contrast to the lowlands of the Jutlandic peninsula, suitable building materials were available further north, which had already led to the development of older stone building traditions. Stone structures in Sweden and Norway were built using dry stone walls without the use of mortar. The characteristic, reccurring *opus spicatum* of the Fieldstone Wall of the Danevirke, is, however, not known there. The Scandinavian stone structures are therefore not suitable as models for the Fieldstone Wall.

During this period, the Danevirke served primarily to defend the border against the Saxons in the south, but also against the Carolingians, who under Charlemagne attempted to extend their influence beyond the River Elbe to the north in the late eighth/early ninth century AD. Written sources indicate contacts between the 'Dani' and the Franks as early as in the eighth century AD, and particularly in the first half of the ninth century AD, there were interactions in which envoys from the King of the Danes also experienced the monumental architecture in the Carolingian centres of power.

Whether ninth-century AD Carolingian masonry occurs also north of the River Elbe in parts of the Church of Bonifatius, in Schenefeld, Steinburg district, approximately 50km south of the Danevirke, as suggested in older research is now considered highly controversial (Kramer 1981).

Further south, the late eighth and ninth centuries AD can be regarded as a period of revival of monumental stone construction north of the Alps between Antiquity and the Middle Ages, but there are still many unanswered questions in research on Carolingian masonry techniques. In a compilation of fifty buildings between Hildesheim and Geneva published in 2016 (Papajanni and Ley 2016), the example of the Niedermünster in Regensburg (Papajanni and Ley 2016: 233–239; Wintergerst 2019: 34–49) is cited. Here remains of walls from the eighth century AD were excavated which, due to the use of *opus spicatum*, are comparable to the construction of the Danevirke Fieldstone Wall. In general, the herringbone pattern, which originates from Roman building traditions, appears to be a characteristic feature of Carolingian architecture. Examples of the use of anchor stones can also be found in the Carolingian south (e.g. in the monastery of Müstair in Switzerland, eighth century AD).[1] The older research opinion that the Fieldstone Wall of the Danevirke is no older than the eleventh or twelfth century AD due to the *opus spicatum* has now been finally refuted.

[1] Goll J. 2025, Stiftung Pro Kloster St. Johann, Müstair, Switzerland. E-mail to the authors, 2 June.

Figure 7: The illustration shows an attempt to reconstruct the Palisade Rampart (built in the late 730s) based on archaeological findings. Since the post holes with stone wedges were preserved, but the wooden palisade itself was not, we can only speculate about its exact height, construction and appearance. During the excavation, the sediments in the ditch in front of the wall showed clear signs of water influence and also indicate standing water; however, it is questionable whether this water was permanent. (Illustration by Anselm Zielonka, SciComLab)

How the technical knowledge and craftsmanship reached the north is unknown. There is evidence, however, that at the court of Charlemagne, there was an exchange of knowledge among craftsmen 'from all countries on this side of the sea' (Papajanni and Ley 2016: 12; own translation from German). In addition, the Royal Frankish Annals describe envoys of the Danish King Siegfried (father of Godfrey), who visited Charlamagne in AD 782 at the Paderborn Palace/Palatinate, built in AD 776. It is plausible that the inspiration for the construction of the Fieldstone Wall was based on direct contacts and that travelling groups of craftsmen passed on the necessary know-how.

The wall of Godfrey

It is certain that the Danevirke was renovated, enlarged and reinforced in the late AD 730s in a massive wooden construction project (Figure 7). The background to this expansion may have been the expansionist ambitions of Charles Martel, grandfather of Charlemagne, who between AD 718 and 739 directed his efforts against the Frisians and Saxons. In AD 734, the Frisians were defeated and their main territory captured – also in the AD 730s, Charlemagne launched a campaign against the Saxons. Further north, this is likely to have led to unease and uncertainty, triggering the major expansion of the Danevirke. Who was responsible for this expansion is not known.

The situation was different during the following phase of expansion – the building of the Fieldstone Wall. It is impossible to determine exactly when the wall was built. However, archaeological evidence shows that it was erected with reference to the older wooden structure. As explained above, the time span was at least several decades. From AD 772 onwards, Charlemagne's expansion into Saxon territory (Saxon Wars) once again brought him dangerously close to the area of the Danes. It is known from written sources that Charlemagne handed over the Saxon settlement area north of the River Elbe to his Slavic allies, the Abodrites, in AD 804. The conflicts between the Franks and Saxons in the last third of the eighth century AD must have been a real threat of invasion for the Danes. As a result, their king Godfrey fought a preventive war against the Abodrites in AD 808 and, according to the Royal Frankish Annals quoted at the beginning, decided 'that the borders of his realm [...] were to be fortified with a rampart'.

The Fieldstone Wall must be regarded as a specifically planned defensive structure and prestige project, the construction of which required considerable resources in terms of labour and materials over a long period of time. In view of the highly specialised craftsmanship required, which was not available locally, and the scale of this significant structure, its construction can only be attributed to a powerful ruler, as Godfrey is characterised in the sources. The Royal Frankish Annals describe on several occasions a Danish royal power that potentially possessed significant military strength (Andersen 2017: 238–243). In the eyes of the Carolingians, Godfrey was a serious opponent whom they believed capable of undertaking an ambitious and resource-intensive expansion of

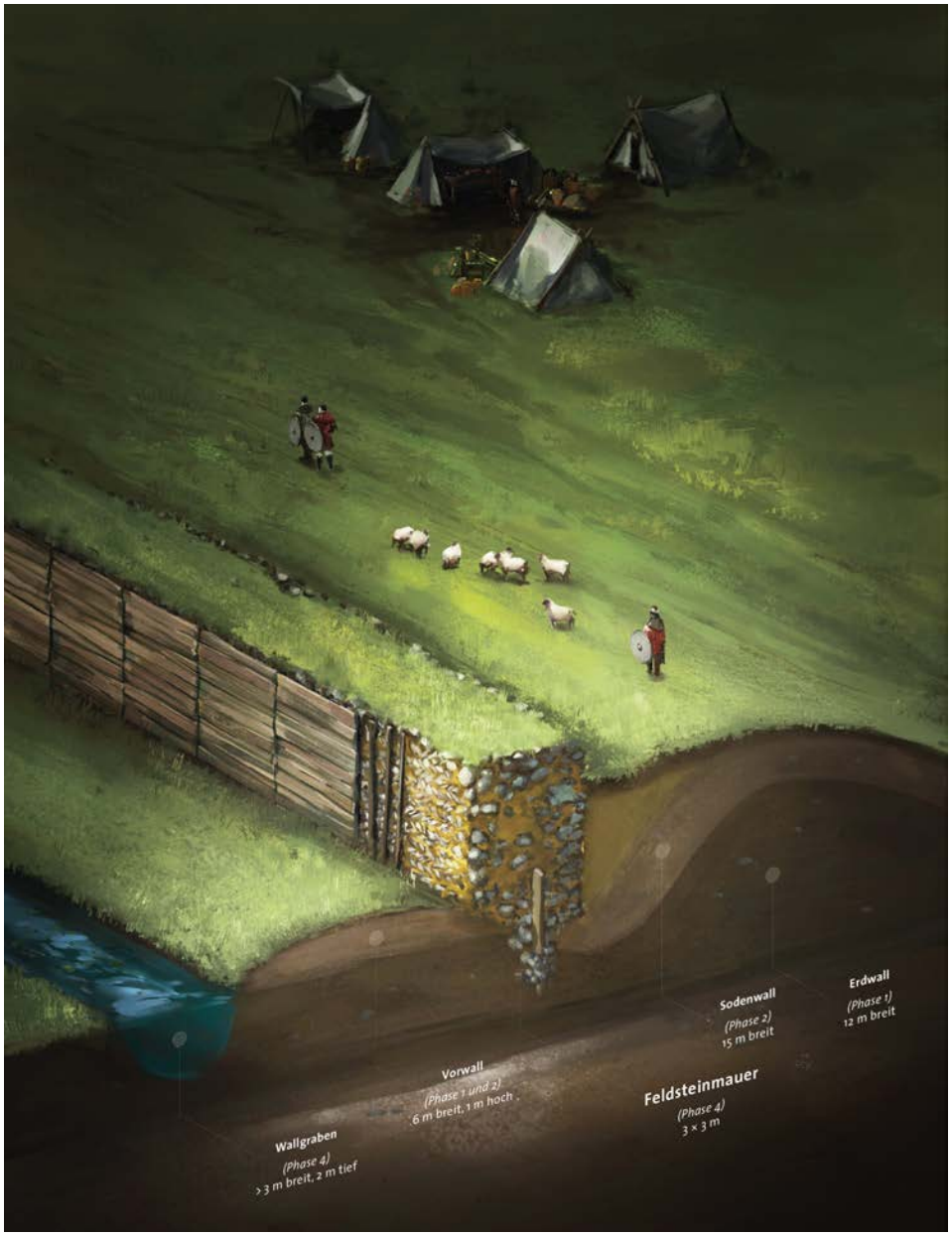

Figure 8: The illustration shows an attempt to reconstruct the Fieldstone Wall (built around 800) based on archaeological findings. The wall was built in front of the older heather Turf Rampart (around 500) and over its direct predecessor, the Palisade Rampart (late 730s). Its post holes with stone wedges remained preserved under the Fieldstone Wall and formed its central axis. After its completion, the wall proved to be sensitive to weather conditions and was therefore covered with wooden cladding on the front. Since the wall crown has not yet been found completely preserved in any excavation, its exact appearance can only be speculated upon. What is certain, however, is that there must have been a covering to protect the clay-stone construction. (Illustration by Anselm Zielonka, SciComLab)

the Danevirke. The uniqueness and monumentality of the Fieldstone Wall fit in with the picture painted by the Royal Frankish Annals of Godfrey and the historical background. The archaeological evidence of the Fieldstone Wall, its stratigraphic connection to the older palisade, and possible Frankish construction design in no way contradict a construction period around AD 800. It is difficult to image that the Royal Frankish Annals refer to other phases in the construction of the Danevirke but have left no traces in the archaeological record. For this reason, only the Fieldstone Wall can be considered the 'Wall of Godfrey' ('Godfredsvold' in Danish or 'Göttrikswall' in German) (Figure 8).

Conclusion

Our fieldwork demonstrated five phases for the Main Rampart. Phases 1/2 and 3 (Earthen Ramparts and Turf Rampart) relate to the fifth/sixth century initial construction of the Danevirke, Phase 4 to an early eighth-century Palisade Rampart, and Phase 5 comprises the Fieldstone Wall, with a concluding medieval Phase 6 (Brick Wall). However, the relationship between Phase 4 and Phase 5 had been unclear. We now postulate two major structures in the eighth century AD that were built several decades apart. Our findings here show that the Palisade Rampart (Phase 4) dated to around AD 740. Meanwhile, the Fieldstone Wall (Phase 5 was built around AD 800) and with some confidence can be called the 'Wall of Godfrey'.

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Astrid Tummuscheit, Archäologisches Landesamt Schleswig-Holstein, Brockdorff-Rantzau-Str. 70, 24837 Schleswig, Germany
Email: astrid.tummuscheit@alsh.landsh.de

Frauke Witte, Museum Sønderjylland, Viden & Samlinger, Arkæologi, Dalgade 7, Dk-6100 Haderslev, Denmark
Email: frwi@msj.dk

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The Welsh Marches and the PAS: Possible 'productive' sites and their significance

Pauline M. Clarke

The Portable Antiquities Scheme has resulted in the recording of over 1.8 million artefacts, predominantly of metal and from all archaeological periods, which have been found across England and Wales. This corpus has contributed greatly to academic research, one strand of which is the identification of early medieval 'productive' sites. These are potential areas of activity, and this data is particularly pertinent for the identification of early medieval sites, as other evidence – for structures and ceramic use, for example – is scarce. This article seeks to identify such sites across modern borders in the Welsh Marches, an area of little developer-led archaeology. This cross-border approach is still relatively uncommon in archaeology but one which is called for in many current Research Frameworks. The article identifies the sites and discusses their possible purpose and significance, including their relationship to Offa's and Wat's Dykes.

Keywords: Marches, early medieval, site, artefact, border, Wales, Dykes

Introduction

The Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) has generated a repository of 1.8 million recorded items (at the time of writing), and this database has been used extensively in many research projects; currently there are over 1000 of these listed by the PAS. This largely voluntary scheme, created in 1997 and administered now by the British Museum through local officers, encourages anyone who has found artefacts to report them to a local Finds Liaison Officer (FLO) and thus have them added to this freely available database. While the scheme is open to all, in practice most of the items are reported by metal detectorists, who actively seek artefacts: in 2023, 95% of finds came from this group (Lewis 2024: 5). Research utilising this data has resulted in, for example, the Viking and Anglo-Saxon Landscape and Economy project (VASLE), which used detected finds to develop a new national database for finds from the early medieval period across the country, from which 65 'productive' sites were identified and discussed (Richards *et al.* 2008). VASLE used selective data which was additional to the PAS information for specific sites, which this study does not. Some studies use the PAS data to create typologies, such as Martin's (2015) work on early medieval cruciform brooches, of which over half of the examples were drawn from PAS records. Many studies support the identification and exploration of specific sites such as the Viking burial ground at Cumwhitton, Cumbria, excavated following the finding and responsible reporting of a pair of Viking-style oval brooches (Paterson *et al* 2014: 2).

For western Britain in the early medieval period particularly, evidence for structures, burials and occupation sites is scarce, particularly due to the acidic nature of the soils.

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Carver (2019, 77) considered that there was no evidence at all available for the period in Wales, while at the same time highlighting the potential contribution of the PAS data to the understanding of this period. Set against these challenges of survival and recovery, is it then possible to use the PAS data for an area of the Welsh Marches to identify 'productive' sites from the early medieval period? Is the study of such sites indeed valid in the area, as most of the work to date has been undertaken on sites in the south and east of England, with limited studies also on Continental sites (Pestell and Ulmschneider 2003)?

This article seeks to identify early medieval sites in the west and discuss their potential character and relevance, and any relationship that they may have to the major linear earthworks of the region. Offa's and Wat's Dykes are important features in the landscape of the Marches, and there are still many unanswered questions relating to their purpose and construction. One such question is that of who constructed them: Cyril Fox, for example, considered that local labour was conscripted by minor thegns as part of their obligation to the Mercian overlord (Feryok 2013: 185). Others considered a labour force and supporting suppliers that moved in from outside of the area, such as Hill, who envisaged a civilian force, and others who considered that this may have been an army at rest in a relatively peaceful period (see Ray and Bapty 2016: 216). Does analysis of the finds provide any evidence towards resolving this question?

Using the PAS data only, five sites have been identified on the English side of the modern border, and a further three sites in Wales are considered. These were identified originally as part of work undertaken for a doctoral thesis, but are considered here in light of their contribution to the broader debate on the character and function of 'productive' sites (Clarke 2023a and b). These sites displaying characteristics of occupation, burial and commerce across the early medieval period but remain a focus of debate regarding their significance and function.

The data used in this study is drawn only from the PAS database, as was the doctoral research. It is acknowledged that artefacts are found under other conditions, but most work on 'productive' sites has been driven by the activity of metal detectorists (Ulmschneider and Pestell 2019: 1). Each site is discussed below and considered in light of their contribution to understanding populations in the early medieval period in an area often underrepresented in research.

'Productive' sites

First identified as part of studies into the distribution of coins across the country, 'productive' sites were originally defined as those which yielded a particularly high number of early medieval coin finds (Blackburn 2003: 20). This period has little material culture in comparison to, for example, the Roman era, and concentrations of coins were seen as one of few reliable indicators of activity (Blackburn 2003: 20). This definition was later to be expanded to cover any artefact from the period. It has been problematic

from the start, not least in the terminology, as the sites are 'productive' to metal detectorists and others today, rather than 'productive' in original purpose (Willmott and Wright 2021: 183). Probably the best accepted definition, and the simplest, is one proposed by Ulmschneider – that they are 'places... that produce large quantities of coin and metalwork finds' (Pestell 2012: 562). Further, it is not possible to use the absolute numbers of objects as a measure of activity in the west.

Many other sites have been identified only after considerable numbers of artefacts have been recovered; the detectorist working at Little Carlton, for example, found over 800 small finds which they correctly reported to the FLO; a previous detectorist operating in the same area had not done this, delaying investigation of the site and removing data from the study (Willmott and Wright 2021: 183). He had also, unlike many detectorists, collected all materials, including iron and non-metallic items such as glass, forming a useful and complete record (Willmott and Wright 2021: 183). Perhaps the best-known site identified in this way is the Viking winter camp at Torksey, Lincolnshire. The 'amazing quantity' – thousands after eventual excavation - of pieces found by two detectorists was the first indication that the site may have been significant when hundreds of these detected finds were first reported to the PAS (Hadley and Richards 2021: 89, 91). This scale may be appropriate in parts of the country which were more heavily populated in the period; however, a lower level of proof may be appropriate when considering less well researched areas, or those in which preservation is not as favourable. As an example, Shropshire has 9,397 PAS records for all periods, compared with Lincolnshire which has over 82,000[1].

There are many reasons for this disparity; the success of the PAS in different areas, the geography, topography and agricultural regimes of the Marches, popularity of detecting and so on. In response to this apparent lack of artefacts in the west, Redknap (2022) has recently identified early medieval sites of importance in South Wales which had yielded as few as two finds. His approach was to consider the value of the finds themselves as opposed to just the sheer volume of them. It should be remembered too that the site at Cumwhitton, mentioned above, was identified following the detection of just two brooches (Paterson *et al* 2014: 2, 5).

It should be mentioned though that Griffiths (2003) debated the validity of the concept of 'productive' sites in the west. The majority identified to date are in the south and east of the country, and are often located inland, whereas those few which are known from the west tend to be in coastal locations (Griffiths 2003: 62–3). However, in a study of 'productive' sites in East Anglia, Pestell (2004: 35; 2012: 560) did identify some coastal areas which he tentatively considered may be 'Type A' *emporia*, (seasonal, gateway locations) or alternatively early *monasteria*, considering the type of material found in some cases to be evidence for literacy. In contrast, Willmott (2022: 33) did not consider that ecclesiastical

[1] These are records which are amber or green flagged on the PAS database and are therefore visible to researchers, while those with red flags are only accessible to those working for the scheme. Theoretically the red records should be comparatively low in number

activity has a defined material culture. Willmott and Wright (2021: 2) stated that the period during which Little Carlton was fully occupied – the seventh to ninth centuries AD – was one that should be primarily approached through the material remains as little other evidence exists. Griffiths (2003: 72) contends too that there are fewer candidates for such sites in the west overall as a result of the lower circulation of metalwork from the seventh to tenth centuries: this study will though identify some inland sites, contrary to what is known currently about 'productive' sites in the north-west. The identification of any such sites is a valuable contribution to knowledge of settlement and other activity in the period set against the current low level of understanding.

The sites identified in the east of England also seem to exist for a relatively short period of time. In Blackburn's (2003) study, much of the coinage was concentrated across a period covering AD 700–750 at sites such as Hollingbourne and 'South Lincolnshire'. It is worth noting too, that this study identified sites from with as few as twelve or fourteen coins, not large numbers (Blackburn 2003: 35–6). Indeed, *emporia* in particular were considered to have been a short-lived part of the development of the economy, succeeded after a gap of a century by *burhs*, and smaller market sites were thought to be of no value in their eventual development (Palmer 2003: 48). Do areas with no visible evidence for a large economy still have markets in the west and are they important to the area?

The question here is thus twofold. Firstly, is it valid to look for 'productive' sites in the Wales and the west of England? The work of Redknap would suggest that this is possible, albeit at a much lower threshold than has been used in the south and east of England to date. Given the overall scarcity of artefacts, this is an approach that is possible and valid given supporting evidence such as place names and adjacent sites. Secondly, do these sites exist for a short period, as they seem to in the east, or are they persistent here? Evidence will be presented for longevity of some of the areas identified.

The Welsh Marches

The Welsh Marches, a term that has been in use for centuries, is not a homogenous region, and was not in the past any more than today. The exact shape of this liminal area along the border between modern England and Wales fluctuated greatly through the fifth to eleventh centuries, according to the prevalent polities in action at any one time. The western border with Wales was subject to many redefinitions over the period under consideration, although it is not always clear by how much. Even Offa's Dyke, the most obvious territorial marker in the landscape, was possibly only relevant for a comparatively short period of time in its original form (Ray and Bapty 2016: 250–251). Cheshire, a key component of the Marches landscape, actually shows variance between the east and west of the county, displaying characteristics which differ markedly, enough to conclude that the county faced towards Wales in the west and away from it in the east (Sidebottom 2020: 25). For simplicity here, though, the whole of the 1974 county is included, as are Shropshire and Herefordshire, for which similar arguments could

probably be made. The Welsh counties adjacent to the modern border – Flintshire, Denbighshire and Powys, along with Wrexham Borough, will also be included in the study. The southern counties of Worcestershire and Gloucestershire again display considerable variance and are better understood historically; thus, they will not be included in this survey.

Much of the area is high land – the Clwydian Range and the Shropshire Uplands are over 300m high in many places, generally considered to be the limit of viable agriculture and therefore metal detecting (Brown 2004: 5–6; Rowley 1972: 22). While most of Cheshire consists of the low, fertile area known as the Cheshire Plain, in the east of the County are the foothills of the Peak District. The underlying geology of Shropshire and Herefordshire is complex, resulting in varied soil types, although, like Cheshire, most are better suited to grazing rather than arable production (Stanford 1980: 33; Stoertz 2004: 10). This limits detection as practitioners generally prefer to search on ploughed soils, and this may be a contributing factor to the lower number of overall finds from the area (Robbins 2014: 30). These are also not soils which facilitate the preservation of organic remains, building wood and bone, that may indicate settlements in other areas in the south and east of England. The Marches today are sparsely populated, characterised by small, dispersed settlements with the exception of a few larger towns, and lower overall development (DEFRA 2021: 10). Thus, developer-led archaeology is not undertaken on the same scale here as in other, more populated areas of England and Wales, and the use of artefact data to support investigation is therefore essential. Using the distribution of finds categorised by the PAS as early medieval, that is produced from approximately AD 410–1066, it is possible to identify 'productive' sites from this period throughout the Marches, and provide an initial interpretation as to their function.

Table 1 is a summary of records (not number of artefacts) against each period on the PAS database: the low values for the lithic periods are perhaps to be expected, due to the dominance of metal detected finds, and as the PAS does not routinely record modern (post 1900) items, the weight of evidence may well be reduced in these periods. Of the remaining periods the early medieval is considerably underrepresented, especially when considered against high volumes of Roman and Medieval finds. The national picture too is differential, for example, the number of finds from the period in Cheshire is currently 153, but for Norfolk is 7,380 (as of June 2025). As hinted above, there are a variety of factors which explain this discrepancy. The agriculture in the west of England and the east of Wales is not generally arable, and ploughing is attractive to the detectorist because of the propensity for new objects to be brought within range of the detector after each ploughing event. Much of the land in the area is high, which further limits agricultural activity, and the soils are not generally conducive to preservation. It is human nature to return to areas which yield rewards, and the east of England is more likely to do this, for the reasons above and perhaps also because the population at the time was greater – the Domesday Book records that East Anglia was the most densely populated area at the time (Pestell 2004: 16). The author notes that the detectorists of

the north-west of England considered a rally in the east to be the 'Holy Grail' of metal detecting. The VASLE project, outlined above, mapped the 'hard' constraints in land access, such as National Trust land and National Parks, all of which feature in the study area. There are less tangible affects, such as the willingness of the detectorist to record, the staff that the FLO has available, and their areas of interest, which all play a part in an object being recorded (Robbins 2014: 35).

Table 1: Number of records by period on the PAS database for the study area

PAS Period	Number of records	Percentage of total
Palaeolithic	1659	<0.2
Mesolithic	10,971	1.02
Neolithic	23,281	2.17
Bronze Age	14,356	1.34
Iron Age	59,569	5.26
Roman, Greek and Roman Provincial and Byzantine	413,279	38.46
Early Medieval	43,261	4.04
Medieval	258,844	24.09
Post Medieval	227,768	21.19
Modern	6736	0.64
Unknown	16,992	1.59
TOTAL	1,074,716	100

Studies vary immensely in the number of finds that are considered criteria for further exploration. As already highlighted, the Viking Camp at Torksey was identified when metal detectorists declared hundreds of finds from a dense concentration, while Mark Redknap's (2022) recent study utilised as few as two finds to support the identification of sites in South Wales, considering that the conditions and lower overall material count in the west meant that even two finds indicated activity in some form in South Wales. Daubney (2022: 74) developed a criteria based on number of artefacts, where 0–10 finds indicates an area of low activity, 11–20 medium and over 21 as high: the type of finds in his study was a significant factor in decoding and understanding their importance, rather than mere numbers which are known to be low in Wales for the reasons discussed, and this approach will be adopted here for the areas in modern Wales (Redknap 2022: 77).

Methodology

The data for the early medieval period in the counties to be studied was downloaded from the PAS database in March 2025, see Table 2. The lower number of finds from

the modern Welsh counties is apparent in this list. When compared with the eastern counties, as hinted at already, even the English counties recorded low numbers of finds for the period. This is, as discussed, a function of many factors including the higher ground and lack of ploughed land; in Cheshire, for example, grazing pasture is the dominant land use (DEFRA 2018). Of course, there is always the occurrence of non- or under-reporting, but this a factor common to all areas, and does not affect the identification of the areas considered here, although it may mean that other sites cannot be similarly identified (Robbins 2014: 34–35). It is possible to demonstrate that, in spite of the low numbers of finds, in percentage terms the study area is comparable to other Counties on the east of England, and in similar adjacent areas such as Derbyshire, which also has mixed land use and geology (Clarke 2023a: 80–84).

Table 2: Number of records and artefacts recorded for each PAS area in the Marches (* includes the contents of two hoards)

County	No. of records	No. of finds
Cheshire West and Chester, Cheshire East, Warrington	156	186*
Shropshire with Telford and Wrekin UA	211	215
Herefordshire	102	131
Flintshire	12	12
Denbighshire	12	12
Wrexham Borough	14	14
Powys	9	9
TOTAL	516	579

The identification and interpretation allocated to the artefacts by the FLO is used here, except if there is a specific reason for not doing so, perhaps new scholarship which may revise a date given for an object type. Generally, though, a review of the data gives little reason to revise the FLO's entry. The cultural style of the find is a broad categorisation, used only for early medieval finds; the applicable groups here, from the list of controlled vocabulary on the PAS database, are Anglo-Saxon, (Anglo)-Scandinavian or British. In addition, the terms 'Anglo-Saxon' and 'Viking' will be used here, merely as a convenient and recognisable shorthand for two groups of people of differing geographical origin and temporal impact on Britain.

There are two further notes about the data that should be presented. Firstly, the locations used by the PAS are often the actual find location, accurate in some cases to a 1m square. However, in order to protect some sites, a 'known as' location can also be given, which is often a nearby settlement or a parish, and this is used here. Although this prevents close identification of the actual location, it does not affect the theoretical basis of the study. Any maps here, in which finds are plotted to their accurate location, are

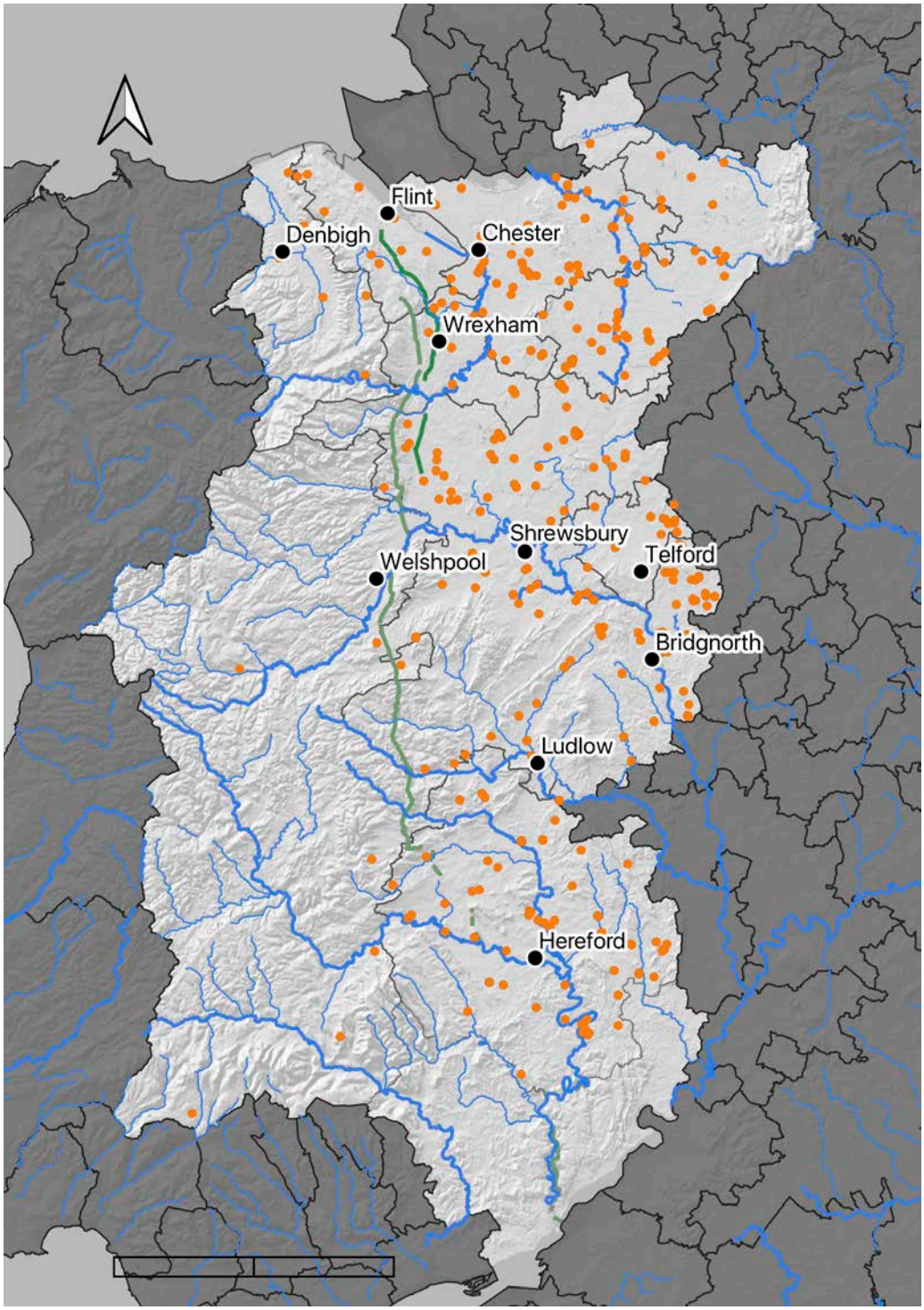

Figure 1: The Welsh Marches, showing Offa's Dyke (light green) and Wat's Dyke (dark green), and the general distribution of early medieval finds (orange dots)

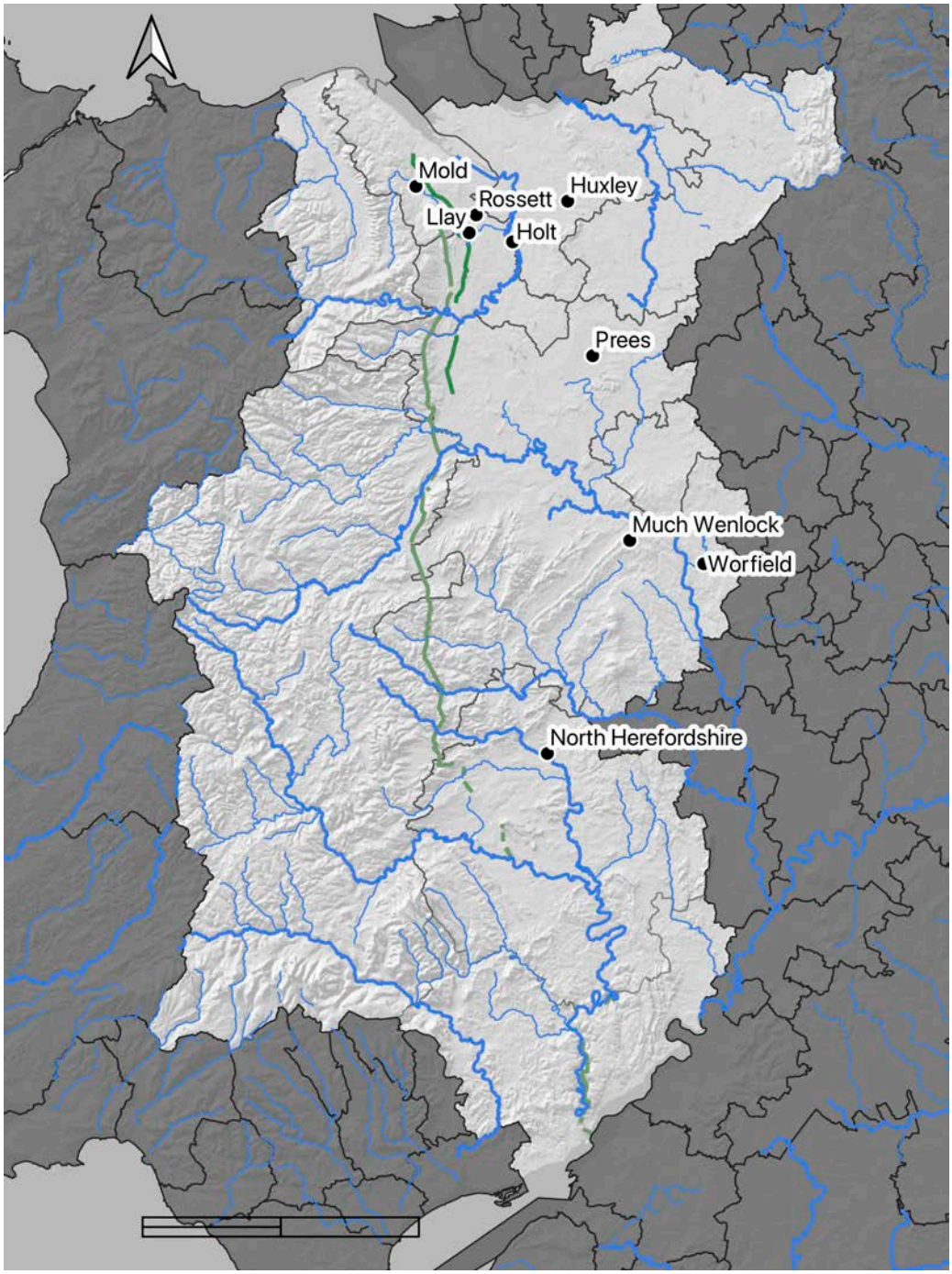

Figure 2: Location of the postulated 'productive sites' discussed in the article

designed to avoid revealing exact locations. Also, the number of finds that will be used as indication of a productive site will have different thresholds for the counties either side of the modern English/Welsh border. In the now English counties, any area which contains more than 5% of the total for the county will be considered as 'productive'. However, in line with the discussion about the lower overall objects from Wales, and Redknap's work, noted above, Welsh sites will only need to have two or more artefacts in association.

Distribution

Figure 1 illustrates the study area and the general distribution of finds throughout it. This is reasonably even, with the exception of a swathe of land running east-west across southern Shropshire. It is unclear as to why this occurs; it may be a feature of the prevalence of higher land, or differential detecting or reporting, and is found across multiple periods: possible reasons for this difference have been addressed elsewhere (Clarke 2023b). The boundaries of early groups of British such as the Magonsæta (Hereford) and Wreconsætna (Wroxeter, although a base in the area of the Wrekin is also a possibility) may meet at such places (Stanford 1980: 173). The influence of the early medieval dykes on material distribution has been discussed in a previous article, and will not be further covered here (Clarke 2023b: 170–207).

Despite this reasonably even distribution, there are still a number of areas of concentration of finds. These are, however, more closely identified from consideration of the number of finds listed to an area from the data than by mapping. Thus, in Cheshire there are numerical concentrations around Huxley, and one near Marbury. In Shropshire there are four potential sites; Prees and Whitchurch in North Shropshire, Much Wenlock and another near Bridgnorth (Worfield) in the south. In Herefordshire, one site is dominant - known as North Herefordshire, it has twenty-two finds, over a fifth of the total for the county. Wales is represented by clusters in Mold, Holt, Llay and Rossett (Table 3).

The finds in Marbury are an exceptional case. One entry is incomplete and therefore no conclusions can be drawn from that. Another three are probably from the same hoard, located on different occasions. Therefore, Marbury actually only numbers four identifiable finds and will not be discussed further. Detailed mapping of the finds listed as being from Whitchurch are in fact scattered around at some distance apart and do not form a coherent cluster, again they will not be discussed further here. Finally, although two finds are listed for Llay and this would normally bring it into the discussion under the criteria used, in fact one of them is likely to be modern, and so Llay will not be considered in this study either. The areas to be examined are shown in Figure 2.

Table 3: Location of clusters in the study area. The locations marked with an asteriks do not fulfill the critiera for a site, see text for expalantion

Location	County	Number of finds
Huxley	Cheshire	12
Marbury*	Cheshire	7
Whitchurch*	Shropshire	8
Prees	Shropshire	12
Much Wenlock	Shropshire	9
Worfield area	Shropshire	21
North Herefordshire	Herefordshire	22
Mold	Flintshire	3
Holt	Wrexham	2
Llay*	Wrexham	2
Rossett	Wrexham	4

The productive areas in Marches

Huxley, Cheshire

Huxley is first recorded in the Cheshire Court Rolls of 1260, and the name may derive from Hôc's lēah, suggesting an Old English (OE) language origin (Ekwall 1960: 260). It lies approximately 6km south of Tarvin, the name of which in turn derives from the Welsh terfyn, meaning a boundary. Dodd (1986: 14) saw this juxtaposition of language in surviving names as an indication of the 'changing relationship between the Welsh and the Angles'. The River Gowy, which forms part of the boundaries of each parish, was probably an important marker in the early landscape. It is possible too that the Gowy was navigable in the period, emptying into the River Mersey (its OE name also meaning 'boundary' (Mills 2011)); this would have facilitated access to Viking Dublin (Mills 2011; Garner 2009: 50).

A total of twelve objects have been recorded for Huxley, all within a small area (Table 4) Of these, the most well-known and researched is the Huxley hoard, a collection of twenty-two pieces of Hiberno-Scandinavian Viking silver found adjacent to the Gowy at a metal detecting rally in 2004 (Ager and Graham-Campbell 2009: 45, 47). In contrast to the probable hoard at Marbury, this is reported as one record on the PAS database. Deposited in the early tenth century, at a time when there was political and social tension in the area characterised by the Viking occupation of, and prompt removal from, Chester in AD 873. The eviction of the Vikings from Dublin in AD 902 caused an exodus, and Scandinavian settlement in the north west of England increased (Edmonds 2009: 5). These uncertain territorial arrangements may have contributed to the deposition of the Huxley hoard (Edmonds 2009: 6). This is part of a wider landscape of deposition of such non-coin caches, including one from Chester and two ingots found in Eccleston, both within 12km of Huxley (Griffiths 2003: 13; Williams 2009: 73–74).

Table 4: Finds from Huxley, Cheshire

Find ID	Artefact	Date from AD	Date to AD	Style
LVPL-BFBC1E	Buckle, Marzinzik type I.6	450	600	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-1E1E51	Pin/strip brooch?	700	850	Scandinavian?
LVPL-4B8655	Strap end, Thomas Class B, Type 4	750	1100	Anglo-Scandinavian
LVPL-123B9B	Strap end, Thomas Class A Type 1	800	900	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-D1295B	Strap end, Thomas Class E, Type ?	800	1000	Scandinavian
LVPL-4B46A3	Strap end, Thomas Class E, Type 1	800	1100	Scandinavian
LVPL-C63FBA	Hoard	850	950	Scandinavian
LVPL-AEEE02	Pencil, Biddle Class I	850	1100	
LVPL-71C370	Bell, hexagonal	900	1100	Scandinavian
LVPL-74EDA0	Stirrup strap mount	1000	1100	Scandinavian
LVPL-1DCD95	Coin, halfpenny of Cnut	1029	1036	
LVPL-EDD2BA	Coin, penny of Edward the Confessor	1046	1048	

Other finds from Huxley include an early (AD 450–600) Marzinzik Type I.6 copper alloy buckle, and part of a trapezoidal brooch or pin, decorated with a Greek key design. The buckle has, at one time, had garnets or other stones mounted in it, they have been removed or lost at some point. A similar find in Coddenham, Suffolk where the stones had been removed in antiquity was thought to indicate the possible presence of a Viking workshop, recycling older objects, in some cases as hacksilver such as the objects in the Huxley hoard (Newman 2003: 104, 106; Ponting 2023). The hoard was unusual in that all of the armbands had been folded and flattened and Sheehan (2009: 68–69) postulates that this is the output of a metals workshop; if so the treatment of the buckle supports this and would indicate a more permanent settlement. Redknap (2022: 77) considered that hacksilver was to be found in zones of occupation.

Two of the strap ends noted are generally considered to be Anglo-Saxon in design and are therefore earlier than the other two, which are Scandinavian in design, although the Class B type, usually considered to be Anglo-Saxon has been categorised as Anglo-Scandinavian by the FLO. A strap fitting is recorded as being of Anglo-Scandinavian style, while a stirrup mount is one which would have been fixed to a metal stirrup, an innovation introduced

by Scandinavian settlers (Williams 1997: 58–67). The bell is of a type known as a Norse bell, and is hexagonal in section; these are considered to be a tenth-century phenomena and are widely distributed in areas of Scandinavian settlement, found on the Isle of Man and Anglesey, as well as the area of the Danelaw (Griffiths 2007: 70–71; Shoenfelder and Richards 2011: 160, 164–165). The two coins date to the reigns of Cnut and Edward the Confessor, from the first half of the eleventh century AD. Coins were widely recycled by the Viking peoples and may not necessarily indicate a trading place.

The artefacts span the early medieval period, but there is perhaps a concentration around the later part, from AD 800–1100, in line with the date of the hoard. They are predominantly Scandinavian in style, and 'domestic', rather than military. This can be a feature of detecting, as detectorists tend to 'dial out' iron in their searching, this is done in an attempt to avoid spending time excavating 'modern' farm equipment, for example (Oksanen and Lewis 2020: 111). It does however mean that swords, knives and so on are consequently scarce finds. What these known finds suggest is a market site or settlement, rather than a place where an army may have gathered. The earlier finds may have been destined for recycling as indicated by the work on removing gems from the buckle.

Prees, Shropshire

The first of the Shropshire sites, the Parish of Prees, which has been used as the location for these finds by the PAS, encompasses the hamlets of Sandford, Darliston and Fauls and Mickley. The finds are spread throughout these but in still a relatively concentrated area (less than 2km^2) and therefore, in view of the low amounts of artefacts found in the Marches, worth analysis. The name Prees is first documented in AD 1255 and is Welsh in origin, meaning a covert or area of brushwood (Ekwall 1960: 373). It is one of only two surviving Welsh names in the wider area and is said by Gelling (2006: 144, 194) to be a 'pre-English linguistic survival' and evidence of Welsh and 'English' integration. The Church of St Chad at Prees is a late fourteenth-century building located on a pre-Conquest site; the Domesday Book mentions a priest and the large size of the Parish may suggest that it was a minster (HE 1213100). The A49 and A41 trunk roads pass either side of the parish, and local sections of these follow (respectively) the Roman Roads with Margary numbers RR6A, which ran from Wroxeter to Chester, and RR19, which followed a route from Whitchurch to join with Watling Street (the modern A5) near Stretton; the finds are located closer to RR19 (Margary 1967: 316; Burnham and Davies 2010: 316). Darliston originates as *Déorláfs Tun*, *Déorláf* possibly being an Anglo-Saxon monyer operating post AD 925, and '*tun*' being the most common form of 'settlement' in Old English, while Sandford (unsurprisingly, 'sandy ford') appears in the Domesday Book as Sanford (Ekwall 1960: 13, 404; Gelling 1984: 318; Lias 1991: 57). There are the remains of a motte at Sandford, but no dating evidence for this is presented (HER 7087911). The Historic Environment Records thus demonstrate that across Prees parish there seems to have been activity in the area from both the Roman and Post-Conquest periods. This would suggest the possibility of ongoing activity in the area throughout the early medieval period as well, especially given the status of the church.

Table 5: Finds from the Parish of Prees

Find ID	Artefact	Date from AD	Date to AD	Style
WMID-73E745	Brooch, cruciform, Martin's Type 2	475	550	Anglo-Saxon
LANCUM-AB9693	Coin, sceatta	675	740	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-D1CA29	Coin, primary sceatta	655	680	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-D7E3A4	Pin	400	1066	
HESH-1BEDA8	Pin	700	850	
WMID-1DCC87	Pin	700	900	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-C14513	Vessel, bucket mount	700	1066	
WREX-58DB2D	Strap end, Thomas Class A	750	950	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-7EE655	Strap end, Thomas Class A, Type 1	800	900	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-D6F7E1	Hooked tag	400	1066	
HESH-24A9D4	Hooked tag	800	900	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-A65F43	Hooked tag	800	900	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-ED08B6	Stirrup strap mount	1000	1100	Anglo-Scandinavian

The thirteen finds lie to the east of Prees village, mainly within the hamlets of Sandford and Darliston, in two clusters with one outlying artefact (Table 5).

From the evidence above, it is clear that the area around Prees did indeed see activity through the early medieval period, which is reflected in the artefacts, particularly the early sceattas. It would be easy to conclude that the area was one heavy in passing traffic, moving along the Roman roads. However, there is a curious occurrence here – two of the hooked tags form an identical pair. Additionally, one of the strap ends was found in the same field, and all three are Treasure cases, being made of silver, and are well preserved. This then possibly represents a manufacturing site or a high-status settlement of some description. The cluster centred around Sandford comprise the three pins, a strap end and one of the hooked tags. They have a range of dates but all encompass AD 400–700, and are objects typical of those found in an early burial ground. The proximity of the church may support the evidence for a 'pagan' burial ground or field cemetery, which was later supplanted by the churchyard, although the area is not located on a boundary as may be expected (Brookes 2020; Sayer 2013: 134). The continuity of the site could be understood through the presence of a later stirrup strap mount, by this period the church at Prees was possibly at the apex of its importance. If indeed it was a minster

church before Domesday, it is possible that this was site of trade associated with an important church; such a conjunction has been identified at Deerhurst, Gloucestershire, where two annual fairs were granted in AD 1318, formalising a practice which originated in much earlier centuries (Hare 2021: 297). This is a possibility for the development of Prees, although a high-status site associated with the minster is also to be considered.

Much Wenlock, Shropshire

The first seven items on Table 6 are found within a close area near to the town, while the last two are approximately 9km away from Much Wenlock; therefore, the more distant finds will not be discussed here. The grouped finds, south of the town and up to 1.5km from the centre, are all (with the exception of the Edward penny) early–mid period; this is not surprising as the Priory in the centre of the modern town was founded in the AD 680s, possibly in reused Roman buildings (HE 1004779). This distribution pattern reflects one 'permission', i.e. a detectorist has access to one farmer's land, which follows a minor road and has resulted in this closely located cluster. The condition of the copper-alloy brooches and the buckle make it difficult to draw conclusions about them, but these objects are often found in graves – Martin (2015: 191) considered the cruciform brooch (LVPL-7070E4) to be 'numerous' in grave contexts. Capper (2025: 63) also suggests the presence of a small Anglo-Saxon cemetery, predating the founding of the Abbey, much as may be the case at Prees, above.

Table 6: Finds from Much Wenlock
*These finds are not associated with the others

Find ID	Artefact	Date from AD	Date to AD	Style
LVPL-A557C1	Brooch, cruciform	450	600	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-7070E4	Brooch, small long	401	600	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-B32C32	Buckle, zoomorphic	500	700	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-AD366F	Strap end, Thomas Class A, Type 2	750	950	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-AD8858	Strap end, Thomas Class A, Type 2	750	950	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-A4C81F	Strap end, Thomas Class A, Type 2	750	950	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-951268	Coin, penny of Edward the Confessor	1048	1050	
HESH-6CF669*	Coin, sceatta	680	765	
HESH-167369*	Strap end, unknown	850	1100	Scandinavian

To date the only early medieval cemetery excavated in Shropshire is to be found at Bromfield, 4km north-west of Ludlow in the south of the county. The thirty-one graves there were excavated in the 1970s and were identified by soil morphology as little bone survived (Stanford 1995: 132). Grave goods were limited to two knives, one amber bead pendant and part of a penannular brooch, the cemetery was thus dated to the period AD 650–750 (Stanford 1995: 136, 140). The strap ends from Much Wenlock are well preserved, one even has the rivets present. Thomas (2000: 131) associates these with market sites, tracks, and manuring activity, in that they are redistributed with the general refuse from nearby settlements; the preservation of these may eliminate the latter option. It is known too that many markets were held near minsters and other ecclesiastical sites, and did not necessarily go on to develop into central places but remained seasonal (Bassett and Hare 2023: 225; Wilmott and Wright 2021: 27). It could also be a route with a link to the RR193 that passes to the south, but there is no obvious surviving evidence for this, and the idea that it was a cemetery is probably more viable. Possibly the most likely scenario is that the important monastic double house was the focus for a high-status settlement with a burial ground; it is increasingly recognised that, especially later in the period, such sites were exploited and developed into centres of 'lordly power' (Gould et al 2024: 72).

Worfield, Shropshire

Worfield is a small village 3km from Bridgnorth, which is on a major river, the Severn. Worfield is noted by Eyton (1856: 105) as a 'pre-Conquest manor' and the Domesday Book records the presence of a priest, although it is accepted that the presence of a church does not necessarily follow. A medieval cross in the churchyard provides evidence for its continuing importance into the later period (HER 01938). Although Worfield is listed as the finds area, in fact the twenty–one finds are found in three groups, up to 3km from Worfield. These are in Chesterton to the north east of Worfield, which lies on a tributary to the River Worfe; in Bromley, west of Worfield, between the Worfe and the River Severn and at Oldington to the north, also on the Severn. Thus, the wider area seems to be one of significant activity and is worth discussing as one entity.

A Danish army overwintered at Quatford (OE: *Cwatts ford*), approximately 3km downstream of Bridgnorth and 5km from the site under discussion, in AD 895–896; there is a further reference to their crossing the Severn at 'Cantbricge', location unknown but probably also Quatford, in AD 910 (HER 114799; Horovitz 2010: 9). Bridgnorth is hence the 'north bridge', distinguishing it from the crossing in the south at Quatford (Ekwall 1960: 64). The burh established at *Brycge* by Æthelflaed in AD 912 is usually associated with Bridgnorth, although the possibility remains that it may have been located at Quatford (National Trust 1789308; Ekwall 1960: 377; Horovitz 2010: 9). A mint was also established at Bridgnorth or Quatford, from which coins were issued from AD 979 to AD 985 and again from AD 1009 to AD 1016 (HER 1078718). St. Andrews church in nearby Quatt contains remains of early medieval fabric, predating anything currently known from Bridgnorth. Excavations at the foot of Panpudding Hill, a medieval ringwork and

bailey castle which is in the town itself, have revealed only finds from this later period (Horovitz 2010: 2, 9; Holland 2012: 15). The evidence would then suggest that Quatford was the pre-Norman settlement.

Table 7: Finds from Worfield

Find ID	Artefact	Date from AD	Date to AD	Style
WMID-FE6EAB	Button	580	650	Anglo-Saxon
HESH-110A96	Coin, sceatta	680	710	
HESH-543615	Pin	700	900	
WMID-DF2AD5	Pin	700	900	
WMID-AFE646	Hooked tag	700	1000	
HESH-A5C584	Unidentified object, bracelet terminal (?)	750	1100	Anglo-Scandinavian
DENO-2150DA	Coin, penny of Offa	765	792	
WMID-C4E5D8	Strap end, Thomas Class B, Type 1	750	1050	Anglo-Saxon
WMID-DFCCD4	Strap end, Thomas Class A, Type 1	800	900	Anglo-Saxon
WMID-221D28	Strap end, Thomas Class A, Type 1	800	900	Anglo-Saxon
WMID-E6951A	Strap end, Thomas Class A, Type 2	800	900	Anglo-Saxon
WMID-B8BEBD	Strap end, Thomas Class A, Type 1	800	1000	Anglo-Saxon
WMID-A58487	Strap end, Thomas Class A, Type 2	800	1000	Anglo-Saxon
WMID-5ABF5E	Strap end, Thomas Type G	900	1200	Anglo-Scandinavian
WMID-E0C914	Mount	850	1066	
WMID-E195A0	Mount	850	1500	
WAW-C104D7	Sword, pommel	900	1100	
WMID-637852	Stirrup terminal	1000	1100	
WMID-43A0F2	Stirrup terminal	1000	1100	
HESH-150405	Stirrup strap mount	1000	1100	
WMID-097191	Stirrup terminal	1050	1100	

Worfield (OE '*field on the River Worfe*) place-name comprises two elements. The river name Worfe, '*Wor*' meaning 'wandering' or 'tired' (Ekwall 1960: 534) and *feld*, which Gelling (1984: 240, 243) suggests is indicative of land brought under cultivation, in this case

possibly within woodland. The village lies in a bend of the River Worfe. Here also is a Romano-British enclosure, and St. Peter's church may have been founded in 'Saxon days' and have been the original minster church for the area (HER 114722; HER 114492). Also, just south of the village is a place known as the Lowe. Gelling (1997: 138) states that this is a development of the Old English *hlāw* indicating a possible burial mound. Roman Road 193 from Greensforge, Staffordshire (near modern Kingswinford) to Newton, Powys passes through Worfield (HER 1358747; HER 1326559; Margary 1967: 296). Further, Chesterton, 8km north-east of Bridgnorth, has a name which suggests a *tün* by a *CAESTER* or Roman fort (OE). Here too a large, multi-vallate Iron Age hillfort known as 'The Walls' and finds of Roman period coins support possible continued use (HE 1021065). There may also be a Roman Road which passes Chesterton Walls, a nineteenth century antiquarian noted a ford crossing a brook as part of the route of a road from Droitwich, an important source of salt (Watkins 1879:359). The meaning of 'Bromley' is not definitive, but the lēah element would suggest an OE language origin (Ekwall 1960: 68). Between Claverley and Quatt are what the HER record describes as 'five tumuli in quincinx', in which human remains, and a sword were found in the early nineteenth century; the barrows are not visible today (HER 114590). These areas are all close to the rivers Severn, an important routeway, and Worfe, which is fed by the wonderfully named 'Mad Brook' in the north and flows into the Severn north of Bridgnorth. There is good evidence then for occupation from the Iron Age onwards in the area.

The twenty-one finds are given in Table 7, and date across the early medieval period. The early button in the Bromley group could also be a brooch or other fitting, it comprises gold cells, which would have perhaps contained garnets at some point. This group is the most widespread in dates, from the button to the later stirrup fittings. If it was the scene of Viking activity, it is not unknown to find objects which have been dismantled for rework or for melting into bullion; see the discussion above about Huxley. The sword pommel in this group is of a style which has been attributed to Viking use, as well as later Anglo-Saxon. There is also the later, Viking-style, strap end in this group, as well as earlier examples. There is also evidence for the first time for use of horses and weaponry, metal stirrups were introduced by the Vikings but were likely widely adopted later – it is of course known that Vikings were in the area. In all the finds are perhaps typical of settlement – the high numbers of copper alloy strap ends would support this, tending toward the second half of the period. With the known Viking activity in the area, it is likely that this was at least a seasonal site, later disturbed by the creation of the *burh* at Bridgnorth, although Zaluckyj (2002: 212) considers this to have been a fort defending the river crossing, rather than a place which developed into a town. In this case though, Worfield, in spite of being the site of the early minster, was eventually overtaken by Bridgnorth.

North Herefordshire, Herefordshire

The twenty-two finds from this site, which is within 100m of a river, were all located within a small area, and some form a cluster which are closer in date than objects from

many of the other sites here – Table 8. In particular the three fragments of brooches are finds of an early date. The sleeve clasps too are generally thought to be artefacts brought as heirloom objects by the earliest Anglo-Saxon settlers, exclusively worn by women in England, possibly with a different style of dress to that of the incumbent population (Owen-Crocker 2004: 56; Walton-Rogers 2007: 123). These are rare finds in the west of Britain; Mileson and Brooks (2014: 21) considered them rare even in the better populated Thames Valley area, and to be confined mainly to East Anglia and the East Midlands. These then are significant objects, used by people with new ideas of dress and identity, perhaps earlier in the west than is often considered.

Table 8: Finds from North Herefordshire

Find ID	Artefact	Date from AD	Date to AD	Style
HESH-B8FE61	Unidentified	400	900	
HESH-B8F058	Brooch, cruciform	430	550	Anglo-Saxon
HESH-B90BC0	Brooch, cruciform, Martin type 3	480	550	Anglo-Saxon
HESH-B90507	Brooch	480	600	Anglo-Saxon
HESH-927418	Vessel	500	700	Anglo-Saxon
HESH-85E083	Sleeve clasp, Hines form B18c	500	600	Anglo-Saxon
HESH-926A22	Sleeve clasp	550	800	Anglo-Saxon
HESH-F3BC94	Sword (pommel)	600	850	Anglo-Saxon
HESH-85CC82	Pin	650	900	
HESH-85C3B3	Pin	650	900	
HESH-85ADC8	Pin	650	900	
HESH-859D01	Pin	650	900	
HESH-5B1DB2	Coin, sceatta	695	715	
HESH-1F9457	Finger ring	700	1200	
HESH-1F8A76	Mount	700	1200	
HESH-5AD183	Coin, Northumbrian styca	800	900	
HESH-85D871	Strap end	800	1000	
HESH-85D275	Strap end, Thomas Class A, Type 1	800	1000	
HESH-5AFD80	Coin, Northumbrian styca	830	855	
HESH-9296F6	Strap end, Thomas Class C	850	1000	
HESH-928C27	Harness fitting	1000	1100	
HESH-1F7483	Buckle	1000	1200	

Capper (nd.: 204–205) largely based on the evidence outlined above characterises this site as 'the damaged remains of a small Anglian-style cemetery', see also above. It may have been in use until the ninth century, past the date proposed by Hines as that of the end of

the furnished burial period of c. AD 680 (Capper n/d: 206). A cemetery of this size would represent a single family, as does the one at Bishops Cleeve to the north of Cheltenham with 26 graves, of which only 7 were furnished. This is Reynold's (2006: 144, 146) 'western margin' of Anglo-Saxon burial; this one in North Herefordshire and the site at Bromfield pushes that boundary 50km further west. Reynolds (2006: 146) states that the lack of sword or shield at Bishops Cleeve rules out a pioneering group advancing the Anglo-Saxon territories. If so, the presence of a sword from North Herefordshire may then suggest that these were actually pioneers. Brookes (2019: 67)argued for a continuation in use of a cemetery at Loveden Hill, Lincolnshire, an extensive area which functioned later as a hundredal meeting place focussed on the cemetery. Langlands (2019: 37) notes that meeting places or muster points form part of the 'landscape of governance', as we have evidence for here in the surrounding 'lenes' of Kingsland, Monkland and Eardisland, which define a territorial area of the period (Lovell 2004: 4). If indeed Capper's assertion is correct, and the finds are typical of grave goods, the sherd of ceramic being very characteristic of a cremation urn, then it can be asserted with reasonable confidence that this was an early cemetery and then perhaps a meeting place, albeit not necessarily a hundredal one. As stated, Bromfield has been the only other cemetery excavated in Shropshire, which Stanford (1995: 137–140) dated to AD 650–750, but the presence of early sleeve clasps and brooches (AD 430–600) at North Herefordshire may indicate an earlier founding for this cemetery than that at Bromfield.

Mold, Flintshire

Starting at the most northern and western of the study area, on the Welsh side of the current border, Mold lies to the west of Wat's Dyke, the only one of the sites reviewed here which does. The Welsh name for Mold, Yr Wyddgrug, means 'prominent mound' although it is unlikely that this refers to the Norman motte and bailey, rather a natural feature (Silvester *et al.* 2012: 41). This lies 200m to the northwest of the Church of St. Mary, which is probably an early foundation (Silvester and Hankinson 2004: Appendix 3). Additionally, the early shrine to St Winifride at Holywell, founded in the seventh century AD, is only 14km to the north, and a Roman road to Chester may run within 4km of Mold (Silvester and Hankinson 2004: 7, 13; Wynne 1855: 238). Swallow (2016: 312, 336) identified two further medieval motte and bailey structures in the area, both overlooking the River Alyn, and it may be that Mold was strategically important in guarding and monitoring the river and the Roman road until much later.

There are three finds from Mold (Table 9). The coin and strap end have the same map reference, although the designation 'from a paper map', reported perhaps before GPS functions on telephones became more commonplace, implies an amount of inaccuracy. The coin is late, the strap end early, and is made from silver inlaid with niello and, like the one from Rossett, decorated in Trewhiddle style. The book mount is of gilded copper alloy, decorated with a triquetra knot, a common insular design, and thus has a wide date range, from AD 600–900. The two artefacts are of high status and would certainly support the presence of a strategic settlement or an important early religious house, the book mount

being the sole artefact discussed here that could suggest literacy. It might be that the river, with a safe crossing place, was already being guarded before the Norman Conquest.

Table 9: Finds from Mold

Find ID	Artefact	Date from AD	Date to AD	Style
LVPL-5EAC05	Strap end	400	1066	
LVPL-918135	Mount	600	900	Insular/British
LVPL-7D2F34	Coin, Edward the Confessor	1056	1059	

Holt, Wrexham

Possibly best known as the site of the Roman tile works and settlement, Holt lies on the Welsh bank of the River Dee. This facilitated transport between the tilery and then other locations at Chester and along the wider North Wales coast, where much of the product was utilised (Matthews 2018: 7). Roman Road RR 660 links to further roads which also go on to Chester and the coast. There is thus much evidence for Roman occupation, but early medieval settlement has to be inferred from the layout of the village, with a green opposite the church, and later monuments such as the impressive medieval bridge (CPAT n/d: 101261).

Table 10: Finds from Holt

Find ID	Artefact	Date from AD	Date to AD	Style
WREX-C232E2	Brooch	450	750	Anglo-Saxon
LVPL-20C747	Coin, sceat	700	710	

The gilded annular brooch and the sceat shown in Table 10 are rare finds for Wales, in fact at the time of recording the coin was only the second to be recorded in the Country – there are still only three on the database. It seems then that this was another area with high status people moving through it if not residing there, the later bridge obviously signifies an important crossing point, protected by a contemporary castle (Coflein 2002). Certainly, the settlement immediately opposite Holt on the other bank, Farndon, is the site of an early minster (Shaw and Clark 2003: 3). Holt though retained its importance as a river crossing; a castle was built between 1282 and 1311 to facilitate the ongoing war by Edward I against the Welsh, which was still in use during the English Civil War, the Church in Holt dates to a similar period (CPAT 101258; CPAT 101260). Once again the finds, although few, provide evidence for continuity over a long period.

Rossett, Wrexham

Rossett, Yr Orsedd in Welsh, and thus 'the throne' could perhaps then be a royal centre, but it is far more likely that this designation is a Bardic tradition, based perhaps on the tumulus which is noted on the OS maps (Lias 1991: 66). Domesday notes a settlement here, and there is mention in a document of AD 1562 of an early medieval chapel, although no trace of this remains today (Silvester and Hankinson 2004).

Table 11: Finds from Rossett

Find ID	Artefact	Date from AD	Date to AD	Style
CPAT-4AAF81	Coin, penny Coenwulf	796	805	
NMGW-D75B2B	Strap end	n/d	n/d	Anglo-Saxon
WREX-4975C9	Coin, penny Æthelred II	997	1003	
HESH-ABE884	Harness fitting	1000	1200	

There have been four finds declared from Rossett, Table 11. The early coin, potentially minted in Canterbury, is listed by the PAS as 'a very rare find for Wales'. There are fifty-one coins noted for the entire study area, so two within in small location is significant. Coenwulf seems to have spent his time mainly in the south of England, apart from forays into Northumberland and Powys, and possibly had little impact on North Wales (Venning 2013: 117–8). The same applies to the later coin, that of Æthelred II, minted at York. Another monarch with other things on his mind, this time serious Viking incursions, he probably had little impact on the Marches. Coins are more important as a representation of trade and therefore people to trade with. The silver strap end is very fine and it is allocated a broad date in the PAS commentary of the second half of the ninth century, based on its Trewhiddle design. There are 102 strap ends noted in the PAS data for the area under discussion and while most of them are of copper-alloy, approximately 10% are of silver or have been silver plated. Copper strap ends are the more common, and those made of silver must have been made for a high-status individual. Finally, the copper alloy harness fitting fragment is listed on the database as being 'Anglo-Scandinavian', not surprising as they were probably widely adopted post-tenth century AD.

Discussion

After the decline of the Roman military and administrative system and the attendant decline in their administration in the early fifth century AD, it is generally accepted that Germanic settlers started to settle in parts of lowland Britain (see, for example, Cunliffe 2012: 401; Naismith 2021: 22–3). Their settlement and activity in the south and east of

England is well researched, facilitated by the excavation of a number of large cemeteries, and the identification of contemporary settlements. As already discussed, this in turn is supported by better soil conditions than are encountered in the west of England and the east of Wales, and more developer-led archaeology, amongst other factors. The evidence here demonstrates though that it is possible to identify potential early sites in the west, even with low numbers of finds. Eight sites have been identified here through the examination of the PAS data for the area. Many of them show evidence for continuity over a number of centuries – Prees and Holt both have strong Roman period signatures in their proximity to Roman roads and a large tileworks respectively. Holt was also sited on the River Dee, allowing access to the North Wales coast along which much of the production was delivered. It was to retain its importance into the seventeenth century, seen by the construction of the castle and the church, the evidence here bridges a gap exposed by a lack of other archaeological evidence for continuity through the early medieval period. This too is the case at Mold, which may have been an important route in the Roman period, being relatively near to a road and also an important river which was again defended into the Medieval period. On major rivers also are Huxley (Gowy) and Worfield (Worfe and Severn), both of these would allow access to the Irish Sea, and this is reflected in their Viking-period finds. Three are each near to a minster church – Prees, Much Wenlock and Worfield – and all show the possibility of having been the site of a pre-Christian field cemetery outside the later churchyard. All of these locations survived as church sites into the medieval and modern periods, even if the current church architecture dates from the medieval period with no remaining earlier fabric. The proximity to a minster church though does not, from the evidence here, produce artefacts associated with literacy, giving substance to Willmott's argument (2022: 33).

It is not possible at this stage to definitively characterise the type of activity in the area, indeed Willmott and Wright (2021: 2) cautioned against applying blunt labels to sites which often are more nuanced in purpose; there are, however, some clues. Huxley has long been known as the site of the hoard, but the surrounding objects move the site from a remote one in which a hoard was hidden to one of much more Scandinavian activity. It is near a river that may have been navigable, offering passage onto the Irish Sea – was Huxley then a seasonal camp or meeting place? The one early find has already been discussed and might be a residual item ready for reworking. The date distribution of the other finds suggests a place of persistent activity but not a site with longevity – there is no evidence for church founding, for example, and today it is a small ribbon settlement. Prees offers the possibility in an otherwise unexamined landscape of settlement which may have taken advantage of the two nearby Roman Roads, the church also being part of this early development. It is possible that the church was an economic force, many productive sites analysed by Ulmschneider were in proximity to a later medieval church (Pestell 2012: 565). There is also a possibility that Prees represents a pre-Christian field cemetery.

Worfield is less straightforward to ascribe a definition to, as the finds are dated across the early medieval period. Known Viking activity nearby though would perhaps indicate

another seasonal camp or even longer-term rural settlement. Water, always important in influencing settlement locations, was readily available and the Severn would have allowed access to the wider Irish Sea landscape, as well as other areas of Britain. Indeed, the role of rivers and Roman roads in the movement of goods is accepted, and all of the sites are near rivers or are located on Roman roads (Palmer 2003: 51). The early button found at Worfield could have been indicative of a workshop, as postulated at Huxley, and the strap ends and stirrup mounts found there are of Scandinavian style. This may have been an early site which was later populated by Scandinavians, perhaps an integration of the cultures rather than a takeover, although there is no evidence from the finds for either scenario. At North Herefordshire, the presence of the early medieval sherd, and the nature of the finds, along with the fact that they are clustered over a very small site, would point to this being an early cemetery, later perhaps a meeting place while the settlement developed nearby – the modern village is 1.5km to the north-west of the site, presumably above a floodplain. The coin may indicate the later use of the site as a meeting place or even market; there are precedents for the reuse of burial grounds in this way such as at Bidford-on-Avon (Baker and Brookes 2013: 150). Pestell (2004: 33) too, notes that coins are a feature of early ecclesiastical sites, although the presence of only one coin is inconclusive. The possibility that a site changes its character over time has major implications for understanding early medieval society (Willmott and Wright 2021: 26). Pestell states that (twelfth-century) churches often appear near productive sites – more evidence that they are not isolated moments in the landscape. Sites here do indeed change or to shift in focus.

Some of the conjectured land use is supported in some cases by the place name-evidence and later, such as in the case of the Viking occupation of Quatt, by documentary evidence. However, place names do not always signal occupation – *lēah* for example, as in Huxley, might indeed be an area cleared of woodland, but it does not automatically follow that this was then occupied. The meaning of the term has been challenged, as it was thought to have been a name attributed to a settled area of cleared land, but is can also be considered to be a topographical term denoting an area of wood pasture (Lennon 2009: 185–186). Prees – 'brushwood' – is an even more opaque name when considering occupation. Overlaying the evidence of the PAS demonstrates that activity – settlements, markets or temporary camps, happened in these places. Mapping the PAS finds offers areas to investigate further, occasionally, as in North Herefordshire, a very precise location which could be verified by excavation.

The sites located in modern Wales are more problematic. In spite of the assertion that a small number of finds can provide information, all that can reasonably be asserted here is that there was activity of some description in the early medieval period. Holt is the best served and has been discussed above, but Rossett and Mold are less transparent. The items found at Rossett could easily be accidental loss and are dated (reliably) to a span of over two hundred years, which does not offer evidence for continuity. It is encouraging though that the number of finds here has doubled since 2023, and may continue to increase (Clarke 2023a: 151). Mold, west of Wats's Dyke, also has a temporal

spread of finds, but the book fitting is interesting, suggesting literacy and therefore the presence of clergy – although the view that only the clergy had access to books is by no means universally accepted. This would accord with an early church founding, and again, the finds bridge the Roman-medieval gap.

The area around Offa's and Wat's Dykes, built around the end of the eighth century and the early part of the ninth century respectively, is particularly rural in character and under-researched (Williams 2021: 152). The presence of such large monuments in the landscape must suggest that there was territory to be protected but this territory would also provide a source of labour. It can be argued that not all of the sites reviewed here are relevant to or affected by the building of Offa's and Wat's Dykes, but the furthest one from the Dykes, Worfield, is less than 50km away, 2 days travel on foot and was therefore in all likelihood affected by whatever control the Dyke's were designed to exercise (Carver 2019: 8). All of the locations were all under the aegis of Mercia, and if the Dykes regulated the flow of trade, which some commentators consider to have been their purpose, then the occupants of the wider landscape would also have been affected by this. It has already been stated that David Worthington considered that labour may have been moved into the area from greater distances than this to build the Offa's Dyke (Feryok 2013: 185). It might be that in light of the increased activity shown by the sites identified here that Fox's idea of a local workforce under central control is more probable. The Dyke's were built with manual labour which obviously leads to the necessity for tens, if not hundreds of people not only building but in support of these workers (Ray and Bapty 2016; 215). Ray and Bapty (2016: 224) considered that diverse Mercian forces were recruited to build during a relatively peaceful time in the territories, but it is also a possibility that a local workforce was involved, as Fox postulated. The evidence from the PAS distribution suggests more occupation, and therefore population, than could be considered from the paucity of evidence for buildings and this perhaps gives new momentum to Fox's idea. While these may be seen as random finds, their presence in such a denuded landscape garners significance, as seen in Redknap's (2022) examination of extremely low number of objects in a landscape. There are a considerable number of high-status finds too; this is significant if we were to consider that the labour was raised by local *earles* or *ducs* as part of their levy to the Mercian overlords (Ray and Bapty 2016: 224). There is documentary evidence from the late eight century that holding book-land brought with it obligations such as the building and maintenance of bridges and fortification – it is not unreasonable to consider the building of Dykes as a form of fortification (Ray and Bapty 2016: 222).

Conclusion

It is, of course, imaginative to speculate that any settlement in the area housed the people who built the Dykes, although it may at least admit the possibility of a local labour force. What is shown here is that the PAS data can be utilised to start to pinpoint areas of interest to those studying the early medieval period in the north-east of Wales

and the wider Welsh Marches. It provides a stream of evidence for occupation that can then be examined along with other sources such as place names, landscape survey and so on. It can be supported too with evidence for occupation before and after the early medieval period; these are more material rich eras with more written evidence. What all of these sites have in common is that the evidence for continuity of use is within the artefact record. Even at the lower numerical threshold, they are 'productive' sites, inland and with evidence for their use, and indeed their changing use. In Wales, the evidence threshold has to be lower than in England, because of the lower numbers of detected objects overall, and here it has been used to confirm known early medieval sites at Holt and Mold. Rossett has less evidence for early occupation so the presence of four objects merits further investigation, possibly as part of a wider examination of the character of north-east Wales in the period. On both sides of the modern border, there are a number of sites which are approaching the threshold for occupation and further study of this important resource is thus necessary and desirable.

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Pauline Clarke, Visiting Research Fellow, University of Chester
Email: p.clarke@chester.ac.uk

A Drone Photographic and Photogrammetric Portrait of Offa's Dyke

Julian Ravest and Howard Williams

This preliminary article applies drone photograph and photogrammetry visualisations to four significant sections of Offa's Dyke to provide fresh insights into specific features of the monument. Also demonstrated is the role of drones as a means to record the present state of features for future reference, and as a tool for the discovery of subtle features not previously recorded. The four case studies chosen for this article are part of a drone survey that covers an effectively continuous 16km ribbon of the Dyke plus the sections of Hergest Corner and Rushock Hill. Together with the complete set of Offa's Dyke drone photography undertaken, they establish a platform for future work.

Keywords: Aerial photography; drone; photogrammetry; Offa's Dyke: Hergan Corner; Llanfair Hill; Pen Offa; Rushock Hill

Introduction

This article presents preliminary results from drone photography along Offa's Dyke's central sections in Shropshire and Powys (historic Radnorshire) by Julian Ravest (JR). It identifies key sets of observations that augment existing identifications and interpretations regarding its design and placement. The results are presented via case studies that show the adjusted-segmented design of the monument, possible pre-existing features the Dyke traversed, and possible gateways in the monument, as well as further aspects of the monument's construction and use. This work illustrates new insights into aspects of the Dyke's placement, building and function. This in turn reveals the successes of avocational investigators in providing fresh insights into ancient monuments often considered well-known, as well as identifying the potential for further high-quality investigations of linear earthworks using drone photography in future.

Background

JR has had a broad and varied career. He was trained as a physicist and, after undertaking research in electrical engineering, he studied history and philosophy at Oxford University. After teaching and being a museum curator (which included running a planetarium), JR became a management consultant, working in major accountancy companies. This was followed by becoming an independent senior consultant on major projects to both the Arts Council of England and the Heritage Lottery Fund. During this latter period, he was also an agent for Russian artists.

On retirement to Wales, JR became actively involved with archaeology. This had been stimulated as a child by books in Abergavenny Library, however, it had remained an

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armchair interest until retiring to Wales. The crossover of JR's interests in archaeology, photography, computing and hill walking led to an appreciation of drone photography and photogrammetry as a useful tool to explore the historic environment in detail.

The output from the photographic survey consists of 'simple' oblique photographs, photomosaic maps and photogrammetric digital surface models. The photomosaic maps consist of numerous photographs 'stitched' together to form a geo-referenced image covering a large area with high resolution. The photogrammetry imagery is based on the same multiple overlapping photographs to create what is effectively a three-dimensional digital model of the visible land surface which can be manipulated to produce visualisations, (images), to reveal particular features. Details of the process used and the consequent results are given later in this article.

Working between 2016 and the present, JR has amassed a collection of some 60,000 aerial photographs, including around 7,000 images of Offa's Dyke. In total, these have contributed to over four hundred HER site records and has created many new ones. JR produced around 450 photogrammetric digital models, of which seventy-two are of Offa's Dyke.

Besides the Dyke, other significant projects have included the medieval Cistercian monastic sites of Strata Florida and Abbey Cwmhir with their surrounding landscapes and land holdings, upland surveys, and the mapping of a medieval field system on Penybont Common. The Strata Florida photography was initiated as part of the Sacred Landscapes Project and is an ongoing project with Professor David Austin. The Abbey Cwmhir work has been under the auspices of the Abbey Cwmhir Heritage Trust and is also ongoing. All other work has been self-motivated and self-funded (see Ravest 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022a, 2022b, 2023; Bezant *et al.* 2021; Austin and Ravest 2022).

JR is also a keen advocate of encouraging wider awareness of archaeological sites and their importance. In this context, JR has presented numerous talks to local groups in mid-Wales as well as to professionals and students. JR has also published videos on YouTube as a means of widening the appreciation of significant sites, cited in videos list at the end of this (Ravest, 2021a, 2021b and 2021c). Unless people are aware of such sites they cannot be expected to value and preserve them. In this, JR shared the rationale of the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory to encourage responsible and sustained avocational engagement with the monument (Williams and Delaney 2019; see also Ray *et al.* 2021). To this end, JR's images have been used by the Collaboratory in its promotional material and in various contributions to *Offa's Dyke Journal* volume 1 (A. Williams 2019). The images also contributed to the re-display of heritage interpretation led by Professor Keith Ray for the Offa's Dyke Centre in Knighton, Powys (see H. Williams 2021a; 2025). Yet, to date, JR has not articulated his project and its preliminary results in print elsewhere.

Most field observations of Offa's Dyke have been conducted from ground level and via existing Ordnance Survey maps and/or bespoke maps (Fox 1955; Noble 1981, 1983). Aerial

photographs have been utilised to record Offa's Dyke systematically in order to monitor the monument on behalf of Cadw (Musson 1994: 142–143; 2013: 50–51) but they have had a fairly limited, and a supplementary at best role in identifying and interpreting the monument (Hill and Worthington 2003; Worthington Hill 2019; Williams 2023). This matches the restricted use of detailed topographical survey to date in investigating Offa's Dyke (Ray and Bapty 2016: 194–198). The only exception is the detailed analysis of the monument by Ray and Bapty (2016) who incorporated not only twenty aerial photographs of Offa's Dyke in their careful discussion of the monument's form and placement, but also a few low-level aerial photographs taken by drone as well as a single Lidar image. When considering the study, mapping and illustration of the monument, Keith Ray (2021) explicitly notes the potential of modern digital recording methods including aerial survey, explicitly noting the value of drone photography. However, to date, although innovative uses of ground survey and Lidar technologies have developed important new insights into the monument's character, placement and course (Delaney 2021; Humphreys 2021; Ray *et al.* 2021), drone photography has yet to be systematically deployed in investigating the monument. Set against this backdrop, the article builds on a talk given to the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory conference in June 2024 (Ravest 2024; reviewed by Williams 2025).

Aims and methods

The article aims to present preliminary results from an avocational high-quality survey of central sections of Offa's Dyke conducted to support Welsh and borderlands archaeology. JR targeted a particularly well-photographed and studied section of Offa's Dyke sporting generally good survival in south Shropshire and East Radnorshire. This area of the monument was first systematically surveyed from the ground by Sir Cyril Fox (1955: 125–172) who defined it as the 'Mountain Zone' between the Vale of Montgomery and the Severn to the north, and the Herefordshire plain to the south. Referred to by Noble (1983: 40) as the 'central border' zone, it contains particularly well-preserved sections from Hergan Corner in the Clun Forest (SO 261 854) south through Knighton to Rushock Hill (SO 301 596) at which point the precise line of the Dyke becomes more difficult to track east and south (but see now Delaney 2021: 88–90). This article provides a photographic portrait of four lengths of Offa's Dyke in this zone which are presented in geographical order from north to south: Hergan Corner and Llanfair Hill (both in Shropshire), Pen Offa and Rushock Hill (both in Powys, formerly Radnorshire).

The aim for each section is to elucidate the potential contribution of drone photography to study Offa's Dyke. Specific objectives linked to this aim were fivefold:

1. heritage conservation, management and interpretation: to attempt to capture the character of the monument for heritage conservation, management and interpretation for the public today and in the future;
2. empirical: to provide a detailed record of a some 20km of the Dyke as a reference survey for future research and teaching;

3. methodological: to demonstrate the application of drone technology to an archaeological site.
4. interpretative: to provide new data for interpretations of the function and significance of Offa's Dyke in early medieval Britain.
5. educational: the case studies include iconic, easily recognised sections of the Dyke which may provide fresh insights into the Dyke and its context to both the specialist and non-specialist reader.

This article provides an overview of the project and shows results of selected sections of the Dyke. The four sections chosen as case studies were selected as they are well known and have been extensively discussed in the literature. As such the results of the drone imagery can be readily compared to recognised features and interpretations provided using other remote sensing means, notably and briefly:

Aerial photography from aircraft remain an invaluable research tool by efficiently covering large areas. Still, they are limited in resolution and ability to frame low level oblique images. The resulting images cannot be used as the source of photogrammetry.

Lidar: This is an extraordinarily powerful technique overcoming the limitations of visible light photography by being able to cut through vegetation cover (see Davis 2011, Delaney 2021). It is now available for the whole of Wales at a resolution of 1m per pixel. The drone photography used in this survey has a typical ground resolution of around 2–3cm per pixel. Colour is preserved which is important in photographing parch marks. Higher resolutions are obtained by flying lower. Drone photography is restricted by weather and vegetation.

The drone photography survey is based on aerial photographs taken using a DJI Phantom 4 drone with its built-in 12Mp camera. The images used in this article are a small selection from a collection of over six thousand which were taken of the Dyke during periods of fine weather between 2018 and 2021. Some hand-held camera photographs were also taken but are not shown here.

Two types of photographs were taken: oblique and vertical. For oblique photographs the drone simply acted as a tripod in the sky enabling views to be framed. The oblique photographs have immediate appeal and can be informative in showing the Dyke and its landscape context.

Overlapping vertical photographs were taken by the drone flying on a pre-programmed flight grid. Flight plans used in this survey were created using Drone Deploy software. Once uploaded to the drone a series of photographs were automatically taken to cover the area of interest. For this vertical photography the drone was usually flown at approximately

Figure 1 (next page): Orthomosaic of Hergan Corner, Clun Forest, Shropshire (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)


0
100 m

75m above ground surface to give a photographic ground resolution of 2–3cm per pixel. All aerial photographs were geo-referenced using the drone's built-in GPS system. The collection of all aerial photographs were managed using Adobe Lightroom.

The overlapping photographs were used by mapsmadeeasy.com software to create photomosaics and a range of point clouds in different formats. The point clouds were uploaded to Relief Visualisation Toolbox, (RVT), a service provided by the Institute of Anthropological and Spatial Studies, Slovenia, or to Planlauf/TERRAIN which is available from Planlauf GmbH, Germany. These programmes provide customisable visualisations to reveal characteristics of the landscape. RVT is now available as a plug-in for QGIS.

For the purposes of this project the Dyke was divided into fifty-five sections, each with its own photogrammetric survey and oblique photographs. This case study illustrates the range of imagery and the information available for each of the fifty-five sections. Together, these cover an almost continuous ribbon of Offa's Dyke.

Case study 1: Hergan Corner (SO 262 856)

Fox described the survival of the Dyke here as 'remarkable' in scale but took the 'right angle' as 'awkward and incomplete; the builders were apparently indifferent, and made no attempt to disguise it' (Fox 1955: 130). He notes it was one of a series of angles at clearly defined geographical locations, others being at Cwmsanaham Hill and Rushock Hill. Yet, at Hergan, Fox argued the angle was the result of a disjointed construction caused by different work gangs failing to adequately liaise with each other (Fox 1955: 153). Frank Noble concurred that the shift of alignment at the Hergan Corner col was the result of a 'lack of co-ordination' which resulted in over a mile of the Dyke to the north of Hergan Corner having 'no command of the ground nor any view to the west'. Noble also noted this arrangement resulted from the need to 'cross small head-stream valleys and boggy springheads draining eastwards' (Noble 1983: 67). Hill and Worthington (2003: 53) made a point of disagreement with Fox and Noble, seeking a logic in the positioning of Offa's Dyke here resulting from a desire to avoid the Dyke crossing wet and boggy ground: 'The line is in fact very carefully chosen with great regard for the local topography whilst keeping the long-distance objective in view; it is economical of build and minimise both the effects of the dead ground in one section and the number of streams crossed'. Therefore, the placement suggests the builders were 'extremely sensitive to local topography' (Hill and Worthington 2003: 53; see also

Figure 2 (next page, above): Oblique view looking south along the line of Offa's Dyke towards Hergan Corner with Hergan Hill in the background (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

Figure 3 (next page, below): Vertical view detailing the Hergan Corner section of Offa's Dyke with two clear breaches: one is a modern farm track and a second, arguably original gateway and associated trackway (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

Figure 4: Viewed from the east (behind) Offa's Dyke looking west, this oblique view of the Hergan Corner gateway seems designed to impress those approaching overshadowed by the bank, ditch and counterscarp bank to their right and upslope (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

Williams 2013: 156). Ray and Bapty (2016: 237) dismiss these earlier explanations in favour of regarding the logic of Hergan Corner resulting from the need for it providing one of a series of 'surveillance facilities at key points along the Dyke and also providing a striking impression when approached from the west'. To inform this debate, Hergan Corner was selected as an important case study with which to apply drone photography.

We begin with an orthomosaic of Hergan Corner where the bank from the north has been deflected to meet the southern bank, which at this point is bivallate (bank and counterscarp bank), to create an obtuse angled corner at an angle of approximately 110 degrees (Figure 1). This configuration is clearly intentional and integral to the original design; there are no topographical reasons for this deflection and no indications of any prior straight section which had been subsequently modified to create the corner. An oblique view along the straight section approaching Hergan Corner from the north of the Dyke, looking south, clearly illustrates this purposeful deflection to form an 'angled turn' far more effectively than previous ground-level photographs (e.g. Ray and Bapty 2016: 238) (Figure 2). Focusing in on the angle turn itself, the 'corner' is breached in two places. One is a modern-era farm track whilst the other is likely to be far older and perhaps the original raison d'être of the corner; a gateway through which a track passes (Figure 3).

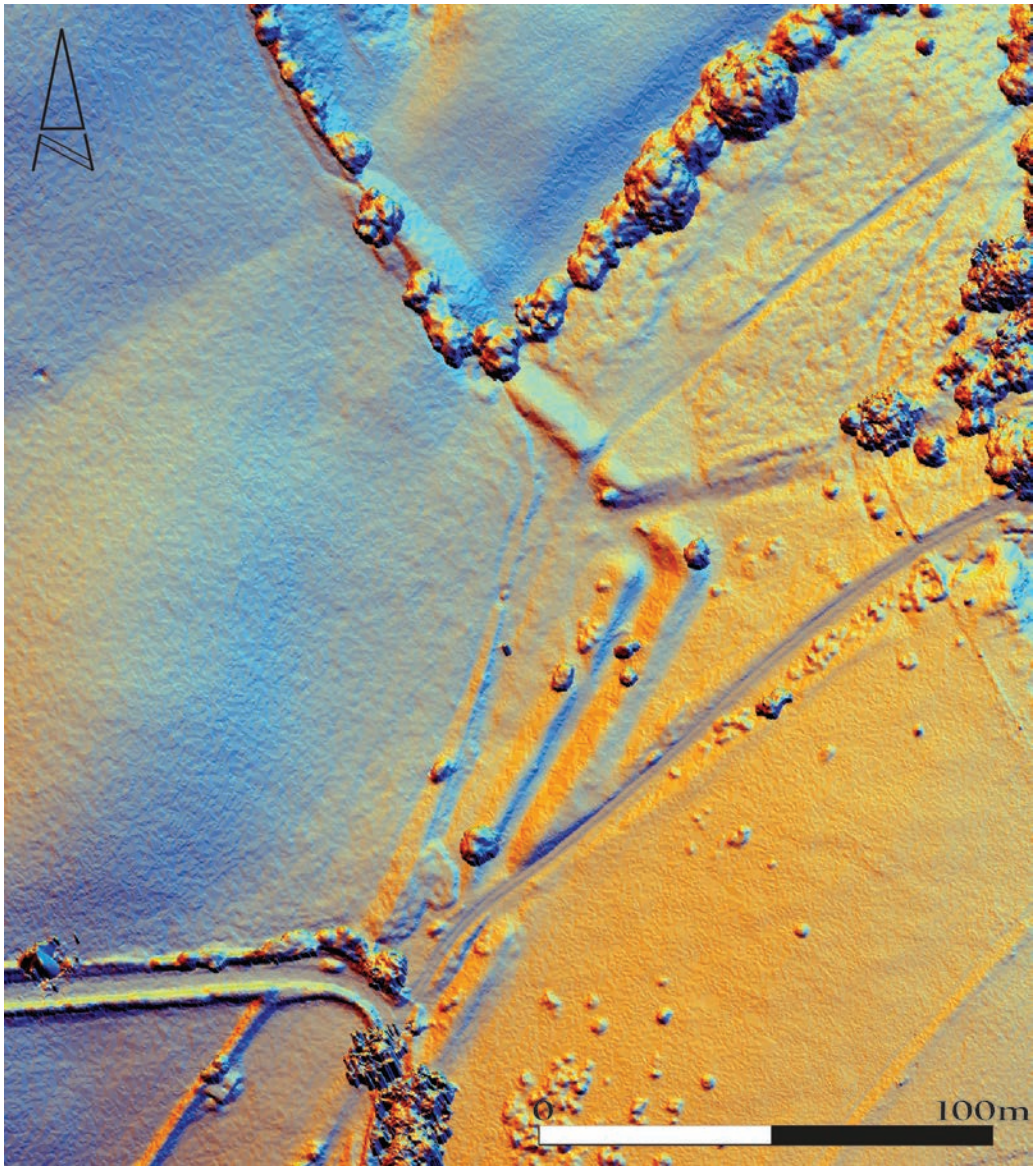


Figure 5: Hergan Corner viewed as a 3D surface model with north-east facing slopes coloured orange and south-east facing slopes coloured blue emphasising how the angle turn is located at the lowest part of a shallow valley (col) (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

This earlier gateway through the Dyke, viewed from the north-east looking south-west along the slopes of Hergan Hill (Figure 4), is designed to impress those approaching from the west (as argued by Ray and Bapty 2016: 239). Those approaching the corner would first have passed beneath the single vallate set in the hillside above, before facing a large bank immediately in front of them with the impressive bivallate section to their right. The corner is thus a distinctive confluence of routes from the west and perhaps an ideal place for observing and controlling the movement of people and their animals wishing to pass east of the Dyke.

Figure 6: Oblique view of the wider course of Offa's Dyke showing how the scale of the earthwork reduces away from the particularly monumental earthworks at Hergan Corner (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

Hergan Corner is further revealed by a 3D surface model with north-east-facing slopes coloured orange and south-east facing slopes in blue (Figure 5). The counterscarp bank is clearly visible to the south of Hergan Corner (see Ray and Bapty 2016: 209–211). This emphasises how the corner sits in the lowest part of a shallow valley. The track on the eastern side of the gateway also shows up before it enters trees. No trace of the track towards the west is now visible. Looking northwards from Hergan Corner, the Dyke arcs over the landscape crossing multiple valleys before descending into the Vale of Montgomery. Moreover, away from the Corner, the scale of the large bank reduces in scale as the Dyke traverses the landscape northwards (Figure 6). In summary, the drone photographs reveal the behaviour of Offa's Dyke at Hergan Corner and its relationship to a possible historic crossing point of the monument in more precise detail than existing published photographic records have been able to achieve to date (see Ray and Bapty 2016: figure 6.10). This bolsters the argument of Ray and Bapty (2016) regarding this being a likely historic gateway allowing control and surveillance of those approaching the monument from the west rather than a mishap of poor co-ordination or else exclusively concerned with avoiding wetland and water courses.

Figure 7: Oblique view looking north-west over Springhead Farm and the northern edge of Llanfair Hill (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

Case study 2: Llanfair Hill (SO 251 797)

This is an iconic section of Offa's Dyke where it straddles the western slopes of Llanfair Hill (Fox 1955: 134–135; Hill and Worthington 2003: 8, 51). Here, Noble (1983: 62) described it as '... one of the most impressive stretches of the Dyke'. Ray and Bapty described the Dyke in this location as surviving in their 'monumental construction mode' (Ray and Bapty 2016: 169) across 'sweeping uplands' (Ray and Bapty 2016: figure 6.4) where the monument's 'adjusted-segmented construction' that they have identified and characterised is clearly visible (Ray and Bapty 2016: 203). Another distinctive aspect of this stretch is that a counterscarp bank can be readily discerned as a continuous feature of the monument (Ray and Bapty 2016: 210, figure 5.37). This is also one of a series of locations where dry-stone wall revetments were incorporated into the west-facing bank of the Dyke (Ray and Bapty 2016: 212). Here also, quarry pits are visible (not to be confused as an eastern ditch) to the east of the bank (Ray and Bapty 2016: 188–192, 219).

The drone photography elucidates some of these features far more clearly than high-level or ground-level images. For instance, an oblique view looking north-west over the Dyke shows clearly its curving path around the contours before it drops down off Llanfair Hill before crossing a stream and heading in a relatively straight section towards Springhill Farm and

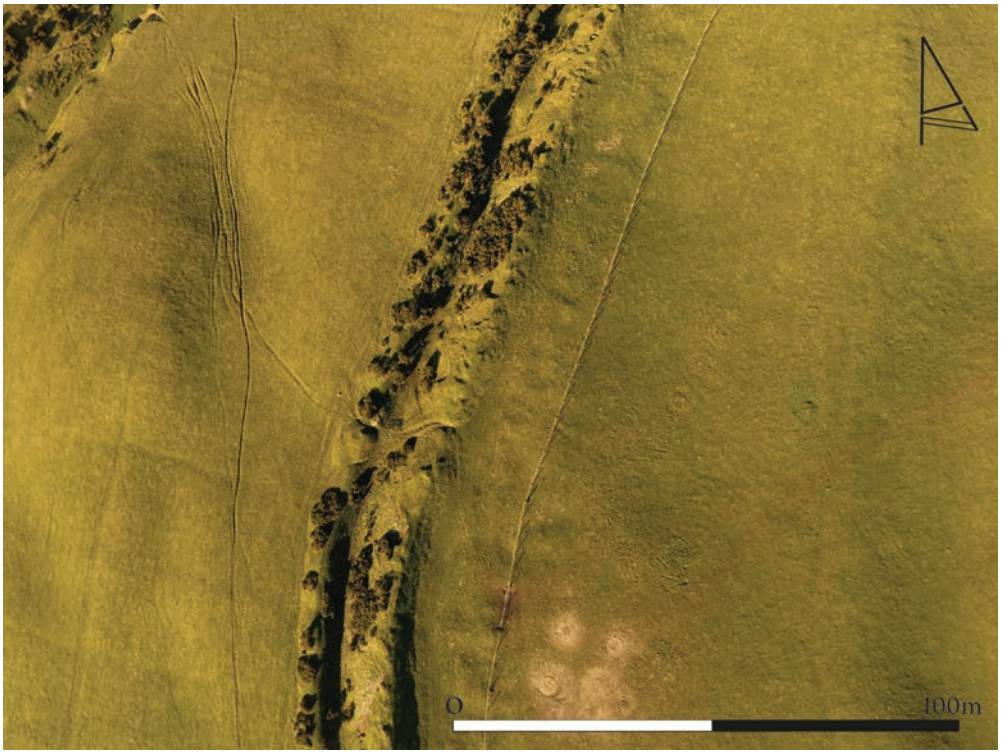
Figure 8: Example of a georeferenced orthomosaic image of Offa's Dyke has it traverses west of the summit of Llanfair Hill (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

from thence to Spoad Farm in the Clun Valley (Williams 2023: figure 24). Springhill Cottage is in the trees near the centre of the image. Few features are visible in the surrounding 'improved' enclosure fields through which the Dyke passes but the quarry pits can be readily distinguished to the east (near-side in this photograph) of the monument (Figure 7).

To further introduce this stretch, an example of a georeferenced orthomosaic image maps a composite of eighty-eight photographs superimposed on a satellite image to demonstrate how such images, created from drone photographs with GPS metadata, can be applied

Figure 9 (next page, above): One of the eighty-eight overlapping vertical photographs that make up the photomosaic Figure 8 (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

Figure 10 (next page, below): Illustration fo the detail of the Figure 9 orthomosaic photographs (Photograph, Julian Ravest, 2019).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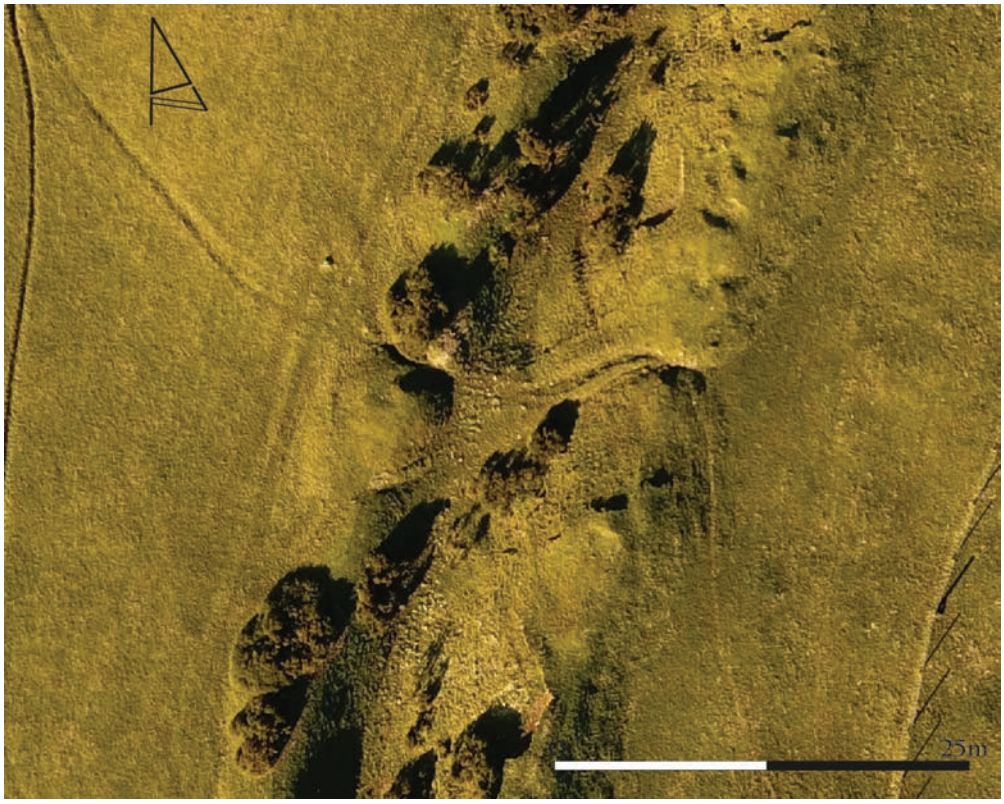
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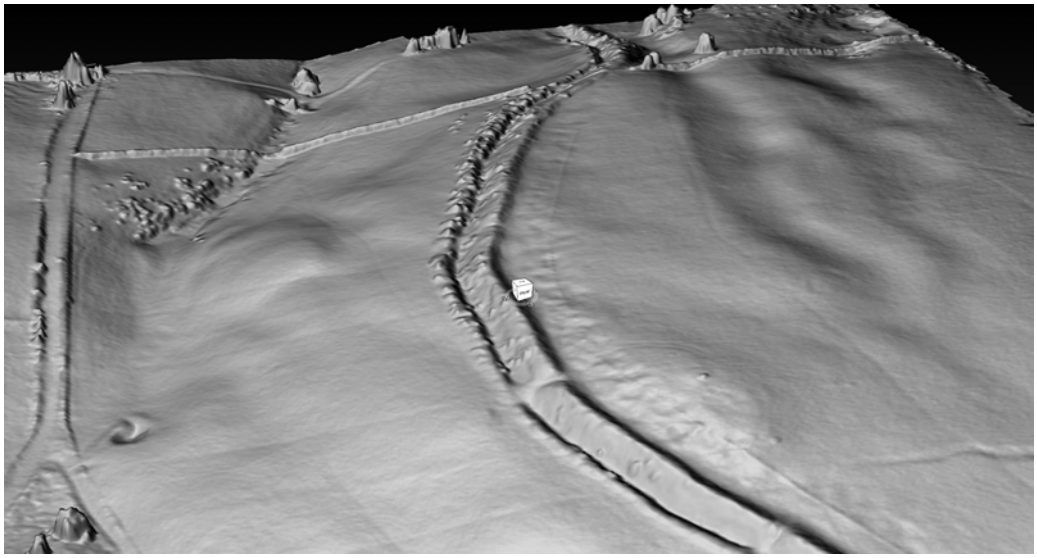


Figure 11: Oblique view of part of 3D digital surface model with vertical elevation exaggerated by factor of 1.5 revealing quarrying on the eastern side of the bank and the counterscarp bank (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

Figure 12: Oblique view south along Offa's Dyke at Llanfair Hill (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

Figure 13: A lower oblique view south along Offa's Dyke Dyke illustrating the adjusted-segmented structure and a braided relict route seemingly passing under the monument (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

to Geographical Image Systems (GIS) (Figures 8–9). Details of the quarry ditches to the east and counterscarp bank to the west are readily identified with a definition hitherto unmatched (see Ray and Bapty 2016: 209–211). Details of such high-resolution vertical photographs afford a precise recording of the state of the monument at the time it was taken and thus can be invaluable for heritage conservation, management and interpretation as well as education and research in the future, such as by assessing erosion over time (Figure 10). Specific features can be discerned through further scrutiny of the images. For example, by adopting an oblique view of part of 3D digital surface model with vertical elevation exaggerated by factor of 1.5, the aforementioned quarry pits on the eastern side of the bank are revealed, as are the straight sections of the adjusted-segmented design of the Dyke (Figure 11). Parameters such as angle of 'digital' lighting, angle of view, exaggerated vertical dimension can be varied to reveal subtle features which may otherwise pass unnoticed.

Further oblique drone photographs reveal this section of the Dyke's careful navigation of the topography to the west of the summit of Llanfair Hill. The Dyke itself is well formed and in good condition and generally free of agricultural damage apart from some crossing farm tracks (Figures 12–14). The overall relationship of the Dyke to the ridge

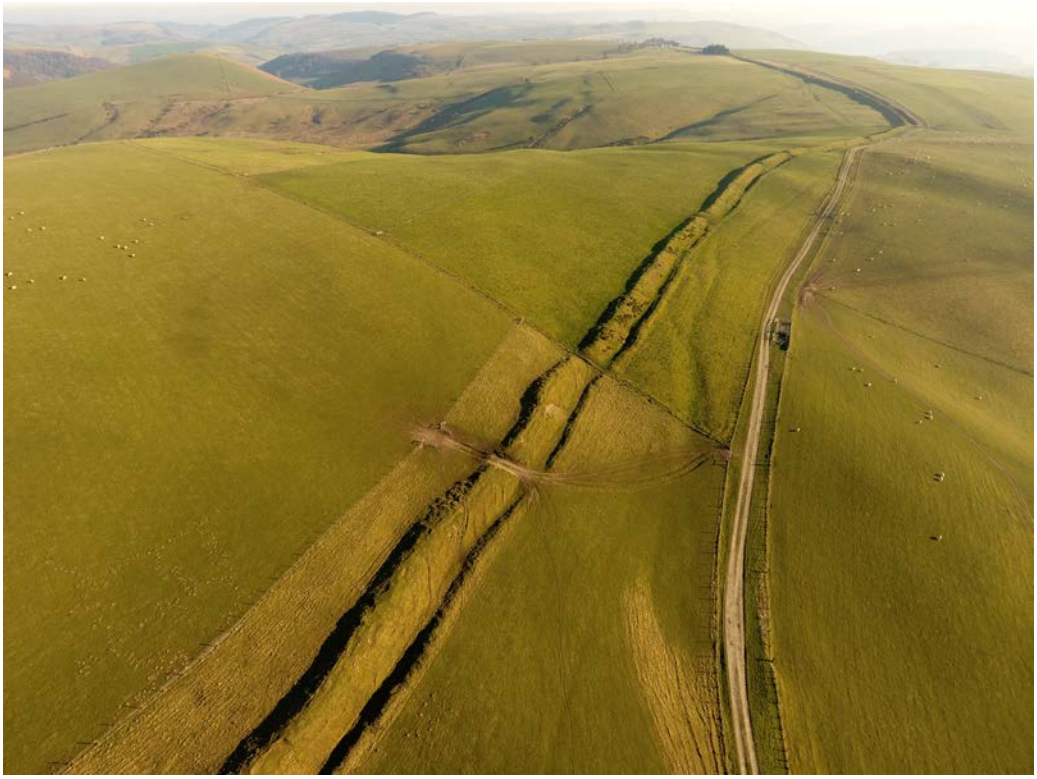


Figure 14: Oblique view looking south over the braided track in relation to Offa's Dyke on Llanfair Hill (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

can be seen (Figure 12), but from a lower viewpoint the line of the Dyke can be seen to 'wiggle', not because of differential erosion but because of its original, deliberate adjusted-segmented design comprised of straight lengths 'bolted' together (Ray and Bapty 2016: 192–208). These photographs thus show far more precise and discernible evidence than the ground-level photographs hitherto presented in support of the existence of this design feature on Llanfair Hill (Ray and Bapty 2016: figure 5.30). This design is reminiscent of the subtle changes of direction one can discern in a ridgeway over open countryside which can sometimes constitute a locally agreed boundary. Notably the Dyke is on a westward facing slope in the foreground section while in the distance the Dyke is on an eastern slope, illustrating how the monument navigates through the topography to optimise its role in blocking, controlling and surveilling movement in the landscape between the watersheds (see also Noble 1983: 62). A sunken braided track can be seen passing under the Dyke in this and the following photograph (Figure 13), possibly enhanced by recent farming activity but perhaps revealing a longer-term ridgeway route used to traverse the landscape from before the Dyke's construction. This braided track rises from the valley below and follows the line of the ridge (Figure 14).

The drone photographic survey revealed a further, hitherto unrecognised earthwork feature associated with Offa's Dyke. In glancing light, at the point where the modern

Figure 15: In oblique light, this vertical view reveals a previously unrecorded earthwork underlying Offa's Dyke (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

farm track and the Dyke converge is the hint of a previously unrecorded rectangular earthwork, approximately 40m x 25m, (SO 2528 7897) (Figure 15). A photogrammetric view of the earthwork highlights this subtle feature the vertical scale when it has been magnified by a factor of ten (Figure 16).

A different type of visualisation of the same 3D digital model shows more clearly the rectangular enclosure on top of a raised platform that is beneath, and hence older than, the Dyke. Some processing artefacts are present at some edges of the visualisation where there are insufficient overlapping photographs to provide a 3D analysis (Figure 17).

No conclusive interpretation of the earthwork is possible without further parallels or investigation. One option is that it has prehistoric origins as a control point along as the postulated (above) north–south ridgeway passed through a ridge-top choke point. A second suggestion is that this might be a Roman fortlet: a form of monument which takes varied forms in northern Britain from the first to the early fifth century AD, but has far fewer parallels in western Britain beyond the first century (see Symonds 2018: 197–208, 214–218; White 2022). Still, aerial reconnaissance, geophysical survey and earthwork survey have together begun to reveal more examples of varying date-range, size and likely function

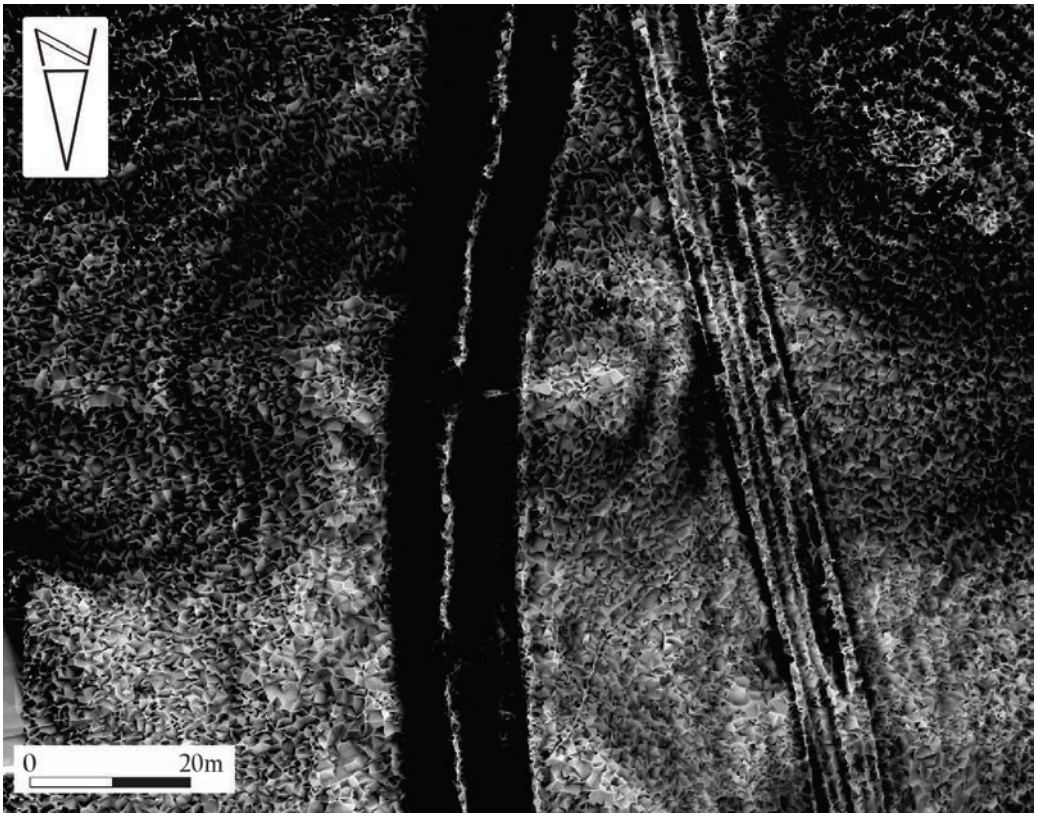


Figure 16: Photogrammetric view of the earthwork hinted at in Figure 15 magnified by a factor of ten on the vertical scale in order to highlight this subtle feature (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

(Burnham and Davies 2010: 67–68, 71, 291–301: Driver *et al.* 2020). At c. 40m x 25m, the Llanfair Hill earthwork is not dissimilar in proportions from Pen y Crocbren, measuring 23.5m x 20m (Putnam 2010: 297; see also Frere and St Joseph 1983: 139–140), Waun-ddu (Y Pigwyn III) c. 38m x 35m (Murphy 2010: 298–299), Penmincae sized at 42m x 30m (Frere 2010: 296), and Period 1 of Erglodd at 49m x 32m (Davies 2010: 292–295). More examples of these fortlets are likely to come to light with further aerial investigations: a notable recent example in the Anglo-Welsh borderlands is the Harpton signal station in proximity to a series of Roman first-century marching camps and associated structures and activity in the Walton Basin (Britnell and Jones 2019: 60, 74, 91).

For Llanfair Hill, the nearest Roman forts are Brompton/Pentrehyling (White 2010) and the longer-lasting Forden Gaer slightly farther away still (Jones 2010: 243–245; see also Jones and Mattingly 1990: 103, map 4:34, 103–105, maps 4:34–4:38). Yet, a precise Roman context to activities in the Clun Forest has not been established, although it is plausible this postulated fortlet might have served as part of a chain of communications between Roman military installations during the first-century invasion phase or later various attempts to control and communicate across the province. Thus, it might be

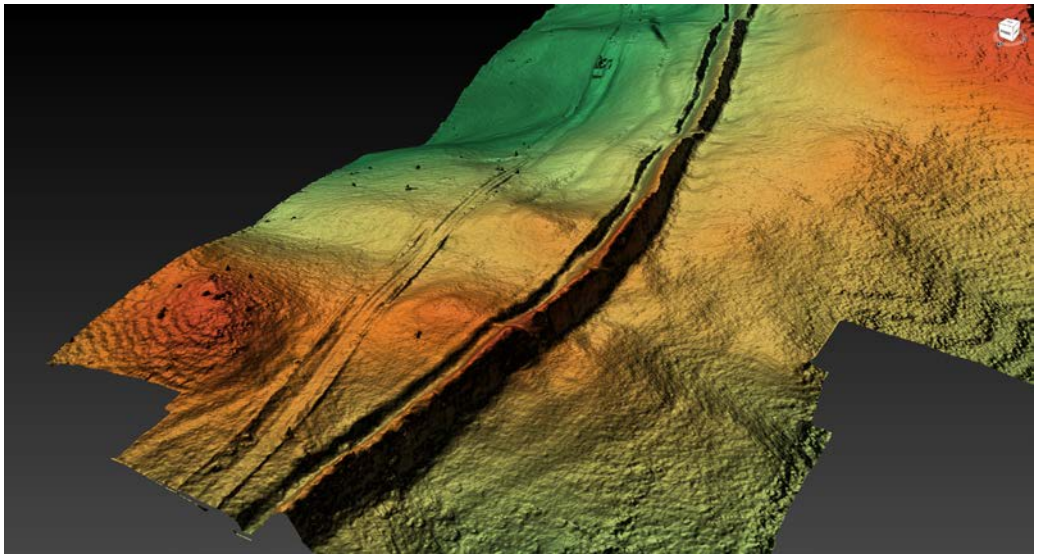


Figure 17: An alternative visualisation of the same 3D digital model as Figure 16 (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

no coincidence that Offa's Dyke incorporated this ruinous site into its line. However, without further investigations, a precise logic and context to a Roman fortification at this precise location cannot be determined.

A further alternative explanation for the earthwork is that it may relate to the actual construction of the Dyke: perhaps a small garrison was installed here to protect workers or to act as their base, a suggestion hitherto not considered but which might equally apply to enclosures and fortifications adjacent to or under the Dyke, including possible repurposed prehistoric sites (cf. Ray and Bapty 2016: 244–250). Whatever its date and function, any beacon on this specific site would be visible for long distances to the east and its position gives it extensive views to the west. As such, its incorporation into the line of Offa's Dyke certainly speaks to the careful positioning of the Mercian monument in the landscape.

Case Study 3: Pen Offa (Castle Ring) Crossing (SO 269 638)

Our third case study explores a gap in the Dyke at Pen Offa near Castle Ring which coincides with a slight change of direction of the Dyke of some 20 degrees, creating an obtuse corner. This feature was completely missing from Fox's commentary on the course of the monument (Fox 1955: 145–146) but identified by him as an 'opening' where the bank is 'slightly reflected', the gap being 5–6m in breadth. A deep trackway leads to the opening from the north-west but is not discernible on the east side of the monument which he regarded as the line of a 'hill-way' from Radnor Forest (Fox 1955: 158). Frank Noble also considered this a possible gap and noted a trend for this happening where traffic from the Welsh side would have to pass below one flank of

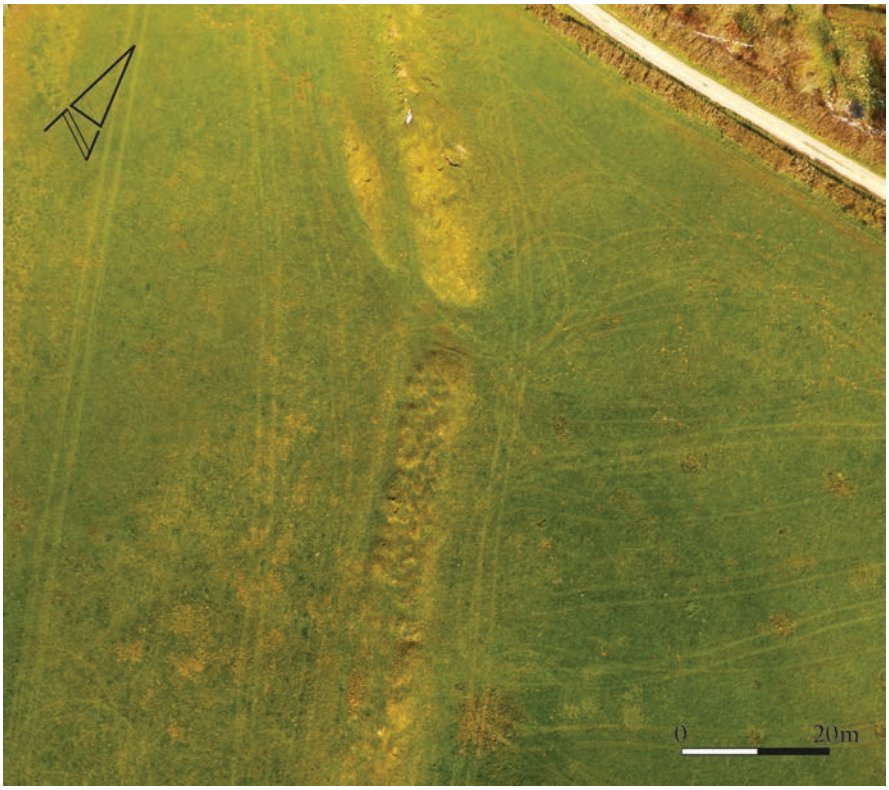


Figure 18: Vertical view of the gap at Pen Offa (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

Figure 19: An oblique view of the Pen Offa gap looking south (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

Figure 20: Offa's Dyke at Pen Offa viewed from the west showing the bank after the second gap with a third gap visible beyond (to the south) (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

Dyke when approaching the monument (Noble 1983: 44). He considered it a 'very important crossing-place on the upland between the Lugg and the Teme valleys' (Noble 1983: 45). Hill and Worthington (1983: 53) conducted excavations (their site 62) which they describe as 'limited' and argue that the gap is the result of being crossed by 'post-medieval drainage' and not original. Ray and Bapty (2015: 229–232) explicitly countered Hill and Worthington's scepticism and excavation results (noting the limited records of the excavation, and how the trench was unlocated). They questioned whether the small ditch uncovered was the continuation of the Dyke's ditch. Utilising drone photography by Adam Stanford of Aerial-Cam to support their arguments, Ray and Bapty show how the Dyke approaching the gap from both directions, north and south, shifted its alignment eastwards and that the gap exists at the point where the alignment is angled. Following Fox's observations of a trackway approaching from the north-west, the Dyke is here seen as diverting an earlier route towards the gap. They find this evidence 'compelling' regarding this being an original gateway, and add the observation that the place-name of the cottage to the north-east of the gap by only 100m 'Bwlch' means 'gap, pass, or notch' (Ray and Bapty 2016: 231–232).

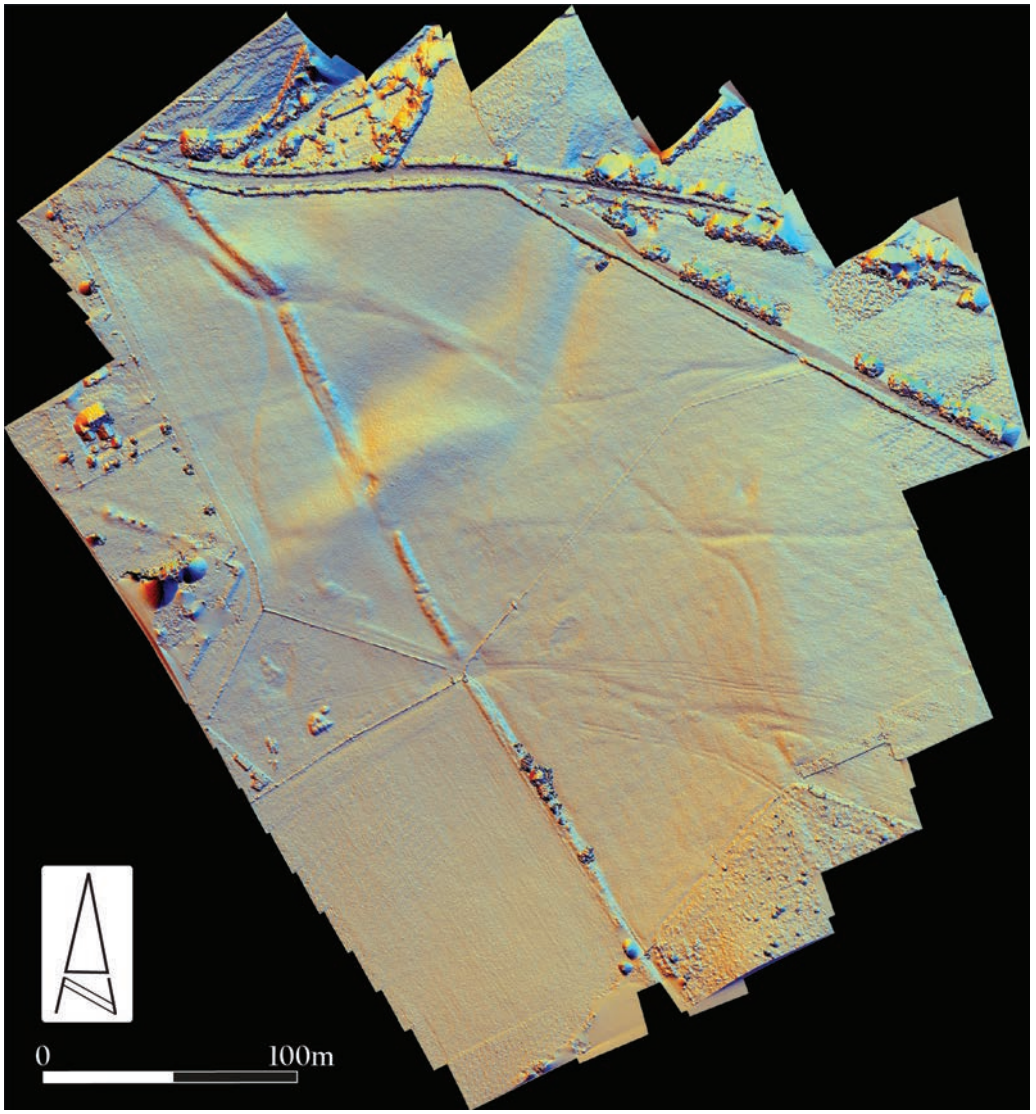


Figure 21: Multi-directional vertical 3D visualisation of the three crossings of the Dyke near Pen Offa with associated tracks (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

The new drone photographs conducted by this survey reveal a short counterscarp bank lies parallel to the Dyke to the northern side of the gap and there is a vestigial, possibly much eroded, counterscarp bank also visible on the southern side of the gap (Figure 18). The significance of the crossing point would have been enhanced if this part of the Dyke had been bivallate, supporting the arguments of Fox, reiterated by Ray and Bapty, that the section either side of the gateway was particularly monumental. As noted by Ray and Bapty (2016: 230), a sunken east-west, braided, track crosses the Dyke at this point and this may have been a precursor of the modern road along the valley (Figures 19–21). The modern road, B4372, crosses the Dyke some 70m to the north of the postulated gateway

(Figure 20) and two other sunken tracks cross the Dyke in this section (Figures 20 and 21). In summary, this high-resolution drone photography, oblique and vertical, supports and enhances prior observations regarding the potential for this having been an original gateway in Offa's Dyke.

Case study 4: Rushock Hill (SO 289 595)

The Rushock Hill section of the Dyke is the most southerly area photographed in this survey and represents a critical node in the monument's major 'stances': To the north of Rushock Hill the monument follows a broadly north–south alignment, to the south of Rushock Hill it heads north-west/south-east to join the Wye west of Hereford (Ray and Bapty 2016: 128). The abrupt change of direction , 'angle turn', of the Dyke at this key node of some 65 degrees, is a significant and much debated feature in this section between Herrock Hill and Rushock Hill (Fox 1955: 148–150; Noble 1983: 40; Hill and Worthington 2003: 132–134, 143).

We begin this final case study with an orthomosaic view of Rushock Corner that provides a clear impression of the angle-turn of the monument, supporting the argument that this was a feature that enhanced the visual impact and use of the monument in controlling movement along and across its line (Ray and Bapty 2016: 234–240). No 'hidden' features are revealed by photogrammetric techniques in the adjacent improved

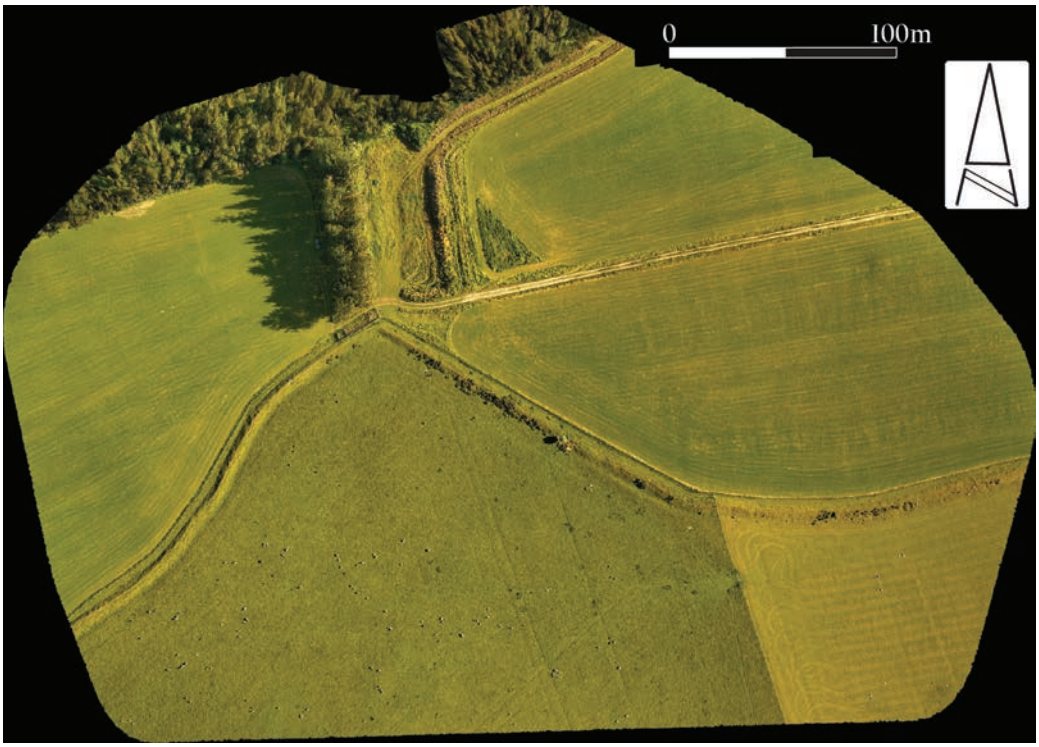


Figure 22: Orthomosaic view of Offa's Dyke's angle turn on Rushock Hill (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

fields with no gap in the Dyke. The actual corner shows no sign of discontinuity where the two branches meet. The adjusted-segmentation of the monument is evident in this and subsequent images (Figure 22). Indeed, it is demonstrable in a fashion that has not been adequately mapped or visualised before (cf. Ray and Bapty 2016: 206).

At this point the Dyke appears to make a deliberate and purposeful detour off the more obvious ridge line (Figure 23). While no track has penetrated the Dyke near the corner, a possible sunken track can be seen directed towards the Dyke but peters out before reaching it. This is possibly a cross-ridge track that would have predated the Dyke and may have been a reason for this particular location of the corner.

A second cross ridge sunken track can be discerned passing through the Dyke further to the east (Figure 24). It does not appear to be part of the Dyke design but is a later break-through. Offa's Dyke Path follows this track across the Dyke. As on Llanfair Hill, the line of the Dyke is laid out in adjusted-segmentation along a ridge. A closer view looking east of the crossing shows where Offa's Dyke Path meets the Dyke. This is the only location on Rushock Hill where a significant number of exposed stones rest in the ditch perhaps formerly elements of the monument's bank (Figure 25) (see also Ray and Bapty 2016: 212–213).

An oblique photograph looking north-east shows Offa's Dyke dropping off Rushock Hill ridge into Kennel Wood via a series of adjusted segments (see also Ray and Bapty 2016; contra Hill and Worthington 2003: 50). Furthermore, a georeferenced photogrammetric visualisation/map shows the adjusted segments of the Dyke before it crosses diagonally down a steep slope which is now wooded (Figures 26 and 27). One consideration might have been the creation of an obtuse corner where there is a gap in the Dyke; now a crossing point by the Mortimer Trail (SO 2982 5952). Part of the Dyke is severely eroded in this section. This firmly supports Ray and Bapty's (2016) and Delaney's (2021) determinations that Offa's Dyke continued into Kennel Wood and did not, as Hill and Worthington (2003: 143) argue, stop on the hilltop.

Discussion

This study has presented case studies from an avocational high-quality survey to support Welsh and borderlands archaeology. The twenty-seven images in the case studies presented in this article are but a small fraction of the information contained in the complete survey database and are indicative of the contribution that drone photography can make in the mapping and analysis of Offa's Dyke. In particular, this project complements the strengths and weaknesses of other remote sensing tools available to archaeologists (e.g. Davis 2011;

Figure 23 (next page, above): Oblique view east over Offa's Dyke on Rushock Hill (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

Figure 24 (next page, below): Oblique view looking east over Offa's Dyke on Rushock Hill showing a second cross-ridge sunken track passes over the earthwork (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

Delaney 2021; see also Ray *et al.* 2021). Its overall benefit is to detail archaeological features at high resolution and at low level in their landscape context. Its main weakness is that, unlike Lidar, it cannot penetrate vegetation cover.

Two uses that are not covered in this survey are its use in recording, in 3D modelling via photogrammetry, of archaeological excavations and in surveying parch or crop marks. However, the case studies included are sufficient to justify the ongoing and sustained use of drone photography alongside other aerial reconnaissance methods to benefit our understanding and appreciation of the historic landscape of the Anglo-Welsh borderlands, including its linear earthworks. Certainly, the potential remains to widen the scope of this survey, not only to other areas of Offa's Dyke, but to other linear monuments in the region. These include the 'short dykes' of western Britain (e.g. Hankinson 2024) and Wat's Dyke (Williams 2021b) as well as other linear monuments of postulated early medieval date (e.g. Vyner 2021). Such work might deploy drone photography in targeting specific features and sections which might resolve questions regarding the presence, character, function and significance of linear earthworks.

This initial report of a drone survey of the Dyke has contributed fresh insights and clarity into understanding the selected features, and in so doing has provided evidence to determine some long-standing uncertainties and controversies.

Topographic position

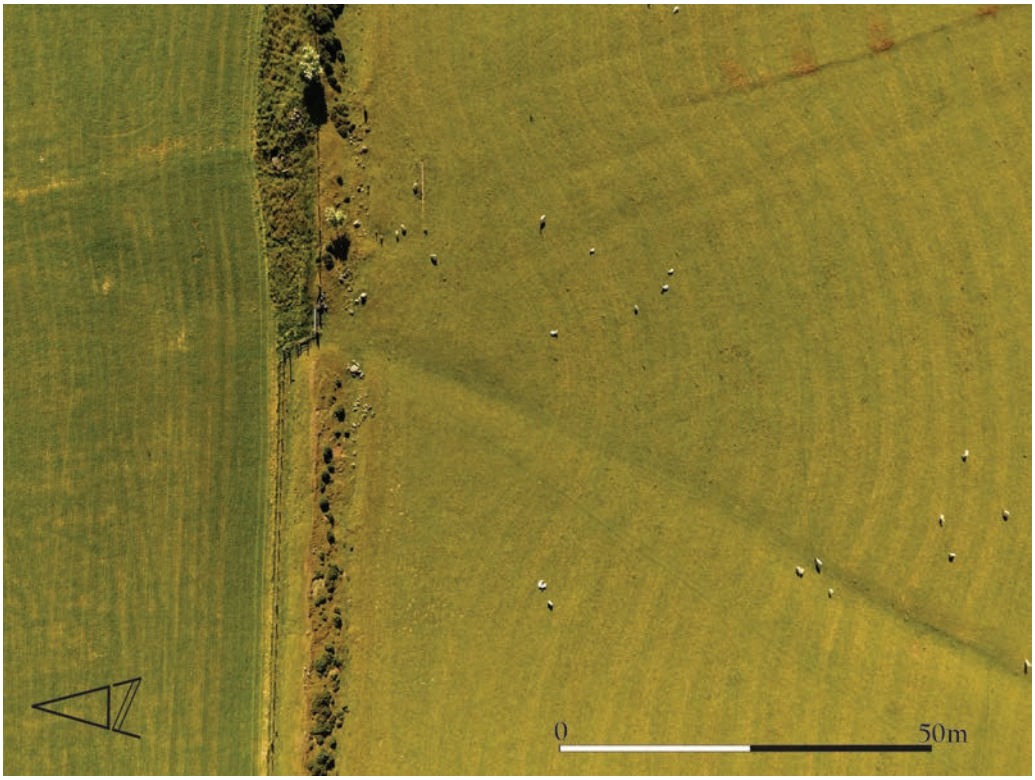
The course of the Dyke through the landscape is clearly shown in each of the four case studies. It does not hog the western slope so as to dominate the west. Often it is seen to follow ridges, or even on occasions eastern slopes, where visibility from the west would be limited. The placement appears deliberate in all sections considered as it navigates complex topography along, across water courses and other routes of movement in the landscape (see also Ray and Bapty 2016; Williams 2023).

Relationship with earlier trackways

An aspect of the survey is its ability to show trackways not readily apparent from ground level. Such trackways, at Hergan Corner, Llanfair Hill, Pen Offa and Rushock Hill, may cross the Dyke and in some instances might suggest cross traffic prior to the construction of the Dyke. Other tracks run parallel to the Dyke or cross under it as noted on Llanfair Hill. Such tracks may have been used to mark earlier, pre-existing boundaries which have been reinforced by the Dyke.

Figure 25 (next page, above): Vertical view of the crossing showing exposed stones on and around Offa's Dyke (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

Figure 26 (next page, below): Oblique view looking east-north-east showing Offa's Dyke dropping off Rushock Hill ridge into Kennel Woods (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)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Design of gateways

The gateways considered at Hergan Corner and Pen Offa both appear to have been part of the original design of the Dyke, confirming and enhancing arguments presented by Ray and Bapty (2016). There is no evidence of extant alignment of the dyke being prefigured by earlier banks. Rather, the banks adjoining gateways have been planned to make concave corners, even if slight, towards western approaches. In the case of Hergan Corner the placing of the gateway with banks, including bivallate construction (bank and counterscarp bank), is designed to impress those approaching from the west. However, an acute corner does not necessarily indicate a gateway in all instances, and there seems not to be one at the Rushock Hill angle turn.

Construction modes and methods

The mode of construction of the Dyke has been revealed with counterscarp, ditch and bank, particularly on Llanfair Hill. Meanwhile, quarrying on the eastern side of the Dyke in the Llanfair Hill section has been depicted in detail. All these features are revealed far clearer via drone photography than available to previous investigators. Whether the material was used in the initial construction, or used later for 'maintenance', cannot be determined from the photography. However, at a practical level, it is plausible that after the ditch and bank were constructed, excavating from the deep ditch would have become more difficult. The mode of construction of Offa's Dyke in adjusted segments by Ray and Bapty (2016) is confirmed and extended in each of the four sections investigated and show careful installation of the bank and ditch in regards to seeing out from its line and being seen by those approaching the monument.

Discovery of a new monument

The discovery of a previously unrecorded rectangular earthwork under the line of Offa's Dyke is notable, particularly as this section of the Dyke has been studied by generations of archaeologists. Further visual/photographic studies are unlikely to determine its date or function is required. This instance illustrates a key limitation of drone surveys which are necessarily concerned with the visible ground surface.

Conclusions

Early medieval sites and monuments in western Britain are investigated using a range of methods and techniques, in which aerial photography (often alongside geophysical survey and excavation) has been long-established as valuable technique for both identification and interpretation (e.g. Jones *et al.* 2018). However, to date, the potential for drone photography for further investigations of early medieval linear earthworks has yet to be fully realised. The application of aerial photography and photogrammetry using drones to archaeology has been made possible by technologies and software developed in recent years for more commercial endeavours. Its increasingly affordable pricing

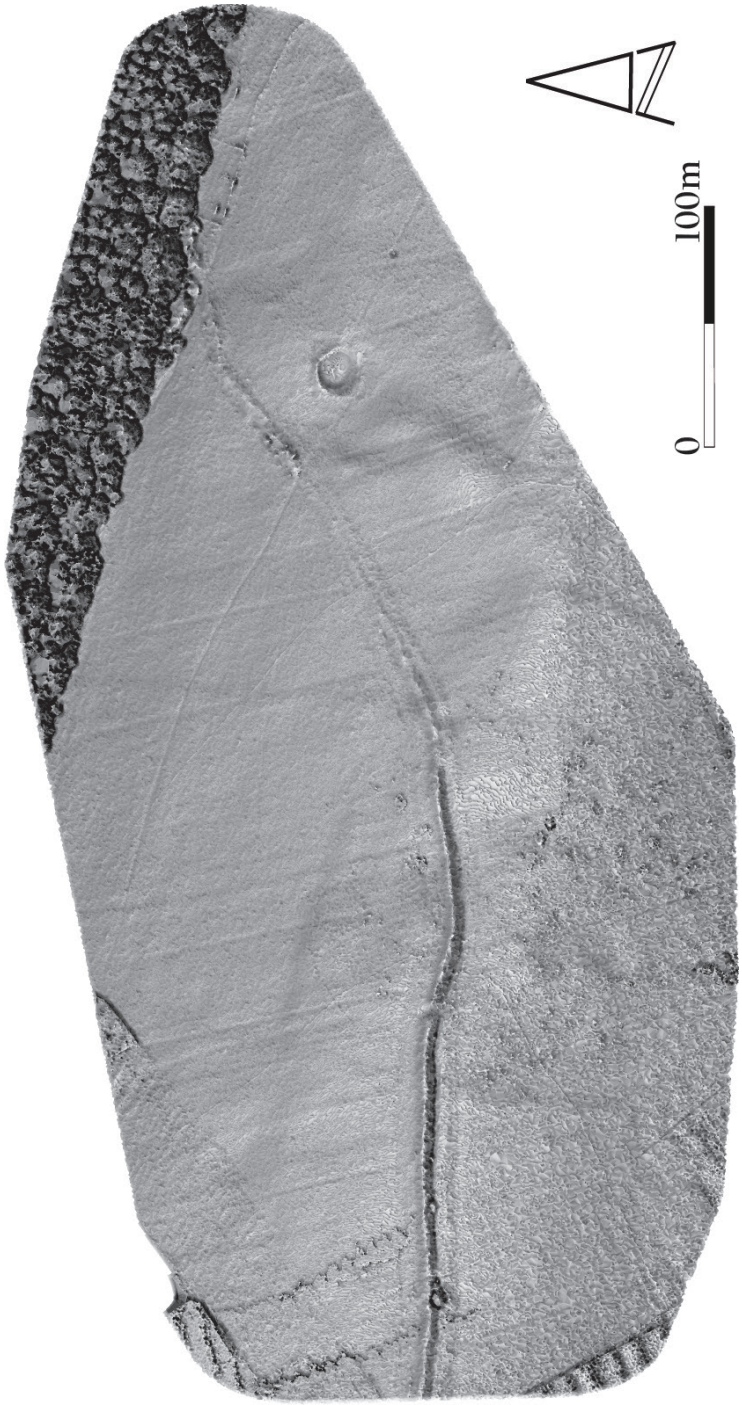

Figure 27: A georeferenced photogrammetric visualisation/map showing the adjusted-segmentation of the monument and its course into Kennel Wood (Photograph: Julian Ravest, 2019)

enables non-professional, (avocational or amateur) archaeologists to contribute to the sum of archaeological knowledge in new non-invasive ways. It is a tool for recording, for discovery, for research and for increasing awareness to the general public.

Postscript: availability of imagery

JR took all photographs and created photogrammetric visualisations in this article. All photographs and visualisations in the complete Offa's Dyke collection are available by contacting JR or Heneb-CPAT as are all my other aerial photographs.

In the context of this article, by making the images of this survey freely available, it is hoped they may be used by others to augment their researches into the Dyke and be used to promote it responsibly to the widest possible audience. It can also be used in the management of the Dyke as it records the Dyke, in detail, at one point in time and therefore might be of valuable for examining its future condition in comparative terms.

Acknowledgements

The early encouragement of the Offa's Dyke Association, in particular its current chair, Dave McGlade, was important in motivating this project. The drone photography and investigation was conducted by Julian Ravest. Subsequently, Howard Williams worked in liaison with Julian to select the four case studies to show-case his project, contributing to this article by providing the context of past research approaches and interpretations, identifying parallel sites and monuments, and considering the project in relation to current archaeological research theory, methods and techniques.

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Julian Ravest
Email: julian.ravest@gmail.com

Howard Williams, Professor of Archaeology, University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester CH1 4BJ, UK
Email: howard.williams@chester.ac.uk

Reply to Ravest and Willams

Lena Delaney

Offa's Dyke has a long tradition of scholarly investigations, many of these based upon observations of how the surviving monument uses the landscape (Fox 1955; Noble 1981; Hill and Worthington 1983; Ray and Bapty 2016; Delaney 2021; Williams 2023). Although these investigations have brought great insights, the process of interpretation is difficult due to the vast scale of the Dyke and the many factors affecting how, where and to what extent it survives. Multiple excavations of the Dyke remain the more desired intervention for future research in order to address the many remaining unanswered questions about its date, form, function and significance. Still, there is a lot of potential in studying the landscape archaeology of the monument remotely. Fine-grained and accurate accounts and mapping of Offa's Dyke's landscape context is essential for interpretation, as Julian Ravest's drone photography ably demonstrates here.

The use of a drone to capture bespoke, targeted, high-resolution photographs provides new perspectives on Offa's Dyke. Whilst aerial photography is not a new technique for archaeological prospection, due to a relative paucity of published interventions and surveys, the low-level photography taken from drones is a relatively new undertaking for Offa's Dyke. This article serves to illustrate and encourage the many potential applications of drone photography.

The article discusses possible readings of the monument based on its surviving form in the landscape in four stretches. It identifies possible gateways at Hergen Corner and Castle Ring, a probable earthwork feature underlying the Dyke on Llanfair Hill, and confirmation of the earthwork continuing beyond Rushock Hill into Herefordshire.

In the first stretch of Offa's Dyke investigated, Hergen Corner, the study provides a reading of the terrain which hopes to explain the usual behaviour noted by previous scholarship. The proposal that the unusual behavior denotes a type of bottleneck gateway is worthy of consideration. Still, the wider view of the landscape should not be forgotten when looking at curious behaviour of the Dyke, offered by Hill and Worthington (1983) and lidar surveys (Delaney forthcoming). That is to say, the proposed gateway is not firmly demonstrated and the right-angled turn at this location might instead suggest the course of the monument is a product of both avoiding less favourable ground but also sacrificing efficiency in the route to utilise the north-west ridge of Hergen Hill to enhance its visibility towards the west.

The photographs from Castle Ring seem to show that traces of previous access routes were cut off by the construction of the Dyke. Here, the landscape provides an insight into how

the Dyke affected movement through the region. This is consistent with other discoveries that the Dyke did block existing routeways (Ray *et al.* 2021) rather than created gated access. Similar to Hergen Corner, the seemingly impractical shifts in the alignment of the Dyke at Castle Ring appear to position the monument to best utlilise the entire north-west slope of Granner Wood, thus enhancing its visibly towards Castle Ring to the north-west. Again, this might relate less to a gate through the monument in this specific location and more to the negotiation of complex topography by the Dyke in relation to its desire to exploit western facing slopes on a broader (roughly) north-to-south alignment.

The existence of a possible earthwork enclosure cut by the Dyke at Llanfair Hill gives insight into a broader pattern I have observed regarding how the Dyke treats previously existing monuments along the route. My own work along the entire length of the monument shows that at no point where the Dyke cuts through an existing (prehistoric) monument is the Dyke utilising existing earthworks, e.g. Lancaut (Gloucestershire), Redhill (Herefordshire), Burfa Bank (Powys), Llanymynech Hill (Shropshire) (Delaney forthcoming). This gives us a valuable insight into the construction practices of the Dyke builders. The lack of reutilisation reveals a policy of overwriting existing features by the Mercians, possibly as a demonstration of their physical domination over the landscape, although this power makes compromises in its course to avoid other monuments.

Both Llanfair Hill and Castle Ring show the importance of the act of construction to the builders. They did not take shortcuts by using existing banks of monuments. Instead, the process of shaping the landscape by constructing the Dyke was more important to them than using opportunistic lengths of existing earthwork. Cutting off routeways, like at Castle Ring, made the Dyke overall more impractical, but its presence was more important than any practical management of the frontier. As demonstrated with the shifts in alignment at Selattyn Hill (Shropshire), Llynclys Hill (Powys), Cwm-Sanaham (Shropshire), Rushock Hill (Herefordshire) and Lower Meend (Gloucestershire). These locations involve the Dyke making movements in the landscape that are less efficient in terms of construction but lead to more favourable visible landscape or even avoiding, probable, contested land (Delaney forthcoming).

The confirmation that the Dyke continues east then south beyond Rushock Hill outlined by this article supports my own research into the Dyke in Herefordshire (Delaney 2021). Together, this promotes a more accurate view of the completed Dyke between the Severn and the Wye (see also Ray *et al.* 2021). This is part of my ongoing doctoral research focused on using lidar data to analyse Offa's Dyke, looking into landscape use and the monument's agency to affect the experience and movement of people in the early medieval landscape. Lidar has obvious benefits in rapid data collection and mapping landscapes without vegetation cover, and it has allowed me to conduct a far larger scale investigation into Offa's Dyke's interaction with the landscape. However, it comes with limitations. In relation to drone photography, the resolution of that data is often not able to match the high resolution of the drone photography Ravest's survey allows.

This means that detail can be lost when producing models for analysis. Therefore, the use of Ravest's drone photography is an excellent extension to this wider lidar survey and enables a continuation of scholarship. In fact, undertaking more high-level surveys and modeling on specific parts of the Dyke, will undoubtedly improve upon the current understanding of the monument. This type of collaboration is vital for researchers to capitalise on opportunities to build upon insights.

In summary, in this work, Ravest and Williams target critical sections of Offa's Dyke for drone photography and produces high-resolution data for further analysis. This type of work will be an important data source for the future, enabling researchers to see and research features previously unseen by the available lidar data. This complements my ongoing work which is demonstrating that Offa's Dyke cut off existing routeways, was continuous in the landscape (and particularly through Herefordshire), and did not reuse existing pre-existing earthworks (Delaney forthcoming). The modelling Ravest shows here offers some evidence to support those positions, and new avenues of study. I am excited to see more of it in tandem with other work. Whilst my work has not supported the existence of gateways along the route of the Dyke as proposed here, the possibility continues to be a fascinating topic worthy of further research. Certainly, there is a lot more to unravel with the morphology of Offa's Dyke.

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Lena Delaney, Doctoral Researcher, University of Chester CH1 4BJ
Email: 1816919@chester.ac.uk

The Great Dykes of the Welsh Borderlands on Early Cartography

Robert Silvester

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

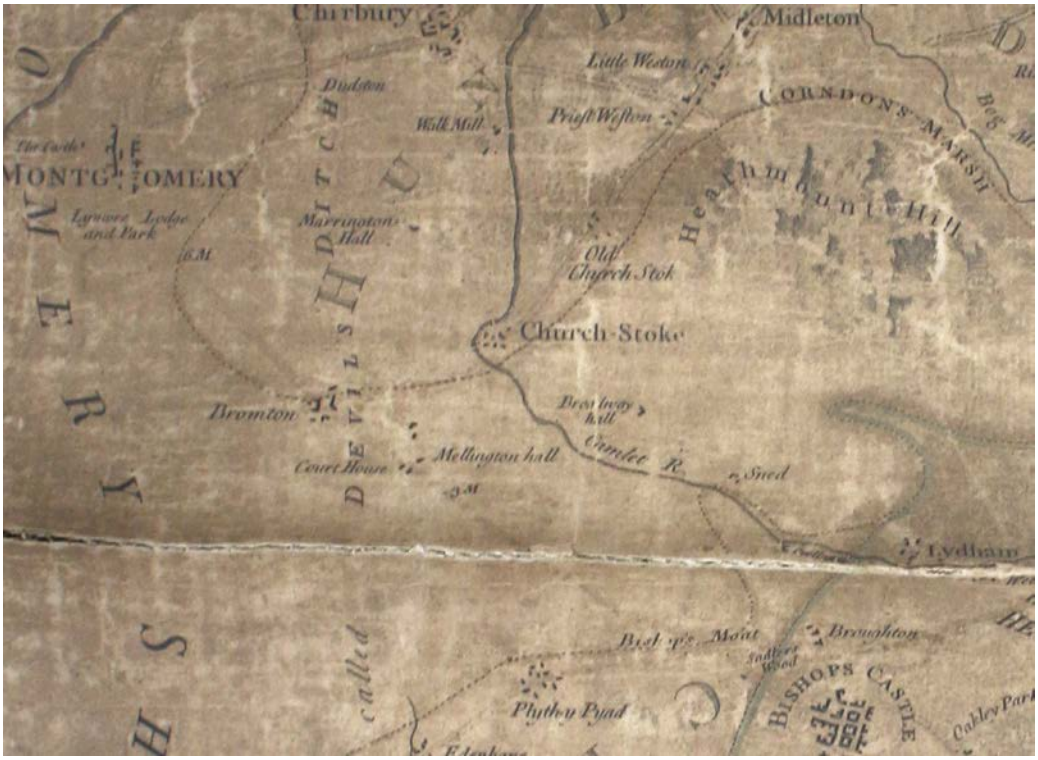

Figure 3: Part of John Rocque's map of Shropshire (1752) showing the Devil's Dyke. Reproduced by permission of Shropshire Archives

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

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

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

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

Estate mapping

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

[4] Byegones, 12 August 1874: 98

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

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

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

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

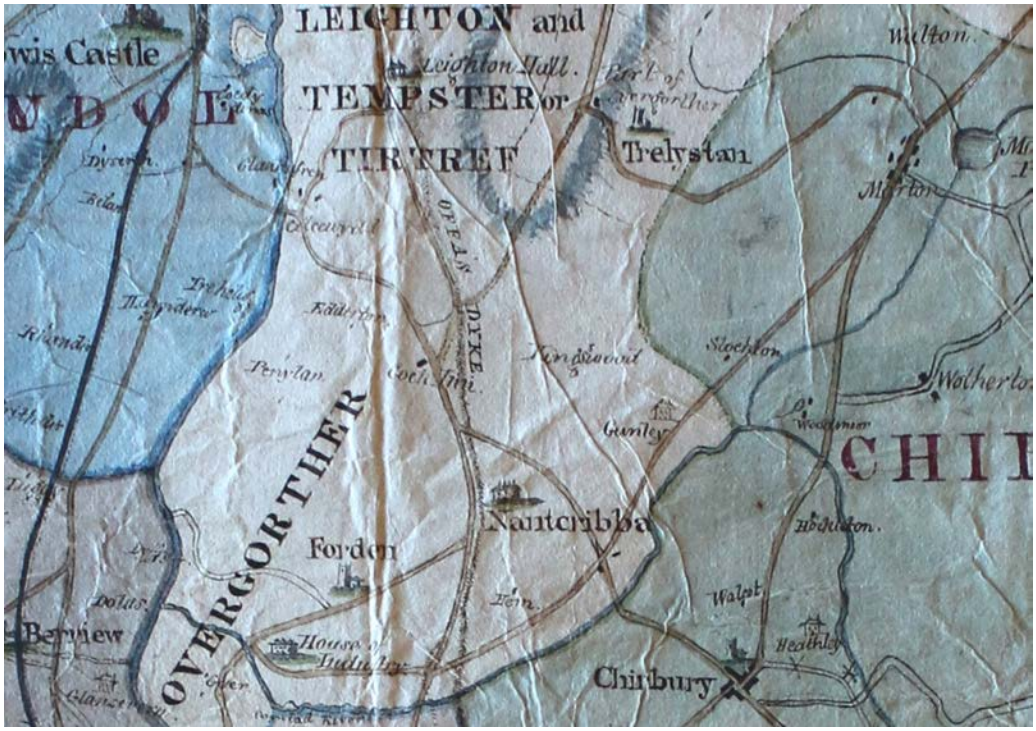

Figure 5: Part of the Powis lordship map of 1820 with Offa's Dyke running from north to south down the centre of the map. NLW/ Powis Castle/M269. Published with the kind permission of Viscount Clive and the Trustees of Powis Castle Estate

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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Poetry and Archaeology as Earthwork: Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*

Christoph Bode

This article analyses and interprets Geoffrey Hill's collection of poetry Mercian Hymns *(1971). In* Mercian Hymns, *Hill deals with the historical King Offa, Offa's kingdom of Mercia, Offa's Dyke, his coinage, rule and foreign relations, but in such a way that all these are connected to Hill's childhood and youth, to his life now and to the region that once was Mercia. It is argued that what Hill achieves here can be read as a poetical transcendence of time and space. This essay also reveals a stunning analogy between Hill's idea of the writing of poetry as work in the layers of language on the one hand and archaeology on the other: both can be seen as earthwork. The article is a slightly revised, but not updated version of Bode 1992.*

Keywords: Coinage, historicity, King Offa, Offa's Dyke, poetry and archaeology as earthwork, regionalism.

I 'There's no there there' (Gertrude Stein): The mediacy of ideas of regionality

It is all too understandable that at a time when regional cultures are fading fast and the ensuing vacuum is filled with the surrogate paraphernalia of uniform mass culture, there should be a reaction against this levelling process, against the imminent total hegemony of the 'centre'. Yet the refusal to be content with the inauthentic and the longing for a sense of belonging do not in themselves vouch for the soundness of a 'new regionalism'. The trap is set for one to be caught in another kind of inauthenticity when the new/old points of reference – viz. region, landscape, history and myth – are not subjected to some critical questioning as well. There is the danger that, fleeing from the dictates of a superimposed hegemonic culture, one finds oneself landed in the new myth of marginality, a myth of blissful *immediacy*. The idea that 'somewhere out there' life is closer to the roots and somehow more 'real', because 'there' the experience of the present still partakes of a rich, unbroken, indigenous tradition – this idea is itself a highly ideological construct of the 'centre', which has always tended to project myths of origin, immediacy and innocence onto its margins.

'Region', 'landscape', 'history' and 'myth' are never 'there' so that one could easily have recourse to them. They are never simply 'at hand', in unmediated presence. But what they *are*, in the sense of what they *mean* to us, is 'always already' the result of a historical and cultural negotiation – and therefore not 'given' but 'made'. If, as Hayden White says in his account of Droysen's hermeneutically based philosophy of history,

> the historically real is never given by naked 'experience'; it is always already worked up and fashioned by a specific organisation of experience,

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> the praxis of the society from within which the picture of reality is conceptualised (White 1987: 98)

and if, as Gadamer says, it is the hallmark of a *historical* consciousness that it always brings its own historicity into consideration (Gadamer 1975: 343), then the idea of a particular region and of what it has come to mean for somebody should always be subjected to a rigorous questioning which must of necessity be a rigorous self-questioning, too. The relation between a historically mediated object and a historically situated consciousness is necessarily a dialectical one, the process is one of hermeneutical interaction.

The difficulties for a new regionalism are therefore at least twofold: For one, it cannot escape its own temporality, it must set itself *relative* to something that is also subject to time, something that, in its *meaningful* aspect, is constituted by a hermeneutical activity, which, by definition, is always as much self-questioning as it is self-assuring. Two, it relates itself to something that is on the verge of becoming extinct. It is a last-minute attempt – not the first in history – to salvage cultural goods threatened by historical change. Jeremy Hooker (1982: 181) was right to point out that 'poetry of place after Wordsworth cannot be understood, I believe, outside a context of loss', and Seamus Heaney (1977), in his brilliant essay on Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin and Geoffrey Hill, 'Now and in England', was certainly not mistaken when he drew the connection between a 'sense of an ending' and a kind of poetry that reverts to regional and local 'origins'.

Which is a risky business: The very attempt to preserve and recover, to go back to one's roots, may fatally limit one's horizon. Friedrich Nietzsche, in *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie*, differentiated three kinds of relating oneself to the past, the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical, and of the second he wrote:

> Das Kleine, das Beschränkte, das Morsche und Veraltete erhält seine eigne Würde und Unantastbarkeit dadurch, daß die bewahrende und verehrende Seele des antiquarischen Menschen in diese Dinge übersiedelt und sich damit ein heimisches Nest bereitet (...). Der antiquarische Sinn eines Menschen, einer Stadtgemeinde, eines ganzen Volkes hat immer ein höchst beschränktes Gesichtsfeld; das Allermeiste nimmt er gar nicht wahr, und das Wenige, was er sieht, sieht er viel zu nahe und isoliert; er kann es nicht messen und nimmt deshalb alles als gleich wichtig und deshalb jedes Einzelne als zu wichtig. (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 3: 40, 41)

For Nietzsche, the ideal attitude lay between the extremes of total historical amnesia and a life-denying living in the past, an attitude which manifested itself in the '*plastische Kraft* eines Menschen, eines Volkes, einer Kultur':

> (...) ich meine jene Kraft, aus sich heraus eigenartig zu wachsen,

> Vergangenes und Fremdes umzubilden und einzuverleiben, Wunden auszuheilen, Verlornes zu ersetzen, zerbrochne Formen aus sich nachzuformen. (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 3: 32)

It seems to me that poetry is especially suited for such an enterprise – to question and to salvage at the same time, to relate itself not to a given entity but to a dialectically opposed pole – because, as Adorno emphasised in his 'Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft', poetry is the aesthetic test for a philosophy of hermeneutic and historical dialectics,[1] containing in itself an element of *rupture* and oppositeness, thematising implicitly, and, as it were, allegorically, 'das geschichtliche Verhältnis des Subjekts zur Objektivität, des Einzelnen zur Gesellschaft im Medium des subjektiven, auf sich zurückgeworfenen Geistes.' (Adorno 1957: 16).

If 'region', 'landscape', 'history' and 'myth' are concepts which stand very much in need of questioning before one can rely on them for a new sense of identity and if that questioning can best be achieved through poetry as the most self-questioning of literary genres and the most 'languagy', too,[2] one might do worse than turn to the poetry of Geoffrey Hill for an illustration of what could be meant by a poetry that is at once rooted and deracinated, immersed in history but outside History, regional yet of no particular place, concrete but elusive etc. – a poetry that does not stabilise itself through reified concepts but offers a conspicuously *mediated* vision of its *donné* and that is in turn affected by its mutability. 'No other English poet this century', says Hugh Haughton, 'has generated such a powerful and disturbing sense of history in his work' (Haughton 1985: 148). In the poetry of Geoffrey Hill – for some 'the best poet now writing in England' (Christopher Ricks, quoted in Sherry 1985: 210) or 'the strongest British poet now alive' (Bloom 1976: 234) – there is ample evidence of, as Haughton put it, 'the imaginative pull of the past for a poet obsessed above all by the persistence of what has been lost, and the impossibility of reappropriating it: the idea of continuity – and the stark fact of distance' (Haughton 1985: 131). Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* is a good case in point (Hill 1985).

II An Offa you can't refuse

Mercian Hymns (originally published in 1971), Hill's third book of poetry, was completed in only three years – a comparatively short time for this painstakingly meticulous poet. It is a sequence of thirty prose poems 'about' (but not quite, as

[1] Cf. Adorno (1957: 16): 'Wenn einmal die große Philosophie die (...) Wahrheit konstruierte, Subjekt und Objekt seien überhaupt keine starren und isolierten Pole, sondern könnten nur aus dem Prozeß bestimmt werden, in dem sie sich aneinander abarbeiten und verändern, dann ist die Lyrik die ästhetische Probe auf jenes dialektische Philosophem.'

[2] Adorno 1957: 14–15: 'Die spezifische Paradoxie des lyrischen Gebildes, die in Objektivität umschlagende Subjektivität, ist gebunden an jenen Vorrang der Sprachgestalt in der Lyrik, von dem der Primat der Sprache in der Dichtung überhaupt, bis zur Form von Prosa, herstammt.'

will be seen) the Anglo-Saxon king Offa, who ruled Mercia between 757 and 796 and re-established his kingdom as the supreme power on the British Isles. At the end of his reign, he had practically all of England south of the Humber under his control, with Northumbria and Wessex as allies – a fact that was reflected in his self-styled title *rex totius Anglorum patriae*, or later, for short, *rex Anglorum*.

This unification he achieved by 'ruthlessly suppressing resistance from several small kingdoms in and around Mercia' *(Encyclopaedia Britannica)*, and although he remains 'the obscurest of the leading figures of Anglo-Saxon history', because 'no contemporary wrote the history of his reign, and of much that he did there is only a faint tradition' this most powerful and impressive king before Alfred the Great seems to have been a thoroughly disagreeable man, 'formidable and unsympathetic' (Stenton 1989: 224).

Of his forty years' reign four achievements, apart from the near unification of England, stand out: 1) He was the first English king to be accepted as an equal on the Continent. Charlemagne sought his friendship and wanted their children to marry. Offa had good relations with Pope Adrian I and used them to stabilise his power at home. 2) Offa was a king who saw to the economic interests of his realm: After a trade war with France, Charlemagne and Offa signed the first commercial treaty in English history (796), not only laying down principles of foreign trade but also specifying quality and quantity of the trade goods to be exchanged. 3) In his reign, Offa introduced a new currency – coins 'broader, thinner and heavier' than before, bearing his name and portrait ('showing a delicacy of execution which is unique in the whole history of the Anglo-Saxon coinage') and the name of the moneyer on the reverse: 'The continuous history of the English currency begins in Offa's time' (Stenton 1989: 223). 4) Under Offa, a great earthwork, known as *Offa's Dyke*, was constructed to define Mercia's western frontier against the British. Its remains can still be seen today and both the scale and the course of that fortification bear testimony to a king who seems to have been a *Realpolitiker* through and through: 'No other Anglo-Saxon king ever regarded the world at large with so secular a mind or so acute a political sense' (Stenton 1989: 224).

All this reappears in Hill's *Mercian Hymns*, though significantly transformed; for, as Hill makes clear in his explanatory notes to the sequence, the historical King Offa is only a stepping-stone for him, a point of departure for a poetic disputation of the history of his native region, Worcestershire, or the West Midlands:

> *The Offa who figures in this sequence* [emphasis added] might perhaps most usefully be regarded as the presiding genius of the West Midlands, his dominion enduring from the middle of the eighth century until the middle of the twentieth (and possibly beyond). The indication of such a timespan will, I trust, explain and to some extent justify a number of anachronisms. (Hill 1985: 201).

But why Offa? Several answers present themselves: For one, Offa stands for the beginning of England as a national state *(avant la lettre)* and as a military and economic power of international impact. He personifies the merging of political, religious and economic interests and is himself an intriguing compound of cruelty and creativity, of greatness and meanness, both tyrant and creator of order and of law. Besides, as a past ruler of Hill's home country, this highly ambiguous figure presents himself as ideal material for a poetic acting-out of Hill's own ambivalent feelings for the region he hails from – the temporal distance, as indicated above, is, in true hermeneutic fashion, the theatre in which this negotiation with personal and national history takes place. In addition, as will be demonstrated later, Offa's earthwork and coinage supply Hill with magnificent metaphors for his own poetic activity, and lastly, it is the very scarcity of information about Offa that makes him the ideal unifying principle for a sequence of prose poems on the *problematics*, the possibilities and dangers of 'region', 'landscape', 'history' and 'myth'. Winston Churchill remarked that 'in studying Offa we are like geologists who instead of finding a fossil find only the hollow shape in which a creature of unusual strength and size undoubtedly resided' (Churchill 1972: 67). For Hill, this hollow shape, this absence of a presence is ideally suited to trigger off and allow the free play of imagination. Not that he projects a prejudice onto the past or subjects it to 'the violence of retrospective interpretation' (Habermas 1979: 192; author's translation). Rather, what 'Offa' *might mean* is the ruling concern and central question of *Mercian Hymns*, this linguistic field of force containing and celebrating the tensions and contradictions of a subject in commerce with history, of subject and object dialectically entwined.

In an interview with John Haffenden Hill explained his motivation in the choice of Offa:

> (…) I was genuinely interested in the phenomenon of King Offa and of the rise and fall of the Kingdom of Mercia. My feeling for Offa and Mercia can scarcely be disentangled from my mixed feelings for my own home country of Worcestershire. Since Offa seems to have been on the whole a rather hateful man who nonetheless created forms of government and coinage which compel one's admiration, this image of a tyrannical creator of order and beauty is, if you like, an objective correlative for the inevitable feelings of love and hate which any man or woman must feel for the *patria*. The murderous brutality of Offa as a political animal seems again an objective correlative for the ambiguities of English history in general, as a means of trying to encompass and accommodate the early humiliations and fears of one's own childhood and also one's discovery of the tyrannical streak in oneself as a child. (Haffenden 1981: 94)

Therefore, *Mercian Hymns* is 'about' King Offa, but at the same time 'about' the poet, it is 'about' the past, the present and what's in between, it is both deeply

regional and basically about England. Here as elsewhere, Hill's subject is *difficulty* (cf. Bloom 1976: 235) and the painful and, at times, exhilarating realisation of being inescapably bound to historicity. *Mercian Hymns* is an imaginative meditation on roots, which refuses to consolidate, objectify and reify something that is never immediately accessible.

Yet something *is* given: Offa's deeds, the name he made himself, the titles he paraded, and it is here that Hill begins his 'intense onslaught upon historical realities', his 'indictment, (...) often a funny one, of a particularly English inheritance' (Hart 1986: 153). The first of the Mercian Hymns, which are only headed by Roman numerals, the titles being printed separately, is called 'The Naming of Offa':

> King of the perennial holly-groves, the riven sand-
> stone: overlord of the MS: architect of the his-
> toric rampart and ditch, the citadel at Tamworth,
> the summer hermitage in Holy Cross: guardian of
> the Welsh Bridge and the Iron Bridge: contractor
> of the desirable new estates: saltmaster: money-
> changer: commissioner for oaths: martyrologist:
> the friend of Charlemagne.
>
> 'I liked that', said Offa, 'sing it again.'

So much for history as a discipline. Into the last line Hill manages to compress a verdict for which, in 'Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters', Brecht needed a whole poem.

There is another approach, different from the historian's – it is the poet's, through language and sound, and it is displayed in No. II, also called 'The Naming of Offa':

> A pet-name, a common name. Best-selling brand, curt
> graffito. A laugh; a cough. A syndicate. A specious
> gift. Scoffed-at horned phonograph.
>
> The starting-cry of a race. A name to conjure with.

Indeed, 'a name to conjure with'! 'Laugh', 'cough' mimic and echo 'Offa', so does 'scoffed-at horned phonograph' ('His Master's Voice'?). The poem is a play on O, F, F, A ('What's in a name?'), an elliptical riddle ('Curt graffito?' – '– – – off!') (cf. Sherry 1987: 130), a historical crossword puzzle ('specious gift?' – 'an Offa you should refuse'). The race is open ('They're off!') – the Anglo-Saxons enter the competition. Hill's ambiguities are always a means of compressing language, of overlaying meaning with meaning. Yes, Offa will be pursued on *this* ground, on the poet's own, the Mercia of his mind.

III The Poetical Transcendence of Time: 'I, Offa' on the Moebius Strip

In Hill's Mercia, the past and the present are merged and blended. The historical past is 'there' only insofar as it is present in the poet's mind, whose own historical present (the twentieth century) in turn consists mainly of childhood memories, his personal past. *Mercian Hymns* is about the presence of the past and about the passing of the present. That is why, strictly speaking, there are no anachronisms in this sequence (cf. Bloom 1976: 244). There is no frame of reference against which an anachronism of one kind or the other could safely be identified.

Here is the beginning and the end of No. XIV, 'Offa's Laws (2)':

> Dismissing reports and men, he put pressure on the
> wax, blistered it to a crest. He threatened male-
> factors with ash from his noon cigar.
> (…)
>
> At dinner, he relished the mockery of drinking his
> family's health. He did this whenever it suited
> him, which was not often.

In between these, we read the following passage:

> When the sky cleared above Malvern, he lingered in
> his orchard; by the quiet hammer-pond. Trout-fry
>
> simmered there, translucent, as though forming the
> water's underskin. He had a care for natural min-
> utiae. What his gaze touched was his tenderness.
> Woodlice sat pellet-like in the cracked bark and
> a snail sugared its new stone.

Who is 'he'? Is this about the love of nature of a ruthless tyrant? Or is it about the Offa hidden in GeOFFrey? Who is to decide? Here is 'he' mercilessly planning to strike back and eliminate his enemies (No. VIII):

> The mad are predators. Too often lately they harbour
> against us. A novel heresy exculpates all maimed
> souls. Abjure it! I am the King of Mercia, and
> I know.
>
> Threatened by phone-calls at midnight, venomous let-
> ters, forewarned I have thwarted their imminent
> devices.

> Today I name them; tomorrow I shall express the new
> law. I dedicate my awakening to this matter.

If this unmitigated ferocity and unrestrained desire for revenge betray an infantile streak in the tyrant, there is also a tyrannous streak in the child:

> (...)
>
> Ceolred was his friend and remained so, even after
> the day of the lost fighter: a biplane, already
> obsolete and irreplaceable, two inches of heavy
> snub silver. Ceolred let it spin through a hole
> in the classroom-floorboards, softly,
> into the rat-droppings and coins.
>
> After school he lured Ceolred, who was sniggering
> with fright, down to the old quarries, and flayed
> him. Then, leaving Ceolred, he journeyed for hours,
> calm and alone, in his private derelict sandlorry
> named *Albion.* (No. VII, 'The Kingdom of Offa (1)')

So, just as past and present merge, the identities of 'Offa' and Hill's childhood self are blended and likened to each other in a process of perpetual cross-fading. As Vincent Sherry remarked, *Mercian Hymns* is 'not a historical fantasia or a museum of local color; it is a poem of autobiography, though an oblique one' (Sherry 1987: 130). But even if it is true, in a way, that 'Hill has at last no subject but his own complex subjectivity' (Bloom 1976: 243), the exploration of his former self and his facing up to 'the tyrannous streak in oneself as a child' (Hill, see above) are means of 'appropriating' King Offa, of coming to terms with him. Calvin Bedient was right in comparing, in this respect, *Mercian Hymns* with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness:* 'The volume has the scary control and exhilaration of Marlowe on his trail for Kurtz' (Bedient 1981: 18); of course, Hill in trailing Offa probes his own 'heart of darkness': at the end of his journey, nothing human will be alien to him. The relation is anything but one-sided: As Offa emerges from the past, he becomes a key to the poet's childhood self. The elucidation is mutual.

The tensions and paradoxes created by this kind of ahistorical collage can be very funny, and indeed Hill himself has twice pointed to the 'occasional comedy' in *Mercian Hymns* (cf. Purkis 1976: 52; Morrison 1980: 213).

This, for example, is part of 'The Death of Offa (1)', No. XXVII:

> 'Now when King Offa was alive and dead', they were
> all there, the funeral gleemen: the papal legate and
> rural dean; Merovingian car-dealers, Welsh mercen-
> aries; a shuffle of house-earls.
>
> He was defunct. They were perfunctory. The ceremony
> stood acclaimed. The mob received memorial vouch-
> ers and signs.[3]

In No. XVII, 'Offa's Journey to Rome (1)', 'he' drives his sports car through the Vosges and after a flashback to a serious bike-accident when he was a boy –

> 'God's honour – our bikes touched; he skidded and came
> off.' 'Liar.' A timid father's protective bellow.
> Disfigurement of a village-king. Just look at
> the bugger ...' – ,

he speeds up his 'maroon GT car',

> (...) [it] chanted then overtook. He lavished on
> the high valleys its *haleine.*

Haleine, Hill explains in his notes, is a reference to *La Chanson de Roland:* "Ço dist li reis: 'Cel corn ad lunge aleine.'" (202). The modern Olifant – a sports car, and contrary to Roland, 'he' is determined to use it.

It could be argued that as a rule such fusing tends to diminish the past but never enhances our esteem of the present. But the answer *Mercian Hymns* gives is not that clear-cut. When we find that in Hymn No. XXI images of ancient warfare and modern holiday tourism are daringly blended and fused, a successful amalgamation of the seemingly disparate, –

> Cohorts of charabancs fanfared Offa's province
> and his concern, negotiating the by-ways from Teme
> to Trent. Their windshields dripped butterflies.
> Stranded on hilltops they signalled with plumes
> of steam. Twilight menaced the land. The young
> women wept and surrendered.
>
> Still, everyone was cheerful, heedless in such days:

[3] The first line refers to the fact that Offa, in 783, had inaugurated his son, Ecgfrith, as his successor, so that the continuity of dominion was ensured. Cf. Stenton, 1989: 218–219.

at summer weekends dipping into valleys beyond
Mercia's dyke. Tea was enjoyed, by lakesides where
all might fancy carillons of real Camelot vi-
brating through the silent water. –

we cannot maintain – or can we? – that thereby history is exposed as a process of degeneration and decline. Again, when Christopher Ricks in reviewing *Mercian Hymns* detected 'pained comedy' in the second stanza of No. XX and commented, 'to see the names of far-off battles resurrected for suburban dwellings is to be perplexed by, not superior about, what history seems to have done to the English and their honourable name of Smith' (Ricks 1972: 274), he ignored two important counterweight aspects: In the preceding lines –

Primeval heathland spattered with the bones of mice
and birds; where adders basked and bees made pro-
vision, mantling the inner walls of their burh: –

the homely cosiness of middle-class England receives an analogue from the natural world – it is not 'unnatural' to protect your private happiness, to make provisions, to make a castle of your home. Second, as the poem is entitled "Offa's 'Defence of the English People' (1)", it can be read as a vindication of a way of life, the life of the Smiths and the Joneses. But, admittedly, given Offa's controversial role in the sequence, this again undercuts any unequivocal reading of this tableau.

There is a second 'Defence of the English People' (No. XXII): It is 'about' World War II as remembered by a boy:

(...)

At home the curtains were drawn. The wireless boomed
its commands. I loved the battle-anthems and the gregarious news.

Then, in the early shelter, warmed by a blue-gassed
storm lantern, I huddled with stories of dragon-
tailed airships and warriors who took wing im-
mortal as phantoms.

No evidence of a downright condemnation of the present as an inferior version of the past – no acquittal either. Only a defence that is tied to the romantic, fairy-tale perspective of a child who doesn't really know what war is – but still, a defence of sorts.

'The memories of childhood', Dylan Thomas said, 'have no order and no end' (Thomas 1953). In Hill's Mercia, the beginnings of England and its virtual coming

to an end are interlaced and interlocked with the beginnings of the poet's mind and his 'now', which must always carry an air of an ending. Time in *Mercian Hymns* is certainly a continuum, but it is twisted like a Moebius strip: there is neither outside nor inside – it has no beginning and no end.

IV Place is only a point in time: the strata of earth and language and the density of the medium

In yet another sense the past is present. Landscape can be seen as a physical, material record of history: In its forms, in the strata of earth and soil, we not only find history *inscribed*, but in a way these *are* the material manifestations of time. Or, in other words, history and time are spatialised in the process of sedimentation (see also Lively 1976). In order to go back in time, one must dig and excavate – the further back, the deeper. The historian's job and specifically the archaeologist's job is to bring to light that which lies covered by strata of more recent date. The roots of the present are always in the compost, detritus and sediment of the past – and they profit from it. To follow one's roots is hard labour – but it can be done here and now.

Mercian Hymns teems with imagery of earth, soil, strata, digging and excavating. As the cycles of natural life run their course, death and decay form the topmost layer of soil: 'Primeval heathland spattered with the bones of mice and birds' (XX), 'He reigned forty years. Seasons touched and retouched the soil' (XI). Likewise, what is lost in the human sphere becomes part of the underground hoard, as in the case of the lost model airplane:

> (...) Ceolred let it spin through a hole
> in the classroom floorboards, softly, into the
> rat-droppings and coins. (VII)

Ground and soil are the stratum where life is transformed into rotting matter, preparing a rich ground for new life: Becoming and decaying are inseparably entwined (see, for example, No. XII).

Under the most recent sediments of the soil, there are the strata of earth, partaking in the same dialectics, being source and ending, origin and grave:

> I was invested in mother-earth, the crypt of roots
> and endings. Child's play. I abode there, bided my
> time: (...). (IV)

The mole – or moldywarp (XII) – is the secret king of this realm, a perfect underkingdom, where he makes contact with Roman and Anglo-Saxon remains (IV).

The workers who find 'Offa's Coins (2)' are in the same trade:

> Their spades grafted through the variably-resistant
> soil. They clove to the hoard. They ransacked
> epiphanies, vertebrae of the chimera, armour of
> wild bees' larvae. They struck the fire-dragon's
> faceted skin.
>
> The men were paid to caulk water-pipes. They brewed
> and pissed amid splendour; their latrine seethed
> its estuary through nettles. They are scattered
> to your collations, moldywarp. (XII)

As the present now is only the past of a coming age, even the kitchen garden promises to be a rich archaeological site for future generations:

> We have a kitchen-garden riddled with toy-shards,
> with splinters of habitation. The children shriek
> and scavenge, play havoc. They incinerate boxes,
> rags and old tyres. They haul a sodden log, hung
> with soft shields of fungus, and launch it upon
> the flames. (XIX)

As long as one has access to the past, one can become someone else: The boy wrenches the snarled root of a dead crab-apple from the earth and, sporting it like antlers, becomes 'Cernunnos, the branched god' (XV), i. e. the mythological Celtic stag-god of fertility (Sherry 1987: 133).

Given such a dynamic view of landscape, such a temporal idea of place, it is small wonder that sometimes, when 'he' lived in a 'Fern Hill'-like boy's kingdom –

> The princes of Mercia were badger and raven. Thrall
> to their freedom, I dug and hoarded. Orchards
> fruited above clefts. I drank from the honeycombs of
> chill sandstone. (VI) – ,

'the landscape flowed away, back to / its source' (VI). Not only can such a landscape be read (Hart 1986: 159) – to the initiated and sensitive it speaks on its own, like the French landscape in Hill's *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Peguy:*

> Landscape is like revelation; it is both
> singular crystal and the remotest things.
> Cloud-shadows of seasons revisit the earth,
> odourless myrrh borne by the wandering kings. (188)

In earth and its strata, in landscape as the material presence of the past, Hill finds a powerful metaphor for language, and in the digger's activity the perfect analogue for

the poet's. For Hill, language has always been a very material thing, a medium which through its density puts up a resistance to the artist who works in it and who, in order to bring out what is hidden in it, to bring out its potential, must overcome 'the coercive force of language' (Hill 1984: 2), a feat that can never be performed to perfection, since the elements of language as his only material 'always already' carry meaning – meaning which even by the most rigorous re-contextualisation of these elements can never be totally obliterated. Compared to the other arts, literature is congenitally impure. Hill: 'The arts which use language are the most impure of arts, (...).' (Hill 1984: 2). But if there is no escape from the prison-house of language, the poet can still negotiate for better terms of convict labour. More on this point later on. Suffice it to say now that Hill's view of language as a material medium comes through in his poetical treatment of it. Critics have often remarked that Hill's 'words verge on a density like that of the physical objects they name' (Sherry 1987: 130) or that, more concretely, his words are like bricks (Bayley 1979: 38) or like 'molten solder' (Heaney 1977: 480).

But earth and its strata is the more appropriate trope for Hill's idea of language because it highlights both its *materiality* and its *historicity*. Hill in an interview with Blake Morrison:

> 'The poet's true commitment must always be first to the vertical richness of language. The poet's gift is to make history and politics and religion speak for themselves through the strata of language.' (Morrison 1980: 214).

And, at another instance:

> Language *contains* everything you want – history, sociology, economics: it is a kind of drama of human destiny. One thinks how it has been used and exploited in the past, politically and theologically. Its forthrightness and treachery are a drama of the honesty of man himself. Language reveals life (quoted in Ricks 1972: 301).

Consequently Hill approvingly quotes the philosopher Rush Rhees as saying: 'For we speak as others have spoken before us. And a sense of language is also a feeling for ways of living that have meant something' (Hill 1984: 11).

Therefore, by immersing himself in his medium, language, which is historical through and through, the poet at the same time makes contact with the past: 'In handling the English language the poet makes an act of recognition that etymology is history. The history of the creation and the debasement of words is a paradigm of the loss of the kingdom of innocence and original justice' (Hill in Haffenden: 88). Just as the archaeologist unearths his findings, the poet by engaging in his material is always a treasure-hunter of sorts, a digger for lost but retrievable riches. And riches Hill brings

home in *Mercian Hymns*. The profile he cuts through the English language brings into open view a linguistic layering whose mixed flavour is matchlessly described by Heaney again:

> Hill is (…) sustained by the Anglo-Saxon base, but his proper guarantor is that language as modified and amplified by the vocabularies and values of the Mediterranean, by the early medieval Latin influence; his is to a certain extent a scholastic imagination founded on an England that we might describe as Anglo Romanesque, touched by the polysyllabic light of Christianity but possessed by darker energies which might be acknowledged as barbaric (Heaney 1977: 472).

But it pays to follow the well-established analogy of poetry and archaelogy (cf. Getz 1982: 13; Hart 1973: 173; Sherry 1987: 31), of writing and digging, onto another aspect which throws light on Hill's peculiar way with words. Archaeological findings do not by themselves tell a story. It is only when they are embedded into a narrative that they attain meaning: reality is found, but meaning is constituted; and it is constituted exactly when the relations between the findings, objects and other data are spelt out, one way or another. Meaning, not only in language, but in history, too, does not reside *in* the elements of discourse or in the objects of study, but it exists *between* what is given, it is not a substance but a relation. And it is here that Hill's practice – or the poet's practice in general – differs fundamentally from that of the historian. The meaning is deliberately and significantly withheld. Words stand there isolated like objects in a landscape – the narrative that might link them is not given:

> Gasholders, russet among fields. Milldams, marlpools
> that lay unstirring. Eel-swarms. Coagulations of
> frogs: once, with branches and half-bricks, he
> battered a ditchful; then sidled away from the
> stillness and silence. (VII)

> Tracks of ancient occupation. Frail ironworks rust
> ing in the thorn-thicket. Hearthstones; charred
> lullabies. A solitary axe-blow that is the echo
> of a lost sound. (XXVIII)

As Hayden White has emphasised, only the chronicle form of historical representation could do without a narrative (White 1987: 1–25), but it could only do so because it presupposed a *transcendental* guarantor of the meaning of the facts it recorded. No such thing in Hill, of course. It is true that the Mercian Hymns are 'looking at history (…) through minutiae' (Booth 1985: 205), but the solidity and concreteness of the objects evoked by Hill's solid and concrete words (cf. Bedient 1981: 21; Dodsworth 1971: 61–63)

is deceiving: What they are seems clear enough, what they mean is a mystery.

Here, we are at the core of Hill's often-remarked hermeticism, complexity and ambiguity. A poetry that systematically erases the common links between its elements sets them free to multiple interpretation. Despite their seeming solidity in meaning, they begin to flimmer and flicker, and for the moment it seems as if the poet had overcome 'the inertia of language', '[its] coercive force' (Hill 1984: 2). Hill's 'remarkable economy' (Ricks 1972: 364), his Empsonian 'maximal, directed ambiguity' (Thurley 1974: 154), is thus due to elimination, to a systematic withholding of a meaningful context, which is the perfect soil for a *plurality* of *possible* contexts. And what is true of the relations between the words is also true of the relations between parts of a poem and of those between a poem and all others of the sequence.[4] That is why all quoting is misquoting. What I mean is: It is somewhat deceitful to quote from *Mercian Hymns*, let alone paraphrase, because each passage apart from the evidence it is supposed to produce seems to have an undertow of meaning pointing in a different direction – and if it does not, this is only because it has been doctored for the sake of the argument …

This is the secret of the 'unyieldingness' of *Mercian Hymns* (Ricks 1972) and the reason why Hill's poetry has been called 'strong poetry' (Bloom 1976) or could be mentioned as an example of 'Language poetry' (Perloff): As the poet cannot escape the conditions of his material, its inertia and gravity, his only chance is to sever the habitual ties between its elements, condense through elimination and thereby achieve a new quality of *density* of the medium, one that is not at all like the intransigence of established meaning, but, quite the contrary, the result of an extraordinary *charging* of language with meanings. That is why Hill repeatedly cites Henry Rago to the effect that 'when the language is that of the imagination, we can be grateful enough to read that language as it asks to be read: *in the very density of the medium*, without the violence of interpolation or reduction' (Hill 1984: 6, emphasis added). When that state is reached, the referential function of language fades to a degree, and correspondingly new rules govern the axis of combination:

[4] Titles and notes serve the same function: More often than not the titles do not clarify but obfuscate what is the subject matter or at least create a tension between themselves and the poems they head and thereby open the field for a *variety* of readings. The notes are very much like T.S. Eliot's to *The Waste Land* – a witty mix of genuine and mock scholarship, see for example Hill's note to Hymn No. IV: "'I was invested in mother-earth'. To the best of my recollection, the expression 'to invest in mother-earth' was the felicitous (and correct) definition of 'yird' given by Mr (now Sir) Michael Hordern in the programme *Call My Bluff* televised on BBC 2 on Thursday 29 January 1970." (202). Could anything be more tongue-in-cheek? That the poet does not feel himself bound to 'facts' becomes apparent when Hill in Hymn No. XIII gives *Rex Totius Anglorum Patriae* as an inscription on one of Offa's coins – he must have known from Dolley (1960) (reference given in his note to Hymn No. XVII) that none of Offa's coins carried this title; in other words, Hill deliberately 'forges' Offa's coins, cf. Hart 1986: 176; Dodsworth 1985: 50; Sherry 1987: 142)

He was defunct. They were perfunctory. (XXVII)

I abode there, bided my time. (IV)

Or, more daring:

(...) there, a cross Christ
mumming child Adam out of Hell. (XXIV)

Thus, Hill's digging does not produce evidence of a linguistic Golden Age in which words were not yet debased (as is suggested in the quote taken from Hill 1984: 11), but, *pace* Hill, it is, as Vincent Sherry observed, 'the *virtu* of Hill's own art (...) to disprove that myth. Etymology for Hill reveals no original or true meaning, but a play of difference; it is a delight in those multiple senses accumulated over the course of a word's history, meanings available in their variety and particularity for the modern poet who studies the dictionary' (cf. Sherry 1976: 20) – plus, it must be added, new, unheard-of meanings his texts *set free* through their *poeticalness*.

In the strata of earth and language we encounter the presence of the past. In the hourglass measuring millenniums, place is only a point in time, soon to be superseded by others. And in both history and language what our findings mean is not in them but between them or rather between them and us – it is not given, but constituted. And if this task is deliberately left by the poet, it is up to the reader to complete it and invest the words on the page with meaning. They are there, no doubt, but they tell no story by themselves and, in this case, no history either. Yet they offer themselves to various readings.

V Earthworks and coins: Offa the writer

Offa's Dyke is an astounding earthwork in more than one respect. Historians have remarked on its impressive scale, the skill with which its line is drawn and the general efficiency with which it was carried out. To plan and to realise such a dyke is a task very much like the poet's. The original landscape is the starting point of all planning, just as is common language for the poet. And in both cases, the task is to form and mould the given to one's advantage, to overlay what is at hand with constructions of one's own. This is done with maximum efficiency when what the material (be it landscape or language) offers or lends itself to is exploited with a minimum of effort and change. And yet, the whole point of building dykes and writing poetry is to make a difference. A good earthwork is one that is not violently imposed on the landscape but one that, as it were, grows out of it. The analogy with poetry need not be spelt out.

This paradox of both earthwork and writing, viz. that both make a difference by skilfully following and then overlaying the contours that lend themselves to it, is accompanied by another one: Such a rampart as Offa's Dyke could only be constructed in peace time – it

is the expression, military in nature, of truce. By drawing a line, it defines the frontier against the British and makes a pledge at the same time: neither you nor we shall cross this with bad intent. In Offa's case, this gesture of reconciliation is demonstratively obvious: '(…) 'Offa's Dyke' shows policy as well as man-power. In many sections it follows lines favourable to the British, and historians have concluded that it was a boundary rather than a fortification' (Churchill 1972: 68). In other words: This dyke is a line that defines 'on this side' and 'on the other side', but in defining recognises the other as excluded yet of equal value. The analogy with language should make every deconstructionist's heart jump with joy.

In building his dyke, Offa imposes his will on the landscape, but prudently so, by exploiting the opportunities it offers. He is the writer who, taking away here, adding something there, works on his poem, until it is an impressive monument, a frontier that takes cognisance of what it excludes, a statement which is congenitally non-totalising.

Of the thirty Mercian Hymns, although many contain allusions to it, none is entitled 'Offa's Dyke'. There is no need – Offa's earthwork is the silent unifying metaphor of the whole sequence.

Offa's coins supply Hill with another powerful metaphor for the poet's trade. The archaeological aspect need not be dwelled upon: Just as Offa's coins are found and unearthed by digging through the strata of earth, so the poet finds specimens of older usage when he engages with the diachronical dimension of language, the underground hoard. But words and coins have other things in common – the metaphor is well established and has given rise to innumerous ingenious deliberations (Derrida 1974/75). Words and coins are there to be exchanged. They both have value, but it is a value subject to change and it depends on its being recognised as such – as currency, words and coins always imply a wider frame of reference set by convention. Both bear a stamp of meaning which can be defaced by usage, so that what they meant originally is no longer apparent – save to the expert. Also, the quality of solidity and substantiality implied by the coin-metaphor must have appealed to Hill.

There is in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne* a famous passage in which Nietzsche puts forward his idea of truth as an illusion based on an erroneous conception of language:

> Was also ist Wahrheit? Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen, kurz eine Summe von menschlichen Relationen, die, poetisch und rhetorisch gesteigert, übertragen, geschmückt wurden, und die nach langem Gebrauch einem Volke fest, kanonisch und verbindlich dünken: die Wahrheiten sind Illusionen, von denen man vergessen hat, daß sie welche sind, Metaphern, die abgenutzt und sinnlich kraftlos geworden sind. Münzen, die ihr Bild verloren

> haben und nun als Metall, nicht mehr als Münzen in Betracht kommen (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 4: 546).

This idea of 'the debasement of language' (Hill in Haffenden 1981: 87), the defacement of coins, is a recurrent theme in Hill's thought. As he sees it as the poet's office to work against this debasement – to strike a new relief into coins worn by usage or to exhibit hardly used older specimens – , his practice is at the same time an eminently ethical one. 'To purge the (...) language of both long-established and recent perversions of its meaning and implications' (Hill in Haffenden 1981: 95) is the poet's prime task, a task that also includes the redemption of expressions degenerated into cliches and believed to be irredeemable (cf. Ricks 1964: 96–101). Through his poetical technique, the poet serves a moral function and helps, in Blake's words, 'to cleanse the doors of perception' (quoted in Ricks 1964: 97) – a connection that was also set forth by the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovskij (1916) in his seminal essay 'Art as Device', sometimes also rendered as 'Art as Technique' .

The poet as minter can never start from scratch – he finds no unminted bullion in his mint:

> All other artists have for their medium what Aristotle called a material cause: more or less shapeless, always meaningless matter, upon which they can imprint form and meaning. Their media become media proper under their hands; through shaping they communicate. As artists they are uniquely sovereign, minting unminted bullion into currency, stamping their image upon it. The poet is denied this creative sovereignty. His 'material cause' is a medium before he starts to fashion it; he must deal in an already current and largely defaced coinage. (Burckhardt 1956: 279).

That is why the metaphor of coining and minting carries far more violence and force than that of dyke-building: The new image is *struck*. Striking coins is an act of force even more frightening for the exactitude with which the blows are dealt. And the violence does not stop here. The poet's and king's determination and cruelty reveal themselves (and remind one of former tyrants) when it comes to preventing the counterfeiting of their currency:

> Coins handsome as Nero's; of good substance and
> weight. Offa Rex resonant in silver, and the
> names of his moneyers. They struck with accountable
> tact. They could alter the king's face.
>
> Exactness of design was to deter imitation; muti–
> lation if that failed. (...)

> Swathed bodies in the long ditch; one eye upstaring.
> It is safe to presume, here, the king's anger. (…) (XI)

Uncompromising, though dependent upon helpers whose allegiance must be watched ('They could alter the king's face'), Offa, the poet-minter-king, disseminates his name and portrait as tokens of his sovereign and of his possessive hold of the country:

> Trim the lamp; polish the lens; draw, one by one, rare
> coins to the light. Ringed by its own lustre, the
> masterful head emerges, kempt and jutting, out of
> England's well. Far from his underkingdom of crin–
> oid and crayfish, the rune-stone's province, *Rex*
> *Totius Anglorum Patriae*, coiffured and ageless,
> portrays the self-possession of his possession,
> cushioned on a legend. (XIII)

Only when an ancient coin has been preserved underground can the poet be content to merely polish it – no need to strike a new face if the original one is still in full relief, unworn. For Hill, to give but one example, 'leechdom' is such a coin. In Old English, 'leechcraft' signifies the physician's art, 'to leech' means to cure, to heal, 'leech' as a noun is another word for the physician, 'leechdom' is medicine, remedy. The connotations of 'leech', 'leechdom' etc. are such that one could even speak of Christ as 'leech' (cf. German 'Heiland') and of his suffering as 'leechdom'. On the other hand, a leech is of course, and that is the original meaning, a worm which sucks out the blood of other animals, it is a kind of parasite. Although the connection between these two fields of meaning is a direct one – leeches were used by physicians to cure their patients –, 'leechdom' might also be taken as an example of what Sigmund Freud called 'der Gegensinn der Urworte'.[5] This becomes apparent when Hill speaks ambiguously of 'Offa's Leechdom' – the healer and saviour of his country or its parasite? Hymn No. VIII – already quoted in full above – underlines that the ambiguity is an intended one: Offa's terror is inseparably connected with the imposition of order and culture, his prescription against imminent anarchy is itself deeply disturbing – it is 'leechdom'.

There is an amusing anecdote about the historical Offa which shows him, for once, doing *exactly* what the poet does, viz. processing bullion already minted. It is about one of Offa's coins, still extant, 'imitating a[n Arabian] dinar struck by the Kaliph Al-Mansur in 774, but carrying the legend *Offa Rex* in Roman capitals across the centre of the reverse' (Stenton 1989: 223). Winston Churchill tells the story:

> The Canterbury mint evidently regarded the Arabic as mere ornamentation, and all men would have been shocked had they known

[5] For a very concise presentation of the concept see Freud 1969: 185–187.

> that it declared 'There is no God but one, and Mahomet is his Prophet'. Offa established a good understanding with the Pope. (...) The papal envoys in 787 were joyfully received in the hall of Offa, and were comforted by his assurances of reverence for St Peter. These professions were implemented by a small annual tribute to the Papacy, part of it unwittingly paid in these same infidel coins which proclaimed an opposite creed. (Churchill 1972: 67)

It seems to me that Hill's use of Offa and ancient Mercia comes close to this re-stamping: Bullion already pre-minted by the historians receives a new relief in Hill's hands. But unlike Offa's moneyers, Hill knows exactly what he is doing.

VI The language of power and the power of language

Mercian Hymns carries as an epigraph a quote from C.S. Sisson: 'The conduct of government rests upon the same foundation and encounters the same difficulties as the conduct of private persons: that is, as to its object and justification, for as to its methods, or technical part, there is all the difference which separates (...) the man acting on behalf of himself from the man acting on behalf of many'.[6] This seems to imply that the subject matter of *Mercian Hymns* is not 'roots' in all its shades of meaning but the relation between power and morality. I believe this alternative is a specious one. To the same degree that 'Offa' is an alter ego of the poet, the discussion of this 'anarchic lord of order' (Sherry 1987: 136) and his guilt in office is simultaneously a metaphorical deliberation on the poet's responsibility in and towards his craft.

It seems too easy to reiterate that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, to hark back to the fact that Offa 'must be brutal to father an impressive culture' (Hart 1986: 190), or to opine that 'the innermost truth of the *Hymns* is Hill's need for and failure to find, either in the facts or the illusions of his history, its prose or its poetry, anything worthy of one's utmost admiration' (Brown 1981: 67). *Mercian Hymns* is not about the failure of such a quest, but about the illusionary nature of such a craving.

Hill knows only too well that language always 'catches itself with the bitten apple in hand' (Bedient 1981: 22), that the word is both spade and sword (Hart 1986: 157), that it is compromised by power, and accomplice to oppression, but at the same time strangely, even miraculously resistant to the claims of power. And it is one of Hill's greatest achievements to continually expose this undercutting of the language of power by the power of language,[7] which sometimes manifests itself in

[6] Unaccountably, the epigraph is missing from the Penguin edition of Hill's poetry.

[7] '(...) while Hill is continually drawn to the 'language of power' and entitlement, he consistently subjects it to a paradoxical or critical counter-pressure.' (Haughton 1985: 142).

silence. In No. XVIII ['Offa's Journey to Rome' (2)], 'he' visits Boethius' dungeon at Pavia. The scene is that of a confrontation between spirit and power:

> At Pavia, a visitation of some sorrow. Boethius'
> dungeon. He shut his eyes, gave rise to a tower
> out of the earth. He willed the instruments of
> violence to break upon meditation. Iron buckles
> gagged; flesh leaked rennet over them; the men
> stooped, disentangled the body.

Not very uplifting. Neither is the reaction of the visitor, an odd mixture of relish and complacency:

> He wiped his lips and hands. He strolled back to the
> car, with discreet souvenirs for consolation and
> philosophy. He set in motion the furtherance of
> his journey. To watch the Tiber foaming out
> much blood.

But behind all this, there is 'a hinterland of silence' (Hill 1984: 27), the roaring silence of a conspicuous absence, namely that of Boethius' *Consolations* – the reason for the visit and all that has remained of the scene: his words.

Historical guilt is not only a question of personal tyranny. Violence may equally reside in the make-up of a society. The human cost of industry is a case in point. Here is Hymn No. XXV with a reference to Ruskin, a quote from *Henry V*, which, however, 'has no bearing on the poem' (203), and an uncharacteristically direct treatment of the plight of Hill's own grandmother, who fabricated nails in cottage industry:

> Brooding on the eightieth letter of *Fors Clavigera*,
> I speak this in memory of my grandmother, whose
> childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the
> nailer's darg.
>
> The nailshop stood back of the cottage, by the fold.
> It reeked stale mineral sweat. Sparks had furred
> its low roof. In dawn-light the troughed water
> floated a damson-bloom of dust –
>
> not to be shaken by posthumous clamour. It is one
> thing to celebrate the 'quick forge', another
> to cradle a face hare-lipped by the searing-wire.

> Brooding on the eightieth letter of *Fors Clavigera*,
> I speak this in memory of my grandmother, whose
> childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the
> nailer's darg.

This underside of culture, all the work and pain that went into it, forms an impressive counterweight to notions of History as the story of rulers, a notion which had been exploded by Hill as early as in the first hymn.

Hill offers no *metaphysical* transcendation of the opposition of good and evil – as, for example, T.S. Eliot does in *Murder in the Cathedral* –, although the recognition of the blending of both in history is obvious. Rather, Hill's drift in this matter seems to be in accord with the line taken by Nietzsche – an unmitigated indictment of the past and, at the same time, an unreserved acknowledgement that we, as descendants, are inevitably part of that past and that the past is a part of us as well:

> Hier wird deutlich, wie notwendig der Mensch, neben der monumentalischen und antiquarischen Art, die Vergangenheit zu betrachten, oft genug eine *dritte* Art nötig hat, die *kritische:* (...). Er muß die Kraft haben und von Zeit zu Zeit anwenden, eine Vergangenheit zu zerbrechen und aufzulösen, um leben zu können: dies erreicht er dadurch, daß er sie vor Gericht zieht, peinlich inquiriert, und endlich verurteilt; jede Vergangenheit aber ist wert, verurteilt zu werden (...). Menschen oder Zeiten, die auf diese Weise dem Leben dienen, daß sie eine Vergangenheit richten und vernichten, sind immer gefährliche und gefährdete Menschen und Zeiten. Denn da wir nun einmal die Resultate früherer Geschlechter sind, sind wir auch die Resultate ihrer Verirrungen, Leidenschaften und Irrtümer, ja Verbrechen; es ist nicht möglich, sich ganz von dieser Kette zu lösen (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 3: 42–43).

For the poet especially, the chains of the past, materialised in the oppressive power of language, must make themselves felt – subverting it, he defines the conditions of his freedom.

VII A non-reactionary de-temporalisation

The objection could be made that in matters of historical, cultural, social or political import *any* kind of de-temporalisation is dubious and questionable, because it inevitably gives rise to fallacious ideas of unchangeable 'human nature', 'constants' of human behaviour, basic 'continuities' untouched by the ripples of history etc., in short, that any de-temporalisation promotes an ideology of human essentialism and mystifies existing power structures.

Indeed, when one reads of *Mercian Hymns* that Offa 'becomes a timeless figure of the struggle to hold psychological as well as political power' and that in presenting him as he does, Hill 'confirms [Offa's] common human nature' (Sherry 1985: 208), or, worse even, that 'cruelty, murder, minting, building, fighting and dying are forever present as man's essential, and terrible inheritances' (Milne 1979: 58), one might, given the premise that these readings are adequate renderings of the sequence, be inclined to agree with Douglas Dunn 'that the book's conception of history is suspect' (Dunn 1972: 70). But *Mercian Hymns* promotes no such myth and its concept of history is completely different, as I hope I have made abundantly clear in the preceding pages. For, quite the contrary, *Mercian Hymns* shows that no such myth will do, that there are, in Coleridge's phrasing, no fixities and definites, that we can never simply go back to our roots, both in terms of time and of place, but that the supposedly fixed entities of 'region', 'landscape', 'myth' and 'history', also of subject and object, continually modify each other and that there is no escape into a haven of timeless, permanent universality.

If there is any central message in *Mercian Hymns*, it is that there is no 'as such'. Region, landscape, myth and history in *Mercian Hymns* are not safe harbours that one might easily have recourse to. Rather, they are the terms (as language is the medium) in which the problem of human existence is discussed and poetically dramatised – themselves problematical, they are not the answer, but the material through which one has to work and with which one has to engage if the quest is meant to be serious at all, serious and unsparingly frank and self-questioning. Therefore, paradoxical as it may sound, Hill's technique of the de-temporalisation in *Mercian Hymns*, his poetical transcendence of time, which would be incomplete were it not accompanied by a corresponding transcendence of place, is not a flight from history, but a radical involvement in it. *Mercian Hymns* shows no signs of escapism from historicity and temporality – it is the document of a mind that takes the only road open to non-mystics: *deeper into time* and its complexities. Eric Hornberger saw this when he remarked that Hill 'shoulder[s] the burden of history' and that 'with *Mercian Hymns* the skills of the formalist and the inclinations of the myth-maker are harnessed to a poetry whose full meaning is historical' (Hornberger 1977: 210).

Always historicise!, is the maxim of Fredric Jameson and friends. Hill historicises naive notions of History writ large as an 'objective' process, probes them, subverts them, de-reifies them. Terry Eagleton must have felt something of the playful earnestness of this eminently dialectical endeavour – to engage in history on its own terms – when he, in an unsigned review for the *TLS*, later reprinted as part of an essay in Schmidt and Lindop's volume on *British Poetry Since 1960*, criticised the trend in some poets towards myth and legend, but cautiously exempted Hill from total condemnation: Having established a difference between the workings of myth and legend – 'myth (...) takes the form of timeless universalisations achieved through symbol and archetype; 'legend' works in an opposite direction, excavating the substance of a specific time and place remote from ours, salvaging it for reinhabitation' (Eagleton 1972: 235) – Eagleton went on to say 'but the important difference is that legend' (and he saw

Mercian Hymns as an example of this tendency) 'is still able to accommodate a sense of history, in ways in which myth isn't' (Eagleton 1972: 235). The praise, if praise it was meant to be, could well have been less subdued. If the desideratum is really 'an art (...) which (...) find[s] the possibility of transcendence within history itself' (Eagleton 1972: 234), then *Mercian Hymns* is an example that stands to be surpassed, even if it is not exactly the kind of poetry Eagleton had in mind. Certainly, *Mercian Hymns* not only meets Eagleton's criterion taken from Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* – that 'those symbolic resolutions [should] recognise themselves as heuristic fictions, with complex relations to a real history outside them' (Eagleton 1972: 239)–, it even puts quotation marks around 'real' and is all the more consistent for it.

Geoffrey Hill once wrote of Shakespeare's seemingly non-committal attitude in *Cymbeline* that 'Shakespeare stands back not through timidity or unconcern but in order to obtain focus. His concern is with nearness and distance, with adjustment of perspective; in his handling of character and situation he makes a proper demonstration of that concern' (Hill 1984: 57). When, at the very end of *Mercian Hymns*, the boy-poet drifts into 'the last dream of Offa the King' (XXIX), we are confronted, one last time, with this paradox of historical nearness and distance. This is the last poem in its entirety:

> And it seemed, while we waited, he began to walk to-
> wards us he vanished
> he left behind coins, for his lodging, and traces of
> red mud. (XXX)

Money and blood on the ground, Offa's legacy. It is a ground about which Hill, when a young poet, could feel very strongly. 'So the boy born and brought up in Worcestershire', writes Hill about himself in 1954, 'is still to all intents a local boy. He does not, unless he is very unfortunate, lose touch with his home ground. His roots still ache for their soil' (quoted in Milne 1979: 62). Later, doubts creep in and he speaks of his 'mixed feelings for my own home country of Worcestershire' (Hill 1981: 94).

One of the most moving recognitions of this ambivalent entanglement is when Hill chooses as an epitaph for one of his *Tenebrae* poems ('Te Lucis Ante Terminum') a line from Paul Celan's 'Kermorvan' (of which Hill's poem is an improvisation):

> Wir gehen Dir, Heimat, ins Garn.

Mercian Hymns is the result of Hill's productive engagement with this condition, a perfect demonstration, I think, of what, in a quote introduced earlier, Nietzsche called 'die *plastische Kraft* eines Menschen': 'jene Kraft, aus sich heraus eigenartig zu wachsen, Vergangenes und Fremdes umzubilden und einzuverleiben, Wunden auszuheilen, Verlornes zu ersetzen, zerbrochne Formen aus sich nachzuformen' (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 3: 32).

But if this is so, then Hill's Mercia of the mind is not only an affair of the past and of the present – it has a future dimension, too, because it demonstrates, as an 'exemplary exercise', a poetical 'Aufhebung' of the past. And this 'Aufheben' in its threefold Hegelian sense (but without its deterministic overtones) always allows and sometimes even presses for a utopian perspective: If for once we could entertain the idea that 'where we belong' is maybe not in the past but still to come, that we 'can't go home again' because 'home' is something yet to be realised, then we'd have glimpsed the implications, both promising and frightening, of what it means that man is a *historical* being:

> *Die wirkliche Genesis ist nicht am Anfang, sondern am Ende* (…). Die Wurzel der Geschichte aber ist der arbeitende, schaffende, die Gegebenheiten umbildende und überholende Mensch. Hat er sich erfaßt und das Seine ohne Entäußerung und Entfremdung in realer Demokratie begründet, so entsteht in der Welt etwas, das allen in die Kindheit scheint und worin noch niemand war: Heimat (Bloch 1959: 1628).

Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*, by radically thematising what was and is, is by inversion a silent elegy for what is not – and maybe never will be, for 'At this distance it is hard to tell' (XIX).

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Christoph Bode
Email: christoph.bode@anglistik.uni-muenchen.de

The Contemporary Archaeology of Offa's Dyke

Howard Williams

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

related narratives and tie together nested sets of borderland local, regional and national identities and senses of the past: social memories. As such, this article is an immediate successor to this author's earlier considerations of naming practices and consideration of both 'authorised' and deliberate installations which direct and mark Offa's Dyke, and commemorate its significance, as well as those that informally and by happenstance have become landmarks and features connected to it (Williams 2020a, 2023a, 2025). In pursuing this evidence, the discussion here moves beyond the fragmented and selective nature of authorised heritage interpretations along this monument to tackle a range of further landmarks and material cultures that together comprise 'today's Offa's Dyke'.

Method

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

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

[1] http://offaswatsdyke.wordpress.com/. The first reflection on contemporary material cultures on Offa's Dyke was posted on the signs and memorials on Offa's Dyke from Panpunton Hill to Cwm-sanahan Hill (Williams 2017).

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

Naming practices as material citations

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

Heritage interpretation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Art and monuments

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

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

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

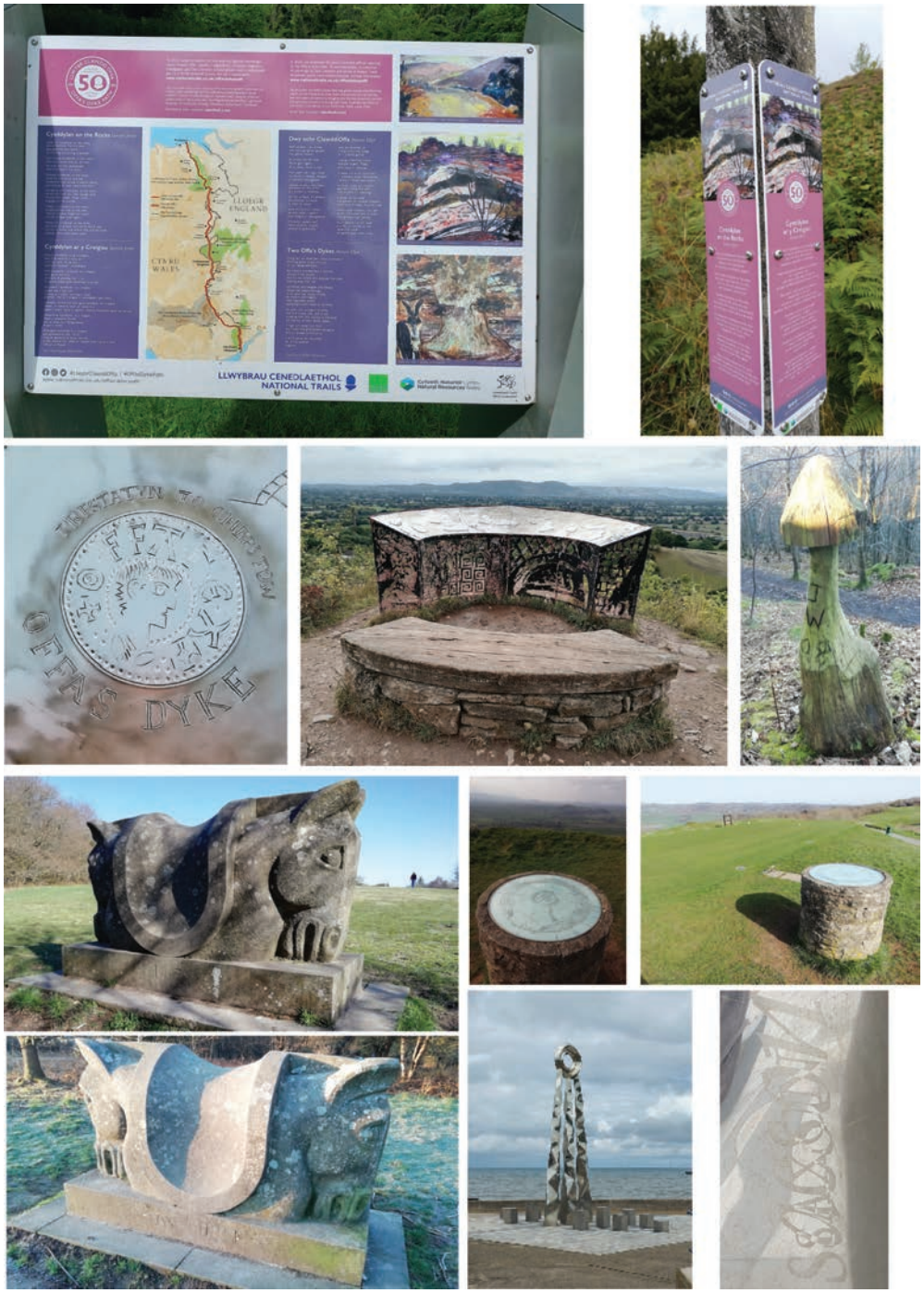

Figure 4: A montage of images of art installations associated with Offa's Dyke and the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail. 4a and b (top): Dan Llywellyn Hall's 'Walking with Offa' project (see Hall *et al.* 2023). 4c and d (middle-left and middle-centre): metal art on Llanymynech Hill. 4e: mushroom sculpture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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Walking material cultures

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

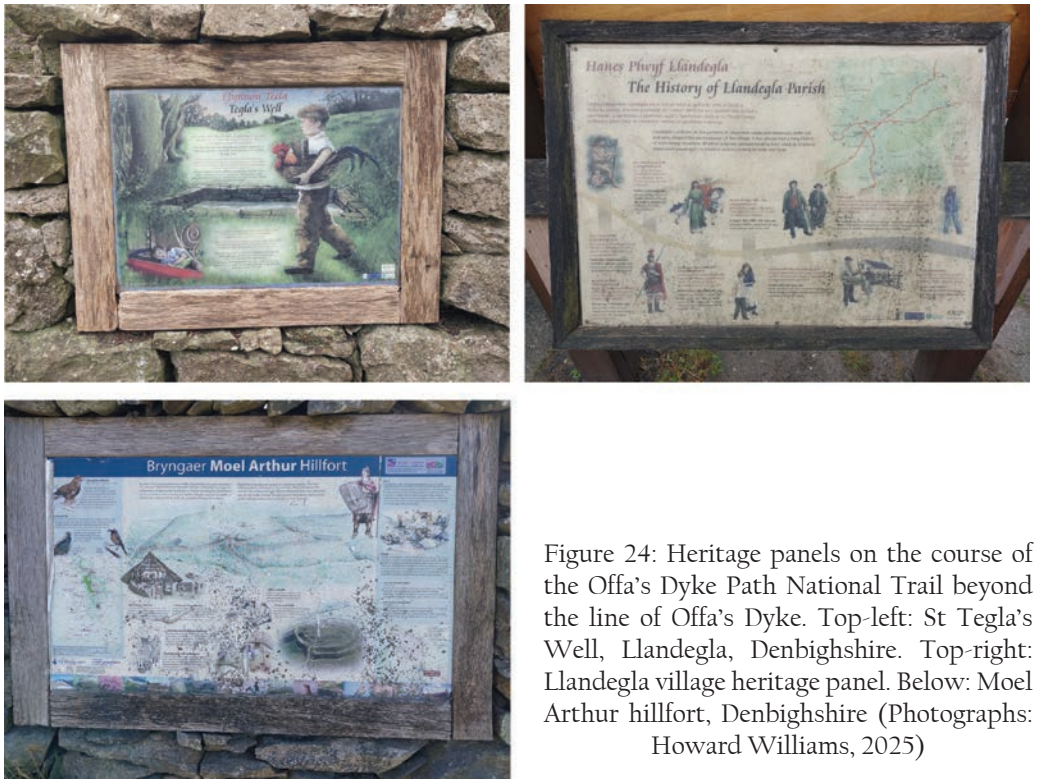

Figure 24: Heritage panels on the course of the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail beyond the line of Offa's Dyke. Top-left: St Tegla's Well, Llandegla, Denbighshire. Top-right: Llandegla village heritage panel. Below: Moel Arthur hillfort, Denbighshire (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2025)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seated memories

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rural things and structures

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

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

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

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

Natural presences and traces

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

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

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

Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Howard Williams, Professor of Archaeology, University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester CH1 4BJ, UK

Email: howard.williams@chester.ac.uk

Viking Wirral in Public Archaeology and History

An interview with Clare Downham and Paul Sherman

This interview which took place on 4 November 2025 with Clare Downham (CD) and Paul Sherman (PS) with editor Howard Williams (HW) discussed initiatives and challenges in promoting knowledge of the Viking Age in the Wirral. This frontier zone marked the boundary between England and Wales by land and a maritime boundary between England and the Irish Sea. As such it is often assigned a marginal rather than a central place in narratives of British and Irish history.

Keywords: Irish Sea, liminal, public archaeology, Viking Age, Wirral

Introduction

HW: Welcome! Let's begin with brief introductions to your backgrounds and expertise.

CD: I'm professor of medieval history in Irish Studies at the University of Liverpool, but I did my PhD research on vikings in Britain and Ireland, so I've always been interested in cross currents straddling the Irish Sea. And being based now in Merseyside, my interests are drawn into how this region is involved in a network of contacts in different directions.

PS: I'm a heritage consultant involved in several companies. Practical Heritage and Conservation Services has been involved in various commercial projects. I am also involved in NW Heritage CIC, which is a community non profit. So, between them I have been involved in various commercial and community-based projects across the region. It was with the first company that I first got involved in a Wirral based project with Clare and also archaeologist Rob Philpott. We were commissioned to work on reporting on 'The Search for the Battle of Brunanburh' project for Wirral Borough Council and that was around 2020/2021 (Sherman *et al.* 2020).

COVID made things a little difficult on that project which lasted around 16 weeks. Since then, our community non profit organisation community interest company has also worked on various projects relating to Wirral's Viking past amongst others.

When Sefton Council had a Heritage and Archaeology Task Group, I was a regular participant on the panel. Others as I recall included Sue Stallibrass, Mark Adams and Rob Philpott. It was a means to discuss various projects across the region and it was here that I first met David Jordan from Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) who was a guest one time. This meeting which led to a collaboration between NW Heritage and LJMU whereby we provide training opportunities for students and in return we get to use LJMU facilities and equipment. Since 2017, we've been expanding on that and

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we are now working on a variety of projects with LJMU students. More recently, we have been running field schools for the University of Liverpool as well, working on two major sites in the English North West: Poulton Hall at Bromborough on the Wirral, and Lathom House near Ormskirk. They are both sites that have seen considerable action during the English Civil War, but they are also of much wider historical interest as well.

How has the story of early medieval Wirral been told

HW: To set the scene for your work on Wirral, how would we capture the back story here of the historiography of early medieval Wirral? In other words, how is it seen in the context of national histories and long-term local narratives about the Viking Age or the Early Middle Ages more broadly?

PS: I recall as a young teen at school in West Lancashire, just a few miles away from Lathom, where we now have one of our field schools. Considering that Lathom was the 'northern court' and home of Sir Thomas Stanley, the most powerful man in England after his stepson, King Henry VII, as far as history classes were concerned, Lathom did not exist, it never got mentioned. As far as my school history teacher was concerned the North West in the early medieval period was simply considered to be wasteland and forest. The perception being that not a lot happened there from an historical perspective. In English literature I remember reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in which the Wirral is mentioned: 'in the wyldrenesse of wyrale wonde ther bot lyte' (In the wilderness of Wirral dwelt there but few). That captures a sense of how the history of the region was portrayed to me at that particular time. However, more recently, I have come to believe that the Wirral held a much greater significance than either my school history teacher or the author of Sir Gawain afforded it.

CD: There are two points there: the marginalisation of regional histories and the lack of materials we have to work with. Firstly, the way that schools adhere to the National Curriculum which is focused on general national narratives means that regional perspectives are often marginalised. While there are some teachers who are proactive in trying to bring local history and archaeology into the classroom, it does require an extra level of effort and that raises the question: should one of the things that we work on as academics be to create resources to help teachers if we truly care about promoting local heritage? The other thing, particularly for the Viking Age is just that there isn't a lot for the historian to work with, and that can be a problem. So, when we're talking about viking settlement in the North West, everybody goes to this one recorded event of AD 902 (the expulsion of vikings from Dublin). This is often seen as the starting gun for viking settlement across the North West because we don't have many other references to viking activity in the region. Of course, there is other evidence to pick through and evaluate but nothing so prominent and the broader task requires dialogue with expert historians and archaeologists.

One dimension of local history I've contributed to has been the controversial claim that the Battle of Brunanburh in AD 937 was located on Wirral when many experts believe it was fought in other locations (Downham 2021). Scholarly discussions have often focused on place names and the etymology of the name Bromborough. Yet to understand why this area was strategically important is key to the argument. To understand that, it is necessary to explore the landscape and archaeological evidence.

PS: I recently learned there might be moves to include more local history in the school curriculum so maybe that's a constructive direction (Diver 2025).

HW: So, you get this traditional sense that there's a national story and you may have a local illustrative example at best, or it's just not mentioned, but there's no coherent story. The North West in general, and the Wirral in particular, are considered a place in between.

PS: And yet being a place in between makes the Wirral particularly important, located as it is between the Mersey and the Dee, in between England and Wales, part of it in between the English kingdom and, for a time, an Hiberno-Norse enclave. It's 'in-between' status made it important in trade from both Dublin and York. So, located between political territories and on trade routes across the Irish Sea, it was a significant liminal space. Indeed, this situation can be traced back far earlier than the early medieval period.

Recent work on Viking Wirral

HW: So how can we look afresh at early medieval Wirral? It sounds as if foregrounding its liminal status is key.

PS: Yes, I think we need to look at it afresh and to stop thinking of it as it was in older history books. This is where new archaeological evidence is now starting to filter through and transform our understanding of the historical narrative for this part of the world.

CD: I agree, I think it's important to think of the area as a sort of crossroads and its liminality. There are certainly points in time when the region becomes very significant. For example, King Edward the Elder reportedly dies at Farndon in 924. Then, in 937 there is the Battle of Brunanburh. At other times the significance of the region has been downplayed partly because the main narratives we have for the development of the English kingdom were very much Wessex driven. The historical sources for the Wirral area are sparse, Work on place names from the era of Dodgson (1970) onwards has been driving forward the research agenda and now too archaeology. A lot of the credit here goes to local enthusiasts, so not people who are trained as historians, including Stephen Harding (2000, 2002). He's obviously got academic interests but has come from a non-historian's perspective. He has gathered this data together and stepped into the breach because the professional historians haven't really dealt with this material and the picture from archaeology is still emerging.

HW: We know abouta number of individual Viking-period archaeological sites (see Griffiths 2015), notably the coastal site of Meols (Griffiths *et al.* 2007) and the settlement evidence from Irby and Moreton (Philpott and Adams 2010: 209–218; Philpott 2015). There are also Viking-period carved stone monuments (e.g. Bailey 2010; White 2015; Williams 2016), and metal-detector finds of hoards and stray finds (e.g. Graham-Campbell and Philpott 2009; Kershaw 2015), but also Victorian-era traditions of Viking presence on Wirral.

CD: Yes, there's a lot of folklore about Vikings by which I mean both old folklore and new folklore. It's tricky to deal with. I don't want to quash local people's enthusiasm, it is often the folklore that fascinates them. For instance, the idea that the rocky outcrop at Thurstaston was a site dedicated to the Norse god Thor is the result of nineteenth-century antiquarian musings on the place-name (which is derived from Thorstein nor Thor) (Picton 1877). Likewise, locals have relayed to me that a 'Viking sword' had been found on the foreshore at Heswall which is not the case (an item was recovered of much later date). Another recent conjuring based on musings and very little evidence is the claim that a Viking ship lies hidden under the car park of the Railway Inn, Meols. Those are the kind of fables – both old and recent – that animate people. Interest in early medieval Wirral is linked to local pride and enthusiasm to learn more which we can and should encourage. Equally, we must be wary that folklore creates another historiography which can perpetuate misinformation and sometimes full-blown fantasies.

HW: The Wirral's Viking heritage is a heady mix of genuine historical, archaeological and toponomastic gems, and now genetic discourses, plus some rich fables of nineteenth-century Northern antiquarianism (see also Griffiths and Harding 2015: 1–8). In broad terms, academics have a reputation of being patronising towards local people and not taking seriously their stories. But equally, we have a responsibility to not indulge contrived narratives whilst simultaneously fostering local enthusiasm in history and archaeology. So, how do we best go about doing that: channeling and supporting the public whilst challenging stark 'fake history'?

CD: In that regard, I think the stories are interesting to study on their own merits, as stories that are an interesting phenomenon, but not to treat them as historical enquiry. It reflects the fact that people are filling in the gaps because they haven't got anything that addresses their local narrative directly. The folklore responds to landscapes and histories academic scholars have been unable, or unwilling, to explore. The same applies for other localities. For example, some of the earliest publications in Scottish history drew from folklore (Downham 2011). The valorisation of oral narratives and traditions was a reaction to the dominance of Anglocentric narratives of Britain and Britishness. In that light, folklore in the English North West, and Wirral in particular, might, at least in part, be a reaction to the marginalisation of selected peoples and themes in authorised historical narratives.

New directions for Wirral's Viking heritage

HW: This leads us to consider ways forward for Wirral's Viking heritage.

PS: The key moment for me as regards being involved in the way forward with Wirral's early medieval heritage was my involvement in producing the Wirral Borough Council report into a large number of metal-detected finds from central Wirral and their significance especially relating to Viking Age activity on the Wirral. That's when myself, Rob Philpott and Clare produced the report for Wirral Council on the relationship of the metal detected finds and the postulated location of the Battle of Brunanburh. This involved collating around two thousand metal-detected finds that had been recovered over multiple decades in the locality. The bulk of these were from a single field, which is just unparalleled anywhere in the region for metal-detected finds. However, there were issues – the recording techniques were in some cases non existent and the collection was the result of over twenty years detecting with some finds recorded without any meaningful context whatsoever.

However, a fair proportion of the finds were found to be modern era in any case. In addition many of these finds had been stored in plastic bags for many years, resulting in severe corrosion and disintegration. So, when we actually came to start to catalogue all the finds for the Council report, unfortunately, several significant finds had not survived. Notably, there were two early medieval arrowheads that were lost because of poor storage, which was a shame. Here are two more from the project that are in a much better state of preservation, a Jessop type T2 and a type T1 (Figure 1). A striking range of early medieval lead gaming pieces or weights were recovered (Figure 2).

There were several recommendations put in that report about the collection and its ongoing care as well as how the group should proceed in future as regards finds recording. There was also an issue concerning claims that had previously been made by certain members of the metal detecting group that had been rather far fetched. As a result, there appeared to be a stigma surrounding working with the detectorists among academics and professionals. One key example of the problems involved was when some of the metal detectorists appeared on regional television and in newspapers making claims that could never stand up to any scrutiny and therefore caused the group significant reputational damage. There was, for example, a claim that a piece of incised lead sheet was a runic character somehow related to the Battle of Brunanburh! In this circumstance, it is no wonder that many were reluctant to engage with the group.

The submission of that report marked the end of my contractual obligations and at that point it would have been quite easy to also distance myself from further involvement. However, I recall having discussions with Rob Philpott on this matter and we came to the conclusion that the project started by this group had the potential to be of immense value in terms of advancing the knowledge of Wirral's heritage and therefore it was too important to walk away from. We decided that it would be better to work with them

Figure 1: Two early medieval tanged arrowheads from the main finds site of Wirral Archaeology's 'Search for the Battle of Brunanburh' project. Above: Beeton 2022a. Below: Beeton 2025a.

Figure 2: Some of the early medieval lead gaming pieces and weights from the main find site (Photograph: Paul Sherman 2025)

and provide assistance wherever possible rather than distance ourselves, a 'them and us' situation that is often heard when discussing interaction between metal detectorists and archaeologists.

The group themselves realised the problem and a restructuring of the CIC's board resulted in a renaissance and at this point it was where Rob and I felt we could fruitfully invest time building an ongoing constructive relationship with them that has continued to this day. Now the group are working scientifically, seeking professional advice wherever needed, producing high quality geospatial finds data, and recording all finds with the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

The group, now called Wirral Archaeology CIC, has a new project: 'Poulton Hall and its environs'. The work already carried out by the group appears to show that the area of Wirral around Poulton Hall was of considerable significance in Wirral's past. They have recovered some significant Roman and medieval finds. They are also actively raising money to pay for ongoing research into the archaeology of the site. I have just completed the first phase of work on the project. This involved landscape interpretation of the area and carrying out a range of geophysical surveys followed by the excavation of a small number of trial trenches. Two of the questions the current research seeks to address include: 'is there any evidence to demonstrate that Poulton Hall may have once been a burh or similar early medieval fortified site?' A second research question is: 'what evidence exists to support the theory that there was once a masonry castle on the site?' Wirral Archaeology have just applied for funding towards the next stage of that work. So things are starting to move forward in that respect.

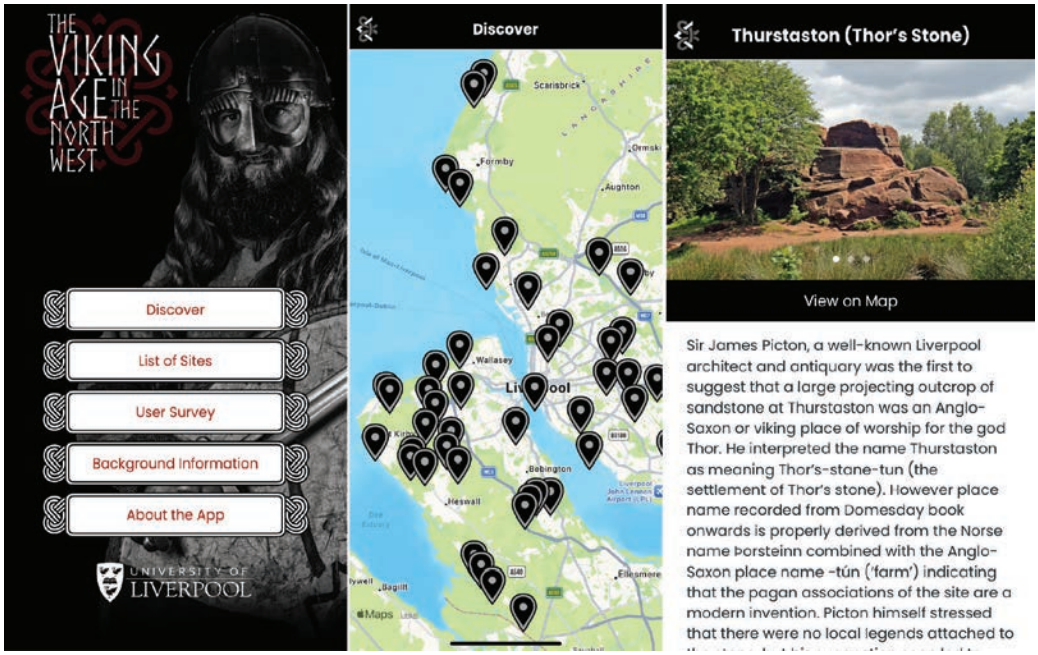

Figure 3: Screen shots from *The Viking Age in the North West* app. Left: the opening screen, middle: the map, right: a typical site entry

HW: This is an example of the benefits of sustained dialogue between professionals and avocational enthusiasts dedicated to exploring a specific locality. What other ways have you been working to improve public understanding of the Viking heritage of the region?

CD: A free smartphone app called *The Viking Age in the North West* was developed over the last six years by the University of Liverpool (Figure 3).[1] Initially it focused on twenty-five sites in Merseyside and then in 2022 it was expanded to draw in a selection of sites along the coasts of Lancashire and Cumbria. Although this represents a fraction of the locations for which there is evidence relating to vikings, the aim was to provide a series of heritage routes highlighting the variety of evidence that has survived (place names, folklore, sculpture and discoveries). The goals of the app are twofold. First, it is to enhance knowledge and appreciation of the heritage that is on people's doorstep. Second, it aims to promote that story to the outside world. I think that is quite important if we want heritage to be cared for, it has to mean something to people. This app promotes awareness and encourages people with an interest in Wirral and the Viking Age to visit sites. Obviously, academics tend to speak directly to few people

[1] https://liverpool.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=a110b9f1-030f-4400-8dbd-b07000ff4ff9&start=7.560603. As a spin off from the app, viking colouring sheets were created for schools during COVID: https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/humanities-and-social-sciences/research/projects/viking-colouring-sheets/

beyond their circle of colleagues and the dedicated local enthusiasts. The app is pitched at the many more people who might simply want to know a little extra about history and archaeology on Wirral.

On the app there are places that people can go and visit. It can help contribute to quality of life for people to get out and visit sites of interest at minimal cost and to develop an appreciation of their environment and surroundings (Sayer 2024). This complements the more hands-on approach that Paul has with the metal detector users. In addition, we have done some community engagement activities using the app. This included a group cycle tour of sites on the Wirral in 2019 as part of the 'Future Yard' music festival in Birkenhead.[2] In addition, there have been a range of other activities we have instigated or participated in to promote Wirral's Viking heritage, including stalls at local viking festivals.

We have also worked with reenactment groups who are really enthusiastic people. One example Dave Capener, who is one of the Wirhahl Skip Felagr reenactors. He's self published (Capener 2014) with a military background and he is passionate about promoting the Battle of Brunanburh project. Recently he's been working on evaluating potential beacon sites on the Wirral as a signalling system in the Viking Age. His approach is welcome: given his knowledge of military strategy and how to read a landscape. In contrast, I'm addressing the written sources. Together, we've done talks as a duo at the Bloom Building in Birkenhead to raise funds for local mental health charities, and reenactors also came along in kit. It was just a really nice way of communicating the local heritage to a local audience. But while the Viking past can be an effective way of engaging with people, there can be a problem of perception in that members of the public who might think that academics are remote and arrogant. Yet we can learn from each other and draw on the expertise and insights of those from non-academic backgrounds. In that sense, I totally learn from Dave Capener because he reads the landscape as somebody who's got a military background and can interpret things in a way I have not been trained to do. So, I think there just has to be that kind of mutual respect for each person's area of knowledge and what they can bring to the table.

While there are sometimes arrogant behaviours in academia by those who regard those without academic training as providing limited or no insights in exploring the past, there are also levels of arrogance among some avocational enthusiasts who believe there is no need for any kind of specialised training. In our interactions, that was evident in the original name of the metal detector group who defined themselves as 'archaeologists' by calling themselves 'Wirral Archaeology'. I think one of their early press releases claimed they were not metal detectorists at all but 'semi-professional' archaeologists! And yet there was no evidence they had participated and completed any training or qualifications to call themselves that in the media. Most significantly, the methods they employed didn't justify that. In short, we need mutual respect, transparency and

[2] https://news.liverpool.ac.uk/2019/08/09/explore-viking-wirral-on-wheels-dr-clare-downham-future-yard/

accountability for academics and professionals in order to work with stakeholders. Together, experience and background from a range of backgrounds and perspectives can help to provide a set of tools to explore Wirral in the Viking Age.

PS: The arrogance that Clare was just referring to is certainly no longer present within the reorganised Wirral Archaeology CIC. The restructuring of their board I referred to earlier certainly put paid to that and as a group they have made enormous progress in producing data that will advance the history of the Wirral. For example, I know they have members currently translating and transcribing previously unknown medieval documents from the Poulton Hall archives. Overall, whether looking at archaeological or documentary research, this project has the potential to become a great example of what can be achieved through collaboration.

HW: It seems the best way to approach such groups is to curb unbridled and misdirected enthusiasm, but also to respect their local knowledge, whether it's reenactment groups, local parish councils or any other group of local people.

CD: I suppose in a way it's a reflection that people do feel passionate about local history and heritage, but then there is also this idea of who owns it. Sometimes there's accusations of exclusivity of certain local groups and then obviously there's voices from outside the groups who object to the way stories are being told about their local area. Heritage is always about our times, and it is often contested in some fashion, and that certainly applies to Viking Wirral. There is comedy value in small groups with rivalries and tensions: that's human nature. The same thing happens within academic communities: that's just humans and politics, and academics can be just as bad as anyone else! It can be a distraction but on the whole it's a good thing because it shows that people care and if people don't care, then you've got a problem. If people care, then that's just a case of how you direct it and how you bring the different stakeholders round the table and who wants to be part of a progressive conversation and who doesn't.

HW: With the challenges overcome and new products created involving local people and building momentum for community participation in Wirral's Viking heritage, what do you feel is the best way forward?

CD: I think when you've got like a lot of public interest like that there, there is the risk that you can therefore get quite a lot of misinformation circulating. To that end, one thing I'd like to do more of is to work with local school teachers to reach young people and engage the next generations in local heritage. This is really important since, as we are aware, vikings have been co-opted and manipulated in popular culture and political discourses on a global scale but certainly also in the UK. Making sure that good reliable information is disseminated at grassroots level to young people is a key way to ensure misinformation doesn't gain traction and instead we give people clear, engaging, fun and helpful information about the Viking-period in their localities. This certainly applies to Wirral.

PS: Following up on the point about getting involved with schools, I think the things that I've picked up on when I've visited schools is the lack of funding. The teachers that I've spoken to have remarked that their history budget amounts to pennies per child per year. So, when the teacher is going to touch on a particular subject, for instance, the Viking Age in their locality, the Viking Age being a core topic within Key Stage 2 of the UKs school curriculum, what resources are the teachers going to look to? They generally have next to nothing themselves and have to rely on Google to help them scratch together whatever they can find.

One solution would be if we could work with teachers to produce a learning pack to go out to schools, right across the peninsula. Perhaps one version for junior schools and a more detailed one for senior schools, This could help to bring Wirral's diverse heritage to the fore for future generations. Within the history that's covered at school, such a resource would be a big bonus and possibly the kind of thing that could be achieved through external funding, such as, the National Lottery Community Fund. Widely distributed to schools and communities, it could help get grassroots engagement with history and heritage.

CD: That leads on to a second point though, and I think when there's ever any kind of dissemination, it's really important that you have a conversation with teachers to understand what they want. We should be having more conversations with people outside academia about what they would like before we try to offer solutions, or else it's not going to work. The risk otherwise is that we are creating a resource which is just going to sit there and not really be used. The children and teachers, as well as the entire school community, need to feel like they're part of that process. And I know co-creation is a bit of a buzzword right now, but I think that is the approach we need to this.

To be fair, there is already some co-creation. But if there's the interest and enthusiasm, then there may need to be more. I'm not quite sure how best to identify and engage different stakeholder groups but school teachers are an obvious one. Groups like the Viking reenactors should also be approached: they see part of their job as knowledge dissemination. It might be good to actually have conversations with different stakeholders to say what do you want from us and on what can we create together.

PS: I agree. And the way research is going on the Wirral at the moment, there's a lot of raw data that soon will start to drip feed into the historical narrative for the area now that the Wirral Archaeology group is organised and every single find is being geolocated and recorded correctly. They are contributing data to the PAS scheme that can already be shared in the community and far beyond. These include Iron Age and Roman finds from central Wirral which are really important in their own right, as well as some significant early medieval artefacts. For example, we have a 'boat brooch' that almost certainly came from Central Europe and dates to around 800 to 700 BC (Figure 4). It raises the question of what is that doing in the middle of Wirral? The group also have

Figure 4: Iron Age copper-alloy 'boat or 'leech' brooch, dated c. 800–700 BC (Carey 2025)

a considerable number of Roman finds as well as some fascinating ones from the early medieval period.

In terms of early medieval finds, there are exotic items including this Sasanian drachm of Khusrau II (reigned AD 590–628) (Figure 5). There is another Sassanian coin and this Abbasid dirham of the caliph al-Mahdi dating to 775/776 (Figure 6). There are also finds from later in the early medieval period with links to Europe, such as this omega brooch, dating to c. AD 1000–1300 (Figure 7) as well as a copper-alloy spangle (Figure 8). Whilst the PAS entry for this item states 'They are often found in burials of the later fifth to later seventh centuries…', examples of both objects are also often found in European contexts linked to Baltic contact hundreds of years later than this. They are both comparatively rare in this country but similar examples have been recovered by metal detectorists in association with other Baltic derived material at a site just north of the River Mersey as well as from sites along the River Ribble (P. Sherman – personal comment, research ongoing).

As individual finds, they are interesting but perhaps somewhat inexplicable. But as an assemblage, you start to put things together and realise some particular sites such as this have been attracting people and their associated objects from a wide geographical area. The question remains: why were they all coming here? Currently, I think the

Figure 5: Early medieval silver Sasanian drachm of Khusrau II (Beeton 2022b)

Figure 6: Early medieval Abbasid silver dirham issued by Caliph al-Mahdi (Beeton 2021)

Figure 7: A copper-alloy medieval Modvinian penannual (omega) brooch, dating to c. AD 1000–1300 (Beeton 2014)

Figure 8: Copper-alloy spangle, possibly fifth or sixth century AD (Beeton 2025b)

answer relates to a potentially important central place, the area around Bromborough. From the finds data alone it certainly appears to be of some significance during the Roman period (and perhaps even earlier), but it also appears to have been important during the early medieval period too. In the context of the previous discoveries of the nineteenth century from Meols interpreted as a beach market, we might now suggest people were coming in to Meols and then perhaps also moving down the peninsula to this second significant location around Bromborough towards Chester. Between Meols and Chester, in the centre of Wirral, the area around Poulton Hall might well have held some significance, perhaps even of power and influence, as revealed by this assemblage. Further research may well answer some of the questions surrounding such finds.

A broader context for Wirral's Viking heritage

HW: Is one of the biases of the discussion of Viking Wirral the idea that Chester is not part of this phenomenon, being a burh established by Aethelflaed and therefore someone seen as integrated into the emerging English kingdom? Certainly in terms of its modern civic identity and uses of its Roman and (to a lesser extent) medieval past, Chester sees itself as set apart from Wirral.

CD: I agree. We're reliant on modern perceptions of regions, politics and localities which can hinder cross fertilisation with a broader regional picture. So, we often face quite a siloed approach to some of the local studies. That's where outside stakeholders getting involved can help break down these arbitrary divides and provide an overview on Wirral and its connectivities. By way of example, the Museum of Liverpool is currently hosting the Treasures exhibition which show cases Liverpool and Merseyside, including Wirral, within a broader picture of national and international connections across Northwest England, North Wales and beyond. This is good, but, I agree that there hasn't been too much discussion across boundaries to date.

HW: That links to a point I've made on Viking heritage and history elsewhere: we perhaps need to think of Viking-period heritage as 'glocal': tacking between localised and international perspectives, and in local events many scales of Viking heritage collide and interact (Williams 2024; see also Williams and Clarke 2020). This leads me to ask what you feel are the wider implications of the work you have both been doing on Wirral and the English North West more broadly for other parts of what are considered the 'Viking world', especially given the persistent co-opting 'the Vikings' by global white supremacist and ethnonationalist movements and discourses?

CD: I think the relationship of local stories to international connections and wider historical processes is what makes the Viking age exciting to local people, is that their local story does fit into a much bigger story, and that's exciting to them, although obviously a lot of people think that the story just goes back to Scandinavia, whereas I think there's

some more communication to do. It's the breadth of the Viking trading routes and cross connections between that brings the story together. I remember I was giving a talk once where I mentioned finds of Arabic dirhams from the Viking Age in North West England and one of the members of the audience just wasn't having it, but I wasn't making this up. They just didn't like the idea that there were these trade links with the Middle East in the early Middle Ages. To me however, that makes the Viking Age more exciting: it's the big-picture that surely makes local heritage all the more important because it was part of this great field of endeavour. I feel this awareness of interconnections is something that should be embraced and promoted for every part of the Viking world.

PS: And people want to embrace it because I think thanks to media, certainly in recent years, Vikings have become more popular among the general public on a global scale. I always think back to the British Museum 'Vikings: Life and Legend' exhibition from 2014. I remember Gareth Williams mentioning that while that exhibition was on a small boy came to him and said 'Vikings rock – Saxons suck' and he said that stuck with him. When Gareth told me that, it stuck with me as well and of course in the years since then, with Vikings increasingly portrayed in the media, they have become more popular. This maybe only because they have seen the *Vikings* series on television or they've read one of Bernard Cornwell's books, or whatever it might be, but it is still a type of interaction that's bringing people in to take a little bit more interest in early medieval history when they hear the word 'Viking'.

HW: Bringing things back to Viking Wirral, I would be interested in your views regarding the choice of the 2023 film based on Bernard Cornwell's books: *The Last Kingdom: Seven Kings Must Die* (Bazalgette 2023) in which Wirral, and Bromborough specifically, is portrayed as the location for the Battle of Brunanburh.

CD: Wirral Archaeology were very effective in engaging Bernard Cornwell. They invited him to the Wirral, showed him finds. Cornwell had long chats with Dave Capener, who explained his military vision of how the battle would have played out. And I think that was probably quite a canny move for them to get Brunanburh located in Wirral in his book! I haven't read the book or seen the film, but I understand in the book he mentions Wirral Archaeology because they gave him a Viking Age knife which Bernard misunderstood was actually from the battle site, but it was an item acquired from somewhere else and given to him as a gift.

I know one of the things when we first dealt with Wirral Borough Council was that they wanted to know if there was tourism potential in promoting the Battle of Brunanburh association: asking can we monetise this? I suppose that level of publicity does create that possibility. And I mean, you know, the other thing that was going through my mind is it's very easy for us to say, yes, we should be doing resource packs for school teachers, and promoting local awareness. Yes, we should be bringing stakeholders around the table, but all of us are busy actually doing day jobs. We don't get paid any extra and

receive very limited kudos from management for doing local engagement work. That is a problem because the other thing I do find, which is nice, is that the public see us as a resource. So I had an email today saying something like: 'I've just read something about vikings and I would love to chat about it. Would you be available to talk to me about this…'. It's a member of the public I have never encountered before. Likewise, I occasionally get asked to go to primary schools and I have done that a few times but you lose most of a day to travel and have an hour in the class with kids, and you've reached out to thirty children. It's fun, it's enjoyable, but it's a lost day of work. There was no time off to do it and no brownie points from my employers. At the same time there are so many pressures to perform on other things, that there is almost a need for expectation management as to what we can do for people. But also, wouldn't it be nice if that stuff was actually encouraged by our employers as part of our jobs? I don't think the business model of the contemporary university allows for much recognition of these activities.

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Clare Downham, Professor of Medieval History, Institute of Irish Studies
Email: c.downham@liverpool.ac.uk

Paul Sherman, NW Heritage CIC
Email: heritageservices@lathomcastle.online