

# Offa's Dyke Journal

Volume 6 for 2024

## Aims and Scope

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

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

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**Front cover:** Photograph of the excavated ditch of Offa's Dyke, Chirk, north-facing section (Ian Grant, CPAT Photo 4565-0134)

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*A Journal for Linear Monuments, Frontiers and  
Borderlands Research*

Volume 6 for 2024

Edited by Howard Williams



University of  
Chester



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# Great Works by Great Men? Rethinking Linear Earthworks

Howard Williams

*Introducing the sixth volume of the Offa's Dyke Journal (ODJ) for 2024, the introduction surveys the contents and recent related research published elsewhere as well as the main Offa's Dyke Collaboratory's activities during late 2023 and 2024.*

**Keywords:** monument biographies, borderlands, dykes, frontiers, landscape, linear earthworks

## Introduction

Linear earthworks define who we are today and where we imagine we come from in more ways than we are often willing to admit. They stalk our landscapes and our imaginations. Clearly, they held complex, shifting and contested uses and significances for past people, too. The task of this academic collection is to explore these varied meanings and significances of linear monuments in the past and the present through fresh academic research.

To set the scene, this article introduces *Offa's Dyke Journal* 6, setting out to present the rationale for this open-access publication before reviewing the five articles. The study then surveys recent key related publications exploring the significance of linear earthworks. The introduction then reviews the key activities of the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory since volume 5, aimed at promoting and supporting research on frontiers, borderlands and linear monuments (see Williams 2023a).

## Dykes as statements of power and origin myths

In his guidebook, Frank Noble described Offa's Dyke as built by the late eighth-century ruler of Mercia, Offa. He describes this ruler as a '... contemporary (and almost an equal) of Charlemagne' (Noble 1981: 9). Offa 'built this great earthwork when the nations of Europe were struggling into conscious existence out of the wreck of the Roman Empire' (Noble 1981: 9). This view by Noble of a 'great work designed and implemented by a great man' is a pervasive metanarrative for Offa's Dyke that has endured from long before the survey and interpretation of Sir Cyril Fox, which described Offa's Dyke as a 'unitary work' (Fox 1955: 282). It continues to dominate our thinking of this linear earthwork, carved in the hazy 'Dark Ages' of Britain, forged by, and simultaneously forging, the kingdoms that were to eventually morph into England and Wales (Hill and Worthington 2003; Ray and Baptý 2016).

Motives assigned to King Offa vary. Offa is seen as perhaps using the monument to defend his territories, to assert hegemony over his Welsh opponents and own subject peoples, to aggrandise his achievements for his Anglo-Saxon rival polities, and to proclaim his identity and authority to a broader audience across these islands and, indeed, upon a European stage (Ray and Bapty 2016: see also Williams 2023b). Yet, Offa's Dyke is certainly a carefully designed, placed and organised monument, but this needn't imply a singular function, as Ray and Bapty (2016: 363) are at pains to emphasise. Still, the singular agency of a Mercian ruler, etching his name into history through the making of his Dyke and thus carving a legacy for himself, is a simple and seductive story. It is all-too-often adopted to the study of other linear earthworks of prehistoric and early historic periods by archaeologists and historians across Britain and beyond in which the contribution of others, and the experience of others, (during and after their construction) is neglected or downplayed. Dykes and walls are often perceived as having been designed for specific elite agencies for singular purposes to articulate power, authority, assert territory or implement specific military goals, at particular historical moments.

This approach is often deployed regardless of whether the evidence backs this up. It is often deployed to the exclusion of more complex stories hinted at by our evidence: of construction and contested meanings and uses. It is applied without consideration of longer-term patterns of landscape use, shifting impacts and significances of dykes through time on and for different communities: in other words, with little consideration of the complex agencies enmeshing people, monument and place in the life-histories (monumental biographies) of linear earthworks (Chadwick 2016). As we ask new questions, deploy fresh methods and techniques alongside tried-and-tested approaches, and interrogate fresh data, we find this 'great man' story sometimes might be borne out, at least in part, at other times requires significant revision, and in further instances it simply does not work and can be discounted.

This opening observation is particularly poignant for the subjects tackled in this volume of the *Offa's Dyke Journal*. The journal continues to promote new research that challenges our existing narratives through the interrogation of fresh data. Directly and by way of comparison, each contribution to this volume 6 collection of five new original research articles strives to develop novel perspectives on linear monuments, complicating and enriching our still-fragmentary understanding of why, where, when, how and by whom linear earthworks were built, and how they interacted with – creating and transforming – borderland and frontier landscape, settlement and monuments. The studies here thus reveal how dykes underwent contrasting life-histories of use and reuse over time, and they explore their significance and interpretation in today's world.

## Rationale and review

An open-access 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 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. *ODJ* here reaches its sixth volume, the second sole-edited by Howard Williams (ably supported by Kate Waddington as stand-in editor for his own publication). The core aim is 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 6 comprises this introduction and five research articles, arranged in crude chronological order in relation to their subject matter. Vyner provides an invaluable review of linear earthworks across Britain before presenting the latest data on cross-ridge dykes in North Yorkshire, arguing for their role in demarcating 'territories of ritual' in the early first millennium BC (Late Bronze Age), incorporating earlier cairns and mounds. Hankinson tackles a series of 'short dykes' in mid-Wales, arguing from their dates (where known) and spatial placement that they were part of an early medieval Welsh territory, the direct or indirect predecessor of the late medieval cantref of Mechain. Nevell considers Manchester's Nico Ditch and postulates, based on its position, that it might have been an early medieval period linear earthwork, roughly comparable in date and significance to Offa's Dyke, but controlling borderlands between Mercia and Northumbria. The penultimate publication by Belford, Grant and Malim builds upon the interim fieldwork report in volume 1 (Belford 2019), presenting important scientific dating (radiocarbon and OSL) for the construction of Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke, both confirming their early medieval date and prompting further questions regarding how and why they were constructed and used. Finally, Williams critiques the current heritage interpretation along the line of Offa's Dyke and the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail, advocating for a coherent strategy utilising new media, art and narratives to challenge misinformation and disinformation about the history of the borderlands and Offa's Dyke's significance within it. Together, the contributions provide new insights into the past and present uses and significances of linear monuments.

## New research on linear monuments

Previous introductions to volumes 1–3 and 5 surveyed recent research on linear earthworks (Williams and Delaney 2019; Williams 2020, 2021, 2023a). This review makes no claim to tackle all pertinent publications. Four critically relevant studies published in the past two years are here evaluated to set the articles published in this volume in their appropriate context.

### *Crawford's legacy*

In volume 3 of this journal, Garland *et al.* (2021) outline their Leverhulme Trust 'Monumentality and Landscape: Linear Earthworks in Britain' project. Building on this work, Moore *et al.* (2023) consider the legacy of pioneering archaeologist O.G.S.

Crawford's work on Britain's linear monuments. They chart the subsequent decline in interest in linear monuments until the recent revival, in no small part illustrated by the creation and maintenance of this journal. They identify the key challenge of varying chronological attributions for dykes based on limited evidence, including the default assumption that many will be 'sub-Roman' in date. One key issue with this approach is overlooking potential multiple phases of dykes' use and reuse. They subsequently identify the interpretative straightjackets applied, often contrasting between whether dykes are considered prehistoric, sub-Roman, or early medieval in date. Martial interpretations have been reduced for prehistoric monuments in favour of considerations of tenure, while defensive functions are considered more important for early medieval dykes, alongside their proposed role in delineating political territories and ethnic divisions. Moore *et al.* (2023) propose a cross-period comparative approach to understanding linear earthworks focused on considering their relationship with fluid social formations and as manifestations of power. Thus, more robust theoretical framework and fresh methodological applications are required for future studies beyond period-based interpretative constraints.

#### *Early medieval Wales reviewed*

Nancy Edwards (2023) has succeeded in producing the first up-to-date and detailed synthesis for the archaeology of early medieval Wales, in which linear earthworks are an important component of her chapter ten, which focused on 'power and authority'. Building on the foundations laid by Ray and Bapty's (2016) analysis, Edwards tackles both Offa's and Wat's Dykes by considering their role in defining and transforming relationships between Mercia and the kingdoms of Wales. She concedes there remain many unresolved questions regarding their dating, extent and purpose and Edwards recognises the possibility that the dykes might have multiple phases of construction and use. Edwards effectively reviews past work, including that by Hill and Worthington (2003) and is pitched to survey work up to Ray and Bapty's (2016) book. Unfortunately, the synthesis does not fully take into account more recent work including the studies in this volume since 2019, notably regarding Delaney for the Herefordshire Plain (Delaney 2021). Still, Edwards' account matches closely with that by Williams (2023b) regarding Offa's Dyke's functions in facilitating surveillance and controlling movement (Edwards 2023: 391). Edwards sets her interpretation in the context of the short dykes and a discussion of the evolution of the wider frontier landscape, where she brings to bear place-names, early medieval stone sculpture and ecclesiastical archaeology to consider the dykes' active role in the evolution of the frontier (Edwards 2003: 393–398).

#### *Four Crosses: Offa's Dyke in landscape context*

Britnell (2024) provides a detailed synthesis drawing on multiple phases of archaeological fieldwork at Four Crosses, Llantysilio, Powys, to consider it a multiperiod nodal point in the

Welsh borderland from the Mesolithic through to the modern era. The key monumental developments are the Middle Neolithic to Middle Bronze Age barrow cemeteries and associated land use, followed by Late Bronze Age land divisions, Iron Age metallurgy and burials, and Roman burials, field systems and enclosures. This long sequence of persistent, if not necessarily continuous, activity in the Four Crosses landscapes provides context to the origins of the kingdom of Powys in the vicinity in the fifth to seventh centuries, and helps us understand this as a landscape of contestation by Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Norman and English politics with Welsh kingdoms and communities from the eighth to thirteenth centuries (Britnell 2024: 102). Britnell argues for continuity from the Iron Age and Roman periods into the early medieval phases, with evidence of a Roman enclosure at Arddleen recut in the fifth to eighth centuries AD. Meanwhile, nearby is the New Pieces elite settlement site dating from the fifth to seventh centuries AD.

Offa's Dyke carves through this landscape from the Severn to the south to ascend Llanymynech Hill. Its relationship with these earlier land uses is still unclear given that its line across the Vyrnwy floodplain is covered by the modern road. Still, Britnell reiterates the course of the Dyke as aligned between two ancient symbols of political power: the hillforts at Llanymynech and Y Breiddin, perhaps to control the former hill's mineral resources (Britnell 2024: 102–104). The close relationship of Offa's Dyke with the two churches, St Tysilio's, Four Crosses and St Agatha's, Llanymynech, both in circular churchyards and thus of possible early medieval foundation, are noted even if no stratigraphical relationships can be discerned (Britnell 2024: 103–105). The association of the Dyke and the church of St Tysilio's with the sprawling multi-phase prehistoric barrow cemetery is also noted. Britnell recognises the wider pattern of association between early medieval burial sites and churches with prehistoric ceremonial monuments but he equally notes the lack of conclusive and deliberate association between the Dyke and barrows or cairns elsewhere along its course. Thus Britnell is circumspect: suggesting that the associations of the barrows, with the church of St Tysilio and Dyke 'may be coincidental but there are perhaps hints that the earlier monuments had some influence in the eighth and ninth centuries AD', via 'ancestral, supernatural, mythical or historical associations' linked to identities, senses of place and social memory (Britnell 2024: 104–105, 110).

### *Conserving Offa's Dyke*

Published in Cadw's popular *Heritage in Wales* magazine circulated to members, Upson and Davies (2024) provide a valuable synthesis of emerging conservation and management strategies for Offa's Dyke via their cross-border project. Having introduced Offa's Dyke, and explaining it as 'one of the greatest engineering achievements of the pre-industrial age' (Upson and Davies 2024: 32), they set out the Offa's Dyke Conservation Project from 2016 onwards, involving a survey of the condition of the monument and subsequently the enactment of conservation strategies in collaboration with landowners and other stakeholders. They present work from Drewin Farm, near Churchstoke, Powys, as a case study: one of a number of examples of best practice which is being identified and refined through ongoing conservation work.

## Collaboratory activities, late 2023–2024

The Offa's Dyke Collaboratory continues to support this ongoing work. The Collaboratory is a sustained research network for those investigating linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands. The core Collaboratory activity has been the production of this open-access academic journal and the maintenance of the Collaboratory website and blog. There has also been one key public event during the period under consideration.

### *Borderland events*<sup>1</sup>

The principal event in late 2023/2024 was a day-conference on 1 June 2024, held at Alyn Waters Country Park, and organised by Dave McGlade, Keith Ray and Howard Williams. Supported by the Offa's Dyke Association, the event was themed: 'Conflict, Collaboration and Early Medieval Frontiers'. With an audience of fifty people, the event brought together avocational and professional and academic investigators to explore the latest thinking and insights into Wat's Dyke, Offa's Dyke and their landscape contexts, and this was subsequently disseminated digitally (see below). A full review and compilation of videos of talks for this successful event can be found on the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory blog.<sup>2</sup>

### *Digital dykes*

The Offa's Dyke Collaboratory continues to support the publication of digital media to foster interest and educate understanding of the region's archaeology. A key component of the aforementioned 1 June 2024 conference – 'Conflict, Collaboration and Early Medieval Frontiers' – was its recording and sharing online. This was done both via the *Archaeodeath* YouTube channel<sup>3</sup> and the channel of the Offa's Dyke Association.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the Collaboratory website hosted a blog-post reflecting on the landscape of the borderland via a guest post on the folklore of Llanymynech by Melanie Roxby-Mackay. This comprises part of her doctoral research exploring the long-term significance of borderland identities mediated by the lived experience of the landscape either side of the modern Welsh/English border.<sup>5</sup>

The blog also featured a discussion of the proximity and significance of Wat's Dyke to Y Cae Ras, now associated with celebrity ownership and with a Disney Plus television show following the fortunes of Wrexham AFC. The documentary also provides an entertaining light introduction to the history and heritage of Wrexham. Offa's Dyke is briefly and misleadingly represented in series 1 as part of the history of Wales for

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<sup>1</sup> As reviewed on the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory blog: <https://offaswatsdyke.wordpress.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://offaswatsdyke.wordpress.com/2024/10/22/conflict-collaboration-early-medieval-frontiers-1-june-2014/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/@archaeodeath>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/@OffasDykeAssociation>

<sup>5</sup> <https://offaswatsdyke.wordpress.com/2023/11/14/lords-and-ladies-of-llanymynech-by-melanie-roxby-mackay/>

beginners. Meanwhile, the mural on Crispin Lane has constituted a new feature of Wrexham's cityscape, thus celebrating both club and show in immediate association with traces of Wat's Dyke running parallel to the road and railway lines, although nothing explicit connects the two or allude to the Dyke's proximity. The blog-post also highlights the potential of the What's Wat's Dyke comic to educate and engage people with the story of the Dyke in relation to the history of the football club. If taken forward, such heritage initiatives would enrich the club and documentaries' paired impact on the city and the region, in which Wrexham's borderland identity as part of a deep-time contested landscape would be showcased for local people and visitors alike (Swogger and Williams 2021; Williams and Swogger 2021).

Building on existing resources on the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory blog, Howard Williams presented further instances of heritage interpretation in the landscape, focusing on Ruabon and Plas Power as well as digitally as part of the Ceiriog Heritage Trail. Together, these posts provide drafts of ideas later to be incorporated in Williams's contribution to the present volume.

## Conclusion

Linear earthworks often remain enigmatic, but the ongoing research showcased here indicates they were far more than 'great works by great men'. Built at different times involving varied agencies, linear earthworks were made with varying and overlapping motivations. Some were single-phase monuments and reflect royal and/or elite power, authority and design. Yet they can be constructed and utilised through multiple phases of building, use, neglect, abandonment and reuse, reflecting shifting cooperation and conflict between different individuals and groups. At each juncture dykes might thus accrue successive or overlapping functions and significances. Their traces continue to acquire complex valences and affordances to this day. It is our task as scholars, researchers and professionals to explore and reveal, question and critique these functions and significances through our investigations, teaching and public engagement.

This journal continues to deliver the responsibility for accessible, up-to-date and original research to tackle new interdisciplinary investigations of linear earthworks in their wider borderland and frontier settings. *Offa's Dyke Journal* promotes reliable and accessible scholarship and research to a broader audience and thus enhancing public understanding and appreciation regarding the history, archaeology and heritage of linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands. Simultaneously, the journal have also provided peer-reviewed academic content that is up-to-date and serves to critique and challenge false narratives.

To date, forty-nine published articles have appeared over six volumes, of which thirty-eight are original articles and five are 'classics revisited' publications of revised and reformatted content that had previously appeared elsewhere. The introductions to each

volumes are themselves reflections on new perspectives, public engagement and research impact. Together, the articles in *Offa's Dyke Journal* have transformed recognition and understanding regarding linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands in Britain and beyond.

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