

TECHNICAL OFFICERS'
WORKING PARTY REPORT

WYE VALLEY AONB
JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE
3rd July 2017

OFFA'S DYKE COLLABORATORY

Purpose

To inform members of progress and forthcoming events generated through the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory.

FOR INFORMATION

Key Issues

- The Gloucestershire part of the Wye Valley AONB contain some of the best preserved and most dramatic sections of Offa's Dyke, the eighth century earthwork believed to be commissioned by the Offa, King of the Mercians, to delineate the boundary between the 'Anglo-Saxon' kingdom of Mercia and the 'British' kingdoms of eastern Wales.
- The inaugural Offa's Dyke Collaboratory workshop, on Friday 28th April 2017, was a great success with 45 attendees from across the country, academia and heritage management.
- Several further workshops and conferences are planned.
- Project proposals are also developing, including on and around the Lancaut peninsular with the landowner and the Forest of Dean Buildings Preservation Trust.

Reasons

The Offa's Dyke Collaboratory seeks to encourage a new era of research in the landscape of the Mercian-British frontier, between the Severn and the Dee estuaries in the borderlands of England with Wales, through a wider process of collaboration between researchers and communities. The publication of *Offa's Dyke: Landscape and Hegemony in Eighth-Century Britain* (Ray and Bapty, Windgather, 2016) promotes several new approaches and interpretations to Offa's Dyke and the western frontier of Mercia. It suggests how Offa's Dyke may have reflected, and helped create, a new 'political landscape' in late-eighth and early-ninth century Britain, extending well beyond the line of settlement and contact along what became the eastern Marches of Wales.

The inaugural event for the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory was a workshop hosted by the University of Chester at the University Centre Shrewsbury on Friday 28th April 2017. The event, attended by 45 delegates, comprised a rapid series of short presentations on current and ongoing research on Offa's and Wat's Dykes and their environs, seeking to identify and revise key themes and questions for future investigations. There was also a session in the round where proposals and ideas were debated by participants. Representatives came from the Universities of Birmingham, Cardiff, Manchester, Nottingham, Oxford and Wales, and from the Brecon Beacons National Park, Cadw, Historic England, the respective local authorities along the Dyke, the Forest of Dean Buildings Preservation Trust and the Offa's Dyke Association.

Implications

There are many questions that remain to be resolved about Offa's Dyke and the British-Mercian frontier. Very many of these questions, and previous attempts to address them, were identified at within *Offa's Dyke: Landscape and Hegemony in Eighth-Century Britain*. Based on this, lists of '100 Questions' and '100 Projects' were presented at the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory workshop in Shrewsbury. Eight of the 'projects', listed below, relate directly to the parts of Offa's Dyke in the Wye Valley AONB. The AONB Unit are working Dr Keith Ray, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire County Archaeologists and local interest groups to see how these local 'projects' can be implemented.

As part of the Forest of Dean Buildings Preservation Trust's funded work on the conservation of Lancaut Church, a public seminar is being planned to highlight the context of the early church and settlement at Lancaut. This will build on current project proposals being developed to further investigate the significance of the Lancaut peninsular from the early Middle-Ages.

Three other events are currently planned under the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory:

Frontiers & Archaeology – Past & Present

On Wednesday 13th December 2017, at the Grosvenor Museum, Chester, a free day conference will be hosted by University of Chester archaeology students. This is event will explore the archaeology of frontiers and their interpretation in the human past and their significance and challenges for community and public perception and engagement in the present.

From Brexit and IndyRef to the Refugee Crisis and Trump's Wall, frontiers dominate our news. Archaeological research can provide perspectives and insights into how frontiers are created, perpetuated, defined, fragmented, moved, removed and reinvented. Archaeological research shows us that frontiers needn't divide 'civilization' from 'barbarians', nor are they always simply lines on a map. Instead, frontiers can be zones and regions that might possess topographic, economic, social, political, religious and ideological dimensions. Moreover, frontiers can be arenas of interaction and creativity as much as barriers and blockades, in which new identities and perceptions of the environment can be fostered and reproduced.

From Offa's Dyke to Hadrian's Wall, from the Great Wall of China to the Berlin Wall, the conference will explore the archaeology of frontiers past and present. Archaeology sheds light on how frontiers interact with natural features, including seas and straits, river and valleys, hills and mountains, forests and fens. Also, archaeological research reveals how frontiers are created and transformed in relation to routes and settlements, fields and farms, fortifications and watchtowers, beacons and bridges, linear earthworks and walls, sacred sites and burial grounds. Finally, the conference will tackle how archaeology can explore today's frontiers afresh: both the material culture of present-day frontiers and how ancient frontiers are conserved, managed and interpreted in the present.

Dykes Through Time: Rethinking Early Medieval Linear Earthworks

At the 39th Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG) annual conference at Cardiff University, 18-20 December 2017, there will be a session on Dykes Through Time: Rethinking Early Medieval Linear Earthworks on behalf of the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory. This session aims to foster new approaches and investigations of early medieval linear earthworks, theorising their significance in the past and the present.

Background

The Offa's Dyke Collaboratory is a network of individuals, groups and organisations aimed at promoting and supporting the management and investigation of Offa's Dyke, Wat's Dyke, and their landscape settings. The publication of Dr Keith Ray and Ian Bapty's book 'Offa's Dyke: Landscape and Hegemony in Eighth-Century Britain' (Windgather 2016) provides a valuable impetus for fostering new collaborative projects on the linear earthworks of the modern Anglo-Welsh border. The AONB Manager is part of the convening group of the Collaboratory. For more information visit <https://offaswatsdyke.wordpress.com/>.

Eight Projects relating to the parts of Offa's Dyke in the Wye Valley AONB

Extracts from "Notes towards the development of a Research Programme 'in 100 Projects'" <https://offaswatsdyke.wordpress.com/about/offas-dyke-some-notes-towards-the-development-of-a-research-programme-in-100-projects/>

Projects 32-39: Localised projects – Gloucestershire & Herefordshire

32. *A project designed to enlist the support of (for example) rock-climbers to establish whether Offa's Dyke did once survive along cliff-top locations such as Ban-y-gor Rocks opposite Wynd Cliff north of Chepstow, and/or the extent to which subsequent quarrying may have removed all traces. (NB this project could usefully compare this Gloucestershire situation with that at Blodwell Rock, Llanymynech).*
33. *The East Vaga to Madgett's Hill lengths. This is envisaged as a close study, survey and investigation project. Experience (including field reconnaissance studies in 2017) has shown that while LiDAR is an essential tool for the full study of Offa's Dyke in the woodlands of the Forest of Dean, ground observation is essential to the purpose of mapping the subtleties (and anomalies) of structure and siting. This is especially true of this 4km length of Offa's Dyke which is probably the best surviving stretch anywhere.*
34. *Passage Grove promontory complex. In study-visits I undertook in April 2015 and March 2017 (latterly with Jon Hoyle), the complexities of particular locations within the stretch noted in 'project 33' were fully appreciated, perhaps for the first time. This project, focusing upon a particular location with especially striking configurations of the Dyke and other possibly related features, is an example of the kind of place where detailed and in-depth study, including specialised mapped characterisation, multi-spectral geophysical survey, and excavation (especially in response to past forestry interventions), could elucidate both structure and purpose in respect to the observable remains.*
35. *Staunton to Ross-on-Wye: locating the Dyke. From Common Grove to Lower Lydbrook in the parish of English Bicknor there is a stretch of Offa's Dyke that is reasonably well-preserved and characteristic of several other lengths further south in the Wye Valley. And yet to its west between Redbrook and Redinhorne (Symond's Yat) there is no trace of the linear earthwork across a 5km distance. Northwards from Lydbrook the early charter bounds of Goodrich appear to make reference to the Dyke, and there are hints of its presence at Bishopswood and Walford south of Ross. This project would be aimed at determining whether there are traces of the earthwork that have been 'missed' in these locations, or whether it was not completed, or why it was deemed not necessary, here.*

36. Gateways – investigating the ‘yats’. *The important conservation/research study conducted in the 1990s by Jon Hoyle and Jo Vallender looking at Offa’s Dyke in the lower Wye Valley noted that there are as many as 10 ‘yat’ or ‘yeat’ place-names here, often surviving as ‘gate’ or ‘yat’ names today. This project would aim, through a range of studies, to establish whether these names do indeed refer to gateways in, or points of transit across, Offa’s Dyke in the locations concerned; and if so, whether they were of similar, or contrasting, character.*
37. Quarries and stone-cappings. *The focus of this project would be upon the relationship between the form and location of quarries to the east of the Dyke and the use of quarried stone to create both facades and cappings to the bank; and the digging of the ditch to the west of the bank to create a counterscarp bank. In the places where the latter survives intact, it is often also capped with stone. While mostly a survey project, insights from non-intrusive work could be tested through excavation, especially in reference to the quarries. The existence of such east-side quarries is more obvious in Gloucestershire than elsewhere, but its ubiquity is becoming evident all along the course of the Dyke. So some comparative work could usefully be done elsewhere.*
38. The Mork Stream valley and its complexities. *While there are various anomalies and curiosities among the groups of earthworks occupying the landscape in the lower Wye valley that Offa’s Dyke traverses (in part due to excellent preservation conditions, in part due to an ‘underlay’ of prehistoric settlement and its field systems), nowhere exhibits greater complexity in the Mork tributary valley where the dyke-builders had to negotiate a highly topographically-convoluted landscape. This project would embrace this complexity, using the apparent disadvantage of complex inter-relationships of earthworks (including several ‘linears’), to attempt to establish a sequence and pattern associated with the Dyke and the river to its west.*
39. A River Wye frontier – Ergyng and ‘the south Herefordshire zone’. *A project investigating the conundrum of the apparent absence of a linear earthwork in an area that was clearly in contest between incoming Anglo-Saxon settlers and indigenous British communities; but that also betrays hints of compromise and even collaboration. The project would seek to expand upon recent discoveries indicative of early English settlement south of Hereford, and the evidence for a spread of thriving early Christian communities with allegiances southwards towards Gwent.*