

# Offa's Dyke Journal

Volume 2 for 2020

## Aims and Scope

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

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

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### Editors

Professor Howard Williams BSc MA PhD FSA (Professor of Archaeology, University of Chester)  
Email: [howard.williams@chester.ac.uk](mailto:howard.williams@chester.ac.uk)

Liam Delaney BA MA MCifA (Doctoral Researcher, University of Chester)  
Email: [1816919@chester.ac.uk](mailto:1816919@chester.ac.uk)

### Editorial Board

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Professor Keith Ray MBE MA PhD FSA (Honorary Professor, School of History, Archaeology and Religion, Cardiff University)

**Submissions:** [odj@chester.ac.uk](mailto:odj@chester.ac.uk)

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# Offa's Dyke Journal

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Edited by Howard Williams and Liam Delaney



University of  
Chester





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# Collaboratory, Coronavirus and the Colonial Countryside

Howard Williams

*Introducing the second volume of the Offa's Dyke Journal (ODJ), this five-part article sets the scene by reviewing: (i) key recent research augmenting last year's Introduction (Williams and Delaney 2019); (ii) the key activities of the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory in 2020; (iii) the political mobilisation of Offa's Dyke in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns; (iv) the ramifications of accelerated efforts to decolonise the British countryside on both archaeological research and heritage interpretation on linear monuments; and (v) a review of the contents of volume 2. Together, this introduction presents the context and significance of ODJ volume 2 for both research on the Welsh Marches and broader investigations of frontiers and borderlands.*

*Keywords:* archaeology, borderlands, colonialism, coronavirus, frontiers, linear earthworks

## Introduction

As the first and only open-access peer-reviewed academic journal about the landscapes, monuments and material culture of frontiers and borderlands in deep-time historical perspective, the *Offa's Dyke Journal (ODJ)* has a concerted focus on the Anglo-Welsh borderlands given its sponsorship from the University of Chester and the Offa's Dyke Association in support of the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory (Williams and Delaney 2019). Yet *ODJ* also provides a venue for original research on frontiers and borderlands in broader and comparative perspective. While Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke remain key foci, the contents of volumes 1 and 2 together illustrate the wider themes, debates and investigations encapsulated by *ODJ* concerning boundaries and barriers, edges and peripheries, from prehistory through to recent times, as well as considerations of the public archaeology and heritage of frontiers and borderlands.

Before discussing the six articles in *ODJ* 2, recent new work on linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands is reviewed, and then the specific activities of the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory during 2020 is surveyed. Next, the article explores both the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns on the politicised rhetoric surrounding Offa's Dyke, and the implications of the Black Lives Matter movement on ongoing discussions of the British colonial countryside. As well as shaping and structuring the activities of the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory in this unprecedented year, the dual themes of coronavirus and decolonisation promise to shift debates regarding the present-day significance of ancient frontier works. I conclude by showing how the articles published in *ODJ* 2, in multiple fashions, herald such endeavours.

## Recent publications

The introduction to *ODJ 1* reviewed recent work on frontiers and borderlands (Williams and Delaney 2019). This section reviews recent literature missed last year and relevant new publications from 2020.

One recent survey omitted from last year's review was Peter Spring's (2015) *Great Walls and Linear Barriers*. This is a bold venture exploring the often scant evidence for linear monuments from across Eurasia. It contains a discussion of the more prominent later prehistoric and early medieval linear monuments of Ireland and Britain and promotes a military thesis for understanding their creation and use.

In the context of the articles in this volume (especially Bell and Malim), Tom Moore's recent discussions of late Iron Age *oppida* and other 'polyfocal' or 'networked' sites deserves recognition. He considers these clusters of sites as 'landscape monuments', incorporating banjo enclosures and dyke systems and socio-political, economic and ceremonial gathering places. His multi-scalar approach has considerable potential to inform our understanding of linear earthworks of both later prehistoric and early medieval date as monumental strategies for managing and manipulating landscapes. Moore considers linear monuments in this context as serving to funnel people, animals and resources across landscape interfaces rather than operating as territorial boundaries (Moore 2012, 2017).

Also of direct relevance to our discussions is recent analyses into Roman-period frontier works. For example, a novel application of LiDAR data, taking it beyond visualisation and site prospection, is implemented in a high-resolution metric survey, evaluating the projected extent of the mid-second-century AD Antonine Wall in relation to its famed distance-slabs (Hannon *et al.* 2017). Symonds (2020) conducts an evaluation of the development of Hadrian's Wall by considering historic fording places. Moreover, Symonds iterates the significance for understanding seemingly static frontiers in terms of transforming and controlling mobilities in the landscape (see also Murrieta-Flores and Williams 2017).

For early medieval linear earthworks, Nigel Jones' (2018) report on recent excavations along the course of the Whitford Dyke concluding that, while still undated, it remains disconnected from Wat's Dyke and Offa's Dyke (see also Hill this volume). The principal investigation of early medieval linear monuments published since *ODJ 1* is Tim Malim's (2020) consideration of Wat's Dyke around Old Oswestry. Reviewing previous work, Malim hints at the possibility that Wat's Dyke, incorporating Old Oswestry hillfort at a key node in prehistoric routeways, might have enshrined an older line of significance in the prehistoric landscape implied through association with at least three standing stones (Malim 2020: 153–157). Again, as with the work of Moore and Symonds, we are prompted to consider the broader connections of linear earthworks to the manipulation and reconfiguration of past mobilities.

Just as historic routes provide an inspiration for understanding the design and utility of Hadrian's Wall (Symonds 2020), so do contemporary paths inform the interpretation of a new study of Chinggis Khan's Wall. Deploying high-resolution satellite imagery, Shelach-Lavi *et al.* (2020) explore this 737km-long wall spanning the steppes of modern Mongolia, Russia and China and identify a series of rectangular and circular structures in clusters situated at regular intervals along its line. Rather than lookout points, these auxiliary structures were located in association with water sources and present-day paths. Built to bisect the lowlands between two mountain ranges, most likely by the medieval Liao dynasty, they infer that the wall was not a border or military defensive work but was constructed and garrisoned to monitor and control the movements of pastoral nomadic groups. Together, these studies reveal valuable new methodological approaches and insights gained from investigating the landscape contexts of linear monuments.

Yet linear earthworks were clearly only one strategy for iterating and consolidating socio-economic, territorial and military arrangements. Reynolds extends his earlier work exploring the significance of Anglo-Saxon execution graves by providing a fresh interpretation of graves at Werg near Mildenhall (Wiltshire), close to the ruins of the former Roman town of *Cventio*. Looking to the wider landscape, he suggests that the Kennet valley was part of a late eighth-century contested frontier between Wessex and Mercia (i.e. contemporary with Offa's Dyke). He argues that Wansdyke and Offa's Dyke were each named after imagined ancestors of the respective West Saxon and Mercian royal houses to bolster their legitimacy and efficacy in the landscape (Reynolds 2020: 265; see also Seaman 2019). Notably, Reynolds indicates a late eighth-century strategy of granting land to powerful and loyal kin in this frontier zone as a means of socially and politically fortifying contested territory alongside dyke-building. Execution sites, charters and dyke-building are thus all material dimensions and territorial expressions of the evolving judicial and military authority of Anglo-Saxon kings.

Another new and significant study relating to early medieval engineering has ramifications for understanding linear earthworks. Werther *et al.* (2020) explore the archaeological and historical evidence for Charlemagne's failed attempt at building a canal ('big ditch') linking the Rhine and Danube, arguing that this hydraulic work was inspired by the writings of Vitruvius. They report on archaeological investigations which reveal from dendrochronological dating that the canal was commissioned in AD792 with work beginning in the spring of AD793 and abandoned later that same year. This work has implications for understanding the speed and scale of early medieval engineering projects and the potential for further careful study of how linear earthworks interacted with, and manipulated, water courses. The methodological implications for the potential dating of linear earthworks in locations where waterlogged remains might be preserved is also apparent.

Offa's Dyke features in a recent survey of fifty 'things' which serves as a valuable introduction to students and general readers for early medieval Europe's material cultures

and monuments (Deliyannis *et al.* 2019). Furthermore, setting linear earthworks in a longer-term and broader context, Lindy Brady (2017), *Writing the Welsh Borderlands in Anglo-Saxon England*, deserves mention. Brady provides valuable literary perspective to the biography of the Welsh borderlands as a 'distinctive territory' of both conflict and peaceful interactions between peoples from the seventh to the eleventh centuries AD (Brady 2017: 168).

In addition to these recent works that feature frontiers and linear earthworks, it is important to reiterate the persistent neglect of linear earthworks in syntheses of early medieval history and archaeology. The most recent example in this tradition is Martin Carver's (2019) *Formative Britain: An Archaeology of Britain, Fifth to Eleventh Centuries*. Despite 140 pages dedicated to 'monumentality' as part of this far-ranging and distinctive archaeological survey, dykes are completely absent from the interpretation of the societies and landscapes of early medieval Britain, illustrating the need for ongoing detailed analyses but also new syntheses in later prehistoric and early historic archaeologies which incorporate them into discussions of not only military activity, but also landscape and society (see also Grigg 2018; Williams and Delaney 2019; Bell this volume).

Frontiers are not merely a challenge for how they are interpreted in the human past, but also their effects today. Therefore, these new studies of past frontiers are complemented by research on contemporary walls and barriers from the perspective of refugees and those living in their shadow over the longer term. Two key books have been published recently which are deserving of note, although neither fully integrates contemporary archaeologies with past linear monument constructions and uses (Hicks and Mallet 2019; McAtackney and McGuire 2020).

Contemporary administrative and political barriers can divide archaeological organisations and communities and their research into past frontiers. Regarding the archaeological professional and heritage sector themselves, Paul Belford (2020) focuses on the complex and fragmented ecosystems within which archaeology and cultural heritage which operate in the Anglo-Welsh borderlands, showing how administrative boundaries hinder rather than help archaeological understandings and practices at every turn. To combat this, he proposes a multi-agency cross-border initiative to foster and support what he argues is a 'cultural coherence' and ambiguity of the borderlands. Similar challenges face heritage agencies and organisations worldwide and combatting the imposition and back-projection of contemporary political and administrative divides onto the human past is a constant challenge.

This leads to a consideration of how public archaeology is conducted within present-day borderlands and interpret past frontiers and linear monuments. For the Anglo-Welsh borderlands, two publications deserve specific note. First, there is the recent collection of studies on *Old Oswestry Hillfort and its Landscape* (Malim and Nash 2020) which also considers Wat's Dyke as a component of both protests against housing development in the proximity of the hillfort, and as a further element of the rich heritage of north-

west Shropshire incorporated in the creation of a heritage ‘hub’ with archaeological, historical, heritage and natural conservation dimensions (Clarke *et al.* 2020; see also McMillan-Sloan and Williams 2020).

Finally, the publication of the proceedings of a conference organised, in part, under the auspices of the Offa’s Dyke Collaboratory, explores *Public Archaeologies of Frontiers and Borderlands* (Gleave *et al.* 2020). This first-ever collection dedicated to the public archaeology of past, present and fictional frontiers and borders, the collection includes multiple investigations of linear monuments worldwide as well as in the Anglo-Welsh borderlands. For example, Ray (2020 – see below) reviews the public archaeology of Offa’s Dyke, while further studies explore Wat’s Dyke’s heritage interpretation (Williams 2020a) and new initiatives for public engagement along its line (Swogger and Williams 2020). The power of walls in contemporary perceptions of frontiers is underpinned by reflections on fictional frontier works in this collection too.

Drawing this literature together, we can see that across periods and regions, there are innovative new thinking and methodological approaches to frontiers and borderlands, including their linear monuments, drawing upon expertise from across disciplines. In particular, taking landscape perspectives and incorporating fresh methodologies, studies are moving beyond either purely military or symbolic approaches to linear earthworks. Moreover, it is clear that the ODJ is part of a broader conversation linked to the legacies and traces of linear monuments in the contemporary world.

## The Offa’s Dyke Collaboratory in 2020

*The Research and Conservation Forum, 22 January 2020*

The Offa’s Dyke Collaboratory is now operating effectively to facilitate new conversations and research on linear monuments in the Anglo-Welsh borderlands and beyond. There were three principal public events organised by, and one significance conference involving the participation of, multiple convenors and members of the Offa’s Dyke Collaboratory during 2020. In this section we also want to note a new significant research project investigating linear monuments.

The first Collaboratory event of 2020 took place at Cardiff University, organised by Professor Keith Ray. Eighty heritage professionals and academics were invited to discuss future directions in the investigation, conservation and management of Offa’s Dyke, Wat’s Dyke and their related short dykes in the Anglo-Welsh borderlands. Opened by eminent early medieval archaeologist Dr Alan Lane (Figure 1a), the event comprised of presentations by convenors and members of the Collaboratory, including talks by local groups offering new insights regarding the line and significance of Offa’s Dyke in Flintshire and in Gloucestershire (Figure 1b). Among other talks, Professor Andrew Reynolds of UCL introduced a brand-new Leverhulme Trust-funded project





Figure 1: Four images from the Cardiff University Research and Conservation Forum, 22 January 2020. (a) top-left: Dr Alan Lane introducing the day; (b) top-right: Ray Bailey presenting about the northern stretches of Offa's Dyke; (c) below-left: David McGlade revealing the new art commissioned by the Offa's Dyke Association (see also front cover); (d) below-right: Ian Mckay discussing CoSMM (Photographs: Howard Williams, 2020)

(see below), Offa's Dyke Association chairman Dave McGlade addressed conservation issues for Offa's Dyke (Figure 1c) and Ian Mackay presented about the Community Stewardship of Mercian Monuments (CoSMM) initiative (Figure 1d). The event was closed with a discussion which flagged up the need for our work to be responsible and have integrity, in order to guard against extremist and political appropriations of the past. The more archaeologists and heritage professionals raise awareness of these ancient frontier works and borderlands, the more our expertise can be applied to effectively combat false narratives (see also Williams *et al.* 2020).

### *Special Offa, 4 April 2020*

Complementing the Cardiff event which had been aimed at heritage professionals and academics, a public conference was planned for 4 April 2020 on the theme 'Special Offa: Communities and Offa's Dyke'. It was organised together with Pauline Clarke (doctoral researcher, University of Chester) and Andy Heaton of the Trefonen Rural Protection Group. The schedule of a morning of talks by academics, heritage experts



and local enthusiasts was to be followed by a guided walk along Offa’s Dyke in and around Trefonen, Shropshire. The aim of the day was to explore different relationships between communities and Offa’s Dyke, past and present, from a range of perspectives and showcasing the latest research and thinking. The choice of Trefonen was not arbitrary: the village sits on Offa’s Dyke and has many local groups working hard to promote and bring benefit to the local area’s history and heritage.

However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, sadly the talks in

Figure 2: the advertisement for the digital Special Offa event by Archaeosoup Productions



Figure 3: looking north along Offa’s Dyke north of Trefonen (point 12 on the map in Figure 5) (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2020)



Figure 4: Howard Williams filming the Special Offa Tragical History Tour (Photograph: Kara Critchell, 2020)

the Village Hall and the walk along Offa's Dyke had to be reconsidered. Rather than cancel or postpone the event completely, it was decided to 'go digital' (Figure 2). To this end, *Special Offa* became perhaps the first public archaeology and heritage event to be delivered virtually during the 2020 pandemic lockdowns in the UK. Every confirmed speaker generously agreed to present via digital media, but the virtual format provided the opportunity of inviting many additional contributions. The results were presented via the Collaboratory's blog, and disseminated further via posts on the Collaboratory's Facebook and Twitter accounts. Furthermore, I created a YouTube playlist of the video contributions which included a video launching this second volume of the journal coinciding with the publication online of the first article (Malim).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the Trefonen Tragical History Tour of Offa's Dyke went ahead digitally as a series of videos posted on YouTube at points along Offa's Dyke and the Offa's Dyke Path within and around the village, including a well-preserved stretch of

Offa's Dyke to Trefonen's north (Figures 3 and 4). This virtual tour was supported by a map of the locations where the videos were shot (Figure 5).<sup>2</sup> Wrapping up the day, Archaeology Soup's YouTube channel hosted a special live event linked to the Special Offa conference (Figure 6).<sup>3</sup>

The result is that, despite the short notice, the extra work for all involved, and many additional technical challenges related to delivering this event during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, the Special Offa free public conference was a distinctive and experimental public-facing virtual showcase, with videos attracting from c. 100–450 views. As well as a legacy of digital resources for those wishing to learn more about Wat's Dyke, Offa's Dyke, and the landscapes of the Anglo-Welsh borderlands, Special Offa provided a viable template for future public events in Wales and elsewhere. A full round-up of the event collated posts from various social media platforms (Williams 2020b).

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xyNjhfgWCo&list=PLlB6PYW8nJ2FsFvXVmjYHVI0GRrICE-Ze>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3ZRURrTfuo&list=PLlB6PYW8nJ2F8Ewz9TMAJlznNWplfAPxts>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p39F0yFYPCk>



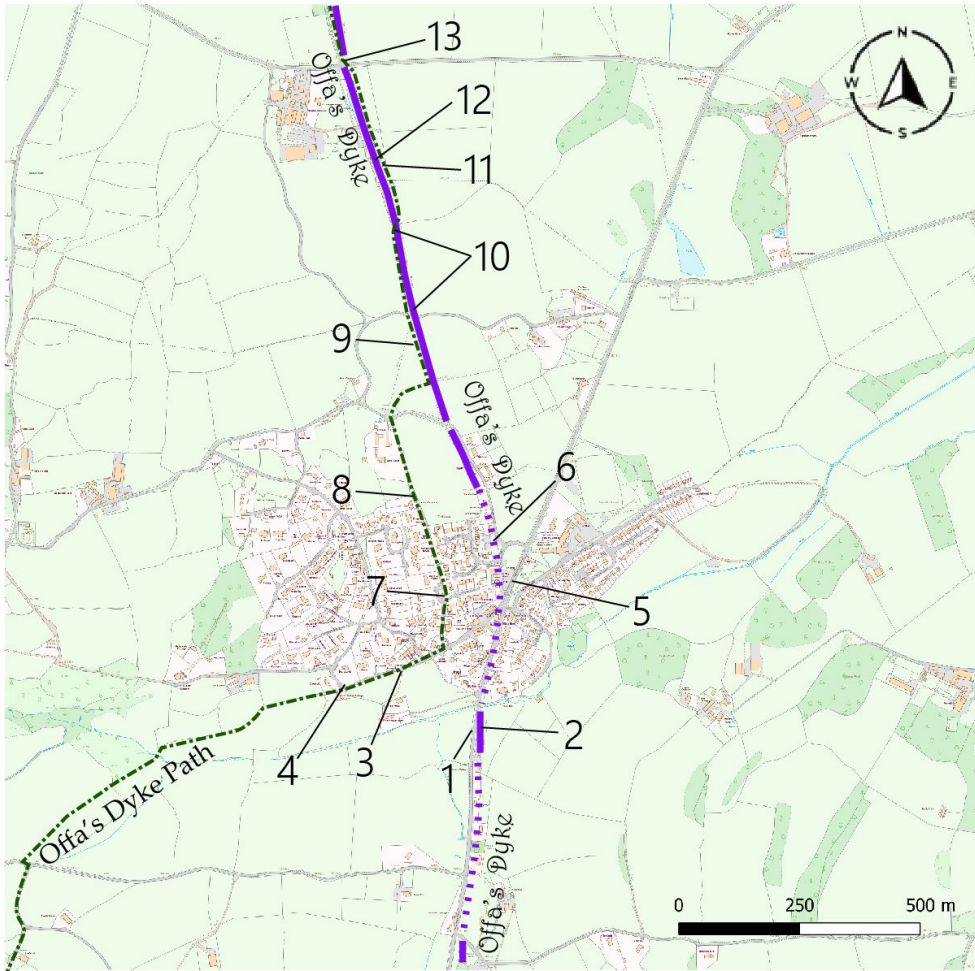


Figure 5: The Special Offa Tragical History Tour map (Designed by Liam Delaney and Howard Williams)

*The Borders of Early Medieval England conference, 11–12 July 2020*

While not organised by one of the Collaboratory co-convenors, this far-ranging conference organised by Dr Ben Guy brought together a host of historical views on early medieval frontiers in early medieval Britain. Exploring how borders operated and evolved prior to the Norman Conquest of AD 1066, the presentations addressed a host of themes and multiple Collaboratory members participated.<sup>4</sup>

*Establishing boundaries at the EAA, 26 August 2020*

The third Collaboratory-organised event in 2020 took place on 26 August 2020, the culmination of a year of planning resulted in a successful and far-reaching conference session

<sup>4</sup> <https://bordersconference.wordpress.com/>



Figure 6: Screen shot from the Special Offa livestream on the Archaeology Soup YouTube channel

exploring boundaries, frontiers and borderlands across Europe (Figure 7). Co-organised by Liam Delaney, Astrid Tummuscheit, Howard Williams and Frauke Witte, session 245 at the 26th (virtual) annual meeting of the European Association for Archaeologists (#s245, #EAA2020virtual) explored *Establishing Boundaries: Linear Earthworks, Frontiers and Borderlands in Early Medieval Europe* (part of session theme 2: From Limes to regions: the archaeology of borders, connections and roads).<sup>5</sup> This was a session sponsored by the Medieval Europe Research Community (MERC). The session demonstrated the ability of the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory to address European, and indeed global, archaeological themes linked to frontiers and borderlands past and present, their history, archaeology and heritage. Attracting a significant audience of c. 35 archaeologists, the EAA plan to release a video recording of the presentations and discussions in due course.

### *Linear earthworks in Britain*

A new project was launched by the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, and Durham University's Department of Archaeology titled 'Monumentality and Landscape: Linear Earthworks in Britain'. Funded by the Leverhulme Trust, the project aims to explore Iron Age and early medieval linear monuments in comparative terms by fresh analytical mapping, volumetric analysis using LiDAR data, plus new field investigations across the island of Britain.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> <https://submissions.e-a-a.org/ea2020/sessions/overview/preview.php?id=245>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.linear-earthworks.com/>



# CALL FOR PAPERS

## Session #245

### Establishing Boundaries: Linear Earthworks, Frontiers and Borderlands in Early Medieval Europe

#### Organisers:

Liam Delaney (University of Chester, UK)  
 Astrid Tummuscheit, (Archäologisches Landesamt Schleswig-Holstein, Germany)  
 Howard Williams (University of Chester, UK)  
 Frauke Witte (Museum Sønderjylland, Denmark)

In stark contrast to the sustained investigation of the Roman Empire's frontier zones, early medieval linear earthworks (including those called ramparts, dykes and walls) have been repeatedly marginalized in archaeological research. Even within investigations of early medieval territorial creation and organization, and further still for those earthworks of a monumental scale, such as Offa's Dyke, Wat's Dyke, Wansdyke and the Danevirke, their date, function and significance remain poorly understood. Yet these earthworks may have operated as the spines of early medieval frontiers and borderlands and their creation had ideological, political, social and economic dimensions. Their creation led, in some instances, to the establishment of the complex networks of surveillance and control, land divisions and territory formation which set the groundwork for the transformation of medieval communities and kingdoms. Even today, early medieval linear earthworks are deployed in political and cultural debates and discourses on migrations, ethnicity, frontiers and nationhood.

This MERC sponsored session aims to promote new research on early medieval frontier landscapes, including monumental linear earthworks, their landscape settings, afterlives and legacies, including their heritage management and interpretation. The session organisers invite contributions to address themes relating to linear earthworks and medieval frontiers and borderlands including:

- (i) their relation to post-Roman territorial regions;
- (ii) how they were components of frontier networks;
- (iii) the dating and biographies of these linear works;
- (iv) the role they played in the emergence and collapse of communities and kingdoms;
- (v) their role in interactions between different societies;
- (vi) what elements of broader ideological, political, cultural and economic geographies they represent;
- (vii) their contemporary role in modern cultural identity;
- (viii) the impact of heritage conservation, management and interpretation on these features;
- (ix) how they are viewed in contemporary media and popular culture.

Submit abstracts: <http://e-a-a.org/EAA2020>  
 Deadline: **13th February 2020**

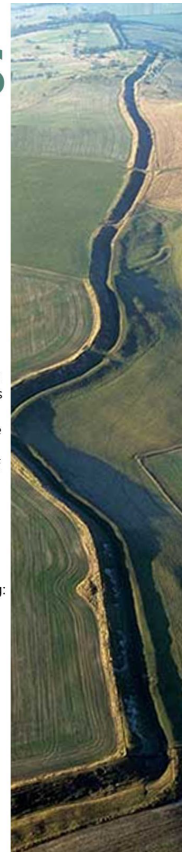


Figure 7: The EAA session poster by Liam Delaney

## Offa's Dyke and coronavirus

The relationship between ancient linear monuments and contemporary politics has become more prominent during 2020. Keith Ray (2020) notes the ongoing geopolitical relevance of Offa's Dyke for the soft border between England and Wales where no single topographical feature can stand in lieu as a descriptor. He used the Tory Prime Minister David Cameron's statement from 2014 to show how Offa's Dyke continues to be appropriated as ammunition to support particular political positions (Henry 2014). Like Hadrian's Wall (see Bonacchi *et al.* 2018: 187), debates have intensified since the IndyRef 2014 and Brexit (Brophy 2018). Ray sensed that the political 'weaponisation' of Offa's Dyke has 'increased many times over' (albeit not based on quantitative data) (Ray 2020: 128).

Ray (2020: 126–128) identifies that Offa's Dyke serves a purpose in colloquial speech, not as a specific historical reference. Instead, it defines a physical marker, popularly imagined to be built by an 'English' king to define a 'border' against the Welsh for the entire length of the land-border between England and Wales. This fits into a wider pattern identified by Bonacchi *et al.* (2018) of the mobilisation of the past in polemical



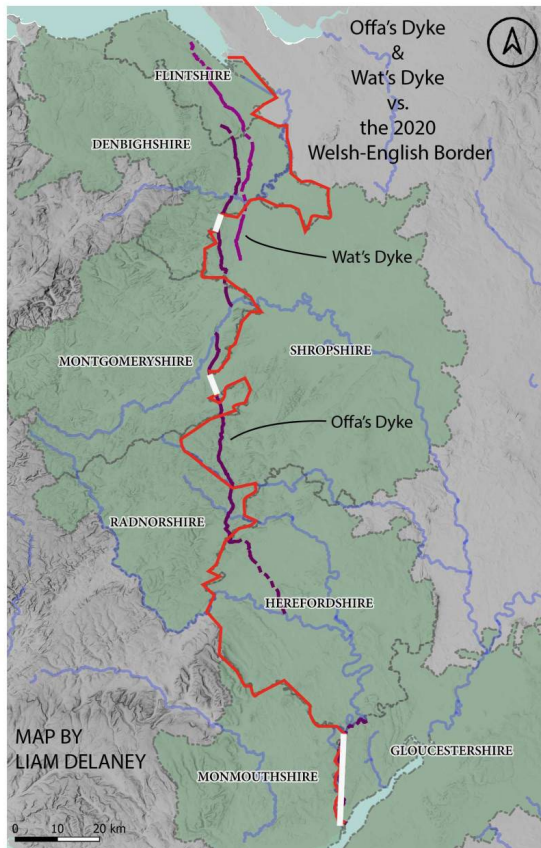


Figure 8: Map showing the relationship between the modern Anglo-Welsh border (red), Offa's Dyke (violet), Wat's Dyke (purple) and the small areas of coincidence between the border and Offa's Dyke (white) used in the Archaeodeath YouTube video and blog-post (Map by Liam Delaney)

discussions over Brexit since 2016. However, I would identify a threefold conflation of border, national trail and early medieval linear earthwork at play in current popular understandings when the phrase 'Offa's Dyke' is deployed.

The reality is that archaeologists still do not know whether Offa's Dyke was conceived of and built as a continuous line, whether it operated as a 'border' in a modern sense. Yet the surviving line of Offa's Dyke only follows the modern border for a small fraction of its surviving length (let alone the tinier fraction this would be had it actually run 'from sea to sea'). Ray (2020: 128) estimates 'less than one tenth' of Offa's Dyke coincides with the modern border. However, for those living far east and west of Offa's Dyke and not in the borderlands, such details must appear technicalities and only relevant to those who live in the borderlands itself. Therefore, 'Offa's Dyke' stands in proxy for a complex historical process of Anglo-Welsh

inequalities, rivalries and antagonisms as well as providing a geopolitical quasi-historical shorthand for the contemporary border. Yet for many locals and visitors alike, it also means the 'Offa's Dyke Path'; indeed as Ray (2020) has shown, there remain many confusions persist between the line of the Path which does run from 'sea to sea' and the Dyke which does not. Whether it was built as a colonial monument, over the centuries it certainly has become one, at least to some sections of the UK population.

Ray concludes by expressing concern over the exploitation of Offa's Dyke in relation to Brexit, but also a broader breakdown of consensus regarding 'Britishness' too (Gardner 2017). Conversely, Wat's Dyke is clearly too obscure and only makes sense for the northern part of the frontier, and so seems to have received no comparable attention (see Williams 2020a). Indeed, on 15 Nov 2019, Plaid Cymru leader Adam Price, in a positive response to the accusations that a 'hard border' with English would be the result if Welsh

independence transpired, stated: ‘Wales has never had a hard border, there was one attempt by a seventh-century Saxon King called Offa: built a Dyke and tried to keep the Welsh out. Didn’t work’ (see Williams 2020c). While getting the century of presumed construction wrong, Price was mobilising the popular nationalist perspective that Offa built the dyke against the Welsh to assure listeners that a ‘hard border’ is neither desirable nor feasible as a future dimension of Welsh independence. Yet unlike subsequent commentators, he did not conflate Offa with the ‘English’ or ‘England’ today (Williams 2020c).

Despite this long tradition of conflating Offa’s Dyke with the Anglo-Welsh border, few could have anticipated how the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns would not only see a dramatic impact on the heritage and tourism sectors, including the Offa’s Dyke Association and the Offa’s Dyke Path, but would also witness Offa’s Dyke becoming itself mobilised in political and popular discourse. Often through attempts at humour, but also in aggressive and chauvinistic ways, in discussions of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown the Dyke has been repeatedly evoked. Specifically, hard-border perception and militaristic associations are made explicit in these evocations, thus equating and conflating past and present divisions between the ‘Welsh’ and the ‘English’ via references to the ancient linear earthwork.

The context for this was the ongoing, fluctuating and increasingly conflicting positions of political administrations of a Conservative-run Westminster administration and the Welsh Labour-domination of the Senedd Cymru in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Early on, from March 2020, tourists and day-visitors poured into rural districts of Wales despite lockdown restrictions, causing an outcry and demands for ‘Offa’s Dyke’ to be fortified/rebuilt. As the lockdown persisted into May 2020, Liam Delaney identified the problem and a blog-post and YouTube video was composed in response (Figure 8) (Williams 2020c; see also Jonson 2020; Morgan 2020; Smith *et al.* 2020). While recognising that it was often said in jest, and even by academics alongside politicians, celebrities and the wider public, I pointed out that Offa’s Dyke never was a border between ‘England’ and ‘Wales’ (neither having existed in the eighth century, and conflating intermittently surviving monument with both the Offa’s Dyke Path and the Anglo-Welsh border is geographically illiterate and irresponsible in contemporary political discourse (Williams 2020c).

Tensions rose sharply again, however, when local areas of Wales were on lockdown again in September and early October 2020, especially in the context that English visitors were able to visit from areas with high infection rates whilst those in local lockdown areas in Wales could not do the same. Further still, when Wales entered its two-week firebreak national lockdown on 24 October and England refused to follow similar measures, further jokes and bile were posted online in which Offa’s Dyke was again deployed to refer to the border being ‘rebuilt’ or ‘fortified’, as well as castigating the First Minister, Mark Drakeford for imposing allegedly unfair restrictions and ‘declaring war’ on the economy (e.g. Lynn 2020). The *Mail Online*, for example, featured photographs of the Offa’s Dyke Path and signs to the Offa’s Dyke Centre in discussing how the border town of Knighton was divided by the new restrictions (Weston and Martin 2020) (Figure 8). This situation



Figure 9: COVID frontiers: (above-left) the pandemic lockdown signs in Knighton outside the Offa's Dyke Centre and (above-right) the door of the Centre (Photographs by David McGlade, 2020)

was then flipped, with Wales coming out of its two-week lockdown and England going back in to a four-week national lockdown through November. In this context, some commented that Offa's Dyke need to be 'reversed' as the Welsh might attempt to leave.

The full and significant impact on tourism and the economy of the Anglo-Welsh borderlands has yet to be fully evaluated, with many sections of the Offa's Dyke Path, and the Offa's Dyke Centre, closed to visitors (Figure 9). Equally, the public use of Offa's Dyke to articulate frustrations and dissent regarding the lockdown regulations is a study deserving of systematic analysis of social media posts. How Offa's Dyke and Hadrian's Wall are being perceived and deployed in popular and political discourse is a focus of ongoing attention through big data analysis (see Bonacchi *et al.* 2018; Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2019). Still, the impression is clear from a brief survey of Twitter posts mentioning 'Offa's Dyke' that myths of both conquest by, and resistance to, the Anglo-Saxons of the past and the English of today, are being mobilised through the Dyke (cf. Bonacchi *et al.* 2018). Who knows what coming weeks and months will bring in UK politics but these instances show that Ray is only partly correct in saying that Offa's Dyke is a popular shorthand for the Anglo-Welsh soft border. In addition, its past military and ethno-linguistic dimensions are explicitly used within English and Welsh nationalistic discourse and the latent potential of it being reinstated as a hard border, and rebuilt as a military frontier, either by its original 'English' creators, or 'reversed' by the 'Welsh'. For example, Welsh journalist reacting to a column by right-wing writer Toby Young tweeted on 22 October 2020: 'Fortify Offa's



Dyke NOW'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, season 4 of *The Last Kingdom*, first aired in early 2020, had already presented a fictional early tenth-century context in which the famous Hywel Dda proposes to do just what present-day commentators are suggesting and rebuild and reverse Offa's Dyke (Williams 2020d). This popular cultural reference and wider political mobilisations of the monument in the context of COVID-19 reveal the place of Offa's Dyke in a wider public consciousness as the border and a zone of confusion and dispute between both England and Wales, ostensibly between Cardiff and Westminster. The Dyke thus mediates a sense of threat felt between both English and Welsh people, albeit often framed in humour, in which the concept of a hard or even fortified frontier drawing upon a 1100-year-old precedent is a seductive fantasy. While Ray is surely correct that the local scale of community engagement provides the rejoinder to nationalistic and chauvinistic discourses (Ray 2020: 145), academics must work to responsibly counter the repeated appropriations of the past to serve contemporary political ends (e.g. Brophy 2018; Williams *et al.* 2020).

If Offa's Dyke has emerged as an ongoing weaponised tool for popular dissonance, in the heartland of Mercia, the Anglo-Saxon period and its material culture has taken on a positive dimension during the pandemic lockdown. Evoked to encourage support for pandemic social distancing measures, Tamworth Borough Council devised two 'shield yourself' posters. One depicted shields emblazoned with the yellow cross on blue background of Tamworth's coat of arms, held up by stick figures to articulate the 2m rule. Meanwhile, a replica Sutton Hoo mask is shown against a (now) commonplace fabric one with the humorous motto: 'You don't have to be *exactly* like Saxons.... This will be fine' (Figure 10). This light-hearted message reminds us that evocations of a martial early medieval past need not always be negative, and early medieval linear earthworks too might be deployed as positive forces in today's society.



Figure 10: COVID-19 posters encouraging social distancing by Tamworth Borough Council (reproduced with permission)

<sup>7</sup> [https://twitter.com/simon\\_price01/status/1319237695219093504](https://twitter.com/simon_price01/status/1319237695219093504)



Figure II: The statue of Offa at Powis Castle: an Anglo-Saxon ruler in a colonial context (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2019)

## Dykes and the colonial countryside

Britain's colonial landscape has been the focus of intense and passionate debate during 2020 in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests. From the toppling of Colston's statue in Bristol (e.g. Figs 2020; Hicks 2020; Olusoga 2020; Siddique and Skopeliti 2020), to the protests and counter-protests in London, the UK debates rapidly spread far beyond public statuary and monuments to consider how the colonial legacy is recognised in the British landscape and what steps should be taken to highlight and explore often overtly obscured and hidden traces of slavery and colonial connections in the countryside.<sup>8</sup>

The National Trust are one of the organisations that have gone beyond passive recognition of the Black Lives Matter movement and

have enacted initiatives to reflect and develop engagement with the colonial legacies of a selection of the properties in their care, having commissioned an interim report focused on the slaving links in the histories of many of their country houses (Huxtable *et al.* 2020). Despite largely spurious outrage by some politicians and sections of the British media (Bush 2020), this is a welcome and far-reaching report that speaks a pervasive theme for the study and heritage conservation, management and interpretation of the historic landscape. The publication focuses on the historical personages who once built and occupied country houses and their economic interests and politics, as well as the presence and representation of Black people. These are all necessary and essential foci for tackling the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism more broadly. Yet, to date, the estates of the National Trust properties, and the town and country landscapes in which they are situated, have yet to be tackled in this exploration of colonial connections and legacies. Moreover, the broader backcloth of ancient and medieval colonialisms in relation to country houses has yet to be addressed in any systematic fashion (Williams 2020f, 2020g; see also Gosden 2004).

<sup>8</sup> E.g. see the Legacies of British Slave Ownership project: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>





Figure 12: Looking north along a much-denuded line of Offa's Dyke beside the National Trust car park at Chirk Castle. The Dyke is unmarked and without heritage interpretation, yet every car or coach-driven visitor to Chirk Castle crosses the monument to reach the car park, and then most pedestrian visitors will walk over the Dyke past the adventure playground (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2016)

In the context of this discussion of linear monuments, it is therefore important to recognise that colonialism in the modern era can be set against deep-time ancient and medieval processes of colonialism in the British landscape. One manifestation of these are linear frontier works built by the Roman Empire, Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall. Yet, the great linear earthworks constructed by the Mercian kingdom in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, Wat's Dyke and Offa's Dyke, can also be conceptualised as colonial monuments, implementing and articulating the control of the landscape through hegemonic power (Ray and Bapty 2016) and thus requiring post-colonial interpretations in the contemporary world. Dykes were not only frontier and military constructions, but also instruments of colonial and colonising strategies inherent in their design, affordances and legacies down to the present day (Ray 2020). Arguably, engaging in fresh ways with early medieval dykes, therefore, is a further fruitful basis for decolonising the countryside through their reinterpretation alongside efforts to reevaluate the colonial impact of the modern era.

This is important since these ancient monuments not only continue to frame ethnonationalist discourses in recent centuries (Bonacchi *et al.* 2018), but also there are



Figure 13: Erddig Hall National Trust property looking south-south-east towards the house from the line of Wat's Dyke which formerly ran along the ridge-top but is now lost due to landscaping (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2016)

multiple heritage sites and landscapes where ancient, medieval and modern colonialisms intersect and, arguably, interact, whether by happenstance or active consideration, shedding light on histories of slavery and colonial exploitation. For the Anglo-Welsh borderlands, for example, it is possible to consider the colonial legacy of Roman, Anglo-Saxon and later medieval settlements and peoples alongside the modern history of the city of Chester and its environs. Likewise, the immediate proximities between Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke and multiple country estates with great houses with imperial and colonial connections include the National Trust properties of Powis Castle and Chirk Castle to Erddig Hall (Huxtable *et al.* 2020: 107, 109). At each, the connections between the modern colonial era and the early medieval linear earthworks in their proximity are striking yet completely overlooked in present-day heritage interpretation.

Powis Castle (Powys) contains the collections of Robert Clive (of India) and his son became 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Powis (Huxtable *et al.* 2020: 46). A medieval borderlands castle in origin, the residences has spectacular views overlooking the Severn valley with Offa's Dyke crossing the valley slopes to the east. King Offa is one of two Anglo-Saxon monarchs (the other being King Edgar) whose statues frame the main northern entrance; the early medieval past is thus materially and spatially connected to the residence's colonial legacy (Williams 2019) (Figure 11).





Figure 14: A monument of resistance to Mercian colonisation? The early ninth-century cross now known as the Pillar of Eliseg, survives in fragments and re-positioned on top of the Early Bronze Age burial mound close to Valle Crucis Abbey, Denbighshire (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2020)

Originally a strategically sited thirteenth-century castle, the National Trust property of Chirk (Wrexham) was home to an investor in privateers and the sugar trade, Sir Thomas Myddleton (Huxtable *et al.* 2020: 49). Moreover, the castle is located adjacent to the surviving line of Offa's Dyke. The monument is large but denuded on the Chirk estate but dramatic in scale as it descends south of the castle into the Glyn Ceiriog. However, there are no heritage interpretation panels or details in the visitor guide book about the linear earthwork. This is despite the fact that almost every visitor walks and/or drives over the monument at least twice during their visit; the Dyke is disconnected from the successive stories of colonialism to be found in the castle and its landscape (Williams 2016a) (Figure 12).

There is also an absence of interpretation for Wat's Dyke at Erddig Hall where the Mercian frontier work ran through the estate and was later incorporated into an Anglo-Norman motte-and-bailey castle (see also Belford 2019). Erddig Hall had been built by Joshua Edisbury, one of whose main benefactors was Elihu Yale. Yale made his fortune with the East Indian Company (Huxtable *et al.* 2020: 107; Williams 2020g). Yet, neither existing heritage interpretation nor the recent report recognise the slaving links of Yale



Figure 15: Wat's Dyke at Soughton Farm, looking south-east (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2020)

to the wider landscape including his former residence at Plas Grono or his tomb in nearby Wrexham. Equally, there is no recognised connection between these country house and the earlier phases of colonialism revealed by the late eighth-/early ninth-century dyke and the late eleventh-century castle (Figure 13).

These case studies reveal intersections between the colonial countryside's ancient, medieval and modern dimensions which need to be tackled alongside the specific historical personages with slaving links. Others surely exist linking the Anglo-Welsh borderlands and early medieval linear earthworks to the legacy of colonialism and slavery (e.g. Williams 2020e). Such instances illustrate the work still to be done, not only by the National Trust but also other heritage organisations and practitioners aspiring to rethink how best to conserve, manage and interpret the British landscape through a decolonising lens.

I contend that recognising and explaining walls and borders past and present, not only the traces of recent divisions (e.g. McWilliams 2001) but also those of the distant past, must be a key ingredient in such endeavours to explore movement and memory, domination and resistance, imperialism and colonialism, in the landscape. This involves considering broader alterities of power and hegemony but also subaltern stories in the landscape (e.g. Murrieta-Flores and Williams 2017; cf. Ray and Bapty 2016), so that monuments such as

the Pillar of Eliseg, inscribed to commemorate the dynasty of Powys in close proximity to Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke, can be conceptualised as material components of the complex biographies of conflict and collaboration in the borderlands from the Early Middle Ages to the present day in relation to both Mercian linear monuments (Figure 14). In doing so, specific sections of preserved linear monument, such as Wat's Dyke at Soughton Farm, Northop (Figure 15), cannot be neglected without a narrative for local communities and visitors. We must strive to contextualise these monuments in relation to the wider inhabited historic environment in which identities and senses of place are configured and negotiated (see Williams this volume).

## Reviewing volume 2

This context amplifies the necessity of an open-access, digital and peer-reviewed venue for the publication of academic work on frontiers and borderlands in the human past and in today's world. For the *Offa's Dyke Journal*, our remit set for volume 1 was to re-publish classic reports that shed light on linear monuments and their relationships with frontiers and borderlands that, while published elsewhere, have remained difficult to access and thus were sometimes overlooked or ignored (A. Williams 2019; Worthington Hill 2019). Moreover, volume 1 set the precedent for the dissemination of the latest fieldwork, analyses and syntheses from across differing disciplines exploring linear earthwork's functions and significance in the human past (Belford 2019; Seaman 2019; Tummuscheit and Witte 2019), and in today's world (Swogger 2019) extending far beyond Offa's Dyke. Indeed, as our Introductory essay made crystal clear and evidenced by only two of the six articles tackling Offa's Dyke directly (Williams and Delaney 2019), the title *Offa's Dyke Journal* was explicitly used to create a focus and a tone for the journal's content, not to set this one linear monument as the journal's primary subject.

This second volume repeats and extends this broader remit in the study of linear monuments and their landscape contexts past and present. The volume opens with Mark Bell's original article, building off his 2012 book-length survey (Bell 2012). Focusing on two sets of linear earthworks in southern Britain, Bell shows how they have been tenacious chimera and despite being long debunked and re-dated to later prehistory, they continue to conjoin and perpetuate popular accounts of the Early Middle Ages. Yet despite Bell's lead, and other discussions of antiquarian and early archaeological accounts of linear monuments (e.g. Ray and Bapty 2016; Ray 2020; Williams 2019), there remains a wider dearth of in-depth critical historiographies of linear monuments. The Offa's Dyke Collaboratory has identified this as a required principal focus of ongoing research by historians of antiquarianism and archaeology.

Linked to challenges of dating and interpreting linear monuments, Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews writes a definitive critique of key pseudoarchaeological narratives about Britain's linear earthworks. For while there is a demonstrable global bias away in the application of pseudoarchaeological theories to non-European sites and monuments,



Wansdyke and Offa's Dyke in particular have attracted occasional fantastical narratives attributing them as 'prehistoric canals', the deeds of Roman emperors or sub-Roman 'Arthurian' military stop-lines. Crucially, Fitzpatrick-Matthews also identifies the dangers of elevating provisional dating and tentative interpretations within mainstream academic discourse to the status of unequivocal facts. In combination, Bell and Fitzpatrick-Matthews reveal how the difficulties within defining the dates, extents and contexts of linear earthworks make it difficult to debunk old-fashioned conceptions surrounding them and renders them ripe for use and misuse for dubious and spurious pseudoarchaeological narratives. This is the very reason that the aforementioned select linear monuments equated with modern borders – Hadrian's Wall and Offa's Dyke – are particularly powerful and dangerous within contemporary political discourses.

This leads us to the heritage interpretation of linear earthworks in the contemporary landscape. Doyle White focuses on Kent's Faesten Dic, an undated linear earthwork which has been afforded interpretation panels and sculpture which promotes an old-fashioned interpretation as a military defence demarcating Saxon Kent from Roman London. Doyle White reviews the (ambiguous) evidence for its date and function and proceeds to explore the difficulties and political context of the recent narrative for the monument.

Exploring the material cultures and landscapes of contemporary landscapes in relation to ancient linear earthworks is a theme taken up by Williams, exploring naming practices in the Welsh Marches associated with Wat's Dyke and Offa's Dyke. Williams argues for both the unrecognised significance of naming practices for materialising monuments hiding in plain sight and constituting an ingrained element of borderland identities constituted by them, but also the untapped potential of these place-names for mobilising localities to engage with these monuments' histories and significances in today's world (see also Williams 2020a).

The collection concludes with two 'classic revisited' articles. First there is David Hill's 1991 survey of the Offa's Dyke Project's fieldwork on both Wat's Dyke and Offa's Dyke in Flintshire, and then a re-publication of Tim Malim's 2007 consideration of Grim's Ditch and Wansdyke. Individually, in combination, and in juxtaposition with the original articles, these pieces have enduring value for students and scholars seeking to interpret Britain's later prehistoric and early historic linear earthworks.

## Conclusion

Set against a broader backcloth of growing ethno-nationalism and xenophobia in the UK, manifest in the debates surrounding both IndyRef 2014 and the Brexit process, and the divisive 2016–2020 Trump administration in the USA, I am writing this article on Saturday 7 November 2020 when Biden/Harris have been projected by global and US media as winners of the US Presidential election. On the aftermath of both the Black Lives Matter movement and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, this is a momentous day.



Likewise, one of the very foundations of Trump's original 2016 presidential campaign and ongoing rhetoric, the US-México 'Trump's Wall', can now be firmly regarded as fictitious, with only a short stretch of new wall built where none had existed before, even if existing border walls have been replaced over hundreds of miles. In short, the border has been fortified but a distinctive 'Trump's Wall' is little more than rhetoric (Rodgers and Bailey 2020).

Yet barriers, ancient and modern, do not evaporate with violent regime changes or democratic elections. For the UK, the Brexit process has encouraged a new tide of antagonisms within and beyond the UK, building off (among other things) the 2014 IndyRef process and the 2015 Refugee Crisis and its aftermath. In this political environment, the material remains of Britain's past have been politicised in all manner of fashions (see Brophy 2020), set against a broader strategies of militarised and hard borders, as well as localised community wall-building, during the late twentieth-/early twenty-first-century (McAttackney and McGuire 2020).

Having provided something of the unique context the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory finds itself in 2020, specifically the Black Lives Matter movement and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 which have enhanced and sharpened the popular debate and political mobilisation of already contested linear earthworks and their perceived relationship with contemporary borders, I argue that the academic study of linear monuments and their frontier and borderland contexts has never been more crucial. Wall-building and wall-uses dominate our popular consciousness like never before within these global circumstances and this has directly impacted upon both Hadrian's Wall for ongoing Scottish-English relations, and for Welsh-English relations attention has intensified around Offa's Dyke. Indeed, his mobilisation of ancient monuments is particularly uniquely powerful and distinctive: this pair of ancient monuments materialise modern tensions and discourses in a fashion unparalleled elsewhere in the Britain, Ireland and across Europe.

Following Spring's (2015: 322–327) projection, the neglect of walls and linear monuments for critical and scholarly attention is long overdue systematic redressing across disciplines. Reflecting on the enduring mythology of the Maginot Line as a failed line of defence and a broader mentality of fixed barriers as negative and futile, exacerbated by the legacy of the 'too successful' semi-permanent trenches of the First World War, Spring recognises scholars' 'unconscious horror of linear obstacles' (Spring 2015: 324). This builds upon a cluster of theoretical, methodological and practical factors behind this which have worked against the serious study of linear monuments past and present (see also McGuire 2020).

Spring's (2015) advocacy of a shared primacy of the military function of pre-modern linear barriers (see also Grigg 2018) and his naturalisation of them as a common human response to a similar set of problems throughout human history should be moderated. Still, the need to rectify the neglect and biases he rightly specifies is fair and clear. Specifically, together with the contemporary archaeological work of McAttackney and McGuire's

(2020) collection and the public archaeology perspectives of Gleave *et al.* (2020), the articles published here together demonstrate the timely and necessary role of the *Offa's Dyke Journal* in collating and disseminating academic research across disciplinary divides and to wider publics (e.g. Clarke *et al.* 2020; Swogger and Williams 2020).

To reflect the importance of ancient borders as not a means of valorising military works, but celebrating the redundancy of borders and barriers past, I end with Frank Noble's words, written in his guide to the Offa's Dyke Path he was instrumental in creating. In reflecting on the official opening of the Path on 10 July 1971, Noble reminds us of the positive power of ancient, now defunct, frontiers and borderlands to reflect on new ways to construct shared pasts and new connections, rather than misguided attempts of creating new fashions to divide us.

At a time when Britain's entry into the Common Market was being negotiated, the largest frontier earthwork dating back to the period when the present nations of Europe had their origins, was being put to peaceful use. As a precedent for the adaption of redundant European frontiers – preserving national identities without provoking conflicts – it may have come at a remarkably apposite moment. Twelve hundred years lie behind the Dyke. There is no excuse for looking short-sightedly along this Path (Noble 1981: 13).

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Howard Williams, Professor of Archaeology, Department of History and Archaeology, University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester CH1 4BJ  
Email: [howard.williams@chester.ac.uk](mailto:howard.williams@chester.ac.uk)