

## WANSDYKE<sup>1</sup>

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After the two Roman Walls between Solway and Tyne and between Forth and Clyde, and after one post-Roman structure—Offa's famous Dyke from Dee to Wye—the most important of all British boundary-marks is undoubtedly the Wansdyke, running for some eighty miles from near Portbury on the Severn Estuary to the foot of Inkpen Beacon, on the boundary between Berkshire and Hampshire. It is of special interest to us during the present meeting of the Society, because we have crossed it several times, often unwittingly I fear, during the course of our recent excursions. Wansdyke has been a source of controversy and a centre of hypothesis for four hundred years, ever since John Leland made the first guess at its origin, as he rode across the uplands of Wiltshire during the reign of Henry VIII. As you all know, it consists of a ditch and mound, with the ditch on the north side always, as if constructed to face a northern invader, running over hill and dale, with a general direction west and east, though it sometimes, especially in its Somersetshire section, diverges a good deal from that general direction, and makes curves and salients towards other quarters of the compass. At its highest, where best preserved, it rises to 30 feet: but stretches of this loftiness are rare.

In the western or Somersetshire part of its course the Dyke pursues a somewhat curving line, three to five miles south of the Avon, leaving all the important villages on the south bank well without it, such as Easton-in-Gordano, Long Ashton, Keynsham, Twerton, etc., and depriving Somersetshire, therefore, of a good many thousand acres of fertile valley land. But, just above Bath, Wansdyke comes down much closer to the river, so that Bath, Bathampton and Bathford are

<sup>1</sup> An address read at Bath during the Summer Meeting, 1930.

only a mile or so outside it. From Bathford, however, it suddenly becomes almost exactly straight in its course, and runs through Wiltshire in an accurate line for thirty miles, having Box, Corsham, Laycock, Calne, Avebury and Marlborough well to the north of it, and Bradford, Melksham, Devizes and Pewsey, as far to the south of it. It passes through no single town or village, and the only one very near it is the vanished

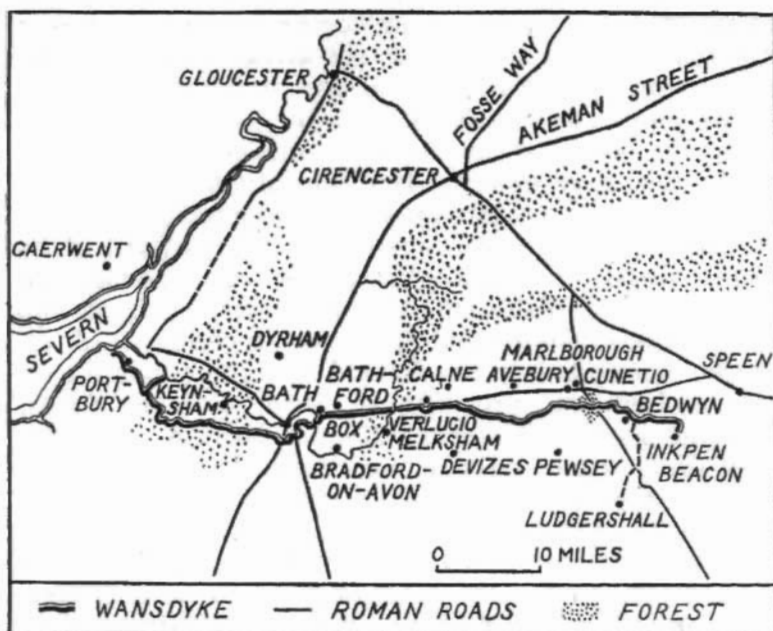


FIG. 1. SKETCH-MAP OF THE WANSDYKE

Roman station of Verlucio, which it avoids. It charges right through the forest of Savernake, which in all ages must have been both a considerable military obstacle and a natural boundary, and on emerging from this woodland swerves a little south, but soon comes to a definite end under the Inken Beacon. Efforts to trace a continuation of it either into Berkshire, or (turning at a sharp angle) into mid-Wiltshire fail entirely. Some suggested fragments of a subsidiary ditch, falling out of the main Wansdyke near Bedwyn and trending south towards Ludgershall,

seem imaginary, though several Wiltshire antiquaries have tried to link them into a line. They are not continuous, as Wansdyke always is, and seem to be isolated field banks and enclosures, connected only into a system by the eye of faith. Obviously boundaries east of Inkpen Beacon cannot have concerned both of the two states whose limits Wansdyke marks.

The main puzzle in Wansdyke is that it corresponds to no recorded boundary in British history, and that it often seems to sin against the obvious conveniences of geography. We could easily understand a line drawn along the summit of Mendip, or a line drawn along the course of the Avon, or one following the lie of the Berkshire downs. But Wansdyke does none of these: it seems not infrequently to laugh at geographical suggestions, and to pursue a wayward path of its own. Least of all does it follow the known civil boundaries of historical regional units, such as the line between Wessex and Mercia in Anglo-Saxon days, or the line between the Belgae and their neighbours the Dobuni in pre-Roman and Roman times. Ptolemy in his account of Roman Britain distinctly says that *Aquae Calidae*, i.e. Bath, belonged to the Belgae, like Ilchester or Winchester, and not to the Dobuni like Cirencester. But Wansdyke leaves Bath north of its line, throwing it into the same unit as Cirencester, not south of its line as one would have expected. We have to look out for some period when a state-boundary, marked by an earthwork of tremendous labour, must have run across the known limits of historical regional units. I can only find one such period—a sufficiently dark one as it chances.

I need hardly point out that Wansdyke cannot have been a purely military work, intended to be held by force of arms along its whole length. No army such as a British tribe or a Saxon king could raise would have been large enough to man eighty continuous miles of mere ditch and earth-bank. The enemy would always have been able to make feints at one or more places, and break through at his real objective point. For Wansdyke is not like the much shorter Roman

walls of the north, with their solid mile-castles and their enormous permanent garrison of regular troops. It is obviously a state-boundary, intended to delimit exactly the ground belonging to two separate units, so that there should be no doubt as to whose men were trespassing on the territory of the other, if they were found north or south of the great dyke.

Before the days of scientific spade-work antiquaries used to make guesses as to what particular date Wansdyke might belong to. Leland, the first to guess, suggested that it might have been, at some time or other, a boundary between Mercia and Wessex. But there was no period, after the date at which the very composite kingdom of Mercia came into existence, when the northern third of Wiltshire belonged to the Midland Kingdom. Mercian kings repeatedly discomfited the men of Wessex in the seventh and eighth centuries, and took from them Chiltern land beyond Dorchester-on-Thames, round which the primitive West-Saxon Kingdom had its origin, so far as we can discover. But if Christian kings such as Wulfhere or Ethelbald of Mercia had ever annexed a great cantle of Wessex, and run a tremendous boundary-dyke across it, that structure would not have got the name of the heathen god Wotan, but (like Offa's Dyke) would have been named after the builder. The name Woden's Dyke is a testimony to great antiquity, and must have been bestowed in the heathen period.

Obviously, before the spade was put in, Wansdyke might be ascribed by antiquaries to one of four periods. It might be either (1) pre-Roman, a Celtic tribal boundary, or (2) Roman, or (3) belonging to the period between the break-up of the Roman province of Britain, and the Saxon occupation, or else (4) Anglo-Saxon. The first, second and fourth theories have been widely held at one time or another, but I rather fancy that I am the first to call attention to the superior claim of the third—viz. (speaking roughly) the sixth century.

The accepted theory in the nineteenth century was that Wansdyke, like Bokerley Dyke and Grim's Dyke, was Celtic and pre-Roman. Guest called them

all 'Belgic Ditches' and opined that they marked the limit of the Belgic invasion of Britain, which took place not so very long before the days of Julius Caesar. Putting out of consideration the all-important fact that Wansdyke excludes Bath, which was certainly Belgic, there has been a conclusive stopper placed upon all the pre-Roman hypotheses. When General Pitt-Rivers, in the end of the nineteenth century, dug out Bokerly Dyke and Grim's Dyke he found in their earth fragments of unmistakable Roman red pottery, and iron objects of obvious Roman date. And as Mr. St. George Gray mentioned to us last Tuesday, red 'Samian' ware was found by himself and others in lower strata of Wansdyke, while in one long stretch the Dyke lies over the line of a Roman road, and must therefore have been posterior to it.

Pitt-Rivers therefore drew a cautious deduction from his diggings. The dykes could not be pre-Roman, but they might conceivably have been cast up during the last days of the Roman period, when the Picts and Scots had broken into the province, or by the Romano-Britons after the Saxon invasion had begun, or by Wessex kings as a protection against Mercia. He did not make a definite decision in favour of any of the three views.

I note that among recent writers on Wansdyke, Mr. Albany Major was rather taken with the idea that the structure might be late-Roman, while Major Godsall—that most ingenious framer of hypotheses—ascribed it to Ceawlin, the West Saxon, constructing after a conquest of Somerset (for which there is absolutely no historical authority) a wall to serve as his base of operation for the conquest of the lower Severn Valley. This seems absolutely ruled out, not only by its military improbability, but by the fact that Wiltshire and Somersetshire show no traces of early Saxon antiquities of the heathen period in their barrows and cemeteries, as do Hampshire or the Thames Valley.

It has been acutely remarked by Mr. Edward Burrow that it is impossible that the Britons can have thrown up Wansdyke as a protection against the Saxons, because it was obviously designed, as a whole,



to defend the south against the north, and there never was a time when all along its line the Briton was on the south and the Saxon along the north—when the Saxon can have held Gloucester, Cirencester and Bath, while the Briton was still in occupation of all southern and central Wiltshire. This is perfectly true—undoubtedly the conquest of the lower Severn Valley came after that of Wiltshire.

But there is another explanation of Wansdyke, falling into the same dim sixth century, which seems to me perfectly feasible, and which ascribes the work to British hands. I may now proceed to develop it. I mean that it was thrown up as the boundary line between two of the Celtic kingdoms which arose in Western Britain, after the Saxon invasions had met with that temporary check which certainly befell them somewhere about the year 500, after that dim but certainly existent 'battle of Mount Badon,' on which Gildas, our only authority of a contemporary sort for that period, lays so much stress, remembering not only its decisive military importance, but the fact that it coincided with his own birth.

Gildas has a bad reputation among lovers of well-constructed and coherent history, because his invaluable historical facts, the observations of a contemporary, are inextricably mixed up with tedious 'Jeremiads' about the decay of worth and virtue, interminable and often inappropriate screeds from the Old Testament, and virulent declamation against the kings and all the governing classes of the Britain of his own day. But he is a contemporary, and the only one, describing the state of affairs in the middle of the sixth century. And we find from him that the Saxon invasion, which had desolated all Eastern Britain, had been checked while he was an infant, and had made no progress for forty years, while Western Britain had fallen apart into five kingdoms, always at civil war with each other, whose rulers he proceeds to chastise with his pen in the most unmeasured language—language so uniformly vituperative that one is bound to suspect it of a certain exaggeration. That Gildas himself had retired overseas to Brittany, the newly settled Britannia Minor—is

rendered all the more probable by the violence of his reprobation of the kings. Monarchs of the sort that he describes would surely have visited such a purveyor of insults with tangible demonstration of their wrath.

Now Gildas names (and abuses) five kings of south-western Britain, with two of whom we are specially concerned. The dominions of the other three lie too far from Wansdyke to interest us.

Constantine was ruling the kingdom which Gildas already calls Damnonia—the name by which it was to be known for some centuries. He is cursed for the sacrilegious murder of his two nephews, who had taken sanctuary under the protection of an abbot, as well as for other crimes. His neighbour in the narrative is Aurelius Caninus, who must almost certainly, from his name, have been the son or grandson of that great Aurelius Ambrosius, 'the last of the Romans,' whom Gildas records to have been the saviour of the wreck of Roman Britain. That this Aurelius was not an upstart or a usurper, but descended from a house which had already been ruling for some time, is sufficiently indicated by the fact that Gildas reproaches him with having degenerated from the virtues of his ancestors, and bids him reflect on the unhappy ends of his kinsmen in recent times. In spite of these warnings Aurelius is accused of being a stirrer up of wars, and a curse to his neighbours. Now we have just before been told that since the time of the battle of Mount Badon wars with the Saxons had ceased, a limit having been set to their progress full forty years back. Therefore the wars in which Aurelius involved himself must have been wars with other British princes, and we are told that he had been successful in them—though not to his credit. 'Dost thou not hate, as a deadly serpent, the peace of thy country, and thirsting unjustly after civil wars and frequent spoil, shut the kingdom of heaven against thine own soul? Unless thou shalt be quickly changed in mind (as the Psalmist says) the Lord our King shall speedily brandish his sword against thee, who hath said by the mouth of his prophets "I will kill or I will

spare : I will strike or I will heal, and there is no one who can deliver himself out of my hand.'"

After dealing with Aurelius Caninus Gildas goes on to censure other princes—Vortiporius of South Wales, and Cuneglassus—undoubtedly to be identified with the Cinglas son of Owain and great grandson of Cunedda, who occurs in the Welsh genealogia. His realm must be sought in the medieval Powys—the land of the upper Severn and mid-Wales. He is (like Aurelius) accused of loving civil war—but also, which seems to have provoked Gildas even more, of having married his divorced wife's sister, and also of 'persecuting the saints,' i.e. apparently molesting the clergy. The last in the list of reprobate kings is Maglocunus (or Maelgwyn) of North Wales—*insalaris draco*, the dragon of Anglesea. More paragraphs are devoted to his ill deeds than even to those of Constantine or Aurelius. He died in the great 'Yellow Plague' of 547—and this date settles the fact that Gildas' reproaches of him must have been written not later than that year.

But with Maelgwyn, Vortiporius, and Cuneglassus we are not concerned—they were too far from Wansdyke to engage our attention. It is on Aurelius that we must concentrate our powers of observation.

Where was the realm of Aurelius? Obviously it lay between Damnonia, where Constantine was reigning, and which almost certainly included not only Devon and Cornwall—the region to which the name was afterwards restricted—but Somerset and Wilts, and on the other side Demetia, i.e. South Wales, whose king, Vortiporius, is next in the list of censured monarchs to Aurelius Caninus. What lies between Damnonia and South Wales?—obviously the Valley of the lower Severn, where three Roman-British cities of importance were still alive in 577—Gloucester, Cirencester and Bath. All of these are recorded as having been sacked in that year, when the West Saxons, under Ceawlin resumed the aggression which had been for forty years suspended. I take it that the kingdom of Aurelius must have extended over the territories of these three Romano-British cities, and



probably over much wider stretches, both northward into the Midlands, and westward at least as far as the Wye. For 'Demetia' never included Glamorganshire, Monmouthshire or Herefordshire, the old land of the Silures. And probably Caerleon, that great city whose ruins surprised Asser in a later age, was as alive as Cirencester or Gloucester in and about 540, when Gildas was writing.

Now, if there was a king of an aggressive cast in power on the lower Severn, and addicted to civil wars with other British princes, he must undoubtedly have fought the Damnonians and the Demetians, his neighbours on each side—and probably other people also. And here we get, I think, the explanation of Wansdyke. It is a boundary instituted by the ruler of the lower Severn Valley, after successful wars with the Damnonian king of the south-west. The border-line exactly fits—the owner of Bath would hold the south bank of the Avon, up to the line of Wansdyke. The owner of Cirencester would certainly possess all the northern part of what was one day to be Wiltshire—up to the line of Wansdyke again. Whether in Roman days the territories of those two cities corresponded to the limit indicated by Wansdyke we are of course unable to say; it is quite possible, but not necessary.

Anyhow, we are forced to conceive of the Damnonian king, after wars with Aurelius Caninus, marking out the, perhaps, shrunken limits of his kingdom, by throwing up this great boundary dyke—undoubtedly after having been beaten by Aurelius and having made peace with him on terms of submission, and with an agreement for the exact delineation of frontiers. For Wansdyke, as I pointed out before, can never have been a military work intended to be held all along its front. How many soldiers would be required to garrison a wall 80 miles long, against an enemy who could select his point of offensive wherever he might please, while the defender would have to hold every yard well watched?

It is probable that the other Wiltshire ditches, in the south-east corner of the county, Grim's Dyke, etc., were thrown up to mark the limit of the Saxon frontier.

But, as I have already said, Wansdyke can never have indicated any historical line between Saxon and Briton.

When the ruin of the West-British kingdoms did come, thirty years after Gildas wrote, at Ceawlin's invasion of A.D. 577, the attack would seem to have been delivered well north of Wansdyke, across the extreme northern section of Wiltshire, since the decisive battle was fought at Deorham, on the hills north of Bath. There fell three British kings—Condidan, the first is, of course, Candidianus, probably the son of Aurelius Caninus whom Gildas abused, and ruler of the kingdom of the lower Severn. With him, according to the Chronicle, fell two other kings, Conmail—which I suppose would be Latinized into Cunomaglus—and Farinmail—whose Celtic form is Ffernvael. Unfortunately it is impossible to identify these two unfortunate monarchs—though Ffernvael is a well-known name among the genealogies of several south-Welsh royal houses, but none of its bearers can be pinned down to 577. And Cunomaglus is a perfectly good and possible Celtic royal appellation. I suspect these princes to have come from beyond the Severn, rather than to have been Damnonians, for in the British south-west old Roman names like Constantine and Gerontius went on for a longer time than in Wales.

When Ceawlin had slain the three kings, the Chronicle informs us that he took three cities—Bath, Gloucester and Cirencester. The conquered lands were settled up by the body of immigrants who afterwards called themselves the Hwiccas. After this extension of Saxon territory, Wansdyke would have no meaning, since its line across Wiltshire would not form a dividing line between two states.

If a concluding proof be needed to show that the great earth-work was in existence even before the West Saxons broke into west Britain, I think it may be drawn from the name which they gave it. In their ignorance of who built it they called it after their ancestral god, as a maker of things marvellous. That Woden was made its sponsor is a sufficient proof that

the conquest was made before Christianity was introduced into Wessex in the second quarter of the seventh century. As a variant appellation the Wiltshire rustics of the Middle Ages sometimes called it the 'Devil's Dyke,' because Woden and all his kindred came to be considered evil spirits. A delightful sample of folk-etymology told that it got its name 'because the Devil built it all on a Wednesday.' Apparently the framer of this derivation was not even aware that Wednesday was called after a forgotten heathen god, though he knew that Wansdyke was reckoned a miraculous and superhuman work, and could, therefore, be ascribed to that same evil power which had the credit for so many 'Devil's Bridges' in various parts of Europe—not to speak of Devil's Causeways, Devil's Punch Bowls, Devil's Arrows, and similar inexplicable abnormalities.

I obtained a great deal of my knowledge of the detail of the structure of Wansdyke from the handsome volume published a few years ago by Mr. Edward Burrow, as the result of persistent pilgrimages on the part of himself and his friend Mr. Albany Major; their admirable photographs and numerous maps make comprehension of Wansdyke wonderfully clear. Mr. Burrow called the book *The Mystery of Wansdyke*: and no doubt it has been a source of puzzlement to three centuries of antiquaries. But I am inclined to think that the 'Mystery' need not be a mystery any longer, and that we may safely ascribe the origin of the greatest of dykes to two bellicose Celtic-Roman princes of the first half of the sixth century, without much possibility of going wrong.