

WANSDYKE IN THE WOODS

An unfinished Roman military earthwork for a non-event?

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Introduction

'Archaeologists who have dealt with Wansdyke have acted generally on the assumption that it is a single work constructed at one time with one object' (Major and Burrow 1926, 135). My purpose, heavily trailed in the sub-title, is to suggest that Wansdyke, *sensu* East Wansdyke in Wiltshire alone, is indeed a single work constructed at one time with one object; and, further, that it was a military work in Roman mode, intended to face a military threat from the north. In arriving at that judgement independently, I am nevertheless only reviving a century-old idea, for Pitt-Rivers (1892, 25-6, 30) was clearly of similar mind and indeed saw close similarities between Wansdyke and Hadrian's Wall.

My addition to the continuing debate about Wansdyke is the observation that part of it at least was unfinished at the time construction work stopped, and that the work was never completed. The stoppage, I suggest, occurred because the anticipated military event did not happen. And because the threat evaporated, the work was not completed.

Wansdyke is unfinished in West Woods, in Overton and Fyfield parishes. They are the 'Woods' of my title, woods which existed in late and post-Roman times (Fowler 2000). Here we are concerned with but 4.5 kms. of unfashionable dyke within them. We largely ignore, therefore, East Wansdyke in all its grandeur to the west on the downs, and its on the whole rather pathetic and puzzlingly discontinuous remains to the east in and beyond present-day Savernake Forest. Pitt-Rivers himself, a military man, observed that 'the rampart diminishes in size, or is wanting, in places where forests may have existed, and that it increases in places where forests are unlikely to have grown.' (1892, quoted by Major and Burrow, 1926, 152). But our point is that in West Woods the bank is lower, the dyke smaller, not because it was intentionally built smaller or because it is in the woods, but because it was not finished.

My observations to this effect have arisen in recent fieldwork on and along a monument which I honestly thought had been 'done' and consequently needed little attention during my landscape study of Fyfield and West Overton parishes (Fowler and Blackwell 1998; Fowler 2000). The latter contains the academic background and much of the detail behind this discussion, but is not repeatedly referenced here in what is meant to be a readable essay. This paper, originally written over Xmas 1998, is the result of a little exercise in 1997-8, a spin-off from the larger project.

OS maps apart, the only worthwhile publications specifically on East Wansdyke are Hoare (1821), Pitt-Rivers (1892), Crawford (1953), Fox and Fox (1958), Clark (1958) and Green (1971). 'Worthwhile' means publications which brought forward new primary evidence, as distinct from re-assessments of existing evidence.

East Wansdyke: new evidence from fieldwork in the woods

Our fieldwork has produced new evidence in West Woods in three respects:

1. On the nature of the bank;
2. On the nature of the ditch;
3. On the nature of the gateways.

We first treat them separately, working from west to east in each case. Our description can luxuriate in impressionistic terms like 'fairly low' because the earthwork is quite well-recorded in plan and profile throughout, notably on OS large-scale maps and in Fox and Fox 1958, 10-16, 20-25 (we refer as appropriate to their profiles as 'Fox D.7' etc.). We accept such records overall, and specify the particular points which we find inadequately recorded and those with which we disagree.

1. The bank

Wansdyke's impressive bank continues eastwards off the downs into Woden's Dene, where there may have been an original gateway (*below*), and up to Shaw Farm (Fox D.6). Were it not for its covering of beech trees, it would be as well-known here as the length immediately to the west. After Shaw Farm, however, it never really regains that downland stature. It is first mangled by the site of Shaw Manor Farm: called 'Homestead' in 1734 (WRO 1553/109, the earliest map of this area), the Farm consisted of four buildings. The two largest – house and barn? – were actually on the bank. Wansdyke was also affected by the comings and goings to Shaw village, now deserted, immediately to its south. An ancient and important track passed through it by the Farm on its way south from the

Marlborough Downs to the Vale of Pewsey (and *vice versa*). At the Wansdyke crossing itself, however, there is no clear evidence of an original gateway.

The bank re-emerges east of the Shaw disturbance as an upstanding earthwork (Fox D.7) to pass downhill to a narrow combe, where there is a break which continues a short distance up the eastern slope. The 1734 map shows Wansdyke as continuous over this length between 'Great Wood' and 'The Triangle', a cleared area, on the north and 'Church Lands' on the south. For some 400 m. as far east as the eastern corner of 'The Triangle', Wansdyke's ditch is the ancient boundary between Shaw (now West Overton Civil Parish) and Alton Priors (Huish CP), a rare co-incidence as Bonney has observed and ruminated upon (1966, 1972). The likelihood in this case is that the earthwork briefly followed, for convenience, the line of an existing estate boundary across a small dry valley before heading north east as it climbed again on to a ridge at the 220 m contour. Here it turns with the contour through 55° to cross the ridge and start descending again across the contours to a track coming up from Hursley Bottom. This pattern of arrangements is closely mirrored 2 km. to the north east at Daffy Copse and Clatford Bottom. The break in Wansdyke at this Hursley Bottom track is original and was called 'Edgar's gate' in the 10th century.

The bank restarts quite prominently east of Edgar's gate (Pl. I, left hand side) but soon decreases up the slope until it fades out and stops just before reaching the 'Stone' marked on the OS 6 inch map at SU 15086501 (Pl. II). The stone itself is a round-headed, late 19th century boundary stone inscribed 'H.M.' (Henry Meux). In the gap before the bank starts again two tracks elide. One is another track climbing southwards from Hursley Bottom; the other is the modern farm track hitherto in front of the ditch but here switching to run eastwards behind the bank. The bank itself is stepped forward, its new departure point on the eastern side of the gap being in line with the ditch coming up from the west (fig. 3).

For the whole of the next stretch the bank is even lower than it appears, because it is overlaid by a boundary bank along its length (Pl. III). Such banks, boundaries of individual woods and copses which make up the silvicultural mosaic of West Woods, are common archaeological features in these woods. Here, the boundary is of the southern edge of what was generally Wells Copse and specifically Brickkiln Copse (*see below*) and Strawberry Ground.

The bank of Wansdyke here is actually a series of dumps which have joined together in line but still show their own tails fanned out at the back. Each heap is 2-3 m. in width but not more than 50-75 cms. high – hardly a mighty earthwork.

In front of them is a berm, the shoulder of the original ground surface on which they were dumped, back from the quarries which were the source of their material. The copse bank too very slightly undulates as it runs from heap to heap. Collectively, these heaps look as if they await another one or two heightenings and a final smoothing before the bank of which they were meant to be a part would have been completed. The bank, however, rises and expands as it approaches the next break so that, here apparently completed, it is up to 1.75 m. high as it becomes the western side of Titferth's gate (*below*).

The bank continues north eastwards at its grandest in the woods (Fowler and Blackwell 1998, colour Pl. 27) – but it is still less than 2 m. high above the present ground surface when viewed from behind. But it does seem to have been completed, at least over a length of some 450 m. More or less coincidentally with being cut by a modern forestry track (but see gate vii below), the bank reverts to a lower and unfinished appearance. The Foxes provide no profile along the whole of this length and the Burrow water colour (no. 77) is a fanciful exaggeration. By the time we reach the parish boundary with Fyfield, the bank is barely a metre high.

The parish boundary is a low bank with a shallow ditch on its east, running north west-south east to cross Wansdyke more or less at a right angle. The whole is barely more than 2 m. in width, with each of its two components not more than 30-40 cms. in relief. The role of this earthwork as the parish boundary is, however, secondary, for here we enter that part of Fyfield which was added to the parish in 1896 when it absorbed Clatford Park; and the earthwork is indeed the Park pale: hence the ditch on its east, the *inside* of the pale. And of course the ditch cuts through the top of Wansdyke's bank, because it is later, and then clearly proceeds southwards. Its course is mapped on OS maps as a continuous curving boundary looping round the south and east sides of Clatford Park Farm. We meet it again *below*.

Within a few metres of the banks' conjunction, Wansdyke's bank fades away and stops with a slight inward curve, arguably a last heap of soil. Then there is a significant difference between Wansdyke as mapped and the evidence on the ground, though the OS 1889 6 inch map, and curiously the recent Explorer 157 1: 25000, show the situation correctly. Wansdyke is missing for some 70 m. Across the gap from bank end to bank end runs a slight scarp; it falls c. 30 cms. towards where the ditch should be but is not. It looks like the marking out line for the earthwork, here not covered over because work stopped before any ditch was dug. The gap might be accidental, where the bank had simply not been built

when construction work stopped. On the other hand, it may be deliberate, for example a gap left for the insertion of a gate. Either way, it indicates incompleteness when work was abandoned.

When the bank begins again, it does so with a few low humps behind the line of the scarp. Then it becomes a proper bank again, across the line of the scarp, but it is never more than 1 m. high at the back until the corner of Daffy Copse where, its most north easterly point in the woods, it was completed. By then the earthwork overall is once more at its woodland best, so that the sharp south easterly turn of 70° is impressive. This would have been particularly so had a view of it from below in Clatford Bottom been clear of trees, as indeed was the case in medieval times. Even now in woodland, it seems like a salient deliberately jutting out over the lower ground, a facade meant to be seen. The most was made of military necessity, however, for the earthwork had to be turned south east so as not to lose height to the north east with the natural slope. So Wansdyke was turned to cross the combe side at right angles to its slope and then straightened up to cross the combe itself almost at a right angle. It is not difficult to recognise a military mind at work. And yet, all the way down the slope from the salient to the edge of the woodland north west of Clatford Park Farm, Wansdyke is unfinished (Pl. IV).

Briefly clear of woodland as it crosses Clatford Bottom, the dyke is momentarily quite impressive on the west side of the road (Pl. VI, essentially the same view as Burrow's accurate rendition No. 78); but the bank does not appear to start again until some 200 m. up the eastern slope. Even then the bank is minimal to begin with, though it may be larger beneath a superincumbent lynchet (Pl. VII). After that, all the way up past Short Oak Copse on the north to the north west corner of the former Gore Copse on the south, the bank is continuous, a metre or so high at its rear and perched back from what is visibly the front edge of a berm marked by a break in slope (Pl. VIII). At the south east corner of the modern Short Oak Copse, the bank is destroyed in two places by two major holloways. It has been completely removed by the more easterly, a deeply scored track which has ascended from the north as a holloway diagonally across the slope from Clatford Bottom. It continues southwards in a tunnel of trees as a 'sunken way' towards Clench Common.

Along the western side of that holloway runs Clatford Park pale which sweeps round from the south to use Wansdyke as its boundary, now also Fyfield parish boundary, all the way back to that impressive salient in Daffy Wood. For the whole of that length, the earthwork, more specifically its ditch, is co-incident with

the parish boundary between Fyfield and Preshute Civil Parishes. This is not historically significant in this case in terms of ancient estates, for Fyfield's medieval boundary did not come as far south as Wansdyke. It was Clatford Park, a creation of Elizabethan times, that followed the earthwork as part of its northern boundary. When the Park was added to Fyfield parish in 1896, therefore, it was Wansdyke, alias the Park pale, which became part of the south eastern boundary of the new civil parish.

2. The ditch

Wansdyke's ditch is always on the north; but the ditch is no more continuous through the woods than is the bank. In some places, it is now impossible to be certain visually whether the ditch existed but has been filled in, or whether it was never dug; but that is a matter that nowadays could easily and speedily be resolved geophysically. Here the reader can assume that, except at the points commented on, the ditch is present throughout, normally in these woods c. 6-7 m. in width and only a metre or so deep below the present land surface outside it (Fox D.7, D.8).

In fact, it crosses Woden's Dene and approaches Shaw in its downland guise, some 3 m. and 5.25 m. below, respectively, the outer ground surface and the bank top (Fox D.6). In the woods, between gates iv and v, uphill of Edgar's gate the ditch becomes progressively shallower going up the slope, then narrows, then comes to a rounded end as a continuous feature, and then its line is continued first by a quarry pit and then by two contiguous pits (Pl. II; fig. 2; *above*; *below*). Then it stops altogether, just short of the end of the bank, which has correspondingly decreased. On the east side of the break, the ditch recommences, stepped forward from its line to the west; but it is now once more different. Its original end may well have been obliterated, for dug into it is a deep pit with baked clay debris around its northern rim and signs of structure immediately north again. This is presumably the brick kiln of 'Brickkiln Copse'; two buildings are positioned here in 1889 (OS 6 inch map). Further east, however, the ditch continues to be larger than might be expected from the small size of the bank (*above*), and it contains further, clearly secondary, pits as it passes along the south side of much-pitted woodland (Pl. IV). Its line is again staggered either side of Tifferth's gate (fig. 2).

After a good run where it seems to have been completed, the ditch is then obliterated by modern works on a forest ride following a much older track ('*readdan gate*' *below*). Immediately east of the Fyfield parish boundary/park pale, the ditch becomes shallower, ending in two pits, apparently quarry-pits.

There is no ditch at all for the 70 m. gap where the bank is missing. Thereafter, though mechanically infilled where crossed by a wide, forestry ride at one point, the ditch picks up its 'normal', woodland proportions as far as the salient in Daffy Copse; but thereafter to just above the floor of Clatford Bottom, it is unfinished (Pl. V).

At the complex intersection of Wansdyke, tracks and parish boundary at the south east corner of Short Oak Copse, the ditch comes up the slope from the west (Pl. VIII) and firmly stops in an original, rounded end. Its restart is obliterated by a later, very large, deep quarry (see 'gateway x' *below*).

3. The gateways

Documentary evidence for four 'geats' through Wansdyke in the 10th century does not, of course, necessarily make them original, for the earthwork was by then four hundred and more years old. Nevertheless, here we propose that they were original gateways. In addition, we bring into consideration six other breaks which might also have been original features of the woodland Wansdyke. The ten possible original gateways through Wansdyke on this stretch are:

- i. *Woddes geat*: a gate referred to in a spurious charter (S272, discussed by Fox and Fox 1958, 14, following Grundy, unaware of the charter's status) (SU 12746523)
- ii. Old Shaw on the way from Boreham to Huish (SU 13546534)
- iii. 'Triangle gate', a name invented here, following a 1734 field name, for an otherwise unnamed possible break across a minor combe (SU 14236535)
- iv. *Eadgardes gete*: a 'charter gate' (AD 972, West Overton, S784) on the way from Hursley Bottom to Huish (SU 14766547)
- v. 'Meux gate', a name invented here for a nameless break beside the 'HM' boundary stone on the track from Hursley Bottom to Heath Barn (SU 15076555)
- vi. *Titferthes geat*: a 'charter gate' (AD 939, East Overton, S449) on the way from Hursley Bottom to Oare Hill and Martinsell hillfort (SU 15406568)
- vii. '*Readdan gate*', a name invented here for a nameless break in the earthwork on the line of another old through-route, from Fyfield to Oare Hill, using a word from a descriptive phrase in the 9th century Oare charter (S424; SU 15676604)
- viii. 'Broadlet gate', an name invented here, taken from an adjacent block of woodland on the south, for an original, 70 m. gap in the earthwork (SU 15926629)

- ix. 'Clatford Park gate', a name invented here for a possible, undocumented gate at the junction between Wansdyke and the track along Clatford Bottom from Clatford to Oare Hill and Martinsell hillfort (SU 165662)
- x. 'Short Oak gate', an invented name to avoid making the assumption that this break, largely modern, is the site of the Oare charter's 'cripel' gate (S424), though the location is at least approximately correct, on the track through Wansdyke from Clatford Bottom to Clench Common and Martinsell hillfort (SU 16896642)

None of these are certainly original gateways; even if some are original, none are definitely built gateways, in the sense that there were such through Hadrian's Wall; and all may simply be gaps, original or otherwise. Four, however, provide primary field evidence of original structure, the criterion on which judgement is initially made in the following list.

- i. *Woddes geat* occurs in a spurious charter but that does not alter the likelihood of there having been an original break in Wansdyke, gated or otherwise, at this junction between the Dyke and an ancient trackway along the bottom of Woden's Dene. There is no alternative location in the bottom or on the sides of the combe so we are happy to follow the Foxes (1958, fig. 28) even though no archaeological evidence is visible to help decide whether this break is original or not. The Foxes incline to suggest a late Saxon break had been made to accommodate the track (1958, 14); we are minded to suggest Wansdyke was built to control access along such a track (*below*) and would therefore expect the *geat* to be an original feature, perhaps with a built gateway. Probably original.
- ii. The evidence on the ground at 'Old Shaw' on the way from Boreham to Huish is too confused to be useful. The case for an entrance here rests almost entirely on the judgement that the former north-south trackway passing through Wansdyke here was likely to have been in existence before Wansdyke was built (an idea elaborated in Fowler 1998). Existence unproven.
- iii. 'Triangle gate' is merely a suggestion, based on the gap there today and the similarity on a smaller scale with the probable gates at Woden's Dene and Clatford Bottom (nos. i and x). The bank and ditch come down into a small combe from the west, but no earthwork crosses the combe floor or starts up the slope to the east. Wansdyke is, however, shown as continuous here on the 1734 map. No ancient through-way up

thiscombe is known, though a local track from Hursley Bottom is mapped. Dubious.

- iv. *Eadgardes gete* is located reasonably securely by our reading of the West and East Overton charters (S784, S449), despite differing from the Foxes (1958, fig. 12) who were following Crawford (MS 6 inch map). The area of the *gete* is far more than a simple gap through the bank (fig.2a). The eastern ditch terminal projected across the entrance to narrow an original causeway to path-width, giving on to a way through between the bank terminals which was itself oblique and narrow (Pl. I). In front, the slight remains of earthworks are now badly-damaged by farm traffic at a busy cross-tracks in the woods at a low point which collects water and is nearly always muddy. Two outworks are nevertheless discernible, with a suspicion that the outer and larger one continued obliquely across the entrance nearer or actually to the outer lip of the western ditch (that area is cut up by the east-west track *cf.* gate vi). The shorter, inner bank looks as if it was intended to funnel traffic obliquely into the 'gateway' from the north east; the general effect anyway seems to have been to deflect to one side or both any direct approach up the track head-on to a gateway. The position is right at the head of a narrowcombe, a natural line for a through-track which is again thought to be of considerable antiquity (the last centuries BC is suggested in Fowler 2000, chapter 16). That track continues southwards as one of the main through-routes to Pewsey Vale and beyond, initially as a fairly straight and apparently made-up road. Charter S449 refers to this length of track as *stanihtan weg*, 'stoney way.' Markedly firm and dry even in wet weather, it is the southerly continuation of a through-track called 'ridgeway' high on northern Overton Down in the same charter (and so called the 'Overton Ridgeway' in Fowler 2000). The name, position, context and nature of this gap in Wansdyke make it almost certain that it is original and very probably a built gate of military character.
- v. The 'Meux gate' is only some 300 m east and uphill of Edgar's gate, so another original proper gate here would seem unlikely; yet both bank and ditch coming up that slope diminish and then stop (fig. 3). The existing track along the front of the dyke passes through that gap, continuing eastwards behind it. The bank and ditch east of the gap are stepped forward. In two important respects, then – the stepped and staggered relationships of bank and ditch on each of its sides, - the plan

of this gap (fig. 3) resembles features of the two named gates to west and east (fig. 2). The intended gate, with military characteristics in plan, was clearly unfinished.

- vi. *Titferth's geat*, another confident identification, is flanked by the two most impressive lengths of Wansdyke in the woods. Although damaged by modern usage, it is the best-preserved of the claimants to be an original gate. Its plan (fig. 2b) shows its main characteristics: a change in Wansdyke's alignment; staggered and stepped earthwork terminals, with the ditch ends on both sides deliberately stopping short of the bank ends (or the bank ends deliberately overshooting the ditch ends on both sides); and a curved outwork, strongly indicating an intention to control passage coming from the north. No direct approach would have been possible and entrants would have been forced to pass through on in effect a path between the outwork and the end of the eastern ditch. The plan, and presumably the intention, were very similar to that at Edgar's gate (fig. 2a); and indeed, one suspects that the plan at the latter, had it been better preserved, would have looked even more similar to that at Titferth's gate. And, as at Edgar's gate, these arrangements, interpreted as of an original, built military gate, were across an alternative track from Hursley Bottom on what was essentially the same, ancient through-route between the Marlborough Downs and the Vale of Pewsey. Almost certainly an original built gate.
- vii. '*Readdan gate*' is another intersection of Wansdyke and an ancient track, this time one from Fyfield past its animal pound and sheep-cote called *Attele* to *readdan sloh*, a point towards the south east corner of the East Overton charter (S449). This track is another branch of the great north-south 'Ridgeway route' (Fowler 2000, fig. 16.4). The charter bounds in fact pass just to the west of this break, then run south west along Wansdyke to Titferth's gate. It is the boundary of the Oare charter (S424) that may well have followed the track northwards from *readdan sloh* to our putative gate, turning at Wansdyke to the east or, expressed probably more correctly, then turning east along a line subsequently followed by Wansdyke. The 'gate' now looks like a completely modern flattening of the earthwork to facilitate recreational use of a bridleway. Merely a suggestion, but see *below*; unproven.
- viii. 'Broadlet gate' is another suggestion only, occasioned by a genuine and apparently original 70 m. gap in Wansdyke. The dyke may merely have been left unfinished but it is conceivable that the gap was left deliberately for the insertion of a gateway which was never constructed. The point is not on any known track. Hypothetical, but see *below*.

- ix. 'Clatford Park gate': no unequivocal evidence of a gate exists here but a break in the bank and ditch of Wansdyke seems to have occurred where it is intersected in Clatford Bottom by another ancient, north-south track. The track is now tarmacadamed. On its west, bank and ditch come right up to the road (Pl. VI), but on the east, where the ground starts rising immediately, there is no ditch and no clear sign of a bank for as much as 100 m. Then its presence becomes apparent more as a lynchet than a free-standing bank (Pl. VII). The position and situation are very similar to those at *Woddes geat*, but no name exists here. Probable original gap but gate unproven.
- x. 'Short Oak gate' at the south east corner of the eponymous Copse is probably in the right location for the 'geat' referred to in the Oare charter (S424), but the area is markedly disfigured and the evidence for an actual gate slight. The two best pieces of evidence are that, here again, is an intersection between Wansdyke and another main branch of the north-south through-route and, secondly, the western ditch stops in a clearly-defined rounded terminal. There are no outworks. Probably an original break, possibly a built gate.

Interpretation

Construction

Our primary field evidence allows the following proposition as to how Wansdyke was built through the woods in five constructional stages (fig. 4):

1. The precise line of the bank was chosen using military criteria concerning topography, field of view especially overlooking and along combes, and the defensive qualities of the situation at intersections with combes and, above all, with existing tracks of the north-south Ridgeway through-route; and then marking out this line with a scarp dug into the topsoil indicating the line for the back of the bank.
2. Material was scraped up from a line of separate, shallow scoops and dumped at the back of the intended bank, over the marking out line. The process was repeated, making small quarries along the line of what was to become the ditch while dumping material from them in heaps along the back of what was to become the bank.
3. As the quarries enlarged, they joined up, at least near the ground surface, enabling the embryonic ditch to be deepened as a series of irregular pits producing the material for larger heaps which were also joining up

4. Penultimately the ditch-pits were joined up by knocking down the 'walls' between them and then by deepening the ditch to produce enough material for a continuous, if still somewhat humpy, bank.
5. Finally, the ditch was finished off at its required depth as a continuous feature and its sides trimmed so that they were at the required angle; and the bank was smoothed off with a continuous slope into the ditch at the front and down to ground level at the rear. Whether a palisade was added to the bank top is unknown, for no excavation of Wansdyke in the woods has taken place. The existence of a palisade would help explain the inadequacy of Wansdyke's earthworks as a barrier even where it was completed in the woods.

Such a sequence independently inferred from newly-observed field evidence is close to that proposed by Green (1971), based on his excavated evidence to both west and east of our length in the Woods. Little good evidence exists, however, from excavation or experiment to calculate accurately the sort of logistical input necessary to build Wansdyke in the woods as we have described it. Nevertheless, we have the original data from the Overton Down experimental earthwork study as modified by Atkinson and utilised by Renfrew and Startin (all references in Bell *et al.* 1995, 14.16). In addition, an engineer's estimate is available for the Vallum behind Hadrian's Wall (Breeze and Dobson 1987, 81). The imponderables are still too great for any certainty but the various approaches all point to an effort of the order of 20-30 days by 1000 men being required to build Wansdyke in the woods – had it been completed. The hint that the work could have been done in that sort of time, say between hay-making and cereal harvest or in September between harvest and ploughing, gives the wooded earthwork a human dimension while emphasising the scale of the undertaking across the downs.

Gateways

Ways through Wansdyke occurred at predetermined places, some of them with actual gates. As on Hadrian's Wall, for example, gates might have been built as free-standing structures, to which the earthwork later abutted (*cf.* Breeze and Dobson 1987, 46 in relation to Portgate; 70 in relation to milecastles and turrets). On Wansdyke, however, it is more likely that construction of the bank may have begun at the gates, with gangs of people working outwards from them in both directions as is strongly suggested at and either side of Tifferth's gate; or gaps were left at pre-determined places during construction of the bank and ditch for the 'specialist gate-builders' to come along later and complete the work. The 'Broadlet gate' can be convincingly interpreted in this way, and to a lesser

extent so too can the 'Meux gate'. Of course, various methods may have been used simultaneously in haste.

These 'pre-determined places' were at the earthwork's intersections with the pre-existing through-ways, all part of the bundle of tracks we have elsewhere argued to be the north-south transhumant 'Ridgeway route' (Fowler 2000, chapter 16; Fowler 1998). Such were sufficiently important to have to have been accommodated by this new construction (rather as existing roads have to be accommodated with flyovers and underpasses when a modern by-pass is built). In general, we see all ten of our 'gates' as original gaps rather than later breaks, with some (nos. i, iv, v, vi, viii, ix?) also furnished with contemporary structures and possibly manned – or intended to be manned, - not just for defence but to control travellers, herdsman and farmers on both sides of this new barrier. Functionally, an almost exact description of what we envisage of Wansdyke has already been written by others of another linear barrier 300 miles to the north: 'The purpose of the barrier was to control movement, not to prevent it, as the liberal provision of gateways demonstrates. Civilians, whether merchants, local farmers moving their cattle and sheep or simply local people visiting relatives on the other side of the Wall, would be allowed through the gateways ... movement on horseback, or in carts, or the driving of beasts, would only be possible through a controlled gateway' (Breeze and Dobson 1987, 40-41).

Conceivably, there is just the hint in the gateway arrangements on Wansdyke that a different, or double, set of intentions was in mind. Perhaps, as with Hadrian's Wall, a master-plan, or memories of the need for an overall design plan, were in existence, intending to place gates, especially deliberate military gates, at roughly fixed intervals as well as blocking and therefore controlling main, existing through-tracks. In fact, if such was in mind, it was not too difficult to meet both objectives.

It seems likely that the main through-ways within the Ridgeway route passed locally along Woden's Dene, through Hursley Bottom and up Clatford Bottom. That is, our study-length of Wansdyke forms a natural entity, with open downs to its west, Savernake Forest to its east, and woodland in between (fig. 1). Overall, its length is 4.74 km., that is 5184 yards, 2.95 miles or close to 3 Roman miles. Edgar's gate occurs roughly half way between the named gate in Woden's Dene and the probable gate in Clatford Bottom. Each of the lengths of Wansdyke respectively to west and east between it and the next major gate is then close to 1½ Roman miles, meaning that each length could be neatly subdivided into three lengths of ½ Roman mile each. A unitary subdivision along such lines can

in fact be perceived (fig. 5). In the eastern half of our length of Wansdyke, for example, it is 0.5 Roman miles from Edgar's gate to Tifferth's gate and then again to the possible 'Broadlet gate'. From there it is another 0.5 Roman miles to the suggested gate in Clatford Bottom. This may be accidental; if not, questions have to be asked about the nature of Wansdyke.

All of the gates are across branches of the north-south Ridgeway route except for the 'Meux gate' and the 'Broadlet gate', both of which were unfinished and spaced out at the smallest unit of sub-division. They look as if they may have been inserted – or rather were intended to be inserted, - to meet some design requirement rather than a real need. One is reminded of the Poltross Burn milecastle, conventional in its spatial location according to the rules but actually in a locally ludicrous position topographically. The Wall of which it was a part, far to the north, may well have been in mind, in however imprecise a form, when Wansdyke was being conceived, designed and built: 'So many gates were provided that travellers had to walk no more than half a mile (0.8 km.) along the Wall to the nearest crossing point. But the gates were also provided to allow troops to move easily through the Wall to deal with an attack from the north ... the lavish provision of gates must have facilitated the maintenance of the wall and ditch ... there is a clear overprovision of gates ...' (Breeze and Dobson 1987, 40-41). On our wooded stretch of Wansdyke, with its similar 'lavish' provision of gates, the average distance between the principal gates, actual and intended but omitting 'designer gates' v and vii, is 0.73 km. (800 yards). The analogous gates on Hadrian's Wall were, of course, through the milecastles; the two turrets spaced between each milecastle at 1/3 Roman mile intervals (494 m., 540 yards) were not gateways. Nevertheless, it is just possible that, however faintly, the Hadrianic pattern of milecastle > turret > turret > milecastle > turret > turret > milecastle may be echoed in the pattern of Wansdyke's gates through West Woods: main (*Woddes*) > minor > minor > main (Edgar's) > minor > minor > main (Clatford Bottom).

The three main gates provided the framework for a rough and ready metrical pattern of two gateways (which may well have looked like turrets if they were built with any sort of superstructure) within each 'half' of Wansdyke in the woods. In each half, one gateway was astride a probable 'ancient' through-track (Shaw and 'readdan') with the other ('Meux' and 'Little Wood') meeting a design requirement. Therein probably lies their incompleteness when work stopped: they were being left till last. The position of every one of the nine possible gates between *Woddes geat* and 'Clatford Bottom gate', including those two named

ones at the ends, can be explained by the hypothesis that Wansdyke is based on Roman military thinking and design.

Purpose

Our interpretation overall is that the intention of Wansdyke in the woods was specifically to block the Ridgeway, but the Ridgeway as a route newly-developing in late Roman times. The concept is of a 5 km.-broad corridor stretching from Red Shore (which blocks the single track now alone called the Ridgeway) to Short Oak Copse containing a bundle of trackways which was increasingly being recognised as the main north-south route from Thames to Solent. Locally, these tracks offered a variety of ways for moving off the Marlborough Downs, across the Kennet valley and then down into the Vale of Pewsey and beyond. East of Red Shore, a big Wansdyke blocked the way but from Woden's Dene onwards a carefully contrived earthwork was, we propose, specifically designed to control those many ways by constructing gateways through it to which traffic was funnelled. Clearly it was not the intention to prevent ordinary traffic moving through; rather was Wansdyke designed to allow that to continue while being prepared for the arrival of less friendly visitors.

Indeed, taking a wider view and accepting the whole of East Wansdyke as a distinct and quite short length of bank and ditch 15 miles (24 km.) long centred on our study area (Yorke 1995, 26), we may have stumbled on the reason for its construction by looking at the gates. They were to allow normal, civilian passage within a linear zone of movement some 4 kms. wide through a cross-country military barrier. That barrier was designed specifically to control movement along that broad route and, if necessary, to make the route itself defensible against hostile approaches along it from the north. The western and eastern 'wings' of Wansdyke either side of the central wooded length can readily be explained on this model as outreach portions intended to make access across the watershed from northern to southern Chalk even more difficult. They had the effect, should anyone try to gain entry to 'inner Wessex' by stepping off the Ridgeway route, of pushing would-be intruders off the Chalk altogether and away westwards into more wooded ground on the flanks of the Avon valley and eastwards into Savernake Forest.

That interpretation, of course, begs the larger question of why Wansdyke was built in the first place. People build such defining lines across the landscape for a number of reasons, rarely for a single one. Hadrian, we are told, did so '... to separate the Romans from the barbarians' (*Scriptores Historiae Augustae, Vita Hadriani* 11 2), but modern study suggests his reason was also very much to

control movement, commercial as much as military, into and from the province (as with the Berlin Wall). Such lines could also have been built primarily for defence (as with the Maginot Line) but also as statements about power, image and perception of a legitimate frontier (as with the Great Wall of China). The actual building work itself might well have been started as a provocation to the opposition outside or possibly as a distraction inside to keep the local populace occupied and with a sense of something being done. Wansdyke's nearest analogue, Bokerly Dyke, seems to have been a late-Roman re-inforcement of an old boundary, military and defensive in one obvious and doubtless necessary sense at the time – blocking a Roman road – but also a re-drawing of a political frontier. It remains the county boundary between Hampshire and Dorset (Bowen 1991), whereas Wansdyke left no imprint in either woods or minds. That it was referred to Woden, meaning its namers clearly had no idea who built it or when or why, speaks volumes about the brevity of its career and local insignificance.

Overall, the field evidence clearly indicates that Wansdyke in the woods was incomplete at the time that work on it was abandoned. Was it again like Hadrian's Wall where 'Work was broken off so abruptly that sections of wall were left standing to a variety of heights ... (Breeze and Dobson 1987, 46)? Wansdyke would have looked like an earthen equivalent, rather like an unfinished, major pipeline where work had stopped over a Bank Holiday weekend, a raw and messy scar across the land. It is conceivable that the cessation of work on Wansdyke in the woods marks the passing of the emergency which created the need for it in the first place.

My suggestions arise independently and directly from new field observation but, more than half a century ago, Trelawney Dayrell Reed (1944, esp. chapter IV), working only from his desk and library, had arrived at exactly the same conclusion: 'Wansdyke and Bokerly Dyke are similar in construction and both are, of course, derived ultimately from the example of the Roman Wall' (*ibid.*, 150). Reed's highly plausible account inadvertently indicated that a direct link may lie in his version of Arthur's northern campaigns, along and on both sides of Hadrian's Wall (*ibid.*, 163-70). They could easily have provided the mechanism, were that necessary, to bring the requisite idea south in the 470–80s.

Date

According to Reed (*ibid.*, 154), however, Wansdyke was already built by then. He envisaged it as built c. 365 to mark an 'agreed boundary' negotiated under Ambrosius. His outside date-range is c. 365–515, with a preference for the shorter c. 365–390. At the other end of the chronological range, Reynolds

(1999, 85) consciously flouts convention in proposing ‘a Middle Anglo-Saxon context, as Wessex’s equivalent to Offa’s Dyke.’ He correctly recognises both West and East Wansdykes as unfinished, but would explain both as the product of a hypothetical ‘short-lived settlement between the West Saxons and the Mercians in the late eighth or early ninth century.’ Were that so, presumably their ascription of their work to the pagan god Woden by the Christian West Saxon builders was some sort of joke. Can we suggest any more convincing historical circumstances in which such an intended major public work was unfinished? When, indeed, was Wansdyke built – and abandoned?

If our overall contention about Wansdyke’s Roman inspiration is correct, then the later of commentators’ two favourite dates is unlikely i.e. around the mid-6th century (Myres 1964). So the often-mentioned earlier date in the late 5th century would seem preferable; and that could supply circumstances for a great construction effort and sudden abandonment. Another factor tilting the balance to this context is the clear evidence now from Somerset of renewed defence and gateway building at the Cadbury hill-forts. Indeed, at the one near Congresbury (Rahtz *et al.* 1992), one plausible interpretation has long been that the building occurred in response to the Saxon threat in the late 5th century, only to be disregarded in the decades after the decisive battle of Badon when, as Gildas relates, a generation of peace (and luxury and decadence) followed. We suggest that East Wansdyke, and specifically the length in the woods, was being hastily constructed in the 490s with Roman precedents in mind against what was feared to be an imminent invasion of Saxons from the Thames valley. Such an invasion would have had to come down the line of the Ridgeway route to enter the heartlands of the still Romanised Chalk country. A battle which proved to be decisive in that it halted the Saxons for a couple of generations took place, however, somewhere north of Wansdyke – perhaps Liddington Castle above Badbury village, perhaps outside Bath, perhaps elsewhere. The exact location does not matter for present purposes, though Liddington, only some 15 kms. (9 miles) to the north north east, would fit neatly – close enough to be alarming, close enough to suck in most of the local, able male population, and close enough to hear quickly of the repulse of the invaders. Reed (1944) joins me in liking Badon at Liddington Hill. Wherever the encounter, its decisiveness was recognised immediately, as it was by all later writers. In this interpretation, then we see the duration of Wansdyke in the Woods as a matter of months in the mid-490s, say over 1–2 years at the most during construction, immediately before and only to within hours after the battle of Badon. Plausibly, Wansdyke became recognisably redundant that day. Dare we even imagine the British

builders of Wansdyke, at that moment women, children and old men, downing tools, giving a resounding cheer, and walking off site away through the woods?

That romantic touch will not please the purist; but more serious is the objection that local knowledge in the late 5th century Upper Kennet/Pewsey Vale area could not possibly embrace information about Roman-style defences, let alone the specifics of Hadrian's Wall. Yet current work is continually indicating the degree of Romanisation present in the 5th century in the locality (e.g. Corney 1997), and the Rudge cup, with its names of Wall forts, was found not a thousand miles away. In truth, however, the new field evidence does not require proof that a late Roman knowledge of military matters existed in central Wiltshire in the later 5th century. The evidence on the ground can stand without that, for it unambiguously indicates that Wansdyke in the woods was to an extent military yet was structurally not completed.

Bede, writing in the 720s and quoting a somewhat muddled Gildas, recounts how the Emperor 'decided to separate that portion of the island under his control from the remaining unconquered peoples, and he did this not with a wall, as some imagine, but with an earthwork. For a wall is built of stone, but an earthwork ... is constructed with sods cut from the earth and raised high above ground level, fronted by the ditch from which the sods were cut, and surmounted by a strong palisade of logs. [He] built a rampart and ditch of this type from sea to sea, and fortified it by a series of towers.' (Sherley-Price 1955, 1.5). If the 'series of towers' is envisaged as gate towers, these words, about something nearly four hundred years older than Wansdyke, written only about a generation after Wansdyke, and accurately quoted two hundred years after Wansdyke, could be a description of Wansdyke as we have found and interpreted it in the woods. There, at least, it is an earthwork firmly in the Roman tradition in thought, word and deed, built by Britons and nothing to do with Saxons who failed even to arrive for its opening.

Acknowledgements. Many people have quietly contributed to the infrastructure on which this essay has been created. Specific and critical help has been enjoyably forthcoming from Ian Blackwell, notably on Saxon charters and their bounds in the field, and from Gill Swanton and Mark Corney in fieldwork and survey, including being such elegant photographic scales. The author alone, however, is responsible for the argument and the suggestions.

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Captions to the Illustrations

Plates:

I Edgar's gate: looking through from the north, showing the trackway through it, doing a 'dog-leg' left of the puddle (= end of the western ditch) in the foreground and then right this side of the left figure on the stub of the eastern bank and beneath the right figure standing in the slight 'holloway' at the foot of the western bank. The continuation of the track southwards in the middle distance is called *stanihtan weg* ('stony way') in the East Overton charter (AD 939).

II Wansdyke east of Edgar's gate as it begins to run out uphill towards the camera and the west side of the 'Meux gate'. The figure on the left stands on top of what has by here become a small as well as low bank, with a clear berm between its front and the ditch's inner lip (marked by the coppiced hazel, centre). The scale provided by the right hand figure shows the ditch is narrow and little more than a shallow scoop.

III Wansdyke along the southern edge of Brickkiln Wood looking east. The ditch is out of sight to the left. The bank largely consists of a copse bank to the left of the left hand figure who is standing on top of a low, irregular mound. The base of the back of the original, unfinished Wansdyke is marked by the right hand figure.

IV Wansdyke in the same area as Pl. III but now looking west to show the ditch at its largest but still accompanied by a low, irregular bank. The left hand figure stands on a copse bank on top of Wansdyke's incomplete bank.

V Wansdyke, a shallow, irregular ditch with a low bank on its left in this view looking west just before the earthwork plunges behind the camera into Clatford Bottom. This is a rare length in which a parish boundary runs along the ditch where it also served as a post-medieval park pale (the parish boundary status is modern).

VI Wansdyke down the slope from Pl. V, here viewed looking east as it briefly emerges from the woodland to cross Clatford Bottom where there may have been a gate. The apparently impressive bank is only c. 1m high above the ground behind it, and indeed the dimensions of the earthwork overall, here quite clear out in the open, are typical of the tree-obscured bank and ditch for much of the length eastwards. The breaks in the bank are not original; the parish boundary runs along the ditch, here also that of a park pale. Clatford Park Farm is to the right.

VII Wansdyke at the equivalent position to Pl. VI but on the eastern side of Clatford Bottom climbing up and eastwards towards Short Oak Copse. There is no sign of a ditch here – it begins again slightly uphill in the bushes on the left – and the line of the bank, if it existed, is indicated only by a break in slope at the edge of a ploughed field.

VIII A typical length and profile of Wansdyke viewed looking east as it continues to climb along the south side of Short Oak Copse. The two coppiced hazels on the slope into the ditch are actually on a slight break in slope where the bank ends and the ditch cut begins. The bank is scarcely 1 metre high at its rear, and the ditch, still the parish boundary, is only a little deeper in relation to the slight bank on its outer edge. This could be of Clatford Park pale rather than an original feature of Wansdyke.

Figures

1. Map of East Wansdyke in West Woods
2. Schematic plans from original field survey of two of the 'gates' through Wansdyke. *a* is *Eadgardes gete* with outer earthworks apparently channelling access from the north on to a causeway narrowed by the end of the eastern ditch overlapping the end of the eastern bank; *b* shows *tifferthes geat* with a plan also incorporating outer earthworks and apparently attempting a similar effect but with the 'stagger' this time created by the eastern end of the bank overlapping the end of the ditch.
3. Plan of 'Meux gate', with details of Wansdyke approaching from the west and stopping in an incomplete state
4. Model of Wansdyke's construction
5. Comparative model of Hadrian's Wall and Wansdyke in the woods, showing an equivalence between milecastles and turrets on the former and gateways on the latter.

Note for the editor: of the five drawings:

Fig 2 is the bottom half of one of the Fowler 2000 drawings, as per the attached copy – I'll send the original, or a good copy thereof, as soon as I get the material back from the printers who are currently handling 'Fyfod' (could your printer handle a digitised version of the attached? – all the Fyfod graphics have been digitised and I could probably get a disc for him to use)

Figs 1, 3-5 all exist as roughouts but have to be drawn up properly. I reckon that is 2 days' work and the earliest 2 days available are 26/27 June – a damn close-run thing for your end June deadline.

