

Frontier dykes in the Wrexham area — recent work, 1972 and 1973

By DAVID HILL and DAVID WILSON

IN 1928 and 1934 Sir Cyril Fox carried out his great survey of the western frontier works of Mercia in the Wrexham area. So successful and convincing were the results that they have tended to discourage any further work. This has proved unfortunate in the extreme as modern intensive land usage in agriculture, industry and residential development has changed the face of the area.

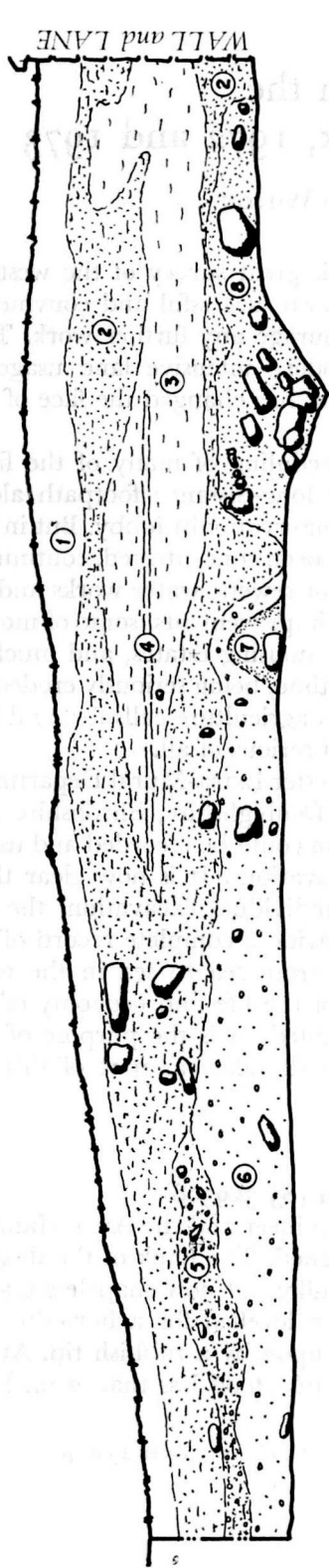
On the positive side, there has been the scheduling of many of the finer stretches of the dykes and the opening of the long-distance footpath along Offa's Dyke which is bound to strengthen the conservationist lobby. But in the lowland zone of the dyke systems the damage has been concentrated, continuous and immense. Frequent small cuts are needed for sewers, water works and oil pipelines; large cuts have been needed for road improvements, some of motorway scale. Large areas have disappeared under housing estates, and much of the remaining country stretches are, for the first time, being seriously eroded by the new deep-ploughing techniques that modern agriculture calls for, and it is possible to argue that this last threat is the most serious of all.

In 1972 a group from the University of Manchester Extra-Mural Department began an exploratory series of excavations in Denbighshire, Shropshire and Montgomeryshire to see if some of the destruction could be recorded and useful archaeological results obtained from small excavations. It is now clear that, apart from the structural evidence from any individual excavation, the soil buried below the banks of the dykes should provide a complete record of the landscape and agriculture of the border area from sea to sea in the early Middle Ages. The effect of this on the study of the life and economy of the Mercians and the Welsh cannot be underestimated. It is the purpose of this note to record two small rescue excavations undertaken as part of this exploratory programme.

1. Wat's Dyke: General Station, Wrexham (SJ 329508)

With the kind permission of the Divisional Engineer and the Area Manager of British Railways, a small excavation was opened. The bank of the dyke at this area was described by Fox in 1934 as 'a bulky but now shapeless mass'.¹ Since his day much of the bank here has been levelled for a horse-loading siding and the remnants are being encroached upon by a rubbish tip. At the point chosen for excavation the rump of the bank stood less than 2 m. high,

¹ Sir Cyril Fox: 'Offa's Dyke', The British Academy, Oxford University Press, 1955, p. 240.



OFFA'S DYKE, Coedpoeth

WAT'S DYKE, Wrexham

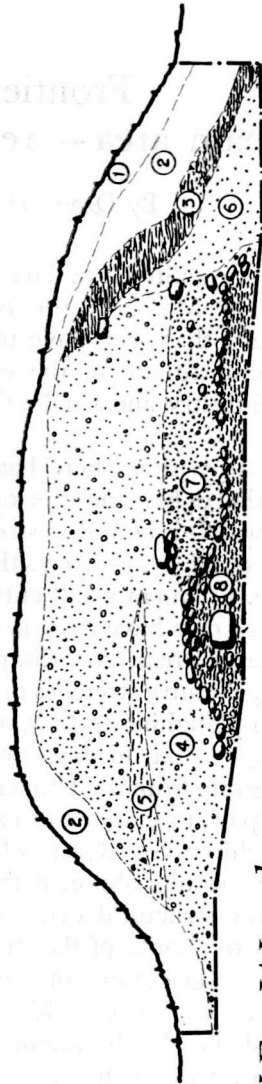


Fig. 1. Offa's and Wat's Dyke excavations: section drawings. The Offa's Dyke section is oblique to the bank.

the rear cut into by a path, the front obscured by the tip. A trench 1.5 m. wide was cut across the bank. The whole of the remnant of the bank was covered with a thick layer of railway rubbish (layers 1 and 2 on Fig. 1) and the bank proper consisted of layers of clean pea gravel which formed an unstable feature (layers 4, 5, 7). Individual tip layers could be seen (layer 5) and the bank must originally have been in excess of 6 m. wide at this point. On the western (Welsh) side the layers (Nos. 3 and 6) lay in such a way as to suggest that the face of the bank had either been robbed out or had collapsed owing to the deterioration of some facing. The impression gained from these layers and from the complete absence of finds was that this robbing or collapsing took place in antiquity. The lowest layer excavated in this bank was of great interest. Because of the restricted nature of the trench, not enough of this bottom layer (layer 8) was exposed to be certain that we had recovered a small marking-out bank of water-worn pebbles, but the excavation here suggested such a small bank resting on the natural ground level.

2. Offa's Dyke: Tyn-y-coed, Heol Offa, Coedpoeth, Denbighshire (SJ 293512)

A trench 20 m. long and 2 m. wide had been cut through the bank of the dyke to take a pipeline from Tyn-y-coed farmhouse to the main sewer in the road. With the kind permission of Mr. R. T. Jones, the owner of the farmhouse, a 10 m. length of each side of the trench was trowelled down, and the floor was excavated to natural ground level.

Under the turf, topsoil and modern disturbances (layer 1) and within boulder clay (layer 2) the bulk of the bank was made up of a firm, rich brown soil which had the appearance of representing a decomposed turf bank (layer 3; disappearing in layer 5), the layers of which were indicated in at least one place by lines of boulder clay (layer 4). This bank would appear to have been in excess of 7 m. wide when complete, the front (Welsh) side being cut away by a stone wall and road; the back (Mercian) side is probably complete.

Within a layer of mottled boulder clay (layer 6) under the bank, resting on the old ground surface, and about 3 m. from the face of the bank, was a feature 60 cm. wide by 60 cm. high made up of light grey soil and clay, possibly indicative of a marking-out bank (layer 7). As at the Wat's Dyke site at Wrexham General Station, there was no indication of the original turf line, and it may be that the turf had been removed during the construction of the bank. Cut into the natural, parallel to the face of the bank and about 2 m. from it, was a small marking-out ditch, 1.5 m. wide and 30 cm. deep, which had been loosely back-filled with rubble and grey soil (layer 8). On the floor of the trench, alongside this ditch, was a patch of charcoal, which is at present being tested in the Chemistry Department of Manchester University. Soil samples were also taken for analysis.

Conclusions:

Considering the limited nature of the excavations and the manpower used, the results were remarkable, showing as they do two completely different forms of construction, demonstrating for the first time the presence of marking-out banks and ditches and providing scientific samples which may be of great importance. Although there were no finds, the charcoal sample may well provide independent dating of the dyke system for the first time.