

## The Coppice, Oswestry, Shropshire: archaeological survey

Huw Sherlock and P J Pikes  
2000



## archenfield archaeology ltd

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Archenfield Archaeology Ltd is a multidisciplinary archaeological consultancy, offering a complete range of archaeological advice and services to the public and private sector. We specialise in giving archaeological advice to developers, housing associations and private individuals. We also undertake archaeological intervention, from monitoring to full-scale excavation; building survey; landscape and geophysical surveys and community-based historical and archaeological projects.

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Cover Photograph: Extract from the 1st Edition OS map of featuring the Oswestry coppice area



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## **1.0 Introduction**

Archenfield Archaeology were commissioned to conduct a brief archaeological survey of the Coppice, Oswestry and to advise on the management of the site from an archaeological perspective. A visit was made on Friday 25th August. Mr. Carl Hughes of Oswestry Borough Council attended the site visit and provided additional information about the management of the site. The site is currently open to the public for recreational use, with the entire eastern half of the site covered by mixed woodland and scrub. The western half of the site is currently an open area of rough grassland with a children's play area. This area is partly level ground, and partly steep banks that probably relate to the gravel quarry that previously occupied the site.

## **2.0 Historical background**

The site would appear to have originated as a deliberate plantation. Detailed analysis of the Domesday Book has revealed that Shropshire was generally only very lightly wooded (Rackham, 1980), with perhaps only 8% of the County being recorded as being under woodland. The site lies immediately to the south of the Iron Age hill-fort at Old Oswestry (SAM 103). A section of Wat's Dyke (a late seventh or eighth century boundary earthwork, SAM 115) runs south from Old Oswestry for 160m from NGR SJ 294307 to SJ 293306. The line of this earthwork crosses the western part of the recreation ground surrounding the coppice at SJ 29383068. Until the mid twentieth century the site lay across the boundaries of Selattyn parish, to the north and Oswestry parish to the south. The tithe map (late 1830's) shows the northern part of site as a plantation called Old Oswestry, which at that time was owned by William Ormsby Gore, and is recorded as being 'in hand', i.e. not let to a tenant. The southern part of the site is recorded on the tithe map as being 'The Llwyn Coppice' and the land ownership is given as 'representatives of the late John Mytton'.

## **3.0 Cartographic evidence**

All the available historic maps of the site were examined. These were:

- The tithe map from the late 1830's, together with the tithe apportionments
- The 1st edition Ordnance Survey map (fig.1)
- The Ordnance survey map of 1902
- The Ordnance Survey Map from the 1920's -1930's (fig.2)
- The Ordnance survey map from the 1950's.

As discussed above (1.0) the site is shown on the tithe map as being divided into two land holdings in the late 1830's. This division is also noted on the 1st edition OS map of the late 1880's (fig.1), and a gravel pit is also shown occupying the south western part of the site. An access road to the gravel pit is shown entering the site where the main access point is now. The gravel pit is shown as having truncated a section of Wat's Dyke, which is shown as being a well defined ditch and bank as it runs north south to the north western corner of the site. The entire area of the site is shown as being wooded. A group of buildings, marked as Llwyn Cottage with associated outbuildings and yards is shown adjacent to the access road to the gravel pit. The western edge of the site is defined by the course of the road, which is still in use.

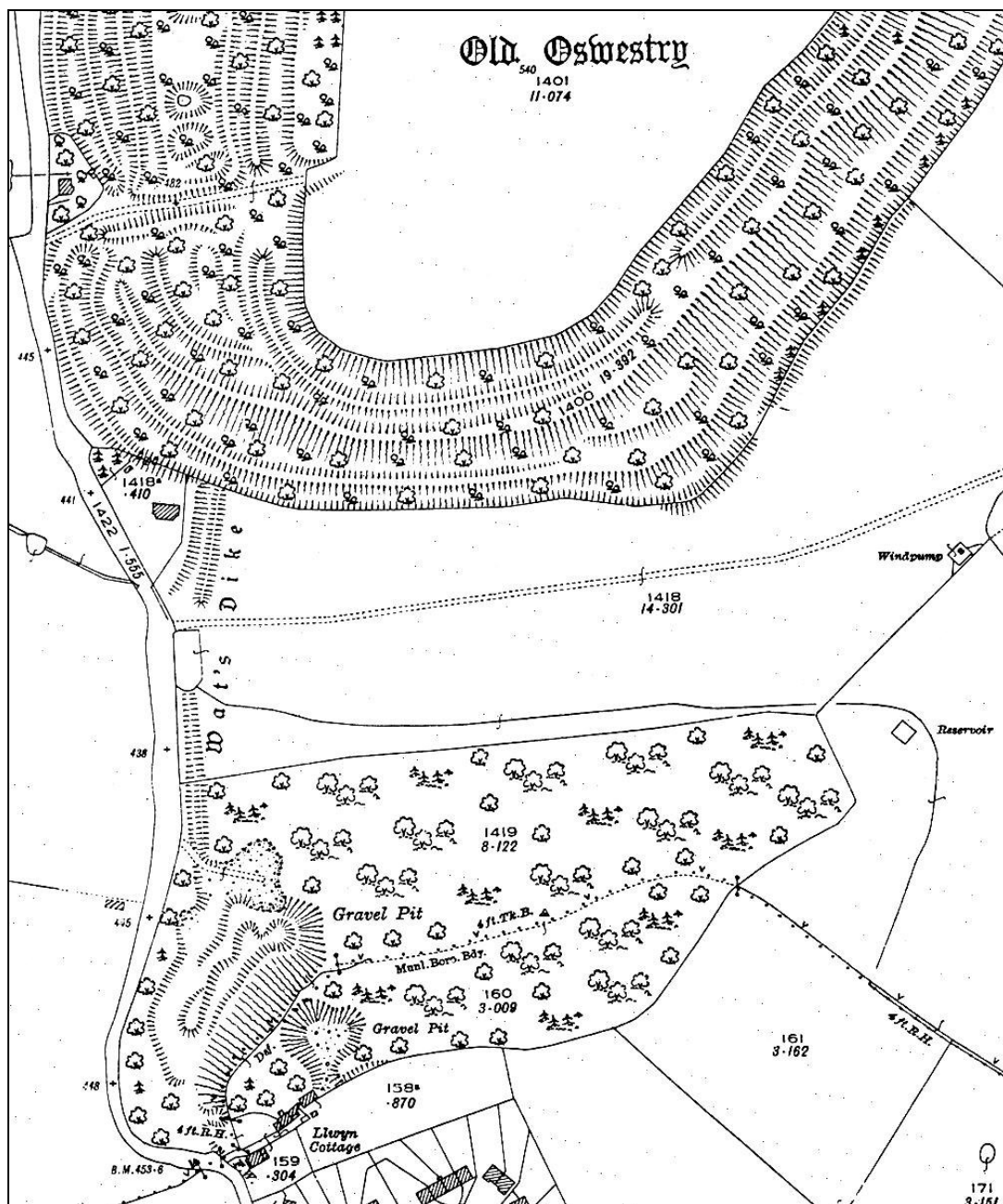


Figure 1: Extract from the 1st edition OS map.

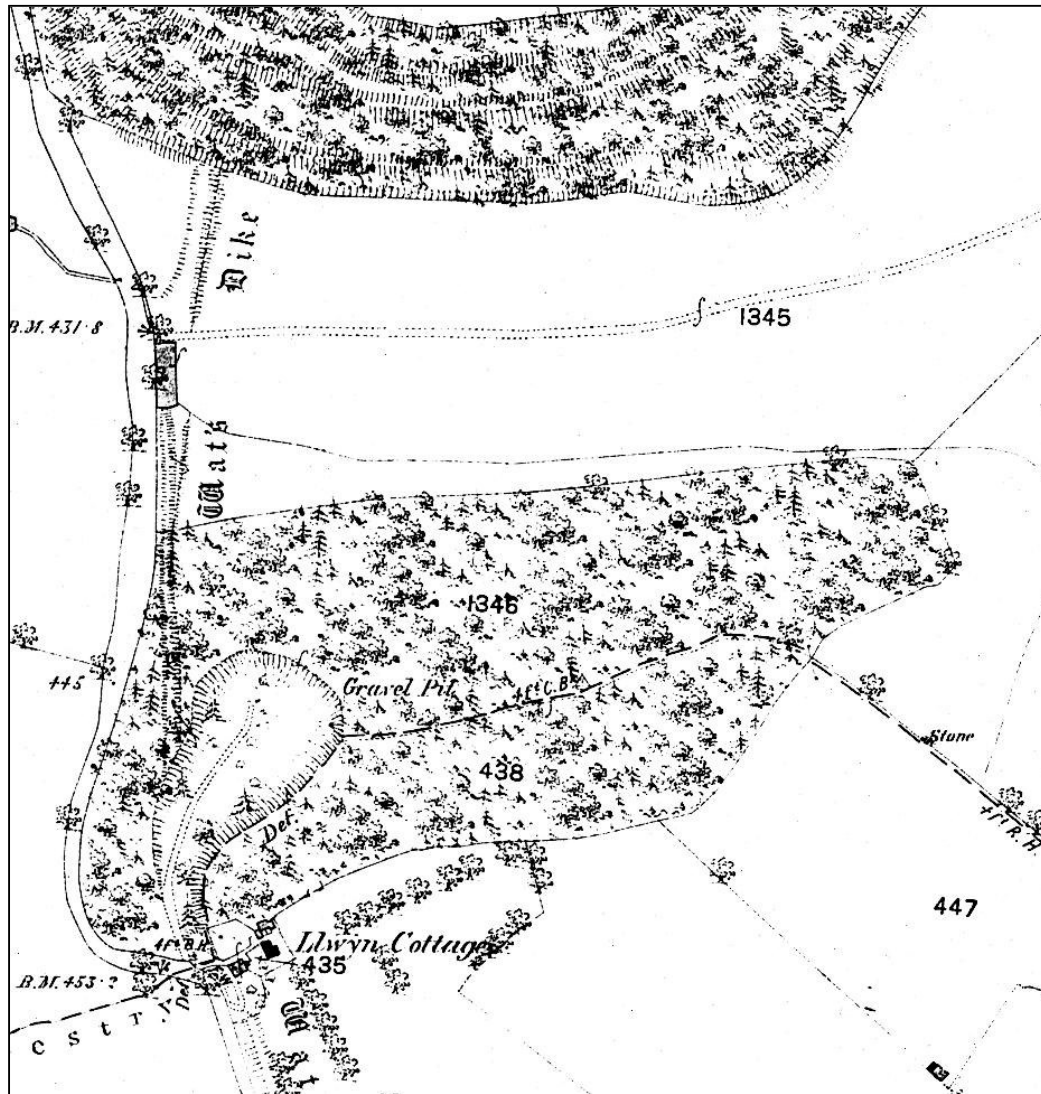


Figure 2: Extract from the OS map issued in the 1920's.

By the 1920's the OS map (fig.2) shows that the gravel pit has extended to the north and west, destroying a further section of Wat's Dyke. A new access road has been opened from the lane flanking the western edge of the site to the new section of gravel pit. This is still shown as being extant in the extreme north western corner of the site, and would still appear to be a clearly defined ditch and bank. A new section of gravel pit has also been opened immediately to the north of Llwyn Cottage. Two distinct land holdings still appear to be shown, with the course of the Municipal Borough Boundary delineating the two plots. This boundary coincides with the course of the current right of way through the woodland, which runs up the spine of the hill, and returns to the north-west, exiting the woods at a point where the gravel quarry made a steep cutting into the side of the hill. The entire site, apart from the gravel pits is still shown as being covered by woodland.

## **4.0 Summary**

The survey confirmed that the southern part of the site is likely to have been the original coppiced area. The trees on the southern side of the former boundary show signs of having been previously coppiced. To the north of the former boundary the trees appear to have been deliberately planted, as there are discreet stands of mature trees that do not appear to have been coppiced. At the boundary of the wood there is a low bank which the boundary fence now stands on. This would appear to have been partly formed by the natural migration of soil down the slope, but there must have been a boundary hedge around the original coppice to keep stock and deer away from vulnerable young trees.

The coppicing of woodland still formed an important part of the rural economy within living memory. Charcoal burning, green wood turning and the collection of firewood were all income generating activities that involved large numbers of people. Such areas of coppiced woodland were therefore an important way of making otherwise relatively unproductive land more valuable.

## **5.0 Site management proposals**

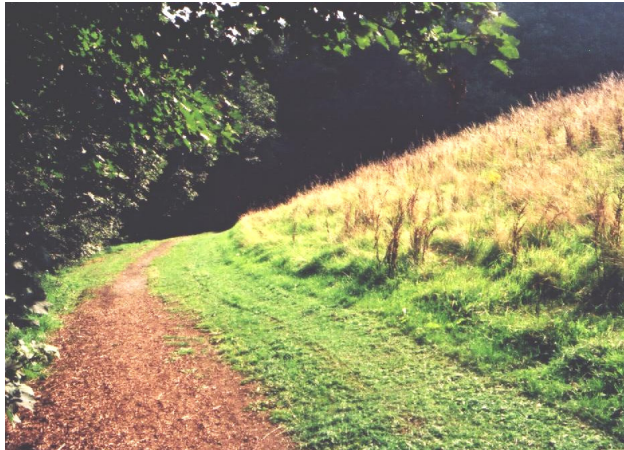
Where the line of Wat's Dyke crosses the north western boundary of the site it is well defined outside the site, but is little more than a shallow bank inside the site. The ditch appears to have been back filled. This may have happened if the area had been subject to levelling in the past, possibly after the area had been quarried for gravel.

The fact that the section of this feature immediately to the north of the site has been afforded Scheduled Ancient Monument status means that the visible and invisible remnants of the dyke that cross the site need to be afforded special treatment. Care should be taken to avoid any further erosion of the remaining portion of the bank, and whilst it is no longer visible caution should be exercised when any work involving disturbing the ground in the region of the line of the ditch is planned.

A limited geophysical survey across this area might be effectively able to determine if the ditch has been totally destroyed or has merely been backfilled. This would enable future site management planning to incorporate this knowledge and avoid further destruction of this monument. An information panel about the history of Wat's Dyke and Old Oswestry itself would raise the amenity value of the site and add to its potential for educational visits. The view of Old Oswestry itself from the crest of the hill is a major amenity value in itself, and the viewpoint should continue to be kept clear.

A further, more detailed archaeological survey would be useful in order to identify any further archaeological features that may not currently be visible amongst the undergrowth, and to carry out a more detailed topographical survey.





**Plate 1: View looking east into the northern edge of the wood.**



**Plate 1: View of Old Oswestry looking north from the viewpoint**



## 6.0 Bibliography

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