

## Notes from Local Interest Group Meeting 27<sup>th</sup> February 2020

**Present:** Maureen Lloyd (ML), Roy & Avryl Lloyd, Wendy & Dainis Ozols, Joan Lloyd, Edwina Griffiths, Jenny Francis, Sue Farmer, Evelyn & John Bally, Richard Thomas, Richard Martin, Richard Harris, Cherry & Victor Williams, Jenny & James Martin, Lisa Lloyd, Grace Davies, Robert Collingwood, Lucy Trench

**Apologies:** Iris Lloyd

ML welcomed everyone and started with a couple of announcements.

- A reminder that the closing date for the photography competition is the end of April. The theme is "Radnorshire Life". Digital images, please, to be e mailed to the Webmaster of the website, <https://www.paincastle-rhosgoch.co.uk/> The pictures must have been taken by the entrant.
- The March meeting will be a talk about ABC Mapping by Helen Whitear. Philip Hume has agreed to come to talk about the Mortimers in April and we have our first out meeting, a visit to Huntington, in May.

ML then went on to welcome our speaker for the evening, Rob Dingle, the Trail Officer for Offa's Dyke Path National Trail.

### Offa's Dyke Path National Trail

Rob began his talk by saying that he has been in post since 2007. He explained that the Trail is supported by a number of organisations. The two main fund providers are Natural Resources Wales and Natural England. Two thirds of the path are in Wales and one third in England. Powys County Council is also an important supporter; the county hosts the longest stretch of all the authorities through which the trail passes. All the way along the trail walkers will see an acorn symbol; this is the symbol of the National Trails in England and Wales and it helps to keep people on the right path. He added that acorns sometimes go "missing" and so do need constant replacing! CADW and English Heritage administer Offa's Dyke itself and about 60 miles of the trail are along this ancient monument.

Offa's Dyke Path National Trail is part of a family of national trails in England and Wales. There are currently 15 of these in England and Wales; by 2021 another will be added when the English Coast Path is completed. The Welsh Coast Path is not a dedicated trail at present. The trails were set up through legislation passed in 1949, the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, which was also responsible for the creation of National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The first of the National Trails to be established was the Pennine Way (opened in 1965). Offa's Dyke Path National Trail was designated in 1955, but it did not open until 1971 because it takes a long time to set up the infrastructure and negotiate with landowners. 2021 will be the 50th anniversary of the trail and events are being planned to mark this event.

Three sections of the path have an association with Offa's Dyke, a scheduled ancient monument, and Rob told us that more pieces of what are thought to be parts of the Dyke are being unearthed all of the time. However, because these sections have not yet been verified, they are not scheduled. Where the path does not follow the Dyke, the route has been chosen to follow the best of the landscape features, eg the section over the Black Mountains.

Rob then gave us some facts about the trail:

- It is 177 miles long
- Offa's Dyke is about 80 miles long.
- The trail starts at Sedbury Cliff in Gloucestershire and ends on Prestatyn beach.
- There are 9 managing authorities involved – Gloucestershire, Monmouthshire, Brecon Beacons National Park, Powys, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Wrexham, Denbighshire and Flintshire.
- It takes in one national park and three AONBs.
- It crosses the Wales/England border about 26 times.
- Over 40 miles of the trail are associated with Offa's Dyke Ancient Monument.
- Around 2800 pieces of furniture (fingerposts, gates, steps, etc) can be found along the trail.
- About 28 000 ft of ascent are made when you walk the trail; this is the equivalent of climbing Mt Everest.

One of the main features of the trail is the stunning scenery through which much of it passes. It takes about 12-14 days to walk its entire length, but some people have done it in 52 hours!

Rob went on to say that much work takes place along the path in order to maintain it. 500 stiles have been replaced with gates in the last ten years, for example, and there are now only around 200 stiles left (there were probably around 900 in the early days). The trail will probably never be completely stile-free as some of the old stone stiles, particularly in the north, are part of the historic landscape and so will never be removed.



Four legs can help

On Hatterall Ridge, in the Black Mountains, work has been done on a very badly eroded part of the path. Weathering and wash had created significant erosion scars on this heavily used section. Materials and equipment were airlifted in and the path surface has been significantly improved, with paving stones laid, stones steps constructed and gravel put down. This kind of remedial action is very expensive, but necessary if the path is to be kept in good order.

Rob continued by talking a little about Offa's Dyke. There are some really good sections of this monument still in existence, for example near Discoed where the mound and ditch are very evident. This section is easy to reach for anyone wishing to see the Dyke. However, in other places, such as near Pen Offa, near Evenjobb, the Dyke has been badly eroded and is not so obvious. The Dyke is

1250 years old and is the largest linear earthwork in the UK. It is also the longest scheduled ancient monument (SAM) in the UK. One of the best sections that remain can be seen on Llanfair Hill, south of Newcastle on Clun, where the path runs alongside the structure in order to preserve it.



Llanfair Hill near Knighton is a great place to see the Dyke

Obviously, damage to the Dyke is a concern and it can come in many different forms. Where trees on the Dyke are blown down, they take parts of the structure with them in their roots. Badgers and rabbits also cause damage when they burrow into the structure. When the burrows are abandoned, parts of the Dyke can collapse. Since the Dyke goes through farmland, damage from stock can also be an issue. In 2012/13, a farmer sold some land on which there was a scheduled section of the Dyke. The new owner dug a large section up before anyone knew what was happening. Sadly, due to a loophole in the law at the time, he was not prosecuted, but this will not happen again as the law has now been changed so that no-one can claim that they do not know that they have a SAM on their land. More recent damage has occurred at Knighton and near Mold, but these are being dealt with.

In 2017, a complete survey of the monument was done along its entire course and so there is now an excellent record of what exists, including a great deal of data. This has also facilitated the drawing up of a conservation management plan. 28 threat types have been identified, and these have been grouped into four categories, agriculture (8 threats), vegetation (8), erosion (7) and development (5). Funding is now available to manage conservation on the ground. The biggest threat is considered to be "benign neglect". Only 8.7% of the Dyke is considered to be "in a favourable condition" along its entire length. The National Trail is working with CADW and English Heritage, for example it has moved sections of the trail off the monument as a conservation measure.

Rob continued by giving us some information about King Offa. He was born in around 730 AD and was the Anglo-Saxon King of Mercia from 757 to 796 AD (his death). Mercia was a huge kingdom, covering all of the Midlands, as well as East Anglia and parts of the South East of England. He minted the first coins in the country after the Romans, even having his wife's head put on some of them (very unusual at that time). The exact purpose of the Dyke is not clear; there is no evidence that it was defended along its course. However, it is a very visible structure from the west and may have been built as a defence against Offa's enemies, the Princes of Powis, or maybe as a show of strength or status. Rob recommended a book, "Offa's Dyke: Landscape and Hegemony in Eighth Century Britain", by Keith Ray and Ian Bapty for those who would like to know more.



A little closer to home now

The final part of Rob's talk took the form of a pictorial journey along the trail, south to north, to give us an idea of the landscape and features passed along the way. He emphasised that, although walking the trail is itself quite an experience, there are many great things to see and do just a short journey from the path.

- Sedbury Cliffs mark the start of the trail and there are great views across the Severn Estuary from the stone which marks the southern end of the route.
- A view of Chepstow from the viewing platform on the path, showing the castle (built between 1067 and 1188 and the oldest surviving post-Roman stone fortification in Britain) and Rennie's 1816 bridge.
- Wintour's Leap with a view over the R Wye. This is named after a Royalist leader, said to have escaped his pursuers by leaping over the cliff.
- Tintern Abbey – the view from Devil's Pulpit. The Cistercian abbey was founded in 1131 by Walter de Clare, Lord of Chepstow.
- Above Lower Redbrook – from here there are good views of the Wye valley and Monmouth in the distance.
- The Kymin above Monmouth. This consists of a Round House (1794) and Naval Temple (1800), celebrating great naval battles of the late 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The site is owned by the National Trust.
- Monnow Bridge, Monmouth – the only remaining medieval fortified bridge (13<sup>th</sup> century) in the UK.
- White Castle (late 12<sup>th</sup> century) – one of the Three Castles (also Skenfrith and Grosmont). This is maintained by CADW and is free to enter and so popular with walkers on the trail.
- Llangattock Lingoed church – very welcome refreshments are available to walkers here. Rob told us that four or five churches along the trail offer these.
- Llanthony – here the trail is along the ridge above the valley and priory (founded in 1103 by William de Lacy and under the care of CADW), but, because the section from Pandy to Hay is a long one, many trail walkers descend to Llanthony for accommodation in order to break the section into two.
- Hay Bluff – a steep descent here down into Hay on Wye.

- Hergest Ridge – made famous by Mike Oldfield in the 1970s and because of the legend of the Black Hound of Hergest, thought to be the inspiration for Conan-Doyle's "Hound of the Baskervilles". Rob said that he considers the section from Gladestry to Kington, over Hergest Ridge, to be a particularly special section of the trail.
- Rushock Hill – from here there is a fabulous view over the Radnorshire Hills.
- Hawthorn Hill – overlooking Pilleth and its battlefield (1402). This was a great victory for the Welsh rebels, under Owain Glyndwr, over the English forces of Sir Edmund Mortimer.
- View over the Teme Valley from Panponton Hill. In the distance, the Knucklas viaduct, with its Gothic arches, is visible.
- Llanfair Hill – here there are some of the best-preserved parts of Offa's Dyke and the path runs alongside it in order to preserve the structure.
- Mid-point of Offa's Dyke Path National Trail – a fingerpost marks the spot and is very well photographed. This is just above Newcastle on Clun.
- Montgomery Canal near Buttington– this is a particularly lovely section of flat walking, a great break from all of the hills and giving a different feel to the trail.
- Llanymynech – the view from the hill is of the Breiddens.
- Oswestry Racecourse – here there is a stone statue of a horse, with Wales written on one side and England on the other, but Rob has been unable to trace the origins of the structure.
- Chirk Castle, built in 1295 by Roger Mortimer de Chirk – owned by the National Trust and easy to access from the trail by a permissive path.
- Pontcysyllte Aqueduct – this is a World Heritage Site and was built by Thomas Telford and William Jessop between 1795 and 1808. There are two options here. The official trail follows a path beneath the aqueduct, from which there is a great view of the structure. Alternatively, there is a permissive route on the canal towpath over the aqueduct, which is in the care of the Canal and River Trust. The aqueduct takes the Llangollen Canal across the River Dee in the Vale of Llangollen. It is 38m high.
- Ruabon Moor – Rob showed us a photo of a black grouse, the largest population of these birds in Wales can be found on the heather-clad Ruabon Moor. He used this photo to highlight the fact that it is possible to see interesting wildlife along many stretches of the trail.
- Jubilee Tower on Moel Fammau – this was built to mark the golden jubilee of George III in 1810; it was never completed. This section is the most walked part of the national trail.
- Moel Arthur – on top of which is a hill fort with impressive bank defences, where Bronze Age axes have been found. This suggests that it is one of the earliest settlements in the area. There are many hill forts in the Clwydian Range.
- Prestatyn Beach – the northern end of the trail. Here there is a sculpture called "Beginning and End", made of polished steel, which aims to "mirror ambitions and achievements of Offa's Dyke Path walkers". Locally, it is known as "The Polo".

Rob concluded his talk by talking about the effects of the recent heavy rainfall and flooding (February 2020 – Storms Ciara and Dennis). This flooding has caused several issues. One example he showed us was from the River Teme, near Knighton. Here a large section of the path, including a kissing gate, has been lost because of erosion by the overflowing river water. This badly needs rectifying as this is an important part of the route just north of the town, giving access to the path up to Panponton Hill. A new route will need to be negotiated with the landowner as the right of way has been lost. He also showed us a very startling image of a 2m high fingerpost almost totally submerged on the riverside section of the path in the Wye valley, near Brockweir.



Through the beautiful Vale of Clwyd

Rob then asked for questions. James Martin asked whether there were rangers on the trail. The answer is no, but the authorities through which the trail goes have officers who have management of the path as part of their rôle. James also asked about the reporting of issues/damage and Rob said that he would like to be informed, his e mail address is on the website. Jenny Martin asked whether diversions are put in place when problems arise. Rob told us that this is the case, and that fortunately, in the example above of the recent flooding in the lower Wye Valley, there is an alternative route on the higher ground which can be used. He went on to say that the website and social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, are good places to glean information about the trail, both for him and for walkers.

ML thanked Rob for his most interesting talk. It was great to learn so much about this important national trail which comes through our local area from Hay to Gladestry and beyond. His talk was brilliantly illustrated and it is almost certain that a few appetites were whetted and some went away with the intention of walking at least some sections of the trail, if not all.

The evening ended, as always, with refreshments kindly made by Avryl Lloyd and Edwina Griffiths and this gave people the opportunity to ask Rob more about his job and Offa's Dyke Path National Trail. A most enjoyable evening had been had by all.