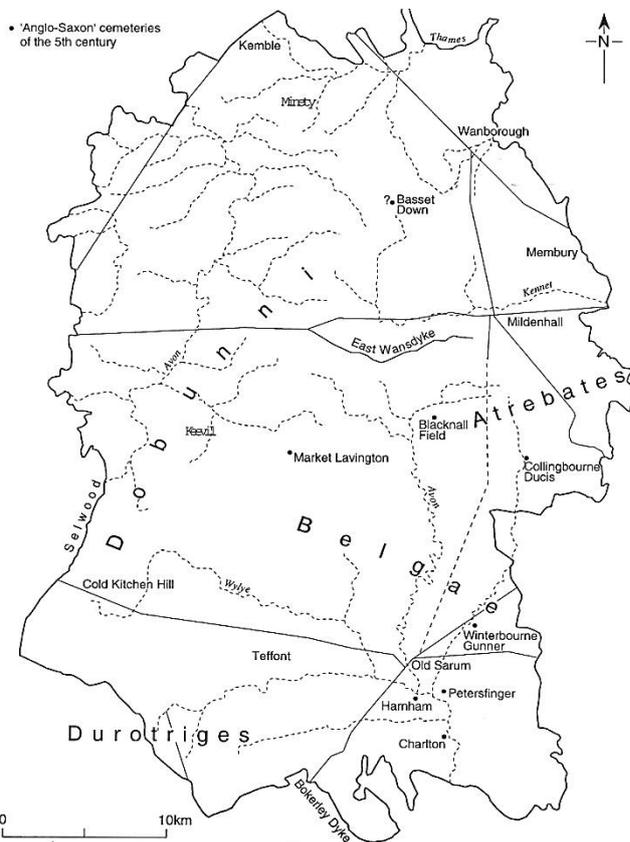


Wansdyke (East), Wiltshire (notes for visitors, prepared by the Royal Archaeological Institute, 2017)

There are two long linear earthwork banks and ditches in south-west England called Wansdyke (=Woden’s ditch), but despite the similarity of their names, and their being linked by the Silchester to Bath Roman road, the two dykes are not necessarily of the same date. West Wansdyke overlooks Wiltshire’s ‘other’ Avon, south of Bath. East Wansdyke, wholly in Wiltshire, runs from where it meets the Roman road for about ten miles east from Morgan’s Hill to Savernake Forest; some people have argued that it continued on from there, but the banks further east are much slighter (see on-line entry, Chisbury).

East Wansdyke is a substantial ditch and bank, the ditch being on the north side and overlooking the Kennet valley. That indicates that it was constructed by people who controlled the area to the south. Very little excavation has been done, only enough to show that it is very late Roman or later, and that in one place the ditch was filling up in the late Saxon period. For long it was taken for granted that it was built immediately after the Roman



period, by surviving British people to protect themselves from Anglo-Saxon newcomers to the north. As Bruce Eagles’s map shows, however, the fifth-century Anglo-Saxon cemeteries are to the south; place-names and artefacts both indicate that British influence survived much longer in the north of the county (Eagles 2001).

Constructing the dyke would have used a lot of man-power, even more if it had a wooden revetment and walkway, so a well-organized social system would have been needed, perhaps more than could have been mobilized in the early Anglo-Saxon period. Consequently, mid Saxon dates have recently been suggested, trying to fit the construction with known historical episodes; certainly this area fluctuated

between the control of the Mercian and Wessex kingdoms in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D., and Wansdyke might have been more important as a boundary marker than as a substantial defence: a statement and a challenge, built by whoever controlled its south side. Whatever its date or function, it is remarkable how little impact it has had on administrative units; even parish boundaries do not follow its line – so either it was built across them regardless of property rights or it was already redundant when estates were being defined. It takes its name from a Germanic god, but that does not mean that it was built in the pagan

period, as such names were often attached to earthworks whose originator had been long forgotten (Reynolds and Langlands 2006).



Looking west to where the East Wansdyke begins beyond the trees on the hillslope, this view shows the now much eroded but still impressive bank and ditch, and gives an idea of the wide area that can be seen in places along its length. (Photograph by Andrew Smith, reproduced under Common Licence, accessed from Wikimedia).



East Wansdyke is less easily made out at its eastern end, but this carpet of bluebells shows it running through West Woods, which obviously impede the views from it and were not in existence when it was built – a corrective to the old notion that the Anglo-Saxons moved into abandoned areas where trees had grown over Roman farmland (Fowler 2011; photograph by Brian Marshall, under Common Licence, accessed from Wikimedia).

References and further reading:

- EAGLES, B. 2001. Anglo-Saxon presence and culture in Wiltshire, *Roman Wiltshire and After*, in Ellis, P. (ed.) Devizes: Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society
- FOWLER, P. J. 2011. Field archaeology in West Woods, Fyfield and West Overton, Wiltshire, *Wiltshire Archaeology and Natural History Magazine*, 104, 135-41
- REYNOLDS, A. AND LANGLANDS, A. Social identities on the macro scale: a maximum view of Wansdyke, in W. Davies, G. Halsall and A. Reynolds (eds), *People and Space in the Middle Ages*, Turnhout: Brepols

These notes were originally prepared for the annual summer meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute held in July 2016; see www.royalarchinst.org for further information. RAI members have access to the printed Report which contains syntheses of the significance

of recent research to archaeological understanding of the county. The notes on Wansdyke were prepared by David A. Hinton. Other on-line entries can be accessed through the RAI web-site.