Living after Offa: Place-Names and Social Memory in the Welsh Marches

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Abstract

How are linear monuments perceived in the contemporary landscape and how do they operate as memoryscapes for today’s borderland communities? When considering Offa’s Dyke and Wat’s Dyke in today’s world, we must take into account the generations who have long lived in these monuments’ shadows and interacted with them. Even if perhaps only being dimly aware of their presence and stories, these are communities living ‘after Offa’. These monuments have been either neglected or ignored within heritage sites and museums with only a few notable exceptions (Evans and Williams 2019; Williams 2020), and have long been subject to confused and challenging conflations with both the modern Welsh/English border and, since the 1970s, with the Offa’s Dyke Path. Moreover, to date, no study has attempted to compile and evaluate the toponomastic (place-name) evidence pertaining to the monuments’ presences, and remembered former presences, in today’s landscape. Focusing on naming practices as memory work in the contemporary landscape, the article explores the names of houses, streets, parks, schools and businesses. It argues for the place-making role of toponomastic evidence, mediated in particular by the materiality of signs themselves. Material and textual citations to the monuments render them integral to local communities’ social memories and borderland identities, even where the dykes have been erased, damaged or obscured by development. Moreover, they have considerable potential future significance for engaging borderland communities in both dykes as part of the longer-term story of their historic environment.

Keywords

house-names; Offa’s Dyke; memory; place-names; street-names; Wat’s Dyke

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References


Offa’s Dyke, great English earthwork extending linearly, with some gaps, from the River Severn near Chepstow to the seaward end of the Dee estuary, passing for 169 miles (270 kilometres) through the counties of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Radnorshire, Montgomeryshire, Shropshire, Denbighshire However, only in a few places does it follow the English–Welsh boundary as it is now fixed. Offa’s Dyke. Section of Offa’s Dyke along the current border between England and Wales. Aloys5268. Many English place names can be peculiar and perplexing, even to those who live there. For every sensible sounding location such as a Southampton or Northampton, there is a Wetwang or a Caistor that can be located on the same map. Over two millennium of immigration from continental Europe has seen a marked impact on the geography of the English countryside, signposts...
point to the mix-mash of different settlers from afar. In the two thousand years since the Romans founded it, London has survived and thrived. Many experts believe that Londinium is a Romanized name and its name has its true origins in the language of the Ancient Britons. Other English places with Roman origins in their name include Lindum Colonia - Lincoln. Welsh place names are part of what makes Wales different, but where did they come from and what is their origin? They may not be able to pronounce them – many of those who live in the country would be equally as hard put - but they are still fascinated by the look and by the sounds of those names. They are part of what makes Wales different but where did they come from and what is their origin? At the risk of over-simplifying the matter, when the Romans invaded Britain in 43AD the vast majority of the native population was Celtic and most of them spoke one of two languages, Brythonic and Goidelic. They were derivations of Common Celtic (Brythonic) and Gaelic and Manx (Goidelic). Brythonic was not unlike the...