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The Date of Wansdyke

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THE DATE OF WANSDYKE.

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FOR forty years after the publication of the article on "Belgic Ditches"¹ in 1851, by Dr. Guest, his conclusion that Wansdyke marked the last frontier of the Belgic province was generally accepted; though it must be confessed that this acceptance was due rather to the reputation of the learned writer than to the cogency of any arguments to be found in the article. In 1889 and 1890, however, General Pitt Rivers cut sections in the dyke near Devizes, and gave his opinion as the result of what he found that Wansdyke, in that district at any rate, is a work of Roman or post-Roman age. And probably few people who will take the trouble to go carefully through what he says on the subject in his book on *Excavations in Bokerly Dyke and Wansdyke* will doubt the correctness of his conclusion.

But the period stated, Roman or post-Roman, is more than a sufficiently wide one, and it will be well to quote at length what General Pitt Rivers said with regard to the possible age of the dyke; the passage will be found on pages 29 and 30 of his book, which will be quoted in this paper as *Excavations*. After discussing the possibility that Wansdyke was constructed by Aulus Plautius in 43, with regard to which he remarks that the only objection he can see to the supposition is that the Roman frontier at that time lay far in advance of Wansdyke, he proceeds: "We must also not altogether overlook the possibility of such an entrenchment having been thrown up during the troubles of the year 208, when the Caledonians penetrated far into South

¹ *Archæological Journal*, viii. 143.

Britain, necessitating the presence of the Emperor Severus himself to put a stop to their inroads. We must consider also the possibility of the Wansdyke having been constructed by the Romanised Britons, after the departure of the Romans, as a defence against the Picts and Scots, when the Britons were driven into the south-west corner of the country. . . . The Britons must doubtless have learnt the Roman methods of castramentation and defence, and the resemblance of the Wansdyke, in the general principle of its construction to the walls of Hadrian and Antoninus, should not be overlooked. Lastly, we must bear in mind that there is nothing in our evidence to disprove the supposition that both these works (*Bokerly and Wansdyke*) may have been thrown up by the Saxons. During the seventh and eighth centuries the wars between the West Saxons and the Mercians continued up to the time of Offa. The great work drawn along the frontier of Wales, to keep the people of that country in check, is attributed to Offa, and it is not impossible that the Wansdyke may in like manner have been thrown up by the West Saxons as a defence against *him*. The frontier between Wessex and Mercia appears constantly to have been shifting, but the line of the Wansdyke represents, more or less, the ordinary boundary that existed between the two tribes. It is true that nothing Saxon has as yet been discovered to support this hypothesis. But our evidence, from the nature of it, fixes only the earliest, and not the latest period, at which these works may have been constructed. Two circumstances appear to me to militate against its being regarded as Saxon. Assuming the origin of the name Wansdyke to be Woden's Dyke, it is unlikely that, if it was constructed by the Saxons, they should have attributed it to Woden; and, secondly, it would appear probable that if so large a work had been constructed by the Saxons, some mention of it would have been made in the Saxon Chronicles."

This is so admirable a piece of historical writing that no apology is needed for the length of the quotation. As an instance of the clear insight of the writer, we may notice that

the remark that the Britons must doubtless have learned the Roman methods of castramentation and defence is illustrated by what Henry of Huntingdon relates concerning the battle fought not far from the line of the Wansdyke, as a result of which Ceaulin was driven from his kingdom in 591: "Cum autem Brittones, more Romanorum, acies distincte admoverent, Saxones vero audacter et confuse irruerent, maximum prælium factum est, concessitque Deus victoriam Britannis." A century and a half after the departure of the Romans the Britons, using Roman methods, were victorious. It is true that Henry wrote five centuries after the battle, but he seems to have had access to authorities not now extant.

Wansdyke may be taken to extend from Maes Knoll at the eastern end of Dundry Hill to a short distance south of Chisbury Camp, near Bedwyn Station. It is singular that the parallel of latitude $51^{\circ} 23' 30''$, which passes through the point where the dyke joins Maes Knoll, also cuts Chisbury Camp at a distance of about forty-two miles and twenty-one yards, though the length of the dyke itself from the north end of the camp to Maes Knoll seems to be about forty-six miles and a quarter—an addition of some 10 per cent. Its course is very direct, the most northern point near Wan's house being less than a mile and a half from a straight line between Maes Knoll and Chisbury, while the dyke at South Stoke, near Bath, is about two miles and three-quarters south of the line. A comparison with the Roman wall is interesting. The distance from Wallsend-on-Tyne to Bowness-on-Solway is sixty-six miles, and the whole length of the wall is about seventy-three miles and a half—also an addition of about 10 per cent. The station *Procolitia* is about four miles and three-quarters north of a direct line between the two extremities of the wall, and Newtown, near Carlisle, is about four miles south of it. The weakest point of Wansdyke is where the valley of the Avon cuts through it between Bathford and Bathampton, and the point where it is said the Scots first pierced or "thirled" the Roman

wall is at Thirlwall, where the little river Tipalt cuts through it at about the same relative point in the line of defence.

With regard to extensions of the dyke beyond Maes Knoll and Chisbury, Collinson takes it right to the Severn: ¹ "Descending the Hill (*Dundry*) it crosses Highridge Common, where its tract is still visible, and soon after thwarting the great western road from Bristol to Bridgwater, forms by its vallum a deep narrow lane overhung with wood and briars leading to Yanley-Street in the Parish of Long Ashton. From Yanley it traverses the meadows to a lane anciently denominated from it Wondesdich-Lane, as appears from a deed dated at Ashton 3 Edw: II. (1310), wherein William Goudulph grants to Adam de Cloptone a cottage with a piece of land adjoining to it in *Aystone juxta Bristole*, situated on the eastern side *Venelle de Wondesdiche*."² Here it crosses the Ashton road at Rayenes Cross,³ and ascending the hill, enters the hundred of Portbury, in the Parish of Wraxall, and terminates at the ancient port of Portishead, above mentioned on the Severn sea."

Collinson was a careful writer, and he was Vicar of Long Ashton, but it must be confessed that few traces, if any, of the dyke can now be found west of Maes Knoll; still, if we accept *Wondesdiche* as representing Wansdyke we must continue it to a point on the Long Ashton road five miles north-west of Maes Knoll. It may be doubted, however, whether for purposes of defence much would have been gained by taking the dyke to the west of that point. Temple Meads Station at Bristol is on the meridian of Maes Knoll, and only four miles north of it, while in old days the tide flowed up the Avon at least as far as Saltford, seven miles above the station. A river with such a tide as the Avon, near Bristol, would surely afford as good a line of defence as any dyke. No traces of the dyke can now be found between Long Ashton and salt water.

¹ *History of Somerset*, iii. 140.

² Ex Autog. penes J. H. Smyth, baronet.

³ A mile and a half westward from the church, ii. 304.

At its eastern extremity the dyke can be traced for a mile and a half from Chisbury Camp; but its direction is changed, it no longer runs east and west, but rather south-south-east, parallel with the ancient road from Cirencester to Winchester, which at this point it is evidently intended to guard. Sir Richard Hoare traced a branch of it along the Berkshire Hills for nearly five miles to the eastward of Chisbury Camp to near Inkpen, and he seemed to have formed the idea that it originally extended to Silchester, around and in the neighbourhood of which place dykes similar to Wansdyke occur, but he was unable to find any trace of it on the ground between Inkpen and Silchester.¹ We notice, however, that an eastward extension to Inkpen would not accord with the very decidedly southern direction taken by the dyke when it leaves Chisbury. It is likely that both Maes Knoll and Chisbury were in existence before the dyke was driven between them over the face of the country.

The dyke varies so much in size and form that no general description can be given of it. Perhaps the section given by General Pitt Rivers, 300 paces west of the point where it joins the Roman road at Morgan's Hill, will give a fair idea of it. Here the rampart rises five feet above the ground on the south and ten feet above the ditch on the north, while an outer bank rises about three feet above the ditch. But sometimes there is no rampart, the natural level of the soil coming to the edge of the ditch, and often there is no outer bank; while along the line of the Roman road between Morgan's Hill and Ashley Wood, in Monkton Farley, there is frequently little more than a slope in the ground down towards the north. The ditch is always to the north of the rampart, showing that the dyke was constructed as a defence against an enemy to the north of it. With regard to the places where the rampart is inconspicuous or absent, the following remarks of General Pitt Rivers are instructive: "I have elsewhere suggested that in places where the dyke passed through a forest, the earthen mound and ditch may

¹ *Excavations*, p. 28.

have been replaced by an abattis of felled trees, no trace of which, of course, remains at the present time. If the Roman road from Marlborough to Bath were made at an earlier time than the dyke, as now appears probable, nothing would be more likely than that in places where it passed through a forest an abattis should have been laid in front of the bank of the road as a defence. But in places where the line of defence left the road, as on the tops of the hills where no trees grew, a deeper ditch and bank would be necessary. This idea must be taken for what it is worth in the present state of our evidence on the subject. It is, however, to be observed that the rampart diminishes in size or is wanting in places where forests may have existed, and that it increases in places where forests are unlikely to have grown."¹ "Abattis are formed of trees cut down and arranged side by side with the branches interlaced outwards and the stems inwards; the branches should be freed from foliage and their ends cut sharp. They may be arranged in one or more rows, so that the fire from the parapet shall sweep along their summits, their stems being firmly fastened by pickets to the ground and partly buried in it; an enemy would suffer great loss while attempting to remove them under fire."² It is evident that a defence of this kind would be very effective, and might be provided very quickly in a wooded country.

It will now be well to follow the dyke shortly in its course from east to west. It is in good preservation immediately to the south of Chisbury Camp. Here the ditch is to the east of the rampart, as the dyke is guarding the ancient road in the rear; the top of the rampart is about ten feet above the bottom of the ditch. I could not trace the point at which the dyke left Chisbury, but about a third of a mile west of its northern end, south of a road near a farm with two fine *Araucarias*, there is a bank with a ditch which looks very much like a degraded piece of the dyke. To the east of

¹ *Excavations*, p. 246.

² "Fortification," *Encyc. Britt.*, Ed. ix., vol. ix., p. 422.

Savernake Forest, about a mile and a half west of Chisbury, the dyke is represented in a ploughed field by a slope to the north-east of about four feet in thirty; no doubt the line of defence has been smoothed down by cultivation, but probably it was guarded here by an abattis. The dyke reappears to the west of Savernake Forest, about five miles from Chisbury, crossing the railway from Marlborough to Savernake, continuing for a mile and a quarter; it is then found at intervals to Shaw Farm, four miles south-west of Marlborough. Near Shaw Farm the bank is fully ten feet above the ground to the south of it, and twenty feet above the bottom of the ditch. Where the dyke crosses the Ridgway the bank is only about six feet above the soil on the south, the ditch is about eight feet deep, and its bottom is some twenty-two feet below the top of the bank; there is also a low outer bank about two feet high. Further to the west the bank is as high as it is at Shaw Farm. From this point it can be traced to Ashley Wood above Bathford. Three miles south of Marlborough is a large camp on Martin-sell Hill, which with Chisbury six miles distant no doubt protected the road to Winchester, which ran between them.

At rather more than eight miles from Chisbury the dyke crosses the Ridgway at an elevation of 790 feet, and about a mile further on it reaches its highest point of 913 feet, on the high chalk hills to the south of the valley of the Kennet. From a point a little west of this there is a magnificent view of the dyke as it traverses the front of St. Anne's Hill and reappears beyond Shepherd's Shore by Furze Knoll on Morgan's Hill. The distance between the extreme points at which the dyke can be seen at Furze Knoll and Shaw Farm is fully seven miles. It is quite as fine a view as that of the Roman wall from Hot-bank. West of St. Ann's Hill the dyke gradually drops to the road between Calne and Devizes at Shepherd's Shore, only 570 feet above the sea. At this weak point in the line the rampart is no less than thirty-two feet above the original bottom of the ditch. A mile and a half further on, at Morgan's Hill, nearly seventeen miles

from Chisbury, at an elevation of 700 feet above the sea, the dyke joins the Roman road from Speen to Bath, along which it runs for fourteen miles, during which part of its course its elevation is very slight. For the greater part of this distance Braden Forest protected it to the north, and for the last two miles the deep valley of the Box brook.

At Ashley Wood the Wansdyke turned to the south-west and crossed the Avon Valley between Bathford and Warleigh. It is well seen on Bathampton Down passing from the south of the camp; and keeping on the high ground close to the south of Bath, it is well developed for three-quarters of a mile between the Cross Keys on the Midford road, and the turnpike on the Fosse. From Englishcombe it can be traced almost continuously by Stantonbury Camp to Compton Dando; then there is a break of about a mile and a half till it reappears a quarter of a mile east of the North Somerset Railway, about three-quarters of a mile north of Pensford Station. And from this point it ascends the hill to Maes Knoll, which it reaches at an elevation of 600 feet above the sea, twenty-five feet higher than Chisbury Camp.

Thus Wansdyke may be divided into three parts; seventeen miles of trenching, except possibly two or three where the line ran through Savernake Forest, between Chisbury and Morgan's Hill; fourteen miles between Morgan's Hill and Ashley Wood, where spade work would have been light; and finally fifteen miles of trenching between Ashley Wood and Maes Knoll. So that it may be said that, roughly speaking, two-thirds of the distance would have been guarded by entrenchments and one-third by forest.

We may now proceed to consider what we can learn about the date of the construction of the dyke. General Pitt Rivers simply called it Roman or post-Roman, and he does not imply that there is anything in the nature of the work itself to fix its age more closely. He only tells us that it dates from the campaign of Aulus Plautius in 43, or some later period. Two questions arise—first, is the name Wansdyke a mere fiction like *Ad Axium* or *Via Julia*,

an invention of some latter-day antiquary? and then, when do we first hear of Wansdyke, name or thing? Both questions can be answered by reference to old English charters, summaries of which are given below:—

I. Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus*, MXXXV.; Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 390. Aug. 19 and Dec. 26. A.D. 825.

quindecim cassatorum in Ætheltune. King Egcbertus to the Cathedral at Winchester. Alton Priors. Boundaries: *be westan wodnesbeorge*. Winton.

Domesday Book, 20 hides. Monks of Winchester.

II. K., *C. D.*, MLXX.; *C. S.*, 566; Thorpe, *Dipl.*, 492. After A.D. 871.

Will of Ceolwen leaving 15 hides at Aweltune acquired by her husband in legal possession with witness of King Alfred to the Cathedral at Winchester. Alton Priors. The same boundaries as in the previous charter. Winton.

III. K., *C. D.*, CCCXXXV.; *C. S.*, 600. A.D. 903.

xx cassatorum in Stantun. Rex Eadward principi Ordlaf. Stanton St. Bernard. Boundaries: *thonne ofer wodnes dic*. Wilton.

D. B., 20 hides. St. Mary of Wilton.

IV. K., *C. D.*, MCXX.; *C. S.*, 734. A.D. 939. Winton.

Also K., *C. D.*, CCCLXXVIII. Original charter in the British Museum.

xv mansas æt Cynetan in Uferantun. Rex Æthelstanus Wulfswytlæ ancillæ Christi. Overton by East Kennet. Boundaries: *on wodnes dene up to wodnes dic*.

D. B., 15 hides. Monks of Winchester.

V. K., *C. D.*, CCCCLXVII.; *C. S.*, 998. A.D. 957.

xx mansas æt Stantune. King Eadwig to Bishop Osulf. Stanton St. Bernard. Boundaries: *on wodnes dic*. Wilton.

VI. K., *C. D.*, CCCCLXXXII.; *C. S.*, 1053. A.D. 960.

xx mansas in Stantun. King Eadgar to Bishop Osulf. Stanton St. Bernard. Boundaries: *on wodnesdic*. Wilton.

VII. K., *C. D.*, CCCCLXXXVI.; *C. S.*, 1073. A.D. 961.

Headed: *De Suthstoca, particulam quinis subestimatum mansiunculis in Tottanstoc*. King Eadgar to the Church of

Bath. South Stoke. Boundaries: Ærest westan northan hyt mæraþ wodnes dic. Bath.

Not named in Domesday.

VIII. K., *C. D.*, DII.; *C. S.*, 1099. A.D. 963.

duas mansas atque dimidiam æt Stantune. King Edgar to the Decurion Ælfsige. Stanton Prior. Boundaries: on wodnesdic. Bath.

D. B., 3 hides. Abbey of Bath.

IX. K., *C. D.*, DXVI.; *C. S.*, 1164. A.D. 965.

bis quaternis preter semissam mansiunculis in Stantun. King Eadgar to Æscwig, Abbot of Bath. Stanton Prior. Boundaries: oth wodnes dic. Bath.

X. K., *C. D.*, DLXVI.; *C. S.*, 1257. A.D. 970.

Exchange between King Eadgar and Æscwig, Abbot of Bath; the King giving x cassates at Cliftune, and the Abbot 100 mancusses of gold and x mansas at Cumtun. In the boundaries of Cliftune: rihte on wodnes dic. of wodnes dic on fosse streat. This Cliftune must be Lyncombe, south of Bath, for that is the only point at which Wansdyke and the Fosse meet. Bath.

D. B., *Lincuma* 10 hides. Abbey of Bath.

XI. K., *C. D.*, MCIX.; *C. S.*, 699. A.D. 933.

v cassatos secus silvam que appellatur Safernoc¹ æt Motenes oran. King Athelstan to St. Mary's, Wilton. Boundaries: to wodnes dic. Wilton.

With regard to Motenes Oran, Sir R. C. Hoare writes (*Registrum Wiltonense*, p. 40): "I imagine this place to be Oare, situated near Hewishi, on the south side of Wansdyke, where there are some very extensive British earthen works." The boundary of Oare does not now touch Wansdyke, but it does run along the entrenchment on Martensell Hill, less than a mile and a half from the dyke, and this may have been regarded as pertaining to Wansdyke. It is not unlikely that the name Martensell perpetuates that of Motenes Ora.

King Athelstan gave the land of ten manentes at Nywantun, and five cassates at Motenes Oran; these appear

¹ This early mention of Savernake Forest is interesting.

in Domesday as 13½ hides and half a virgate at Newetone (North Newnton), belonging to St. Mary of Wilton. It will be seen from the names of the churches to which the estates belonged, given at the end of each charter, that the documents are taken from the chartularies of the cathedral at Winchester and the abbeys of Bath and Wilton; and there does not seem to be any good reason for doubting the genuineness of any of the documents.

We see, then, from the original copy of King Athelstan's grant of Overtown to Winchester in 939 that Wansdyke was in existence at that date, and we see also from the other tenth-century charters that it was in existence also at Stanton St. Bernard in North Wilts, and at South Stoke, Lyncombe, and Stanton Prior in Somerset, that is to say no doubt throughout its whole length, by 970. And we see, too, that it was then known by the same name by which it is known now, and that is a very important matter. We notice also that the name Wodnesbeorge occurs in the Boundaries of Alton Priors both in the charter of Egbert to Winchester Cathedral in 825 and in the Will of Ceolwen after 871. Both Kemble and Thorpe in their Indices take this to represent Wanborough, nine miles away; but the estate is certainly Alton Priors, and *beorg* might well be taken to mean *rampart*. The Wansdyke runs through the parish, and it is tempting to connect the name of the boundary point with the dyke, and so to carry the existence of the dyke back at least another century. However this may be, we may be sure that as the dyke existed in 939 it must have existed in 825, for after Egbert's crushing defeat of the Mercians at Ellendune (Wroughton) in 825 there would have been no need for the West Saxons to construct a line of defence along their northern frontier; the pressure upon them came from the Danes, and from quite other directions. We conclude, then, that the dyke existed as we know it now in 825.

But to the question, How long did it exist before that time? it is by no means so easy to return a definite answer,

because the documentary evidence which has carried us thus far fails.

We have to question the dyke itself, and we begin at the eastern end. On consulting a map, it will be seen that the Ermine Street runs south-east from Cirencester through Cricklade and over Wanborough Plain, and from thence it takes a more easterly direction to Speen and so to London. We also see that at a point nearly due east of Swindon Station a branch road leaves it for Winchester. This branch runs nearly due south to Mildenhall (*Cunetio*), from which point it takes a more easterly course through Savernake Forest to Winchester. Wansdyke could very easily have been carried in a north-easterly direction from Savernake Forest by Ramsbury for some nine miles, in which case it would have guarded the road to Speen and London. Instead of which it is carried only for some four miles from the Forest, first towards the east and then towards the south, with the plain purpose of protecting the road to Winchester and leaving the road to London unguarded. We should gather, therefore, that to the men who made the dyke the protection of Winchester was a more important matter than the protection of London; in other words, that the dyke is more likely to have been the work of West Saxons than of Romans.

Again, if we consider the relation of the dyke to the boundaries of the parishes through which it passes we are presented with a very singular condition of things. In the fourteen miles from Morgan's Hill to Ashley Wood, for which space the dyke follows the course of the old Roman road, it forms a boundary between parishes for the whole distance; while during its course through North Wilts from Chisbury to Morgan's Hill, and through North Somerset from Ashley Wood to Maes Knoll, it has absolutely no relation at all to parochial boundaries. And there must be some good reason for this condition of things. We know that ancient roads and ancient fortresses and ancient dykes are very frequently followed by parochial boundaries, only in this case of course

the artificial landmarks must have existed before the parochial boundaries were laid down. When, then, we find that the central third of Wansdyke where it follows the Roman road is a parochial boundary for its whole length, and the two extremities are nowhere followed by parochial boundaries, we are driven irresistibly to the conclusion that the Roman road existed before the parochial boundaries were laid down, but that the parochial boundaries as we now see them existed before Wansdyke was brought into existence. The Great Western Railway passes over the country from Bristol to Bedwyn regardless of the boundaries of parishes, and we should take the fact as a proof that the boundaries existed before the railway, which otherwise would have formed an admirable line of division. And the argument is no less cogent with regard to Wansdyke, which was probably made some twelve centuries before the railway.

As the West Saxons certainly divided out the district according to their own plan, calling the lands after their own names, if we can determine the date of the conquest of the district we shall not be far off the date of its settlement and the marking out of the parochial boundaries. And it is not difficult to fix the date of this conquest. The Old English Chronicle tells us that in 552 Cynric fought with the Britons in the place which is called Searobyrg (*Old Sarum*), and put the Bret-welsh to flight; that in 556 Cynric and Ceawlin fought with the Britons at Beranbyrg (*Barbury Camp*, above Swindon); and that finally in 577 Cuthwine and Ceawlin slew three British kings at Deorham (*Dyrham*), and took three fortresses (*castra*)—Gloucester, Cirencester, and Bath-amchester. North Wilts then, we may be sure, was colonised between 552 and 577, and it is very likely that North Somerset was also colonised after the capture of Bath; it follows, therefore, that Wansdyke cannot have been constructed till after 552. But we may be sure also that it was not constructed for at least seventy years after that date, because until after 620 the career of the West Saxons was one of unbroken conquest and extension, and there would

have been no need to construct the dyke. In 571 Cuthwulf had defeated the Britons at Bedford and captured Aylesbury, Bensington, and Eynsham. In 584 Cutha and Ceawlin by their victory at Fethanleah had carried the West Saxon frontier probably to the Forest of Arden. In 614 Cynegils and Cuichelm defeated the Britons with great slaughter at Beandune, no doubt Bampton in Oxfordshire. So that in 620 the West Saxon realm would have extended from the Isle of Wight on the south, the Severn on the west, the Forest of Arden and across to the Ouse by Bedford on the north, and down to the borders of Surrey on the east, a territory about 120 miles long and eighty miles wide. Soon afterwards came the blundering crime which brought ruin on the West Saxon realm for many a long year, and which, followed by disaster after disaster, laid it within twenty years absolutely under the power of the Mercian King.

We see, then, that as we may be fairly sure that Wansdyke was in existence by 825, and that it can hardly have been thrown up before 626, the date of its construction must most likely fall in the intervening two centuries, at some period when the West Saxons were depressed and needed protection against Mercian attacks. It is likely that the West Saxons continued to hold what is now Oxfordshire until well on into the eighth century, and that the fights at Somerton in 733, at Burford in 752, and at Bensington in 777 mark successive steps in the advance of the Mercian frontier; but in any case the long line of chalk hills would have formed a sufficient protection on the east. From Avonmouth, however, to the chalk hills near Marlborough there was really no natural protection at all for the West Saxons above the tideway of the Avon except the forest of Braden, while the Mercian boroughs of Cirencester and Bath afforded excellent points from which attacks on Wessex could be launched along the Fosse and Ermine Street. The ancient road from Cirencester to Winchester led straight from Mercia to the West Saxon capital. Further, the high chalk hills on the south of the valley

of the Kennet afforded the best line of defence if the West Saxons were driven to bay, for the flat valley of the Thames would give little advantage to defenders. It is evident, however, from the fight at Kempsford in 800 that the Thames formed the boundary between the two nations at that time. Supposing, then, that Wansdyke was constructed by West Saxons as a defence against Mercians, we see that it was a well-planned line of defence built with the least expenditure of labour, because Braden protected it for a third of its length.

We now proceed to consider whether we can find a time within the two centuries indicated suitable for the construction of the dyke. On April 19th, 626, Eumer, who had been sent by Cuichelm, King of the West Saxons, for the purpose, tried to murder Edwin, King of the Northumbrians; he slew Lilla, a thane, and Forthere, a soldier, and wounded the king. On his recovery Edwin marched southward, no doubt along the Riknild Street, which ran from Aldborough-on-the-Ure to Bourton-on-the-Water, where, under the name of Buggilde Street, it joins the Fosse. It is likely that he met the West Saxon host at this point; and he certainly inflicted a crushing defeat upon them, slaying five kings and a great number of people. No acquisition of West Saxon territory would have been of any value to him, but two years later Penda, King of the Mercians, improved his opportunity, fought with the West Saxons at Cirencester and made a treaty. There is no record of war between the Mercians and West Saxons for the next seventeen years; but when in 643 Kenwalk succeeded to the throne of the West Saxons he put away the sister of Penda whom he had married, and was therefore by that king driven from his throne in 645. It was at this time, no doubt, if not in 628, that Bath and Cirencester and their neighbourhood came into the power of the Mercians.

Kenwalk fled to the court of Anna, King of the East Angles, where he was baptised, and where he remained

for three years. In 648 he would have returned, and in that year the Chronicle tells us: "*Her Cenwalk gesalde Cuthrede his mæge iii thusendo londes be Æscesdune*"—"At this time Cenwalk granted to Cuthred his kinsman three thousands of land by Ashdown." It seems likely that this entry refers to the construction of Wansdyke. It will be noted that neither the Parker nor the Peterborough Chronicle mentions what the units of the land-grant were, though the MSS. B and C insert the word *hida*—hides. But both these are comparatively late authorities. The Manuscript B may be dated about the year 1000, and the Abingdon copy, C, about the middle of the eleventh century.¹ Ethelwerd, writing about the end of the tenth century, simply paraphrases the Chronicle: "*Cenuualh propinquo suo Cuthredo tradidit ex prædiis suis tria millia adjacentia colle qui vulgo dicitur Escesdune.*" The earliest authorities, therefore, give no idea of the extent of the unit of the land-grant. It is quite true that instances can be found in the Old English paraphrase of Bede of the elliptic use of the phrase with the sense of hides,² but even this paraphrase is 250 years after Kenwalk's grant. The extent of the unit is quite indeterminate,³ and the passage has been a difficulty to successive interpreters of the Chronicle. It is perhaps worth noting that if we take the unit to be an acre it would give a breadth of about 160 yards along the whole length of the dyke. Ashdown is, of course, the great mass of chalk downs in North Wilts and Berkshire, between Ilsley and East Kennet, along the edge of which the Ridgeway runs, and which shelters the eastern end of Wansdyke, as the tidal Avon covers it on the west.

But apart from the interpretation of this passage, the return of Kenwalk would be a very natural occasion for the construction of the dyke. Cirencester, hostile probably since 628, was less than sixty miles from Winchester, with

¹ Plummer, *Two Saxon Chronicles*, ii., xxix., xxxi.

² *Two Saxon Chronicles*, ii. 23.

³ Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, 154, note 6.

a direct road between the two places, and it was absolutely necessary that the way to it should be strongly fortified. Moreover the construction of the dyke would not have been so heavy a matter as it seems; for the trenching only extended over some seventeen miles in North Wilts and fifteen miles in North Somerset. If Kenwalk called out the West Saxon *fyrð* and set them to work at it, the task might well have been accomplished in two years. With regard to the Roman wall, "from calculations that have been made, founded upon the experience gained by the construction of the vast works connected with modern railways, and supposing ten thousand men were employed upon it, it is considered that, in the existing conditions of the country at the time, the *Vallum* and the *Murus* could not be reared, even supposing the labour to have been uninterrupted, in a shorter period than two years."¹ On the one hand, the construction of Wansdyke would have been a very much lighter task than that of the Roman wall with its *vallum*; on the other hand, the Roman legionaries, no doubt with native labourers under them, would have turned out much better work than the West Saxon *fyrð* could produce. Besides which the legionaries could work continuously, while the *fyrð* could only be called out for a definite time.

It may be taken as certain that a Mercian king would not willingly sit still while the West Saxons were barring him out; and here again the circumstances of the time lend probability to the idea that the dyke was constructed soon after 648. Bishop Stubbs writes: "Penda never relaxed in his hostility to Northumbria; Bede mentions two expeditions, one in the time of Bishop Aidan, in which he besieged Bamborough, and another in the time of Finan (*H. E.*, iii. 16, 17). These inroads seem to fall between 645 and 652."² Kenwalk might well have seized an opportunity while Penda was occupied in Northumbria to construct the dyke. But it is likely that in 652 the Mercian king was south again, for

¹ *Handbook to the Roman Wall*, Ed. 1895, p. 37.

² *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, iv. 302.

the Chronicle tells us that in that year Kenwalk fought at Bradford-on-Avon. Ethelwerd calls this fight *bellum civile*, as he calls the fight between Egbert and Beornwulf at Ellendune in 825 *bella civilia*; and a civil war waged by Kenwalk at Bradford-on-Avon could only be against the Mercians. We have seen that the weakest point of the dyke was at the point where the Avon cuts it between Bathford and Bathampton, not only on account of the natural features of the country, but also because the Mercian king could husband his resources at Bath till it suited him to make an attack. If Penda found the dyke in being, and wished to force it, an attack up the Avon Valley would seem to suggest the readiest road to success. If this were so the attack seems to have failed.

In 661 the Chronicle tells us that Kenwalk fought at Posentesbyrg, wherever that may be; also that Wulphere, son of Penda, plundered as far as Ashdown and in the Isle of Wight, and that he gave Wight to Ethelwald, King of the South Saxons. Bede (*H. E.*, iv. 13) adds the Meonwaras, or inhabitants of the Valley of the Meon, to the gift. Wulphere would seem to have come to East Hampshire and down the Valley of Meon to Wight. This would have been his natural course if he went up over Wanborough Plain and along the old road towards Speen and then to the south. He would have avoided the dyke by passing to the east of it. We are told that Cuthred died in this year, very likely in battle against the Mercians. With regard to the locality of Posentesbyrg, Mr. W. H. Stevenson, Fellow of St. John's College, Oxford, in a letter dated October 25th, 1904, suggested that it is now represented by Postlebury, in the parish of Cloford, near Frome. The old road from Uphill to Old Sarum must have passed within a mile of this point in its course between Beacon Hill and Maiden Bradley, and it lay on the north-western edge of the Forest of Selwood. Accepting the identification, we should suppose that Wulphere marched from Bath up the valleys of the Avon and Frome with the intention of passing along the

ancient road by Old Sarum to Winchester, but that he was met and defeated by the West Saxon forces on the edge of Selwood Forest. This happened at Easter, which fell on March 28th in that year. Later in the year no doubt Wulphere marched from Cirencester over Ashdown and as far as Wight. It would thus seem that an unsuccessful Mercian invasion from Bath was followed by a successful one from Cirencester.

In 675 we are told that Wulphere and Æscwine fought at Biedanheafde, which is taken by Mr. Plummer to be Bedwin. If this identification is correct, Wulphere was caught in an attempt to pass close round the eastern end of the dyke, and he most likely lost his life in the attempt, for his death is recorded in this year. In 715 Ine and Ceolred fought at a place which the Parker Manuscript calls Woddesbeorg, and the Peterborough Manuscript Wodnesbeorg; this has generally been taken to be Wanborough, but we see from the Winton Charter of 825 that it may very well have been at the point where Ridgeway crossed Wansdyke by Alton Priors. The last fight that we can definitely place on Wansdyke occurred in 1006, when the Northmen marched on a career of plunder through Hampshire to Reading, Wallingford and Cholsey, then along Ashdown to *Cynetan*, where they defeated the *fyrð* which had been called out to meet them, and so by Winchester back to their ships. *Cynetan* has been placed at Kintbury, but it is much more likely to mean East Kennett, where Ridgeway crosses Wansdyke, on which probably the *fyrð* had been posted to withstand the invaders.

We see, then, that supposing Wansdyke to have been constructed immediately after the return of Kenwalk in 648, the positions of hostilities between Mercia and Wessex seem to have a clear relation to the line of the dyke. In 652 Kenwalk fought a battle in a civil war at Bradford-on-Avon, an attack from Bath up the valley of the Avon being apparently the easiest way of piercing the dyke. In 661 Wulphere seems to have passed wide of the dyke on the east, but in 675, trying to slip close by its eastern extremity,

he met with resistance and was apparently slain. The fight in 715 may have been either at Wanborough or where Wansdyke guards Ridgeway.

We now proceed to consider whether what is now North Wilts was in the latter part of the seventh century under the power of the Mercians or the West Saxons, and we turn naturally to the history of the minster at Malmesbury. We are in the habit of regarding this great church as peculiarly West Saxon; but as the Bishop of Bristol has shown, it was in its early days quite as much a Mercian as a West Saxon foundation, receiving gifts from the kings of both peoples. This point will be clear from the following list of early Malmesbury Charters:—

K., *C. D.*, xi.;* *C. S.*, 37. Aug. 26, A.D. 675.

Charter of Leutherius, Bishop of the West Saxons, to the Priest Aldhelm of land to build a monastery.—L.

C. S., 54. A.D. 680.

Grant by Cenfrith, Earl of the Mercians, of x cassates at Wdetun to Abbot Aldhelm, with consent of his lord King Ethelred.—W. M.

K., *C. D.*, xxii.;* *C. S.*, 58. A.D. 681.

Grant by King Ethelred, of the Mercians, at the request of Cenfrith and the prayer of the brethren at Malmesbury of xxx cassates to the west of the public street and xv others near Tetbury.—L.

Marked *Niuentun*, Long Newnton.

K., *C. D.*, xxiii.;* *C. S.*, 59.

Grant by King Ethelred of the Mercians of xv cassates near Tetbury.—L. Boundaries of *Cherletone*, Charlton.

K., *C. D.*, xxiv.;* *C. S.*, 63. Aug., A.D. 682.

Grant by Cedwalla, King [of the West Saxons], of xxxii cassates at Kemele.—L. Kemble.

K., *C. D.*, xxvi.;* *C. S.*, 65. July 30, A.D. 683.

Grant by Berlitwald *rex, regnante domino*, of xl cassates at Sumerford.—L.

K., *C. D.*, xlvi.;* *C. S.*, 103. A.D. 701.

Ina, King of the Saxons, xlv cassates; v at Iserdun, xx

where the stream Corsaburn rises, in another place near the same stream x, and near the brook which is called Redburna x.—L. Garsdon, Corston, and Rodborne.

K., *C. D.*, xciv.;* *C. S.*, 170. A.D. 745.

Cuthred, King of the West Saxons, x mansiones in Wdetun.—L.

K., *C. D.*, ciii.; *C. S.*, 185. A.D. 758.

Kinewlf, King [of the West Saxons], xxx manentes where the streams Meardaeno and Reodburna join.—L.

K., *C. D.*, clxxiv.;* *C. S.*, 279. A.D. 796.

Egeferth, King of the Mercians, restores xxxv manentes at Piertean, which his father Offa had stolen from the Abbey.—L. Purton.

All these documents are given by William of Malmesbury, who wrote not later than 1145, while those marked with an *L* are found in a Malmesbury chartulary written in the time of Richard II.; and they mark the tradition of the abbey in the middle of the twelfth century with regard to the sources from which the estates came to it. The documents marked with a star were regarded by Kemble as doubtful, but it does not therefore follow that the information contained in them is false. We may take it that certainly from the time of Egbert onwards the minster had been in Wessex, and it is unlikely that the monks would have attributed their earliest endowments to Mercian kings unless they had really been so given. We see, then, that to Ethelred, King of the Mercians, and his nephew Berhtwald, an under-king in the same realm, who sheltered St. Wilfrid in 680, are attributed gifts of land at Charlton and Somerford, in North Wilts, as well as at Long Newnton, in Gloucestershire. We notice also that, apart from the grant by Cedwalla attributed to 682, all the earlier grants are Mercian, and all the later grants, except the restitution of Purton by Ecgferth, are West Saxon. Unfortunately, no grant is attributed to the period between 683 and 701; but so far as these Malmesbury Charters may be taken as evidence, they show that in the early part of the reign of

Ethelred the minster received endowments from Mercia rather than from Wessex, and therefore that it probably stood on Mercian territory. How far the Mercian boundary lay beyond Malmesbury there is no evidence to show, any more than we can tell how it was that Malmesbury came under West Saxon influence in the days of Ine, who became king in 688; but that this boundary lay then further south than it does now is clear. Malmesbury lies about thirteen miles north of the dyke; Little Somerford about two miles less.

With regard to the name of the dyke, we have seen that it was known as Woden's from the earliest times at which we can trace its existence. And this need not mean that our forefathers attributed it to Woden, but rather that the West Saxons themselves constructed it as a defence against the Mercians, and called it by the name of Woden, who was considered to be the protector of boundaries; and this dedication would still have been possible in 648. As against Penda, who was the last great mainstay of the old English heathenism, the West Saxons might still have hoped that it would have its influence; while Christianity can hardly yet have obtained a controlling power among the West Saxons. It is true that Bishop Birinus had begun his missionary work among them in 634, and that their King Cynegils was one of his earliest converts; but Bede¹ relates the death of Birinus before that of Cynegils in 645, and Kenwalk did not become a Christian till after his accession to the throne, while he was an exile in East Anglia. After his return in 648 a Gallic bishop named Agilbert came from Ireland, but as he never seems to have learned the language of the West Saxons he can have had little or no influence over the people. Though Bede tells us that Birinus, working from Dorchester on the Thames, built many churches and turned many people to the Lord, we may well think that by far the larger number of the West Saxons were still heathen in 648, and would be likely to call their great boundary

¹ *H. E.*, iii. 7.

dyke by the name of Woden. If this were so Wansdyke has a very real historic interest, as being the last great abiding mark left by an expiring heathenism on the face of the country. We may, however, take it as fairly certain that the name of Woden would not have been applied to the dyke in or after the time of Ine and St. Aldhelm; and as we have seen that it can hardly have been constructed before 626, so we can scarcely place it later than 700.

Concerning the part of the dyke between Spye Park and Ashley Wood, it is generally inconspicuous in this section of its course. General Pitt Rivers gives sections of it from Chisbury as far as the Melksham Canal, and again from the Fosse to Stantonbury;¹ but there is nothing to show what it is like between the Avon at Melksham and the same river at Bathford. South of Laycock, on the road to Melksham, it is represented by a low slope on the north of the hedgerow which forms the parish boundary, while between Chapel Knapp and Whitley a slight slope on the south of the hedge is the only sign of it. It is, however, well developed for a considerable distance to the south of the house in Neston Park, and it seems to be traceable on the north of the wood to the west of the road between Box and Atworth. A quarter of a mile south of the crossing of the roads near Hatt House its ridge can be discerned on the sky-line east of the road, and to the west it is marked by a slope on the north of the hedgerow. It can be detected as a broad low ridge in a field to the west of the road between Kingsdown and South Wraxall, but between Kingsdown and Monkton Farley it can hardly now be traced, though a gate probably marks the ancient course of the Roman road. It reappears in the low ground east of the Avon, rather more than half a mile south of Bathford Church. It is likely that the whole of this district was heavily wooded in early days. In Mediæval times Braden Forest stretched from the Thames to near Wootton Bassett, and from the

¹ *Excavations*, 248, 249.

Ray to beyond Braden Pond, but the name Bradenstoke marks a much further extension to the south and west; while in Domesday great masses of woodland are attributed to the king's manors of Chippenham, Corsham, and Melksham, and to the Sheriff Edward's manor of Lacock.¹ The ground rises gradually from an elevation of 132 feet at the road near Lacock to one of 530 feet near Monkton Farley, and it would seem that though to the east of Neston the dyke is indistinct, it can generally be traced to the west of that point. Probably the wood became thinner as the elevation increased and the soil became more dry.

We see, then, with regard to the date of Wansdyke, that it was certainly in existence under its present name in 939, and probably in 825. On the other hand, the fact that although the portion of its course where it follows the Roman road is a parish boundary for its whole length, its two extremities in no place form boundaries of parishes, shows that these extremities are later in date than the boundaries. But the boundaries cannot be earlier than the colonisation of the district by the West Saxons, a process which, according to the Chronicle, occurred in the last half of the sixth century; while the fact that the growth of the West Saxon realm was continuous until 626 to a point far beyond Wansdyke would seem to show that the rampart is not likely to have been erected before that date. We may perhaps narrow the limit of two centuries rather more by the consideration that the name *Wansdyke* is not likely to have been given to the work after about the end of the seventh century, when under the influence of Ine and St. Aldhelm Christianity was generally accepted by the men of Wilts and Somerset. Within the two centuries following 626 it would not be easy to point to a more likely period for the erection of the dyke than that following the return of Kenwalk in 648, and we shall probably not be far

¹ There are useful papers by the late Canon Jackson on the forests of Braden and Selwood in the *Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine*, vol. xxiii., pp. 162-165, 268-294.

wrong if we think that it was constructed by Cuthred in the four years following that date.

It may seem strange that a paper on this subject should appear in the *Transactions* of a Mercian Society, but Wansdyke is a work of national and not merely of local interest. If it was constructed by West Saxons, on West Saxon territory, the Mercians were the moving cause of its construction, and at any rate the paper was thought out and written on West Saxon soil.
