

THE WANSDYKE - a mysterious link with the past

What is The Wansdyke?

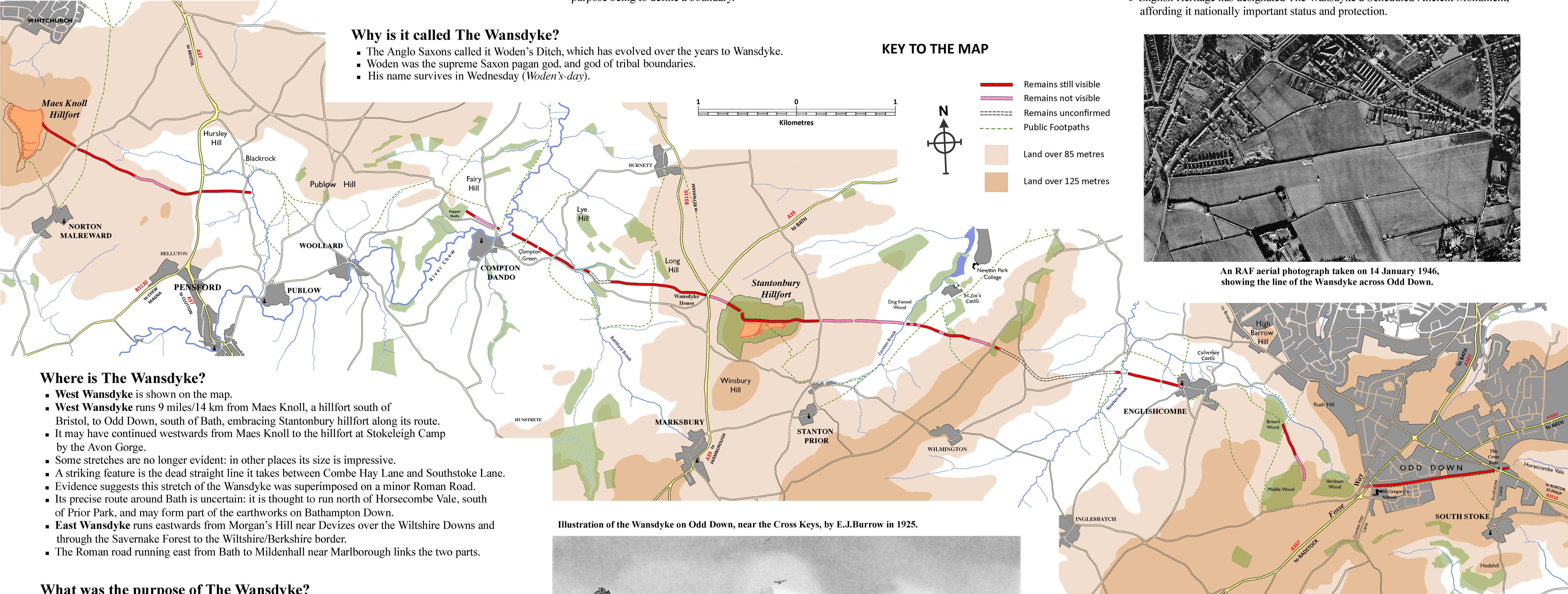
- An ancient linear earthwork: a massive bank with a ditch on the north side.
- It is some 50 miles/80 km long and up to 100ft/30m wide.
- The 2m - 3m high bank was made mainly of material excavated from the ditch and faced with turf, timber or stones.
- The ditch was 4 - 5m wide and 2 - 3m deep.
- The earthwork was consistent in its uniform design and dimensions, implying a master plan.
- Construction of the dyke was probably intermittent, and was not completed in its entirety.
- Construction techniques indicate work in a Roman military tradition.
- It exists in two separate parts known as West Wansdyke and East Wansdyke.

When and by whom was The Wansdyke constructed?

- Archaeological and historical evidence is scarce. Here are four theories -
 1. It is a 5th century post-Roman boundary between native British (north & south Dobunnii) territories.
 2. It was built towards the end of the Roman occupation in the 5th century, by the Romanised native Britons to keep out Anglo Saxon invaders who were occupying the upper Thames Valley.
 3. It was built to establish a territorial boundary after the Battle of Dyrham in AD 577. At that battle the English defeated the Britons, subsequently occupying Bath, Gloucester & Cirencester.
 4. It was built in the 7th century or later by the West Saxons. During this period, the Saxon kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia fought for control of the border territories between the two kingdoms. The northern boundaries of Somerset, Wiltshire and Berkshire effectively marked the line of this fluctuating boundary.
- Latest research favours the late Roman or early post-Roman period: probably during the 5th century; its purpose being to define a boundary.

Why is The Wansdyke important?

- It is among the longest earthworks of its period in England.
- It is evidence of a major former division in the country.
- The stretch from St. Gregory's School to the Cross Keys remains a significant landscape feature.
- It defined part of the parish boundary of South Stoke in King Edgar's charter of AD 961. (Part of the Wansdyke, and an adjoining area now occupied by St.Gregory's School and Sulis Meadows housing estate, were transferred from the parish to the City of Bath by the 1950 Bath Extension Act.)
- The Wansdyke east of Sulis Meadows estate remains the parish boundary after more than 1,000 years.
- English Heritage has designated The Wansdyke a Scheduled Ancient Monument, affording it nationally important status and protection.



Where is The Wansdyke?

- **West Wansdyke** is shown on the map.
- **West Wansdyke** runs 9 miles/14 km from Maes Knoll, a hillfort south of Bristol, to Odd Down, south of Bath, embracing Stantonbury hillfort along its route.
- It may have continued westwards from Maes Knoll to the hillfort at Stokeleigh Camp by the Avon Gorge.
- Some stretches are no longer evident: in other places its size is impressive.
- A striking feature is the dead straight line it takes between Combe Hay Lane and Southstoke Lane.
- Evidence suggests this stretch of the Wansdyke was superimposed on a minor Roman Road.
- Its precise route around Bath is uncertain: it is thought to run north of Horsecombe Vale, south of Prior Park, and may form part of the earthworks on Bathampton Down.
- **East Wansdyke** runs eastwards from Morgan's Hill near Devizes over the Wiltshire Downs and through the Savernake Forest to the Wiltshire/Berkshire border.
- The Roman road running east from Bath to Mildenhall near Marlborough links the two parts.

What was the purpose of The Wansdyke?

- It formed a major frontier built by those to the south to establish their territorial boundary and control access.
- It is possible that the hillforts were intended to serve some defensive function, but no evidence has been found.
- It is generally accepted that The Wansdyke did not have any defensive military purpose as such.

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