

The Three Fields: Historical Landscape

The Three Fields site is located in the vicinity of the ancient county boundary which, for more than a millennium, has separated Worcestershire (and, since 1974, the West Midlands) from Staffordshire.

At various dates, the boundary has also delineated the medieval manor of Oldswinford, the ancient parish of Old Swinford^{*}, the Domesday hundred of Clent, the medieval Halfshire hundred, the Anglo-Saxon royal estate of Swinford, the Norman forest of Kinver, Kidderminster Rural Deanery¹, and the medieval (or early-medieval) Diocese of Worcester². It may also have marked the north-west edge of the 7th-9th century Hwiccan kingdom and perhaps even post-Roman tribal territories³. Whilst the boundary line probably has its roots in earlier (though more diffuse) frontiers dating back to prehistoric times, it seems to have been in continuous use through to the present day. Most recently it has demarcated the western edges of Upper Swinford and Wollaston civil parishes as well as the Borough of Stourbridge⁴; and it still, of course, defines the edge of Dudley Metropolitan Borough today.

It is likely that the boundary's course has altered very little over the centuries, although the straight portion adjacent to The Three Fields and Clent View Road (south of Little Iverley Covert, SO881838 to SO884826) appears to have been formalised more recently. For most of its history, this stretch of the boundary probably traversed largely unproductive heath-land⁵, the area to the west being Stourbridge Common, and that to the east Whittington Common. There is no record of any early enclosures or other economic resources (such as woods or fishponds) in the immediate vicinity, so there was probably little need for a precise boundary line to be drawn until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Maps published in 1782⁶, 1827⁷, 1834⁸ and 1888⁹ show minor variations in the course of the boundary around the (then) new fields in this region. (Facsimiles of the first two of these maps are available online¹⁰.) The straight line apparent on the 1888 and later maps would seem to be the product of a relatively late rationalisation of the boundary¹¹. Although it is not known exactly how this came about, the adjustments probably have their root in eighteenth-century parliamentary enclosures, the development of the civil parishes in the nineteenth century or perhaps in minor boundary disputes between the parishioners of Kinver and Oldswinford, such as that recorded in the 1733 Old Swinford parish records¹².

At the northern end of The Three Fields and to the north of Dunsley Road (SO882851 to SO881839), the boundary line follows a more ancient, and sinuous, course. It coincides precisely with a set of dykes (banks and ditches) on Wollaston Ridge which are known to date from the tenth century or earlier, having been referenced in a charter of AD 951-9 for Swinford¹³. These structures seem to have originally extended further north along the ridge towards Vicarage Road, but quarrying and other later activity has left little evidence of the dykes there today. Figure 1 illustrates the result of a visual survey conducted in 2015.

In the mid-tenth century, the Wollaston-ridge dykes were referred to (in the Swinford charter, S579) as *mæredice* 'boundary dykes'¹⁴ so, even in the Anglo-Saxon period, they must have marked an established boundary. Indeed, it is likely that they date from some time before the seventh century when dyke building seems to have been at its height. They may have originated during the first Anglo-Saxon influx into the area during the sixth or seventh century, but an even earlier date cannot be ruled out.

The dykes appear to have been approximately co-linear with another (though longer) boundary dyke running along Kingswinford ridge (i.e. in the vicinity of Ridgehill Wood, Friar's Gorse and Mountpleasant Covert; SO876883 to SO884860)¹⁵. Although no visible evidence remains there today, the Kingswinford dyke was mentioned in a charter of AD 996 (or, arguably, AD 994) for *Eswich* (Ashwood); and it is believed by Dr Della Hooke, one of the country's foremost experts in historical geography, that it ran along the ridge top which separates Kingswinford from Ashwood Hay¹⁶.

* The two-word form of this place-name, 'Old Swinford', is traditionally used in ecclesiastical contexts.

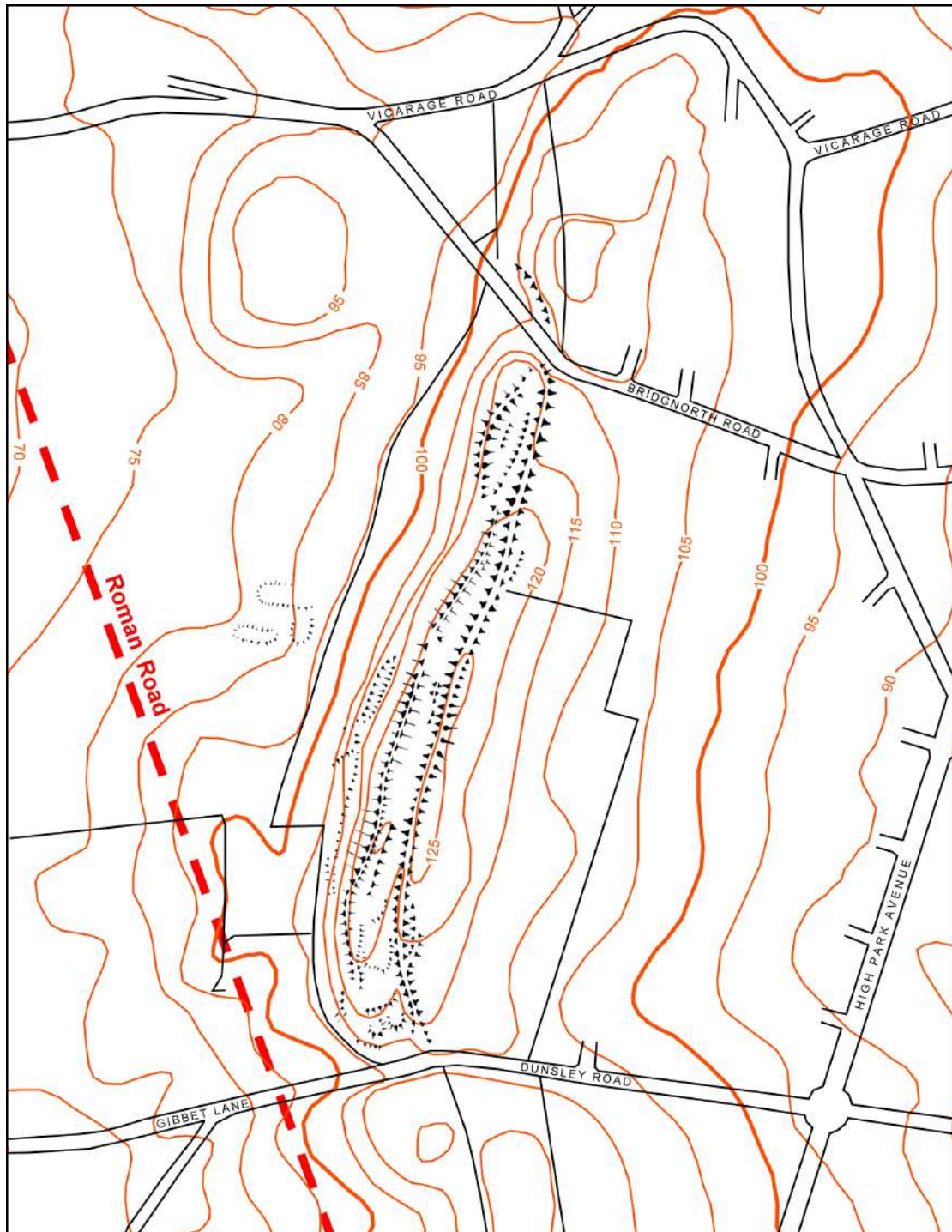


Figure 1. Wollaston-ridge dykes from a visual survey undertaken in March 2015. Two main earthworks are apparent: the eastern bank stands several metres above its accompanying partly-filled ditch; and a second bank, about 20 metres to the west, appears to have been constructed on the ridge's break of slope. A terrace on the face of the slope may be the remnants of a western ditch. Other earthworks are visible in the vicinity, but it is not known whether any of these are contemporaneous with the dykes. That recorded north of Bridgnorth Road represents more recent quarrying. The northern end of The Three Fields site is depicted near the bottom-centre of this figure. The county boundary runs along the eastern dyke and then along the western boundary of The Three Fields. (After James, 2015¹⁷.)

The Triassic sandstone ridges underlying the Kingswinford and Wollaston dykes form what is effectively a single, natural boundary feature. Together, these ridges helped define the pre-Domesday estate or region of Swinford, and probably the hundred of Clent, as well as the two ecclesiastical domains already noted. The coincidence of these functions suggests that the entire boundary line may have derived from that of an even earlier territory¹⁸. Indeed, ridges and watersheds of this kind are often seen to demarcate very early estates, the boundary lines upon them serving multiple subsequent purposes, including use as parish boundaries which frequently survive into the modern era¹⁹.

Many short dykes such as this are associated with major roads (often of Roman origin); and it is thought that they helped to facilitate collection of tolls by post-Roman groups by preventing travellers from circumnavigating toll points²⁰. The first-century Roman road (Margary 192) from Droitwich (*Salinae*) to Greensforge passes within about 130 m of the dykes' southernmost surviving remnants.

It is not known how far south the dykes here extended, but even today, the boundary line's sinuous portion — which coincides with the dykes along Wollaston Ridge — extends south into The Three Fields (for some 80 - 100 metres) before giving way to the aforementioned straight (and probably more recent) section of the boundary (Figure 2). If the boundary's curve is extrapolated at this point, it would intersect the ridge line that runs south through The Three Fields; and it is not inconceivable that the dykes originally continued along this ridge, eventually converging with the Roman road further south (near Little Iverley Covert or even close to the southern end of Clent View Road). Although there is no obvious sign of ridge-top earthworks within The Three Fields today, it is possible that the site still possesses sub-surface archaeology related to the dykes' construction or use. Indeed, a slightly raised area of ground is noticeable near the north-west corner of the site (SO881839; point A on Figure 2). While this may simply reflect the natural topography, it would seem unwise to rule out the possibility that it represents a remnant of the ancient *mæredice* here.

The entire ridge which runs south from Vicarage Road, Wollaston to the southern end of Clent View Road formed the boundary of the medieval Kinver Forest to the east. This boundary line was described in 'The Great Perambulation' of AD 1300²¹; and one of the landmarks referenced therein — the *Croked Apeltre* (crooked apple-tree) — was located somewhere along the ridge line²², most likely near the southern terminus of the dykes and possibly in the vicinity of The Three Fields site.

Trees present at the site today consist primarily of twenty one Limes planted along the line of the county boundary. These would appear to be Common Limes, *tilia x europaea* (although the colour of the hairs on the leaf-vein axils might suggest a related hybrid). They currently reach heights of about 15-20 m and appear to be the surviving remnants of the twenty-six trees mapped here in 1882²³. A few smaller examples of Hazel, Crab-apple, Oak and Blackthorn are also present in the boundary hedge. Despite there being very little Quickthorn (Hawthorn) present, it is likely that the straight portion of the boundary hedge (including the Lime trees within it), is of post-Enclosures origin, probably being late eighteenth or early nineteenth century in date.

No appreciable hedge-bank is visible from The Three Fields although some embankment can be seen from the Staffordshire side of the boundary. In the curved section of the boundary at the north-west of the Three Fields site (SO881839), this shallow embankment extends for several feet into Staffordshire. While this could be the result of soil build-up caused by repeated ploughing, it is conceivable that the embankment might represent a partially ploughed-out earthwork, such as hypothesized previously, along the boundary.

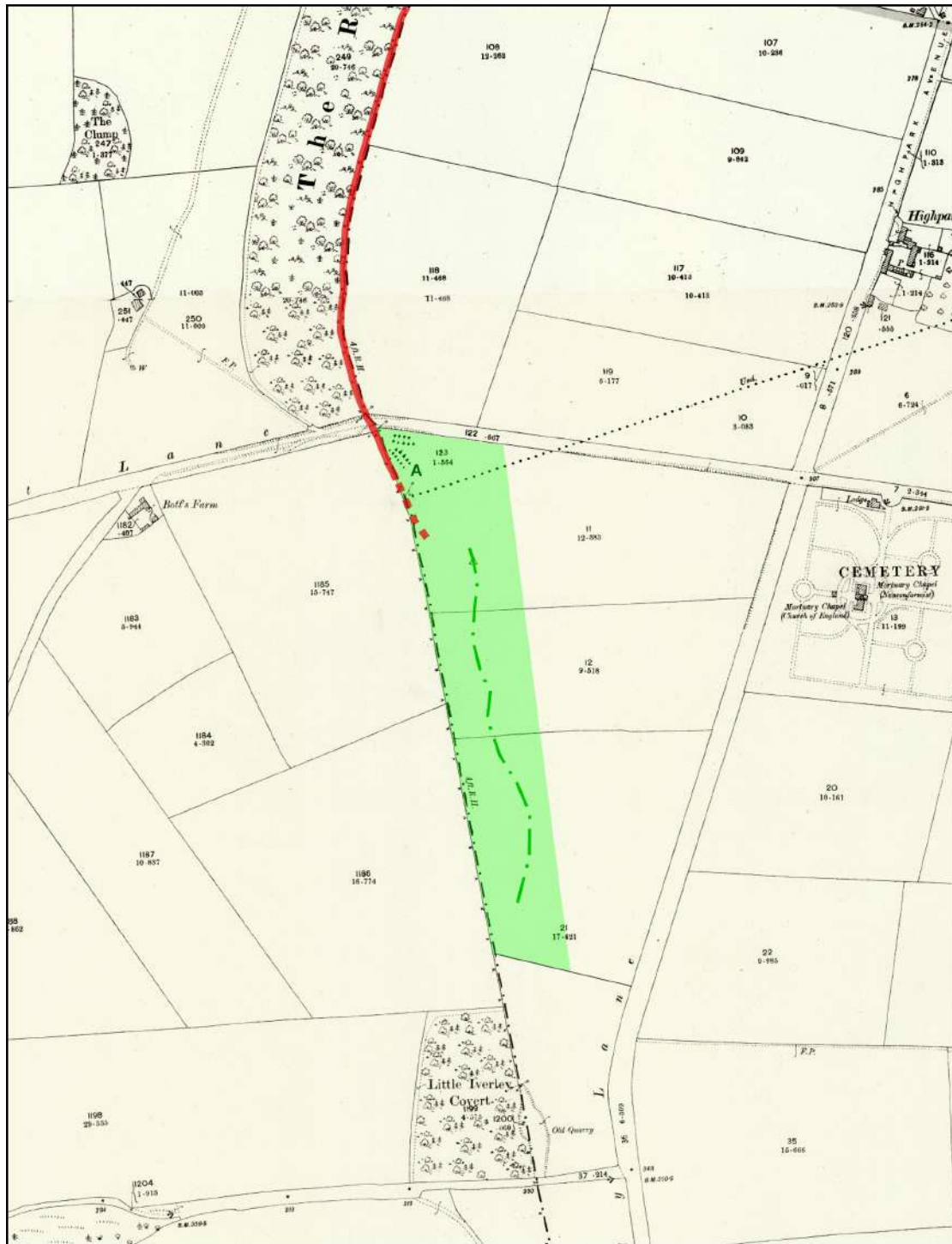


Figure 2. The Three Fields site (shaded green) shown in relation to the county boundary line. The latter coincides with a system of dykes — referenced as 'mæredice' in the tenth century — on Wollaston Ridge to the north. If the sinuous section of the boundary (red line) is extrapolated south-east (dotted red line), it would extend towards the crest of the ridge (green dashed line) that runs through The Three Fields. The dark green hachures at point A depict (very approximately) a shallow ridge in the ground which extends from the NW corner of the site. See text for further explanation. (Map base: OS 25" County Series 1903²⁴).

References

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