

Council for British Archaeology

Cyngor Archaeoleg Brydeinig

Wales/Cymru



Llwyn Celyn, Monmouthshire

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Vernacular farm building, Silian, Ceredigion

Newsletter 57 Spring 2019

<http://www.councilforbritisharchaeologywales.wordpress.com/>

A nineteenth-century inscribed curse from north Wales

A great deal has been written recently about apotropaic marks and symbols, that is the widely distributed scratch markings (daisy-wheels, angular 'letters' etc), usually found in a domestic context, which are interpreted as protective charms. Opinion is divided about the significance of these marks but witch-bottles (previously featured in this journal) are unmistakable countercharms used by those who imagined themselves cursed or bewitched. Witch-bottles are referred to in later seventeenth-century sources, and were filled with urine and sharp objects and intended to turn curses or spells back on those who had uttered them. The latest census of examples records over 200 buried or concealed witch-bottles ranging in date from seventeenth-century bellarmine to eighteenth-century and later glass bottles. This note is concerned with the opposite of these apotropaic objects, that is with physical evidence of the intention to harm and is concerned with the continuation of cursing into the nineteenth century. For some, the recency of the curses is surprising and disturbing.

In 2018 C.R Archaeology conducted archaeological recording at Wern Wen Farm, Llangwstenin (Llangystennin), near Llandudno, north Wales. Wern Wen still has a rural setting and occupies a slightly elevated position overlooking the Afon Ganol floodplain. The farmhouse, together with its outbuildings and the neighbouring property of Wern Goch, is part of a small farm complex. Wern Wen farmhouse is a Grade II listed building (Cadw ID: 3282) and has seventeenth- to mid-eighteenth-century origins. It was remodelled in the nineteenth century when extensive works were carried out at the farmstead.

Archaeological mitigation in the form of a historic building recording was carried out on the site to create a record prior to the renovation of the farm. This record included the farmhouse, where works uncovered an impressive inglenook fireplace, and all the farm outbuildings.

The recording of an early nineteenth-century barn revealed the most surprising element of the works. Partially covered on one of the tie-beams of the barn which flanked the threshing floor was a carved inscription. All inscriptions are exciting but this one appeared to be particularly novel if not unique. It was designed to be seen by those entering the barn. However, the barn doorway had been inaccessible for years and the inscription deliberately covered up. When the boards obscuring the truss were removed the following inscription was revealed "MELLDIGEDIG + FYDDO + LLE + HWN + AMEN". This translates as "May this place be cursed. Amen" or "Cursed be this place. Amen".

This intimidating inscription was deliberately intended to be visible from the threshing floor. The inscription is very prominent, extending the length of the tie-beam and carved in letters some six inches high. It was evidently carved with the tie-beam in situ and includes one upside down letter (an F). The carver presumably became confused while working on a ladder with paper in hand. The style of the lettering, all capitalised and with serifs, and with emphatic crosses between words is solemn and archaic. The inscription shows the influence of the Bible, especially the maledictions in Deuteronomy.

What date is the inscription? The barn is a rather superior three-bay building with twin-tiered ventilation slits, probably estate-built, with ridgeless, pegged tie-beam roof-trusses with raking struts flanking the central threshing bay. The inscription, carved in situ, if broadly contemporary with the barn's construction, must date from the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1845 (the tithe apportionment reveals), Wern-wen (a farm of 28 acres) was owned by Robert Parry Evans and the tenant was Abel Evans. There must have been an interesting story behind this disconcerting inscription. One can only speculate that the inscription was a curse directed at a landlord by a departing tenant, or by a disgruntled farmservant.

An early-nineteenth-century date for this curse while initially surprising is quite appropriate as there was then much consternation about a cursing well at Llanelilian-yn-Rhos (some five miles away). The reputation of Ffynnon Elian as a cursing well developed in the later eighteenth century, and its sinister reputation is an extraordinary negative variant of the positive values attributed to the ubiquitous holy and curative wells. It is referred to by the antiquarian Thomas Pennant in his *History of Whiteford and Holywell* (1796), where he described how farmers and 'coal-adventurers' in the locality suffered from the depredations of the poor but were reluctant to take any action for fear of being cursed in St Elian's well. Ffynnon Elian became a weapon in the hands of an impoverished peasantry and more generally for those who wanted to right a burning wrong. Many stories were told of the tragedies associated with the well and the notorious keepers of the well. The inscription at Wern-wen is an example of the way in which cursing was intended to right an injustice. So too are the cursing-pot and cursing tablet found on Anglesey, now in Gwynedd Museum and Art Gallery Museum, but featured on The People's Collection Wales website. Literary was evidently considered essential for the imposition of a specific curse and there are parallels with the famous Roman cursing tablets. The initials of those who were to be cursed were inscribed on a piece of slate or lead before consigning it to the well. The Anglesey cursing pot spells out the name of the intended victim in full. The Wern-wen inscription is a conditional curse that does not name an individual but is written out in full.

The cursing well fell into disuse in the mid-nineteenth century about 1850 after sporadic prosecutions of those connected with the well. It was the heyday of Non-conformity and a veil was drawn over the whole nightmare, which was rarely referred to subsequently. Nevertheless, cursing has left an archaeological trace at Wern-wen. The inscribed curse at Wern-wen should be understood as the counterpart of the charms against witchcraft, evil men and women, and 'hardness of heart' which widely circulated in nineteenth-century Wales and are occasionally discovered in stoppered bottles as concealed deposits, and badly need further discussion.

C.R. Archaeology/Richard Suggett



References:

Ronald Hutton (ed.), *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain* (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2016), esp. chap. 5. by Brian Hoggard, 'Witch bottles : their contents, contexts and uses'

Richard Suggett, *A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales* (History Press, Stroud, 2008), esp. chap. 6 on cursing wells



THE
PREHISTORIC
SOCIETY
SINCE 1935

New Neolithic evidence from Anglesey (Joint CAA lecture).

Saturday 6th April 2019, 1.30-5pm

Lecture Hall 2, Bangor University, Pontio, Bangor

Jane Kenney on Parc Cybi; Cat Rees on Llanfeathlu; Frances Lynch on Pottery

- Pontio is in the centre of Bangor about 10 mins walk, straight down the road as you come out of the station.
- Trains (c. 8.20-9.50am) from Cardiff, London, Birmingham and Manchester can get you there in time -- and return you!
- By car, take Bangor turn off J11 of A55 and follow A5 into town. Pontio is on the right, directly below the university building on the hill; car parks on left.
- There are cafes and snack bars in the building. The venue is not free so there is a £5.00 fee at the door

For further details contact f.m.lynych@axis-connect.com

WOOLOLOGY!?

CBA Wales in conjunction with the Clywd Powys Archaeological Trust will be exploring all sorts of fascinating connections between wool use / sheep rearing and archaeology at: the Built Wells Smallholding and Countryside Festival (A celebration of rural life, 18- 19 May 2019), the Royal Welsh Show (22-25 July 2019); and the Winter Fair (25-26 Nov 2019).

As part of the Council for the Protection of Rural Wales's sponsorship stand for the Woolpacking and Handling competition, the archaeologists will be showcasing the impact of sheep rearing on our landscape and exploring the ways in which humans have used wool for their own ends. This will include looking at archaeological finds, displays of traditional crafts and opportunities to get interactive with fleece! Come along to say hello and get involved - find us near the Woolpacking competition areas. <http://www.rwas.wales/>



Iron Age (left), Medieval (centre), Modern (right)
(source: Wild, P. 1988)

Oxygen isotope tree ring dating: potential in Wales

Dendrochronology, based on matching the pattern of annual rings in a timber sample of unknown age with firmly dated reference chronologies, is used widely, but it works more easily in some places than others. The method relies on annual variations in the ring widths, so it works best in places where trees are growing under climatic stress. In the mild wet climate of Wales, tree growth does not vary greatly from year to year, making pattern matching very challenging and dendrochronology generally requires very long sequences of at least 80 and usually more than 100 rings. Although there has been considerable success in recent years in dating houses in North Wales, particularly through the 'discovering old Welsh houses group', successful dendrochronology over the rest of Wales is the exception rather than the rule. This is especially true of vernacular buildings such as farmhouses and cottages that are often constructed of fast-grown timbers with far fewer than 100 rings.

A new tree-ring dating technique has recently been developed at Swansea University, in collaboration with Oxford University, which has the potential to date timbers that grew fast in a mild climate. It also works by pattern-matching, but rather than using the width of the rings it uses their chemistry. The ratio of heavy to light oxygen isotopes (^{18}O and ^{16}O) in summer rainfall varies annually due to differences in atmospheric circulation, and that record is stored in tree rings. The team has compiled an 800-year 'master chronology' using securely dated timber samples archived in Oxford. The patterns are stored in the trees irrespective of any climatic stress, and the signal is much stronger than that in tree ring widths, so that secure dates can be obtained with far fewer rings.

Although the master chronology was compiled using timbers from Central England, the first real test of the method was in SE Wales. Llwyn Celyn, in the Llanthony Valley is a mediaeval hall house (see cover), which was rescued from dereliction and restored by the Landmark Trust. It was built from fast-grown oaks and despite repeated attempts failed to date using conventional dendrochronology. Using the new method two timbers were dated unequivocally to 1418 and 1420 CE, and the building is likely to have been constructed shortly thereafter, making it remarkably early for a Welsh house. It was also possible to date later alterations to the house and outbuildings. This first application of the new method received considerable media attention.

Given the success on the Welsh border, the Swansea team have recently collaborated with archaeologists Nigel Nayling and Rod Bale at Lampeter (Trinity St David's) to determine whether there is potential for isotopic dating further west. Two post-mediaeval farmsteads were chosen, from near Llandysul in Carmarthenshire and Silian in Ceredigion (see cover). A single timber from Llandysul had 97 rings (near centre to bark edge winter), but only 50 were cut and analysed to give an unequivocal felling date of winter 1769 CE. A single timber from Silian had 79 rings (near centre to bark edge spring/summer), all of which were analysed, giving an unequivocal felling date of spring/summer 1789 CE. Full details will be published in due course, but the results clearly demonstrate that there is potential for dating even rather humble vernacular buildings in areas of Wales where traditional dendrochronology is very challenging. The team are currently testing the method elsewhere in Wales, on structures of different ages and including timbers from archaeological and waterlogged contexts. The longer term aim is to develop a master chronology specifically for Wales. The typical cost of the new method, which is only applied where traditional dendrochronology has failed, is similar to that of a pair of radiocarbon dates which would previously have been required to provide an age estimate .

Roderick Bale and Danny McCarroll

Links:

Dating team website: <https://www.oak-research.co.uk>

<http://discoveringgoldwelshhouses.co.uk/>

Landmark Trust: <https://www.landmarktrust.org.uk/search-and-book/historic-llwyn-celyn/>

Guardian article: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/jan/13/welsh-farmstead-is-in-fact-rare-medieval-hall-house-experts-confirm>



Oak core sample from a farmstead near Llandysul. Measuring oxygen isotope ratios on just 50 rings was sufficient to give an unequivocal felling date of 1769 CE

CLWYDIAN RANGE ARCHAEOLOGY GROUP

2018 Excavations

In July 2018, volunteer members of CRAG, under the supervision of Dr Ian Brooks, opened a trench 17 metres by 20 metres in size immediately to the SE of the trench which was excavated in 2017. The site is on the NE sloping plateau below Moel Arthur Iron Age hillfort in the Clwydian Range of hills.

The features exposed

The main feature immediately apparent was an ancient watercourse (paleo-channel) running diagonally across the site towards a pool at the NW end, linking with the stream bed that had been exposed in the 2017 dig. This consisted of several intercutting ditches deliberately created over time, possibly to drain a marshy area further up the slope. On days of heavy rain during the dig this channel still collected most of the run-off water.

Clwydian Range Archaeology Group [CRAG] is a group of enthusiastic volunteers established in 2010 who have been investigating human occupation of the plateau below Moel Arthur Hillfort for the past 6 years. Evidence of human activity has been uncovered dating from early Medieval to early Bronze Age. CRAG has received funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund for a three year project to undertake further investigations of the site. As a result an enhanced range of activities, described below, will be undertaken during 2019.

Anyone wishing to participate in any of these activities or to join CRAG would be most welcome and should contact Pat Daley, the Membership Secretary, at pat.daley@tiscali.co.uk for further information.



Fig. 1: General view from the NW



Fig. 2: View after heavy rain

To the SW of the paleo-channel were several features, including a rammed purplish clay floor associated with three post-holes, possibly indicating a roofed structure.



Fig. 3: Purplish rammed clay floor and postholes from the W.

To the SW of this another structure was indicated by post holes and a foundation trench with rectangular impressions suggesting that upright wooden boards had been used to form one end. In this area there were several large tree boles indicating the presence of substantial trees on the site at some time in the past. There were also two large post-holes close to the edge of the pool at the north end of the trench, which had been re-cut and packed several times. A possible enclosure bank was detected in the trench section to the south which could be traced up the hill for some way under the heather

On the NE side of the paleo-channel there was little indication of any activity apart from an area of cobbled surface near the stream which might indicate a track leading to a ford into the settlement.

Provisional interpretation of the trench.



Fig. 4: Composite vertical photograph of excavated trench with possible interpretation

The weather conditions.

As usual the weather was very variable, from Mediterranean heat at the beginning of the excavation to cold, wet and misty towards the end. This is a very exposed site with no protection from the sun or rain.

Visitors

We welcomed over 100 visitors to the site over the period of the dig, many walking the Offa's Dyke path which runs alongside, as well as groups from the Chester Archaeological Society and Borders Archaeology Group on our Open Day.

The Finds

Unlike the 2017 dig, there were no obvious pointed stone tools discovered. However, a number of rounded water-washed cobbles were found, which appeared to have been used as hammer stones. These were mostly in the pool at the N end of the trench. Also there, a large chert core was found (probably of Gronant chert from the Dee Estuary area) from which several flakes had been removed from both ends. A very finely worked 'tanged and barbed' flint arrowhead, (dated to the Bronze Age) was found in the bed of the paleo-channel which crosses the trench, and another flake of worked flint was found by the bank nearby.

Fig. 5: Tanged and barbed arrowhead



Fig. 6: Chert core



Activities for 2019

Landscape Survey

A survey will be held on Saturday and Sunday the 9th/10th March 2019. The intention is for participants to walk in a predetermined pattern noting any features not deemed to be 'natural' and noting their position using GPS so that potential archaeological features requiring further investigation can be identified. If the weather doesn't allow the survey to proceed it will be rescheduled for the following weekend i.e 16th/17th March. The survey will cover the area of the plateau from the base of Moel Arthur down to the quarries towards Penycloddiau as well as the area of the Penbedw Estate which will later be the subject of a Geophysical Survey [see below]

Geophysical Survey

We have kindly been given permission by the Penbedw Estate to undertake a geophysical survey of the area to the east of Moel Arthur, between Moel Arthur and Moel Plas yw. This is the only other area where potential activity/occupation could occur other than where we are currently excavating.

The survey will be undertaken between 1st June 2019 and the 7th June 2019 and will include both magnetometry and resistivity. For members unfamiliar with these surveying techniques, training will be provided on site.

For those wishing to undertake magnetometry there are additional requirements namely to have nothing metallic on their person including metal 'eyes' in their boots, rings and other jewellery.

2019 Excavation

The excavation for this coming year will take place between 13th July 2019 and the 9th August 2019. The area to be excavated lies to the south of the 2018 excavation towards the hillfort. The purpose is to, hopefully, confirm some of the findings from this year namely the existence of habitation [possibly Neolithic] with a surrounding enclosure bank. Samples from the floor of a possible hut collected during the excavation have been sent for sieving and should sufficient charcoal be retrieved from the samples will be sent for C14 dating.

Contact

(<https://cragnorthwales.wordpress.com>) or contact the Hon Secretary (Hilary Lidbury: h.lidbury@yahoo.co.uk or 01925-756375).

New members are always welcome.



U-Boat Project 1914–18 (Commemorating the War at Sea)

Nautical Archaeology Society Field School (Abercastle 7th - 17th June 2019)



The U-Boat Project 1914-18 is a two-year exercise commemorating the centenary of the end of World War I. The project is being coordinated by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

As part of this project the Nautical Archaeology Society (NAS) is running an underwater field school at Abercastle from 7th – 17th June 2019 based around the wreck of the SS Leysian which was wrecked in the bay on 20th February 1917. As a precursor to the field school, research is being carried out into the history of the vessel. Her brief timeline is as follows:

1906 – built as the SS Sarek in Newcastle-upon-Tyne for a German shipping line.

1906 to 1914 – trading as a general cargo vessel between Europe and the west coast of north & south America.

1914 – interned in Swansea at the outbreak of World War I and given to a British shipping line as a “prize of war” and re-named the SS Leysian.

1915 to 1917 – used to transport pack animals from America to assist with the front-line war effort in Europe and north Africa.



The SS Leysian and her approximate location in Abercastle Bay



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There are conflicting accounts associated with the wrecking, the most common being that she mistook Strumble Head for St. David's Head in fog, but other accounts refer to her being chased onto the rocks by a German U-boat, the compass having been tampered with, and a mutiny on board by around 50-muleteers. Fortunately, no lives were lost, but from the date of the disaster (20 February 1917) until she eventually succumbed (around eight months later) and sank during an Autumn storm we are struggling to uncover any details.

We believe that throughout the Spring and Summer of 1917 some salvage work was carried out on the wreck by a Captain J. Driver, possibly using a steam winch erected on the cliffs above the wreck to haul material from the vessel up the cliff face. However, considering that this 400ft vessel (which is almost half the length of the Titanic) sat upright in shallow water spanning Abercastle bay for around eight months, and was very visible from both the beach and cliff tops, we have been surprisingly unsuccessful in finding any records, articles, artefacts, stories or pictures from this period.

Can You Help Us?

If you have any information about this wreck, we would be delighted to hear from you, and if you are in Abercastle between 7 & 17 June, do please come along and introduce yourselves.

Ian Cundy B.Sc. M.A.

Nautical Archaeology Society (Regional co-ordinator for Wales)

Tel: 01684 574774 Mobile: 07707 423089

E-mail: MADUdiving@gmail.com Website: www.nauticalarchaeologysociety.org

Archaeology Field School at Strata Florida this summer



The Strata Florida Archaeology Field School will open its doors (and trenches) for the very first time this Summer. The School will run for six weeks from 13th August - 23rd September at the 12th century Strata Florida Abbey (Abaty Ystrad Fleur), a captivating, evocative and internationally significant site in Pontrhydfendigaid, Ceredigion, Wales.

This is a unique opportunity for people both young and old, from different backgrounds, with and without experience of archaeology to take part in all aspects of an archaeological excavation at this important historical site.

The field school is being delivered by the Strata Florida Trust in partnership with The Prince's Foundation, Allchurches Trust, University of Wales Trinity St. David, Breaking Ground Heritage and the Sacred Landscapes Research Project.

"You could be part of a team that unearths these structures for the first time in hundreds of years and record them for future generations. That's an absolutely thrilling prospect, whether you are an experienced archaeologist or not," said Professor David Austin, Director of the Strata Florida Archaeology Field School.

Full details of the field school, including timetable, fees, accommodation and FAQs are available through the school's comprehensive brochure, which is available [here](#) and can be downloaded from <https://www.stratafloridatrust.org/join-the-dig>. People can register for a place via the website.

For all enquiries, please contact:

Marcus Stanton, Communications Manager, The Prince's Foundation

E. marcus@marcusstanton.co.uk

M. 07900 891287

Helen Whitear, Community Engagement Officer, Strata Florida Trust

E. helen.whitear@btinternet.com

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Offa's Dyke Association – the first 50 years

29th March 2019 marks the 50th anniversary of the public meeting where school teacher / archaeologist Frank Noble presented - 'Offa's Dyke Past Present and Future' - followed by a show of hands that led to the formation of the Offa's Dyke Association.

The ODA's roots can be traced further back to 1959 and a YHA adventure holiday, led by Noble, with a chance meeting of folk who all had one thing in common – an interest in Offa's Dyke and the Welsh Marches. In the 1960s he used this enthusiasm to establish a committee to encourage national and local government to turn the much vaunted Offa's Dyke Path (ODP), approved in 1955, into reality on the ground, followed by the creation of the Association in 1969.

Noble's influence is revealed through correspondence such as that with Eirene White, Minister of State at the Welsh Office, who acknowledged the difficulty of persuading the Ancient Monuments Branch to work in close co-operation with the Countryside Commission. The ODA also got its hands dirty by organising volunteer working parties who spent months clearing the Dyke of overgrown scrub in advance of signposting and waymarking. Efforts paid off - in July 1971 Offa's Dyke Path was finally declared open by ODA President, Lord John Hunt.

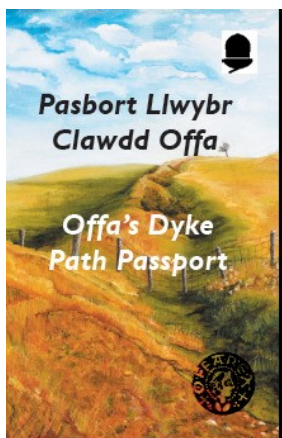
The ODA then changed tack from a single cause pressure group into a charity with the broader aims of helping visitors appreciate and understand the significance, and fragility, of the monument. The ODA's charitable purpose has since changed very little except it now embraces the region's other dykes:

To promote the conservation, improvement and better knowledge of the Welsh March along Offa's Dyke, Offa's Dyke Path National Trail, Wat's Dyke and other associated short dykes.

Moving into the purpose built Knighton Offa's Dyke Centre in 1999, for a few years all was well. Then rental income from Trail Officer staff and a County Council contract for the TIC function were lost. Facing closure, the ODA decided to establish its Conservation Fund, focusing on the conservation of the monument. After two years, £10,000 was invested in grant aiding maintenance works and, partnering Cadw and Historic England, it contributed another £3,000 towards the research and publication of a Dyke Conservation Management Plan.

Attempting to broaden its appeal, the ODA, an active participant in the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory, will co-host with Clwyd Powys Archaeology Trust, a two-day living history event in Knighton on 13th & 14th July 2019. It now has a new website and all colour newsletter and new members are signing up, while donations, turnover and bookings for events at the Offa's Dyke Centre grow modestly but incrementally.

The 50th anniversary presents the perfect opportunity for the Association to showcase itself and in May the launch of its *Walkers' Passport* will hopefully extend its appeal to new and wider audiences. The *Passport*, supported by the National Trail Officer, mirrors the successful Hadrian's Wall scheme and has two aims: to be a lot of fun for walkers as they validate their journey along the National Trail; and also more serious conservation credentials.



Passport front cover



Stamping station box



Passport stamp for one of the 12 stamping stations

Based on soil moisture data published by the Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales (the ODA is grateful to NMR for endorsing the scheme and assisting with set up costs), the seasonal *Passport* operates between 1st May and 31st October when the soils underfoot are typically drier and the monument less vulnerable to the risk of erosion and damage.



Offa's Dyke, north Powys showing recreational damage



Offa's Dyke, south Shropshire; in good condition

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ODA membership and the *Passport* are available via the website: (<https://offasdyke.org.uk/product/full-annual-membership-of-offas-dyke-association/>)

Dave McGlade

Chairman, ODA

david47mcglade@hotmail.com



Offa's Dyke Association 1969 - 2019

Events – CBA WALES

There is a lot happening with archaeology in Wales this year. Check out the events page of our website for opportunities to get involved!

councilforbritisharchaeologywales.wordpress.com

'NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE DYKE'

CBA Wales / Cymru Mini-conference Spring 2019

30th and 31st March 2019. Offa's Dyke Centre, West St, Knighton,
LD7 1EN

Following on the success of the 2018 Conference CBA Wales are delighted to announce that there will be two days of insight into one of the most iconic and mysterious monuments in Wales: Offa's Dyke.

Saturday 30th March 2019

- 10.00 - 10.20 Registration
- 10.20 – 12.30 Talks and presentations
- 12.30 – 13.30 Lunch
- 13.30 – 14.00 CBA Wales AGM and Business meeting
- 14.10 – 16.20 Talks and presentations
- 16.30 – 17.00 Discussion

Saturday evening: Joint celebration:

- 50 years of Offa's Dyke Association
- 75 years of CBA
- 45 years of the Welsh Archaeological Trusts

Sunday 31st March 2019

Expert led guided walk exploring part of Offa's Dyke (for those who stay over or return)

BOOKING ESSENTIAL - More information and booking via our website:

<https://councilforbritisharchaeologywales.wordpress.com>

Newsletter Editors

Items for inclusion in the newsletter should be sent to:

Nikki Vousden: nikkivousden@gmail.com

or

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OLOGY**

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