

Making Earthworks Visible: The example of the Oswestry Heritage Comics Project

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Comics - as an engaging, accessible and vernacular medium for information - can reach audiences that other, more formal types of outreach do not. The example of the Oswestry Heritage Comics Project demonstrates how the use of informational comics can raise awareness of heritage which - though highly visible - is largely overlooked. This has particular implications for linear earthwork monuments, where poor public understanding can contribute to their vulnerability. Comics have the potential to make these monuments better understood, and thus more visible to – and more valued by - the communities which live alongside them.

SLIDE: Titles

I'm going to talk about informational comics and archaeology – about what they are, about how I have used them, and about what they can bring to outreach and research about ancient earthworks. But first, I want to introduce myself with an important disclaimer: I am not a “comics person” -

SLIDE: Biography

- I am, first and foremost, a field archaeologist and an archaeological illustrator. I am not someone with a mania for comics who wants to try and squeeze them into archaeology – rather, I am an archaeologist who has discovered that comics can make a highly effective contribution to the way we do outreach.

As an archaeologist and an archaeological illustrator, outreach is an essential and core component of my work. As an illustrator, I want to make sure that the drawings and paintings I am making explain the sites I work on effectively; as an archaeologist I know that effective explanation of archaeology builds meaningful relationships with community stakeholders, students, official bodies and funders, all of which impacts access to sites, project logistics, budgets and research outcomes. And as a community member whose local archaeology is under threat, I know how crucial it can be to be able to communicate the meaning, worth and importance of archaeological monuments to as wide an audience as possible, as effectively as possible.

SLIDE: Archaeological illustrations

So effective communication of archaeology – of archaeological sites and monuments, of research and interpretation and of working practices – is something which concerns all aspects of my work. But about ten years ago, I came to realise that much of my illustration work was simply not effective as public outreach.

Finds illustration, even reconstructions, require considerable explanation and interpretation in order to “make sense”, limiting an audience's ability to access that information, restricting their engagement with it and their understanding of it. What I started to look for was an alternative visual medium that allowed a different kind of access, a different kind of

engagement, a different kind of way of talking about the past. This is how I discovered comics -

SLIDE: CADW Comics

- not comics about superheroes and mutants and goofy talking animals, but informational comics capable of communicating research about the past in an effective and engaging way, to public and specialist audiences alike.

Comics is a unique medium that allows for the close and integrated use of both text and image within a single composition. In informational comics, visual context and text-based explanation are combined – meaning the specific qualities and strengths of each can be exercised, as well as reinforced by the qualities and strengths of the other. This combination approach creates a composition which informs on multiple levels – both visual and semantic, left-brain and right-brain, passive and active. This, in turn, reinforces readers' connection to the material under discussion, and improves rates both of comprehension and retention.

SLIDE: Comparison

“Traditional” archaeological visualisation – finds illustrations, diagrams and even reconstructions – requires knowledge of a specialist visual language to correctly interpret and use. Even when associated with text, it is text that is often jargon-rich and highly specific in nature. Such visualisations are, frankly, not ideally suited to communicating unfamiliar or complex information about the past to non-specialist audiences.

Comics, however, are different – and I'd like to examine that difference in some detail by looking at examples taken from my most recent project: the Oswestry Heritage Comics. I'd then like to suggest some ways in which lessons learned from the Oswestry project could be applied to information about Offa's Dyke and other linear earthworks.

SLIDE: OHC & info.

The Oswestry Heritage Comics project is a year-long series of weekly, short comic strips about the archaeology, history and heritage of the borderlands market town of Oswestry.

They are published every Tuesday in the Oswestry & Border Counties Advertiser newspaper, as well as online on Facebook, on the website of Oswestry Community Arts, and on my own blog. They are highly visible within the community, and catch the attention of people who otherwise do not necessarily visit museums or have any other formal connection with heritage.

SLIDE: OHC (ii)

Each comic introduces a particular aspect of Oswestry's past: from prehistory to the Napoleonic war, from transport to family history, from current archaeological excavations to research by local historians. The comics have been an extremely useful and successful way of introducing the community to the broad range of heritage in and around the town, giving that heritage context by connecting it to other heritage events or places, discussing its contemporary meaning and place, and giving advice on how readers can “get involved” through participation as volunteers or visitors.

SLIDE: *1. Broad Range of Heritage (i): 340 Million Years of Heritage*

First and foremost, the comics are able to introduce a wide range of heritage subjects to their audience. Their short format and condensed style mean that they can quite happily shift temporal and thematic focus from comic to comic, or even panel to panel. This allows each subject to be placed within a survey of historical context, and demonstrates how local heritage is not confined to one time, or one place. Geology, industry and tourism -

SLIDE: 1. *Broad Range of Heritage (ii)*: Prees Heath

- ecology, archaeology and social history – all presented as equal components to our local past.

SLIDE: 2. *Context & Connection (i)*: What Is Heritage?

Secondly, the comics focus on exploring this broad range of heritage in conjunction with a focus on *who* is interested in these subjects. They have taken the approach that heritage is something which is made relevant through the interest and involvement of enthusiasts and researchers -

SLIDE: 2. *Context & Connection (ii)*: Heritage Open Days

- and how that interest and involvement then makes heritage visible and relevant for others.

SLIDE: 3. *Community Organisations (i)*: OBHAG

The comics have also been an excellent way to highlight the work of local community-based heritage organisations – in Oswestry we have, for example, the Oswestry & Border History and Archaeology Group, active since the excavations at Rhyn Park Roman marching camp in 1977.

SLIDE: 3. *Community Organisations (ii)*: Castle Excavations

The comics are able to signpost the work that each is doing to understand and reveal the past, as well as the ongoing challenges that each group faces with regards conservation and awareness.

SLIDE: 4. *Local Engagement (i)*: Hillfort Herbs

Establishing this connection between site/monument/place and people then allows one to explore different kinds local engagement with heritage, from those who use heritage sites in alternative ways -

SLIDE: 4. *Local Engagement (ii)*: Stone in the Garden

- to those whose interaction with heritage has been accidental and serendipitous -

SLIDE: 4. *Local Engagement (iii)*: The Life-Saving Stove

- to those who have a particular or niche interest in the past.

SLIDE: 5. *Research and Scholars (i)*: Men on the Gates

And this connection then also serves to provide a basis for exploring scholarly interest in the local past, and to demonstrate the national and international context for other local research projects, whether community based -

SLIDE: 5. *Research and Scholars (ii)*: Learning From the Iron Age

- or lead by professional scholars.

SLIDE: 6. *Hidden Heritage (i)*: Fitzalan Road

And having introduced the idea that there are many ways with which to engage with information about local history, heritage and archaeology, the comic can then help demonstrate how there is heritage all around us, hidden in plain sight, on our street corners -

SLIDE: 6. *Hidden Heritage (ii)*: Rhyn Park

- in our fields -

SLIDE: 6. *Hidden Heritage (iii)*: The Llwyd Eagle

- and on our high streets, which reveal the unexpected and the extraordinary to be found in our everyday landscapes and places.

SLIDE: 7. *Contemporary Meaning (i)*: More Than Trains

This embedding of heritage and heritage research within the community then invites discussion of what the past means to us today – how heritage can be more than just the mechanics and minutiae of its specific focus -

SLIDE: 7. *Contemporary Meaning (ii)*: In With the New

- and how discussion of the past and the present inevitably raises the question of how we will safeguard heritage for future generations.

SLIDE: 8. *Getting Involved (i)*: Oswestry's Missing Hospital

Lastly, of course, the comics can use all this – place, people, research and contemporary context – to demonstrate how readers can get involved in local heritage, whether through asking questions -

SLIDE: 8. *Getting Involved (ii)*: A Different Wartime Story

- investigating their own family history -

SLIDE: 8. *Getting Involved (iii)*: 5th/60th

- or realising that involvement through immersive participation.

When talking about outreach in connection with Offa's Dyke, issues like giving heritage context, discussing contemporary meaning and place, inviting people to get involved, understanding how heritage can be “hidden in plain sight”, and emphasising the collective contribution of local researchers, community groups and professional scholars have particular relevance. And, given the damage already suffered by the monument through ignorance and oversight, outreach aimed at people who do not usually visit museums, and can be conducted through “non-specialist” spaces like local newspapers and local online groups also has particular relevance.

So, if this is what informational comics about the past do, how do they do it? There are two key mechanisms at work:

SLIDE: Reinventing Show & Tell – Rhyn Park panel

Firstly, by combining text and image, they reinvent the idea of “show and tell”. In a comic, visual context and narrative explanation are not just close at hand, not just side-by-side, not just in the same place – they are interdependent and inter-related. Each does what it does best, but each does so as part of a “team effort”, if you like.

In this example, the terms *timber gateway* and *earth and wood rampart* can be defined and described by being shown, while the inclusion of people gives that definition scale and context.

SLIDE: Introduce & Remind – Oswestry Castle panel

Secondly, this multi-layered approach to information – text and image together – allows an informational comic to both serve as an introduction and a reminder. Familiar images reinforce existing bits of knowledge – unfamiliar images act as hooks for new learning; known terminology and facts are given new visual relationships – new information can be explained through visual context.

This multi-layered approach to information which serves to show *and* tell, introduce *and* remind, means that audiences do not necessarily have to come to the comic with any prior knowledge. The image-text structure de-complicates without dumbing down; simplifies without making simplistic. It is not a reductive mechanism, but an adductive one. Individual elements - captions, pictures, speech-balloons, panels – are pieced together by the reader one by one. As a result, learning occurs as a literal step-by-step process, which means that readers are actively engaged in constructing their own knowledge of the subject, and are thus never confronted (and discouraged) by the scale of their own ignorance of it.

SLIDE: Feedback

This approach ensures that comics are both accessible and engaging – in the case of the Oswestry Heritage Comics, this has meant that they have been widely read and widely shared. Their publication in the local newspaper means that they are seen by eighteen thousand people every week in print, reaching approximately 40% of the population of Oswestry itself. The comics are also read by a further five thousand readers online, who then share and re-post the comic via blogs and social media for an even wider distribution.

A recent online survey I conducted suggests readers overwhelmingly find the comic not only entertaining and informative, but easier to process than other forms of outreach and more likely to prompt onward engagement with heritage. Indeed, over 30% of the survey respondents indicated that they had become actively involved in heritage as a result of reading the comic. These results chime well with more formal studies into the effectiveness of comics that demonstrate they are effective both as a way of imparting information, and as a way of changing attitudes among readers.

So, what does this all mean for earthwork monuments? Well, Old Oswestry hillfort naturally features prominently in many of the comics, but the two other local earthwork monuments which have appeared in the Oswestry Heritage Comics series have, of course, been both Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke.

SLIDE: OHC: Wat's Dyke

The Wat's Dyke comic started by explaining its name, featured a panel briefly considering the construction of the dyke, then looked at both its past context and its present context. I kept the level of information relatively general, as most local people I talked to prior to

writing the comic had never even heard of the monument, and those that did really wanted to know why it was called “Wat's Dyke” - what “Wat” was, in other words. It was then also apparent that most people knew it as a feature associated with footpaths – so I used the comic to string those things together, using a contemporary context for the monument (as a footpath name) to anchor a brief introduction to its past context.

Here again, showing and telling allows the comic to provide a visual context for an explanation about the monument's purpose and origins. It both introduces readers to the possibly unfamiliar past and reminds them of its present. And, through its narrative approach, links local engagement to issues as diverse as historical research and economic impact. Lastly, the visual incorporation of ordinary people walking the footpath sets an inclusive tone, explicitly connecting present-day inhabitants with their ancient counterparts. In the space of four images and a mere 100 words, past and present, contemporary and ancient are – literally – made visible; and visibly equal, too.

I've written a post about this comic on the Collaboratory blog, where I talk about these things in a bit more detail.

SLIDE: OHC I: Offa's Dyke

Offa's Dyke makes an appearance in two comics. Firstly, as a brief feature in a comic whose theme is Oswestry's position halfway between England and Wales. The Dyke does not play a prominent role in the discussion so much as to highlight the antiquity of Oswestry's trans-border identity. But the second comic features Offa's Dyke much more centrally – it is, in fact, this week's comic in the Advertiser which is all about this present meeting.

SLIDE: OHC: Offa's Dyke Collaboratory

Show and tell permits me here to give this comic about a research group a human face; the purposes and objectives of the group can be introduced alongside visual and explanatory reminders about its focus; both the local and broader connections of that research can be made explicit, and an inclusive invitation extended to the readership. A comic such as this not only makes the Dyke visible, it makes the issue of research visible, and makes the researchers themselves visible.

The adaptability and flexibility of the medium ensures that even this short-format strip and the information it contains, will have a significant digital and real-world footprint. Eighteen thousand local readers of the Advertiser, a further two thousand regular local viewers of the Oswestry Heritage Comics Facebook page, three thousand viewers of my blog, and – through reposting on Instagram and Twitter – an onwards global audience will be reading this week about this meeting. Furthermore, the comic will also feature in several gallery exhibitions about the project this spring, in a number of Heritage Lottery Fund talks I am giving about the project through October, and will become part of a collected anthology out later this year. Finds illustrations and phase diagrams never had such an impact.

This contextual and broadcast visibility is both significant and valuable. It is the reason why – despite still doing plenty of “traditional” archaeological illustrations – I continue to find new uses for comics within archaeology. It has led me to explore ways in which the broader ability of comics to increase visibility of monuments, research and issues can move beyond public outreach – and into the practice of scholarship.

SLIDE: Ceramics, Polity and Comics

Comics used to bring visibility to aspects of scholarship can do all the same things that we have seen comics do in public outreach: they can add visual context to explanation, introduce and de-complicate subjects, locate specific information within broader frameworks, make connections and links with other research – even invite participation. Narrative can be used to ground and humanise both research and interpretation – something which becomes important if one wishes to present models of past social practice as dynamic, and landscapes as inhabited.

For example: within discussions about the past meaning of Offa's Dyke authors often consider its implications as a social frontier, as a materialisation of a borderlands between cultures, of a space between Mercia and Powys, between 'Englishness' and 'Welshness', and as a meeting point shaped by the rivalries of power and kinship:

SLIDE: Text

But such interpretative discussions lose their impact in text alone. After all, when we talk about marriage or hostage-taking, even wealth or trade, we are talking about events and situations that impact individual lives at the level of emotion: of love, jealousy, ambition, greed and pride. Academic text is somewhat unsuited for this kind of discussion – it renders it dispassionate, objective and remote. If such interpretations are to have meaning in scholarship, if we want to understand how intermarriage or mercantile rivalry might drive Mercian foreign policy, early mediaeval economics or Anglo-Welsh culture, and thus how they might be reflected in historical and archaeological data – then we must try and render such interpretations passionate, subjective and intimate.

SLIDE: Aehtweligu – Welsh

In combining text and image, we can bring to such interpretations historical and cultural grounding, a narrative flow, and a sense of emotional depth – all things which are actually meaningful in the contexts of such discussion.

SLIDE: Aehtweligu - English

Such works need be no more than a single page; they need not end up veering away from data towards drama. It is not necessary to go all *Game of Thrones* in order to make good use of comics in this context - what is needed, however, is that we recognise that leaving statements like these as academic text renders significant aspects of our interpretations invisible and thus un-examinable; comics, however, can contribute an important kind of visibility.

SLIDE: Aehtweligu – Journal article

Such interpretative presentations can be rendered as easily for academic publication as for popular, and can usefully stimulate parallel discussions at various levels. Such works become windows into our data and the interpretative assumptions of scholarship – and access points for interdisciplinary collaboration, moments at which – for example - economic data, osteological data and survey data might come together with anthropology, ethnography and psychology. As I work more with comics in this way, I see increasing evidence of a new kind of visibility brought to such interdisciplinary discourse, allowing scholars to reach new kinds of audiences in new ways – both within and outside their particular area of speciality, both within and outside the otherwise sometimes narrow confines of the academy.

There is, finally, one last kind of visibility that comics can bring to earthwork monuments such as Offa's Dyke – a literal visibility. Much of Offa's Dyke does not necessarily present itself to the lay viewer as a comprehensible monument. Even more, “earthwork” is not a common method of building nowadays, and both non-archaeologists and non-specialists sometimes struggle to conceptualise and visualise such constructions.

SLIDE: *Building Offa's Dyke* – p.17

However, a close interplay of text and image makes it possible to explicitly and visibly conceptualise layered information about place, process, human activity, contemporary context and historical meaning. A comic such as this one can -

SLIDE + Howard quote

“... tell about how the dyke works in the landscape, how it varies in relation to geology and topography, and how it varies in relation to modern land-use...” - important considerations in any presentation of the monument.

The panel-by-panel structure of comics then frames this layering within a sequential narrative - a series of temporal jumps - particularly useful when explaining past events like construction. It's an equivalent to the phase drawings or plans we use in archaeology all the time – a comic simply embeds the missing narrative element, interrelating the necessary “other half” of the story and making the sequence accessible for non-specialists.

SLIDE: + *Offa's Dyke* quote

If such an idea sounds vaguely familiar, then it might be because David Hill and Margaret Worthington also employed comics for this very reason in their book *Offa's Dyke* - to capture a sense of time in their diagrammatic illustrations for Chapter 5: How and Why.

A visual rebuilding Offa's Dyke in this way – by process, through time, framed by a narrative explanation, situated in an inhabited historical context – enables those unfamiliar with both earthwork construction in general and the Dyke in particular to “see” it; and having “seen” it as a thing in the past, to understand its current state in the present.

TO HAND: *CADW comics* + *Palau comic* + *NAGPRA comic*

Significantly, comics as objects – comic books, graphic novels, even newspaper strips – are highly portable, meaning the information contained within them can be accessed and re-accessed, read and re-read by audiences without having to make repeat visits to specialist spaces. Unlike interpretation panels, displays or models, they are capable of – literally – staying with their audiences; as “outreach” they genuinely “reach out”, extending the impact of their informational content beyond the forty-five minutes spent in a visitor centre, or the forty-five seconds spent in front of an on-site interpretation board.

Whether for O-level students or undergraduates, long-distance walkers or museum visitors, academics or council officers, this kind of outreach can be an effective way of taking detailed information on earthwork monuments out of the museum and the visitor centre and into the conference session, the planning meeting and the classroom.

SLIDE: *Comics: Making earthworks visible through...* (i): OHC – Offa/Wat/OCD

The Oswestry Heritage Comics provides us with a model for how to increase the visibility of Offa's Dyke by using comics to present it within a broad and connected local heritage

context, to explore contemporary meaning, to understand how monuments can hide in plain sight, to link with a range of local stakeholders, and to connect with professional scholarship – all within the framework of a dynamic print and online distribution potential through the use of local newspapers and local social media communities. The Oswestry Heritage Comics demonstrate how this reinvention of show and tell can introduce and de-complicate specialist information about Offa's Dyke, connect it with wider historical themes, and signpost ways for the public to get involved.

SLIDE: *Comics: Making earthworks visible through... (ii): Aehtweligu*

While beyond the Oswestry Heritage project, comics as a medium also offers the potential for scholars to make both interpretation and data more visible in their own work by exploiting the way comics utilise narrative and represent temporality. In both cases, comics can do so outside traditional venues for heritage interpretation, bringing information about specific aspects of the past into interdisciplinary, or non-specialist spaces, widening its reach, extending its impact.

SLIDE: *Comics: Making earthworks visible through... (iii): Building Offa's Dyke*

And if that outreach reaches out far enough beyond specialist spaces, it could be extended to places where information could have a transformative impact on not just learning, but preservation and protection. Detailed information about how and why earthwork monuments were made for school classrooms, conference halls and lecture theatres, yes – but why not also for the council chamber, the planning office and the on-site meeting with developers? With the right kind of outreach, information can be transformed into action; the right kind of outreach can turn “getting involved” into a rallying cry.

I have made comic books about radiocarbon dating and lead isotope analysis, about prehistoric burials in the Pacific islands and about hillforts in North Wales, about the ceramics industry of Stoke-on-Trent and about Pharaonic emerald mines in Egypt. I know that comics present a huge potential for both archaeological outreach and scholarship. My enthusiasm for the medium comes not from thinking of that potential as novelty, but from seeing that potential realised through increased public engagement with local history, archaeology and heritage – as well as its adoption by scholars and institutions as an effective way to communicate research aims and results.

SLIDE: *Offa's Dyke – Ray/Bapty/Swogger*

Comics are not a silver bullet, nor are they intended to replace any of the existing ways in which we communicate archaeological knowledge, but they are an effective and meaningful way to talk about the past – particularly those aspects of the past which are paradoxically both elusive and highly present, easy to see yet hard to visualise, straight-forward features in the landscape yet with complexity hidden in plain sight. Comics, I believe, can do more than simply raise awareness about Offa's Dyke and other linear earthworks: they have the ability to make the complex nature and histories of the monuments themselves - as well as the work of the research communities engaged with them - truly visible.

SLIDE: Contact