

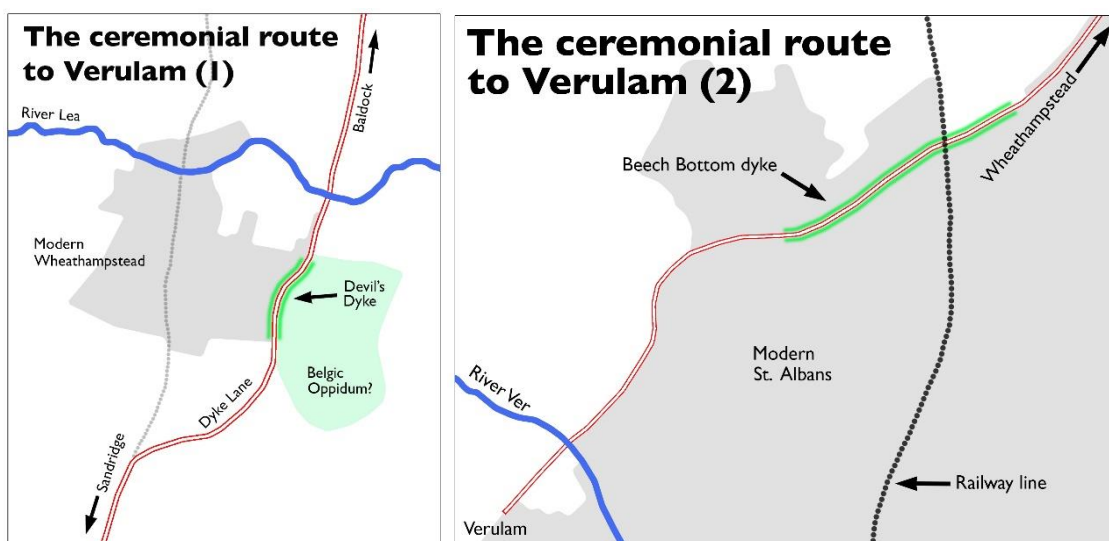
Bryant, S., (2007 *Central places or special places? The origins and development of 'oppida' in Hertfordshire* in 'The Later Iron Age in Britain' eds. Haslegrove, C. and Moore, T., (2007) *The Later Iron Age in Britain and Beyond* Oxbow Books

In this article, Bryant writes about six major Iron Age sites in Hertfordshire: Braughing, Baldock, St Albans, Wheathampstead, Welwyn and the Bulbourne Valley.

In the section about St Albans ("Verlamion" in the Iron Age), Bryant points out that Beech Bottom Dyke is "morphologically similar" to Devil's Dyke in Wheathampstead. While Wheeler (1932) suggested that Beech Bottom Dyke may have been a territorial boundary, Bryant considers "an alternative hypothesis that the Dyke functioned as a routeway connected with the ritual complex at Verlamion". He continues "The similar form of the Wheathampstead Devil's Dyke also provides some support for the idea that Beech Bottom Dyke functioned as a route into the ritual complex [of Verlamion] from the north-east. Although much shorter than Beech Bottom Dyke (430m), Devil's Dyke also lies on the route between the Ver and the Lea rivers and is located in a natural dip in the land ... In addition, the hearth found by Wheeler at the base of the deepest part of Devil's Dyke could also be interpreted as ritual".

In the section about Wheathampstead, Bryant points out that four Late Iron Age sites have been identified in the area, of which Devil's Dyke is one. While Wheeler (1932) suggested that the area between Devil's Dyke and The Slad may have been a Late Iron Age settlement, Bryant writes "subsequent fieldwork and survey (Saunders, C. (1982) cast doubt on previous interpretations of Wheathampstead as an oppidum". He goes on to point out that "the siting of the hearth at the base of the deepest point of the Dyke (10m) does not appear the most practical location for purely domestic or industrial activity".

Bryant concludes that "it is possible that Devil's Dyke and the similarly constructed Beech Bottom Dyke served as a ceremonial route between the Ver and Lea rivers. The deeper part of the Dyke may also have been a focus for specific rituals, as possibly evidenced by the hearth". Wheathampstead may have been part of a wider ceremonial landscape focused on the Ver valley, its particular significance being that it was the location of a river crossing that linked the cult complex at Verlamion with the cult complex at Baldock and also linking with routes to Braughing and Colchester.



In a commentary on Bryant's article, Mike Smith writes:

"This processional route would have run across the Ver at Verlamion, through Beech Bottom, down the Sandridge Road, take a right turn at Dyke Lane and then down the Devil's Dyke, crossing the Lea at Marford, and then presumably going up Sheepecote Lane (also posing the question "Is the early eastern medieval manor boundary an echo of the Iron-Age processional way?").

Of course part of this idea has been suggested before by Saunders (1982). Also, the similarities between Beech Bottom and Devil's Dyke were what brought Wheeler to Wheathampstead in 1932. Wheeler said that it was inconceivable that the two earthworks hadn't been constructed by the same people because the similarities were so close.

Incidentally, Saunders pointed out that the Sandridge Road section of the dyke has never been found. However, this isn't necessarily a major issue if we accept the processional way theory. Beech Bottom and the Devil's Dyke are probably not the remains of a continuous earthwork but signposts along a trackway. Indeed, years ago Simon West¹ pointed out to me that the Devil's Dyke would have been a major feature of the Iron Age valley because the exposed chalk would have acted like a signpost in the landscape.

Incidentally this theory could also answer some of the issues about Devil's Dyke. Wheeler's section across the deepest part of the Dyke revealed spoil banks on either side. This confirms the Dyke, having started life as a watercourse, was at least partially excavated. But the deep section that closely resembles Beech Bottom runs for only a very short distance. Beech Bottom on the other hand is a consistent width and depth for 2k (and probably longer according to Saunders). Was the deep section of Devil's Dyke once longer? The topography and lack of spoil suggests this is unlikely. However the deep section wouldn't need to be very long if it was a signpost on a processional way as opposed to a perimeter defence.

On the face of it we might be exchanging one mad idea for another but Bryant's theory doesn't have the extensive holes in it that spoils Wheeler's version. Indeed, it seems a very elegant explanation.

Mike Smith, personal email August 2023

¹ Simon West was District Archaeologist at St Albans District Council.