

## Shire Ditch

It is the task of the Local Government Boundary Commission to muck about with ancient borders, and the West Midlands has seen plenty of its doings. Take Herefordshire and Worcestershire, for example.

As far back as 1948 the Boundary Commission were proposing to merge these two counties. The suggestion was withdrawn, and then reinstated again in 1969. When the idea was enshrined in the Local Government Act of 1972m it came with all sorts of fanciful names for the new authority, including Malvernshire (which happened to stand roughly in the muddle, sorry, the middle) and Wyvern (a composite name formed from the two principal rivers).

These titles were laughed out of court, but the merger took place, all the same. And then, in 1998, the two counties were de-merged once more.

There is, of course, a perfectly serviceable boundary between the counties of Worcestershire and Herefordshire; it is eight miles long and over 1,000 feet high. For a thousand years and more the Malvern Hills have served as a border between rolling and fruitful Worcester, and wild and wooded Hereford. Standing at the top of them, the two counties could not look more different. Like Chalkshire and Cheeshire.

But these hills are a wee bit too large and cumbersome to act as a clear dividing-line. For something a bit more precise we have to turn to the man known as the Red Earl.

Gilbert de Clare, the Earl of Gloucester, was granted hunting rights over much of the eastern part of this area in the 13th Century. As one of the country's most powerful men, Gilbert expected to be able to chase the deer pretty much wherever he pleased, but he was not alone in claiming such privileges.

Somewhere on the Malvern Hills Gilbert came face to face with Thomas de Cantilupe. This was not just another hunting nobleman, but the Lord Chancellor of England, Chancellor of Oxford University, Bishop of Hereford and trainee saint. Thomas too enjoyed hunting.

So who was infringing whom ? The 13th-century equivalent of the Boundary Commission was held close to the disputed ground at Wynds Point on Candlemas Day 1278. Gilbert claimed time-honoured ancestral rights; Thomas had the knobs, as well as the candles, on his side. When the bishop came riding out of the woods with his priests and tapers, threatening excommunication, it was enough to make the Red Earl back off. The jury too (six men from each county) came down on the bishop's side.

If the Earl had lost the argument, he soon began losing his deer as well, which found that the easiest way to escape Gloucester's hounds was to pop into Herefordshire. It was time, then, to make this boundary rather less permeable.

A little below the summit of the Malvern Hills Gilbert constructed a ditch and bank, some eight miles long. It was not quite Offa's Dyke, nor Hadrian's Wall, yet it was an

impressive barrier nonetheless, and still visible on the hills today. The best place to see it is from the top of Millennium Hill at the far south of the Malvern range.

What came to be known as Shire Ditch, or the Earl's Ditch, stretched from Holybush Hill in the south to a point close to Malvern Priory in the north.

And, as a way of getting his own back, Gilbert arranged the ditch and rampart in such a way that deer could leap from Herefordshire into Worcestershire, but not vice versa.

From this point onwards, the Earl of Gloucester could concentrate on infringing property rights in the opposite direction instead. After one such ill-advised sortee into the Bishop of Worcester's estates at Little Malvern, the Red Earl was obliged to pay an annual fine to the bishop of two bucks and two does for the rest of his life.

This is not, however, quite the end of the story. Recent archaeology has made us change our mind about some aspects of the Shire Ditch. From the late 19th Century onwards historians were beginning to question certain aspects of the medieval tale. Creating a bank and ditch a thousand feet up in the hills was a considerably greater enterprise than enclosing a stretch of parkland. Would even the most fervent of huntsmen have lavished quite so much time and effort on creating such a boundary?

An archaeological survey, commissioned by English Heritage in 2000, began to lend support to this view. The survey provided evidence that the Earl's Ditch began life considerably before the 13th Century. What the Red Earl did in the 1280s was adapt and deepen a much older boundary ditch, dating back as far as the Late Bronze Age, when the first hill-fort was constructed on Herefordshire Beacon.

So that county boundary may, in fact, stretch back a good four thousand years. The Shire Ditch is, for obvious reasons then, a Scheduled Ancient Monument under the protection of English Heritage, and a significant element in our early landscape history.

It's a safe bet that the Malvern Hills will outlast the Local Government Boundary Commission. On the whole, it's probably best to leave them where they are.