

Stourbridge's Western Boundary:

A cornerstone of the historical landscape

by

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The present-day administrative boundaries around Stourbridge are the result of a long and complex series of organizational changes, land transfers and periods of settlement, invasion and warfare dating back more than two thousand years. Perhaps the most interesting section of the boundary is that to the west of Stourbridge which currently separates Dudley Metropolitan Borough from Kinver in Staffordshire. This has been the county boundary for a millennium, and its course mirrors the outline of the medieval manors of Oldswinford and Pedmore; the Domesday hundred of Clent; Anglo-Saxon royal estates, the Norman forest of Kinver and perhaps the 7th-9th century Hwiccan kingdom as well as post-Roman tribal territories. The boundary may even have its roots in earlier (though probably more diffuse) frontiers dating back to prehistoric times.

Extent and Description

As shown in figure 1, the boundary begins at the southern end of County Lane near its junction with the ancient road (now just a rough public footpath) joining Iverley to Ounty John Lane. It follows County Lane north-north-west, crosses the A451 and then follows the line of Sandy Lane (now a bridleway) to the junction of Sugar Loaf Lane and The Broadway. Along with County Lane, this section of Sandy Lane lies upon a first-century Roman road that connected Droitwich (*Salinae*) to the Roman encampments at Greensforge near Ashwood.

Past Sugar Loaf Lane, the line of the boundary diverges by a few degrees to the east of the Roman road, which continues on in a straight line under the fields of Staffordshire towards Newtown Bridge and Prestwood. To the east of our boundary there is a sandy track that runs parallel to Clent View Road. This is now known by two different names: Roman Road and Sandy Lane. The former name is really a misnomer, as this road is not actually Roman in origin. It was, in fact, constructed in the 18th century as part of a turnpike (toll) road linking Kidderminster and Dudley, and is even named Dudley Road on Court and Blackden's 1782 map of Oldswinford parish.

Stourbridge's western boundary continues on a line roughly equidistant between Roman Road (aka Sandy Lane) and the real first-century Roman road. This section of the boundary is almost perfectly straight until it reaches Dunsley Road (part of an ancient route from Kinver to Oldswinford and Halesowen). North of Dunsley Road, the boundary follows a more sinuous course along the top of Wollaston Ridge to Vicarage Road, and then along the (now culverted) Dividale Brook to the Stour.

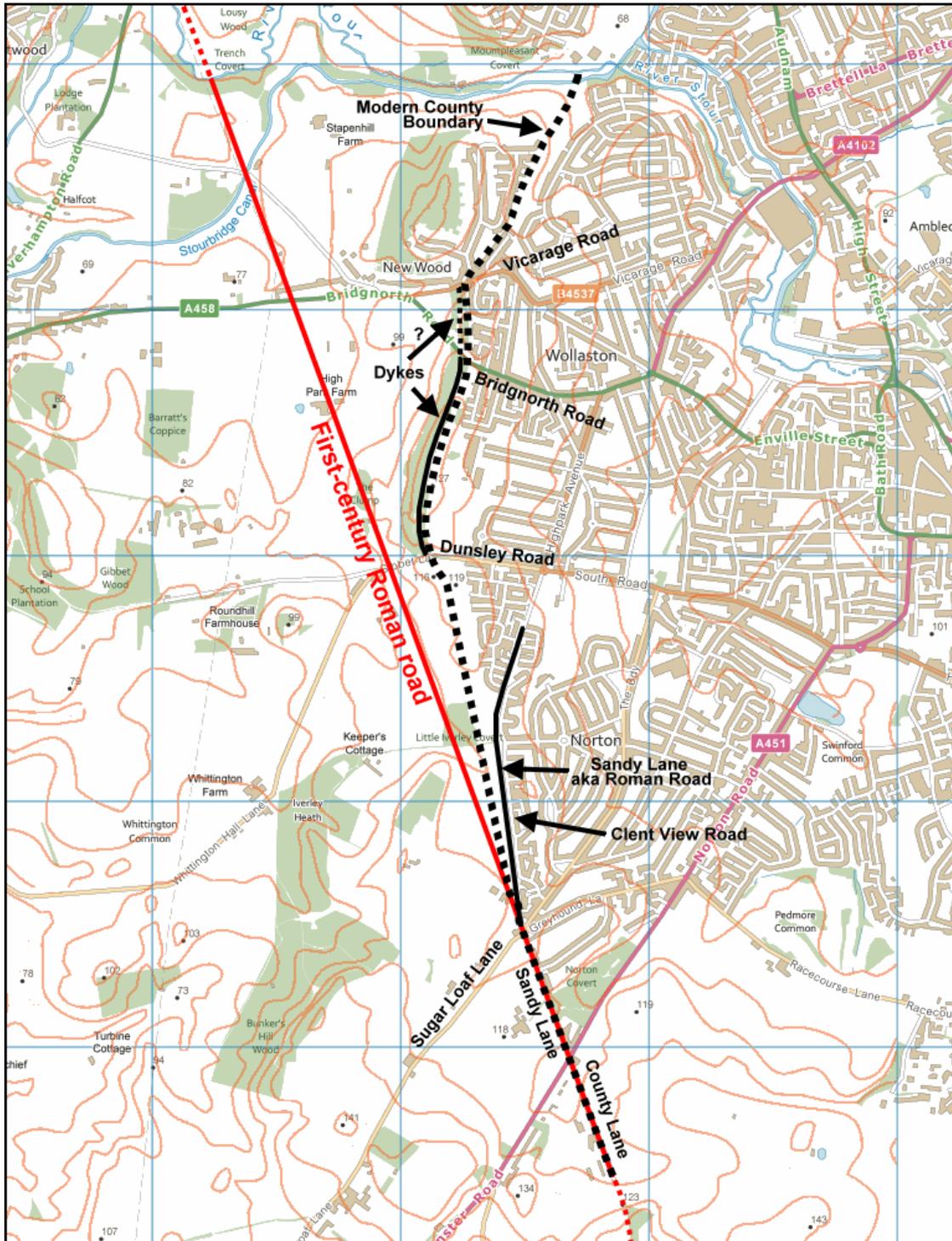


Figure 1. Stourbridge's historic western boundary (broken black line) superimposed upon modern Ordnance Survey mapping. Other features mentioned in the text are also shown.

History of the Western Boundary

Some parts of the boundary—such that lying upon Wollaston Ridge—are very ancient, while other sections are comparatively modern. Over the centuries, the boundary line has served many different functions, which I'll discuss below in (roughly) reverse chronological order.

A county boundary

Perhaps the boundary's most long-standing function is that of a county boundary. Since 1974, it has divided the West Midlands from Staffordshire as shown in figure 2. The shaded area represents Dudley Metropolitan Borough (formerly known as the Metropolitan District of Dudley). Also shown in the figure are the boundaries of the ancient parishes, manors and estates of the region, which I will return to shortly.

Before the boundary changes of 1974 (brought about by the 1972 *Local Government Act*), Stourbridge had lain within Worcestershire for about 1000 years. The historical county boundaries were quite fragmented around Stourbridge (figure 3) with isolated islands of one county embedded within others. The ancient manor of Dudley, for example, belonged to Worcestershire but was entirely surrounded by the lands of Staffordshire. Similarly, the manor of Clent had belonged to Staffordshire since 1016, yet it was surrounded by the lands of other counties. Halesowen, historically part of Shropshire, had numerous small enclaves belonging to Worcestershire (not shown). All this fragmentation resulted from (not always peaceful) changes in estate ownership during the centuries either side of the Norman conquest. Despite this, however, Stourbridge's western boundary seems to have survived almost unchanged, separating Worcestershire and Staffordshire from the tenth or eleventh century until 1974.

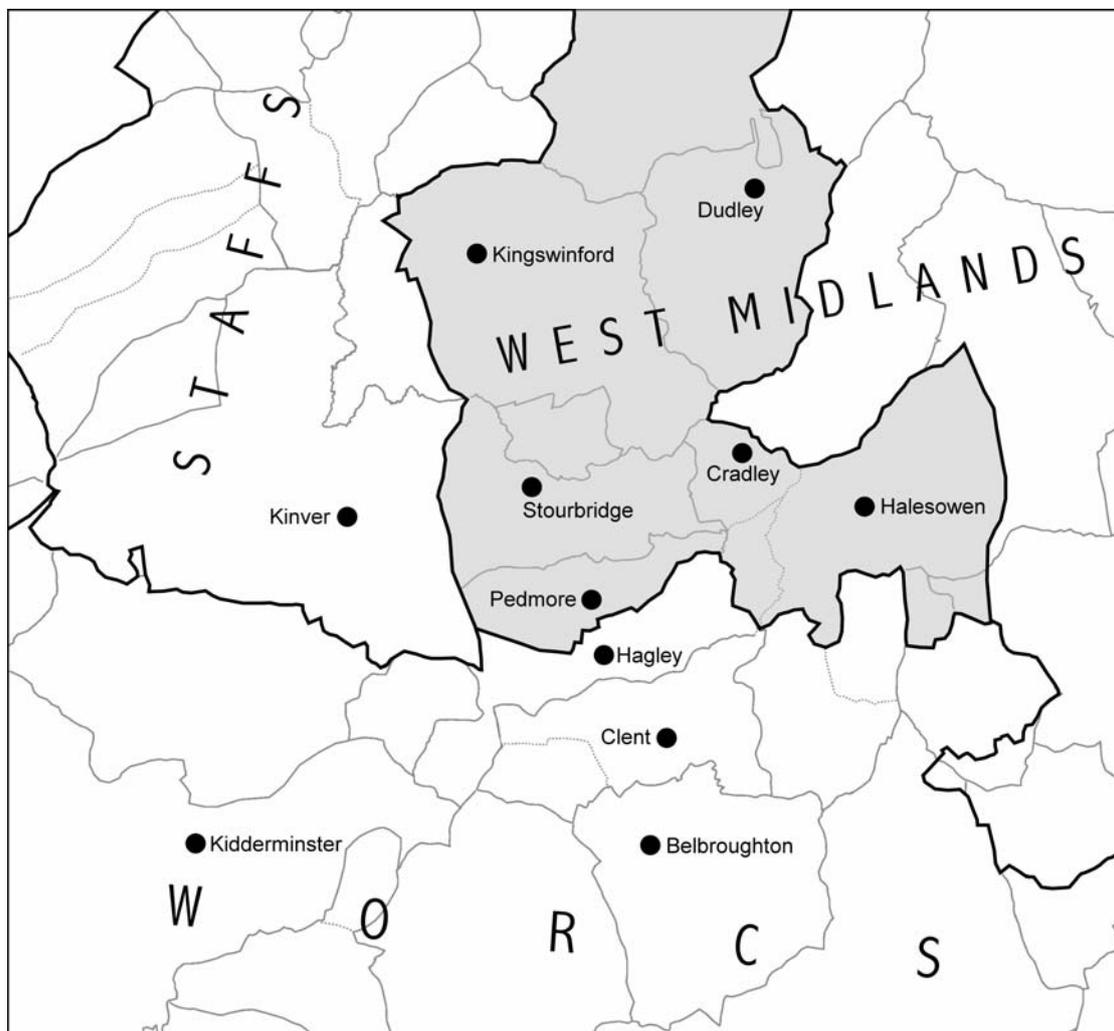


Figure 2. Modern (post-1974) county boundaries superimposed upon the pattern of ancient (pre-nineteenth-century) parish and manor boundaries. The shaded area represents Dudley Metropolitan Borough, part of which is delineated by Stourbridge's western boundary. Until 1866, this boundary bordered the ancient parishes of Oldswinford (in which Stourbridge was then situated) and Pedmore.

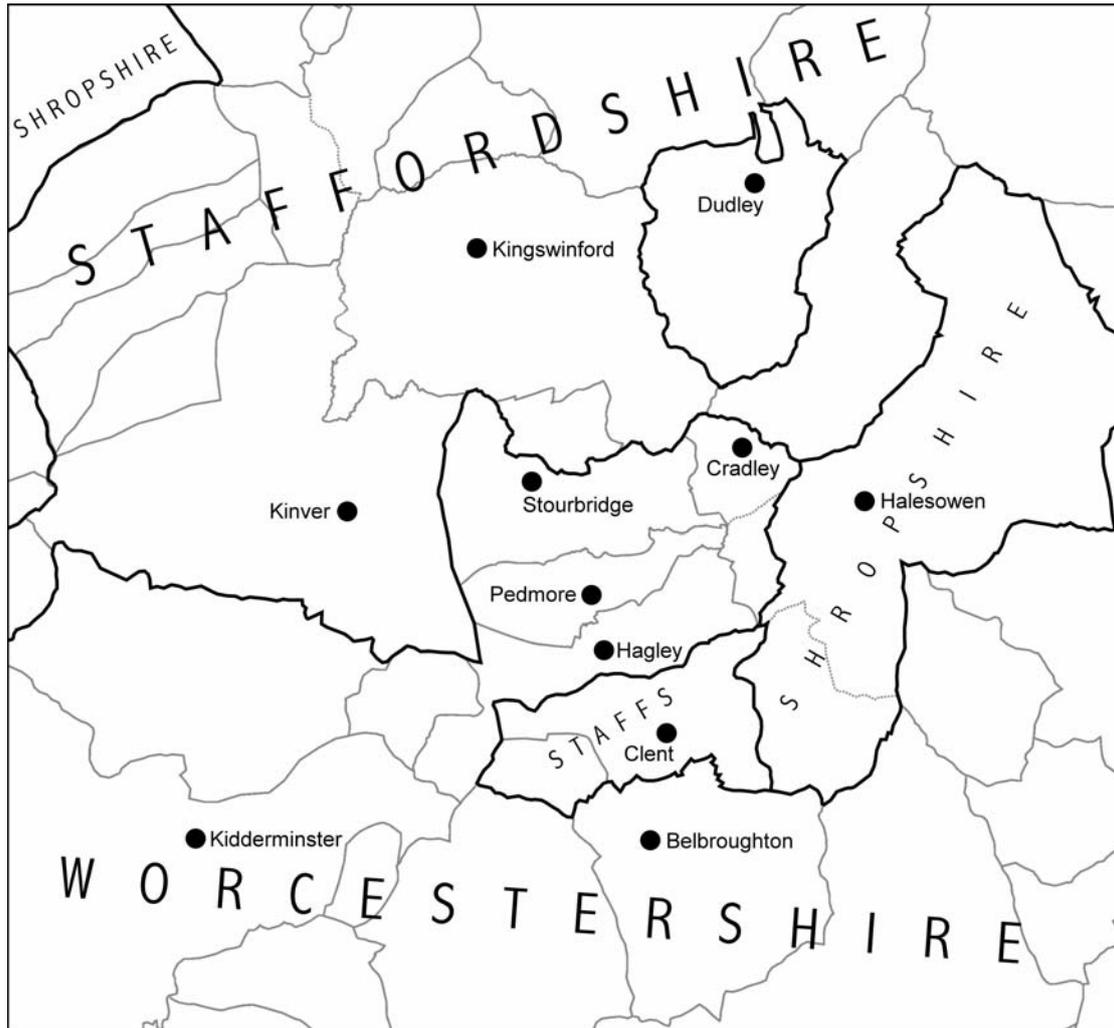


Figure 3. Historic pattern of county and parish boundaries. Fragmentation of the counties came about primarily as a result of late-Anglo-Saxon or Norman estate transfers.

Urbanisation up to the boundary during the 20th century

The course of the boundary remained static during the twentieth century, although a considerable amount of development took place around it—and indeed right up to it. House-building, which had begun on the former estate of Wollaston Hall in the second half of the nineteenth century, was supplemented by urban expansion onto Wollaston Common and Stourbridge Common (or Heath), both of which abutted the county boundary.

The first region to suffer this encroachment was Wollaston Common, with the building of the pre-war High Park estate. Construction came to a virtual halt during the war years but quickly resumed thereafter, when many of the houses on and around Norton estate (formerly Stourbridge Common) were erected. The new building initially stopped some distance short of our boundary, but the remaining slivers of undeveloped land had been taken over by residential streets and Ridgewood (formerly High Park) School by the 1960s and 70s (Haden, 1988 and 1999).

By contrast, virtually no residential development has taken place on the Staffordshire side of the county boundary, the landscape there remaining mostly rural in character.

Stourbridge Borough & civil parish boundaries (19th-20th centuries)

Until 1974, the county boundary marked the western edge of the Borough of Stourbridge. The Borough had been created sixty years earlier from Stourbridge Urban District and two neighbouring regions which abutted the boundary: Wollaston and Upper Swinford (i.e. the Norton area and Oldswinford village). It received its Charter of Incorporation in 1914, and was enlarged in 1933 by the addition of Pedmore parish (in Bromsgrove Rural District) and Lye & Wollescote Urban District. Amblecote Urban District was added to the Borough in 1966.

The various Urban and Rural Districts had become the principal administrative unit within each county in 1895, replacing the medieval system of 'hundreds'. The 1894 *Local Government Act*, which enabled this change, effectively made the medieval hundreds redundant, although it did not formally abolish them.

Prior to 1895 (when Stourbridge Urban District was formed) all of the townships that would eventually make up the Borough (i.e. Wollaston, Upper Swinford, Amblecote, Wollescote, Lye and Stourbridge), had been administered separately as civil parishes (CPs). These were responsible only for local civil administration: religious functions having been allocated, at different times during the nineteenth century, to an almost parallel set of ecclesiastical parishes (EPs). The various civil and ecclesiastical parishes were formed from the *ancient parish* of Oldswinford. Although this still exists as an ecclesiastical entity, it lost all of its civil functions in 1866, at which time it was around 800 years old.

After the inception of the nineteenth-century civil parishes, the county boundary formed the western edge of four separate administrative and ecclesiastical units: Upper Swinford CP, Wollaston CP, Wollaston EP and the ancient parish of Pedmore (which had never become a civil parish).

The boundary's middle section: 18th and 19th century adjustments

While our boundary line seems to have survived with little change over the centuries, relatively recent documents show evidence for some minor adjustments in the now straight section between Sugar Loaf Lane and Little Iverley Covert (figure 1). It seems that this region had, for most of its history, been largely unproductive heath-land, the area to the west being Stourbridge Common, and that to the east Whittington Common. This land was largely unenclosed, and there had been little need for a precise boundary line to be drawn until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The maps by Court and Blackden (1787), Brettel and Davies (1827) and the Ordnance Survey maps of 1834 and 1888 show minor variations in the course of the boundary around the new fields there—see the map facsimiles by James (2015a) for details. It seems that the straight line apparent on the 1888 and later maps is the product of some rationalisation of the boundary which must have taken place between 1834 and 1888. Although it is not known exactly how this came about, the adjustments might have their root in parliamentary enclosures, the development of the new civil parishes or perhaps in minor boundary disputes between the parishioners of Kinver and Oldswinford.

Two such disagreements are evident in a perambulation of Oldswinford parish documented in the parish records for 1733—see the transcripts in Chambers (1978) and Cochrane (2005). One of the disputes relates to the northern end of our boundary:

...where the Bounds End against Kingswinford and Begin against Kinfare, and run up to the X at the New Wood Gate, about which X there is a dispute between Kinfare and Old-Swinford. Kinfare people say that their Bounds Reach to the Green Path leading to the Corner of the Piece of Ground at Old-Ford and accordingly make their X by the Green Path, the people of Old-Swinford say the Ditch without the wood is the Extremity of Kinfare Bounds and accordingly make their X near the Ditch at the Wood gate...

Judging by the boundary depicted on later maps, the dispute was subsequently resolved in favour of Kinver.

It seems that in earlier times the parish boundary was not well defined between Sugar Loaf Lane and Little Iverley Covert. The manorial boundary pattern, which formed the template for Oldswinford and Pedmore parish boundaries, would have been similarly diffuse in this region of unenclosed heath-land. What really mattered would have been the manor, parish, county and ecclesiastical diocese to which each productive resource (field, fishpond, wood etc.) belonged. At a time when none of these resources were present, and there was no distinctive landmark to be followed, there was little point in drawing a precise boundary line. This was probably the situation here for much of the boundary's history.

Kinver Forest: an 11th-13th century boundary

It is interesting to note that, by 1300, much of our boundary line had come to define the edge of the Norman forest of Kinver. The forest was a region reserved for the King's hunt. It enjoyed a special legal status, with draconian punishments meted out to those who fell foul of forest law. The forest system seems to have originated in the late Anglo-Saxon period and reached its maximum extent in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The eastern boundary of Kinver Forest passed south along the Kingswinford-to-Stourbridge road (now the A491) until it reached Coalbourne Brook in Amblecote parish. It then followed the brook west-south-west to the Stour before crossing the river and passing south of the vill of Wollaston to join the county boundary at the north end of Wollaston ridge (between Vicarage Road and Bridgnorth Road). The edge of the forest then continued along the county boundary west of Norton to a point close to Norton Covert, where it swung south-east again towards the top (southern) end of Ounty John Lane. See the British History Online web site for a complete perambulation of the forest bounds.

Shire, hundred, manor & Burhelm's estate (10th-19th centuries)

Along with the other shires that originated in the Anglian kingdom of Mercia, the county of Worcestershire probably dates from the late tenth or early eleventh century—although there is an indication that the counties here were preceded by some form of proto-shire, each centred upon a specific fortified *burh*. The burhs were essentially defensible walled towns that had been developed to protect against Danish advancement into Anglo-Saxon lands (Mercia and Wessex). The shires—and subdivisions thereof, known as hundreds—formed a framework for administering the resources of each burhs' outlying estates. Our boundary line played its part in the resulting network of local administrative units, delineating the western edges of Pedmore manor and Oldswinford manor. These manors, and their associated parishes, were in existence by the time of the 1086 Domesday survey, in which the manors were referred to as *Pevemore* and *Suineforde*, respectively. Although we cannot be sure of the exact form of their boundaries then, they were probably very similar to those depicted on eighteenth and nineteenth century maps.

The ancient parish of Oldswinford included two separate manors: Amblecote, which had been in Staffordshire since 1016 (although it might not have existed as a distinct manor at that time), and Oldswinford itself, which seems always to have been in Worcestershire (Chambers, 1978). The reason for this rather complex arrangement is not precisely understood, but it appears to have been related to the seizure of Kingswinford, Clent and Tardebigge by the Sheriff of Staffordshire in 1016, which resulted in these three manors being transferred to Staffordshire. It is probable that Amblecote manor (in Staffordshire) was subsequently carved out of Kingswinford and incorporated into Oldswinford parish (part of the Worcester Diocese) some time after this seizure—i.e. between 1016 and 1086. Whether this involved a northwards expansion or a southerly contraction of the diocesan boundary is unknown—although a documented tenth-century link between Kingswinford and Oldswinford would seem to make the latter scenario the most plausible.

That link takes the form of an important local charter enacted by King Eadred, or one of his immediate successors, some time during the period 951 to 959. (Though authenticated copies of the charter survive, there is some doubt amongst academics as to its exact date and, therefore, which ruler executed it—see PASE (2010).) This so-called Swinford Charter granted to the King's minister, Burhelm, a six-mansae estate in 'that place to which the rustics according to their custom of name-giving and in sportive language have given the name of Swinford' (Hooke, 1990). This area was named after a swine ford that existed where the main road to Kingswinford (a very ancient salt-way) crossed the Stour. It almost certainly included much of the land between Kingswinford and Pedmore and, perhaps, other land to the south and east as well (James, 2014).



Figure 4. Swinford charter (Burhelm's) estate and the Clent hundred superimposed upon the pre-nineteenth-century manor and parish boundary pattern. The historic (pre-1974) counties are also shown, together with the line of the early diocesan boundary, after King (1996) and Hooke (2011). The county affiliations indicated seem to have held true until 1016 AD, when Clent (together with its dependencies of Rowley Regis and Broom) and Tardebigge were seized by the Sheriff of Stafford. They were subsequently administered as part of Staffordshire, although they were not officially transferred into Staffordshire until shortly after the Domesday survey.

A detailed analysis of the charter (James, 2014 and 2015b) shows that the southern, and perhaps eastern, edge of Burhelm's estate deviated significantly from the local manor boundaries. This implies that the latter resulted from a subsequent administrative reorganisation—probably involving a wider re-allocation of resources within the Clent hundred. Such a reorganisation may have been related to the ongoing evolution of the shires and the development of new systems for overseeing agricultural and military resources within each county. Notwithstanding the geographical differences between Burhelm's estate and the later manors and parishes (which must date from c951-1086), their western boundary seems to have persisted almost unchanged throughout this period of reorganisation.

Figure 4 illustrates the local pattern of medieval manor boundaries, together with the earliest form of the county boundaries that can be inferred directly from documentary evidence. (NB. Not all elements in this figure are contemporaneous, but they seem to have existed at various times between about 951 and 1086.)

The region shown with vertical hatches represents the hundred of Clent, which appears to have come into existence during the early tenth, or perhaps the late ninth, century. Clent hundred was divided into two: part of its southern half (i.e. Elmbridge and Upton Warren) can be seen at the bottom of the figure. The dark-grey hatched region near Oldswinford and Pedmore represents Burhelm's estate (James, 2015b). Clent hundred ceased to exist in the twelfth century, when it was amalgamated with the neighbouring Domesday hundreds of Cresslau, Came and Esch to form *Dimidii Comitatus de Wych* (later called Halfshire hundred), which remained in use until the mid-nineteenth century. Our western boundary persisted, however, forming—at different times—part of the boundary of both Clent and Halfshire hundreds.

The Hwiccan kingdom & the Worcester diocese (7th-10th centuries)

From the seventh to the ninth century, much of what later became Worcestershire, Gloucestershire and west Warwickshire lay within the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of the Hwicce (Zaluckyj, 2001 and Hooke, 1985). This short-lived kingdom shared its boundary with the Worcester diocese. The latter had been founded, in around 680, specifically to serve the Hwiccan people. They seem to have been a mixture of predominantly native Britons and Anglian settlers, although there was probably also some West-Saxon influence in the south of the kingdom. The Swinford area lay on, or very near, the kingdom's northern edge; and it may be that our boundary also marked the extent of Hwiccan land here.

On the basis of Domesday tax links between Kinver and Kingswinford, King (1996) reasons that the Hwiccan kingdom actually extended several miles further west to include Kinver and Enville. If this is a correct assessment, 'Stourbridge's western boundary' would have been subsumed inside Hwiccan territory during the seventh and eighth centuries. However, another scenario is equally plausible: the Kinver-Kingswinford Domesday tax link could have arisen as a result of a post-Hwiccan (e.g. ninth to eleventh century) estate transfer for which there is no surviving documentation. In that case, it remains entirely possible that our boundary line served to delineate part of the kingdom's north-west edge.

A royal estate, a minster estate and an ancient tribal homeland (9th century and earlier)

There are indications that our boundary—which we know persisted for at least the last millennium as a county, hundred, diocese, estate, manor and parish boundary—had also been of some import before the time of the Hwicce.

The Swinford charter provides evidence that the medieval manors of Oldswinford and Kingswinford had once belonged to the same region: Swinford. They may also have belonged to the same proto-shire (centred upon Worcester) before the seizure of Kingswinford in 1016. The larger Swinford region was part of a royal estate in the tenth century. It was probably

royal land at an earlier date as well—perhaps being a component of the estate that later became the hundred of Clent. The *caput*, or central place, of Clent hundred was, logically enough, the vill of Clent; and this appears to have been the site of an early minster (probably dating to the seventh or eighth century), with Rowley Regis and Broom being dependent chapelries.

With such early royal and ecclesiastical connections, it is probable that the Clent hundred derived from a more ancient (and important) estate, perhaps one based upon a pre-Anglo-Saxon tribal or clan territory (Hooke, 1985). Our boundary line might well have partially delineated that territory as well.

There is certainly evidence that the northern section of Stourbridge's western boundary is of some considerable age. The remains of a system of dykes, consisting of two parallel sets of banks and ditches, can still be seen today, running along Wollaston Ridge between Dunsley Road and Bridgnorth Road (figure 5). They might originally have extended further north along the ridge towards Vicarage Road, but quarrying and other later activity means that little evidence remains there today.

The Wollaston-ridge dykes appear substantial and give the impression of a defensive earthwork. Their age is unknown, but they are mentioned in the Swinford charter (where they are referred to as the '*meredice*', meaning boundary dykes); and this means that the dykes must have marked an established—and possibly long-standing—boundary in the mid-tenth century. Indeed, it is likely that they date from some time before the seventh century when dyke building seems to have been at its height. It is possible that they 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. It is quite conceivable that the Wollaston-ridge dykes were built by sub-Roman or post-Roman groups to delineate their territories or to control traffic along nearby route-ways. 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 preventing travellers from circumnavigating toll points (Bell, 2012).

It is also interesting that the Wollaston Ridge dykes seem to have mirrored a similar (though probably longer) system of boundary dykes lying along Kingswinford Ridge. Although no visible evidence remains there today, the Kingswinford dykes were mentioned in a charter of 996 (or arguably 994) for *Eswich* (Ashwood); and Hooke (1983) suggests that they probably ran along the ridge top which separates Kingswinford from Ashwood Hay. If this is correct, the Stour valley would have passed almost centrally between two sets of imposing dykes, to form a riverine gateway leading from one territory into another.

Such an arrangement needs to be interpreted in the context of the distribution of local Anglo-Saxon tribes or clans (and perhaps their native British predecessors), as indicated in figure 6. A charter of 849 for Cofton Hacket (near the Lickey Hills) refers to the nearby meeting place of the *Tomsætan* and *Pencersætan* people—Anglian groups based, respectively, in the Tame valley and in the valley of the River Penk (and possibly also the Smestow). These people must have had to travel a considerable distance through a heavily wooded region (Hooke, 2008) to reach their traditional meeting place; and the most straightforward means of doing that would probably have been to follow local watercourses. Indeed, a route along the Penk, Smestow, Stour and then the tributaries of the Stour would have taken the *Pencersætan* most of the way to their traditional meeting place. (The *Tomsætan* might have used a similar route along the Rivers Tame and Cole and their tributaries.) En-route, the *Pencersætan* would have passed along the Stour valley and through the "gateway" between the Wollaston and Kingswinford dykes, perhaps entering a different tribal territory at that point—presumably the one that later gave rise to the Clent hundred. This is, however, a matter of pure speculation; and Hooke (1985) suggests that the Stourbridge area would originally have been located within a region of "intercommoning"—i.e. an area of shared woodland resources with only diffuse and, perhaps, shifting boundaries.

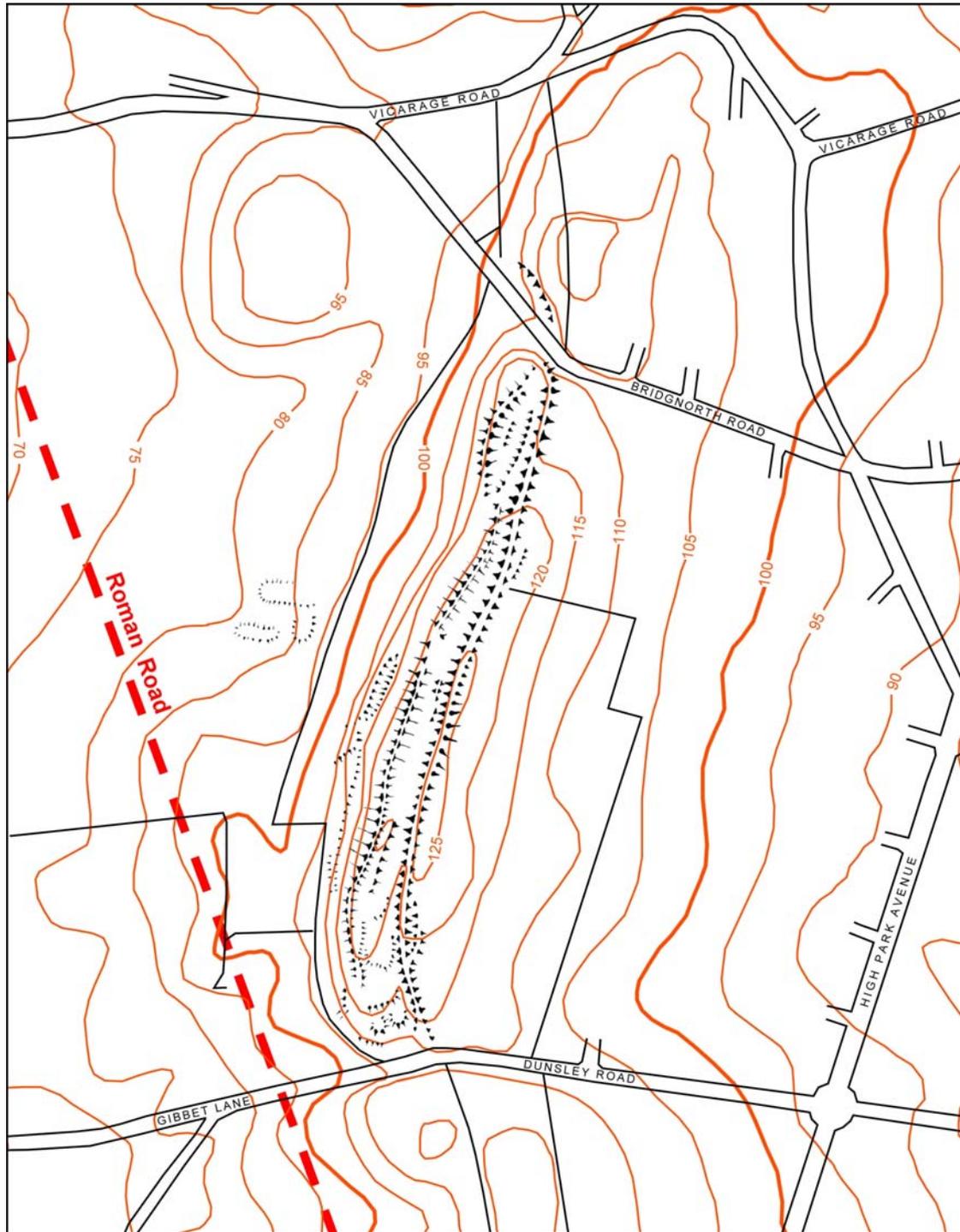


Figure 5. Wollaston Ridge dykes from a visual survey in March 2015. Two main earthworks are apparent: the eastern bank stands several metres above its accompanying partially filled ditch; and a second bank, about 20 metres to the west, appears to have been constructed on the ridge's break of slope. A 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. A cluster of three shallow mounds or platforms lies near the western foot of the ridge. These might be natural formations or the remains of modern agricultural buildings, but their proximity to the Roman Road does raise interesting possibilities, particularly in view of the fact that a Romano-British farmstead or villa has been noted in crop marks on the opposite side of the Roman road (Wardle, 2003).

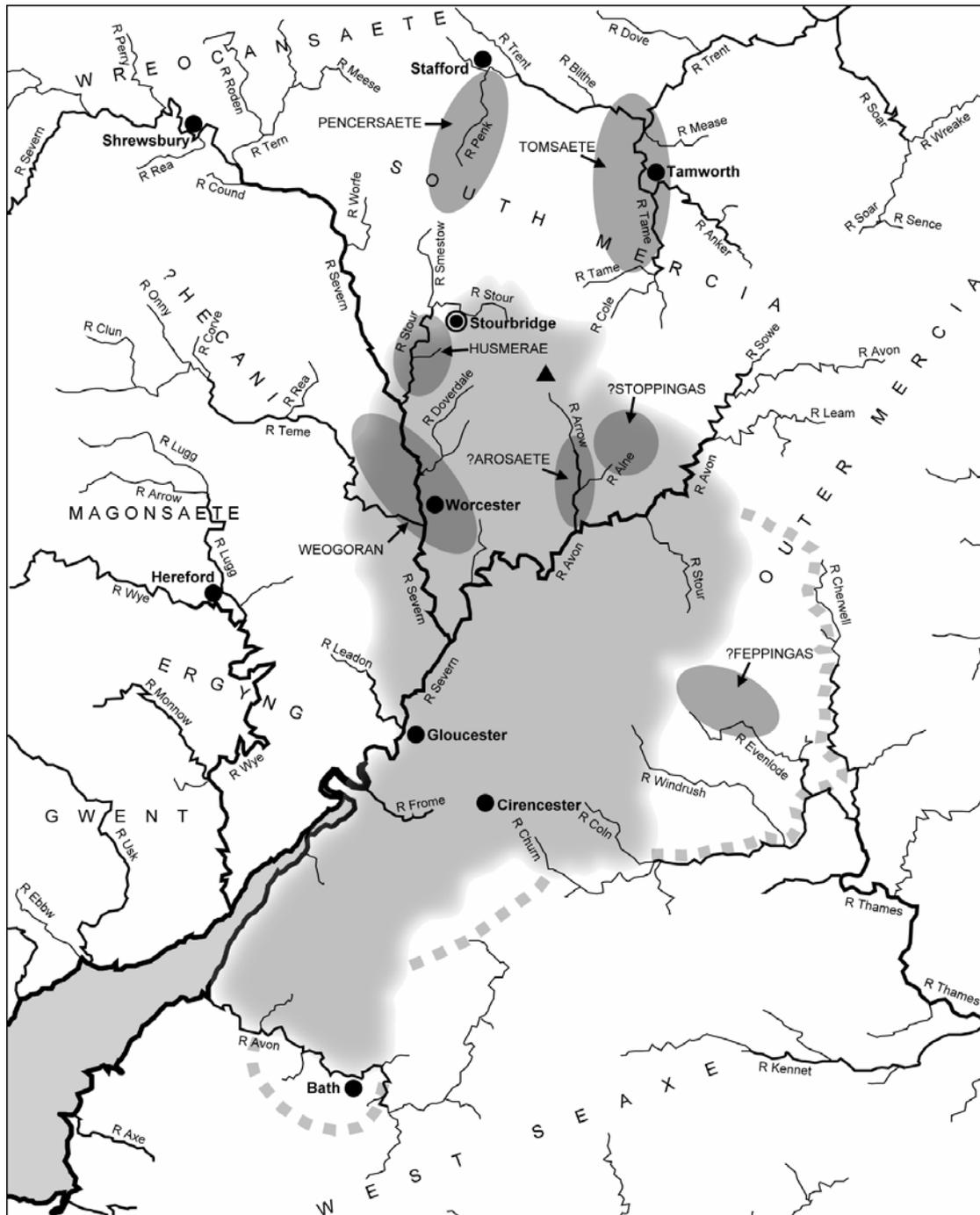


Figure 6. Anglo-Saxon tribal or clan regions prior to the ninth century. The large diffuse area represents the kingdom of the Hwicce: the areas bounded by the broad dashed lines seem to have belonged to the kingdom at an early date (before about AD 680). The tinted ellipses indicate the foci of known smaller tribes or clans. There were probably others, for which no record has survived. The ninth-century meeting place of the Pencersætan and Tomsætan people is indicated by the triangle south-east of Stourbridge near the Lickey Hills.

Of course, without hard archaeological evidence, we cannot be sure when the dykes were constructed, and an Iron Age origin is one possibility. The Stourbridge area lay in a border region separating the late-Iron-Age and Romano-British clans of the Dobunni (from which the Hwiccan kingdom seems to have evolved—see Yeates, 2008) and the Cornovii tribe, whose territory lay to the north-west (Webster, 1991 and Cunliffe, 2005). The Wollaston dykes might, conceivably, have been used as a defensive structure or territorial marker during that period.

Yet another explanation is that they originated as a Bronze Age ranch boundary. Although this seems less likely, there was certainly activity in the vicinity during the Bronze Age: the archaeological record includes a burnt mound near New Wood (within a few hundred metres of the dykes); and signs of significant Bronze Age settlement and agriculture are apparent around Wychbury Hill (Dudley Historic Environment Record, 2014) and Burys Hill (Garwood, 2011). Wollaston's burnt mound, like others in the west midlands, contained fire-shattered stones which are thought to have been used as pot boilers or as a source of heat for steam bathing (Hodder, 2001).

Unfortunately, there is no archaeological evidence available to clarify the origin of the Wollaston-Ridge dykes, but whatever their exact age, it is clear that they were an important boundary structure from an early date. This part of Stourbridge's western boundary has persisted virtually unchanged since then.

Epilogue

Throughout the last two millennia, our boundary's function has altered repeatedly. It probably started out as an Iron Age tribal frontier and marked, at various times, the edge of an Anglo-Saxon kingdom, an ecclesiastical diocese, a royal estate, a Domesday hundred, an Anglo-Saxon nobleman's estate, a royal forest, a rural deanery, a medieval hundred, the manors of Oldswinford and Pedmore, two ancient parishes, various civil and ecclesiastical parishes, the county of Worcestershire, and Stourbridge-Borough. It is remarkable that the same line is still in use to delineate part of Dudley Metropolitan Borough today. Figure 7 summarises how it has been adopted for a variety of different purposes over the centuries.

And what might the future hold? Regional devolution is now a hot political topic, and Stourbridge's western boundary currently marks the edge of Greater Birmingham*. The ever-increasing pressure for urbanisation will almost certainly lead to further expansion of the conurbation; and that would undoubtedly be the closing chapter in our boundary's history: a sad and unwelcome end for such an historic feature.

* The unpopular marketing term proposed for the region governed, since 2016, by the new West Midlands Combined Authority.

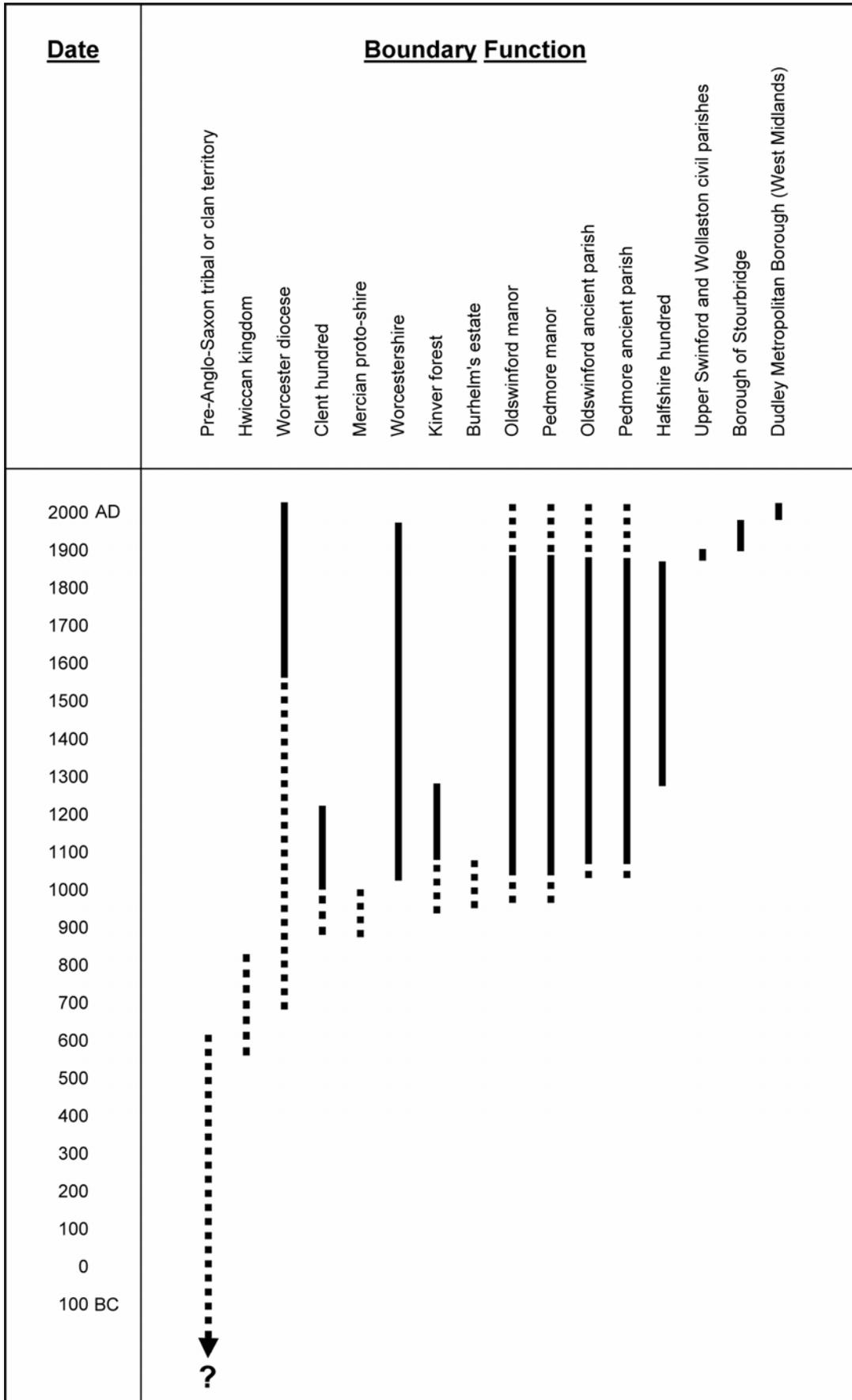


Figure 7. The ever-changing function of Stourbridge's western boundary.

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