



12 MARCH 2020

## **CORPSE ROADS: DIGITAL LANDSCAPE ARCHAEOLOGY**

DR STUART DUNN

*Now it is the time of night  
That the graves all gaping wide  
Every one lets forth his sprite  
In the Church Way Paths to glide*

This passage is from one of Puck's soliloquies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 5, Scene 1, in which Puck explores a number of interlinked themes about how the countryside changes as night falls. The passage is heavy with thick, rural imagery. "Whilst the heavy ploughman snores", "while the wasted irons glow", "while the screech owl, screeching loud", the land slips from the realms of the earthly and the mortal, to that of the supernatural and the immortal. And then beings such as Puck himself come in to their own. "And we fairies, that do run / By the triple Hecate's team / From the presence of the sun / Following darkness like a dream". As is his habit, Shakespeare dips into themes of universal myth, in this case that of the sun being consumed by night, with an eventual promise of its rebirth in the future. However, while the broader theme is universal, the imagery sets the events Puck is imagining squarely in context of the English countryside. In doing so Shakespeare – very cleverly – links this mythological theme with a set of much more local traditions, more associated with the rustic images he invokes. The "Church Way Paths" is a reference to the routes taken by funeral parties on the way to the ceremonies of interment, from the place of death. In the pre-modern period, such routes could extend far across the countryside, since the more important churches preserved for themselves the right to conduct burials, and to charge for the privilege. In some traditions of British folklore, these routes were believed by some to take on special significance. One such belief, the subject of Puck's allusion, was that mischievous sprites might return along the route way – to glide in fact - and make a nuisance of themselves in the deceased's community.

Such traditions, which, as we shall see, were particularly strong in rural areas. These were corpse roads, otherwise known as corpse paths, or coffin roads. To the mundane, modern, or indeed Christian eye, there seems little remarkable about such routes. After all, the road to the church is simply part of the secular infrastructure surrounding the ceremony, and the journey taken there no more significant than any other organizational detail. The separation in space from a place of death to a place of burial, and the consequent need for corpses to be carried for some distance, is itself a product of the mundane: as the population of late medieval and early modern Britain increased, and as the Church reserved for itself the right to bury the dead in consecrated ground – and, as noted before, charge for the privilege – so such journeys became inevitable. This lecture is concerned with some of the less tangible results of the mundane: the beliefs engendered by the necessity to convey corpses and their passage across country, what contemporary research methods we can use to learn more about these beliefs and their context in the landscape, and what broader lessons they can teach us about how we explore the affordances of dynamism, mobility and physical engagement in history and archaeology.



## Evidence

A word must be said first about the kind of evidence available to study this subject. It is especially important when examining the intersections of folklore, landscape history, culture and archaeology to beware the pitfalls of pseudo-history and pseudo-archaeology. It follows from this that the type and quality of evidence one has constrains the kind of questions one can sensibly ask. Where corpse roads came from and what their significance was in the contemporary mind of the early modern period are questions that are lost to sensible enquiry and could only really be answered with reference to the simplistic resources of folk history. This problem is far from new in landscape studies. In his searingly elaborate thesis on the connectivity of ancient mounds and monuments, published in 1925 as *The Old Straight Track*, Alfred Watkins argues that a complex framework of civilizations emerged in the British Isles and beyond, based a system of “leys”, immaterial straight lines connecting such structures. Ley lines are, of course, a staple of pseudo-archaeology, with no material or historical evidence at all to support their hypothesis. Accordingly, as Robert Macfarlane points out in the introduction to a 2013 edition of *The Old Straight Track*, the archaeological community at the time did not buy Watkins’s thesis at all: after all, there are so many ancient monuments in southern England that one can connect multiple subsets of them in straight lines simply by the inevitability of geometric coincidence. It is just a matter of scale and statistics. Watkins’s thesis went on, indirectly, to influence much twentieth century thought on New Age mysticism, and the idea of the ley line remains firmly in this realm.

To be fair, I think that Watkins – a bluff, practical Herefordshire countryman – would have been aghast at this (mis)appropriation of his work. There is no question that he meticulously and methodically documented the antiquarian features of Herefordshire, and indeed his focus on features of the mundane landscape was ground-breaking at the time; but his own single-mindedness led him to a dubious synthesis of the data he gathered. He was no crank, but the intellectual fate of his work is salutary lesson. It is worth pointing out that Watkins also drew on existing thinking and made genuine efforts to ground his work in the scholarship of the day. Throughout, he makes several references to R. Hipsley-Cox’s *The Green Roads of England*, published in 1914, this wide-ranging survey of “green lanes”, country tracks of seemingly very great antiquity, often scored deeply into the fabric of the land by centuries of footfall or hoof-fall, was similarly ground-breaking. Hipsley-Cox prefaces his work with the admonition that:

*“[m]uch is, and must be, guesswork, since all the evidence that remains to guide us, are the trackways and earthworks I have endeavoured to explain, and the best that can be attempted is to offer a theory that fits together the greatest number of facts.”*

I think it is fair to say that Hipsley-Cox does not entirely live up to this level of interpretive rigour in the passages that follow, with the picture he paints of pre-Celtic civilizations and Neolithic sun worship. However, again, there is no doubting the methodical rigour of the ways in which he gathers and presents his evidence, and the enthusiasm with which he guides his reader through the landscapes of the past.

## Deathly Geographies

So, to the subject in hand: we can begin by considering, more broadly, why the journeys associated with death, both before and after it, particularly matter in social, cultural, historic, religious and, yes, folkloric terms. I believe that this significance arises from a contrast between the mobility of these journeys, and the fixity and finality of death itself. Take, for example, one of the most famous gallows sites in English history, the “Tyburn Tree”. Nowadays marked by a concrete roundel in the distinctly unglamorous location of the traffic roundabout linking Edgware Road, Oxford Street and Bayswater Road in London, executions were carried out at Tyburn from at least the twelfth century until the early eighteenth, when the site of execution was moved to Newgate Prison. In that period, the site itself was undoubtedly a place of spectacle and public amusement, especially in the case of



well-known or particularly notorious offenders; but perhaps of even greater spectacle was the journey the prisoner took from Newgate to Tyburn, along what later became St Giles and Oxford Street. The fact that a Tyburn execution levelled out the distinction between rich and poor in society, privileging the spectacle and manner of the death over social status, was captured in Allan Ramsey's *The Tea-table miscellany: a collection of choice songs, Scots and English*, in 1794:

*Since laws were made for ev'ry degree  
To curb vice in others, as well as in me,  
I wonder we han't better company  
Upon Tyburn tree!  
But gold from law can take out the sting,  
And if rich men like us were to swing  
'Twould thin the land such members to string  
Upon Tyburn tree!*

We might further note the fact that this stretch of London thoroughfare constituted part of Watling Street, the Roman Road linking Dover with Anglesey, which in turn illustrates the deep, rich social fabric of important routeways, and how one utilization in one age can be completely overlain by another later on. In any case, it is clear that the anticipation, the prisoner's interaction (or lack of) with the crowd, the show put on by the journey, constituted a process of build-up and climax across both time and place, ending in the finality and fixity of the hangman's noose.

The physical or geographical destination of the journey taken immediately before or immediately after death is therefore has a symbolism that is as important as that of the journey itself. It is therefore worth taking a moment to examine the some of the most important manifestations of that symbolism. A visual motif most associated with the destination of a funeral journey is the yew tree. As well as having been a familiar feature of British churchyards for centuries, yews channel the symbolic and cultural significance often associated with living beings of very, very great antiquity. The significance people attach to them form palimpsests of meaning as different populations have grown, shifted and changed around them; and this includes the shaping of funeral practices. They are among the most long lived of British flora, with evidence for their presence in the British Isles from at least 6000 BC. In his magisterial survey of the subject, *The Ancient Yew: A History of Taxus Baccata*, Robert Bevan Jones notes evidence for funerary traditions associated with yew trees dating back until at least the seventh century. These practices were apparently in play on the continent, where at Pernone in Picardy, a charter of AD 684 refers to the church's responsibility for the upkeep of a particular yew. It follows logically from this, as well as from the simple logic of chronology, that many such yews predate, in some cases very considerably, the churches and churchyards with which they are associated.

There is, however, evidence to suggest that some kind of continuity of practice which places yew trees themselves as the ends of coffin routes. The naturalist and pastor Gilbert White, in his *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, notes:

*'In the churchyard of this village is a yew tree whose aspect bespeaks it to be of great age: it seems to have seen several centuries, and is probably coeval with the church, and therefore may be deemed an antiquity: the body is squat, short and thick, and measures twenty-three feet in girth, supporting a head of suitable extent to its bulk. This is a male tree, which in the spring sheds clouds of dust and fills the atmosphere with its farina.'*

The Selborne Yew blew over in the storms of January 1990. This exposed its root bole and created a large hole, presenting an opportunity for archaeological exploration, which revealed seven complete skeletons, and bones belonging to an unknowable number of others. The archaeologists speculated – and, tantalizingly it is just



speculation – that the presence of these bodies among the roots meant that the yew itself had provided a physical focus for burials, perhaps a kind of *axis mundi*, a hub upon which some kind of cultural imperative to inter the dead focused. But we do not know. What the archaeologists are able to tell us is that pottery from the deepest and oldest of the graves suggested a date of circa 1200-1400 AD, at which point the tree, judging by its diameter, could have been two or three hundred years old. Crucially, this grave also contained disarticulated human bones, suggesting that it was not the first grave at the site. This of course does not prove any continuity of practice from pre-Christian times, but it does continue to demonstrate the very great antiquity of the association between death rituals and yew trees.

Other evidence of this comes from elsewhere. Quoting the work of Martin and Nigel Palmer, Carole Cusack notes in her history of the Fortingall Yew in Ayrshire, one of the oldest trees in Europe, that “in most cases the churches do not pre-date the yews”. She goes on to note that “most [churchyard] yews are in close proximity to standing stones, stone circles, and pre-Christian burial sites ... the tree’s long life and ability to survive makes it a sacred symbol of eternity. The yew tree is also evergreen, which may contribute to its associations with life, regeneration, and immortality”. This is also a theme that is evident in R. V. W. Elliott’s classic 1957 study, “Runes, Yews and Magic”, where he describes the Brittonic belief that the root of a churchyard yew grows out of the mouth of each corpse buried therein, thus sustaining the former and ensuring its continued survival. However, while some of the more circumstantial backwaters of folklore point to a connection between the yew tree, life and rebirth, the yew is generally more associated with the rituals of death. Quoting an 1849 SPCK publication, the *Life of a Tree*, Cusack describes the Fortingall Yew as having a large gap through its middle, caused by the older inner rings rotting away as the new outer rings replaced them. She goes on to argue that funerals passed through this gap, and that this was a key element of the ceremony itself. Furthermore, in his *Observations on the popular antiquities of Great Britain: chiefly illustrating the origin of our vulgar and provincial customs, ceremonies, and superstitions* of 1849, John Brand notes that:

*“to the remarks which have been already made on evergreens used at funerals may be added, that the planting of yew-trees in churchyards seems to derive its origin from ancient funeral rites; in which, Sir Thomas Browne conjectures, from its perpetual verdure, it was used as an emblem of the Resurrection.”*

The story of contrast continues: death and stasis, life and mobility. It therefore seems natural that the routes taken by a corpse to its final, fixed place of burial should attract particular social and cultural significances.

### Material evidence

Let us turn to some of the evidence which corpse roads have left in the landscape. In Yorkshire, the “Swaledale Corpse Way” runs from Keld to Grinton. The tradition of this path is captured by, among numerous other sources, the Yorkshire children’s writer Malcolm Saville. In a paper produced with the Malcolm Saville Society, Stephen Bigger of the University of Worcestershire provides a quotation from *The Mystery Mine* (1959):

*“That’s the Corpse Way,” Sharman explained. “That path has been there for hundreds of years, and until the old church fell out of use and was deconsecrated a hundred years or so ago, coffins were brought over that hill for burial from villages without a church.” (p.204). The old church at Wharram Percy was St. Martins. The church was used by the nearby villages until 1869, long after the ‘deserted’ village was gone, so locals would have a long walk to the church and churchyard for worship and for burial”.*

At various points along this route there are so-called “coffin stones”, flat stones whose purpose seems to have been to provide a point for pall bearers to rest the coffin down and take a much-needed break. This is another example of a coffin stone from the Lake District. For similar reasons of practical necessity, coffins at this time seem to have been made of wicker - much easier to transport over very long distances than wooden equivalents.



The same sort of phenomenon is visible in the lychgates of many churches. This lychgate, that of St Mary Magdalene at Bolney, in Sussex, gives us an example of a dais, or platform, within the gateway itself with the express purpose of providing a surface on which to rest the coffin on arrival at the church (I acknowledge the excellent Wikimedia Commons for the use of this picture, full citation on the slide). Many such churches, especially in Southern England, boast such platforms, and in fact the term lych-gate itself tells this story, deriving as it does from the Old English “*lic*”, meaning “body”.

### Mapping evidence

The idea of the corpse road has left limited evidence in the landscape as mapped by modern cartography. To my knowledge, there are two explicit references in the Ordnance Survey. The first is a trackway marked “Old Corpse Road”, just south of Castleford, near Wakefield, Yorkshire, in the Survey’s six-inch to the mile series. This particular sheet was first surveyed between 1846 and 1848 and published in 1852. It was re-surveyed in 1888-1899, 1905-1908, 1931-1932 and again in 1938. The quantity and frequency of these surveys was probably due to rapid change in the local urban environment driven by the establishment and expansion of the railway network. Nonetheless, the label “Old Corpse Road” appears on each of these editions, appearing to mark just a short stretch of footpath heading north from a “Miners’ Sports and Welfare ground”, parallel to the Pontefract Road. Connecting other stretches of footpath to the south which run on the same kind of alignment would suggest that this stretch, whose label will have been based on local knowledge gleaned by OS surveyors, formed part of a corpse road connecting Castleford with the church at Pontefract itself. An inspection of the Google Maps satellite view of the area indicates that it has now been largely overbuilt by modern housing, although the particular stretch of path in question appears to be bordered on either side by trees. Without independently knowing the age of the trees we cannot know whether or not this is relevant; however later on I shall offer a conjecture as to why it might possibly be the case.

The second example also comes from Yorkshire, from the moorland areas to the north of the county. Sheet 71 of the OS six-inch series covers the districts of Borrowby, North and South Otterington and Knayton. It was first surveyed in 1854, with the north western quadrant surveyed in 1892 and 1911, and the south western quadrant at various points between 1892 and 1930. Again, the corpse road label appears on all of the sheets in question, with the likelihood that it linked the twelfth-century “mother church” of St Michael’s at North Otterington with the outlying settlements of, and around, Thornton-le-Beans and Thornton-le-Moor. To the west of North Otterington, it crosses – or rather it is cut by – the York, Berwick and Newcastle Railway, which was built seven years before the first survey in 1847. According to the map, it then turns north, and continues in parallel with the railway, before heading east over the Leeds Northern line. Incidentally, the path is still marked on modern Ordnance Survey maps and also on Google Maps which, presumably, draws its data from the same source. This seems somewhat strange, as a pathway marked as a “Bridle Road” continues west from this point, directly to the church at North Otterington. This would seem a much more plausible route for a Corpse Road. To my mind, there are two possible explanations for this. Firstly, it could be a mistake on the part of the Ordnance Survey’s nineteenth century fieldworkers. The naming of paths, roads and routes was surely an important task for them, but not as important as ensuring their cartographic geometry was correct. The second possible explanation is rather more beguiling. This is that some kind of pressure and/or misinformation was exerted on the surveyors to re-direct the corpse path around a specific parcel of land. Based on the geography of the area, as expressed on the map, the most likely candidate for this would be the owner of Otterington Grange. I must stress, strongly, that there is no independent empirical evidence for this, and if, and hopefully when, I come to develop this lecture for publication in a peer-reviewed venue, more evidence will certainly have to be acquired before I can include it. However, it is a plausible hypothesis, and I come to further evidence which further supports it shortly.



## Literary evidence

The majority of evidence for corpse road folklore is literary and archival. In the last few years, I have been scouring all the written sources I can find, looking for references to corpse roads in the British Isles. I have currently identified around 40, which I have published as an open document here, along with geographic data locating the start and end points. While this form of evidence is certainly the most voluminous, it is in archival and literary sources that the challenges of the subject become most clear. For example, while it is relatively easy to identify, at least approximately, the latitudes and longitudes of the start and finish of corpse paths, identifying the actual route itself, connecting A with B, is inevitably much more inferential. To fill in the blanks, we very often have to rely on the insights of local historians and geographers, such as Alan Cleaver and Lesley Park, whose excellent *Corpse Roads of Cumbria* describes their investigation of “a few shadows, fading footprints and famously unreliable oral traditions”; but which also contains first-hand accounts of their own experience of walking said paths, and observing features such as “coffin rests”. As noted earlier, these are flat stones and other points where the coffins were rested while the pall bearers took a break. This is an exercise very much in the spirit of phenomenology, the branch of thinking in post processual archaeology which gives weight to experiential engagement with a landscape, or site, in order to fully understand it, rather than relying only on purely quantitative material. I discuss this further later.

As I noted earlier, Cumbria and the rural north west of England seems to be especially susceptible to corpse road folklore. This is perhaps to be expected – rugged rural areas, with numerous local communities far removed from “mother” churches which, as previously indicated, retained rights of burial and so on, are bound to foster the requirements that would lead to coffins having to be carried across country. There is second-hand evidence from oral history for the significance of such paths in the region. In 1915, the folklorist and local historian William T. Palmer, in his *Odd Yarns of English Lakeland*, notes:

*“Some of our mountain hamlets are far from the parish church, which has given rise to the “corpse road,” which goes straight as a lance to the village centre ... But the official who dared to meddle with the corpse road, even though it might not be used once in twenty years, was in for dire trouble”.*

The same author addressed the subject in an earlier work, his 1908 *The English Lakes*, which was illustrated by the watercolourist Alfred Heaton Cooper. In this wide-ranging chorographic description of the region, Palmer describes the town of Mardale, at the southern tip of the Haweswater Reservoir. Most interestingly for the present discussion, he states that:

*“the present little church [at Mardale] dates back some two hundred years; its graveyard was not consecrated till many years afterward. Even yet old dalesfolk will point to where the corpse-road crossed the fells to Brampton. According to such, there were two roads into Mardale: the assize-road, by which, almost as the crow flies, juries went to the county town; and the road we have mentioned, used almost exclusively for funerals”*

Palmer’s reference to the churchyard not being consecrated until later is a clear nod towards the necessity for corpses to be transported for burial in ground that was consecrated – in this case the abbey church at Shap, some fifteen miles to the East.

Obviously, the landscape has changed much in the intervening years. In the case of the road linking Mardale with Shap, which Palmer alludes to here Mardale itself is no longer inhabited. It was, in fact, flooded in the 1930s, in order to form the Haweswater Reservoir, to meet the increasing demands for water for the city of Manchester. We must therefore rely on inference, and analysis of characteristics of the landscape which do endure, to explore the gaps left in the accounts of writers such as Palmer. Two such characteristics are topography and elevation: the physical shape of the landscape itself.



Some of my current research concerns efforts to synthesize data from various sources to explicate the presence of particular corpse paths using analysis of topography. By bringing together publicly available sheets from the 1880s Ordnance Survey map of the area, topographic data from the US Geological Survey, data on public rights of way, and data from Open Street Map, an open source mapping project identifying contemporary topographic features, we can begin to do exactly this. Beginning with the USGS data, we can get an overview of the topography of the landscape. This view is a Digital Elevation Model, or DEM, of the region, showing the height above sea-level of each location, with a height value attached to each square in a 30-meter raster grid overlaid on the earth's surface. This of course has implications for accuracy – 30 meters is quite a long way as a margin of error for walking practices. However, it does allow us to make broad topographic generalisations over a path of 15 miles or so in length. By combining the historic OS data with a sheet from Open Street Map, showing the location of contemporary locations of settlements and waterways, we can immediately see the change wrought at Mardale by the creation of the reservoir. It also makes the original beginning of the corpse path, as described by Palmer, difficult to pinpoint. Overlaying the a map of the modern metaled road network, and the modern public right of way network (as documented at the “ROW Maps” website, which provides free data digitized from local authority records), we can visually align the modern route with the topographic overlay, and start to get a sense of the corpse road which Palmer alluded to.

I am currently embarking on a more ambitious and sophisticated set of quantitative analyses, which maps the “least cost paths” between outlying villages, such as Mardale, and “mother” churches, such as Shap. The calculations are carried out using Geographical Information Systems software, which allows us to crunch the numbers contained in maps of this kind and draw broad statistical inferences for how the features of the landscape work. In the case of a least cost path analysis, we calculate the sequence of 30-meter squares in USGS overlay which one would have to take in order to expend the least cumulative effort in order to complete the journey. Whether that effort is expressed in time, or in kilojoules of energy expended is not specified, and it does not need to be; rather the idea of “cost” is expressed in the abstract. Here is a preliminary analysis showing different kinds of least cost paths between Mardale and various “destination” churches identified in my survey. Three variables are assumed: one the cost of the route based purely on topography. Second, is a route which assumes a “cost” of one additional pixel when crossing rivers. This gives an approximation of how difficult it would be to cross a river if no bridge is present. The third variable gives a two pixel “penalty” for crossing rivers. This allows us, at least conjecturally, to account for the observation made by Palmer in *The English Lakes*, when he tells us that “[t]here were no bridges in the dale then, and during winter, and even summer, the torrents were at times quite impassable”. In particular, it is interesting to note that a “two pixel” penalty for river crossing takes the reconstructed pathway postulated between Mardale and Beetham quite significantly to the east; however the actual present-day path, which corresponds remarkably well to least cost path with no penalties at all, still takes in the so-called “Fairy Steps”, a very steep and rocky pass which, in the present day, the Visit Cumbria tourist website describes as being “situated on one Lakeland’s corpse trails, along which the coffins of those who died in more remote and inaccessible wildernesses of the neighbourhood, would be carried for burial in the nearby churchyard”. This is a feature whose “least cost” would still have been very significant. We can assume therefore that the traversers of corpse paths were less willing to surmount the obstacles placed by rivers, especially as Palmer points out, there were few or no bridges in the area at the time; and would rather face the challenge of the Fairy Steps instead.

This approach, however, brings methodological risks. Quantification assumes some kind of homogeneity, at least in method. This is an assumption which must be treated with great caution, as there is so much variation between different regions. For corpse roads are by no means a purely northern phenomenon. There is plenty of evidence elsewhere for their existence, or at least for assertions in the past that corpse roads existed in one form or another. There is further much more circumstantial evidence for the psychological power that the idea exerted, and in the



way that they connected communities, providing further tantalizing insight into the importance humans attach to movement through the landscape at critical points of their lives.

In 1928, the journal *Folklore* published a note in its Correspondence pages from “Wm Self. Weeks” entitled *Public Right of Way Believed to be Created by the Passage of a Corpse*. This, it seems, referred to a common misconception among landowners that the passage of a funeral party automatically conferred legal status as a publicly accessible route on the path they took. We might speculate, might we not, that the otherwise anomalous right-angled deviation of the “Old Corpse Road” around Otterington Grange might have been due to some such consideration on the part of its owners. Indications of such a belief are certainly recorded elsewhere. In 1977 for example, also in *Folklore*, a Letter to the Editor from A. Vickery stated:

*“Many writers on folklore (e.g. Christina Hole (ed.), Encyclopaedia of Superstitions, 1961, pp.83-5) mention the widespread belief that the passage of a corpse or funeral procession across private land establishes a public right of way. At the entrance to Palace Road, a wooden sign board in good condition states:*

*Private Road  
Heavy Traffic  
Funerals & Hawkers  
Prohibited*

*Whilst the prohibition of heavy traffic and hawkers is understandable, the ban on funerals can only be explained in light of this belief, and might, therefore, be worthy of record in Folklore.”*

(I would, by the way, like to thank the author of this letter himself for bringing it to my attention).

No such provision has ever existed in the statute, civil or common laws concerning trespass or land ownership. Having debunked the actual notion itself (with reference to an earlier Q&A in the journal *Justice of the Peace*, a “legal journal mainly devoted to matters affecting Magistrates and Local Authorities generally”), Weeks goes on to propound the theory that the idea of the corpse path comes from an agricultural practice of deliberately leaving a strip unploughed along a field’s edge, to allow the carriage of bodies: He refers to “bier balks ... wider strips of turf left between the ploughed strips of land in certain places expressly for funeral ways” (page 935). In support of this view, Weeks quotes correspondence in the *Times Literary Supplement* which responded to a previous letter on the subject he, Weeks, published there ten years previously. This came from L. R. Phelps of Oriel College, Oxford, who writes:

*“In many parishes the church path is a familiar feature. Where I knew it best, at Littleworth, in Berkshire [now Oxfordshire], it connected an outlying hamlet with its parish church at Farringdon [sic], some two miles off. The characteristic of a ‘church path’ is that it is never ploughed over, but stands out from the field, hard and dry, and of a width sufficient to allow the bearers of a coffin to walk abreast along it.”*

A public right of way still exists between Littleworth and Farringdon, as can be seen from the data provided by Oxfordshire County Council and digitized by the ROW Maps website (from which the Right of Way data in the analysis for the Mardale-Shap road was derived). Farringdon, and its 11th century church, All Saints, is at the western end of the path. A 2014 archaeological survey of the church’s environs, in preparation for new facilities being built at the church, found evidence for 341 burials of a range of ages in the churchyard. Of course, one cannot easily tell from such evidence the places of death, and thus where the bodies were borne from, but in their conclusion the investigators note:

*The community of believers excavated at All Saints comprised a broader church. Although no clearly high-status individuals were recovered, the investigation revealed a broad demographic section through the population of men and women, children and adults. The*



*excavation showed the degree of care attached to the ill and dying, as well as concern for the well-being of the dead. The prosaic realities of country life and death from the late medieval to 19th century were revealed by the work carried out All Saints, Faringdon.”*

As for the path from Littleworth: two clues immediately support Phelps’s recollection. At Littleworth itself, a footpath sign pointing west at the edge of the village indicates “Church Walk” to Faringdon (below left). This is also the name ascribed to the path by the Ordnance Survey six inch to the mile series, of which the first sheet for this area was published in 1883. Secondly, just outside of Faringdon itself is “Church Path Farm” – also labelled thus on Google Earth – the site of which includes a curious chapel-like outbuilding, with Gothic-style arching (below, right). The walk itself is flat, easy going, and suitable for the transportation of a load – crosses a total of four fields. The easternmost is large and flat, and at the time I walked it, was recently harvested of (I think) kale. The pathway adopts a slightly different direction to the plough lines, which might be of significance, as these at least should preserve the orientation of the field. It seemed at the time that the slight difference between the path and the plough lines might suggest that the field had been sub-divided into strips of a more south-westerly orientation than it is today, and that the path thus pre-dates it. The most obvious reason for this would be a change to accommodate the construction of London Street to the south, which connects Faringdon to the A420. When I reflected on this path in a post on my personal blog in 2018, the Parish Clerk of Littleworth, D. J. Mackay, contributed a response, shedding light on why the path and plough lines were misaligned:

*“[It was] as a result of the hedges of the fields that the “bier balk” Church Walk followed as a headland path were grubbed out by the landowner in, I believe, the 1970’s prior to the enactment of legislation that now protects headland paths. Thus, the Church Walk path along this section became a cross field path no longer protected from cultivation. It is reported that Church walk was indeed a “bier balk” with built up resting places for the coffin bearers to rest the coffin at strategic points between Littleworth and Faringdon.*

Once again therefore, the importance of local knowledge in these matters is highlighted.

The westernmost section of the route, from Grove Lodge to Church Path Farm is characterized by deep, old-looking hedgerows. From Church Path Farm, the route down into Faringdon itself is a modern metalled road, obviously optimized for vehicles with the hedgerows accordingly removed. We can speculate therefore that Weeks and Phelps, whose accounts are confirmed by the parish clerk of Littleworth, might indeed have been on to something. These hedgerows do not simply follow the line of the field boundary as the path does to the east (below), but they delineate a gap between the fields themselves. This would be consistent with a route deliberately left to enable the passage of a bier party – a “bier balk”.

Another Right of Way heads north from Church Walk at Grove Lodge. This path is still clearly visible in the landscape, skirting east to avoid Grove Wood. Could this have served as another corpse path, perhaps linking the settlements of Thrupp and/or Radcot with the church at Faringdon; in the same way that multiple settlements seem to have been linked to the churches at Otterington and Shap? Maybe, but the point is that the “bier balk” hedgerows appear on Church Walk only at this point, and head west, past Church Path Farm and down to the town. Could it be therefore that only the section of the path \*near\* the settlement, which leads down to the churchyard itself, had the characteristics of a corpse path, and that the Shakespearean notion, conveyed in the soliloquy of Puck that I opened with, of dedicated pathways stretching across the pre-Enclosure countryside, are a literary device?

I think this is probably so. There are exceptions – for example the Mardale to Shap route in Cumbria has a number of attestations, and is nearly fifteen miles long, but we can speculate that this is something to do with the extreme remoteness of the area and moorland topography – the “vital” needs to convey bodies for burial, and the challenges for doing so, stands out more in such conditions. But elsewhere, I believe “corpse paths” were in reality short sections of routes, proximal to the church, and would have been the aggregated path of more than one route for bier parties – which would be consistent with local people attaching significance accordingly.



## Conclusion

This lecture has sought to introduce the idea of the corpse road as a legitimate subject of interdisciplinary study. In my view, corpse roads – although undoubtedly a magnet for the eccentric and the off-the-wall – are a testimony to the imaginative power of the physical experience of movement through the landscape at important points in life (and death), and of the kinds of imperatives which drove connections through those landscapes. However, simply by imposing critical limits on the kinds of thing we ask, we can, I believe, avoid the posthumous fate of Alfred Watkins. As the anthropologist Tim Ingold might say, corpse paths are very particular form of “task-scape”. I am interested in why they became important enough, at least to some people, for Shakespeare to write about them, for them to persist in the oral traditions of Lakeland, and to feature on today’s Ordnance Survey maps and, indeed, Google Maps. I have attempted to suggest some answers to this in this evening’s lecture.

More broadly, I would like to conclude with a plea that interdisciplinary approaches, especially when supported specific quantitative methods such as GIS, raise the general respectability of the history and archaeology of pathways, and by extension, the history and archaeology of mobility more generally. Constrained by the limitations of physical and artefactual evidence, much investigation of ancient and historical landscapes has focused on the site, the point, the specific place. I think the case of corpse roads suggests that approaches based on subjective interpretations of the past, which combine vastly differing forms of evidence, including that of contemporary experiential engagement, can open up completely new modes of enquiry. That is exciting.

## Further reading

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