

Walking the Whinny-Moor: Corpse roads and pre-funeral death rituals in early modern England

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This paper discusses the evidence for “corpse roads” in early modern Britain. Corpse roads were route ways used by funeral parties to transport the deceased from the place of death to the place of final interment. In some cases, some routes took on localised symbolic or folkloric significance, and in a few cases, this is preserved in the present day in contemporary route names, tourism and on modern maps. This paper reviews the evidence for corpse roads, and the methodologies needed to interrogate that evidence. These methodologies are drawn from folklore, ethnology, archaeology and history. The case of one corpse path, in Swaledale in northern England, is presented as a case study.

Key words: corpse roads, funerals, footpaths; walking; landscape

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Introduction

The physical transportation of a corpse to its place of interment makes different kinds of connection between geographical places. The first, most obviously is the place of death itself. After death, the body might be transported to another location for a period of time, for example for a wake in a home or other private or semi-public setting (most often the house of the deceased or a relative). The churchyard or other place of authorised burial where the final offices were to be given is the last such place. From the medieval period, churches asserted their rights to bury the dead and conduct the funeral offices. A big motivation for this was financial: the right to conduct funerals was lucrative, with individual mourners expected to contribute to the priest's costs, as well as the fee paid to the church, and the cost of adornments such as candles (Orme 2021: 344–345; Gittings 1984: 138).

A corpse's last journey could therefore mean traversing several miles of countryside, presenting physical and

geographical, as well as spiritual challenges. Especially in rural areas, bodies often had to be carried for long distances over country for burial, rendering the geographies of death and burial complex (Frisby 2019: 14). This led to the emergence of “corpse roads”, or “coffin roads” linking rural settlements to churches with burial grounds, along which funerary parties travelled either by cart or (more usually) on foot (Hindle 1998: 10–12). Such pathways rarely had any official status, but rather were vernacular in character, familiar to local communities as routes used by funeral parties from time to time. Sometimes they followed paths established for other reasons, such as drover roads for livestock, sometimes they simply navigated the pre-Enclosure landscape in the most efficient way possible. Some accounts describe the practice of farmers leaving “bier balks”, narrow strips at the edges of fields left unploughed to allow the passage of bier-parties (Weeks 1928: 394–395).

Corpse roads are often geographically difficult to define, and it is still harder to interpret their meaning to those who knew them as such. As will be shown however, they undoubtedly existed, and evidence of various kinds can be brought together to describe their histories and geographies. This paper attempts such an historical/geographical exercise: to describe the social importance of corpse roads as subjects of study, the kinds of evidence through which their development as a phenomenon in the landscape can be observed, and how that evidence fits together in individual cases. Corpse roads are concurrently subjects of study for history, archaeology, and folklore; physical manifestations of

a significant activity in lives and communities that have otherwise gone largely unrecorded. Although visible corpse roads had – and in some cases continue to have – mappable geographical traces in the landscape, unlike (say) churches or burial grounds, they are not clearly identifiable “sites” with histories that can be documented in a strictly chronological or even linear manner. The social significance of the cortege, and of participation in it, led to corpse roads being associated with largely unrecorded traditions of quasi-religious and/or folkloric belief sometimes preserved in the contemporary landscape, and sometimes not. In some cases, both the routes and the vernacular pre-funeral social traditions they represent are recorded by third party observers, often long after the beliefs were active and the routes were used for funerals. Unlocking the significance of these accounts requires an approach which draws on archaeological observation, historical enquiry, and folklore. While this paper draws on the literature of these fields, it does not attempt a full review of all their relevant aspects; to do so would be to stretch ambition beyond even a book length treatment of the subject. Rather, it seeks a synthesis their most salient aspects and arguments, providing a backdrop for a more specific commentary on corpse roads as sites, and on a particular case study from Yorkshire. Such an approach inevitably runs a risk of oversimplification, and may well need modification as one delves more deeply into the literature of, for example, religious history or landscape archaeology; but it is nonetheless hoped that these modifications would not alter the main thrust of the argument.

Defining corpse roads

A basic question to begin with is what is, and what is not, a corpse road? As a matter of common sense, any footpath for which an ancient provenance exists, for example through its appearance on old maps, and which led (and/or leads) to a church of similar antiquity will likely have defined the passage of a funeral cortege at some point and for some distance. In a significant number of cases, the passage of a funeral was one function among many that a path would have path would have, and its occasional use as such does not make it a “corpse road”. For the purposes of this paper, corpse roads are routes of which the main function, or one of the main functions,



Fig. 1. Corpse path sign at Otterington, North Yorkshire, England.
Photo by Stuart Dunn, 2020

was providing passage for funeral parties – and that there is evidence that they were (or are) known as such. Corpse roads thus defined were understood and documented – and achieved their visible status – by the communities that used them in different and highly localized ways. Tracing such paths – the geographical route, as well as their spiritual, cultural and folkloric significances – involves piecing together an intricate tapestry of evidence from a range of sources. These include historical and archival texts, physical evidence in the landscape itself, reference to old maps and cartographic history, and reference to local beliefs and traditions.

Some corpse roads remain visible and explicitly defined in today's contemporary landscape. In some cases their association with death draws morbid interest, the result of a phenomenon known as “dark tourism”, a genre of sites which draw tourists because of such associations (see Sedgwick 2019; Shekhar – Valeri 2022: 624). At Otterington in North Yorkshire for example, a footpath connecting the village of Thornton-le-Beans with the Church of St Michael and All Angels in the village of Otterington is clearly marked as a “Corpse Road”, with a wooden sign of the type normally used in England to indicate a public footpath or right of way (see Figure 1). In the Lake District National Park in Cumbria, the National Trust, the non-governmental body which administers many historic sites in England, advertises a hiking trail called the “Corpse Road and Tumuli Walk”. Situated south of the lake at Loweswater, this trail offers walkers the opportunity to “[s]ee a traditional farm, walk along an ancient corpse road and discover evidence of human activity dating from the Bronze Age to the Second World War”¹. On Dartmoor in south west England, numerous official, unofficial and semi-official online resources make reference to the Lichway or Lych Way, a route traversing the moor and connecting the hamlets around Bellever with the church at Lydford. As the Forestry England website puts it, “in the 13th Century, residents of the small farmsteads in the surrounding area had to make a 12-mile journey across the moor to bury their dead at Lydford parish church. The word ‘lych’ has its origins in Old English, meaning ‘body’ ”².

The contemporary documentation, guides and signage that make corpse roads such as those at Loweswater, Otterington and Lydford “visible” rarely give much more

historical context than that quoted above. At best, they offer anecdotal recognition of the function of corpse roads and define these particular routes as such, but while the available information renders them visible, their roots, and the historical context behind them remain obscure. A more detailed review of the evidence for such visible corpse roads – and therefore an evidence-based understanding of their history and the cultural significance in the communities they connected – enables deeper questions to be asked about the relationships between landscape, archaeology and folklore. Although a full discussion of the social, cultural and historical development of funerals and attitudes to death is beyond the scope of this paper, it will suffice to say that since the medieval period, turbulence in both official State-sanctioned religion and religious beliefs followed in practice by the general population, contain certain themes (Hutton 1995: 89; Burgess 2009: 196). One of these is a vernacular and folkloric belief that the journey that the soul would take after death took metaphysical form; a belief seen after the Puritanical reforms of the sixteenth and seventeenth century as popish and superstitious. Corpse roads became a physical manifestation of this journey, embodying metaphorical as well as geographical connections between both formal and informal belief systems and traditions. This means considering not just the visible signs of corpse roads in the landscape, but also their intangible heritage³.

Elite and non-elite practices

For the period in question, some of these traditions, especially the more formal and religious aspects of the funeral, are relatively well documented, and can be reconstructed with some degree of historical objectivity. In such documentation, social practices and distinctions such as those between elite and non-elite burials can be discerned, and the changing role of institutions in the process can be traced. Prior to the early modern period for example, the professional Guilds took a role in organizing ostentatious funeral processions through urban areas. Indeed wealthy Guild members and their families were often significantly constrained by the traditions and procedures that the Guilds prescribed (Gittings 1984: 171) Similarly, from at least 1463 the College of Arms was involved in the funerals of wealthy and/or

aristocratic Armigers, although its influence declined in the course of the eighteenth century along with the perceived importance of the elite funeral in the face of reformist zeal (MacLagan 1970: 573; Gittings 1984: 166–167). Conversely, the stigma of a “pauper funeral” was rooted firmly in the social, economic and cultural outlook of the time, a stigma which also manifested itself in the



Fig. 2. Eleanor Cross at Waltham Cross, Hertfordshire, England.
Photo by Stuart Dunn, 2024

passage of the corpse towards its grave, as well as in the rites of the burial itself. As late as 1887, the future Earl of Shaftsbury was so impacted by “the sight of drunken bearers unsteadily conveying a pauper to his grave” that he committed himself to a life of abstinence and reform (Laqueur 2015: 314). In the Victorian and Edwardian periods children were conditioned to regard the prospect of a pauper funeral, including the transportation of the corpse, with cautionary horror. In 1868, Peter Parley’s Annual described such a prospect:

“In a few days the corpse of the poor woman was put into a shell and taken away to the common burial ground at the **expense** [my emphasis] of the parish. It was carried in a chimney sweep’s cart. There was mourning only of the sooty kind. There were no pall bearers.” (Quoted in Kenny 1998: 88–89)

Glimpses of such scenes suggest that the journey of the corpse to its funeral and its final resting place mattered to both rich and poor, that the act of participating in a funerary cortege, like the act of participating in a wake, was one of social identity and support, and the manner in which it was conducted a reflector of social status. Where such aspects relate to non-elite funerals, and the traditions leading up to them associated with dying, death and grief, and what these meant to the family of the deceased and their community, they are harder to reconstruct. History is rarely written by such people, and so their experience of these universal processes is less clearly recorded than those of their aristocratic equivalents. As E. P. Thompson put it, “the labouring poor did not leave their workhouses stashed with documents” (Thompson 1991: 17–18).

The contrast between elite and non-elite funerary practices, and the physical, spiritual and emotional journey(s) which led up to them becomes clear with the most elite funerals of all, those of royalty, which brings us back to the question of how a corpse road is defined in the first place. When Queen Eleanor of Castille died in 1290 after 36 years of marriage to King Edward I, the bereft monarch ordered that her body be transported from where she died, on a Royal Progress at Harby in Nottinghamshire, for burial in Westminster Abbey, where she remains today. At each place where the cortege rested overnight – twelve in all – an ornate stone cross was ordered to be erected. Accordingly, “Eleanor Crosses”

were built at Lincoln, Grantham, Stamford, Geddington, Hardingstone, Stony Stratford, Woburn, Dunstable, St Albans and Waltham (now Waltham Cross), Cheapside in London; and Charing (now Charing Cross), now at the junction of the Strand and Whitehall (and now generally taken to mark the geographical centre of London).

The Eleanor Crosses at Geddington, Hardingstone and Waltham Cross survive more or less intact today, and testify to the presence of a sacred act being commemorated in a secular landscape. In particular, the Waltham Eleanor Cross (see Figure 2) sits incongruously at the crossroads of two modern shopping streets, a testament to the scale, planning and resources that underpinned that last journey of 1290. The route of this high-status cortege is recorded and marked in the landscape, and the Crosses provide an enduring physical testimony to it. But this testimony is to the passage of a specific journey on a specific date. The route does not have an enduring history or identity as a corpse road; no such identity is mentioned by any historical sources as a result of the passage of Eleanor's cortege. On the other hand, the "visible" routes in the north of England referred to above, although none are remotely associated with the pageantry, status or official commemoration of a royal funeral (or the body's last journey before one), do have such an identity. How this identity is formed is a complex historical question and calls for a brief review of the types of evidence that allow such a claim to be made.

The nature of evidence for corpse roads

The clearest form of direct evidence for the presence of a corpse road are contemporary, or near-contemporary, historical accounts of local traditions. Many of these draw on oral testimony that document practices still in use when the account was produced, or at least within living memory. Such written accounts can be found in the work of antiquarians who dealt in oral history and tradition. In his *Odd Yarns of English Lakeland*, W. T. Palmer's description of the village of Brampton noted that: "Some of our mountain hamlets are far from the parish church, which has given rise to the 'corpse road,' which goes straight 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". (Palmer 1914: 37)

Unlike the case of the route between Nottinghamshire and Westminster Abbey commemorated by the Eleanor Crosses, Palmer's account identifies a specific route *and* records the act of carrying corpses along it, asserting that this was acknowledged by the community within living memory. This reinforces the social and communal importance attached to the act, setting it in direct opposition to official policies and actions, and/or of the wishes of local elites.

Separating accounts of the act of participating in a funeral cortege from those of the physical route along which the cortege travelled highlights the distinction between the types of evidence and approaches of folklore in the case of the former, and archaeology in the case of the latter. Folklore and archaeology were both foreshadowed by the seventeenth century concept of "scientific antiquarianism", which sought an understanding of ancient sites based on method and observation, rather than the descriptions of Classical era authors (Trigger 2006: 106–110). In the eighteenth century, they developed a complex, and sometimes fraught relationship throughout the twentieth as the former diverged into the study of material culture, and the latter took a non-material turn.

As Tina Paphitis has shown, a nuanced connection between the study of folklore and the study of archaeological sites, with folklore playing a role akin to public archaeology, can be key to their meaning(s), and their human context in both the past and the present: "When ... contextual analysis of folklore", Paphitis writes, "is undertaken in relation to archaeological sites ... this can not only reveal interactions between people and archaeology, but aid in interpreting their meaning and significance to such groups." (Paphitis 2019: 152) This is certainly true in the identification of corpse roads, where site, meaning and significance merge. Building on Paphitis's argument, a complication is that corpse roads are not "sites" in the classic sense. As the term itself implies, sites are stationary, static, and can be placed on a map. This is reflected in the epistemological assumption within archaeology that the area of an excavation or survey is bounded, with excavation proceeding downwards, both literally through the earth and metaphorically through time.

Pathways on the other hand may be hundreds, or even thousands of years old in terms of their continuous

usage, but depending on the topography they traverse, they remain part of the same physical layer of history and archaeology. As Svensson et al put in in their introduction to *Pathways: Exploring the Routes of a Movement Heritage*, “in studying paths, we face horizontality and verticality at the same time” (Svensson – Saltzman – Sörlin 2022: 2). Corpse roads, like any historic trackway, encode lateral connections that are overlaid through time, and whose meaning(s) may change. There is also the practical consideration that while site A and site B might remain connected over a period of several centuries, and while evidence for the connection might be clearly visible in the material culture of both sites, the exact footprint of the route between them is likely to change as a result of both human and environmental factors. In England for example, the Enclosures of common land between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries caused many ancient vernacular and undocumented footpaths to be rerouted or abolished all together (Readman 2022). A corpse road, even one where there is specific historical referencing, as in Palmer’s Brampton example, may be considered to be a “blurred site” or a palimpsest, which renders the challenge of linking corpse roads with folklore, as described by Paphitis, a great deal more complex.

Despite, or rather because of, the complex tapestry of evidence involved in studying them, roads, routes and trackways have not always attracted the same degree of archaeological and historical scrutiny as the sites they connect. Just as a site was said to contain “situatedness” as above, at a basic level, the site, the excavation, the findspot, the point on the map was historically the basic currency of archaeological enquiry. “Landscape archaeology” as a tradition of scholarship, studying the landscape, and by assumption the pathways through it, over and above sites, did not emerge until the mid to late 1980s (David – Thomas 2008: 27). Before that, the scholarly limitations of research into pathways are acutely visible. In his seminal work, *The Green Roads of England*, R. Hipsley Cox offered one of the first overviews of British prehistory based on the networks of pathways centred on the supposed “capital” of ancient Britain at Avebury. It is a methodologically circular argument however, and adopts a strategy of equivocation that was

subsequently much replicated: “[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”. (Hipsley-Cox 2014: 1)

Such guesswork leaves ample latitude for interpretations which are entirely erroneous. Alfred Watkins’s *Old Straight Track* laid the foundation for the theory of “ley lines”, straight lines supposedly “connecting” ancient and historic sites of all periods and of all varieties, from Neolithic standing stones to Christian churches, throughout the Herefordshire countryside (Watkins 1925). This theory is based entirely on the random correlation of these sites, with no causative link demonstrated. While Watkins himself made no claim of any mystical significance of these trackways, which in most cases did not have any physical manifestation in the landscape – he saw them as historic communication and travelling routes, planned and authorized by some hypothetical central authority – *The Old Straight Track* spawned a generation of New Age mysticism and pseudoarchaeological discourse, which sustained for decades after. Importantly for the present discussion, *The Old Straight Track*’s influence can be said to have “poisoned the well” of scholarly enquiry into ancient trackways, delegitimizing it in the eyes of academia (Bell – Leary 2020: 1351).

Moving from the realms of archaeology back to the realms of history, explicit traces of corpse roads can be found on old maps of the Ordnance Survey. From the earliest “Old Series” maps produced from 1805, one of the Survey’s main preoccupations was mapping route ways, and the rapid evolution of transport connectivity which accompanied the development of the road and, especially, the rail networks in the nineteenth century. The Ordnance Survey explicitly recognised corpse roads as early as 1846, when the revised six inch to the mile sheet labelled a short section of footpath near Pontefract as an “Old Corpse Road”, a labelled designation which was still used in the revised and resurveyed edition of the same area in 1938, even as the usage of the land around the pathway evolved as mining pits were closed and a sports field established in their place (see Dunn 2020 for full discussion).

Case study: The Swaledale Corpse Path

One well-known corpse road was that through Swaledale in Yorkshire, connecting the hamlets of Keld and Muker with the “mother Church” at Grinton. This route’s identity as a corpse road was well established until the church at Muker itself was permitted the right to conduct funerals and inter bodies in 1580. On the matter of evidence, the fact that the Swaledale route, although explicitly described as the “Old Corpse Way” as it traverses Kisdon Hill in journalistic and antiquarian accounts, does not have such a label on the contemporary six inch to the mile Ordnance Survey maps, highlights the partial nature of both the written and the cartographic-historical records.

One journalistic account of the Swaledale Corpse Path dates from the late nineteenth century, when Arthur Haywood Brierly described the route in a series of articles in *The Leeds Mercury* on July 17th, 1897. He describes “how melancholy, yet pathetic, must have been those frequent corteges composed of relays of stalwart Dalesmen who walked the whole distance – sometimes fourteen miles – carrying their deceased brother or sister shoulder high”. In an observational recording of oral tradition that is highly reminiscent of W. T. Palmer’s description of the corpse path at Brampton, the journalist and historian Edmund Cooper writes in *Muker: the Story of a Yorkshire Parish* (1948), that “the remains of the “Old Corpse Way” can still be traced over Kisdon Hill, this being the shortest cut from Muker to Keld, and the scattered hamlets beyond” (Cooper 1948: 34). Cooper goes on to record that the public house at Keld, the Queens Head, kept special “funeral mugs” for the specific purpose of offering refreshment to funeral parties which stopped at Muker to rest (ibid). The path over Kisdon Hill is still known locally as the “Corpse Way”. It retains the physical characteristics of a “green lane”, bordered by the ruins of stone walls, a roadway that was historically accessible by horse and (/or) cart, but not to most motor vehicles, and thus became disconnected from the local transport networks with the advent of the motor car (see Figure 3).

As with Palmer’s account in Cumbria, Brierly’s and Cooper’s descriptions of the corpse road in Swaledale are journalistic, antiquarian and observational, and were no doubt written for an audience whose interest

in arcane rural traditions was stimulated by the emergence of mass tourism and access to the countryside. Despite these narrative attestations, unlike some other visible corpse roads, the Swaledale route is not labelled as a corpse road on any historic Ordnance Survey map (although, as described below, the cartographic history of the Ordnance Survey can be employed to assist in interpretation of the route itself). Beyond text and cartographic history however, written storytelling can be supplemented by physical evidence of corpse roads which remain visible in the landscape today. The ruined walls bordering the Swaledale Corpse Path over Kisdon Hill are evidence of its overlapping function as a “green lane”, which speaks to multiple possible usages, despite Cooper’s description of the route as The Old Corpse Way. However other pieces of evidence are more specific to the corpse road function. Some miles east of Kisdon on the Swaledale Path, Historic England’s official Heritage List documents a “coffin stone” set into the ground near the sixteenth century Ivelet Bridge, which the listing states is “[t]raditionally said to have been set there for the purpose of resting wicker basket [sic] containing a body being carried along the so-called Corpse Way from Upper Swaledale, for burial in Grinton church,



Fig. 3. “Green Lane” over Kisdon Fell, Yorkshire, England.
Photo by Stuart Dunn, 2023

before Muker church (q.v.) was built in 1580⁴ (see Figure 4). This flat stone unmistakably reflects the dimensions of the human body, with a surface now level with that of the road; however before the road surface was metalled and tarmacked, the stone would likely have protruded above the ground by at least half a meter or so.

The location of the stone at the north eastern corner of the bridge, is potentially significant. Ruth Richardson observes that funerals often paused at linear topographical or natural boundaries, such as crossroads or, as in this case, the crossing of rivers: “[T]he journey to the burial place”, she writes “was not always direct, and was occasionally punctuated by a series of stops – either by slowing down, or pausing for a moment or by stopping altogether for refreshment, prayers or singing ... in most older accounts, linear stopping places were at topographical or natural boundaries, such as a crossroads or rivers on the direct route” (Richardson 1993: 96–97). This accords precisely with the situation of the Ivelet coffin stone, suggesting that a tradition such as that described by Richardson was semi-formalized at this location.

Around a mile and a half further east, the Swaledale Corpse Path runs directly parallel to the River Swale for a stretch near the hamlet of Gunnerside, before re-joining the main road towards Grinton, now the B6270 road

towards the town of Richmond. At this point lies a stone similar to that at Ivelet, which also unmistakably reflects the dimensions of the human body, and whose surface has been fashioned into the approximate shape of a coffin (see Figure 5). There are no documentary records, and this stone is not listed in the official Historic England record; however, its size, shape, position, and similarity to the Ivelet Bridge stone makes it a strong candidate to be another coffin stone. Unlike the Ivelet stone however, it is not topographically associated with any natural or linear boundary, as in Richardson's description. It is simply placed parallel to the northern edge of the modern footpath, on the other side of it from the river. While on the face of it this location is incongruous, a review of the



Fig. 4. Coffin stone at Ivelet Bridge, Yorkshire, England.
Photo by Stuart Dunn, 2023



Fig. 5. Possible coffin stone near Gunnerside, Yorkshire, England.
Photo by Stuart Dunn, 2023

present-day topography of the area suggests a possible explanation.

This section of the present-day designated footpath runs from Gunnerside along the north bank of the Swale (where the possible coffin rest is located), eastwards towards the village of Reeth. Both Gunnerside and Reeth are the site of road bridges over the river. Parallel to the south bank of the river runs a second footpath, labelled on present-day maps as “Dubbing Garth Lane”, connecting with a now-metalled road running westwards on the south bank of the Swale, all the way back to Muker. This latter is now known as “Guning Lane”. Dubbing Garth Lane diverges south to follow the river at the eastern end of a deep meander, at the point where the putative coffin stone sits on the opposite (north) bank. The northern footpath continues east and re-joins the modern B6270, which is also the route of Guning Lane, and which dog-legs north and crosses the river over the present-day road bridge at Gunnerside (see Figure 6).

Turning again to the official Historic England listing, the entry for “Gunnerside New Bridge” as it is now known, states that it was constructed in the 1830s, to

allow the passage of greater volumes of road traffic between the hamlets of Muker, Keld, Ivelet and so on in the west of Swaledale, and Grinton and Richmond, and other destinations towards the east. Such traffic no doubt increased significantly in the first part of the nineteenth century as a result of the growth of the lead mining industry in the area. From the configuration of Dubbing Garth Lane and Guning Lane, one may surmise that before the construction of Gunnerside New Bridge in the first half of the nineteenth century, an earlier crossing existed a mile or so to the east where Guning Lane crossed the Swale, either over a footbridge now long gone, or a ford (the present-day river is fordable at several places, including Muker). The second Swaledale coffin stone sat on the north bank (as at Ivelet) at, or very near to, this crossing, suggesting it may have served it in the same way that the Ivelet coffin stone served Ivelet Bridge. Such a supposition, while not definitively provable, is given further weight by the Ordnance Survey Old Series map published in 1805, where the abrupt southward turn of Dubbing Garth Lane is clear, as is its topographical continuity with Guning Lane, both the east and south of the river,

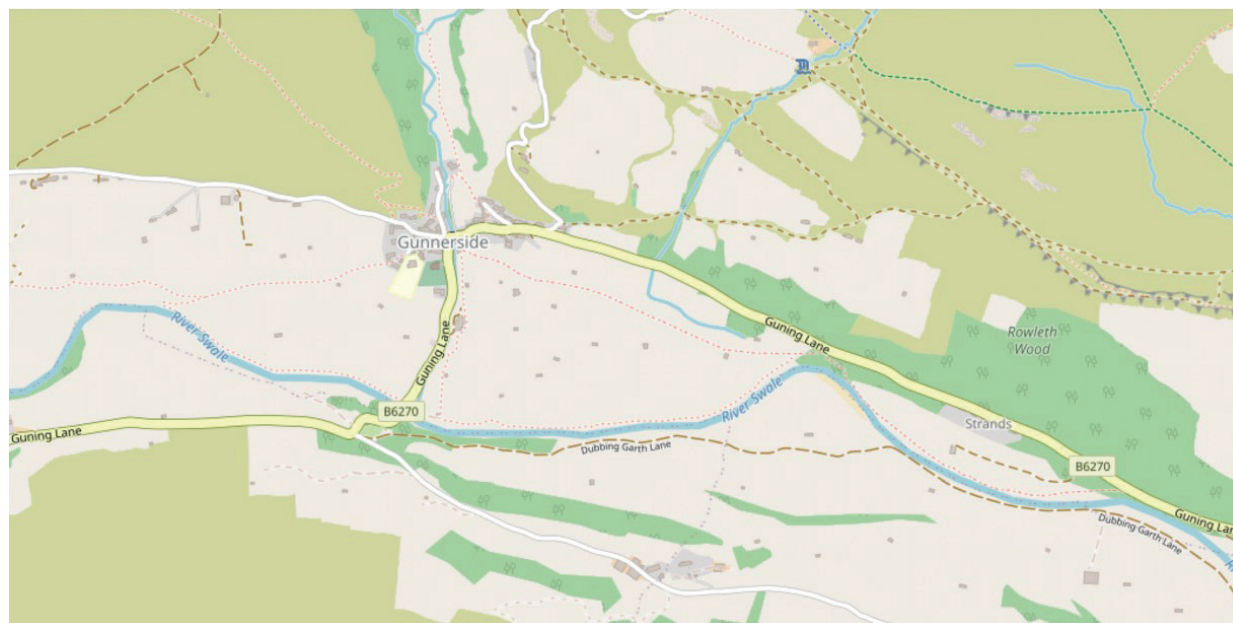


Fig. 6. Guning Lane through Gunnerside, Yorkshire, England.

Map from OpenStreetMap, © OpenStreetMap contributors: <<https://www.openstreetmap.org/copyright>>.

and to the west and the north (see Figure 7). The clear implication of this geographical logic points to the diversion of the path away from the river towards the south, after the crossing (and its coffin stone) were rendered redundant by the improvement of the present day road and the construction of Gunnerside New Bridge.

Corpse roads and metaphor

As noted in the opening, the final journey to burial or other disposal of the body was a metaphorical, as well as a geographical connector of places. This was reflected not only in formal funeral rites, but in local traditions, including those recorded from Yorkshire. Before the ascendancy of puritanism and Protestantism, which adopted generally disapproving views of superstition, dirges, masses and intercessions for the dead were common as a means of smoothing the departed soul's pathway to salvation. While there is scant evidence of how widespread such practices – considered popish and unreformed by

zealous clergy and ministers of the late sixteenth century and beyond were (Cressy 1997) – some accounts of them survive in the writings of antiquarians such as John Aubrey (1626–1697) and Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832). In *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme, 1686–1687*, Aubrey describes a “beliefe in Yorkshire [that] was amongst the vulgar (phaps is in part still)” (Aubrey 1881: 31), that after death the soul of the departed must cross the “Whinny-moor”. A full discussion of the literary history of the *Remaines* is beyond the scope of this paper (for further discussion, see Williams 2016), but taken simply as an example of folk attestation, Aubrey describes the “Lyke Wake Dirge”, a ballad sung at a corpse’s wake, where friends and family observed “the custome of watching & sitting-up all night until the body is interred”, and which describes the need for the soul to cross the Whinny-moor. According to the *Yorkshire Historical Dictionary*, “whin” is a regional northern English dialect term for furze, or gorse, or any rough or thorny vegetation



Fig. 7. Ordnance Survey Old Series Map, 1805–1869

that made walking difficult. How demanding or easy the soul's journey across this metaphorical gorse-land was to be depended on the good works it had done in life. Aubrey suggests that this custom was common until around 1624, when it was no doubt strongly discouraged or even suppressed by Puritan reformers. Addressing the deceased through these night-watches, a member of the family, usually a woman, was said to sing:

*This can night, this can night
every night and awle:
Fire and Fleet and Candle-light
and Christ receive thy sawle*

*When thou from hence doest pass away
every night and awle
To Whinny-moor thou comest at last
and Christ receive thy silly poor sawle*

The Dirge continues:

*If ever thou gave either hosen or shun
every night and awle
Sitt the down and put them on
and Christ receive thy sawle*

*But if hosen and shoon thou never gave mean
every night &c
The Whinnes shall prick thee to the bare beane
and Christ receive thy sawle*

(Aubrey 1881: 31)

The references to giving hosen and shun refer to clothing the poor with hose and shoes. Quite simply, if the deceased had done so in life, they will have hose and shoes to protect them as they cross the whinny moor. Good works in life smoothing the soul's ("sawle's") passage over the Whinnes in death, and its receipt by Christ, have clear echoes in the Catholic idea of purgatory. This is made explicit later in the Dirge:

*From Brig of Dread that thou mayest pass
no brader than a thread
every night &c
To Purgatory fire thou com'st at last
and Christ &c;*

(Aubrey 1881: 31)

It is certainly tempting to imagine that this represents a vivid psychological invocation of the physical travails of crossing Yorkshire moorland, thick with gorse and furze, that this mirrors the journey undergone by an unprepared soul after death; and that it anticipates much the same such journey that the deceased's relatives – the predecessors of the 'stalwart Dalesmen' described by Arthur Brierley some two hundred years later – would be undertaking to the churchyard the following day.

Conclusion

While corpse roads certainly existed in the popular imagination, that imagination was highly localized, and their definition was often recorded informally. The evidence we have for them is patchy, sometimes corresponding to traces still discernible in local lore past and present, sometimes not. The Swaledale example discussed in detail above combines hints from cartographic history, journalistic storytelling, physical traces still visible in the landscape, and historical accounts. The absence of any explicit reference to the Swaledale route being a corpse path in the historic Ordnance Survey record illustrates the patchy, sometimes arbitrary nature of the evidence that has survived. One general principle is more broadly applicable to other types of "blurred sites" where folklore, archaeology and history intersect: that distinguishing between an act or acts attested at the site and the site itself, and treating the evidence according to the methodological norms of folklore and archaeology, can help to avoid pitfalls experienced in the past, in this case in the study of historic and ancient route ways. This is crucial if we are to move beyond anecdotal, or even pseudoarchaeological or pseudohistorical, accounts of such sites.

The last transportation of the deceased in early modern Britain was a matter of belief, ritual and folklore; of social, political and economic standing, and in many cases it was also a matter of landscape and physical toil. This complex, interdisciplinary picture leads to several issues for the identification, interpretation, and definition of corpse roads in the landscape, both historic and in the present day. This paper has sought to highlight these issues and, in the case of the Swaledale Corpse Path, provide a case study for how these disparate streams of evidence can be brought together.

NOTES:

1. "Corpse road and tumuli walk." *National Trust* [online]. Available from: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20240502003255/https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/lake-district/buttermere-valley/corpse-road-and-tumuli-walk>> [accessed May 10, 2024].
2. "The Lych Way at Bellever Forest." *Forestry England* [online]. Available from: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20240407041026/https://www.forestryengland.uk/bellever-forest/the-lych-way-bellever-forest>> [accessed May 10, 2024].
3. See "Intangible Cultural Heritage." *UNESCO* [online]. Available from: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20240417040854/https://www.unesco.org/en/intangible-cultural-heritage>> [accessed May 10, 2024].
4. "Coffin Stone Approximately 1 Metre North-East of Ivelet Bridge." *Historic England* [online]. Available from: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20240510105851/https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1131527?section=official-list-entry>> [accessed May 10, 2024].

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