

SURVEY AND EXCAVATION AT LLANLLYR MEDIEVAL NUNNERY AND POST-MEDIEVAL MANSION, CEREDIGION, 2014-2015

By Frances Murphy

with contributions from R Bale, R Coard, M Lodwick, R Suggett and D Williams

SUMMARY

Rhys ap Gruffydd founded Llanllyr nunnery in the 1180s. At its dissolution in 1537 it is presumed that some of the former nunnery buildings were converted into a house. This house continued in use until c.1830 when it was demolished and building material re-used in a new house constructed a few hundred metres away. No surface evidence survives for the nunnery and post-dissolution house.

Archaeological survey and small-scale excavation investigated the post-dissolution house and the putative site of the nunnery. Evidence for the house comprised cobbled surfaces and robbed-out wall lines and conformed to a 1768 estate map that shows buildings, formal gardens and tracks/drives. Artefacts were not common, but ceramic roof-ridge tiles and floor tiles from Normandy point to a high status 16th/17th century house. The house had been systematically dismantled in about 1830. No definite evidence for the nunnery was discovered.

Earthworks of water management features lie in woodland close to the site of the post-dissolution house. A timber structure, possibly a drain, associated with these water management features and tree-ring dated to the medieval period is, with a few sherds of medieval pottery from the excavation, are the only archaeological evidences discovered during the investigation for medieval use of the site.

INTRODUCTION

Llanllyr house occupies a river terrace at c.68m O.D., a few metres above the floodplain of the River Aeron in the community of Llanfihangel Ystrad, Ceredigion (SN 542559 – Fig. 1). The Lewes family built the current house in about 1830 as a replacement for an earlier house. Most authorities consider that the earlier house was built on or close to the site of the medieval Llanllyr Nunnery.

Although all authorities have focused on Llanllyr as being the location of the medieval nunnery, there are, however, no medieval buildings and no earthworks indicating the former presence of features one may expect to find on a monastic site, and the scant documentary sources are not helpful in locating the precise location of the nunnery. Despite this it has been generally claimed that site of the nunnery was to the west and north of the current house.

Llanllyr is a working farm with a spring-water-bottling plant attached. Nineteenth century farm buildings lie to the west of the house, with modern farm buildings, concrete yards and the bottling plant to the west and north of these. Dyfed Archaeological Trust was concerned that as the exact site of the nunnery was not known important archaeological deposits could be damaged or even destroyed by current farming practices or any plans to extend the current farm buildings or yards. The Trust therefore applied to Cadw for grant-aid to undertake an investigation at Llanllyr. This application was successful and the work was carried over three weeks in May/June 2014 in partnership with the Department of Archaeology, University of Wales Trinity St Davids (UWTSD), and then over two weeks in July 2015 solely by the Trust.

HISTORY

A late 8th century/early 9th century inscribed stone with crosses now standing in the walled garden attached to Llanllyr House (Fig. 1 – PRN 4781) records the donation of land to the church, and is the only evidence of a Christian foundation pre-dating the nunnery. Nancy Edwards (2007, 166-69) describes the stone and translates the inscription as 'The *tesquitas* of Ditoc (which) Aon son of Asa Itgen gave to Madomnuac'. Edwards notes that it is not clear how *tesquitas* should be translated, but 'a small waste plot' or a 'small deserted place' are given as possibilities.

There is very little known documentation relating to Llanllyr Nunnery; it is beyond the scope of this study to conduct or commission primary research and so the following very broad historical outline is derived from secondary sources: Williams 1990 and 2001, Lewis 1971 and the Monastic Wales website. Rhys ap Gruffydd founded the Cistercian nunnery at Llanllyr probably in the 1180s, under the oversight of Strata Florida Abbey. Originally there were about 16 nuns. Giraldus Cambrensis in his journey through Wales in 1188 called it 'a small and poor house'. It was dissolved on 26 February 1537. No documentation has come to light indicating the type and size of buildings that may have existed in the c.350 years between the nunnery's foundation and its dissolution.

Ownership passed to the Crown on the dissolution. By the mid-16th century the Lloyd family occupied Llanllyr. Lewes (1971) describes the numerous family and other disputes over ownership of Llanllyr in the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1696 the property was described as a decayed house in the hands of a tenant. In 1720 John Lewes purchased Llanllyr, and it has remained in the Lewes family ever since. In about 1830 the Lewes family pulled down the old house and built a new one (the present house) a little distance away using materials from the old house. Richard Suggett of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales during a visit in summer 2015 noted sections of roll-moulded beams consistent with a 16th-century date reused in the house and farm buildings (pers.comm.). In 1896 Colonel John Lewis recalled (Rhys 1896, 123-24) a ruined round tower at Llanllyr and, on information conveyed to him from an old servant, provided a highly schematic map of Llanllyr as it may have been in the 18th century; this shows the old house, an old building (used as a stable in 1835), an old round tower, pavement and old graveyard. No scale or north point is provided, and so it is not easy to reconcile the features shown on the map with the present-day landscape. Samuel Meyrick in 1810 (p.242) reported that in the garden a 'corpse in a leaden coffin', had been dug up 'a few years back.' Lewes in his 1971 article noted that the foundations and cobbled yard of the old house could still be seen on the other side of the farmyard to the present one, and that a small building of the old house remained in use as a carpenter's shop until 1880.

THE DINELEY DRAWING AND CARTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

In 1684 the First Duke of Beaufort journeyed through Wales taking Thomas Dineley with him to record antiquities and places of interest (Baker 1864). On page 107 of his journal Dineley drew a house with formal gardens adjacent to a coat of arms (Fig. 2). The house is not named, but Thomas Lloyd (pers. comm.) has identified the coat of arms as those of the Lloyds of Llanllyr, and therefore the drawing is of Llanllyr old house.

A 1768 estate map of 'Llanllear Denesne' (in the ownership of the Lewes family) shows the old house with formal gardens to the south-east (Fig. 3). Reconciling Dineley's drawing and the 1768 estate map is not possible, as undoubtedly changes were made to the buildings and surroundings in the 84 years between the two depictions. On the

estate map, the site of the new 1830s house is shown as a field (no. 11) and is named on the accompanying schedule as 'Cae'r Odyn' (kiln field). It is interesting to note that the c.1843 Llanfihangel Ystrad Tithe Map depicts the old house and garden exactly as on the estate map, but surprisingly the 1830s house is not shown. It may be that the Llanllyr part of the tithe map was copied from the estate map. There are sufficient similarities between the landscape depicted on the estate map/tithe map and that shown on recent maps to locate with a high degree of confidence the old house and garden in the modern landscape, as is shown on Figure 3.

All traces of the old house had disappeared when the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 1st Edition map was published in 1888. On this map the 1830s house is shown with outbuildings to its west, a walled garden to the south-west and the whole sitting within parkland and woodland – essentially the modern landscape minus modern farm buildings and yards. An interesting feature is 'Chapel (site of)' marked on the edge of a field (the approximate position of this is shown on Figs 3 and 4). It can only be presumed that the Lewes family provided the Ordnance Survey with information on the site of the chapel, but on what basis is unknown.

FIELDWORK METHODOLOGY

Thomas Dineley's drawing of 1684 shows what seems to be a multi-period house and it has been assumed that some of the buildings shown could have reused some of the medieval nunnery buildings. This is not unreasonable, as domestic reuse of monastic buildings was common practice following the dissolution. If Dineley's drawing and the 1768 map show the same buildings, then remains of the nunnery and the old mansion could lie approximately 100-200m north-west of the current house. The fieldwork was designed to test this hypothesis.

The archaeological excavation investigated an area on the edge of woodland where the 1768 estate map indicated the location of the early house, and in a nearby small pasture field, in which in 1888 the Ordnance Survey map recorded the site of a chapel, and which is crossed by a small, partly culverted stream. The woodland edge seemed a particularly promising area, as here Mathew Lewes Gee had noted areas of cobbling.

In 2000 a geophysical survey in the pasture field failed to identify anything of archaeological interest, but it was undertaken in exceptionally wet weather, and therefore Jemma Bezant of UWTSD resurveyed the area in May 2014. Apart from faint linear features in the north-east corner of the field (examined in Trenches 1 and 8), no other archaeological features could be identified. Further geophysical survey was undertaken by DAT in 2016, in an area to the east of Trenches 1 and 8 where Mathew Lewes Gee reported seeing in a dry summer parch marks of what seemed to be buried foundations, but again with negative results.

Over three weeks in May-June 2014 Trenches 1-7 were machine-excavated, followed by hand-excavation. During the two-week excavation in July 2015 Trench 3 was extended and Trench 8 was machine-excavated (Fig. 4).

During the winter of 2015-16 Trust staff carried out a topographic survey of earthworks in dense, wet woodland south of the excavation trenches. A wooden structure in and alongside the channel of the Afon Llan-llyr had been noted in this area. This structure, possibly a drain, has been investigated by Roderick Bale and Nigel Nayling of UWTSD, and tree-ring dates obtained.

FIELDWORK RESULTS

As noted above the geophysical survey results were largely negative and so are not further described.

Trenches 1 and 8

These trenches investigated linear geophysical anomalies. Three shallow ditches ran diagonally across Trench 1 cut into natural sands and gravels. Three sherds of 13/14th century Dyfed Gravel Tempered Ware (DGTW) came from the later of two of the ditches that intercut. There were no other finds. A small ditch ran E-W across Trench 8, from which a sherd of DGTW similar to the above was recovered.

Trench 2

Trench 2 was excavated by machine to a depth of approximately 0.60m down to the top of geological deposits either side of a clear raised deposit of stone rubble that was later found to cover a wall (2040). No further work was undertaken south of the wall, as this area never recovered from prolonged episodes of rain at the start of the excavation and acted as a sump for the rest of the trench. The following sequence of deposits and features were identified to the north of the wall (Fig. 5):

Below topsoil (2041) was a layer of silty clay (2045), beneath which lay a stony layer (2044) which butted up against wall 2040 and overlapped the edges of a pitched stone surface (2042), probably a track-way; the same track-way as recorded in Trench 4 (4004).

A loamy soil (2043) lay beneath the pitched stone surface (2042) and the stony layer (2044). Wall 2040 sat within layer 2043. The relationship between wall 2040 and layer 2043 was unclear; no foundation trench for the wall was apparent, but a pit had been dug on its south side (2047). Wall 2040 turned a right angle in the centre of the trench. There was no evidence of bonding material. A George II coin dated 1739 was found between stones of the wall.

A series of roughly E-W aligned linear features cut through layer 2043 from directly below stony layer 2044 (Fig. 5: 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2021, 2025, 2029, 2032, 2034, 2037, plus un-numbered examples). The fills of these features were very similar to layer 2043, and so it was only where they just cut into the underlying geological deposits that they became obvious in plan. They averaged 0.4m wide and varied in depth from 0.15m to 0.45m (when seen in section). No artefacts were discovered in the fills, and there were no diagnostic features to help characterise them. When first seen it was considered possible that they were graves, but given the height from which they were cut, the similarity of their fills to loamy soil 2043, their shallow nature and their rather uneven sides and irregular bottoms this is unlikely and they are more probably the result of gardening activity.

A shallow circular pit (2006) cut linear feature 2008. Towards the bottom of the pit the surface of a deposit of lime mortar (2012) had the impressions of several hoof-marks of a cow. Animal bone and two fragments of human skull were found within the fill of the pit. A report on the human bone by Ros Coard (in project archive) concluded that the fragments represent a single adult female.

Trench 3

In 2014, mud, silts and vegetation were machine scraped to reveal a cobbled surface with maximum dimensions 24 x 22m. The irregular shape of the trench was determined by the presence of trees, fences and track-ways. The cobbled surface was hand-cleaned,

planned and photographed. Artefacts from over the cobbles generally dated to the 19th and 20th centuries, but some 17th/18th century pottery sherds were present as well as a few sherds of Merida-type ware from the Iberian Peninsula dating to the 15th/16th centuries. As the surface was generally in good condition it was decided not to remove it, and thus the only excavation took place on the periphery of the surface in relatively small areas where the cobbles had been disturbed and where evidence may have survived for buildings shown on the 1768 estate map - Trenches 3a, b and d (Figs 6 and 7).

The cobbled surface. This surface survived in remarkable good condition considering it was covered by thin, loose material and trees had taken root in places. Minor irregularities in construction may have been the result of different workers laying the cobbles, or later repairs. The most noticeable features were two parallel lines of stones within the cobbles, one running approximately NW to SE, the other SW to NE, marking the lines of tracks/drives or paths, for decorative purposes, or both. The possible presence of robbed out buildings or walls are indicated by straight edges to the cobble surface.

Trench 3a. This trench was positioned to investigate a range of buildings shown on the 1768 estate map. Approximately 0.20m of loose soil and burnt material (3542 - from the recent burning of pallets) was removed down to a compacted silty clay deposit (3500) containing small and large stones, broken slate, mortar, window glass, roof tile and pottery, including some late 17th century/early 18th century wares, probably indicative of building demolition. This deposit butted up against the cobbled surface on its western side, and overlay a thin layer of mortar with charcoal specks (3541), below which were a series of features cut into geological sandy silts. Most of these features were difficult to characterise and contained no artefacts, they included shallow linear features (3007, 3507) and at least three postholes (3010, 3520, 3552). A more definite feature, a robbed-out wall (3511), containing a boulder at its northern end, ran NW to SE across the trench with a right angle turn to the N/E at its southern end. The robbed-out wall did not continue past the boulder, and there was no evidence for it having turned a right-angle to the north-east. There was evidence of what may have been the wall's foundation trench (3502) surviving in places; this contained a fragment of late medieval/early modern Normandy-type floor tile. A sherd of 17/18th century North Devon pottery was found in the fill (3005) of the robbed-out wall (3511).

Trench 3b. This trench was not fully investigated, but it was able to confirm that the cobbled surface continued to the north-east, possibly continuing the track-way/drive noted in Trenches 2 and 4. A large boulder may have formed the corner of a building on the edge of the cobbled surface.

Trench 3d. Foundations of a wall running approximately SW to NE beneath the cobbled surface were revealed in this small trench. No buildings are shown in this location on the 1768 map, and therefore this wall is evidence of an earlier phase of use.

Trench 4

The trench was positioned to locate a building shown on the 1768 estate map. Cobbled surfaces of a path (4003) and a track-way (4004) lay directly below a thin plough-soil (Figs 8 and 9). A stone-lined drain ran along the south side of the track-way (4006), to the south of which was a line of large stones. The line of large stones and the straight edge on the east side of the path seemed to indicate the location of a building - the

building in existence in 1768. However a sondage excavated across cobbled surface 4003 and the putative building found no structural evidence.

Trenches 5, 6 and 7

These 3 trenches were excavated to determine the depth and presence of archaeological deposits in this area; in particular to discover the location of the putative chapel site. These three trenches were machine-excavated to a depth of between 0.6m and 1.3m. Only modern deposits containing pieces of plastic sheets were revealed, and as water rapidly accumulated in the trenches and the trench sides were unstable no further work was undertaken.

The earthwork survey

The main area of survey lay immediately to the south of the excavation trenches, with a smaller detached area a little further south (Figs 3 and 4). It is clear from the survey that the course of the stream (Afon Llan-Ilyr) that runs through this area has undergone considerable modification. Its present course can be explained by reference to the 1768 estate map and the results of the excavation, as it is quite clear its course respects the southern side and part of the eastern side of the old house and its formal gardens; the two platforms recorded on the survey being the site of buildings and part of the gardens. To the south and east of the stream are channels leading in and out of what is probably a silted-up pond. A curving bank corresponds to a boundary shown on the estate map and more recent maps. Timbers located where the projected line of the bank crosses the stream probably formed a drain or some other element of a water management system. Roderick Bale of UWSTSD has investigated disarticulated timbers from this structure and obtained three terminus *post quem* tree-ring dates of AD1262, AD1269 and AD1270. None of the samples contained sapwood, and so the dates only provide a date after which the parent trees were felled (Bale n.d.). Partial excavation in 2016 revealed a timber structure that may be a drain (Fig. 10). Elements of this have been recovered and are currently undergoing a program of recording and tree-ring dating which should refine the date of the structure.

POTTERY AND CERAMIC BUILDING MATERIALS

by D Williams

A full pottery report is included in the project archive. The pottery assemblage from Llanllyr was relatively small, with most sherds being 18th/19th century and later in date and from unstratified contexts. Some of the key sherds are noted in the trench descriptions, above. Ceramic building materials were of greater interest and merit the fuller account provided below.

A quantity of ceramic building material was recovered, mostly from unstratified deposits. Fragments of ridge tile from three different sources are present. These compare with the type-series established for the excavations at Carmarthen Greyfriars (O'Mahoney 1995, 71-75).

The earliest of the ridge tiles are in a gravel-tempered fabric (O'Mahoney, Types A and B) similar to the locally-made medieval pottery. Crests are usual on these types, with or without stabbed decoration. The Llanllyr tiles are fragmentary and lack diagnostic features other than traces of dark green glaze on their upper surface. These types are medieval (possibly 13th century) to post-medieval in date.

Malvernian ridge tiles (O'Mahoney, Type F/G) are the most prolific at Llanllyr. These are in a fully oxidised red sandy fabric. Upper surfaces are unglazed and the undersides of tiles are sanded. These tiles are also fragmentary and there are no surviving crests. They can be dated to the 15th/16th centuries.

A small quantity of North Devon gravel-tempered, green-glazed ridge tiles are also present (O'Mahoney, Type C/P), for which a 16th/17th -century date is likely.

Eleven fragments of Normandy-type plain floor tile were recovered. These are in a buff-pink, sometimes streaky fabric that is sandy in texture, and has frequent small red grog inclusions. The upper surfaces are glazed a bright copper green or pale yellow, and under-surfaces are smooth. The most complete square tile of this type has a good cover of green glaze. An incomplete narrow rectangular tile with a worn yellow glaze was found in a possible wall foundation trench (3502) in Trench 3a.

Normandy-type tiles were exported from Rouen and Le Havre from c.1490-1530, and were produced somewhere in the Seine Valley (Lewis 1999, 10 and 73-4: Group 31). A considerable quantity has been recovered from excavated sites in Carmarthen: at the Greyfriars site (James and Brennan 1991, 28: Plain type 8), at the Augustinian Priory, where fragments of both green and yellow tiles were recorded *in situ* (James 1985, 133), and from the castle where five fragments were found (Courtney and Williams. 2014, 284 and 319). Normandy-type tiles have been found in quantity in Exeter, mainly at secular sites where it is suggested that they were probably often used in the flooring of town houses. Stratified examples there were found in early sixteenth-century contexts, but are apparently less common after c. 1600 (Allan and Keen 1984, 240-1).

SEAL MATRIX

By M Lodwick

A medieval copper alloy seal matrix of mid-14th to early 15th century date was found by a metal detectorist in a field to the east of the excavation (Figure 11).

The seal is pointed-oval and is complete although the die is eroded (length 46.8mm, width 25.6mm, weight of 18.2g). The rear of the die has a rounded, prominent and undulating midrib (height 11.83mm at the apex and 6.8mm at the base and with a width of 5.1mm). The rib has a circular perforation near the apex (of 2.4mm diameter).

The central device on the die has a standing figure with a crescent to the right of the head (from the viewer's perspective). The figure is clothed in a veil or hood and a monastic cowl. The figure's left hand is in front of his or her abdomen and is holding a book. The right hand is holding a pastoral staff, the crook of which interrupts the surrounding legend. The legend is in open black-letter script but little is now discernible; the only surviving letters are at the end of the legend and may read:

[- - - -] n l l e i r

It is a monastic seal, depicting a religious superior holding the rule book of Saint Benedict and a pastoral staff. Few abbots' seals are known to depict a hooded abbot, and despite the absence of a wimple, the seal is more likely to be of an abbess. The end of the legend, if correct may refer to Llanllyr, indicating the seal to have possibly belonged to an abbess of the nunnery at Llanllyr.

CONCLUSIONS

There can be no doubt that the archaeological investigations revealed well-preserved evidence for the post-medieval yards, tracks/drives and gardens of the former mansion house at Llanllyr. Ceramic roofing tiles and floor tiles from the site indicate that a high status house was in existence in the 16th century, and pottery and other artefacts accord with historical accounts of the house having been demolished in about 1830. The archaeological evidence confirms the presence of formal gardens shown on the 1768 map and Dineley's drawing of 1684. These types of gardens are rare, and the Llanllyr example of cobbled surfaces stands comparison with the important remains in south-west Wales at Aberglasney (Blockley 2002) and Middleton Hall (Austin and Thomas 2012), both in Carmarthenshire. Evidence for buildings proved fleeting in the small excavation trenches, nevertheless, sufficient work was carried out to confirm that the house had been systematically and comprehensively demolished and that complex, multi-phase, stratified deposits survive. In the area of Trenches 6 and 7 only deep modern deposits were present and it is unlikely that a chapel, as noted by the Ordnance Survey in the 19th century, was located here.

As noted above, during fieldwork it was assumed that at least some elements of the old house shown on Dineley's drawing reused nunnery buildings. However, the investigations failed to reveal conclusive evidence for the presence of the medieval nunnery, and although very little examination of stratified archaeological deposits was undertaken, one would have expected to have discovered large amounts of medieval pottery, building materials and other medieval artefacts if the excavation trenches had been located over or close to nunnery buildings. Two possible explanations are possible: one – the garden cobbled surface effectively masked earlier deposits and more detailed excavation of this area would reveal nunnery buildings: two –the nunnery was located elsewhere. If the latter is accepted, then perhaps the most likely location for the site of the nunnery is under the 1830s (modern) house. The only clear archaeological evidences for the use of the site in the medieval period discovered during the recent investigations was the timber structure associated with water management features in the woodland and a few sherds of medieval pottery. The high quality ceramic building materials, roof and floor tiles, discovered during the excavations were likely to have come from the demolished house, but it cannot be ruled out that they were from nunnery buildings. Human skull fragments mixed with animal bone in Trench 2 are difficult to account for but it is possible that they were from a disturbed medieval burial.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FIGURES

Figure_Llanllyr_1_Location map.

Figure_Llanllyr_2_Drawing by Thomas Dineley of Llanllyr, 1684.

Figure_Llanllyr_3_The excavation trenches, topographic survey, current buildings and site of chapel superimposed over part of the 1768 estate map.

Figure_Llanllyr_4_Plan of the excavation trenches, the topographic survey and the modern landscape.

Figure_Llanllyr_5_Plan and east-facing section of Trench 2.

Figure_Llanllyr_6_Plan of Trench 3.

Figure_Llanllyr_7_Drone photograph of Trench 3. Trench 3a is to the top (Photo: T Coombe).

Figure_Llanllyr_8_Plan of Trench 4

Figure_Llanllyr_9_Photo of Trench 4 looking north-west. Scales 2m.

Figure_Llanllyr_10_The timber drain in woodland after removal of the 'lid' timbers (Photo: R Bale).

Figure_Llanllyr_11_ Photograph of the medieval seal matrix (National Museum Wales).

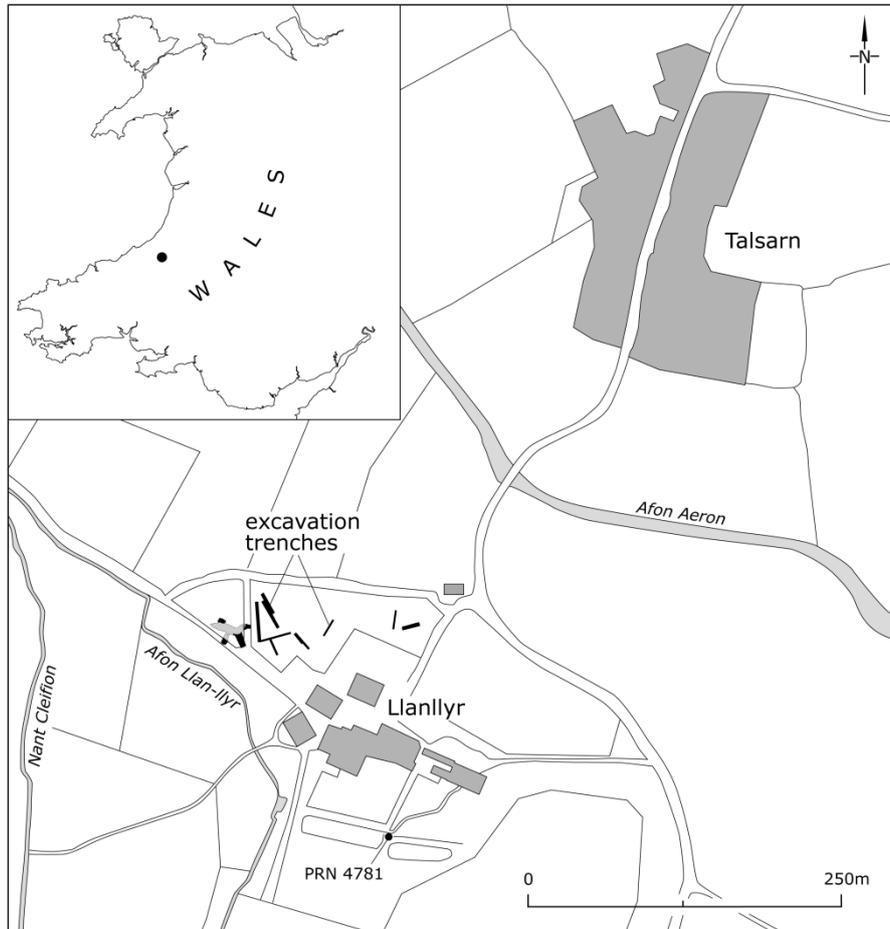


Figure 1.

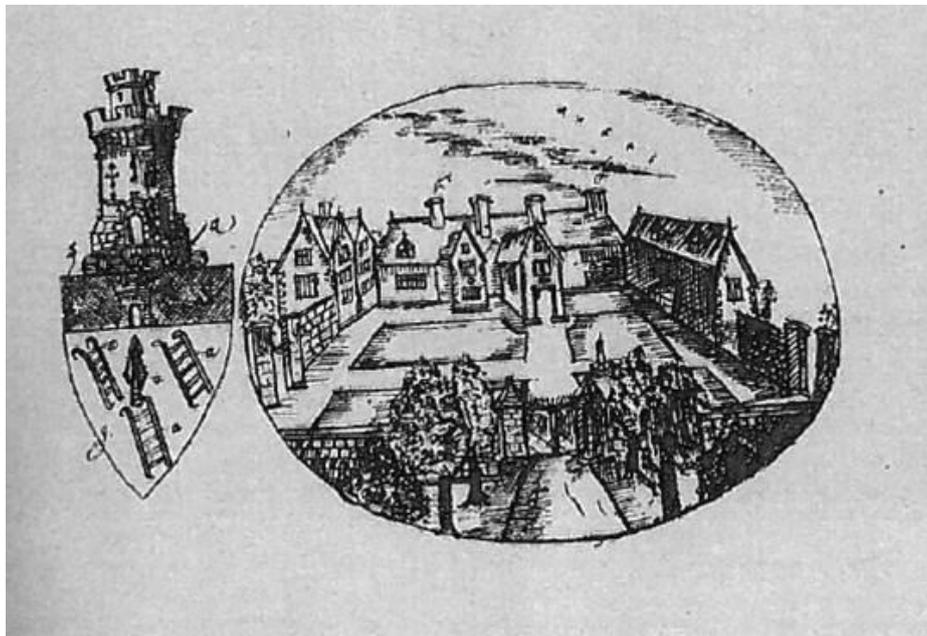


Figure 2.

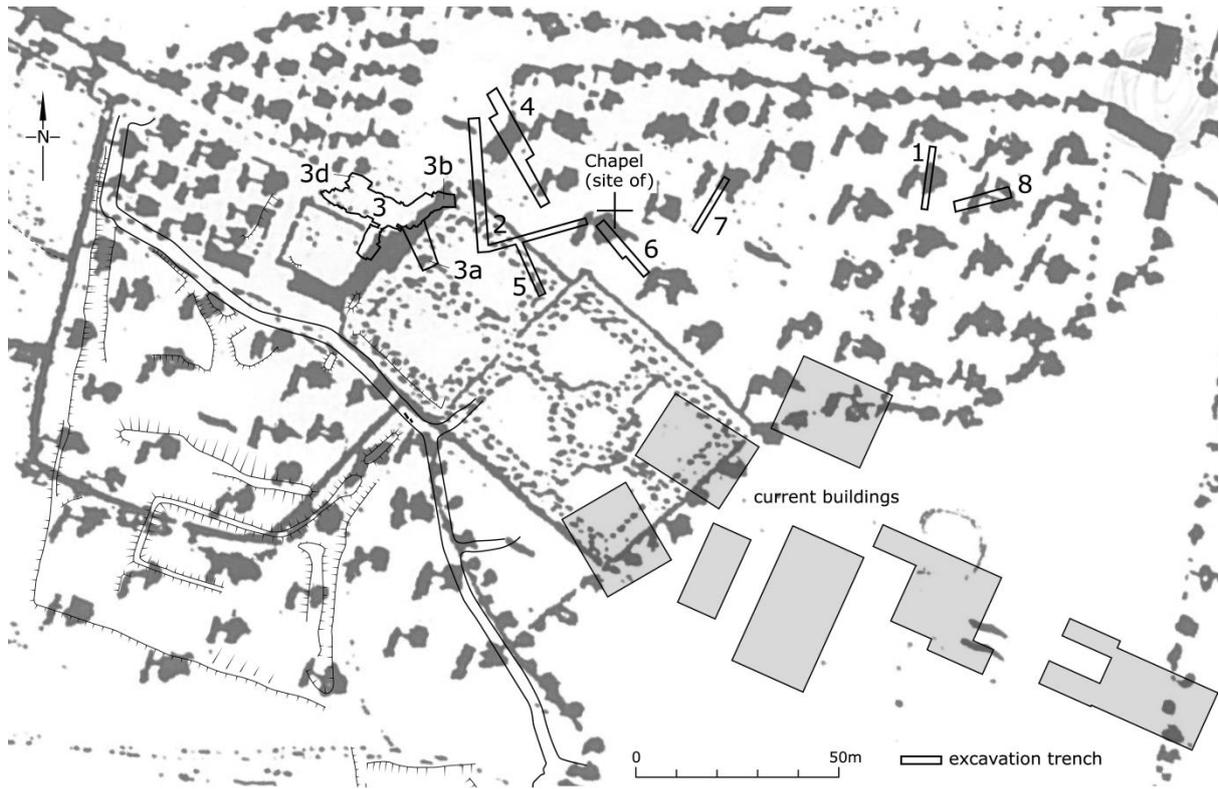


Figure 3.

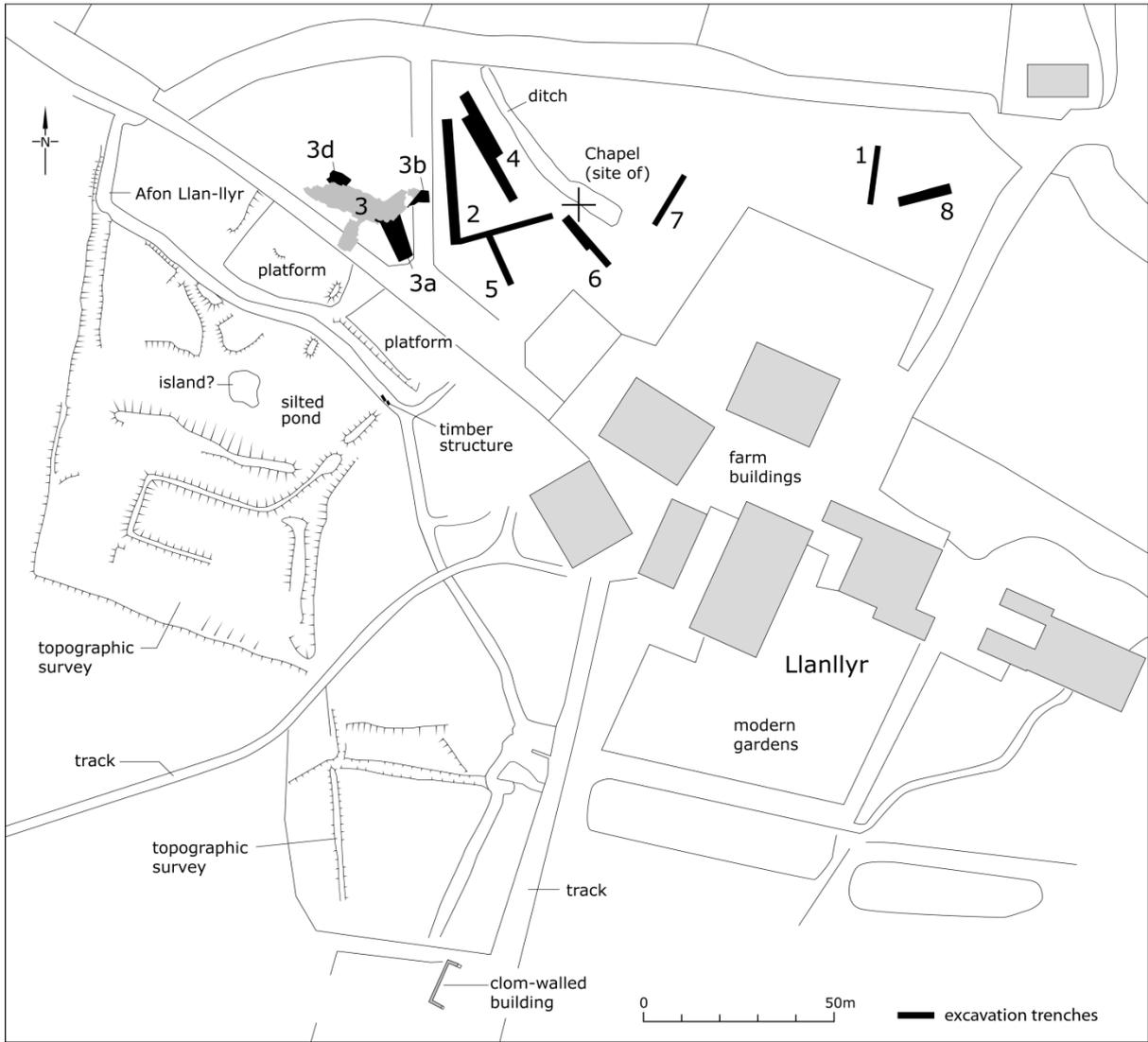


Figure 4.

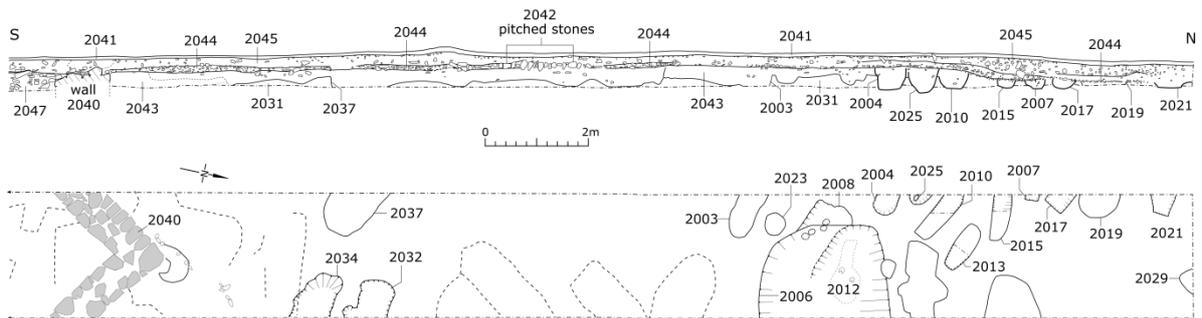


Figure 5.

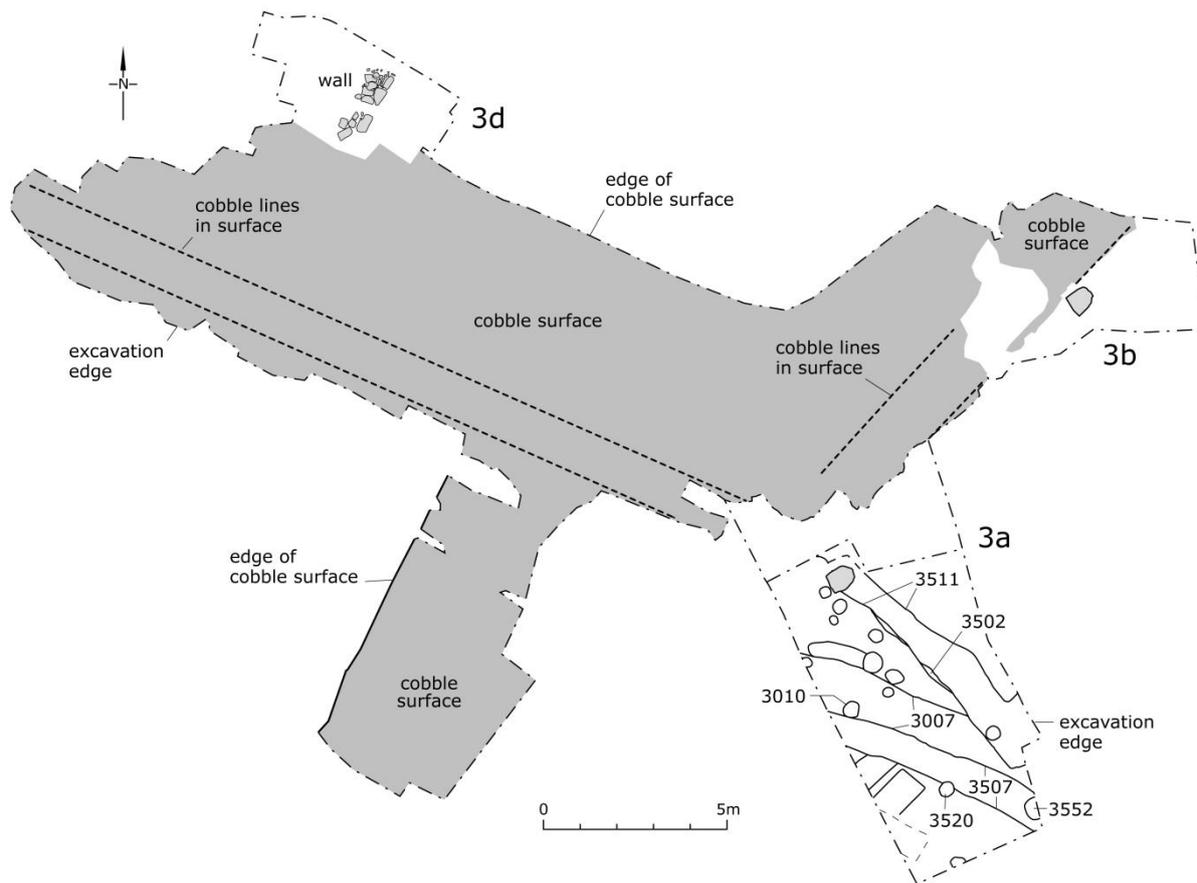


Figure 6.



Figure 7.

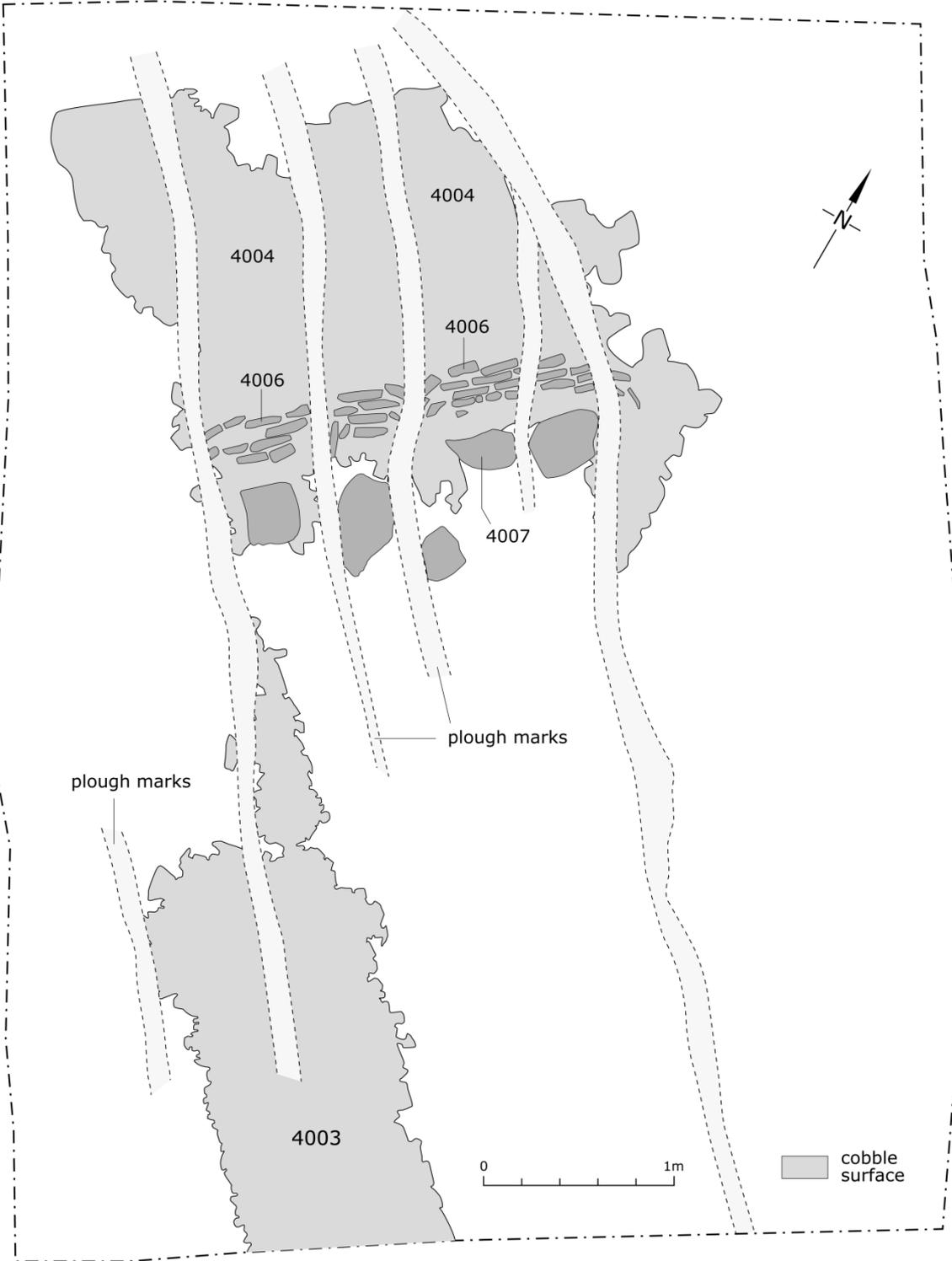


Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10.



Figure 11.