

Abbey Cwmhir Heritage Trust: Community Engagement

Julian Lovell, Abbey Cwmhir Heritage Trust

Recent events, mainly the Covid epidemic, caused the Abbey Cwmhir Trust to examine the way in which it engaged with the public in a more varied and direct way. The rise of the Zoom link and the opportunity to directly reach a much larger audience interested in landscape history and archaeology has enabled the Trust to undertake events which have made a major contribution to well-being and Covid recovery. This development has coincided with the opportunity to join the Sacred Landscapes project, funded by the AHRC. The landscape history and archaeology of two upland monastic houses, Strata Florida and Cwmhir, have provided a comparative with lowland monasteries situated in the Witham valley to the south-east of Lincoln. Through a range of new projects the Trust has contributed to research at a high level, in turn enhancing the publication of academic papers at both local and national level.

A rolling programme of events aimed at public engagement has been devised. The Trust has been fortunate to win grant support to stage events but a continued effort is needed to maintain the momentum. Grants for this project were secured from Local Giving in partnership with the Postcode Community Trust. This latter grant funded much of the excavation equipment. As part of the ongoing project, WCVA grants funded further training opportunities. The opportunity to take part in an archaeological excavation always proves attractive, with more applicants than places. Practical demonstrations and a chance for 'have-a-go' geophysics, to hear about the mechanics of photogrammetry through drone work and come to grips with



farming of the past through an understanding of field botany have all proved popular. At a more basic level walkovers or field-walking, can tell the newcomer what to look for in the landscape, needing only a good pair of eyes and a good pair of boots!

Field-walking: Gwern-y-go 13
Grange

Community Archaeology in the Upper Cwmhir valley

The Trust has been very fortunate in finding a location with suitable sites for introductory archaeological work. The owners are very co-operative and keen to help, a major advantage when arranging community engagement events. To date the focus has been on Llanerch-dirion and Cwm Ffwrn farmsteads, both of which were abandoned as a result of enclosure in the mid-nineteenth century. The landscape is a complex one with many layers of usage to unravel, ranging from the period of pre-history, through the monastic era and down to modern times. It is, of course, a microcosm of the wider contextual landscape. A major advantage from the point of view of the landscape historian is that it has largely escaped intensive modern cultivation, bringing rich rewards to the photogrammetric survey and much at ground level for the field walker.

The Upper Cwmhir valley contains the remains of four farmsteads known as Upper Cwmhir, 310m. OD, Gelenyn, 360m. OD, Llanerch-dirion, also 360m. OD and Cwm Ffwrn, 380m.OD, plus an encroachment settlement. The earliest of these locations is likely to date back to monastic times. 19th Century estate practice was for each one to have the usual cultivation fields, in area ranging from about thirty six acres for Llanerch-dirion, which was the smallest steading, to Cwm Ffwrn at fifty five acres, plus an assigned sheep run for each of them. An early 19th Century estate survey by Layton Cooke (1822) and estate sale documents appear to support this arrangement. Of the four farmsteads named, only Upper Cwmhir shows substantial standing remains, representing a small upland farmhouse c.1800.

None of the potential sites were either in or near existing scheduled areas but nevertheless the Trust appointed Dr. Jemma Bezant as supervising archaeologist for the project. Jemma was already working with the Abbey Cwmhir Trust as part of the Sacred Landscapes project and so a good working relationship had been established. The Trust offered a high standard of instruction to the participants in order to learn new skills and to encourage a lasting interest in archaeology. A wide range of ages was represented, the youngest being a teenager with an interest of pursuing a career in archaeology, the oldest an octogenarian.

Some care was needed in the selection of a site for the first community archaeology activity. It had to be accessible, manageable and ideally be able to promise some quick success. The map which accompanied the Layton

Cooke Report indicated the potential for a small house and a beast house at Llanerch-dirion. Field walking and photogrammetric survey revealed the presence of some low circular earthen banks and the site owners had previously found what appeared to be laid cobbles when a farm track was constructed some years ago. It was felt there was sufficient interest to be found at the site to justify further investigation.

In the hope of confirming the presence of something interesting for the participants, it was decided to conduct a geophysical survey of the part of the site to search for the base of the beast house. This was potentially difficult because of the presence of tree routes and bracken. The survey was carried out by Ian Brooks and showed a potential building base beneath the bracken and undergrowth. A close examination of the surface before revealed the presence some embedded blocks of stone, possibly a revetment, which would serve as a starting point.

After the site had been marked out, some of the overburden of bracken and grass tussocks were removed and work began. The large stones were revealed, clearly set out in an orderly fashion and edged with deliberately placed flat stones. It would appear that our confidence in the site was justified. There followed a pathway of flat stones set into the clay which underlays the site. A gap was then found where the stones had been removed, a common problem in an area where hard building stone is in short supply.

The next stage of the excavation showed stones which were set on edge into the clay, forming the floor of the construction. In Radnorshire the 'passage' by the big stones is known as the soke, in other words a drain and the vertical stones as pitching, making the floor of the beast house.



*Work in progress:
Llanerch-dirion*

Some very careful work along the edge of the soke and floor revealed a drain construction of small flat stones, set to make a small tunnel. It was tested and it still worked. Supported by some documentary evidence, the beast house dates from the mid to late eighteenth century. During the course of the two-day event the group revealed the extent of the beast house floor. However, no wall footings were evident suggesting that the building was of a timber construction. A closer examination of the verges of the paved area showed evidence of post holes at intervals around the flooring. These were left undisturbed with a view to revisiting the site at a later date



*The soke,
passage and
revetment*

This engagement event took place during a difficult time for many people as the effects of the Covid pandemic took its toll. It was viewed by the Trust as a well-being initiative as part of the national Covid recovery strategy and in this, it was successful. Feedback from the members of the course was very positive and certainly encouraged us to proceed with other related events. Another spin-off has been the formation of a regular archaeology activity in the Cwmhir valley. This too has proved to be an excellent Covid recovery activity and more is planned over the next year.

Cwm Ffwrn is located at a height of 380m., the greatest elevation of the Upper Cwmhir Farmsteads and a different character to those at lower elevations. As with the others, it is built into a ledge or platform at right angles to the slope. There is also an adjacent parallel platform, presently with little to show at ground level, which may have carried a byre. There are a some signs of revetment and a few stones appear to have been laid methodically

on the surface of the platform but interrupted drainage requires attention before work can commence here. The team are hoping to explore this as part of the present season's activity.

As with Llanerch-dirion, Cwm Ffwrn ceased to function as a farmstead in the 1860s as a result of the enclosure of the sheepwalks. There is evidence from the Census returns that the house continued to be occupied domestically but the land was apportioned to Gelynen and Upper Cwmhir. It appears to have been abandoned completely after 1881.



*Cwm Ffwrn Farmstead:
Work begins*

At first the site looked unpromising, with a few lines of barely visible stones breaking the surface, hardly surprising in an area where there is a shortage of building stone. The team's enthusiasm was tested to the full as the excavation proceeded and it became apparent that there was still quite a depth of buried walling to reveal. A quantity of loose stone remained within the confines of the outside walls suggesting that the building had been deliberately collapsed inwards, possibly to prevent re-occupation by squatters, a serious problem in 19th century Radnorshire. The footprint of the building is slightly larger than the neighbouring farmstead of Gelynen (8.7m by 5.4m as a comparative), being 8.76m long by 6.26m wide. It is characterised by an internal division making two separate rooms. There is also a suggestion of a further division of the smaller chamber which may have served as a dairy.

This investigation turned into a longer-term project, with a regular weekly sessions and the team working on well into the autumn as weather permitted. Frustration was felt by everyone when the onset of some serious

winter weather finally halted activity. When that point was reached much of the investigation was complete and the team was able to make an assessment of the remains. As already suggested the house at ground floor level consisted of two chambers, the larger of which was the focus of the main entrance and contained a brick-built fireplace and fire pit. An iron fire basket was still in place, almost certainly made by the estate blacksmith. Among the finds was a large pot hook and a fragment of a cast iron cooking pot. The walls were lime plastered up to a thickness of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch but this thickness was far from uniform. Marks on the wall opposite the door indicate the presence of a stairway to an upper floor/loft, reaching to a height of eight and a half feet.

The smaller chamber is divided by approximately half to give a small, inner room which formed a dairy. Signs of a water outlet or drain were present and there was a small window to the long wall elevation. In this area the walls were also lime plastered but the dividing wall was lath and plaster. Plaster debris was present with the parallel impress of the laths but the laths themselves had rotted away.

A good proportion of the original flagstone flooring remained in situ and had been used in all the rooms. The Layton Cooke report mentions flagstone flooring sourced from a quarry at Llanfihangel-nant-melin, about 12 miles distant. The threshold stone remained as well a good 'doorstep' in the only external doorway which was 42 inches in width. Pin holes were present in threshold and an internal doorway still boasted a cast-iron pin. The purpose of these was to fix the door jambs.



*Cwm Ffwrn Farmstead:
Entrance Threshold*

The spoil from the work was carefully removed and examined but the number of finds was unexpectedly small. A variety of small pottery shards, dating from the mid to late 19th century were discovered from the inside of the building with others from a possible midden, close to the main entrance. These were all cleaned, photographed and recorded. Larger finds were also in short supply, with five opening window brackets and the circular metal retaining ring from the centre of a wooden cartwheel being the principle artefacts.



Cwm Ffwrn: Metal finds

The lack of any further finds suggests that the building was systematically decommissioned with a view to salvaging as much as possible, such as slates and timber structures, window frames and glass whilst at the same time making the building unusable for the reasons stated earlier.

Encouraged by the success of this venture the Trust has decided to promote a similar event in the current year. It is also looking at the possibility of engaging with a wider range of participants such as those with specific additional needs, fulfilling an aim to make the history of the landscape available to more people whose well-being are not catered for in this area. Meanwhile, the Abbey Cwmhir Trust team will be exploring and recording new locations in this historic landscape. The public engagement events also feed new discoveries into a well-established research programme from which has come a number of published papers.

Images: Julian Lovell, Abbey Cwmhir Heritage Trust