

Medieval Llaithddu

By Julian Ravest

Background

In this article the early history of the farm of Lower Llaithddu is described using documentary evidence and the results of a photogrammetric study made using a drone.

Llaithddu is a hamlet in a valley of the Llaithddy Brook. It is alongside the a road some 18 km north of Llandrindod Wells. Apart from the older farmhouse, the building are from the mid-nineteenth century. When George Augustus Haig bought the Penithon estate in 1858 he set about investing in his new property. One of his improvements was to create a hamlet for his estate workers. As well as houses for the workers it included a school, a chapel and a blacksmith. Lawrence has described its subsequent history in detail, (Laurence, 1992).

The first reference to Llaithddu is in a donation in the confirmation charter of King John dated 1215, (Ravest, 2023). In this charter the donation of ‘Laythde’ by Marreduch son of Maylgon to Abbey Cwmhir is confirmed. This is further confirmed by Henry III in 1232 and by Edward II in 1318. The significance of these confirmation charters is as evidence of an early ownership of the site by the Cistercian Abbey during the medieval period. The date when the farmstead was first established is not known, only that it was in existence around the year 1200, as a farm site it may have been significantly older.

A much later reference is in the division of a successor estate to Abbey Cwmhir between Charles Gore and Jonathon Field in 1769. In this, both Laith-ty Issa and Laith-ty Ucha passed to Field. The presence of these properties as part of this split is evidence for Llaithddu being part of the Abbey lands until it was dissolved in 1536, that is for over 300 years.

While, at its inception, Cistercian monks were expected to divide their time between prayers and manual labour, the practice of using *conversi*, (lay brothers), to do the actual farming crept in. Eventually the land was simply let to tenants who paid annual rents to the Abbey. The Cistercians brought benefits of sheep management and water management: they were renowned for being improvers of the land they owned.

The extent of the area being donated is not clear from these charters which only give the name. It is not even clear whether it is only one farmstead that is donated, or if the name refers to an area. The area being reported on here focuses only on to Lower Llaithddu at Llaithddu. The donation might also have included the adjacent farmstead of Upper Llaithddu. In either case the donation would have included enclosed fields close to the farmsteads suitable for arable culture and winter pasture and vegetables for own consumption, together with the adjacent

upland, unfenced pasture which may have been held in common with other farms. It is likely that sheep rearing was the main source of income for the farm though there would have been advantages of combining this with cattle. As well as providing meat, milk and hides, the heavier cattle would have broken up the surface soil, mixing in manure and preventing the growth of non-nutritious coarse grasses and vegetation.

Mapping the site

The mid nineteenth century Tithe map, Fig 1, shows the farm buildings prior to its development by as part of the Penithon Estate. Three curvilinear field boundaries at Lower Llaithddu are of interest as they are likely to relate to an early stage of the farm's history before the later, rectilinear enclosures. One field, labelled 412 on the Tithe map, coincides with the Penithon development. Vestiges of the other two field boundaries still exist and are present more accurately on early Ordnance Survey maps, Fig 2. The sub-division of the tear-drop shaped field into two parts, (Tithe field numbers 410 and 411), is shown on the OS map to be the continuation of a track leading to the ford and is now marked by a line of conifers.

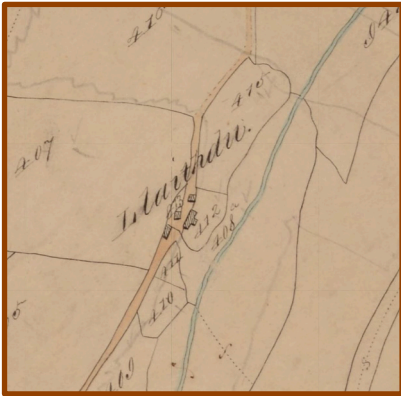


Fig 1: Tithe map of Llaithddu c. 1840

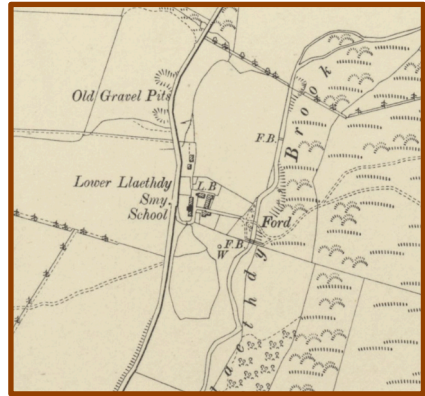


Fig 2: OS map of Llaithddu c. 1890

The present appearance of Lower Llaithddu can be seen in the following oblique aerial photographs. Fig 3 is a view of the valley looking south. The hamlet of Llaithddu is to the right. Fig 4 shows the eroded field that has been surveyed using a drone. The brook, boundary bank of the tear-drop field and erosion platforms are visible. More details are visible in the photogrammetric image, Fig 5.



Fig 2: View of Llaithddy Brook valley looking south



Fig 4: View of erosion field

Photogrammetry, in which multiple overlapping photographs taken by a drone are combined to create a three-dimensional digital surface model, reveal more details, Fig 5. In this image elevations have been exaggerated to reveal details not otherwise perceptible.

Overall, Fig 5 shows three levels created by successive erosion by the Llaithddy Brook. On the topmost, and earliest, level the curved bank of the tear-drop field can be seen. The tip of the tear-drop has been truncated by erosion. The next two levels show signs of ridge and furrow ploughing which may be medieval. This ploughing would once have been more extensive but parts of it too has been subject to later eroded creating the final level which shows no signs of cultivation. The effect of more modern deep ploughing has removed such details

in the field to the south.

The present course of the river is to the east of a straight gully which cuts through a cultivated level. This gully would have been created to preserve the land to the west from further erosion. However, the brook was not to be so easily tamed and broke out to the east to form its present course.

While a sequence of events can be constructed from the photogrammetry, it has not been possible to date them conclusively. However, it is likely that the earliest features stem from the medieval period if not before.

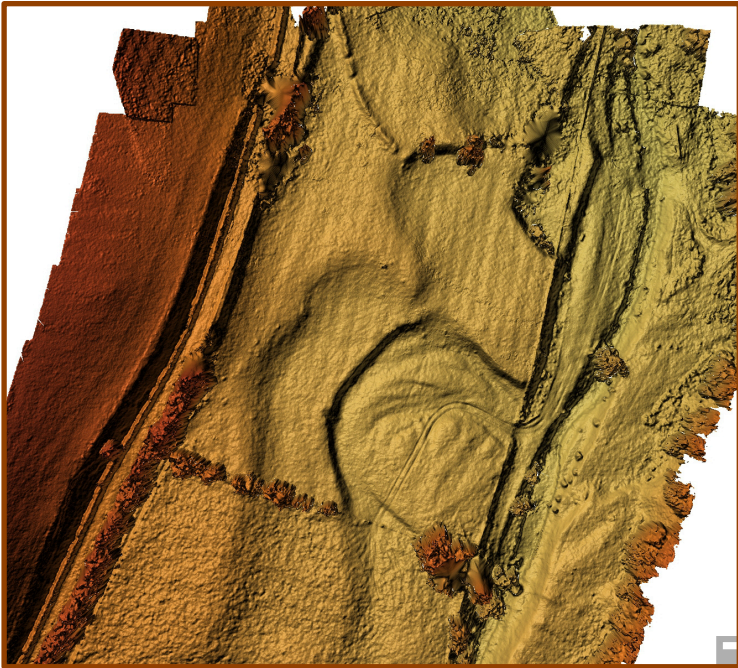


Fig 5: Photogrammetric view showing sequence of erosion platforms

References

Lawrence, Bryan, 1992, *Llaithddu, David's Well and New Well*, Transactions of the Radnorshire Society, vol 62, p66 -72.

Ravest, Julian, 2023, *The Mortimer Charter to Abbey Cwmhir Revisited*, Transactions of the Radnorshire Society, vol 93, Fig 13

Acknowledgement: We would like to thank to Plaxy Muetzel for her invitation to survey this interesting site.