

SURVEY OF AN UPLAND LANDSCAPE ON THE GOLON GRANGE OF ABBEY CWMHIR, RADNORSHIRE

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Introduction

This paper describes the results of a first season of collaboration between the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded 'Sacred Landscapes of Medieval Monasteries' project at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, and the Abbey Cwmhir Heritage Trust (ACHT). A number of upland earthwork platforms and enclosures were surveyed, and several former farmsteads were identified along with their sheepwalks. This paper describes two of the platform sites and two of the farmsteads in more detail. The Sacred Landscapes project is an interdisciplinary project studying meaning as it is embedded in the spaces and production of monastic patronage and estate economies. Strata Florida Abbey in Ceredigion was designed into an earlier prehistoric sacred landscape and was intended to be an important focus of resistant Welsh culture. Both Cwmhir and Strata Florida were founded in the late 12th century by Welsh elites during a period of great political upset and violence in the March and the Welshries and represents the time that the complex territorial and political geographies of medieval Wales first became visible in the historic record.

The joint venture with the ACHT was conceived in 2019 with the aim of investigating the landscape contexts of Abbey Cwmhir primarily within its home grange of Golon in Radnorshire (for the Manor of Golon, see Williams 1990, 40), using the landscape mapping methodologies developed over the longstanding research programmes at Strata Florida (eg Austin 2019; Austin and Bezant 2019; Bezant 2013).

The overall objective of the project is to reconstruct period maps through retrogressive analysis of the functioning landscapes of the Middle Ages and to understand some of the embedded meanings of the space, focussing on the sacred. Professor David Austin and Dr Jemma Bezant of the Sacred Landscapes team are providing training, guidance, and academic direction to the project.

A series of practical workshops and training surveys at Abbey Cwmhir planned for 2020 were moved online due to Covid. A project spatial database was constructed by the participants using QGIS. Nineteenth-century mapping included enclosure and tithe maps, with the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map providing a key base (and proving particularly useful for remapping in detail, the grange boundaries from an AD 1200 grant (Charles 1970)).

These data highlighted a region of discrete sheep-grazing areas linked to former farmsteads. An extensive aerial photogrammetric survey of the entire upper Cwmhir valley produced a spectacular high-resolution surface model (Figure 1), which identified a number of new earthwork features. Field records of two of these sites were made during a training field school in September and by the end of 2020 there were over twenty volunteers with the ACHT working on different aspects of the heritage research.

The Medieval Abbey

Abbey Cwmhir was founded in 1176 by Cadwallon ap Madog (Williams 1990, 268), Lord of Maelienydd and was colonised by monks from Cistercian Whitland Abbey. The current house was founded on the north bank of the Afon Clywedog. The abbey was subsequently patronised by Roger Mortimer who issued a charter in AD 1200 as did various Welsh rulers (see Pryce, 2005). King John in 1214 and Henry III in 1232 issued confirmatory charters (see Banks 1888; Charles 1970). Valued at £35 12s 0d in the 1291 Taxatio, reflecting its income from pastoral sheep farming, the abbey held no appropriated churches as at other Cistercian abbeys, even though it was forbidden by a statute of the Cistercian order. The abbey suffered damage during the Glyndwr rebellion of the early years of the 15th century and in 1644 during the English Civil War. By its dissolution in 1537 only three monks were recorded.

The low walls of the former abbey church are set in an east-west aligned valley standing on the Afon Clywedog in the tithe parish of 'Cefnpawl and Golon in p. Llanbister' some five miles east of Rhayader. It is set at a height of 250m AMSL (height above mean sea level) with nearby hills rising to over 400m AMSL. The former precinct boundary presumably enclosed a cloister and other conventual buildings, now mostly occupied by Home Farm. Recent aerial surveys by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales in the 2018 drought have revealed a cemetery and perhaps later garden enclosures as well as substantial enclosures beyond the inner precinct (Driver 2021, 110).

The abbey sits in the southern part of its home grange, Golon which comprises nearly 10,000 hectares of sheepwalks, unenclosed mountain land and scattered farmsteads. Leland describes the upland nature of Cwmhir in 1538 as an *abbay of White Monkes stonith betwixt ii. great billes in Melennith* (Toulmin Smith 1906, 52).

Upper Cwmhir Valley

The upper Cwmhir valley is within Golon, bounded on its western edge by the grange boundary as described in the 1200 AD grant. The Nant Cwmhir enters the Afon Clywedog to the west of the abbey and this valley rises to the northwest with Castell Garn at a height of 494m. Our survey area comprised the area of the valley west of the Nant Cwmhir now farmed as a single entity, Cwm Ffwrn. Tithe surveys depict and name four farmsteads in this area: Cwm Forn, Llanerch dirion, Gelenin and Cwm Hir together with their respective sheepwalk ranges which functioned as self-contained upland grazing areas. These were operated from the now ruined eponymous farmsteads. The farmsteads are depicted mostly as one or two small buildings surrounded by smaller enclosures. The aim is that future investigation of these sites will inform our understanding of settlement and land use in Golon grange.

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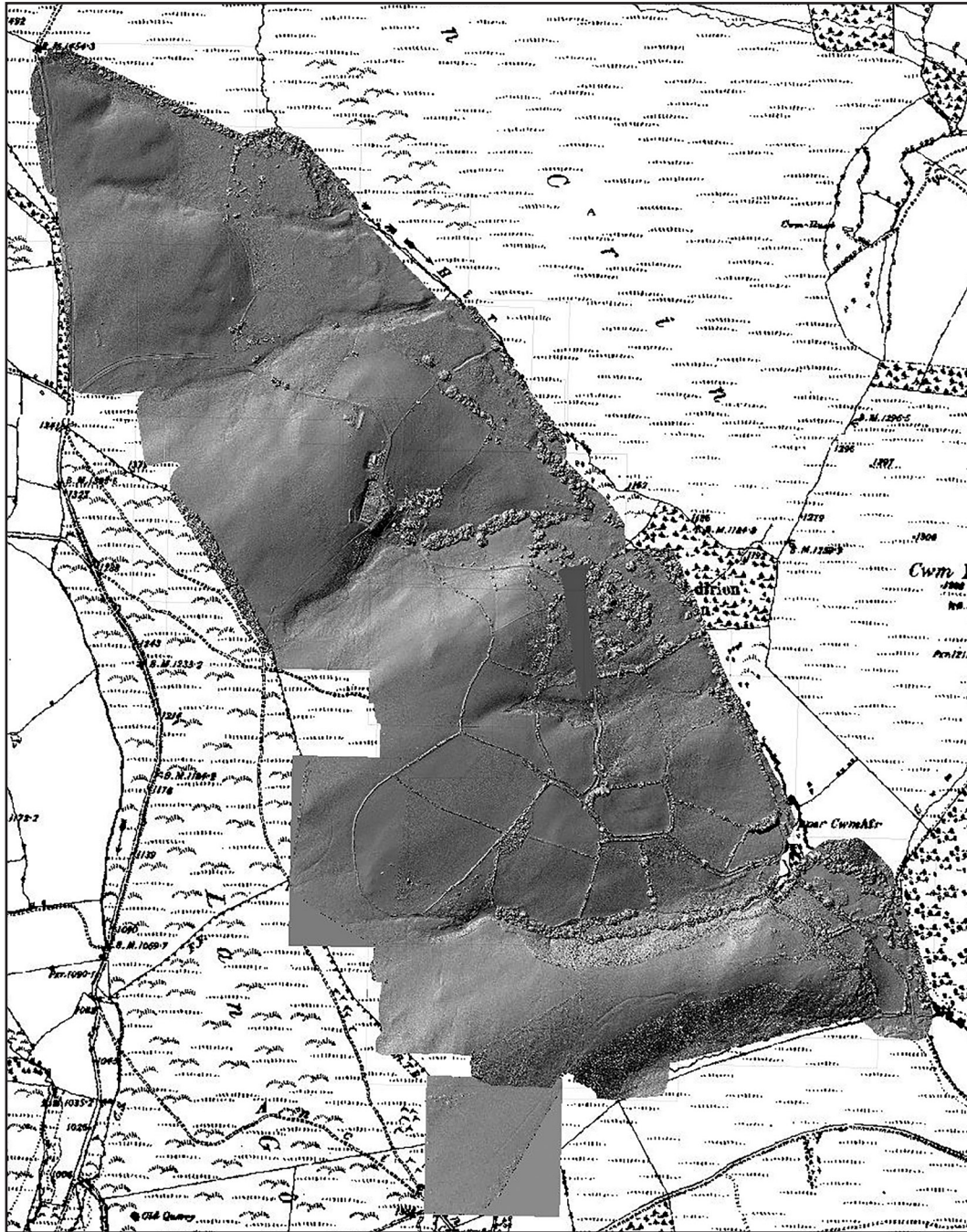


Figure 1: Drone photogrammetry of the upper Cwmhir Valley, Golon grange, Abbey Cwmhir, Radnorshire. Julian Ravest. © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited 2021. All rights reserved, 1964.

An aerial survey of Cwm Ffwrn was carried out at an average flying altitude of 75m giving a surface photographic resolution of around 2-3cm per pixel. The drone was controlled by DroneDeploy software which flew the drone automatically in a pre-set grid pattern taking overlapping photographs. These photographs were subsequently compiled using *mapsmadeeasy.com* into georeferenced photogrammetric tiles which were loaded into QGIS. These tiles were initially located in QGIS using the drone's GPS system with its typical intrinsic accuracy of around +2-3m. This was improved in QGIS by manually adjusting tiles to provide best fit between the tiles and with the underlying 6-inch OS map. The resulting accuracy is estimated as +1m. Thirty-one tiles were created to cover the study area.

A total of 4,445 aerial photographs were taken in this phase of the study and the area walked over. These have greatly complemented the historic mapping and field surveys. However, trees, vegetation and other upstanding features are recorded which can obscure surface features.

A walkover survey was conducted on the upland area of the Cwm Ffwrn sheepwalk. The aim was to investigate two earthwork complexes found on the aerial survey and to train volunteers in field recording and Historic Environment Record (HER) enhancement. The earthwork platform and enclosure sites were surveyed (Figure 2) and records for these and other new sites were produced for the HER curated by Clwyd Powys Archaeological Trust (Table 1).



Figure 2: Field survey of Cwm Ffwrn enclosure (PRN 143668) and platform (PRN 143669), upper Cwmhir valley, Golan Grange, Abbey Cwmhir, Radnorshire, facing southeast. The abbey site is just out of view in the valley beyond, less than 1km distant

Name	PRN	easting	northing	
Cwm Ffwrn Cairn	143665	302239	271495	new record
Cwm Ffwrn Circular earthwork	143666	302095	272360	new record
Cwm Ffwrn Deserted farmstead	143667	302165	272519	new record
Cwm Ffwrn Enclosure	143668	301833	272677	new record
Cwm Ffwrn Platform I	143669	301819	272691	new record
Cwm Ffwrn bank and ditch	143670	301876	272387	new record
Cwm Ffwrn Platform II	143671	302257	271962	new record
Llanerch dirion farmstead	143672	302701	271803	new record
Cwm Ffwrn Platform III	143673	301977	272520	new record
Cefndyrys enclosures	143674	304643	273330	new record
Foel-fach quarry	143676	304640	272908	new record
Groes	127844	304960	273190	updated record
Foel-fach	127419	304680	272860	updated record
Cwm Ffwrn platform IV	143677	302372	271998	new record
Cwm Ffwrn farmstead	53207	302345	271995	updated record
Gelynen farmstead	53208	302718	271485	updated record
Foel-fach enclosures	143678	304563	272900	new record

Table 1: Sites added (or updated) to the Clwyd Powys Archaeological Trust's HER

The farmsteads

Two of the upper Cwmhir farmsteads have been surveyed in more detail.

Cwm Ffwrn (Cwm Forn) farmstead, SO 0234 5719, 370m AMSL

This is the farmstead at the highest altitude. The main site is a stone constructed farmhouse, now reduced to ground level. The footprint indicates a building of three rooms, located on a platform cut into the hillside. There also appears to be a second platform, more or less parallel, a short distance away. These platforms are sufficiently close to suggest being part of the same steading. Stones have been laid on part of the platform, but as yet no revetement has been found. The presence of a house and beast house or byre on parallel platforms has been noted elsewhere. As with Llanerch dirion, Cwm Ffwrn ceased to function as a farmstead in the 1860s. There is evidence from the census returns that the buildings were occupied domestically but the land was apportioned to Gelenin. It appears to have been abandoned completely after 1881.

Llanerch dirion, SO 0270 7175, 360m AMSL

This ceased to function as a farmstead in the 1860's and of the lost farmstead sites in the valley it is the most difficult to assess. In recent times a vehicle track has been driven through to connect with the lower part of the valley and this makes it difficult to precisely locate the site of the buildings. The present owners are aware of some laid 'cobbles' which could be from within the house or part of a yard. The Surveyor's Ordnance Survey map of 1817 suggests two buildings on the site and this again would match with the Layton Cooke report of a *tenement with shed attached serving as stable, turf and beast house* (Powell, 1981: 50). An archaeological excavation conducted on the site in 2021 revealed the floor of the Beast House. The presence of post holes suggests a basic timber structure. Investigation of the low banks on the site has revealed the presence of a pond to serve the farmstead. Sale documents relating to the Fowler Estate refer to it as Wilson's Land.

Hafoddai

Two hut platform and enclosure sites were considered in detail. The northernmost complex (PRNs 143668 and 143669, Figure 3) comprises a rectilinear enclosure (*c* 30 x 27 m) delineated by a low bank adjacent to a level platform (*c* 10 x 6m). The complex at 420m AMSL is north-facing set into the top of a small gully fed by a spring. Sited in the northernmost part of the Cwm Ffwrn sheepwalk, it likely relates to seasonal grazing of sheep flocks farmed from the nearby Cwm Ffwrn farmstead.

The second site (PRN 143667, Figure 4) is sited in an enclosed field below the sheepwalk at an altitude of 380m. The rectangular enclosure (*c* 22 x 13m) and platform (*c* 8 x 4m) are arranged on the sheltered south-facing bank of a narrow gully which runs east-west. The site is overgrown and criss-crossed with faint tracks and low earthwork banks. A possible second banked enclosure to the east is visible and another smaller, possible hut platform is sited on the steep hillside between the two complexes.

Within the context of mid-Wales, hut platforms with



Figure 3: Drone photogrammetric survey of an enclosure and platform earthwork (PRNs 143668 and 143669 in the upper Cwmhir valley, Julian Ravest

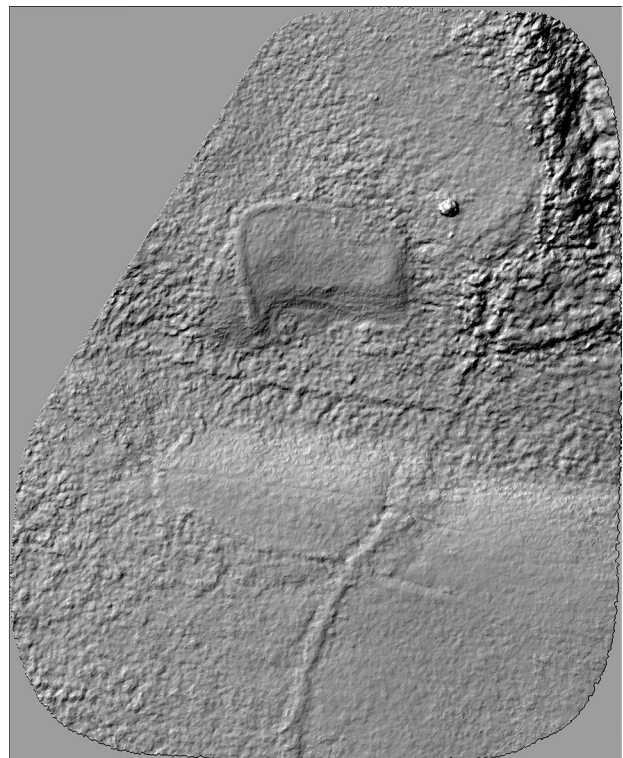


Figure 4: Drone photogrammetric survey of a rectangular enclosure and platform earthwork (PRN 143667), upper Cwmhir valley, Julian Ravest.

associated enclosures are common (Silvester 1999). A complex of four such abandoned medieval complexes with a large Cistercian sheepcote or *bercaria* at Troed y Rhiw were surveyed above the Mwyro valley at Strata Florida in the western Cambrians (Fleming and Barker 2008). Excavations of such upland sites remain rare and thus our knowledge is limited. Butler excavated the interior of a hut platform at Bwlch Yr Hendre in 1962, in advance of the upper Rheidol hydro-electric scheme (Butler 1963). The almost complete

lack of material culture here chimed well with an apparently 'poor' seasonal existence eking out a living on the upland. It wasn't until excavations investigated areas beyond internal occupation spaces such as at Hafod y Nant Criafolen in Clwyd that unexpectedly rich assemblages were found such as spindle whorls, whetstones, ceramics, decorated bake stones and scourers, worked bone scoops, horse shoes and an iron sword (Allen 1979).

The hafod or summer place is a well-known toponym in the upland areas of mid-Wales. Butter and cheese prepared in the upland hafod supported a local community, with wool from the annual clip supplying a wider trade internationally. The hafod was an essential part of a transhumant farming system which dates back at least to the medieval period and in many areas survived into modern times (Sayce 1957a, 1957b). Although traditionally associated with sheep, the Cistercian economy was varied. The Lluest is widespread in mid-Wales and may be related to pre-Norman seasonal cattle ranching and dairying, while *vaccary* is synonymous with hafod in parts of 14th century Caernarfonshire (Williams 1990, 22). Gerald of Wales noted that Strata Florida Abbey in particular was stocked with oxen, sheep, horses and cattle herds (Robinson 2006, 268).

Transhumance was widely practiced in the upland areas of Britain and Europe more widely. Stuart Rathbone has reviewed the extent of transhumance in the highland areas around the North Irish Sea basin: Wicklow Mountains, Antrim plateau and the Mourne Mountains, Galloway, the English Lake District and Wales (Rathbone 2010). Within this it was possible to define and classify eight different types of hafod footprint based on shape, rectangular, oval or round and the number of internal divisions, one, two or three. Whilst there were certain local preferences, all types were represented across the regions considered.

The Welsh Cistercians had a reputation as great sheep farmers and producers of wool, in common with their contemporaries in England and other parts of north-west Europe. Pastoralism formed the mainstay of both the secular and ecclesiastical economic exploitation of the uplands. At Strata Florida Abbey, a valuable demesne sheep farm on the upland *fridd* at Troed y Rhiw with its *bercaria* was sited just below the unenclosed sheepwalk (Bezant 2014, 5). A mix of fiscal rents survived on the Strata Florida granges well into the post dissolution period and demonstrates the mixed nature of these individual farmsteads. In 1577, residents of the Penardd, Mefenydd, Blaenaeron and Cwmystwyth granges were still paying sheep, wool, a range of customary services and suits, a food rent of oats known as *dofraeth*, and a commorth payment (commuted by now into a fiscal rent) for access onto the upland grazing (Bezant 2014, 9). A similar system is likely at Abbey Cwmhir. A sheepcote at Llechelwyddan on Cwmhir's Cefnlllys grange survived *with its seven doors* as late as 1790 (Williams 2001, 253). These likely housed the demesne flock for this grange and were grazed on their own sheepwalk. The individual farmsteads at Llanerch dirion, Cwm Ffwrn, Cwm Hir and Gelenin on the Golan grange would each have farmed their own flocks and paid rents in kind to the abbey on an annual basis. The abbey's own demesne flock would likely have been farmed by *conversi* and grazed on their own adjacent sheepwalk.

Further excavation and survey on the platform sites and their farmsteads would greatly enhance our knowledge about historic land use and development of the monastic granges in

the Welsh uplands. The precise dating of occupation phases and use of Cwm Ffwrn and Llanerch dirion farmsteads would reveal their relationships to the platform sites on their unenclosed sheepwalks. This would meet recommendations made by the Research Framework for the Archaeology of Wales (Silvester 2003) where historical geography can tell us much about field systems, land use, enclosure, and settlement of 'lower-status' sites beyond the charismatic abbey remains beloved of visitors and curators.

Conclusion

This project has shown how an effectively directed group of heritage volunteers can make important new discoveries that add to our understanding and enhance the Historic Environment Record. In this regard, the link between the Abbey Cwmhir Heritage Trust volunteer group, the historical analysis by Julian Lovell, our drone photogrammetry experts Julian Ravest and Vic Pardoe, survey work by Phil Olivant and Charlie Price with direction by Dr Jemma Bezant of University of Wales Trinity Saint David, has been crucial.

The work described here should be taken as an indication of work in progress in investigating the earlier constituent farmsteads of the present Cwmffwrn farm and, more widely, other land holdings and granges of Abbey Cwmhir. The aim is to host further Field Schools designed to widen skills in field surveying and excavations and to improve both the skills and wellbeing of participants involved. These events would be aimed at encouraging the local community and the wider public to take an interest in this project leading to an increase in the number of volunteers at the regular field survey events and awareness of the heritage of this area.

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