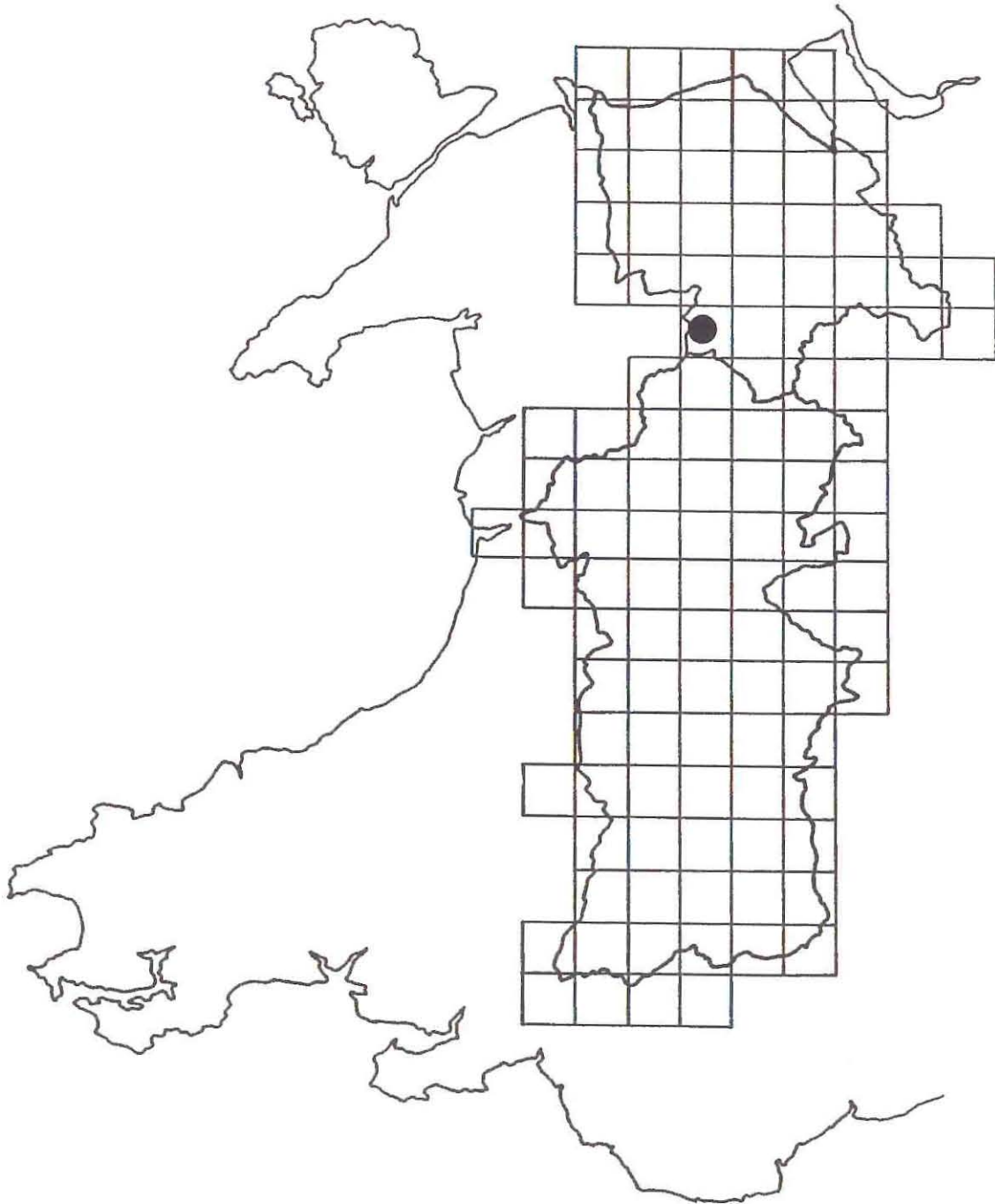


THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

*A Medieval Field System
above Llandrillo, Clwyd*

FIELD SURVEY



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by R J Silvester

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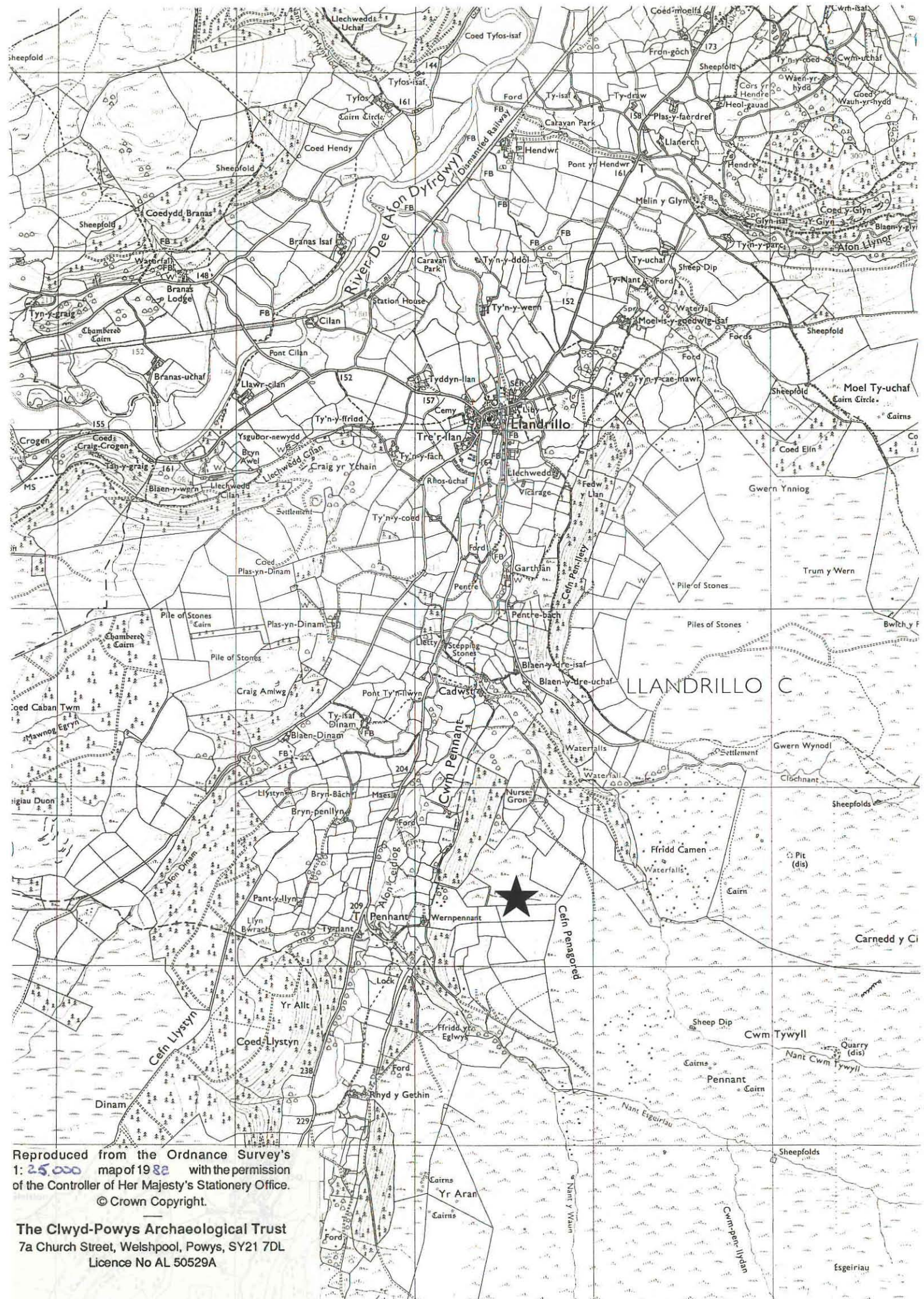
Report prepared for Clwyd County Council and CPAT

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Background

The identification of relict field systems containing numerous strip fields on the western edge of the Berwyn Mountains in Clwyd was with hindsight one of the more significant discoveries of aerial reconnaissance in Wales during 1982. In later years and particularly in the winter of 1986 when a covering of snow accentuated the low earthworks, the full extent of the earthworks above Cwm Pennant (Fig 1) became apparent. Their date generated sporadic debate, with both prehistoric (tending towards Bronze Age) and medieval origins being mooted.

Occasional photographs of the fields appeared in print (e.g. Briggs 1991, 67), and a ground photo of an associated long-house illustrated Glanville Jones' article on medieval settlement (1991, fig 172). A continuing programme of fieldwork in the uplands of Clwyd and Powys by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) focused on the Berwyns in 1991/92, and a one-kilometre wide transect across the spine of the range incorporated a portion of the relict fields. Further more detailed work including the measured survey of the previously mentioned longhouse - inaccurately grid referenced in Jones' article - and a hafod site, both on a block of unimproved though enclosed moorland known as Ffrith Camen was subsequently published (Silvester 1991).

Ffrith Camen was exceptional inasmuch as it had not been detrimentally affected by post-medieval land utilisation and, due to agreement between the landowner and the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) its preservation has now been confirmed by its incorporation into the Berwyn Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The greater part of the system was and remains much more vulnerable. Post-medieval farms are virtually unknown at this height, but the ruins of one remained, its associated fields spreading across and incorporating some of the earlier relict banks. Furthermore, more recent farming has involved pasture improvement on the Berwyn edge: not only are the relict fields within the zone of modern enclosed grazing land, but also cyclical pasture improvement inevitably has an adverse effect on the fields. The result is that some of the boundaries have disappeared altogether, while many others have been degraded to a fraction of their former size, and this degradation is on-going.

The need to create a measured record of the fields to complement the available oblique aerial photography was recognised by both CPAT and the Clwyd Archaeology Service, a section of Clwyd County Council, the result being that the latter were able to provide resources for the former to undertake a full survey. An initial assessment of the results is provided in this interim report, and it is anticipated that a fuller consideration will appear in print in due course.

Methodology

The survey utilised electronic distance measuring equipment (EDM) to plot most of the boundaries, and it was the initial intention to tie this plan into the modern field pattern depicted on current Ordnance Survey maps by sighting in a number of key junction points. This approach was thwarted with the realisation that some boundaries depicted on the Ordnance Survey maps were less accurately plotted than might have been anticipated. Consequently, every significant field boundary junction was measured in to provide a precise framework for the archaeological detail. Finally, large-scale, vertical aerial photographs (taken by the Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography) were used with a computerised rectification programme to plot the most conspicuous relict boundaries,

integrating these with the ground-measured data. The results are shown in computer generated form in Fig 2, though this plot will be redrawn for final publication.

The Setting

Llandrillo in Edeyrnion is situated at the mouth of Cwm Pennant where it enters the Dee Valley. The long finger-like tributary valley carries Afon Ceidiog to its confluence with the Dee, cutting back into the western flank of the Berwyn. The steep western slopes, enclosed where they are not covered by forestry, contrast with the even steeper eastern slopes, some of which are under pasture though conifers and bracken predominate. These slopes start to level out around 330m OD and then rise gradually to about 410-420m OD, against a backdrop of the main Berwyn ridge, as high again, about 4km away. It is on the shelving interfluvium that the relict field systems were laid out.

Those that form the subject of the survey occupy a tract of ground approximately 1.2km from north to south and about 600m from east to west, bounded by V-shaped valleys cut by streams feeding down to Afon Ceidiog. Eastwards a low ridge, Cefn Penagored, fills the skyline and the fields spread across its lower slopes. Further north, above Llandrillo itself and further south on Yr Aran, there is some evidence that similarly shelving land was once utilised by comparable fields, but perhaps not so intensively and certainly not with the same level of survival into the later 20th century. There are hints too that on the opposite flank of the valley, the land may once have been divided up in similar fashion, but most of the banks have been degraded beyond recognition except where integrated into the present pattern of fields.

The boundaries of these strip fields now cover just over 37 hectares (92 acres) in two discrete blocks. Originally, however, it is likely that they extended over a larger area of at least 65 hectares (161 acres). The absence of boundaries between the two surviving tracts is best explained by the presence and influence of a post-medieval farmstead with its own distinctive stone-walled enclosures (see below).

Date of the Systems

The western fringe of the Berwyn reveals extensive evidence of prehistoric activity. Hut circles, 'wandering walls' and clearance cairns, and numerous burial cairns are all to be found within one kilometre of the strip fields. Indeed, close observation during the survey suggested that some prehistoric features survived within the area of the fields (see below). Nevertheless, the strip fields do not fit readily into a prehistoric milieu. Where convincing evidence of prehistoric land use is available in the region it is of a more haphazard form: low meandering banks, not commensurate with efficient clearance and organisation of the land. The relict fields are more akin to medieval strip fields, and this comparison is reinforced by the discovery on adjacent Ffrith Camen of a long house in association with a block of fields. On a broader geographical base, clear comparisons can be made with medieval farms in other areas of southern Britain, most notably on Bodmin Moor in south-western England (Johnson and Rose 1994, 106)

Sequence

Four phases of land-use can be detected on this upland margin, a conservative estimate perhaps, but one that can be supported by the physical evidence.

The earliest appears to be a small group of low stone banks set on a natural terrace not far from the lip of the valley. The most obvious is a linear spread about 70m in total length that includes a gap of about 13m where the stone has been dispersed as a result of a later cultivation terrace being forced through. Some 30m to the south is a small stone-banked enclosure (SJ 0340 3456). Its morphology is obscure, not least because it has functioned as a tip for stone cleared from adjacent areas of cultivation. Internally it could be up to 7m in diameter, but no convincing entrance is apparent and its shape while now sub-rectangular could originally have been more circular. It is set within a levelled D-shaped enclosure, the straight arm of which is a scarp bank, the curving side, part scarp, part bank, incorporating large blocks of stone. A reasonable hypothesis is that these features can be interpreted as a prehistoric (?Bronze Age) hut circle set in its own enclosure together with a contemporary field wall.

The only other feature of putative prehistoric origin is an upright standing stone, 1.45m high, set in a field bank at the southern end of the interfluvium (SJ 0357 3377).

The second phase is represented by the strip fields. The banks that demarcate the strips are now in varying condition but rarely attain a height of more than 0.5m, and beneath a grassy cover are composed primarily of stone with some earth infill. Many run for 300-400m and, towards the west where the ground steepens, the banks give way to lynchets, sometimes rising to several metres in height, which curve southwards to produce terraces capable of cultivation and to facilitate the turning of the plough. Some of the banks are continuous, particularly where they have been fossilised in later boundaries. Others are completely fragmented, existing only in short lengths that have escaped later improvement. The width of the strips themselves also varies: most are between 20 and 30m across.

Scattered throughout the fields are numerous stone cairns, some patently modern in origin, others of apparently greater antiquity. In some cases a single cairn could reflect different clearance episodes separated by centuries. Some at least have a rock outcrop at their base, revealing why a particular spot was chosen for cleared stone. It is however frequently impossible to determine the period at which any particular cairn originated and indeed sometimes whether a cairn exists at all or is simply a grassed over outcrop. For these reasons and because the majority are visible on aerial photographs the cairns were not plotted during the survey.

There is no evidence that the better preserved strips on Ffrith Camen were ever formed into ridge and furrow by continued cultivation, and apart from some ephemeral traces ridges do not show within the strips on Cefn Penagored. But higher up the slope and spreading across the divide between the modern pasture and the unimproved moorland are a couple of hectares of low ridges (SJ 0375 3435). Others have almost certainly been erased during pasture improvement. Several contiguous patches are visible, resulting from subtle changes in the direction of the natural slope. There is no obvious relationship between this ridge and furrow and the strip fields. Two strip field banks fade out close to but do not intrude on the ridges and the overall impression is that the strip field zone terminates to the west of the ridge and furrow. It is conceivable that the ridging reflects an outfield cultivated intermittently and in a different fashion to contemporary strip fields, but alternatively it may attest another phase of arable activity, more likely to be later than earlier in date.

Similar uncertainty surrounds two rectangular structures in the vicinity of the strip fields. A platform terraced into the slope and raised at the front (SJ 0326 3388) almost certainly supported a structure, probably a dwelling, on a natural shelf below the fields. The platform is too short to have accommodated a typical longhouse, and in size if not morphology is more akin to the hafotai sites elsewhere on the slopes above Cwm Pennant. Beside it is a deeply terraced stock pound with drystone walls, presumably contemporary with the dwelling.

The second structure lies at a higher level, its position above and more central to the surviving strip fields (SJ 0363 3419). In this respect it bears comparison with the long house on Ffrith Camen, though again in size it is markedly different. Externally it is no more than 11m by 6m with some upright wall slabs either in situ or toppled. It lies within a large rectangular enclosure with maximum dimensions of 28m by 24m and a distinct curvature to the wall in the vicinity of the dwelling that might indicate that the latter was already in existence when the enclosure was constructed. It is reasonable to assume that the strip fields were worked by families who lived in the immediate vicinity rather than migrated from the valley below on a daily basis. Yet there is nothing to compare with the Ffrith Camen long-house and while it is not inconceivable that other buildings have been swept away during more recent phases of improvement, it may be that the smaller structures that do survive on Cefn Penagored represent the dwellings of those who worked the fields.

The third phase focuses on an abandoned farmstead at the northern end of the survey area. The contemporary name of this is lost but we have termed it Nurse Gron, a name seemingly attributed on modern Ordnance Survey maps to the adjacent plantation. The farmhouse and outbuildings have walls standing to around a metre but the latter in particular have become a dumping ground for stone and other agricultural rubbish. Radiating out from the buildings are boundaries enclosing irregularly shaped enclosures. Some of these are stone and earth banks, other stone walls. The relative association of these are not always easy to determine but it does appear that both relate to the farmstead and may represent successive methods of stock control. It is likely that this phase of activity is wholly post-medieval in origin and duration.

Finally in modern times the ground has been divided up into larger enclosures and fields. Some but not all may date back to the occupation of Nurse Gron. Most are defined solely by fences, others show earlier banks though most if not all of these are re-used medieval boundaries. Analysis of 19th and 20th-century maps may help to resolve some of the complexities of this phase.

A full analysis of the data from the survey is in hand and it is hoped to extend the study to other areas in the near future.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks are due to Mr Jones of Cadwst, Llandrillo and his brother of Ty-draw, and also to Mr Roberts and his son at Plas-yn-dinam for permission to survey on their land. Thanks are also due to Clwyd County Council (Clwyd Archaeology Service) for providing the resources to carry out the survey.

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Fig 2: Explanation

This plan has been generated by the computer directly from EDM data, and no attempt has been to modify or clarify the information depicted.

It shows only the southern two-thirds of the survey area, and excludes the abandoned farmstead at Nurse Gron and associated features, as well as a small number of relict boundaries of an earlier date.

The archaeology as surveyed is shown in black, the modern field system in orange though where modern fields were specifically measured in to facilitate plotting these too are in black.

The putative prehistoric house site within its own enclosure appears in the top left, the hafod-like structures are bottom left and centre right, and the ridge and furrow appears as close-set parallel lines at top right. The crests of the medieval banks were surveyed, hence the single lines each representing one such bank. Where two lines are close-set these represent a substantial scarp bank.