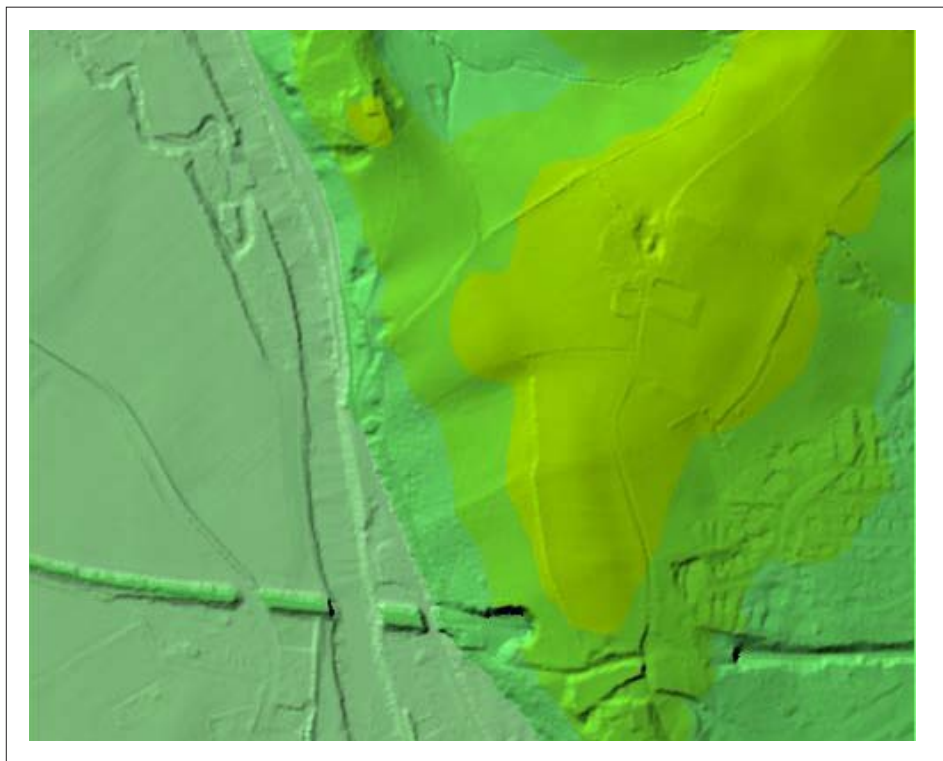


Archaeology Wales

1405 Battle of Pwll Melyn Usk, Monmouthshire

Battlefield Survey



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Report No. 1208

Prepared for:



Archaeology Wales

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Prepared For: The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales

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Crynodeb Anhechnegol

Y mae'r adroddiad yma yn amlinellu canlyniadau ymchwiliad archeolegol ar safle tybiedig brwydr 1405 ym Mhwll Melyn, Brynbuga, Sir Fynwy, ar gyfer Comisiwn Brenhinol Henebion Cymru (CBHC). Amcan y gwaith oedd hel tystiolaeth ynglŷn â maint a lleoliad meysydd brwydrau gwahanol ar gyfer Cofrestr Meysydd Brwydrau Cymru.

Bwriad gwreiddiol y gwaith oedd defnyddio arolygon LiDAR yn ogystal ag archwilio'r maes gyda datgelyddion metel a chloddio ffosydd a thyllau prawf. Yn anffodus gwrthododd y tirfeddiannwr caniatâd i ddefnyddio datgelyddion metel ac roedd y gwaith cloddio yn anymarferol. Yr unig waith posib oedd crwydro'r maes ac astudiaeth o'r arolwg LiDAR.

Wrth gymharu'r canlyniadau gyda gwaith ymchwil hanesyddol (2009) mae'r gwaith maes yn awgrymu bod y frwydr wedi ei hymladd ar ben copa gwastad y crib i'r gogledd a gogledd-ddwyrain o gastell Brynbuga. Mae'n bosib bod y maes wedi ymestyn tu hwnt i'r ardal yma o ganlyniad i'r ffoi a ddigwyddodd yn ystod y frwydr. Ni fydd yn bosib cadarnhau'r dehongliad yma heb ragor o waith maes.

Non-Technical Summary

This report draws upon the results gained by archaeological investigations into the site of the 1405 Battle of Pwll Melyn at Usk, Monmouthshire, for The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales . The work forms part of a larger investigation, the objectives of which are to gather evidence that will verify and inform the location and extent of Welsh battlefields and to inform the consideration of each site for inclusion on the Welsh Government proposed Register of Historic Battlefields in Wales.

Various survey methods were proposed for the site, including Lidar analysis, a metal detector survey, a site walkover and the excavation of test pits and evaluation trenches.

After landowner permission for the metal detector survey was denied and the trenching and test pitting was considered unviable, only the Lidar analysis and the site walkover were carried out.

Considered in combination with earlier historical research (2009), the fieldwork indicates that the main area of the battle is most likely to have been located on the flat-topped ridge immediately to the north and north-east of Usk Castle. The battle area probably extended beyond this, as a consequence of the fighting turning into a retreat. However, it will not be possible to determine this until more fieldwork is undertaken.

1 Introduction

1.1 Location and scope of work

- 1.1.1 In January 2014 Archaeology Wales carried out investigations at the purported site of the 1405 battle of Pwll Melyn, Usk (NGR SO 37622 01284 - Fig 1). Lidar analysis and a site walkover were undertaken.
- 1.1.2 The work was carried out at the request of Louise Barker of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (Henceforth – The Commission) and was funded by the Welsh Government. It formed part of a series of on-going battlefield surveys undertaken by Archaeology Wales Ltd on behalf of The Commission, the primary objective of which is to inform the consideration of each battlefield site for inclusion on a proposed Battlefields Register for Wales.

2 Objectives

2.1 Outline Requirements

- 2.1.1 The objective of the work is to gather evidence that will help verify and inform the location, extent and archaeological character of each battlefield. The fundamental criterion is that in order for a battlefield to be protected and for change to be managed, its location and extent must be confidently identified. In addition, the battlefield must meet at least one of the following three criteria:
 - 2.1.2 **Be associated with historical events or figures of national importance** (i.e military innovations, direct associations with nationally important figures or events and whether the engagement played a key role in a campaign); and/or
 - 2.1.3 **Have significant physical remains and/or archaeological potential** (i.e include natural or constructed physical features at the time of the engagement, evidence from the engagement or other related buried archaeological evidence); and/or
 - 2.1.4 **Have a clear landscape context that allows the events of the battle to be understood or interpreted** (i.e the initial area of deployment and fighting, wider landscape incorporating earthworks, skirmishes, camps, burial, line of advance and retreat, and detached elements such as memorials)

2.2 Aims & Proposals

- 2.2.1 The main aim of the work was to define those areas around Usk which were likely to have been associated with the 1405 battle.
- 2.2.2 Proposals to achieve the above aim included:
 - Analysing Lidar data to identify landscape features possibly associated with the battle.

- Assessing the local topography to determine possible battlefield areas by means of a site walkover.
 - Undertaking metal detector surveys, along with fieldwalking where possible, in the fields to the immediate north of Usk Castle and other areas of potential identified by the Lidar analysis and site walkover.
 - Excavating evaluation trenches and test pits in the area adjacent to the Pwll Melyn (Yellow Pool).
- 2.2.3 Unfortunately, a subsequent meeting with the landowner, Mr Humphreys, failed to reach agreement on the details of the metal detecting survey, so this aspect of the work had to be abandoned.

2.3 Geology and topography

- 2.3.1 The underlying solid geology of the Usk area is primarily made up of Lower Old Red Sandstone deposits, including Downtonian, of Devonian age (British Geological Survey, 2001).
- 2.3.2 The area of the purported battlefield site, to the north of Usk Castle, is located within an area of freely draining and slightly acid, loamy, soils.
- 2.3.3 The site is situated on a natural promontory spur, the flat top of which is located at approximately 50m above ordnance datum, 30m above the surrounding lowlands to the west, south and south-east. Usk Castle is located at the southern tip of this natural spur, overlooking the town of Usk and its associated river crossing.

2.4 Archaeological and Historical Background

- 2.4.1 A complete description of the Battle of Pwll Melyn is contained in the pilot study undertaken by Border Archaeology (2009). The main events, however, can be summarised as follows:
- 2.4.2 The battle of Usk represents one of two critical victories gained by the English over the forces of Owain Glyndwr in Monmouthshire during the first half of 1405, the preceding battle having been fought at Grosmont in March of that year. The years 1404-5 had witnessed a significant breakdown of royal authority in the southern Marches, with substantial Welsh raids being launched into southern Herefordshire. At this time, the English-held castle-boroughs at Abergavenny, Monmouth, Usk, Grosmont, Skenfrith and White Castle appear to have been largely isolated outposts located within hostile territory, the majority of the inhabitants within the surrounding lordships having apparently sided with Glyndwr's cause.
- 2.4.3 The most detailed account of the engagement is contained in the contemporary chronicle of Adam of Usk (c.1352-1430), a prominent Welsh cleric, canonist and native of Usk. Although Adam was not present at the battle, being resident in Rome at the time (until 1406), his account appears to be reasonably trustworthy (except for the dating of the battle to March 15th). Certain details can be corroborated from other independent

accounts and it contains invaluable references to local place names associated with the battle.

- 2.4.4 Adam's account is of particular importance as it describes the key details of the engagement; it is worth quoting at length: 'Gruffydd, the eldest son of Owen, attacked Usk castle with a great host on the feast of St Gregory – an evil hour for him; however the defences there had been considerably strengthened, and Lord Grey of Codnor, Sir John Greyndour and many more of the King's soldiers were there, and they made a sortie in force from the Castle and captured him and his men, driving them relentlessly across the River Usk, where many of them – most notably the abbot of Llantarnam – were killed either at the point of a sword or drowning in the river, through Monkswood, where Gruffydd himself was captured, and onto the mountains of Upper Went. Of those whom they took alive, three hundred were beheaded in front of the castle, near Ponfald, although some of the nobler ones, including Gruffydd, were sent as prisoners to the King'.
- 2.4.5 From Adam's account, it appears that the actual battle began with the English troops, led by Lord Grey and Sir John Greyndour, moving out in force to attack the Welsh who presumably had laid siege to the castle. This sortie appears to have been entirely successful, putting the Welsh to flight and driving them westwards across the River Usk towards Monkswood. Adam's account identifies two locations where considerable slaughter of the routed Welsh forces took place, at the river Usk (possibly in the vicinity of the Usk Bridge, first recorded in 1387), and at Monkswood, some 2km north-west of Usk, where the principal Welsh commander Gruffydd ap Owain was captured.
- 2.4.6 Significantly, Adam also refers to the beheading of 300 captured prisoners 'in front of the castle, near Ponfald. The 'Ponfald' referred to by Adam of Usk was erroneously interpreted by Bradney as 'pont ffald' denoting a 'bridge of the enclosure or more generally a sheepfold'. It is much more likely that Adam's reference to 'Ponfald' simply means a pinfold or pound and that it was located somewhere in front of the castle, although its precise location remains uncertain.
- 2.4.7 The account in the *Annales* describes how 'in another battle at Usk between the Welsha and the English, the household knights of the Lord Prince (familiares Domini Principis), the son of Owain Glyndwr was taken prisoner with many others captured with him or killed, up to 1500 on the part of the rebels'. This account of the battle at Usk is repeated almost verbatim in the *Chronica Regum Anglie* compiled by Thomas Otterbourne, rector of Chingford (Essex), in about 1420, except that the date of the battle is given as March 15th.
- 2.4.8 'The Annals of Owain Glyndwr', a native Welsh chronicle of the revolt that appears to have been originally compiled in the first half of the 15th century, contains a terse but nevertheless important entry relating to the battle, describing 'a great slaughter on Pwll Melyn mountain, near Usk (ar vynydd y pwell melyn wrth frynn buga) where Gruffydd ap Owain was taken prisoner'. The reference to 'Pwll Melyn mountain' near Usk is of considerable importance as it locates the site of the battlefield on the higher ground to the north-east of the Castle. The name itself is derived from a pond located to the north-

east of the Castle, which was scoured in the early 1850s for use as a reservoir associated with the adjacent line of the Coleford, Monmouth, Usk and Pontypool Railway (opened in 1856).

- 2.4.9 The site of the battle can be securely located on the basis of documentary and archaeological evidence as lying on the higher ground to the north and north-east of Usk Castle. The ground appears to have been called Mynydd Pwll Melyn (hill of the yellow pool). Investigations by the eminent historian J.E. Lloyd established that the name 'Pwll Melyn' related to a roughly circular pond feature located within what was formerly a large pasture field approximately 270m north-east of the castle. Lloyd, who derived his information from two local antiquaries, Sir Joseph Bradney and Isca Bowen, quotes a letter from Bowen dated April 1st, 1932 which states that 'he is informed by Mr Tom Rees, of Fernleigh, that it is the pond lying to the north-east of Usk Castle' and that 'according to Mr Rees's father, who was alive upwards of a hundred years ago, numerous skeletons were found in this pond when it was cleaned out'.

3 Methodology

3.1 Lidar Analysis

- 3.1.1 Lidar data, at a resolution of 2m, was purchased for analysis from Geomatics Ltd. Both digital shadow and terrain models were analysed for features likely to relate to the battle.

3.2 Site Walkover

- 3.2.1 A site walkover, encompassing all of the purported battle site, its surroundings, Pwll Melyn (Yellow Pool) and the grounds of Usk Castle (Fig 2), was undertaken on 29th January 2014. The author was accompanied by the landowner, Mr Humphreys.
- 3.2.2 All areas were photographed using high resolution (14MP) digital photography.

3.3 Metal Detector Survey

- 3.3.1 No surveys were carried out, as landowner permission was not received

3.4 Trench and Test Pit Excavation

- 3.4.1 It was initially proposed that small scale evaluation trenching and test pitting was to be undertaken, on the site of the Yellow Pool, in order to locate any remnants of the skeletons said to have been found there in the past.
- 3.4.2 After visiting the site of the Yellow Pool it was decided that trenching in the area was not viable. This was due to several factors, namely: very high groundwater levels (after record rainfall), access issues, the presence of Great Crested Newt within the pool (English Nature, 2001), the proximity of adjacent services connecting to a housing

estate, and constraints relating to the excavation of areas adjacent to the watercourse (see PPG5 – Pollution Prevention Guidelines).

3.4.3 All works were undertaken in accordance with current Health and Safety legislation.

4 Lidar Analysis Results

4.1 Digital Terrain Model

4.1.1 The Lidar data, at 2m resolution, shows the assessment area in good detail (Fig 3).

4.1.2 Two east-west ridges are apparent running across the field to the immediate north of the castle. These may represent removed field boundaries.

4.1.3 The small pond, what remains of the Yellow Pool, is also visible on the Lidar data.

4.1.4 No archaeological features potentially related to the battle were identified.

5 Site Walkover Results

5.1 Conditions

5.1.1 The site walkover was undertaken on an overcast and grey day after a period of extremely wet weather. Ground conditions were wet underfoot.

5.2 Walkover (Plates 1-2)

5.2.1 The flat ridge to the north of Usk Castle extends beyond Castle Farm, further to the north, and represents the original medieval approach into Usk, avoiding the wet valley bottoms to the east and west (Humphreys, Pers comm).

5.2.2 The assessment area covered by the site walkover is composed entirely of unploughed pasture.

5.3 Pwll Melyn (Plate 3)

5.3.1 Pwll Melyn, the Yellow Pool, is located within a housing estate to the north-east of Usk Castle and is now managed by Pwll Melyn Conservation Group, Monmouthshire County Council and Usk Civic Society.

5.3.2 It appears as a shallow, roughly oval (10x8m), pond with no public access.

5.3.3 No landscape features evidently associated with the battle, other than Usk Castle itself, were located by the site walkover.

6 Discussion and Interpretation

6.1 Reliability of field investigation

- 6.1.1 The field investigation was hampered by the land owner's refusal to allow metal detector surveys across the likely battle site, i.e. the fields located immediately to the north and north-east of Usk Castle.
- 6.1.2 Although trenching was not undertaken in the area of the Yellow Pool, it should be noted that this area has undergone a great deal of disturbance in the recent past, with the draining and excavation of the area during the construction of the nineteenth century railway, and the more recent construction of the adjacent housing estate. It is worth noting that no human remains are reported to have been discovered during the building of the housing estate.

6.2 Overall interpretation & Evidence for the Battle

- 6.2.1 The natural, flat topped, spur to the north of Usk Castle, which forms part of the original medieval approach to Usk, is, in topographic terms, the most likely area for the battle of Pwll Melyn to have taken place.
- 6.2.2 An assault on the castle from any other approach would have meant fighting uphill and through the town of Usk itself. Furthermore, the flat top of the ridge is up to 10m higher than the castle, which would be an advantage for any attacking force (Figs 4-5).

6.3 Conclusions

- 6.3.1 Based on the evidence of the 2009 report (Border Archaeology) and the topography of the area as noted during the recent site walkover, it is very likely that the location of the battle of Usk was primarily on the land formed by the flat ridge located to the immediate north and north-east of Usk Castle.
- 6.3.2 The extent of the battle area is, however, likely to extend beyond this ridge, primarily because the initial fighting turned into a retreat.
- 6.3.3 Further definition of the extent of the battlefield is unlikely to be possible without locating and plotting the distribution of battlefield debris through metal detector surveys.

6.4 Recommendations for further investigations

- 6.4.1 Owing to the landowner's refusal to give permission for metal detecting across the area, no further work can be recommended at this stage.

7 Acknowledgements

- 7.1.1 Thanks are due to the landowner, Mr Humphreys, for allowing us onto his land, and to Louise Barker of the Commission for her help in organising the project.

8 Bibliography and references

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APPENDIX I:

Figures

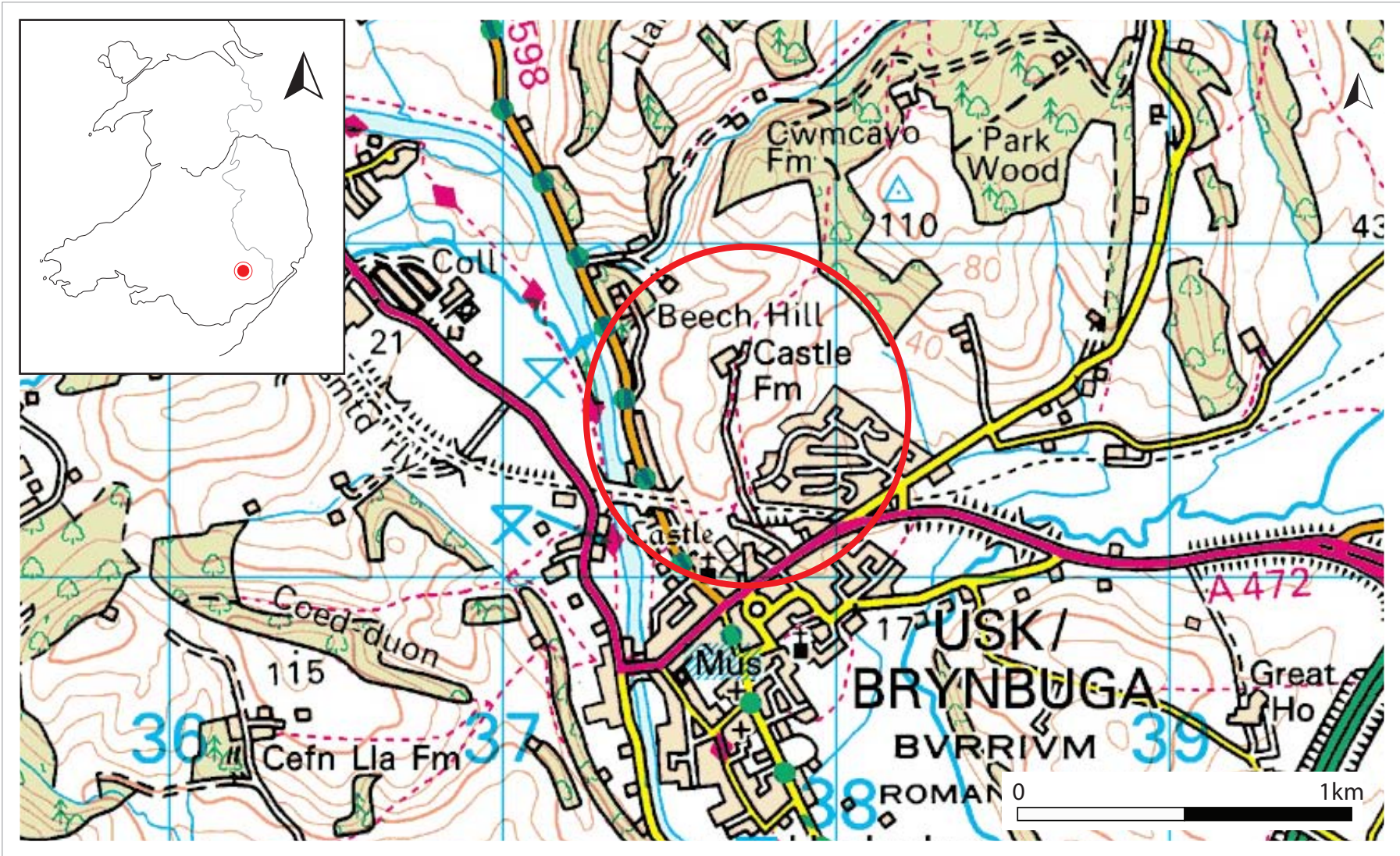


Fig 1: Map showing general location of assessment area



Fig 2: Plan showing location of assessment area and Yellow Pool in relation to Usk Castle

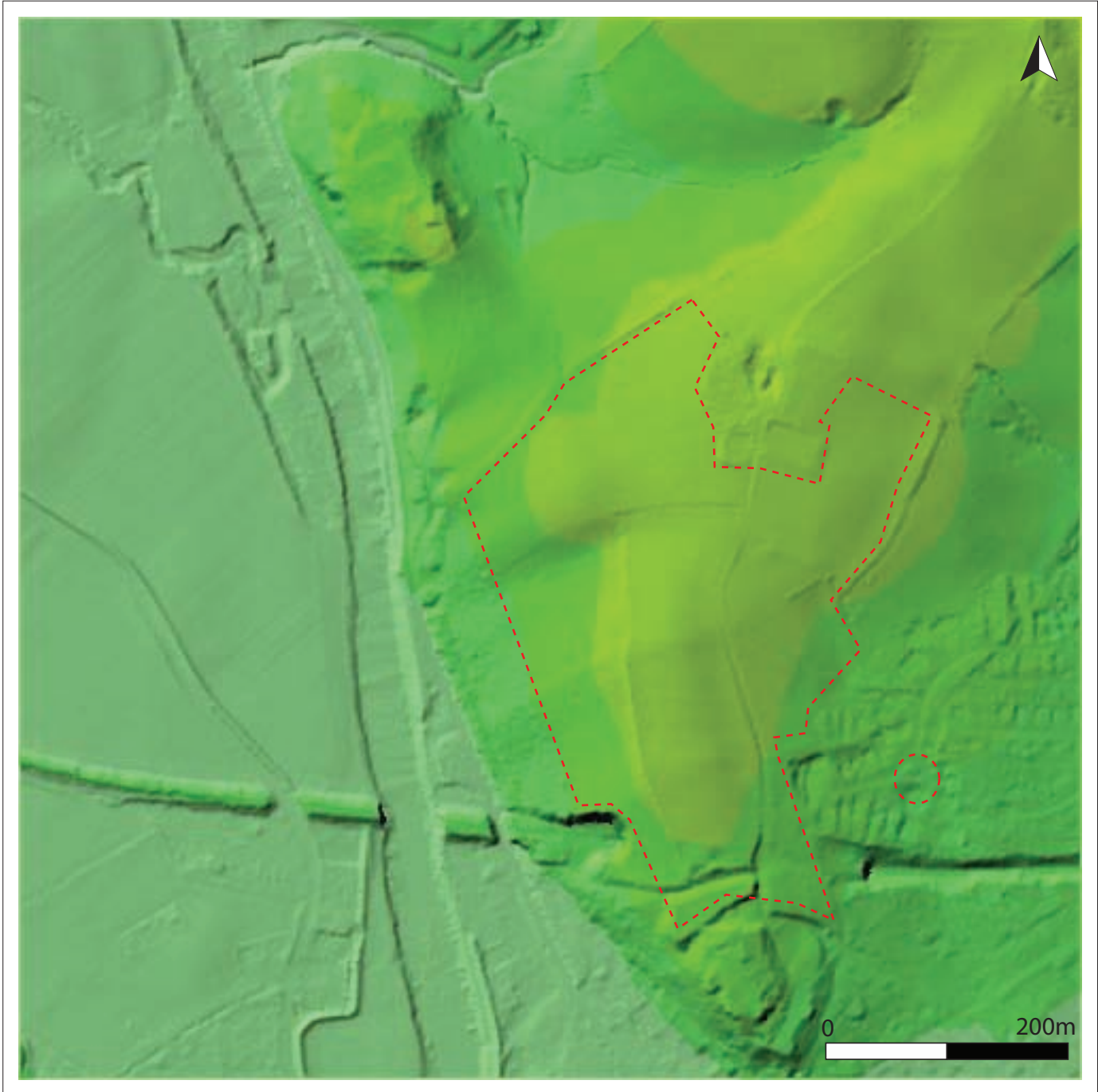


Fig 3: Lidar data digital terrain model showing assessment area and Yellow Pool

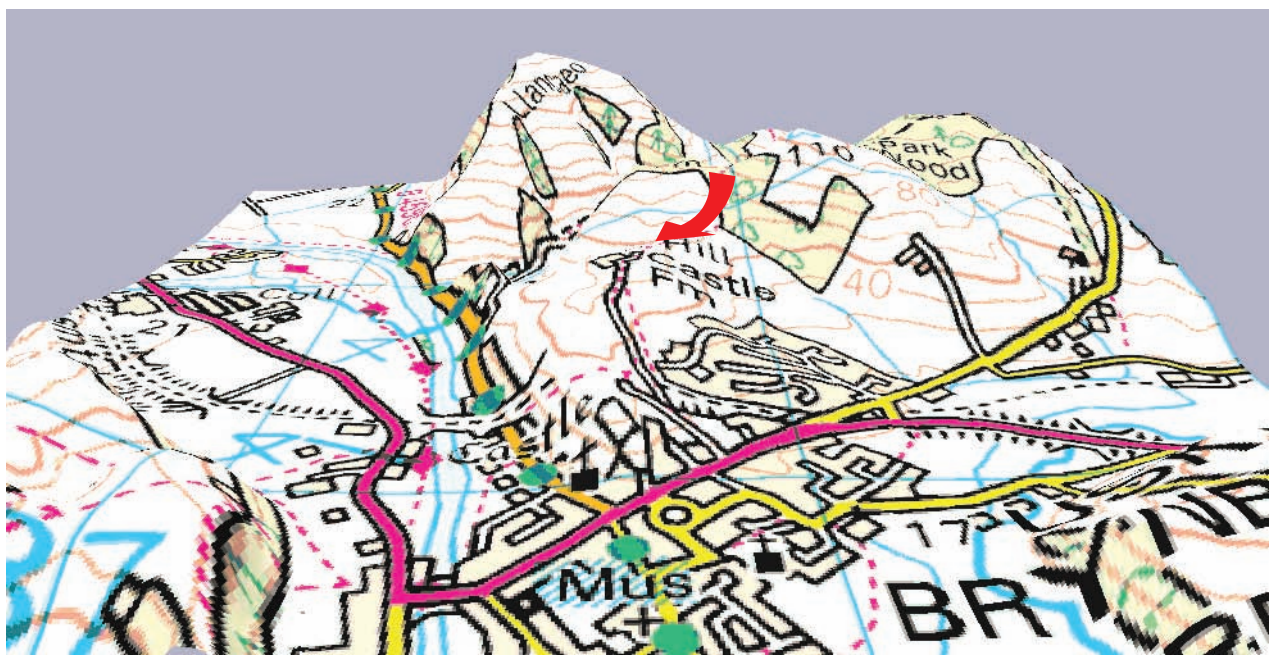


Fig 4: 3D Topographic projection showing flat ridge running north of Usk Castle, the likely main battle area. Red arrow defines likely Welsh approach. Looking north

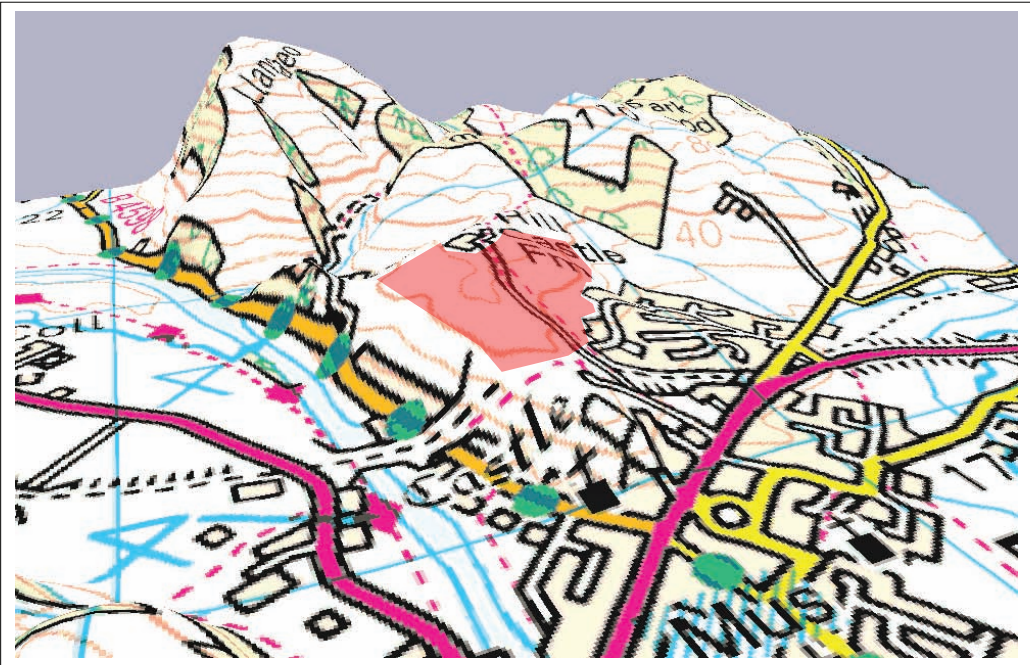


Fig 5: 3D Topographic projection, looking north east, showing extent of assessment area representing likely area of main battle

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APPENDIX II: Plates



Plate 1: View north along flat ridge top to north of Usk Castle, the likely main battle area



Plate 2: View south along flat ridge top towards Usk Castle. Note ridge is higher than castle.



Plate 3: View south east across the Yellow Pool, Pwll Melyn, within housing estate to north east of Usk Castle

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APPENDIX III: Archive Cover Sheet

ARCHIVE COVER SHEET

Pwll Melyn Battlefield, Usk, Monmouthshire

Site Name:	Usk
Site Code:	WBS3/14/SUR
PRN:	-
NPRN:	402320
SAM:	-
Other Ref No:	-
NGR:	SO 37622 01284
Site Type:	Battlefield
Project Type:	Survey
Project Manager:	Chris E Smith
Project Dates:	Jan-March 2014
Categories Present:	NA
Location of Original Archive:	AW
Location of duplicate Archives:	-
Number of Finds Boxes:	-
Location of Finds:	-
Museum Reference:	-
Copyright:	AW
Restrictions to access:	None

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