

Dig turns up 18th-century finds – but no nunnery yet

by Mike Lewis
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A TEAM of archaeologists are desperately trying to locate the remains of an 18th-century nunnery at Talsarn. But, members of the Dyfed Archaeological Trust admitted this week that, despite unearthing an 18th-century cobbled courtyard and driveway at Llanllŷr, the Cistercian nunnery – a daughter house of Strata Florida – remained frustratingly elusive.

"It's like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack," project officer Fran Murphy told the *Cambrian News*.

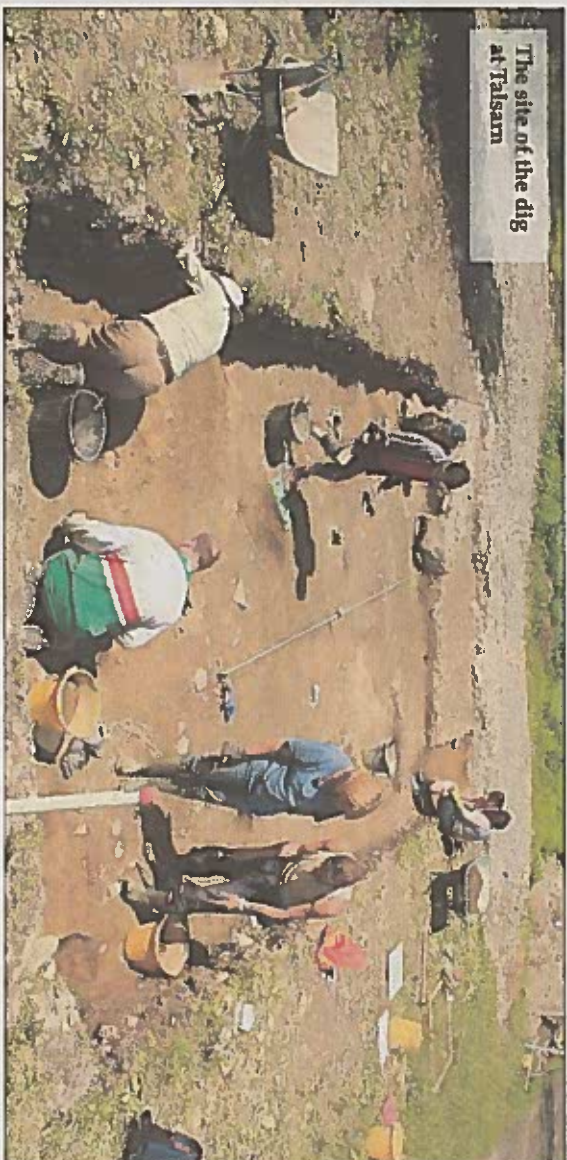
"But we're finding some clues and it's a question of stringing them all together and hoping we eventually find a solution to this puzzle."

She was speaking ahead of last Saturday's open day, the Trust held at the site of the Cadw-funded Llanllŷr excavation as part of the UK-wide Festival of Archaeology.

The team know from ancient documentation that the nunnery was founded by Rhys ap Gruffydd, in 1180, and existed for more than 350 years before being dissolved in 1535.

"Nunneries are very rare in Wales. Llanllŷr would have been one of only two or three in the country," said Fran, turning a hopeful gaze across the site where a dozen volunteers were painstakingly scraping away soil and vegetation to determine what lay beneath.

The site of the dig at Talsarn



"We're hoping to locate its position. The trouble is, we don't know what it looked like, how big it was or what it was actually made of."

"Although the main structure may have been wood, it's reasonable to assume its church would have been built of stone – but where is it?"

Yet this is no wild goose chase. Ecclesiastical monastic records show that the Llanllŷr site came into the ownership of the Lloyd family in the 17th century. The cobbled area and walls the team have discovered are thought to be the original driveway and courtyard and garden of

the original mansion, which was replaced by the existing house in 1825. The burning question is whether they were built over the remains of the old nunnery.

"We wondered whether it could have been a reuse of the nunnery," revealed Fran. "Reuse of older structures was quite common back in those days."

"There are other tantalising hints that something far older remains waiting to be discovered."

"We've found evidence of sluices and a possible river site on either side of the existing house," she said, "and

we do know monastic settlements traditionally founded quite sophisticated water management systems. We've also come across a number of features pre-dating the cobbled yard of 1768; a series of ditches, post holes and a lot of mortar."

"We're just hoping to stumble across a bit of info which will hopefully enable us to add everything up so it all makes sense. It's certainly proving an interesting dig."

"Unearthing the remains of an 18th-century house and its grounds is pretty rare in itself – but it's not the nunnery."