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A MEDIEVAL RELICT FIELD SYSTEM ON MARROS MOUNTAIN, DYFED

by

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SUMMARY

In 1985 land clearance and ploughing both exposed and destroyed traces of a strip field system on the western slopes of the Greenbridge Valley, Marros. Rapid survey and subsequent fieldwork showed that this was part of extensive field systems of medieval origin. These 'open field' arable systems seem to have gone out of use by the time that the land was re-organised in the 16-17th centuries. A possible deserted settlement was associated with the field system.

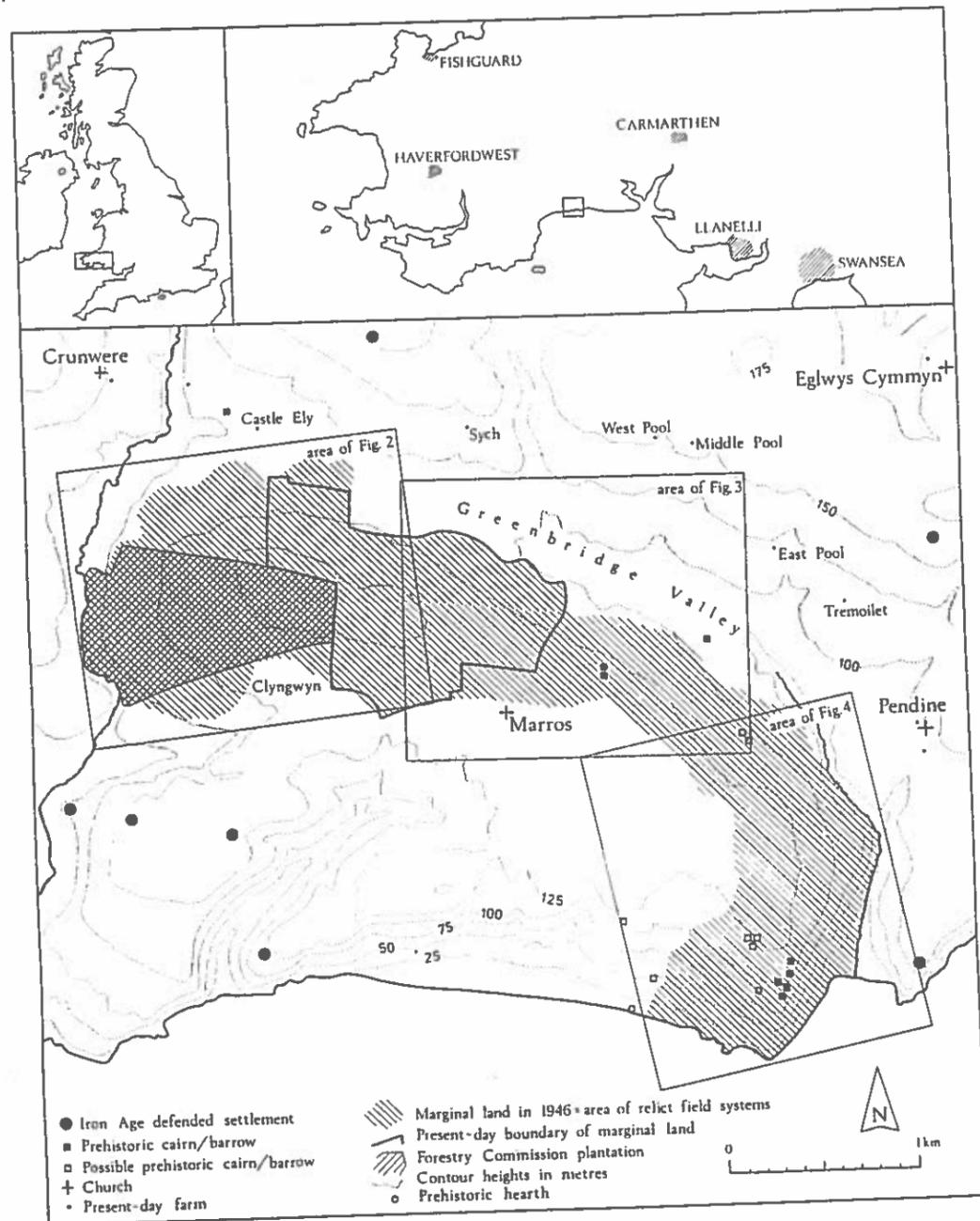
INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 20th century almost half of the 2632 acres (1065 ha) of the former parish of Marros were unenclosed and given over to rough pasture (O.S. 1907-8). This figure did not substantially alter until after the Second World War. Since then a Forestry Commission plantation, piecemeal enclosure and more recently large scale land improvement schemes have reduced the amount of marginal land to 467 acres (189 ha). It was on the marginal and former marginal land that the extensive relict field system and associated settlement were recognised and surveyed.

The former marginal land lay on north and east facing slopes of the Greenbridge valley and on the rounded hill (Marros Mountain) to the north of Marros Church (Fig. 1). Geologically the majority of the parish is underlain by millstone grits and

shales, but the Greenbridge valley follows a band of Carboniferous limestone (Geological Survey 1967 and 1976), into which numerous quarries have been dug. At the limestone/millstone grit interface the land-surface is pock-marked by hundreds of solution hollows. These are rounded depressions up to 15m diameter and 12m deep, but generally smaller.

In 1985 a large block of marginal land (roughly corresponding to the area of the relict field system on Fig. 4) was undergoing land improvement. This area was surveyed during that reclamation scheme. Later, the extant marginal land to the north of Marros Church was included in the survey. The survey was carried out by staff of the Dyfed Archaeological Trust, using conventional land survey techniques, and two members of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments (Wales) who used their electronic distance measuring theodolite. Archaeological remains destroyed by the Forestry Commission plantation and by piecemeal improvement of the marginal land since World War Two were plotted from vertical aerial photographs (RAF 1946). Clearance cairns and other details were not always visible on the vertical aerial photographs, and so in areas where no ground survey was undertaken there is an apparent absence of discrete archaeological features on the figures; this is particularly the case on Fig. 2. Further details not visible on the ground were added to the survey maps from a series of specially commissioned oblique aerial photographs (deposited with the Dyfed Archaeological Trust).



1 Location Map of the Area.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Trust would like to thank Mr P Aubrey, and other land-owners in the area for allowing access onto their land. I am also indebted to Mr D. Leighton and Mr D. Percival (RCAHM) whose help considerably speeded up the survey process, and to Mr N Chisholm (Department of Geography, University College of Wales, Aberystwyth) for his advice on plotting the aerial photographs.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Several types of archaeological feature were recognised in the survey. These are classified below. Where only one example of a type exists it has been described in the main body of the text and not included in the list.

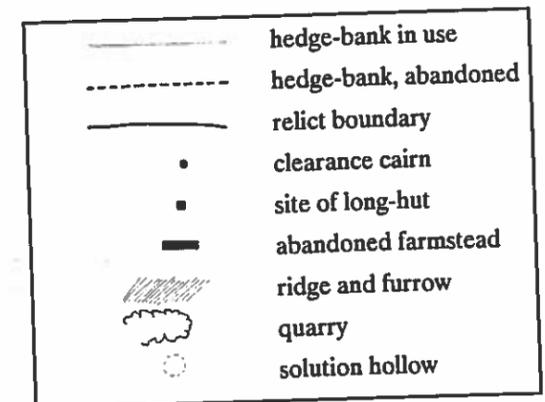
- i) Hedge-bank. Consisting of a stone and soil constructed bank up to 1.2m high and 1m wide usually accompanied by a (silted-up) ditch. A distinction is made on the Figs. between extant and redundant boundaries.
- ii) Relict boundary. A low bank, often less than 0.30m high, constructed from boulders and stones, or earth where stone was not readily available.
- iii) Clearance cairn. On average 6m diameter and 1m high, but could be up to 20m diameter and 1.5m high, or just a heap of a dozen or so stones. Lines of cairns parallel to relict banks seemed to the beginnings of new boundaries. Other cairns were integral parts of relict banks.
- iv) Long-hut. Manifest either as foundations or terraces and platforms, on average 8m by 4m.
- v) Abandoned farmstead. Long-house situated in a complex of disused paddocks and fields.
- vi) Ridge and furrow.

The Area of Figure 2

This area contained the most complete and coherent system of relict boundaries on Marros

Mountain; unfortunately as most of them now lie beneath the Forestry Commission plantation the archaeological features had to be plotted from aerial photographs, thus details such as clearance cairns do not appear on the diagram.

To the west and east of Merriman's Gate the relict field boundaries formed a strip field system, with a strip length of some 300m and a width of 10-20m. A similar (extant) system was surveyed to the south-west of Merriman's Gate, at B (the letters A, B, C, etc., are arbitrarily assigned, to assist the reader in relating the text to the figures). Here the boundaries were constructed from earth rather than the usual rubble, and narrow ridge and furrow was evident within some of the strips. The absence of clearance cairns at B was real, and not the result of imperfect surveying techniques. The general zone of strip fields around Merriman's Gate was well defined on its northern and eastern sides, with very little overspill onto the surrounding moorland. This boundary was respected by the Forestry Commission plantation and was coterminous with the historical northern and eastern bounds of Clyngwyn Farm (NLW, Marros tithe map). The common divisor between the group of strips at A and the group of strips at B was a modern hedge-bank, which, it is assumed, overlay an ancient boundary. Similarly, the hedge-bank that emanates from the paddock around



Key to Figures 2-5.



2 The North-west area of study.

Clyngwyn is considered to be on the line of a relict boundary as it defines the southern limit of the parcel of strips at B.

It is perhaps instructive to assess the land area of the better preserved strips in zones A and B. The following measurements are approximate only, as several assumptions regarding the nature of the strips are implicit within the assessment. The biggest assumption being that these discontinuous strips originally ran from the boundary that defines the parcel of strips to the north to the

hedge-bank defining the strips to the south. In zone A the average area of the five most complete strips was 11,319 square yards; in zone B the five most intact strips averaged out to 8,087 square yards; a total average of 9,698 square yards, 2.0 acres or 0.95 customary acres (the method of computing the customary acre is given in the 1595 survey in possession of Laugharne Corporation). A strip, therefore, may be equal to a 'land'; traditionally the area that one team could plough in a day, equal to one acre (Orwen and Orwen 1967, 35). In

the terminology of open field systems a group of strips or lands would then be called a furlong. Ideally, the length of a furlong/land would have been 240 yards, but in practice they often exceeded this; indeed at Whitehill, Laugharne, some strips in the extant open field system are almost 600 yards long (Davies 1955, 175). Ground immediately to the north and east of the furlong in which Merriman's Gate was situated does not appear to have been used for arable farming and was probably pasture, common or woodland when the strip field system was in use.

Further, but more fragmentary relict field boundaries forming a strip field system lay in the valley bottom north of Merriman's Gate, at C, and further north traces of relict boundaries are visible on aerial photographs as parch marks in improved pasture, indicating the strip field system was once very extensive and not just confined to the poorer quality land. As mentioned earlier, on the north facing valley side between Merriman's Gate and zone C, and on the highest point of Marros Mountain at D no evidence for a relict field system was discovered.

The deserted long-house farmstead of Merriman's Gate is now situated in a small clearing in dense conifer woodland. The house was occupied in the mid-19th century (NLW, Marros tithe map), but had been abandoned by 1907-08 (O.S. 1907-8). It is clear from the figure that the rectangular field system associated with this settlement had been carved out of the earlier strip fields, as the majority of the north-south aligned abandoned hedge-banks overlay relict boundaries, and within the later fields traces of the relict system are clearly visible on aerial photographs. Indeed, it is evident that the relict boundaries had been integrated into the new agricultural regime where they were employed as dividers between bands of narrow ridge and furrow.

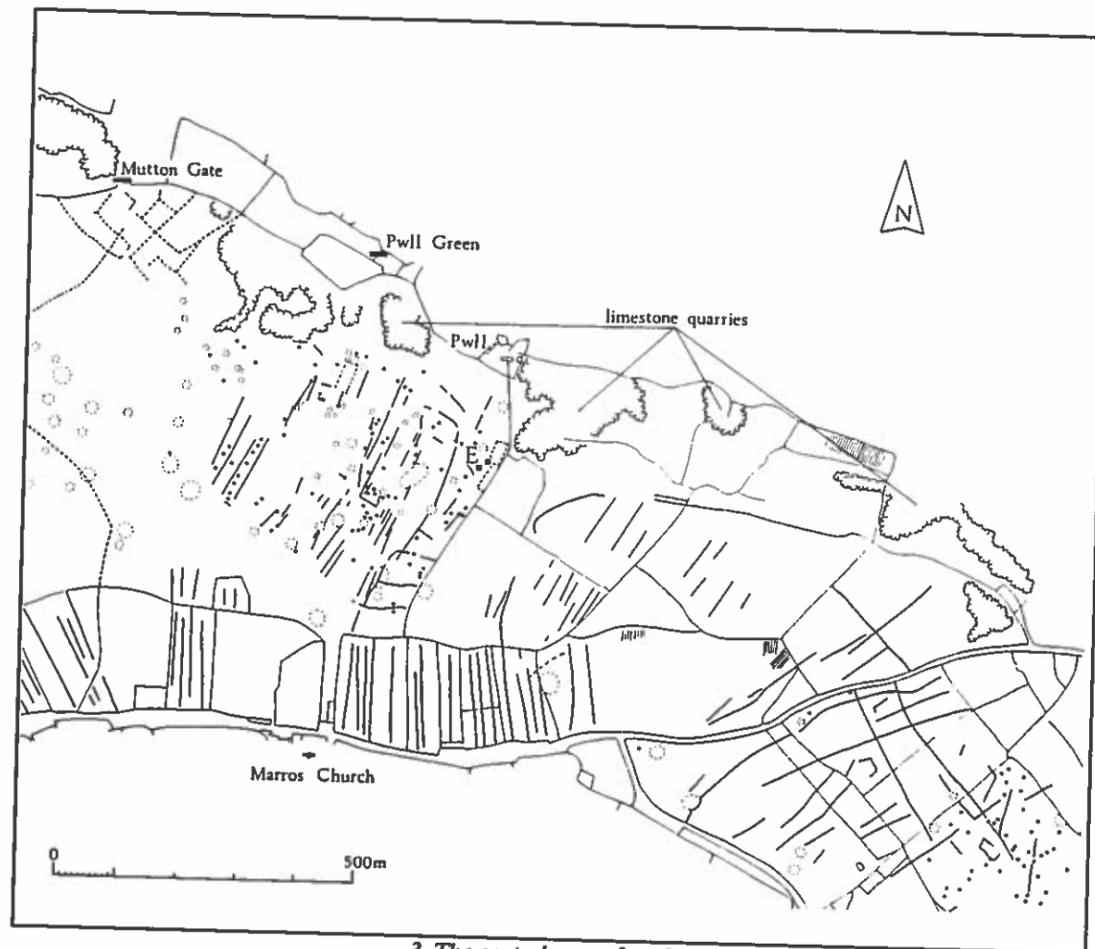
The Area of Figure 3

To the north of Marros Church is the only large

extant tract of marginal land in south-west Carmarthenshire. The relict field boundaries were here very insubstantial, and it is probable that a coherent system of lands and furlongs never existed, unlike the area around Merriman's Gate. Nevertheless many individual strips were identified; interspersed with which were numerous clearance cairns, some of which existed in isolation, but many lay on or in relict boundaries. Other cairns were aligned in rows, forming incipient boundaries. Towards the west of this area clearance cairns and relict boundaries became less numerous, eventually disappearing completely: coupled with this was a general increase in the amount of surface rubble and scree; this suggests that this zone had never undergone an intensive agricultural regime. The boundary between the strip field system (arable land) and areas of little or no detectable agricultural activity (pasture, common or woodland?) was generally not well defined, except to the north and east of Merriman's Gate (see above), suggesting that prior to abandonment new areas of arable were still being brought into cultivation or that land on the fringes of the regularly ploughed ground was only infrequently tilled.

Immediately to the north-east of Marros Church the method by which the modern fields were carved out of strip fields can be detected - several strips were amalgamated into a block which was then surrounded by a substantial hedgebank. On the aerial photographs taken in the 1940s relict boundaries were still clearly visible within these engrossed fields, however, modern farming practice has now obliterated them. Elsewhere in the area covered by Fig. 3 the relict boundaries have been fragmented, and nothing of interest can be said about them.

The deserted farmsteads of Mutton Gate and Pwll Green, together with the still inhabited house of Pwll denote a period of encroachment on to the marginal land of Marros Mountain, followed by a period of retreat. Indeed, the term gate used here and in Merriman's Gate indicates a point of ac-



3 The central area of study.

cess from cultivated enclosed land onto open heath. Mutton Gate, a farmstead occupied into this century elegantly attests the inexorable progress of nature; its once extensive field system is now barely detectable in the dense bracken and gorse cover of the Mountain.

At E on Fig. 3 the sites of two long huts were discovered, and midway between them and marros church were situated three small rectangular fields with low rubble boundaries. despite an over-

lap between these three fields and the strip field system no relative chronology could be ascertained.

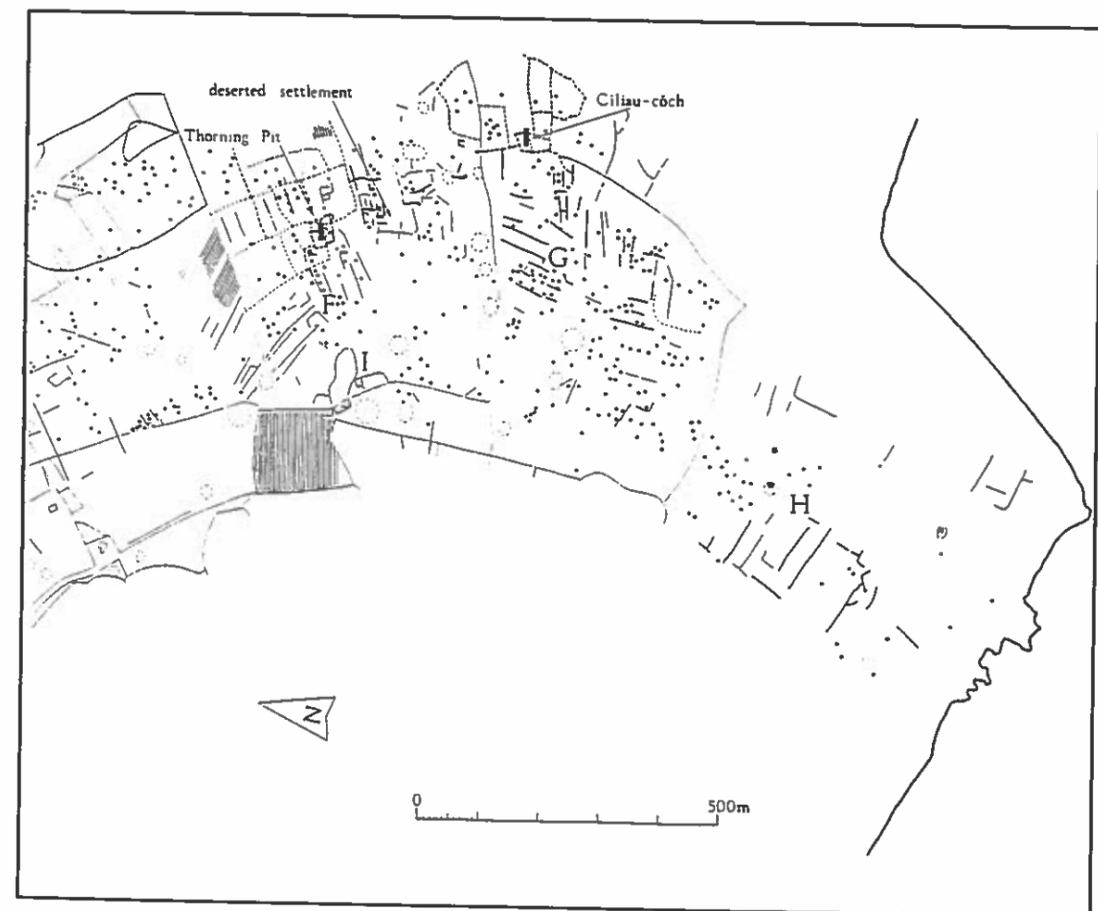
Area of Figure 4

The area of marginal land indicated on Fig.4 has been subjected to land improvement, and none of the archaeological features now survive. Indeed, clearance work was being undertaken

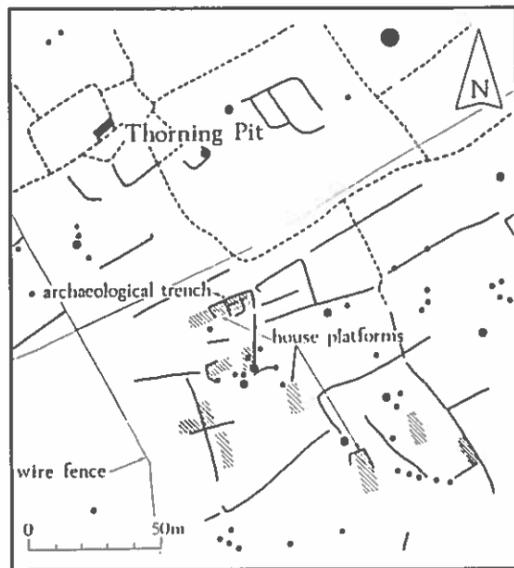
whilst the survey was being conducted, and this accounts for the many gaps in the archaeological record. Relict boundaries were particularly vulnerable to primary clearance, and their absence in any one area of Fig. 4 should not be taken as an indication that they never existed. This is especially so where clearance cairns are shown, as it was demonstrated in the area of Fig. 3 that clearance cairns and relict boundaries occurred in combination.

On level ground the fragmented strip fields were generally aligned north-south; on hillsides

strips were arranged with their long axis down the slope. At points F and G the junction of the north-south and east-west (downslope) aligned strips can be seen, probably the boundary between two or more furlongs. Anomalous to the above was the system on the coastal slope (H) where the boundaries ran across the line of dip. These divisors were also of a different morphology than the norm, consisting of very large boulders with very little rubble infill. Only very slight lynchets had formed along these boundaries. It is not certain how the three long-huts in this area related to this



4 The eastern area of study.



5 The deserted settlement.

field system.

Apparently associated with the strip field system was a deserted settlement or village (Fig. 5). This was manifest as a number of terraces and platforms linked by low rubble boundaries, and was situated on a gently sloping east facing valley side. There were a maximum of ten terraces - possible sites of buildings, although some of the less pronounced ones may have been caused by natural processes. Across the most obvious building platform (14m by 5m) a narrow trench was excavated. No obvious structural evidence was recovered, but the 'floor' of the platform was made up of a dense rubble spread over which, in the topsoil, four silver coins with a date range of 1568-1582 were discovered.

Rectangular fields associated with the abandoned farmsteads of Ciliau-côch and Thorning Pit lay to the north-west and south-east of the deserted settlement. These fields had been carved out of the earlier strip system; a process most in

evidence at Thorning Pit where at the time of the survey relict boundaries were extant within the later rectangular fields. As with Merriman's Gate the two farmsteads of Ciliau-côch and Thorning Pit were deserted by the early 20th century (O.S. 1907-8), although they had been in use in the middle of the previous century (NLW, Marros tithe map). It seems likely that the limestone quarries and lime kilns, the remains of which can be traced up the Greenbridge Valley, were being worked in the 19th century (and probably in the 18th century and earlier) by the occupants of Ciliau-côch, Thorning Pit, Merriman's Gate, Mutton Gate, etc. on a seasonal basis during slack periods in the farming year, so supplementing what must have been a small income from farming their smallholdings.

Low, sinuous rubble banks at I (Fig. 4) contrast with the rectilinear nature of the relict field system across the rest of the mountain. It was considered that this may have been a prehistoric settlement, and so a trench was excavated across the focus of the sinuous banks - nothing of interest was found.

HISTORY

The surviving documentary records for the Marros area, in the Lordship of Laugharne, are quite plentiful, but often separated by long periods of time and of little use in helping to disentangle the landscape history of the region. In 1307 an *Inquisition post-mortem* of Guy de Brian (NLW 10118E Vol. 1) lists 26 tenants holding 15 carucates of land in Marros 'at the will of the lord', yearly rendering 10 pounds, and 28 tenants on 6 carucates at Castle Ely on the same tenure as above. Settlements with arable land attached to them were also noted at Pendine, Tremoilet, Pwllcogan (Pool) and other places in the Lordship, and mills were mentioned at Marros, Clyngwyn and Castle Ely. From the conditions of service and tenure, and the descriptions of the agricultural holdings contained in the *Inquisition* it is clear that a developed arable econ-

omy was operating under feudal conditions in the late 13th - early 14th century. In common with other regions of the country the Lordship of Laugharne suffered an agricultural collapse in the 14th century due to population decline caused by the Black Death (Rees 1924, 241-280). Thus, at Castle Ely in 1437 many of the tenements were in the King's hands for want of hirers (Thomas 1969, 198); by 1580 8 tenants held 11 tenements (Thomas 1969, 198) and this had declined to 5 tenants on 6 tenements by 1595 (Laugharne Corporation).

A comprehensive survey of the Lordship of Laugharne (Laugharne Corporation) was made in 1595, after the death of Sir John Perrot. At Marros 14 tenements were recorded, plus 635 acres of common (or mountain as it is termed in the document), and 90 acres of timber on East Hill (the area of Ciliau-côch and Thorning Pit). Clyngwyn was assessed separately, here there were 80 acres of arable and 338 acres of heath, furze and wood, on which 600 sheep and 20 cows were kept (Barnwell 1866, 357). In addition two tenants at Sych shared 42 acres of heath. Clearly the area of marginal land in 1595 (1105 acres) approached that of 1907-8 (c1300 acres), hence the field system on Marros Mountain was redundant by the late 16th century.

From the descriptions of individual tenements and farms in the 1595 survey (e.g. 'Philip Rawlin, tenant at will, holdeth one tenement containing by estimation twelve acres of arable land, whereof is five closes of one acre a piece saving one which is of two acres') it is evident that Marros landscape, in common with much in south-west Wales, was then undergoing a dramatic transformation; from one where communal open or sub-divided field

systems predominated to one where the rise in personal ownership was creating numerous, small, enclosed fields.

CONCLUSIONS

It is generally accepted that open field systems, the remains of which can be found along the South Wales coast from Glamorgan to Pembrokeshire, were introduced to Wales by the Normans (Davies 1973). Morphologically, the Marros system exhibits enough similarities to published examples of open fields to consider it also to be of Norman date. Indeed, at Laugharne only 8km to the east of Marros open field cultivation is still practised (Davies 1955). Here the arable strips are separated by balks (called landscars - a name preserved as lashed in several of the field names of Marros) of a form remarkably similar to the relict boundaries on Marros Mountain. Thus, it is considered that the Marros open field system was in use by the early 14th century when the *Inquisition post-mortem* of Guy de Brian was undertaken, after which a declining population caused a contraction of arable farming from the poor quality land of Marros Mountain, leaving it to revert to rough pasture and heath.

There is no trace in the documentary record of the deserted settlement, although its fate was probably inexorably entwined with the strip field system. Similarly, history is equally silent over the farmsteads of Merriman's Gate, Ciliau-côch *et al*, although as no tithes were due on these properties in the mid-19th century (NLW Marros tithe map) it is considered they were squatter settlements that arose sometime in 18th or 19th centuries.

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