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Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

Assessment excavations at Pen Y Bryn, Aber, Gwynedd

An interim statement

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Assessment excavations at Pen Y Bryn, Aber: an interim statement.

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust were commissioned by Cadw to carry out an assessment excavation at Pen Y Bryn, Aber, over a three week period during December 1992.

The excavation was designed to assess the potential for recovering evidence to confirm activity on the site during the middle ages and more particularly to assess the potential for recovering evidence, either structural or chronological, which might relate to the former presence on this site of the royal court (*llys*) of the princes during the 13th and earlier centuries.

The excavation was occasioned by the claims of the present owners, Mr. & Mrs. Gibson, that Pen Y Bryn is indeed the site of the *llys*, supported by the suggestion that the earliest phase of the tower of the present house and a barn to the north east of the house may be earlier than the late 16th century when the Thomas family are known to have settled at Aber.

It is well attested in documentary sources of the 13th century and later that the *llys* of the commote of Arllechwedd Uchaf was at Aber. The site of this *llys*, if it were known, would undoubtedly be worthy of consideration as a site of national importance. The current financial difficulties of the present owners are likely to occasion a change of ownership at Pen Y Bryn and with it the possibility of inappropriate redevelopment. Were Pen Y Bryn the *llys*, the obtaining of evidence to confirm this would allow some measure of protection to be afforded through the scheduling process.

The historical evidence

The *llys* of Arllechwedd Uchaf is well attested in 13th and 14th century extents and other documents as being at Aber. Fourteenth century ministers accounts record the shipping of stone to repair the hall. The demesne lands of the Prince here, as at other *maerdrefi* in other commotes, would have been extensive. With the defeat of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd in 1282 the role of the *llysoedd*, as royal residences of a peripatetic dynasty, already outmoded and in decline as a system of government, ceased to fulfil any function at all. The Welsh royal lands passed to the English crown and for a while the court buildings were maintained but not for long. From Aberffraw timbers were moved from the *llys* to Caernarfon in 1322 and the hall at Ystumgwern was relocated at Harlech for example. By the sixteenth century crown lands were being disposed of and passed into private ownership. The Thomas family acquired the 'manors' of Aber and Cemais and at Aber they built a house at Pen Y Bryn, probably in the late sixteenth century. Manorial courts henceforth were held at Pen Y Bryn. It is not in doubt that the lands of Pen Y Bryn occupy a part of the former demesne lands; it becomes a point of unresolved debate, however, whether the present house as the later manorial focus replaces, on the same site, the former medieval *llys*.

The evidence of the antiquarian tradition

Local and antiquarian tradition must be used with extreme caution but can sometimes provide valuable locational clues. The following are the main antiquarian references to the *llys* at Aber.

Lelands Itinerary (1530)

'The Moode, in the parochie of Aber otherwise Llan Boduan, wher Tussog Lluelin uab Gerwerde Trundon had a castel or palace on a hille by the Chirch, wherof yet parte stondith'.

The Moode is *Y Mōd*, the Norman earthen motte which still stands centrally in the village on the west bank of the river. The church is some distance to the west of the motte. Pen Y Bryn rises above the east bank of the river.

Pennant Tours in Wales (1778)

'At the entrance of the glen close to the village, is a very large artificial mount, flat at top, and near sixty feet in diameter, widening towards the base. It was once the site of a castle belonging to Llywelyn the Great. Some foundations are yet to be seen round the summit, and in digging

traces of buildings have been discovered'.

Cathedral Wanderings in North Wales

'In the mouth of the defile, near the village, stands a great artificial mound, the site in other days, of one of Llywelyns palaces. Many years ago some antiquarian by excavating for the purpose, discovered several of its many substructions'.

Nicolas Carlyle (1815)

'In the village is an artificial mound of earth about 15 feet high and about 15 yards in diameter nearly circular, the interior of it has not been investigated, but it is supposed to contain the remains of some of the Welsh Princes who had a palace at Aber. A small portion of old building is pointed out near this mound as the only remaining vestige of the palace of Llywelyn ap Iorweth Drwyndyn the last prince who resided at Aber'.

Cambrian Tourist (1821)

'Near the bridge is a circular mount seemingly artificial, which was the foundation of a small castle, probably constructed of timber, as many of the welsh fortresses were : vestiges of the moat and its feeder from the river still remain.

Traces of buildings have been discovered near this spot, which were probably the remains of the princes palace, as the inhabitants still pretend to show strangers the foundations of the old kitchen'.

Archaeologia Cambrensis (1860)

'The tumulus at Aber is of military character and was once surmounted by defences probably of wood. It may have been connected with the palace Llywelyn the Great is said to have had in this place ...

The only other object of interest is the house at Pen y Bryn, a defensive structure, partially of the 16th century, part of which consists of a small square tower of semi defensive character'.

Old Churches of Snowdonia (1924)

'Before leaving Aber Pen y Bryn should be visited. It is traditionally the house of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd. The present house possible built upon earlier foundations, dates from the 16th century, but the base of the tower is much more ancient. The barn to the left has some rows of small split windows with flat heads and broadly splayed jambs inside, composed of large pieces of Anglesey grit stone, triangular on plan. Whether they are in their original position or whether they were brought from the tower, cannot now be stated, but it is quite possible that they are genuine welsh work of the 13th century. Most unfortunately they have been partly blocked up a few years ago. The building is like a small edition of the great barn at Vaynol dated 1604'.

T Jones Pierce Aber Gwyn Gwregin *TCHS*

Although the actual site of Y Ty Hir cannot now be precisely located, this ancient seat of the princes of Gwynedd was probably situated on or near the elevated site now occupied by the house known as Pen y Bryn'.

As can be seen from the above selection of references there appears to be a switch at the end of the last century from the site of the earthen castle in the village at Aber to the site of Pen y Bryn as the supposed location of the *Llys* complex.

The evidence of the standing structure

The house at Pen Y Bryn comprises three elements: an original Snowdonia plan house at the east

end (late sixteenth century), a central block, with cellar, of the early seventeenth century which truncates the west end of the Snowdonia plan house and a tower at the west end. The chronological relationship of the tower to the other two elements is a matter of debate. It has been suggested that the base of the tower might be medieval although there appears to GAT no overriding reason why this should be so and a date contemporary with or slightly later than the early seventeenth century central block seems preferable. A barn to the north east of the main house has been claimed by some to be, in origin, a gatehouse with first floor hall of the medieval period. Again it is difficult for GAT to accept that this is necessarily the case.

The excavations

Three areas were investigated over a period of three weeks in December 1992.

An area 6m x 6m was opened on the circular lawn immediately in front of the present house (A). A trench approximately 25m x 1.5m was opened in the field to the north of the house (B). An area 3m x 2m in the barn which had been partially excavated by the owners was cleared, excavated and recorded.

A. A substantial wall of large unmortared boulders was identified running parallel with the long axis of the present house. The wall was set on the natural clay subsoil and had been partially robbed. A disturbed cobble surface extended to the south of the wall. Deposits of building debris incorporating post medieval pottery overlay these features.

B. Several features were recorded in trench B. A bank and ditch ran west-east across the middle of the trench, a second ditch ran parallel to the first mentioned and to the south of it; a spread of large stones to the south of this and north of a third ditch with, finally, a second bank abutting the third ditch. The two banks are still visible as linear features across the plateau area of this field to the north of the present house and are likely to represent landscaping features of the sixteenth and later centuries.

C. A sequence of several deposits were recorded within the barn, all devoid of dating evidence. A slate-lined and rubble-filled drain was identified running parallel with the long axis of the barn along the inside face of the west and east walls at the south end and continuing at right angles across the south side of the through passage before exiting the barn through the east door. This drain appeared to be an original feature of the structure.

Conclusions

Pen Y Bryn house and its outbuildings preserve an interesting sequence of sixteenth century and later structures with modifications and additions. The structural history of this site is undoubtedly more complex than that yet established. Colt Hoare, in 1810, for example, recorded a further building to the north of the present main block which has yet to be identified and dated. The current limited excavations and the digging of the owners have demonstrated the potential for extending our knowledge of associated landscaping works contemporary with the post medieval sequence. Walling and cobbled surfaces revealed during excavation in front of the house (including Trench A) are thought to represent cobbled terraces. Excavations against the present standing structure is equally clearly capable of resolving certain debates concerning the structural sequence of the house.

The current excavations have taken us no further towards identifying, at Pen Y Bryn, anything which might reasonably be taken to be associated with the thirteenth century or earlier and speculation concerning the location of the *llys* at Aber remain unresolved. While there undoubtedly was a *llys* and bond hamlet of the Welsh Princes at Aber, GAT remain unconvinced there is any evidence available at present to confirm that Pen Y Bryn was the location. Nevertheless, it would be unwise to draw too firm conclusions from the negative evidence of limited excavations.

