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# **Cymerau Isaf Woodlands**

## **Historial Assessment**

**GAT project G1718 - report No. 426**



Prepared for

**Forest Research**

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**Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd**  
**Gwynedd Archaeological Trust**

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**Front cover:** a view of the Vale of Ffestiniog in the mid-nineteenth century from the hills above Rhyd y Sarn; by Hugh Hughes. Dolgellau Record Office ZT/170

# CYMERAU ISAF – WOODLAND MANAGEMENT

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Gwynedd Archaeological Trust has been asked by Forest Research (Upland Native Woodlands Project) to research the history of woodland management at Cymerau Isaf (SH 69004282) in the Community of Ffestiniog, Gwynedd (**figure 1**).

## 2. ASSESSMENT BRIEF

An initial report was requested from Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, based on desk-top survey assessing the history and significance of woodland management at the site.

## 3. SOURCE MATERIAL

Analysis of archival documentation relating to the site was undertaken in the Sites and Monuments Record, Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, the archives of the University of Wales, Bangor (henceforth UWB), and the Gwynedd County Record Offices at Dolgellau (henceforth DRO) and Caernarfon (henceforth CRO). These included the Ffestiniog tithe survey and schedule of 1843, estate maps, transport plans and other documents.

The archive of prints and photographs at the DRO was also examined for evidence of woodland management within the area.

## 4. FINDINGS OF THE DESK-TOP STUDY

### 4.1 Location

Cymerau Isaf farm is situated on a spur between the Afon Goedol and the Afon Teigl on the lower slopes of the vale of Ffestiniog, immediately above the point where they join at Rhyd y Sarn, which gives the farm its name ('the lower confluences'). Rhyd y Sarn lies the uppermost point of the alluvial plain that reaches to the sea at the Traeth Bach (see front cover). Cymerau Isaf lies within the community, formerly parish, of Ffestiniog.

### 4.2 Ownership history

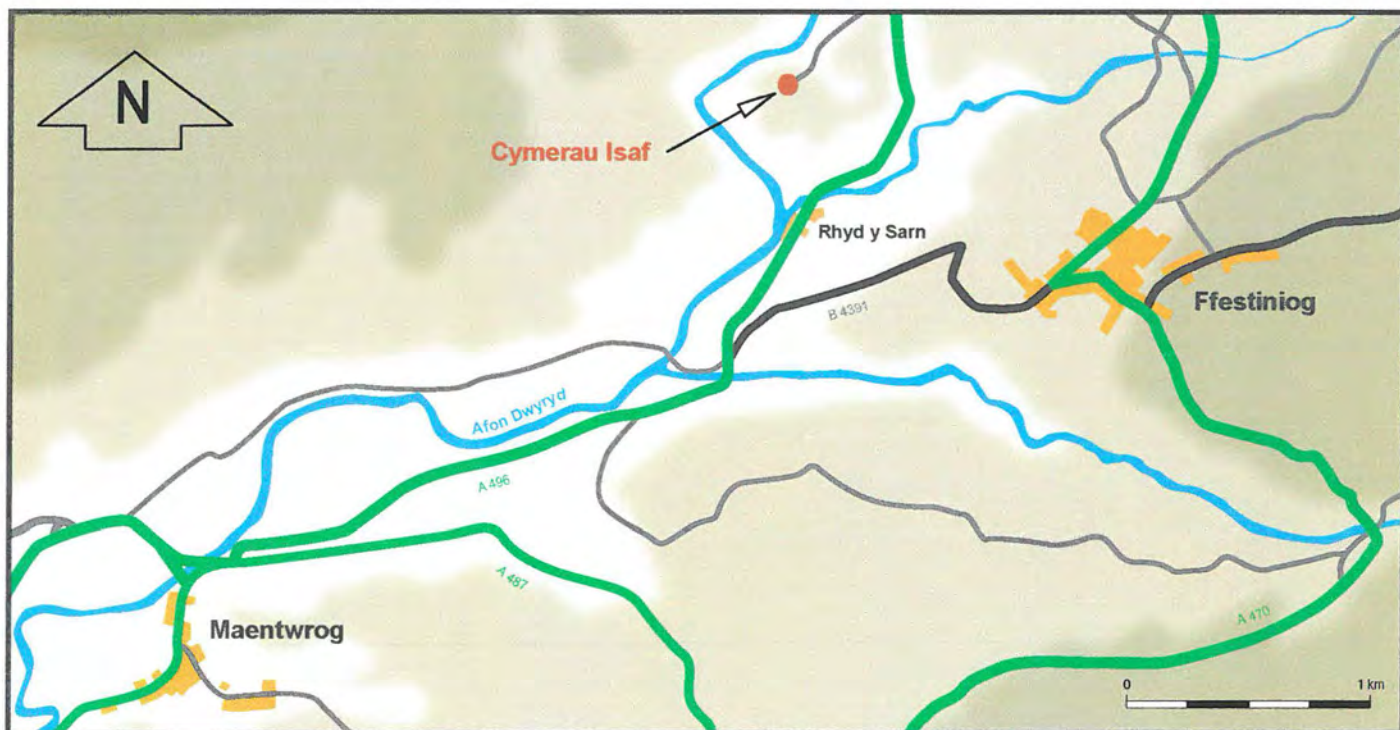
Little has survived in the way of estate documents or maps, mainly for the reason that the owners of Cymerau Isaf until 1919 latterly lived outside the area, and their papers, if they survive at all, may still be in their possession, or those of their lawyers. A number of papers survive in the collection of the adjoining Newborough estate at the CRO. The earliest of these is dated 1802, and shows plans for a proposed road from Lord Newborough's quarries at Blaenau Ffestiniog (**figure 2**). It uses what was already an archaic convention, in which buildings and other features are shown as if in bird's eye view rather than in plan, and shows a small farm-house at Cymerau Isaf, but provides no information on the woodlands other than showing a wooded area immediately adjacent.<sup>1</sup> A map of 1813 shows the cottage to the south of Cymerau Isaf, r' Allt, without identifying it as such, but gives no details of Cymerau Isaf itself<sup>2</sup>. The third, an 'ocular survey' of 1827 for what may be either a road or a railway, is equally uninformative<sup>3</sup> (**figure 3**).

Such documents which do survive are otherwise those which record Pengwern's transactions with other estates. The earliest reference to Cymerau Isaf comes in 1739, when it was owned by the

<sup>1</sup> CRO XD2A 394.

<sup>2</sup> CRO XD2A 387

<sup>3</sup> CRO XD2A 388



**Figure One** Map showing location of Cymerau Isaf (the farm is located at SH 69004282)

### References to the Upper Road Plan &c

The black part is the one mile road quite finished by the English People  
 The parts shaded red as far as the Village, show that much of the Road improved  
 And the other red part as far as the two lowest Bridges, a good new Road  
 From the turnings to the factory is a public road, by wants improving  
 The Length of this Road at the greatest extent, from the  
 Quarries down to the factory is  $4\frac{1}{4}$  and  $\frac{1}{2}$  Chains  
 That part of road from (c) to (d) to be purchased

### References to the Lower Road

Let part of Road from the main Festering  
 road to be mended, South about, half of a  
 Mile and one furlong — The part to be  
 purchased of M. Wynne's About  $1\frac{1}{4}$  mile —

All the road is through L. Newborough's Land  
 The red line is the intended Road to the Quarry  
 as in the other road

The greatest extent of this road from the  
 Festering road to the Quarry is 3 Miles 7 Chains

Or about (679) Road at 12 sp. 8. — 407. 8. 0

Purchase of M. Wynne's ground for Road at

The two new Bridges at — — — at 50.

Fences Road if required 507 8 0

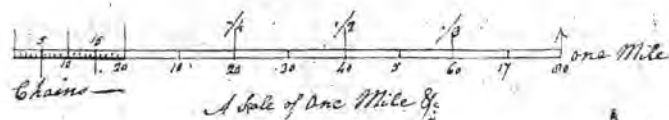


Figure 2 Survey plan 1802 (CRO XD2A394)

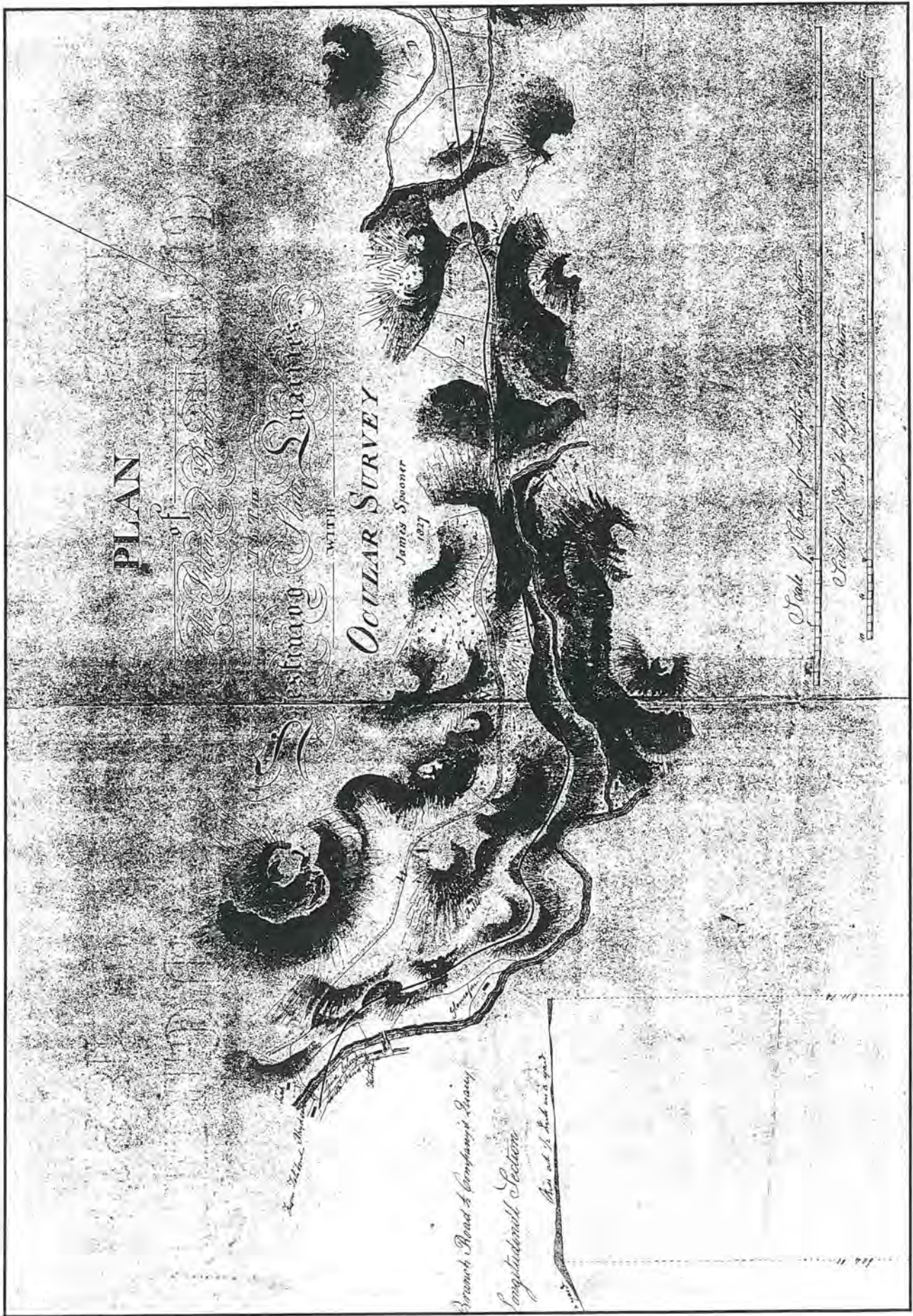


Figure 3 Survey plan, 1827 (CRO XDZA 388)

Pengwern estate. Pengwern itself, an imposing house of late sixteenth century date, stands barely 500 m to the north-east of the Cymerau Isaf farmhouse. It was built and inhabited by a family of local consequence, who adopted the surname Lewis; in the eighteenth century, Anne Lewis of Pengwern married Owen Wynne of Llwyn, Denbighshire, and the property remained in their hands until the death of the Rev. Dr Maurice Wynne in 1835. It ceased to be a family home c. 1800, and was divided up into tenements. Pengwern then passed to his nephew, the Rev. Lloyd Fletcher, who assumed the surname Wynne by sign manual, and also died unmarried. Pengwern and Cymerau Isaf remained in the possession of a collateral descendant until 1919, when all the lands were sold.<sup>4</sup> Part of the estate, including Cymerau Isaf, seems to have been bought by the Newborough family, and was sold by them again in 1937.<sup>5</sup>

An adjacent holding, Cymerau Uchaf is recorded in 1739,<sup>6</sup> and again on the 1818 2" ordnance survey, though the 1" ordnance survey of 1839-1841 records the farm simply as 'Cymerau', as does the tithe award schedule of 1843. The farm is named as Cymerau Isaf on the first edition 6" ordnance survey (surveyed 1888/1899; figure 4).

The local historians of the nineteenth century refer to an east-west trackway across Cymerau, crossing the Goedol by the bridge near the farm.<sup>7</sup> This is not evident on the John Evans map of 1795.<sup>8</sup> The present road down the Goedol was at the planning stage in May 1802, and was built shortly afterwards, to connect Lord Newborough's quarries at Diffwys with Rhyd y Sarn.<sup>9</sup>

However, despite the comparative paucity of information relating specifically to Cymerau Isaf and to general agricultural management within the holding, more general information survives relating to the woodlands both of Cymerau and the areas immediately adjacent.

### 4.3 History of woodland management in the Vale of Ffestiniog

Though Ffestiniog is traditionally associated with the quarrying of slate, and grew to be one of the most productive slate areas of the world, quarrying came comparatively late to the parish, probably from about 1760 onwards. In the eighteenth century the felling of timber formed a more important part of the local economy, and though documentary sources typically have far more to do with the sale and transport of timber than with the management of the woodlands themselves, enough evidence has survived to give some indication of the scope of the trade and the sources exploited.

Gwynedd's timber resources have been actively exploited since at least the Edwardian Conquest, making use not only of extensive afforestation but also of the comparatively easy transport afforded by easy access to the sea or tidal rivers such as the Conwy, and later the Dwyryd and the Mawddach. Timber was floated down from Trefriw for the Edwardian construction programme in the late thirteenth century, and again in the late seventeenth century.<sup>10</sup> In the eighteenth century, throughout the United Kingdom, timber-growing was seen by landowners as a sign of patriotism, by supplying the navy with timber.

Timber – hardwoods, especially oak – were being exported from the heavily wooded slopes not only of Ffestiniog and Maentwrog but also of the neighbouring parishes of Llanfrothen and Llandecwyn. Though the trade may have begun earlier, the first record dates from 1739, and concerns the Pengwern estate, when it was specified that timber to the value of £400 was to be felled.<sup>11</sup> The only

<sup>4</sup> K. W. Jones-Roberts, William Ll. Davies, 'Pengwern, Ffestiniog' *Journal of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society* 13 (1951) pp. 180-184.

<sup>5</sup> CRO XSC 139.

<sup>6</sup> UWB Maenan ms 419.

<sup>7</sup> 'Ffestinfab', *Hanes Plwyf Ffestiniog a'r Amgylchoedd* (Blaenau Ffestiniog, 1879), p. 48.

<sup>8</sup> John Evans, *North Wales* (Llwynygroes, 1795).

<sup>9</sup> CRO XD2A 394.

<sup>10</sup> A. J. Taylor, *The Welsh Castles of Edward I* (London and Ronceverte, 1986), *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> UCNW Maenan 419; demise of Pengwern and estate, including Cymerau Isaf and Cymerau Uchaf, to John Garnons of Rhiwgoch, Merionethshire, gent., Edward Jones of Caernarvon, mercer, and David Prichard of Caernarvon, gent., who are instructed to sell 'so much of the said Woods, underwoods & Timber as will raise the sum of four hundred pounds,' dated 24 August 1739.



Figure four Cymerau Isaf and surrounding area as shown on the first edition 6" Ordnance Survey map (surveyed 1888-1889)

specific reference to timber-felling at Cymerau comes in the *Journeys* of Sir Richard Colt Hoare in 1801, who describes making his way from Tan y Bwlch to Cwmorthin through Cymerau:

I continued my rough and Alpine track through some oak groves, in some of which the axe has lately been introduced; £900 of timber was cut last year and a considerable fall has been made in the present. It is a lamentable sight for a lover of picturesque scenery; in a few years little wood will be left in Merionethshire. During the few years [since 1797, when he first visited the area] I have been frequenting this county the havock has been great; several of my favourite groves which I have so often admired have already fallen, and I hear of more where speedy doom is impending. But the evil does not only arise from felling the wood but from not properly fencing them out when cut by which the young shoots and prospects of a future copse are totally annihilated. The woodland track, intermixed with small pastures, distant mountains etc. afford many pleasing points of view.<sup>12</sup>

By the end of the eighteenth century, the Vale of Ffestiniog had suffered much deforestation. Already by 1763 it was reported of Merioneth that 'this county has been much drained of her timber',<sup>13</sup> and in 1788 it was reported that the stocks of oak in Caernarvonshire, Denbighshire, Merioneth and Flintshire had decreased by two thirds.<sup>14</sup> An indication of the scale of the trade is the advertisements carried by local newspapers, which record sales of timber worth up to £900 a time. By the nineteenth century as many as 6,400 trees a year were offered for sale. Further pointers to the importance of the timber trade are the individuals who were clearly acting as timber merchants. Sometimes they are acknowledged as such; Owen David of Maentwrog is identified as a timber merchant in 1785,<sup>15</sup> and another had been married at Llanfrothen in 1749. Others carried on other trades. In 1749 the Ffestiniog blacksmith, for instance, bought £500's worth of timber at Llandecwyn, far more than he would need for his own use, and far more than he could have sold locally, even if he had had the means to transport them up the valley.

With the revival of shipbuilding in the northern part of Cardigan Bay in the late eighteenth century, local timber came to be needed in ever-greater quantities. This remained the case until the 1820s, when Porthmadog shipwrights began to use Mawddach timber instead, and later still supplies of Baltic and Canadian pine became available. Local mines and quarries were still small affairs, but burnt some timber in the smithies and some used timber as props. Some timber was probably burnt as firewood. Bark also formed an export, some doubtless going to local tanneries, but there was also considerable trade with tanneries in Ireland.<sup>16</sup>

By 1807 the Merioneth Quarter Sessions records confirm that local landowners were encouraging new plantations,<sup>17</sup> and sales of timber are recorded in the *North Wales Gazette* over the following years.<sup>18</sup> By 1816 a quay specifically dedicated to the export of timber is recorded at Cemlyn on the Dwyryd tidal estuary, a little way below Cymerau.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4.4 Melin Rhyd y Sarn

Such documentary evidence as there is for woodland management in the area is mainly concerned with transport and sale. However, Dr Michael Lewis (formerly of the University of Hull) has recently raised an intriguing possibility which has arisen out of his researches into the history of the Ffestiniog area.

<sup>12</sup> Sir Richard Colt Hoare, *The Journeys of Sir Richard Colt Hoare through Wales and England 1793-1810*, ed. M.W. Thompson (Alan Sutton, 1983), p. 174.

<sup>13</sup> R. Fisher, *Heart of Oak, the British Bulwark* (1763), p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> *Third Report of Commissioners appointed to enquire into state of Woods, Forests and Land Revenues* (1788), p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> DRO Z/QS/M1785.

<sup>16</sup> M.J.T. Lewis, *Sails on the Dwyryd* (Plas Tan y Bwlch, 1989) pp. 21-2 gives detailed references to the timber trade.

<sup>17</sup> DRO Z/QS/H18070

<sup>18</sup> E.g., 14 April 1808 p. 2 col. e, 16 March 1809 p. 3 col. a, 20 April 1809 p. 3 col. a, 2 August 1810 p. 3 col. b, 23 April 1812 p. 3 col. a, 6 August 1812 p. 3 col. b, 7 April 1814 p. 3 col. a, 12 May 1814 p. 2 col. d.

<sup>19</sup> DRO Z/DV/4/95.

At the foot of the hill on which Cymerau is situated is Rhyd y Sarn, now a private house. It is first attested on a Newborough estate map of 1802, which identifies it as 'The Great Factory', a designation which suggests a woolen mill.<sup>20</sup> Certainly by 1841, it did function as a woolen mill,<sup>21</sup> but the importance implied by the 1802 map that the Newborough estate attached to building a road to Rhyd y Sarn (rather than to navigable water) strongly suggests that it was connected with the slate trade, probably as a mill for sawing slabs. This would make it the oldest mechanical slate saw-mill in Wales, and hence the world, making use of the falls of the Afon Teigl and perhaps the Goedol as well, to drive a water-wheel.

Dr Lewis suggests that the mill may have had an earlier history as a timber mill. Richard Morris, who owned the land on which the mill was built, witnessed the marriage of William Solomon, a partner in Diffwys slate quarry in the upper part of the parish, in 1779. Whilst Morris was overseer of the poor at the time, it is more likely that there was a business connection between the two men, and the possibility is that the mill was already in existence sawing slate slabs from Diffwys quarry. This possibility receives some slight confirmation from the existence of sawn gravestones in the area from 1775, though these could have been cut with a hand-operated saw. However, the thirty-five stones recorded could not have kept the mill in business, and the mill may have had a dual purpose, sawing timber with a vertical saw, and sawing slate with a reciprocating saw.

In 1761 one John Williams is found selling timber to a copper mine on the Migneint moors, and a John Williams is found selling deal for rebuilding a house locally in 1798, possibly another of the local timber merchants.<sup>22</sup>

G.J. Williams's *Hanes Plwyf Ffestiniog* includes amongst sons of the parish one John Williams y Factory who bought the Plas Tan y Bwlch library when it was sold.<sup>23</sup> There is no record of the sale of the library (which itself makes it likely that it took place earlier rather than later), but it is likely to have been between 1770, when the last Griffith died, and 1789, when the daughter of the house married William Oakeley. 'Factory', or Welsh *ffatri* in local terms, tends to mean a woolen mill, but there was no woolen mill in the area until the 1870s. It is therefore possible that John Williams was connected with Rhyd y Sarn in the 1770s or 1780s, and that it was already functioning as a timber mill. This would make it very early indeed for a mechanical, water-driven mill – it would be the first in Wales. But Rhyd y Sarn was in all probability the earliest slate-slab mill in Wales, and there is no inherent objection, in terms of available technology, to it having also been a pioneer of timber-sawing.

As against this theory, the Ffestiniog historian Steffan ab Owain believes that the John Williams referred to be G.J. Williams is a later individual, and that the 'Factory' by which he is identified was the fulling mill in Tan y Grisiau, elsewhere in the parish of Ffestiniog, which he built in the 1840s.<sup>24</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In view of the fact that the Pengwern estate's papers are not available for study, any analysis of the agricultural and woodland management of Cymerau Isaf is necessarily speculative. However, since documentation for the area immediately around the holding makes it clear that there was extensive exploitation of timber resources in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, even if possibly on an *ad-hoc* basis, and that this trade declined thereafter, it is possible that the current stand of trees dating to the 1840s-1860s represents colonisation of areas that had been exploited for timber in earlier years.

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<sup>20</sup> XD2A 394.

<sup>21</sup> Ffestiniog census, 1841.

<sup>22</sup> Notes passed to author from Dr Michael Lewis.

<sup>23</sup> G.J. Williams *Hanes Plwyf Ffestiniog* (Wrexham, 1881), p. 232.

<sup>24</sup> Steffan ab Owain, article forthcoming in *Rhamant Bro*, and personal communication.

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ZT 170 A view of the Vale of Ffestiniog in the mid-nineteenth century from the hills above Rhyd y Sarn; by Hugh Hughes

#### 6.1.2 CRO

XD2A        386 Plan of Gelli grin  
              387 Map of Traeth back to Ffestiniog  
              388 Railway to Rhyd y Sarn, 1827

#### 6.1.3 University of Wales, Bangor

Maenan mass

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### 6.3 Newspaper sources

*North Wales Gazette*

## 7. NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

This project has assessed the evidence of historical woodland management at Cymerau Isa in the community of Ffestiniog.

It has established that the area was extensively exploited for forestry from the early eighteenth century into the nineteenth century.

## 8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are particularly due to Dr Michael Lewis, formerly of the University of Hull, for passing on much information about the historical development of the Vale of Ffestiniog, and to Steffan ab Owain.

This project was researched and the report produced by Dr David Rh Gwyn with contributions from John Roberts who also produced the illustrations.

