
Ports and Harbours of Gwynedd: **Ynys Cyngar**



A Threat Related Assessment

GAT Project No. 1814

Report No. 671.5

April, 2007

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Prepared for CADW

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Contents

1. Introduction

2. Bibliography

Appendix I: Gazetteer of sites

Ports and Harbours of Gwynedd: **Ynys Cyngar**

Figures

Figure 1 - Site Location Map

Figure 2 - Lt. W. L. Sheringhan RN: Cardigan Bay Sheet V (1836)

Figure 3 - First Edition 25" Ordnance Survey Map of Ynys Cyngar (1888)

Figure 4 - Second Edition 25" Ordnance Survey Map of Ynys Cyngar (1900)

Figure 5 - Third Edition 25" Ordnance Survey Map of Ynys Cyngar (1915)

Figure 6 - 1:10000 Ordnance Survey Map of Ynys Cyngar (1976)

Plate

Plate 1 - Ynys Cyngar: Limekiln: View From the south-east

Plate 2 - Ynys Cyngar: Former powder house

YNYS CYNGAR

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 General Introduction

This report contains the results of an archaeological assessment undertaken as part of a wider assessment of ports and harbours throughout Wales. The assessments have been undertaken by the Welsh Archaeological Trusts and funded by CADW. The report has been compiled by the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust.

1.2 Aims of the project

The aim of the project is to identify the nature and status of the heritage resource within the study area and to aid and encourage the incorporation of the resource into the management and future development of the coastal zone.

1.3 Location and topography

Ynys Cyngar (NGR SH55403650), in its present form, is a sand-encroached rocky outcrop on the coast to the west of Borth-y-gest and Porthmadog. Although only very fleetingly a true harbour in the definition of a land/sea interface, and despite its aborted plans for development, Ynys Cyngar was nonetheless once a site of great economic importance. As a sheltered anchorage (albeit of accidental providence), it provided an invaluable service to the developing slate industry of the Ffestiniog area in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Subsequently, it was itself destroyed in economic and practical terms, by the equally accidental circumstances which led to the development of the nearby port of Porthmadog.¹

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

As its name suggests, Ynys Cyngar was originally an island, one of many such small outcrops of hard rock which were at one time to be found in and around the wide sandy estuaries of the Glaslyn and Dwyryd rivers (known as 'Traeth Mawr' [Big beach] and Traeth Bach [Small beach], respectively)². In this era, before the eighteenth century, the principal 'harbour' (in terms of landing place) of the district appears to have been the nearby wide cove of Borth y Gest³. This was probably the harbour for the mediaeval commote of Y Gest, and its antiquity is alluded to in Lewis Morris' Coastal map (1741-44) by the annotation 'Ancient Harbour of Gest'⁴.

By probably the mid-eighteenth century, natural re-routing of the Glaslyn river (which may have once flowed on the landward side of the then island) had begun the process of connecting Ynys Cyngar to the mainland through the deposition of sand on the lee side (east). This resulted in the creation of a sheltered anchorage with up to 10 feet (approx. 3m) of water, where vessels were protected from the prevailing driving south-westerly tides of Cardigan Bay⁵. Whereas this must have been exploited by mariners and merchants bringing in commodities for the outlying, though quite sparsely-populated district, it was the independent development of the slate industry which benefited the most from this initial silting of Ynys Cyngar.

There is evidence that loading of slates produced at small-scale nearby quarries was being carried out at Ynys Cyngar by the mid-eighteenth century⁶. This produce was carted to the coast and then loaded directly onto possibly beached small sea-going vessels, or perhaps carried by rowing boats out to anchored ships. As such, this trade was probably a minor part of the wider commerce of the district as a whole⁷, and a

¹ See G.P.Jones/G.A.T report on Porthmadog Harbour for further details and references.

² Construction of Maddock's Cob and subsequent changes to tidal flows have left these mini-islands landlocked in the modern era.

³ The name 'Borth' is a mutation of the word 'Porth', meaning gateway in its wider context, but providing the root for the term 'Porthladd' = port or harbour.

⁴ Llangefni archive WM/1905/21. The author is indebted to Dr David Gwyn for providing this reference.

⁵ Lewis (1989), pp.65 - 66

⁶ Owen Morris (1856), p.41, cited in Lewis (1989), p.65.

⁷ See Thomas (1952) *passim* for a broad survey of coastal trade, shipping and ship-building

limekiln identified by Lewis (1989) ⁸ at this site points to a diversity of trade. However, this was to change dramatically as the result of developments elsewhere, post-c.1760 ⁹.

The development of commercial slate quarrying in the Ffestiniog district from the 1760s, created a requirement for a transport system from the highland extraction and processing sites to the coast, from whence the product was sent to market by means of the only viable transport route of the era – by sea. Details of the difficult early transport system can be found in published sources ¹⁰ and need not be recounted here, but the basic steps are highly relevant.

After an initial overland journey down from the highlands of Ffestiniog, the slates from the quarries accessed a coastline in the Dwyrdd estuary which was not conducive to serving the contemporary relatively-large sea-going vessels engaged in the slate trade. At least one quay of some age was to be found at the limit of navigation of the Dwyrdd, but was only suitable for shallow-draught ships. Consequently, there developed a localised secondary transport system for carrying the slates from this, and several newer estuarine quays out to meet the slate ships in deeper water. Given the dangers of sand banks, the tides and driving winds hereabouts, the primacy of the shelter of the partly-silted Ynys Cyngar anchorage became established for the difficult task of loading these sea-going vessels from the specialised river-boats ¹¹.

Whilst adequate for the small scale of slate production in the late-eighteenth century, this transport system was to face operating challenges as the industry expanded in subsequent decades. Remarkably, with the construction of several additional quays by individual slate quarry owners ¹², the boating system coped very well into the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In one sense, it had to, as there was at that time no conceivable alternative to the using Ynys Cyngar, which was the closest relatively deep watered shelter. There is no doubt, however, that this would have been overwhelmed by the massive growth in the slate trade after c.1825, or would have restricted that growth in the Ffestiniog district, had not other factors intervened.

The driving personality of this district in the first two decades of the nineteenth century was local landowner, W.A.Maddocks ¹³. His quest to reclaim land from the sea in the Glaslyn estuary (Traeth Mawr) reached its pinnacle in the construction of the Great Embankment, or ‘Cob’, finally completed in 1811. Although this ultimately and unexpectedly resulted in the construction of a new harbour at Porthmadog (see below), Maddocks’ initial ambitions for servicing the district’s maritime trade was initially directed at providing wharfage at Ynys Cyngar, which he had bought from W.Ormseby Gore. An initial Bill of 1807 to develop the site was thwarted by the opposition of Ffestiniog slate quarry owners who did not like the inclusion of the Dwyrdd estuary within the area liable for Port duties, in an era when the cumbersome transport system was already expensive. A revised Bill, excluding the Dwyrdd, and exempting Ynys Cyngar from dues, was enacted after the compromise quelled the opposition ¹⁴.

However, in the event, nothing of great consequence was done at Ynys Cyngar, which remained bereft of infrastructure apart from a small limekiln (25106), possibly of an early date, and a gunpowder storehouse (25105) both of which may have been associated with the building of the Maddocks’ Cob in the early 19th century. Distracted by the building of the Cob, its disastrous breaching by the sea in 1812, and the consequential financial problems all prevented further action at Ynys Cyngar by Maddocks ¹⁵. And when in 1821, he obtained an additional Act for a new harbour, it was not at Ynys Cyngar, but at a new site close to the great Cob.

⁸ Lewis (1989), p.67

⁹ See Thomas (1939) for a broad account of the role of shipping in the development of the slate industry, and *vice versa*.

¹⁰ The principal published source is Lewis (1989)

¹¹ Lewis (1989), Chapter 5 *passim*

¹² Lewis (1989), Chapter 3 *passim*

¹³ See particularly Beesly (1967)

¹⁴ Lewis (1989), p.67

¹⁵ Beesly (1967) *passim*

The floodgates controlling the outflow of the river Glaslyn to the sea were at its northern end, and the scouring action of the new constricted channel had an unexpected result. The sedimented sands at the foot of the cliffs immediately to the west of the floodgates were rapidly washed out, and became increasingly deposited in the cove of Borth y Gest and in the lee of Ynys Cyngar, greatly decreasing their usefulness as sheltered anchorages. However, the same scouring produced deep water at the base of those cliffs and by the adjacent beach (Y Tywyn), where new wharfage facilities were being constructed by 1824-25, this subsequently developing into the present Porthmadog harbour.

The new facilities gradually attracted increasing amounts of the slate transshipment from Ynys Cyngar despite the payment of harbour dues, possibly in the initial period because of the welcoming facilities for mariners at 'Pen Cei'! Subsequently, the opening in 1836 of a horse/gravity (later steam) railway¹⁶ from the Ffestiniog quarries to the new Porthmadog harbour put the matter beyond doubt, though die-hard opponents to the Festiniog Railway Company [*sic*] and some minor quarries located far from its tracks, continued to use the slate boats and off-shore trans-shipment until 1868, although the silted Ynys Cyngar anchorage had by then been long-abandoned as the site of loading in favour of the waters just off the new harbour wharves¹⁷.

In 1905 45 acres of sand dunes to the north and west of Ynys Cyngar was handed over by the Tremadoc estate to form the land for a new links golf course, the area of which was extended in 1911 to form an 18 hole golf course that incorporated a significant proportion of the dunes. A club house was built in 1912, which still survives¹⁸.

¹⁶ See Lewis (1968) and Boyd (1975)

¹⁷ Lewis (1989), p.73.

¹⁸ Williams (2005) p. 8-16.

2. Principal Sources – YNYS CYNGAR

2.1 Published sources

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Edward Davies, Penmorfa; *Hanes Porthmadog – ei chrefydd a'i henwogion* (Cyhoeddwy'r Cymreig Cyf., Caernarfon, 1913).
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M. J. T. Lewis, *How Porthmadog got its railway* (Railway and Canal History Society, Surrey 1968).
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O.Williams *Porthmadog Golf Club 1905-2005 Centenary-Looking Back* (2005)

Reports

Porthmadog Harbour; G.P.Jones/G.A.T (2005)

Web Source

Kitching D. 2005 *Limekilns*. Seen at <http://www.brocross.com/>

Main manuscript references

Note: the primary published source Lewis (1989) is fully referenced and includes contextual references not listed below.

2.2 Caernarfon Records Office:

XD8/ 2/ *passim* ... W. A. Maddocks' letters (early C19th).

XD8/ 4/ 2 ... Act for building the Porthmadog quays (1821)

X/Plans/ H/ 2 ... Porthmadog harbour

Mss not available due to re-cataloguing in progress:

X/BJC/ Maps/ 20 ... Map of Traeth Mawr & Traeth Bach at low water (n.d).

X/BJC/*passim*

National Library of Wales (Aberystwyth)

NLW 10590C ... W. M. Richards; 'The industrial result of the erection of Porthmadog Cob' (MA thesis, 1925).

Portmadoc Mss (Adrian Stokes collection) *passim* ... Mss of Porthmadog harbour,

University of Wales, Bangor

Bangor 19081 ... research notes by David Thomas from NLW Porthmadoc

Photographs & Maps

Anglesey Records Office, Llangefni, WM/1905/21; Coastal Map, by Lewis Morris, c.1741-44.

Map of coast near Porthmadog and Glaslyn/Dwyryd estuaries, showing high/low water as in 1819

M.J.T.Lewis, *Sails on the Dwyryd*... p.13

Reproduction of annotated map accompanying Harbour Act (1821) referred to above; Lewis (1989), p.68

Reproduction of Admiralty Chart for Porthmadog (1836); Lewis (1989), p.62

Tithe Redemption Map, Ynyscynhaiarn Parish (1839). Originals in NLW. *The present photocopy in the Caernarfon Archives is defective and is missing the portion covering Ynys Cyngar itself.*

View from north-east (modern); Lewis (1989), p.66.

Appendix I: GAZETTEER OF SITES

The gazetteer is divided into three sections if applicable: Group A are extant sites, often remaining as buildings in use. Group B are sites with good potential for the recovery of archaeology. Group C are sites with little or no potential for the recovery of archaeology. Within the gazetteer the sites are identified by their primary reference number (PRN) as used within the Gwynedd Historic Environment Record and are assessed according to their importance, that is national (A), regional (B), Local (C), Other (D) and unknown (E). The site names are printed in capitals if they are already part of the Historic Environment Record, and in lower case they have been identified during the course of the project.

GROUP A: EXTANT SITES

20226	MINOR ROCK EXTRACTION SITE ON EAST SIDE OF ROCK OUTCROP			
Assessment of Importance	D		Site Status Reference	
A probable site of extraction of stone for building material on a small scale				
Easting:	5540	Northing:	3650	

7251	BUILDING ON EAST SIDE OF YNYS CYNGAR PROMONTORY (FORMER POWDER MAGAZINE)			
Assessment of Importance	C		Site Status Reference	
A building much modified in recent times, which has as a consequence lost much of its original character. It is roofed and in use. It incorporates the nineteenth century powder magazine which formerly stood on the site.				
Easting:	5541	Northing:	3654	

525104	Remains of small lime kiln and possible adjacent shed			
Assessment of Importance	B		Site Status Reference	
A well built small lime kiln, located on the foreshore about 40m north of the former gunpowder magazine and set on a shale outcrop. It is approximately 3.5m square, and constructed of large irregular coursed shale blocks. There are slight remains of a probable adjoining shed to the west, which survives only in a very fragmentary condition. The kiln itself with its shaft and stoke hole survive in good condition. It is possibly associated with the production of lime for Madocks' Great Embankment (cob) across Traeth Mawr in the early 19 th century, about 1km to the north east (Lewis 1989). This association, along with its survival in reasonably good condition, accounts for its assessment as of regional importance.				
Easting:	5542	Northing:	3657	

25105	Porthmadog and Borth y Gest golf club			
Assessment of Importance	C		Site Status Reference	
A golf club founded in 1906 on the sand dunes to the north and west of Ynys Cyngar, on land obtained from the Tremadoc estate, and extended in 1911. The original clubhouse survives although it no longer serves its original purpose (Williams 2005). It is an interesting example of a club building associated with the rise of sports clubs in Edwardian Britain, at a time of increasing leisure opportunities.				
Easting:	5508	Northing:	3695	

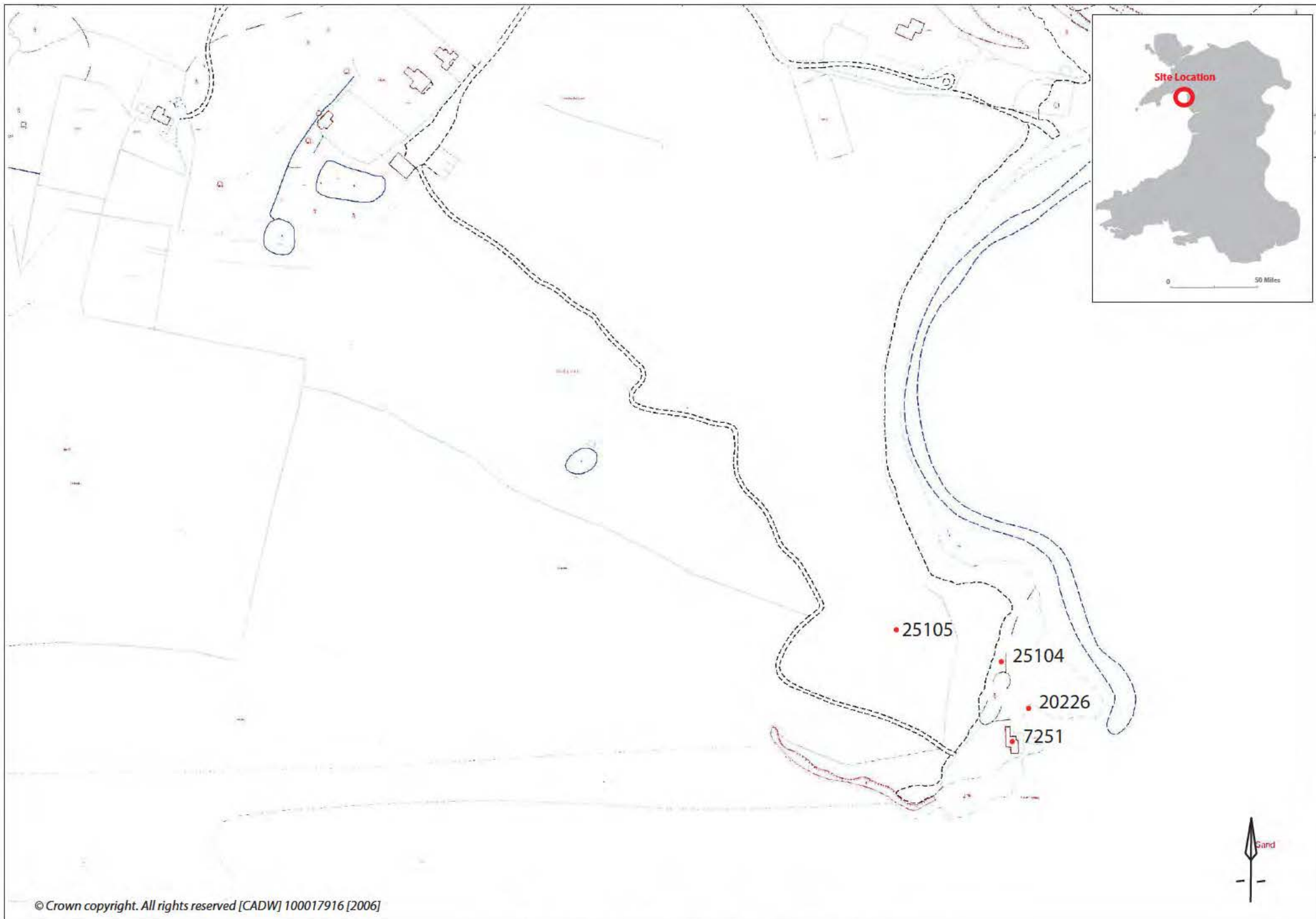


Figure 1: Location Map of Ynys Cyngar. Scale 1:4000

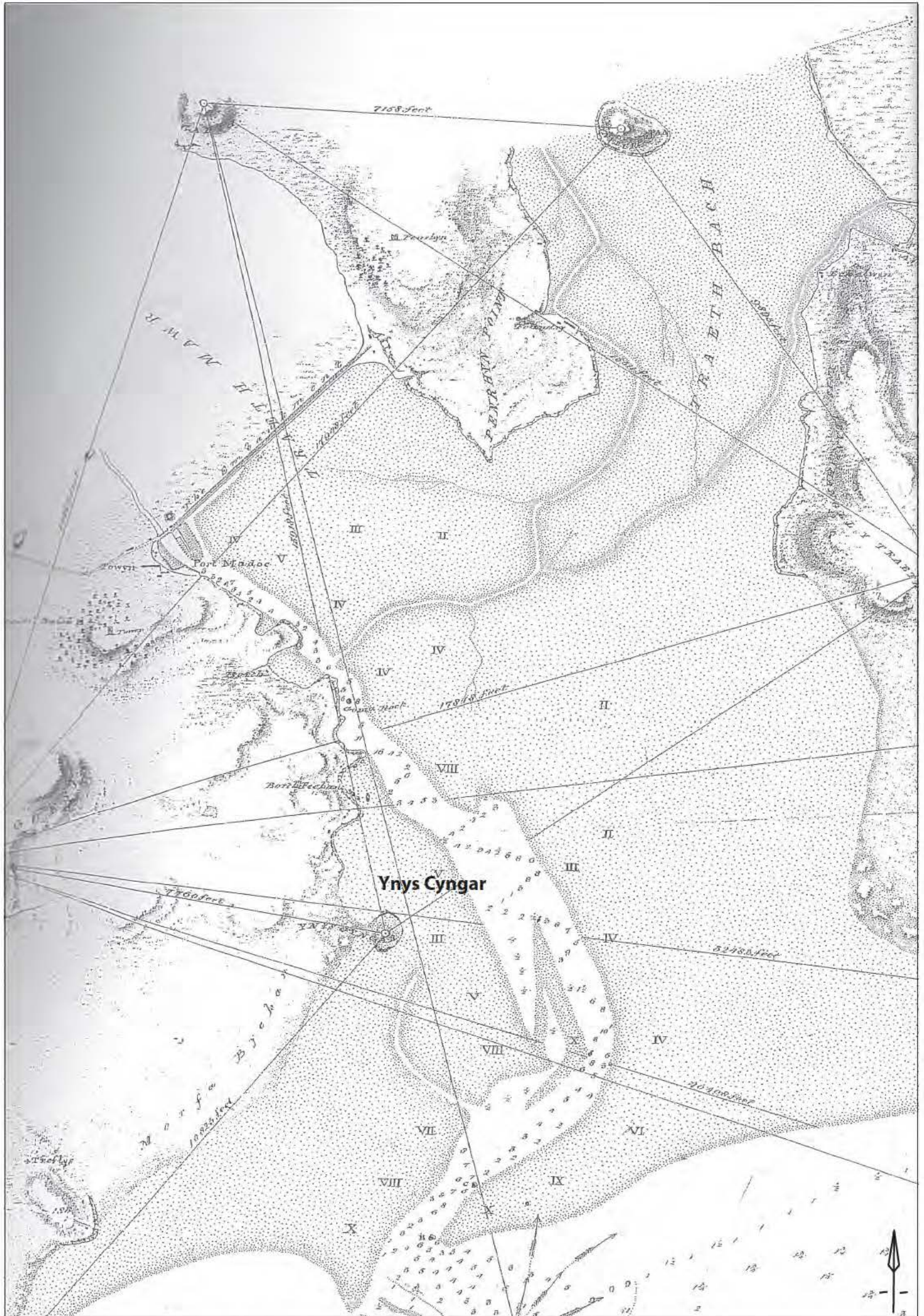


Figure 2: Lt. W. L. Sheringham RN: Cardigan Bay Sheet V (1836). Not to Scale.

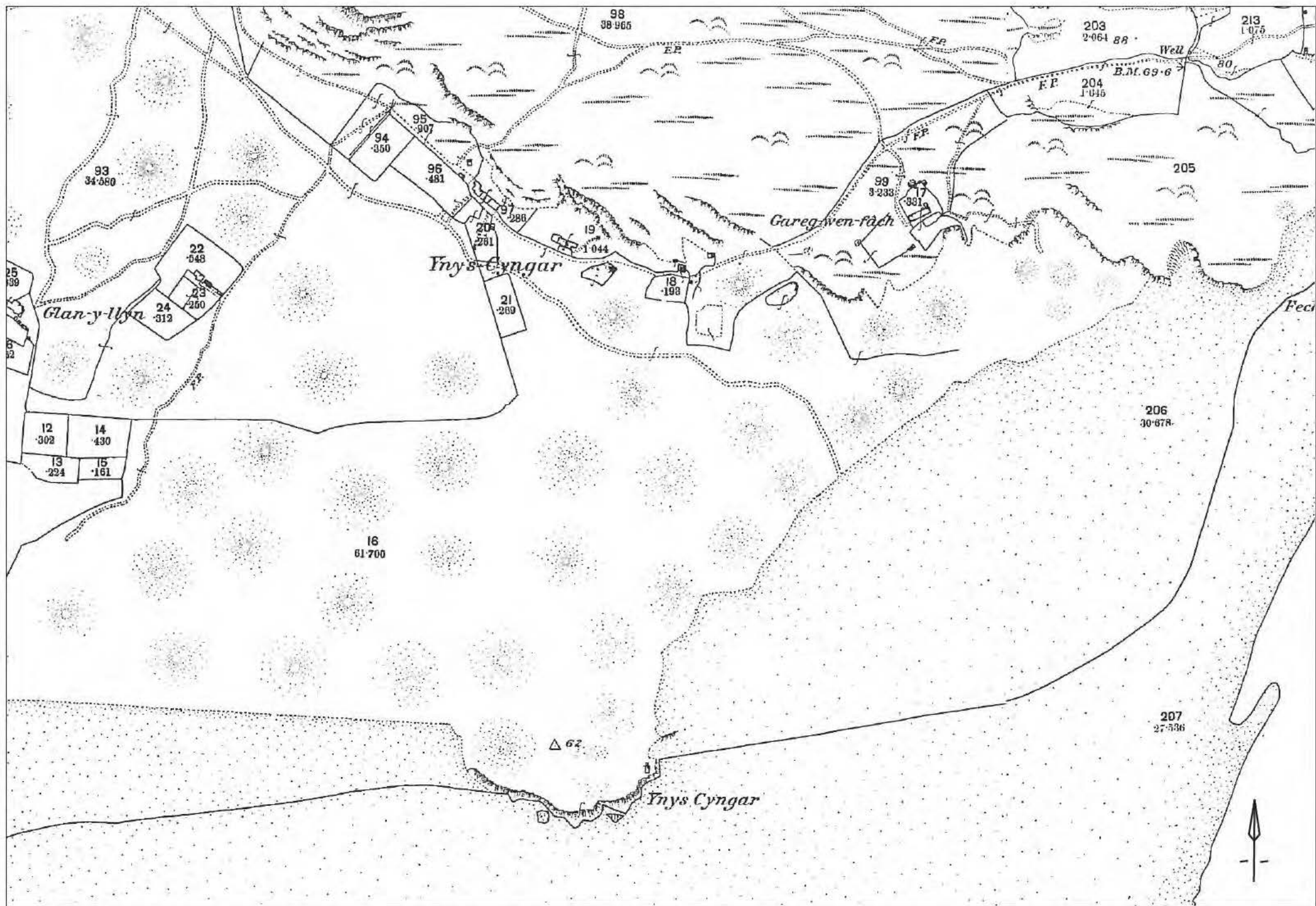


Figure 3: First Edition 25" Ordnance Survey Map of Ynys Cyngar XLII.3 (1888). Scale 1:4000

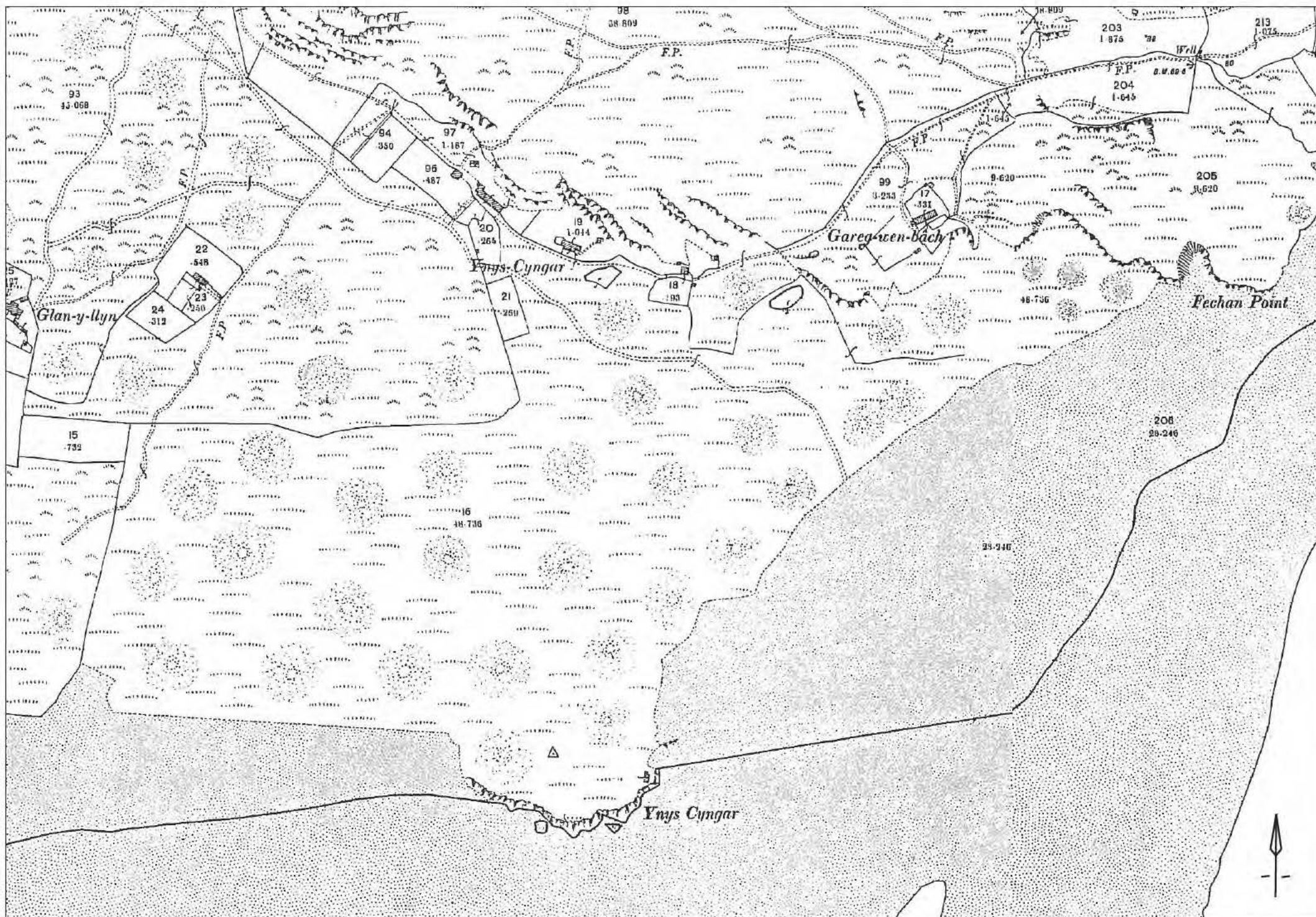


Figure 4: Second Edition 25" Ordnance Survey Map of Ynys Cyngar XLII.3 (1900). Scale 1:4000

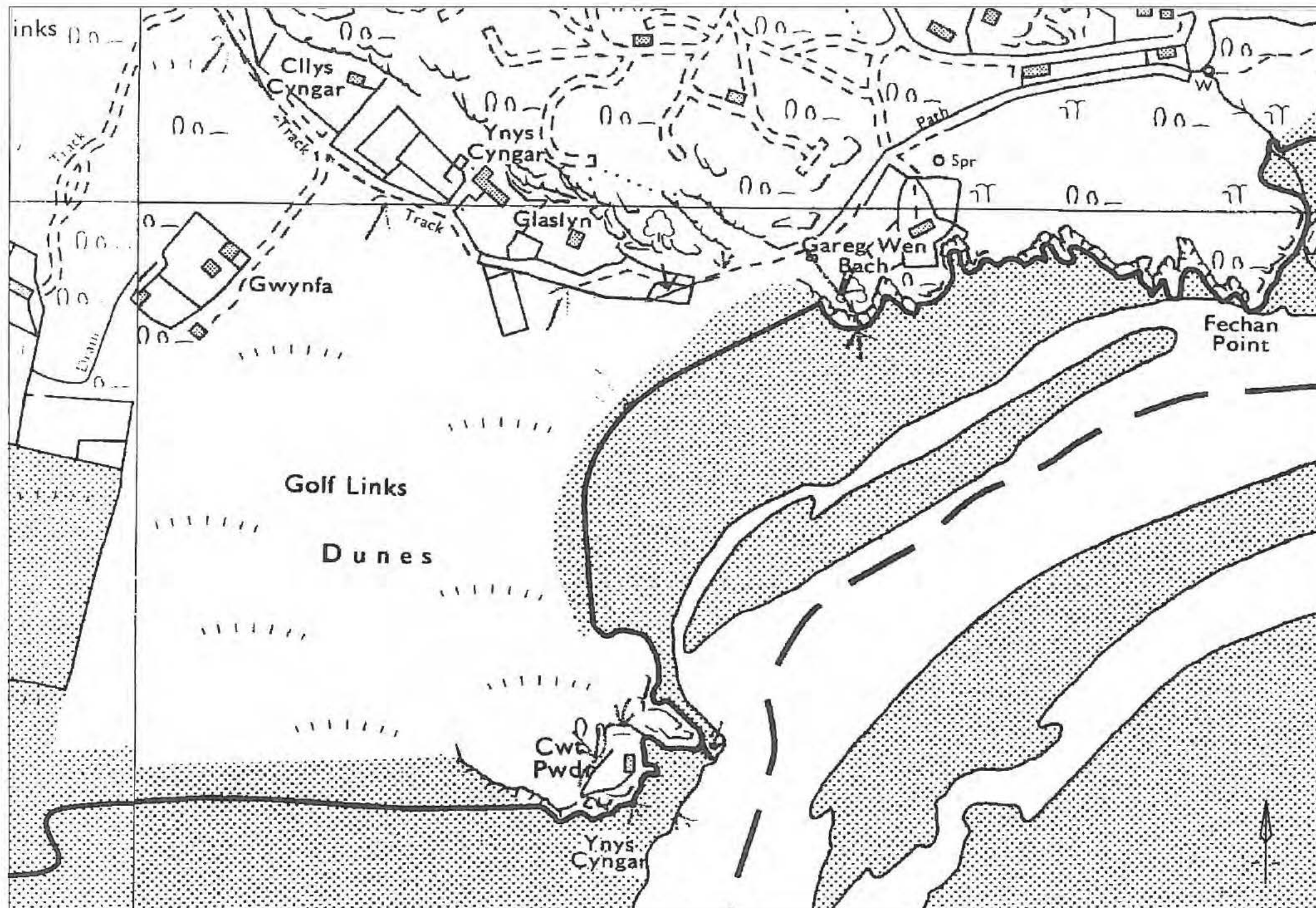


Figure 6: 1:10000 Ordnance Survey Map of Ynys Cyngar SH53NE (1976). Scale 1:4000. © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number AL 100020895



Plate 1: Ynys Cyngar: Limekiln: View From the south-east



Plate 2: Former Powder house at Ynys Cyngar



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