
Morfa Harlech Harlech



Harlech by A Robertson 1786
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Archaeological Assessment

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Morfa Harlech

Harlech

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Morfa Harlech

Harlech

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MORFA HARLECH, HARLECH, GWYNEDD

1. INTRODUCTION

This report contains the results of an archaeological assessment undertaken for Cadw as part of a programme of work to interpret the lower gate (the water gate) at Harlech Castle and the associated lands at Morfa Harlech. It builds on a project undertaken in 2008-9 which concentrated on the area of land immediately below the castle water gate.

1.1 Aims of the project

The aim of the project is to interpret the development of the landscape at Morfa Harlech, and to clarify the method by which boats may have originally reached the castle water gate.

1.2 Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to the following for help during the course of the project: Rhian Parry (Adnabod Ardudwy); Jeremy Ashbee (English Heritage); John Kenyon (NMGW); Mike Yates (Cadw); Environment Agency.

2. METHODOLOGY

This project continues and incorporates a former project undertaken in advance of re-development of the lower carpark at Harlech Castle. In addition to the desk-based assessment already undertaken (GAT Report 774) the following tasks have been carried during the project:

- The information from a geophysical survey undertaken within the carpark has been incorporated
- The information from trial trenching within the carpark by EAS has been incorporated
- LIDAR information supplied by Environment Agency has been processed and examined
- A more extensive aerial photograph search has been undertaken
- Contacts have been made with Aberystwyth and Bangor Universities concerning coastal studies
- A more complete record of field names has been compiled with help from Rhian Parry

3. LOCATION AND TOPOGRAPHY (Fig 1 – 2)

This study is concerned with Morfa Harlech, one of two expanses of Morfa (the other being Morfa Dyffryn) which lie at the north end of Cardigan Bay, and form the coast edge between the Dwyryd estuary in the north and the Mawddach estuary to the south. Morfa Harlech is triangular in shape, and measures some 6Km north to south and 5Km east to west along the north the edge. The west side of the triangle is formed by the coast edge, the east side by the rising edge of the Harlech Dome (which marks the original shoreline), and the north side by the Dwyryd estuary. The castle and borough of Harlech lie at the south point of the triangle. The castle is sited on a dramatic rock outcrop that is part of the Harlech Dome, but sits slightly seaward of the rest of the cliff edge.

The Morfa is, in general, very low lying, most of it below 10m OD, with the exception of small islands, of which the largest is Ynys, on the north edge of the Morfa, and on which stands the church of Llanfihangel y Traethau. Lasynys, birthplace of the writer Ellis Wynne, is smaller and located on the east edge. Also lying above the floor of the Morfa are the sand dunes which now divide the Morfa from the sea along the west coast.

The geomorphological model argued by Steers (1964, 132-6) and more recently by May (2003, 449-53) is that the area that was to become the Morfa originally lay within the tidal estuary of the Dwyryd. The original coastline, or south-east edge of the estuary, is marked by the rising Cambrian rocks of the Harlech Dome, whilst Ynys was an island within the mouth of the estuary. The remaining area of the Morfa lay under water, or within tidal waters. A shingle ridge developed north from Harlech, around

which sand dunes developed. The date of this is uncertain, but development of the ridge is likely to have started in prehistoric times. Between the shingle ridge and the former shoreline an area of salt marsh developed. This was fed by tidal ingress either side of Ynys. When the castle was built in the late 13th century tidal waters or channels through the salt marsh allowed access to the water gate. This access may have been around the north end of the developing shingle ridge, which in turn would have sheltered the castle water gate from the sea. As the shingle ridge, and in particular the sand dunes developed, so access to the castle by boat became impossible. In his conclusion, May (*ibid*, 453) states 'Morfa Harlech is the result of several phases of as yet undated spit growth, and the progressive sedimentation and land-claim of the area between the beach and the former rocky sea cliff upon which Harlech Castle stands'.

The west side of the Morfa, inland of the sand dunes, remained an area of salt marsh, known as Harlech Marsh, until the Enclosure Act of 1806, when defensive sea banks were built at Ty Gwyn to the west of Ynys to control tidal waters, and the former marsh was sub-divided into large square or rectangular fields. The east side of the Morfa, however, as discussed below, had long been drained and enclosed to form a field system, possibly as early as the 14th century. The general drainage of the Morfa flows from south-west to north-east, and whilst the Morfa is criss-crossed by a grid of small drains, three principal drains cross the area and merge before discharging into the Afon Dwyrdd alongside Afon Glyn. It is probable that these form a critical part of the medieval enclosure of the Morfa. On aerial photographs it is possible to trace shadows of former marsh creeks that lay along the tidal reaches towards the castle in between these drains.

Attempts have been made by Institute of Geography & Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University, to date the growth of the sand dunes that define the west edge of the Morfa. Luminescence dating techniques were used to date the deposition of sediments within the sand dune belt. Sixteen samples were taken from 4 cores collected along a 3.2Km N-S transect. The results show that the sediments were deposited during the period from ~100 to 500 years ago. Though this date does not necessarily reflect the origins of sand deposition on the coast, it does reflect a period of increased movement of sand as witnessed elsewhere within Europe during the late medieval period (Pers comm Dr Sarah Davies, IGRES, following work undertaken by H Wynne).

4. HISTORIC BACKGROUND

Though the references within the *Mabinogion* to Harlech (Jones and Jones 1949, 25) suggest a site of some significance prior to Edward I locating his castle here, there is no archaeological evidence for settlement pre-dating 1283, other than hints provided by the find of a gold torque, and a find of Roman coins (Bowen and Gresham 1967, 124 and 259). There is, however, a wealth of sites within, and finds from, the marginal uplands that fringe the Harlech Dome, which reveal the presence of a flourishing population in the area from Neolithic times to the present (see Bowen and Gresham 1967, *passim*).

The history of the castle has been related on numerous occasions, most explicitly by Taylor (1974). It need only be stated here that the castle was built between 1283 and 1289 as part of Edward I's conquest of Wales following the death of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd in 1282, and the capture of Dafydd, his brother, in 1283. The borough was founded at the same time, and lay on level ground to the south and east of the castle. The castle is based around the gatehouse, with an inner and outer ward, and an outer moat on the south and east sides. The principal references, in date order, are Clark (1875); Hughes (1913); Peers (1921-2); Simpson (1940); Taylor (1974); and Taylor (2002). A selection of medieval documents relating to Harlech was collated by Wynne (1846; 1848).

In 1294 the castle was besieged during the revolt of Madog ap Llywelyn, and had to be eventually relieved by sea, as was Criccieth and Aberystwyth.

The castle was taken by Glyndwr's forces in 1404, and held by Owain until 1409. Though the castle and borough were damaged in the Glyndwr wars, the castle was home, for a short while, to Queen Margaret of Anjou in 1460, and was held by its Welsh constable Dafydd ab Ieuan ab Einion for the Lancastrians until the siege of 1468, when it succumbed to the Yorkists led by the Herberts of Raglan.

There is no record of any maintenance being carried out at the castle after this period, and it is likely it was never fully repaired after the damage occasioned when it was held by Glyndwr. It saw no more

military action until the Civil War. The castle was, however, used for various municipal and judicial functions (the Merioneth Assizes were held here, and it was strongly argued that keeping them at the castle would ensure the castle was, at least in part, maintained). In 1644 the castle was held for the King by Colonel William Owen of Brogyntyn. It eventually fell to the parliamentarians in March 1647, the last royalist stronghold to be lost.

The castle remained in Crown ownership, and was transferred from the Office of Woods to the Office of Works in 1914.

The medieval borough was always small, and was inconveniently placed for trade or industry. It occupied a narrow terrace south and east of the castle where the rocky and uneven nature of the site make it unlikely it was ever laid out in regular burgage plots, and there is no evidence it was ever walled. The Subsidy Roll of 1292-3 included 12 townsmen, many of whom had played a significant role in the building of the castle. The 1305/6 account roll refers to 24½ burgage plots and a royal mill beneath the castle. The number of plots had risen to 29¼ by 1312/13, and the borough lands to 123 acres, with a further 46 acres added in that year. In 1316, following a petition to the king, the burgesses were granted the escheat lands of Ardudwy, which included lands in Nancol. Lasynys, Trawsfynydd, Llanaber, Llanddwywe and Llanenddwyn. A new mill was built in 1316/17. Between the early 14th century and the early 15th century it is possible to envisage Harlech as a small but successful borough town, with sufficient lands and resources to maintain its status. Court sessions were held within the castle or within the adjacent shire hall, and we know a chapel lay within the borough close to the castle. Markets and fairs were held on the green outside the castle gate, alongside the shire hall.

5. THE CASTLE WATER GATE

The castle is largely built from local grit stone, though limestone from Anglesey and freestone from Egryn was being shipped in, as was iron and steel from Chester (Taylor 1974, 358-9). The workforce, at its height in the summer of 1286, was over 900 strong, and food was imported by boat. Access to the sea was, therefore, crucial to the successful construction of the castle. However, both castle and borough were built some 50m above sea level, and there could be no development of a bustling harbour in front of the town as developed at Conwy, Beaumaris and Caernarfon. The usual advantages of transporting by sea were severely curtailed when it meant carrying all goods from the castle dock up a narrow stepped path some 150m long and rising some 50m along its length.

Nonetheless, a harbour of sorts must have developed alongside the water gate, and it has been suggested that the two ordinance platforms on the southern cliffs were built for cranes or sheerlegs to hoist supplies up from by the water gate (King and Kenyon 2001, 390). There must also, from the very beginning, have been a way from the base of the rock up to the castle along which building materials and other goods were carried. However in 1289 Ralf de Ocle was paid £124 15s 11d for building the path from the sea to the castle and its accompanying wall (*pro passu de mare usque castrum et pro muro* PRO E101/501/25 no. 63).

Further work was undertaken following the 1294/5 uprising, when the outer wall around the castle rock was built from the north-east tower to the water gate (Taylor 1974, 364-5). The document states 'and in the outgoing and expenses which the said Robert laid out on the king's order immediately after the war was settled, in building a wall of stone and lime around a rock adjoining the said castle, and for building anew in the said castle a gate facing the sea, in the manner of a tower' (PRO E368 76m 8d; translation by Jeremy Ashbee). The gate facing the sea is probably the present water gate. To what extent this replaced an earlier gate is not known, though the implication is certainly that the water gate was rebuilt at this time (note that if correct this contradicts the phase plan given in the Cadw guide (Taylor 2002)).

A survey of the castle undertaken in 1564 describes the outer wall and path from the sea as follows: 'There is a wall stronglie buylte upon the rock, beginning at the debtor's towre, discending in compassing the rock, to the wey leading from the marsh up to the castle on thother side, which wall is in length cxxxv yerdes. The way from the marshe, extending from thende of the said wall, where hath bene a drawen bridge, to issew forthe horsemen or footemen, is forced upon the side of the rocke, having a strong wall towards the sea, being in length to another draw bridge, c yerds, and from the

bridge to the castle wall xxxv yerds. So as the said wey ascendeth, and is in bredth iiii yerdes.' (Wynne 1846, 253). It is noteworthy that the 'way from the sea' has now become the 'way from the marsh'. The castle is clearly shown as landlocked on Speed's map of 1610, though he appears to show the 1295 path from the north-east tower descending on to the marsh, and the 'way from the marsh' is indicated at the upper end by a straight length of wall. They are represented diagrammatically, however, and are not an accurate representation.

Clark (1875, 110) provides the earliest clear description of the water gate. He says 'near this point is the lower water-gate, a regular postern, in a small rectangular shoulder in the wall. A roadway of about five or six yards long, cut in the rock, rises from the marsh ten or twelve feet, and upon it, in front of the portal, was a drawbridge with a pit twelve feet deep, and within the portal a short shoulder-headed passage closed apparently by a door, but without any portcullis. Beyond this is a flight of open stairs niched in the curtain ascended to an embattled platform over the gate'.

Hughes (1913, 313) states the pit was filled up, and the roadway part filled-in with debris. The roadway down from the gate to the marsh had been removed. Peers (1921) does not describe the gate in detail. No subsequent detailed description of the water-gate has been found, nor of the restoration work undertaken by the Ministry of Works. A large scale drawing of the gate by Hughes, the original of the small plan reproduced in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (1913, 313), is in the Welsh Office files held by the NMR, and sketch plans of 1923 and 1924 are also in the file, implying work was being undertaken at that date, including the clearing out of the drawbridge pit. Work to the repair of steps and paving of the 'way from the marsh' was 'approaching completion' in 1931 (Cadw registry files at NMR, see also section on the carpark below where this memo is discussed further).

The water gate today

The water-gate is a small tower with a rectangular corbelled passage on the ground floor, and open steps around the inside of the west wall to a wall-walk, or platform, above. The outer wall is angled to the west for approximately 4m to allow room for the steps, after which the wall is angled back for another 4m, and this length forms the outer wall of the gate-house. The corbelled passage is just under 2m wide, and had a door across the outer opening. Immediately outside the door is a deep drawbridge pit, also corbelled on the west side. At the base are two low segmental arches, possibly for drainage and/or access to the pit. Only a few voussoirs remain of the outer arch, and the inner arch looks as though it has been rebuilt. By the outer door of the gatehouse the main defensive wall is angled back slightly to provide a small nook to the east of the gate, before continuing north. It has been suggested (Taylor 2002, 31) that the nook may be connected with the former presence of a dock outside the gate.

Cut into the natural rock below the water gate is a slight levelled area or terrace. This is now overlain by the current steps leading from the carpark, however it almost certainly marks the remains of the 'roadway' mentioned by Clark (1875, 110), leading down from the gate.

6. THE LOWER CAR PARK

The lower car park lies alongside the water-gate at the foot of the castle rock.. It measures some 94m long by 12m wide, and lies alongside a road of uncertain date, but certainly present in 1810 (UWB Mostyn 8605), and probably constructed as part of the post-enclosure Act works. The car park is shown on the 1810 map as two enclosures labelled 24 and 25, signifying they formed new enclosures created as part of the award within the area described as 'Harlech Marsh in the parish of Llandanwg'. Plot 24 was owned by John Lloyd Thomas and plot 25 by Rev'd Francis Parry.

The implication is that prior to the award the carpark formed part of the open marsh, and, although not entirely clear, it is also indicated as such on the 1771 map (UWB Mostyn 8679). On the tithe map of 1841 the plot (labelled 701) is called 'Tan y Castell' and belonged to John Foulkes, who owned the Blue Lion in Harlech. There is little change between 1841 and 1889, the date of the first edition 25" OS map. The map shows the area undivided, with an open stream running through it. The stream still emerges from the garden which forms the north edge of the carpark, shortly after which it merges with the stream which flows down the north side of castle rock before flowing under the carpark. This forms part of the Harlech Drain, one of the principal drains through the Morfa. Its location so close to the castle water gate is of interest as a potential waterway, though it does not currently carry sufficient water to allow boats along it. The railway was built along the north side of the road in 1867. The

houses south of the carpark, Isallt and Castle Villa, were built by 1889, though are unlikely to be much older.

Information on the development of the car park from the fields developed in 1810 can be found in a sequence of government memo's which discuss the use of the area as a car park and access point for the castle (see GAT Report 774 for a full list of these references). These show that a carpark was created in 1971 from former meadow land, and that at that time the water was piped and the meadow given a metalled surface.

A geophysical survey and trial excavations were subsequently undertaken within the car park (Terradat 2009; Laws and Brooks 2009). The geophysical survey made use of magnetic survey, electromagnetic survey and ground penetrating radar. These surveys identified the main drain running through the site and a number of other potential anomalies. The latter were examined by the excavation of five trial trenches. The piped drain was identified within the trenches, but no other significant features were found. It was concluded that sands had developed over a former marsh. The marsh deposits occurred at a depth of 1.3 to 2.5m below ground level. No evidence was found for the presence of a canal or harbour, though it was thought such evidence may lie at a lower depth than examined.

7. THE BOROUGH LANDS AND MORFA HARLECH (Fig's 3 - 9)

In addition to the burgage tenements and plots within the town of Harlech, the borough was granted lands amounting to some 90 acres, later increased to 123 acres, and later to 169 acres. In 1316 the endowment was considerably increased with lands elsewhere in Merionethshire (Smith 2001, 228). The initial endowment was not large, and the lands have not been systematically mapped. Nonetheless later documentation, of the 16th and 17th centuries, makes it clear the borough owned lands on the Morfa. These references coincide with strong evidence for the presence of a medieval field system surviving on parts of the Morfa.

There is a sharp east-west divide of the Morfa roughly along the present A496 road. To the west lay the area known as 'Harlech Marsh' – lands only reclaimed and enclosed following the Enclosure Award of 1806. An exception to this is at the farm called Morfa, where a small block of fields, marked on an estate map of 1771 (UWB Mostyn 8679) had been reclaimed from the marsh. The regular square shape of these fields, however, which differ from the earlier fields to the east, suggests this area had not long been enclosed when the map was drawn up.

The medieval field system consists of a series of long rectangular strips. The strips can be identified on maps and aerial photographs, and many survive as fields today. They are clearly different from the 1806 enclosures to the west. They can also be traced by the presence of anglicised field names which occur in documents of 15th and 16th century date, and are identifiable on the 1841 tithe map. These names include 'acra' for 'acre' and 'rhwd' for rood (see Jones 1954 and Parry forthcoming for further information). The names tend to occur in groups. The 'acrau' group lies towards the centre of the Morfa, whilst the 'rhwd' group lies north and west of these. Another group of strips are termed 'cors'. There is documentary evidence these were used as turbary. Another group south-east of Lasynys refer to 'hen gors', whilst north-west of Lasynys many of the fields have 'gweirglodd' (= meadow) as part of the name. These areas are identified on figure 1.

It has been suggested (Parry forthcoming) that the 'acra' names may be the earliest divisions, and the 'rhwd' names denote a second period of drainage and enclosure, though both are of medieval date. Lasynys, which would always have been an island, may have formed part of the 1316 grant of lands (Smith 2001, 228), though the extent of the Morfa lands which accompanied Lasynys has not been identified. Another area of higher land lay at Glan y Mor, south of the large island called Ynys. Glan y Mor, also called 'le Towynhen' is referred to in 1316 (Parry forthcoming) and 'acrau' names are found in that area also.

Along the east side of the A496 is a strong sea bank, now much denuded in places, but clearly visible at the north end by Pen y Waen, and at its south end close to Harlech. It can be traced for its full length on aerial photographs. The bank is undated, but would appear to pre-date the 1806 enclosure, and it marks the west edge of the medieval field system.

The 'acra' field names are concentrated within a relatively narrow strip occupying some 60 acres, and now bisected diagonally by the railway. The strip is approximately 220 yds wide. This is a standard measurement for an acre, which was typically measured as one furlong long and four rods wide (220 yds x 22 yds). These, however, were English measurements. A comparable Welsh *erw* (acre) was 90 yds long and 27 or 36 yds wide (Gresham 1951), though many local variations existed. This width of 220 yds may indicate, therefore, that the area was laid out according to English measurements, and by or for the burgesses of Harlech.

A part of the Morfa has been surveyed by LIDAR, which is capable of identifying small topographical changes. The results of the survey were kindly made available by the Environment Agency. This includes the area of the medieval system. The survey shows that the 'acrau' and 'rhwd' strips lie on marginally higher land than the land occupied by the 'cors' strips to the east. This helps explain the location of the fields above the lower lying turbary to the east and west of the salt marsh.

8. SEA ACCESS TO THE CASTLE WATERGATE

It seems likely that prior to the 1806 enclosure sea access on to the Morfa may have occurred either side the higher ground of Ynys. If we examine the access point west of Ynys, it can be seen that this was largely blocked by a line of sand dunes running south to the lower corner of the Morfa. The sea was therefore only able to gain access through a relatively narrow opening, though certainly sufficient to supply an area of salt marsh. However, the date of the growth of the dunes is not known, though we do know that sand incursions occurred during stormy weather at Newborough in 1324, and that the increasing severity of storms in the 14th century led to an increase in sand incursions along the west coast of Wales. Access to the castle from the west side, perhaps through an area of salt marsh, would have been feasible prior to the establishment of the dune system. Steers (1964) suggests the dunes grew around a shingle ridge which developed northwards, though the date of this development is not known. However, if the sand dunes developed or increased in the 14th century, it is possible to envisage sea access to the castle in the 13th century, which was subsequently blocked in the 14th century by sand incursions and an accreting shoreline.

East of the high land at Ynys was an estuary into which, certainly by the 18th century, all the drain water from Harlech flowed, and this must have been tidal nearly as far as Harlech. The Act of 1806 resulted in the closure of this estuary, and enclosure of new lands followed. Infilled creeks within former salt marsh are visible on aerial photographs. However if the field system on the Morfa has been correctly identified as being part of the original grant of land to the Borough, the salt marsh had already been partly reclaimed by the 13th century, though was still probably open up to the boundary between Llanfihangel y Traethau and Llandanwg, where it narrowed to a river.

With no sea access available on the west side of Ynys the only boat access into the morfa and towards the castle and town of Harlech would be along the rivers which flowed into the Dwyrdd estuary east of Ynys. This was the site of Ty Gwyn y Gamlas, a small harbour, which still contains a good example of a dock-side warehouse of three storeys. A 16th century house formerly lay alongside, though it was damaged and taken down in 1927 (Lloyd 1987, 47). Shipbuilding was undertaken here, and the harbour was painted by both Turner and Varley. Gamlas can be translated as 'canal', and it has been suggested that a canal lay through the marsh from here to the castle (Lloyd 1987, 38-9). There is little evidence for this, but certainly it is feasible, and what subsequently becomes the Harlech Drain runs from Ty Gwyn y Gamlas direct to the foot of the water-gate.

In a Jury verdict dated 1650 it is said 'the bailiffs of the said liberties [of Harlech] were accustomed to have, & had, of every ship, or other vessels, lading of any kind of grain or salt, unlading, or selling the same, at Bermouth, Machres, & Gamlas, one Winchester measure, to be used in selling and venteing the said lading' (reprinted in Wynne 1847, 54). The three harbours associated with Harlech at this time were, therefore, Barmouth, which was well to the south, Mochras a short distance south at Pensarn, and Ty Gwyn y Gamlas to the north. In 1833, after the enclosure award had prevented access further up the river, it was said of the latter 'vessels of small burden can ascend the river as far as Ty Gwyn y Gamlas, within a few hundred yards of the church, where they receive or discharge their freight' (Lewis 1833, LLA).

We may, therefore, though there is very little evidence to confirm this, be able to identify a sequence where sea access to the castle from south-west of Ynys was replaced in the 14th century by river access from Ty Gwyn. If Speed's map can be relied upon, then by 1610 this had also ceased, and no access by water was possible. This is also implied in the 1564 document, which describes the 'way from the marsh', thereby implying the path led to the marsh only. It is possible, of course, that the estuary from Ty Gwyn was used to transport goods part way to the castle, though no potential unloading point has been identified. Following the Act of 1806 and the construction of sea banks across the estuary this would no longer have been possible, though Ty Gwyn continued to be used as a harbour.

9. LIST OF SOURCES CONSULTED

9.1 Maps

8.1.1 National Library of Wales

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B.II Survey of Pencraig and Cae Nest, property of O A Poole, R Owen 1770.

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Sale Catalogue 177 Cors y Gedol Estate 1849 Map of Town of Harlech

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Other

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Map 10210 Plan of Building Land at Harlech

Tithe map of Llandanwg 1841

8.1.2 University of Wales, Bangor

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Mostyn 8605 Map and Survey of Harlech marsh in the pa of Llandanwg and Llanfihangel y Traethau. 1810.

Mostyn 8606 Map and Survey of Sir T Mostyn Bart Allotments of common in the pa of Llanfair. 1815.

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8.1.3 Gwynedd Archives – Dolgellau (Z)

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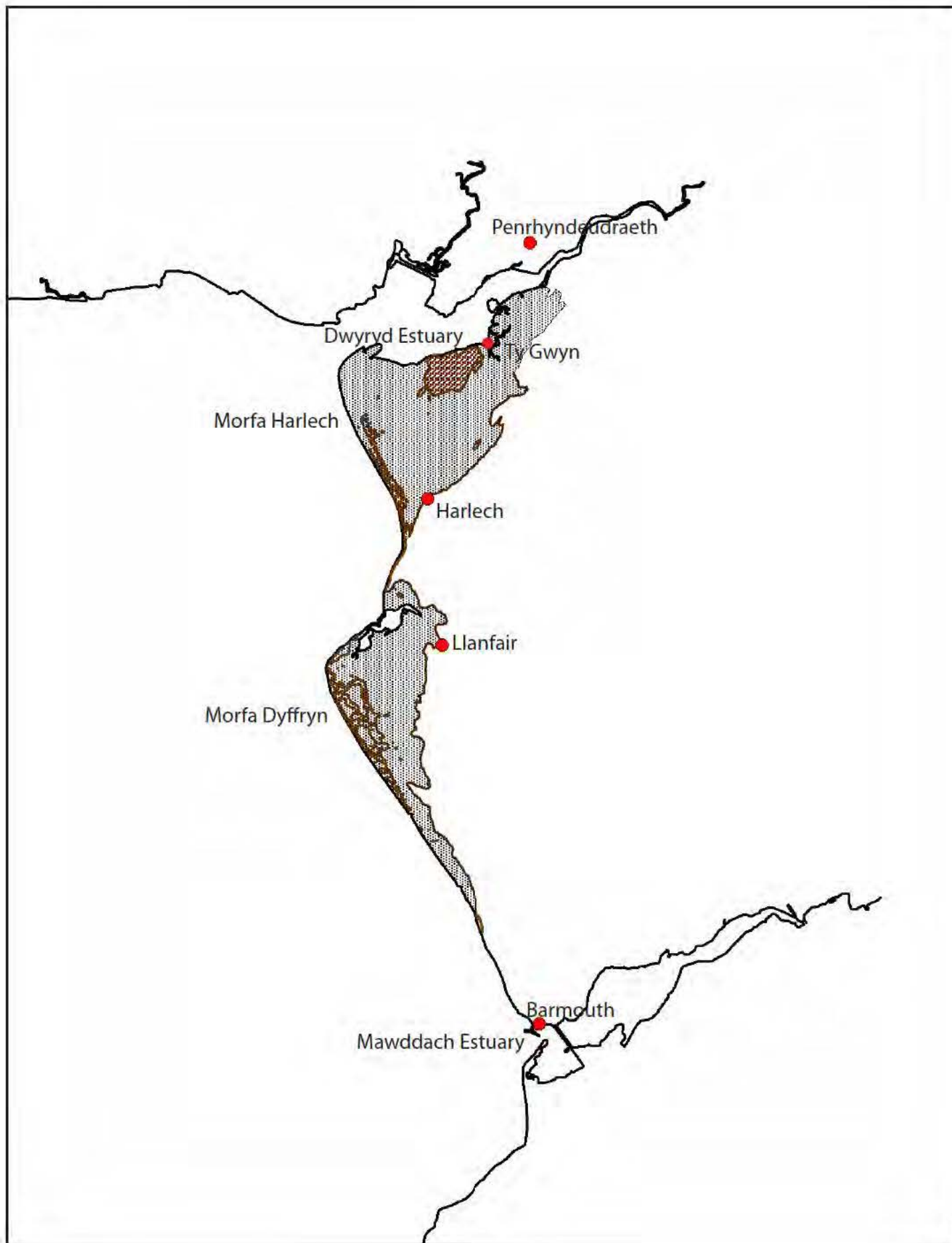


Figure 1: Location of Morfa Harlech and Morfa Dyffryn

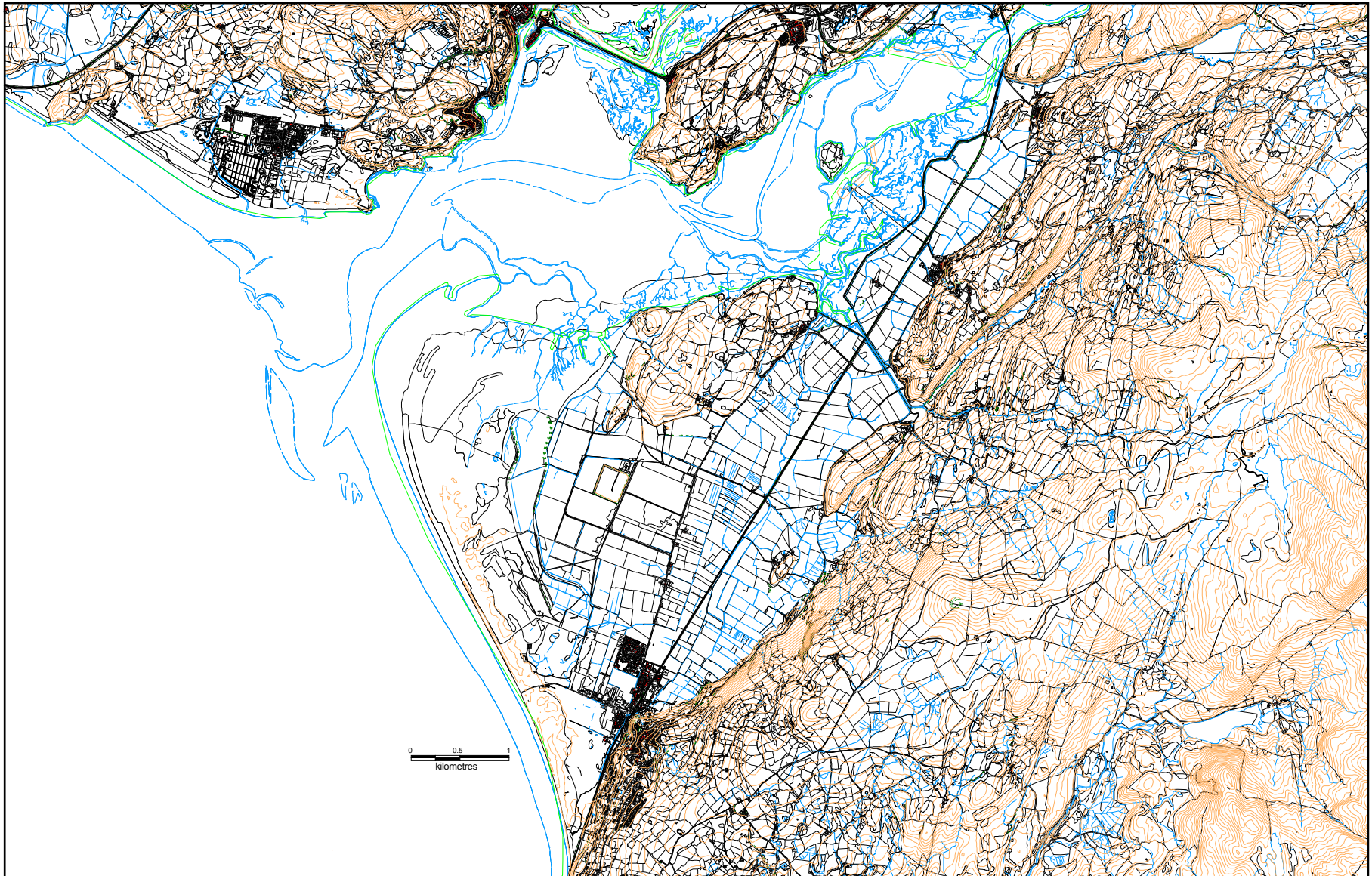


Figure 2: Contour survey of Morfa Harlech

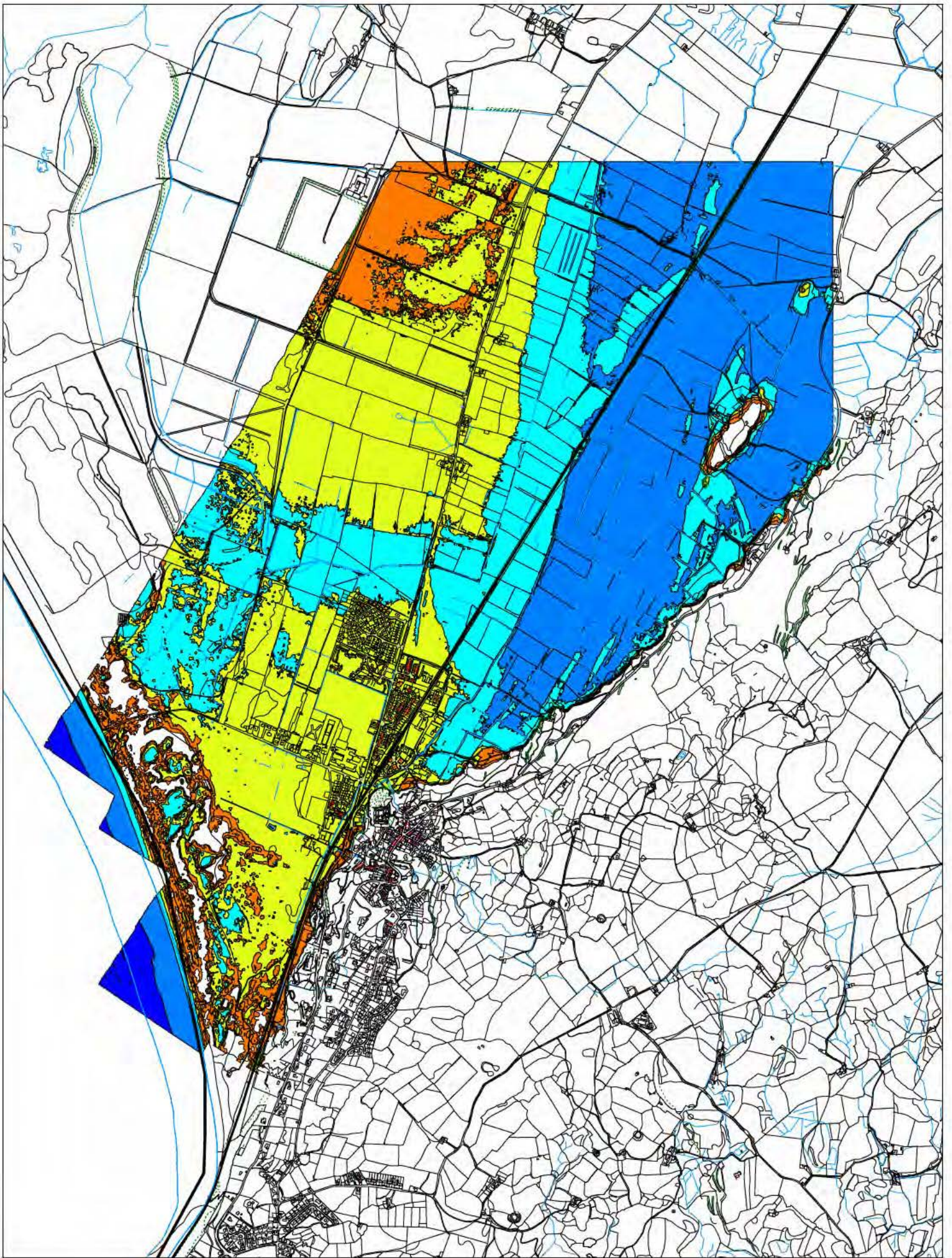


Figure 3: LIDAR Survey showing height graduation (red=highest; dark blue = lowest)
(courtesy of Environment Agency)



Figure 4: Aerial photograph of Morfa (2006). The medieval strips in the centre contrast with the 1806 enclosure plots to the west.

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Figure 5: Aerial photograph of medieval field system cut through by the railway.

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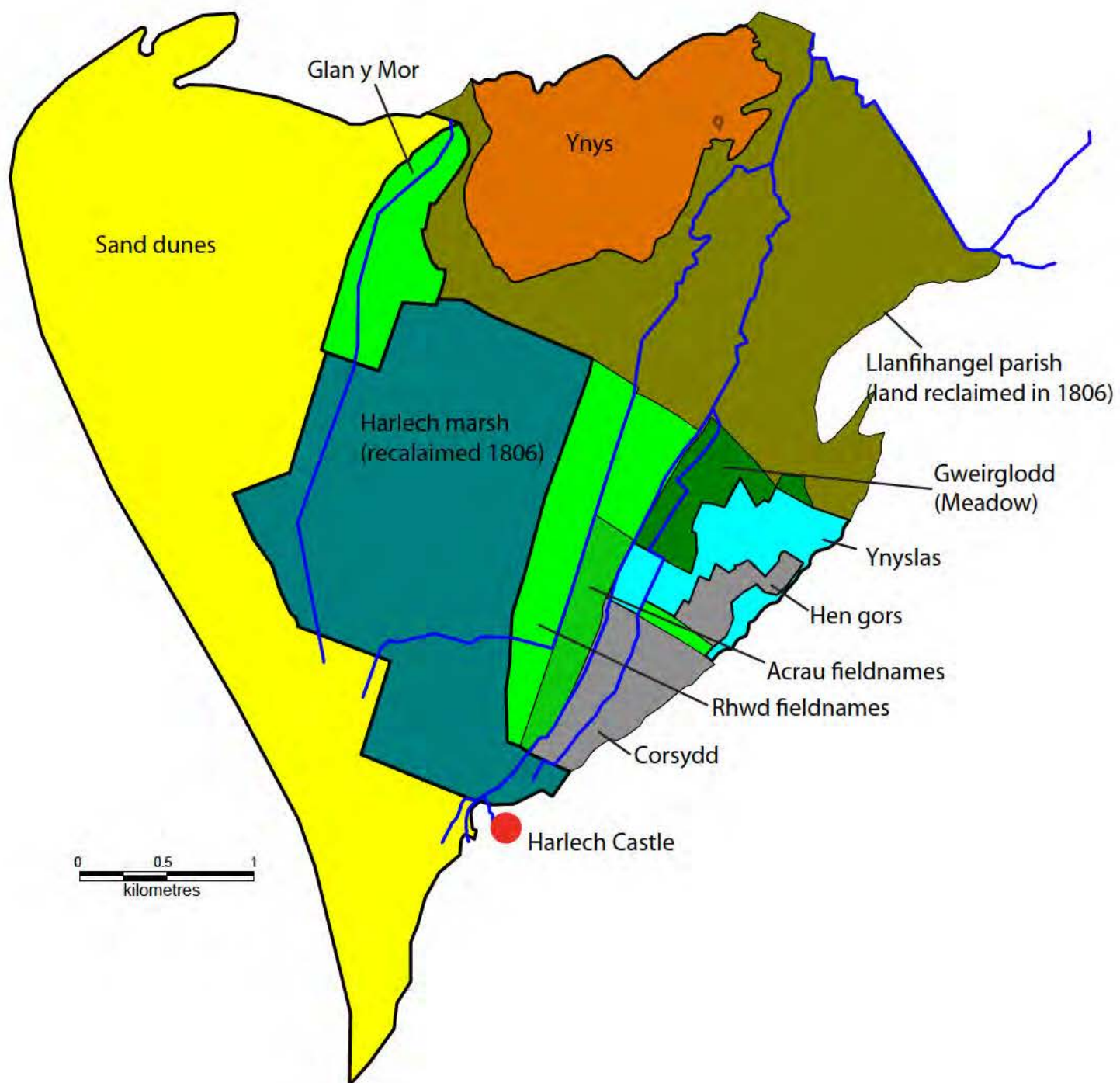


Figure 6: Map showing division of lands on the Morfa and the location of the medieval field system (acrau, rhwd and corsydd names)

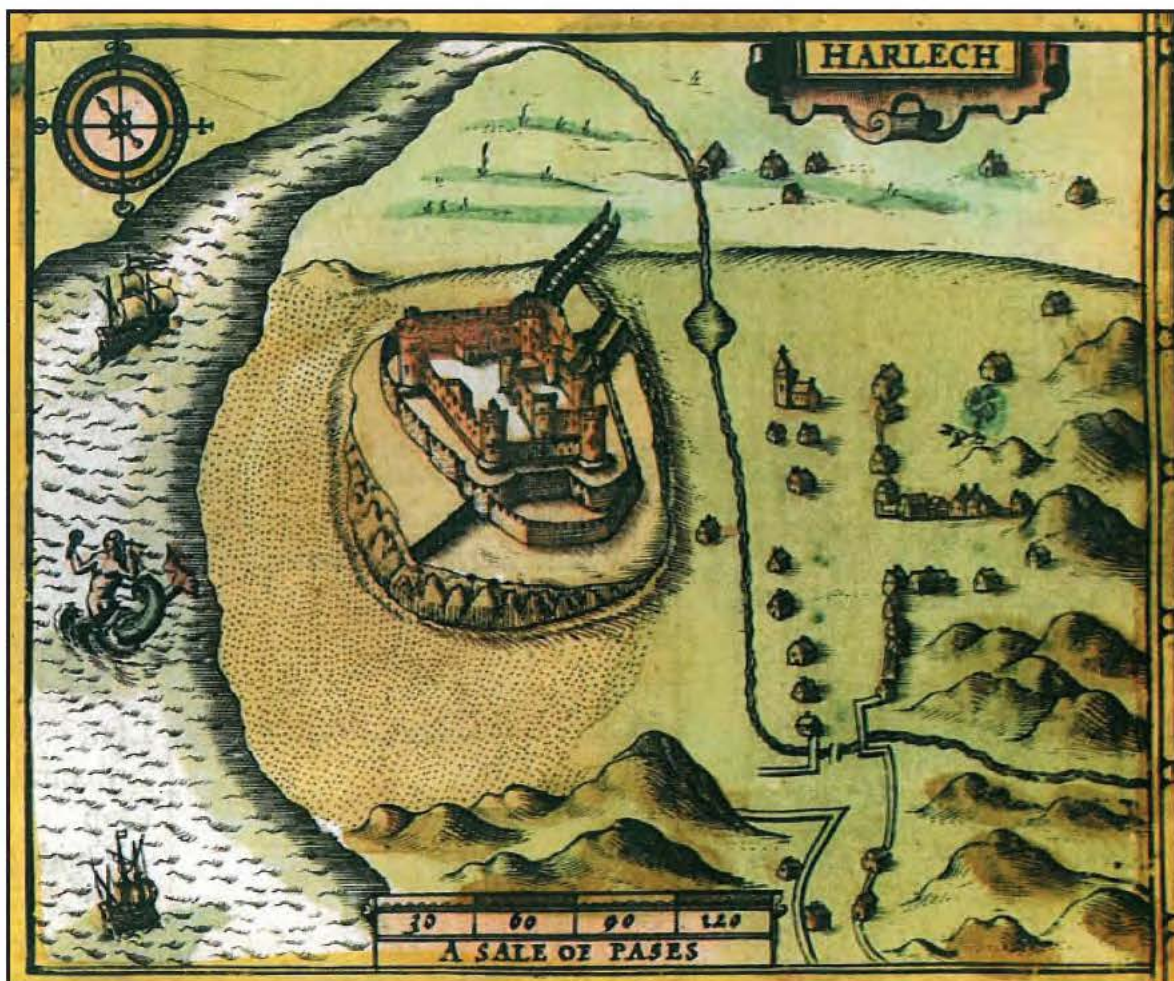




Fig 9: Enclosure map dated 1868 based on Tithe map (PRO/LRRO/2689)



Figure 10: Ty Gwyn by Thomas Allom mid-19th century
British Museum AN298105001



Figure 11: Ty Gwyn by William Turner 1798
(Sketchbook, Tate Gallery, London)



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