
Afon Wnion Ground Investigation Works: **Dolgellau, Gwynedd**



Archaeological Watching Brief

GAT Project No. 2119

Report No. 876

July, 2010

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AFON WNION, DOLGELLAU

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

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CONTENTS	Page
Summary	2
1. Introduction	2
2. Specification and Project Design	2
3. Requirements of the Design Brief	5
4. Methodology	6
5. Results of the Watching Brief	6
6. Conclusions	8
7. Archive	8
8. Bibliography and Sources	8

FIGURES

Fig. 1 Test Pit Location Map, shown on client map B1362900/GI/100 (Rev. 01). Test pits not excavated shown in red.

Fig. 2 Nannau Estate Map of 1794, showing the Marian Mawr as 'Dolgelley Green', and as land owned by Griffith Howel Vaughan Vaughan (Gwynedd Archives ZM/3667)

Fig. 3 The Marian Mawr in 1820, from the Survey of the Llwyn Estate (Gwynedd Archives ZM/86)

PLATES

Plate 1 Site Location

Plate 2 Test Pit 11 under excavation

Plate 3 Test Pit 14 after excavation

Plate 4 Test Pit 8 after excavation

AFON WNION, DOLGELLAU (G2119)

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF – Ground Investigation Programme

Summary

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (GAT) was commissioned by the Environment Agency to provide an archaeological watching brief during ground investigation (GI) works within the Afon Wnion floodplain, Dolgellau, Gwynedd (centred on NGR SH73471797) in advance of a proposed flood alleviation scheme.

A total of 9 trial pits were monitored. No archaeological activity was identified within the confines of any example. The GI programme did inform the varying geological activity across the site, including the location of river deposits (pebbles and large cobbles) and alluvia and material suitable for use in bank construction. In addition to the 9 test pits monitored a further 5 test pits were cancelled due to their location being close to existing gas mains. This evidence recovered may assist in the understanding of exposed stratigraphy during any future archaeological mitigation phases of the project.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The GI (ground investigation) area was located within an existing sports ground, south of Afon Wnion and the flood plain to the east of this area on both sides of Afon Wnion and the A470 (T) Road, as indicated on client drawing **B1362900/GI/100 (Rev. 01)**, and centred on NGR SH 73471797. The principal contractor for the works was Jacobs, White Young Green (WYG) sub-contracting for the groundworks. The works were carried out for the Environment Agency in advance of a proposed flood alleviation scheme.

The site is located on the flood plain of the Afon Wnion, at the north eastern edge of the town of Dolgellau, Gwynedd (Fig. 1).

A total of 14 trial pits were originally proposed, but due to close proximity of two gas pipelines 5 test pits were cancelled, these were all located at the western side of the site.

A mitigation brief was not prepared for this work by **Snowdonia National Park Authority (SNPA)** for this stage of the works.

Reference was also made during works to the guidelines specified in Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Brief (Institute for Archaeologists, 1994, rev. 2001).

2.0 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Geology and Topography

The solid geology of the Dolgellau region consists of intrusive igneous formations and Cambrian imbedded pale grey quartzose siltstone and silty mudstone with Dolgellau black siltstone and mudstone of the Mawddach Group in the Wnion valley (BGS 1982). These are overlain by Quaternary glacial till and thick accumulations of alluvium (Allen and Jackson 1985).

The confluence of the Mawddach and Wnion river valleys forms a distinct natural basin situated between the southern ends of the Rhinog and Arenig Mountains and the northern flanks of Cader Idris. Above the basin floor, which is only just above sea level, the slopes rise steeply on all sides, reaching 629m above OD at the summit of Y Garn in the north-west, 400m above OD at the summit of Moel Offrwm in the north east, and 893m above OD at the summit of Cader Idris in the south. The latter dominates prospects of the basin from most directions. Between 100m and 200m above OD however, shelves of land with gentler gradients occur which have assisted communications and attracted settlement from the earliest times.

The floodplain of the river Wnion is known as the Marian Mawr, and consists of a low lying area between the bridge crossing the Wnion and the town of Dolgellau.

2.2 Prehistoric Dolgellau

In the earlier Neolithic several areas of concentrations of chambered tombs in north-west Wales demonstrate the presence of settlement nearby, but there are none close to Dolgellau, the nearest group being that in Ardudwy to the north-west. However, there are several finds of Neolithic stone axes along the valley of the Mawddach, showing that it was at least being visited, possibly exploited and settled in the Middle or later Neolithic and one such axe has been found here at Cefn Meulan, just north-east of Dolgellau.

Pollen studies of buried peat horizons in the uplands of Ardudwy show the first indications of human activity are from about 4000 BC but that there was much greater wide-scale clearance of forest in the Early Bronze Age, during the second millennium BC (Chambers and Price 1988). This expansion of settlement is illustrated in the Dolgellau area by the presence of numerous funerary and ritual monuments of the second millennium BC, of which there are 15 in the immediate area and many more close by. The most important group in this area is that at Hafod Dywyll, Islaw'r Dref, where there are seven cairns close together and this group can be regarded as a communal cemetery. However, the settlement to which the cemetery belonged is unknown and may be at some distance because the cairn group lies at the top of a pass alongside a trackway that runs east-west. Further to the west this track passes another concentration of Early Bronze Age funerary and ritual monuments at Cregennan, Arthog, including cairns, a stone circle, several standing stones and several cup-marked stones. The Cregennan area can be regarded as a funerary and ritual complex and may have been a focal centre for a wide area around. The location of the funerary monuments does not, therefore, necessarily help to identify the whereabouts of the contemporary settlement, but certainly indicates an active population within the area.

The close relation between the Cregennan and Hafod Dywyll monuments and the trackway has a parallel with another trackway and a concentration of monuments around Hengwm, Ardudwy. Both tracks head east towards the Mawddach valley and it has been suggested that the northern track crossed the Mawddach close to where Dolgellau is now, joining the southern route to continue inland towards the Upper Dee (Bowen and Gresham 1967, 61-2, 116). This interpretation is not supported by the distribution of bronze artefacts such as palstaves, all of which have been found quite close to the coast in this area, only appearing inland on the north side of Ardudwy, in the land lying between the Vale of Ffestiniog and the Upper Dee. The probable prehistoric route south of the Mawddach may therefore have joined the northern route to continue northwards over the Ardudwy uplands and if so the crossing of the Mawddach near Dolgellau may have been an important communication point, perhaps as the first easy crossing point on the estuary.

While the uplands in this period were cleared for pasture there is some evidence that the wealthiest settlement may have been in the areas of arable lowland. One of the largest known burial monuments of this period in North Wales is from the lowland close to Dolgellau at Pentre Farm near Cymer on the north side of the valley and so may reflect high status. The mound is about 22m diameter and 2.5m high and excavation in the 19th century suggested it was of complex construction and probably of several phases of re-use (Bowen and Gresham 1967, 93-40). There are also two high status finds of this period from close to Dolgellau, a stone battle-axe and a stone axe-hammer. Another high status object of the Middle Bronze Age has also been found, comprising a gold torc or neck-ring, from a hill south-west of Dolgellau. A bronze palstave axe-head has also been found close to the town. All these finds might suggest that there was some settlement nearby, but of direct evidence there is none and all the objects could be associated with trade routes.

The earliest known prehistoric settlement in this area is represented by several examples on the fringes of the upland above of Dolgellau, consisting of groups of small circular houses and attached fields. By analogy with other excavated examples in north-west Wales these belong to the last centuries of the first millennium BC and into the Roman period (Smith 1999). Their presence on the upland fringes may be a matter of survival and there may have been other, perhaps more affluent settlement on lower and better quality land, the remains of which have been removed by many centuries of agriculture. Possible remains of such settlement was found sealed beneath a Roman period building close to the Roman fortlet at Brithdir, 4km east of Dolgellau (White 1978, 36-8).

Other evidence of settlement here in the first millennium BC is in the form of four defended sites around the fringes of the area. These forts are set high up in strong natural defensive positions, between about 300m to 400m OD. Three lie to the north on the ridge between the Wnion and Mawddach valleys and one is to the south-west in Islaw'r Dref. There is also one lower-lying defended site on a promontory at Cymer, overlooking the Mawddach estuary. All are similar in having very prominent positions with wide viewpoints but relatively inaccessible as settlements. None have been excavated or otherwise dated and may all have been constructed not long before the Roman conquest. Only one fort, the largest, at Moel Offrwm, has evidence of much actual settlement, two are suggested to have been deliberately demolished (Bowen and Gresham 1967, 142, 153) and one, that at Islaw'r Dref, is unfinished.

2.3 Romano-British Dolgellau

The most visible Roman monuments in the landscape of Meirionydd are a series of auxiliary forts belonging to the Flavian consolidation of Roman rule in North Wales in the late 70s AD. No evidence has yet emerged for the campaigns of Paulinus (as recorded by Tacitus) culminating in the attack on Anglesey in 60 AD.

The auxiliary forts are about 17-20 km apart and would have been linked by an all-weather road system. Dr Jeffrey Davies notes that 'the garrison posts would have been mutually supporting with any serious trouble being tackled by a concentration of auxiliary regiments' (Arnold and Davies 2000, 16). He also notes that well engineered roads would have opened up the country for trade and exploitation of mineral resources (*ibid.*, 35).

The presence of a small Roman fort is noted at Brithdir, 4.8km east of Dolgellau (PRN 1546, NGR SH 77141890), on the south side of the Wnion valley. The site is on a broad natural shelf which provides a level and commanding position some 170m above sea level and about 100m above the bottom of the valley a mile to the north. There has long been a belief that a fort must be located at Dolgellau (Hemp 1949, 294), based on the identified system of Roman roads although it has not been possible to identify one as yet. The presence of a fort at Dolgellau has been suggested by several writers (e.g. Cambrian Archaeological Association 1949, 294 and Jones 1959, 208) but no hard evidence was ever uncovered and it is significant that they were all writing before the discovery of the fortlet at Brithdir (Hopewell 1997). Waddelove (1999, 190-2) suggests that these writers were correct and the street layout of Dolgellau follows the layout of a Roman fort. There is however no reason to suppose that the main streets in Dolgellau are anything other than post-medieval and Ellis (1928, ch 6) suggests an 11th century foundation. The persistence of the street plan of a Roman fort therefore seems unlikely. The recent discovery of a Roman site at Gwanas Fawr, near Cross Foxes is a most important discovery. This appears to be a hitherto unknown Roman fort at NGR SH77111645, 4km south-east of Dolgellau (Hopewell 2008). The site survives as a rectangular, bivallate earthwork, with rounded corners. The enclosure has external dimensions of 168m x 130m enclosing an area of 2.6ha. Jeffrey Davies (University of Wales, Aberystwyth) concluded that the site has all the hallmarks of a Roman auxiliary fort built of earth and timber.

The Roman roads of north-west Wales have been the subject of a Cadw project which was initiated in 2002/03 and follows on from a study of Roman fort environs. This has resulted in the identification of previously unknown or only postulated sections of Roman road. Information about these discoveries in the Dolgellau area is given below. The names given to the roads and their classification are given in Hopewell (2006). The roads seem to centre on the area which is now Dolgellau, possibly suggesting that there was a Roman presence in the area.

Roman pottery (PRN 1,577) has been found at Bryn Mainan, Dolgellau, and tile at Maes Brith (PRN 1,578). The find of various Roman coins has been noted in the vicinity of Ffynnon Fair, Dolgellau (PRN 4,115). These are recorded by Edward Lhuyd in 1695 as having included coins of the Emperors Trajan and Hadrian (RCAHMW 1921, 25).

2.4 Medieval and Later Dolgellau

The town of Dolgellau is located at upper end of Mawddach estuary, between the Wnion river and the lower slopes of Cadair Idris. Several road systems converge on a bridge-head and river which was navigable by small boats. Its location on economic frontier between sheep and cattle farming

countryside to north, and good arable lands in its vicinity, gave the town a strategic significance (Smith 2002, 233).

The layout of the town seems to encapsulate its use as a market centre for the surrounding area, for which the town was claiming a monopoly from the mid fifteenth century (Alfrey 2009, 9). The one documented medieval building in the town was Cwrt Plas yn Dre, which originated as a timber-framed hall house, but the earliest surviving buildings are likely to be of 17th century date. The distinctively haphazard street layout of the town can probably be explained by encroachment beginning at around this time on common and waste land within it by enclosing parcels of land, creating small islands of building 'colonize meandering open spaces between discrete parcels of land' (*ibid.* 9).

Leland described Dolgellau in the 1530's as the 'best village in this commote'. By the late 16th century, if not earlier, Dolgellau, bolstered by the thriving woollen industry of its neighbourhood had commenced the development which would lead to its challenge to Harlech as the true economic hub of the county' (Smith 2001, 253).

By the close of the 18th century Dolgellau was a sizeable town of around 4,000. It contained a few factories and numerous operatives, weavers, carders etc. The main product was webs, though flannel and stockings were produced in considerable quantities. Webs were subject to a virtual monopoly of the Shrewsbury Drapers Company, so all the best cloth was taken overland to Shrewsbury for sale (Lloyd 1993, 14-15; Davies 1810, 399). During 1760's control of Shrewsbury Drapers was lessened – a depot was established at Barmouth for export, but trade largely ceased on start of American War of Independence 1775.

Dolgellau church was rebuilt 1716 in classical style, although the site is a much earlier one. The tower was altered in 1809 when clock and bells were inserted. Restoration work was carried out in 1864, particularly to the chancel of the building (Davidson 2001).

Pennant (1783, 97) describes the town thus; 'The town is small; the streets disposed in a most irregular manner; but the situation is in a beautiful vale, fertile, well wooded, and embellished with numbers of seats, and watered by the river Wnion; over which, on account of its floods, is a bridge of several arches', which suggests that the Marian Mawr was subject to regular flooding. Fenton (1811) states that 'the masonry at Dolgelly merits particular notice. From time immemorial they have built with very large stones, even to the top, lifting the stones to the work from towards the middle course with an immense machine which takes above a day to erect, and worked by two men, every stone being of such a weight as to require a lever of that vast power....The lintels of doors and windows are generally of immense stones. When stones of a middling size are worked in regular courses and stones nearly of a size, they look well, as at Nanney in the new house (Fenton 1811, 94).

The flood plain of the river Wnion, between the town and the river was known as Marian Mawr, and was known in English as Dolgellau Green, on the estate maps of 1794 and 1820 (NLW MAP 7425; GAS ZM/3667; Figs. 2-3). It had long been an area of recreation, as building upon it was an impossibility due to the flood risk, and included a bowling green from the 16th century. In 1811 the Enclosure Act for the Parishes of Dolgelley and Llangelynin stated that the Marian Mawr should be held in trust by the leading citizens of the town 'for the recreation of the public'. In the 20th century the town rugby and cricket clubs settled on the Marian Mawr, and the area remains the town's recreation area, controlled by the Marian Trustees. Further areas of floodplain to the east of the town remain undeveloped also.

3.0 REQUIREMENTS OF THE DESIGN BRIEF

The design brief submitted by GAT stated that the **watching brief** should consist of the following:

- Observation of non-archaeological excavation works.
- A drawn, written and photographic record of any archaeological structures and deposits that may be revealed.
- Preparation of full archive report.

The watching brief monitored:

- Trial pits excavated by machine as part of the ground investigation work (total of 9).

4.0 METHODOLOGY

4.1. Ground Investigation Works

- All attended test pit locations were excavated with machine to a depth of either 1.0m or 3.0m to identify suitable deposits that could be used for the creation of flood prevention banks. The GI test pits were excavated under the supervision of a geologist working for the groundwork contractor, White, Young and Green (WYG), and a GAT archaeologist.

4.2 Archaeological Watching Brief

- A photographic record was maintained throughout, using a digital SLR camera set to maximum resolution.
- Notations were made of all subsurface deposits.
- The archive is held by GAT under an appropriate project number (**G2119**).

5.0 RESULTS

The location of the individual test pits monitored by GAT as an archaeological watching brief can be found in Figure 01. The *Jacobs* Proposed Exploratory Hole Location Plan (Document Ref.: B1362900/GI/100).

TP 01 – TP 05

These test pits were cancelled by the geologist from WYG, and approved for cancellation by Jacobs due to their close proximity to 2 existing underground gas pipelines.

TP 06

Size: 2.00m x 0.60m x 1.10m Orientation NE-SW

Description

The upper layer consisted of a brownish grey sandy silt and had a maximum depth of 0.10m, followed by a lighter brownish grey sandy silt with a depth of 0.50m. The lower deposit was a coarse brownish grey coarse sandy silt with river pebbles and cobbles, some of which were quite large (boulder).

Interpretation

Thin band of topsoil followed by alluvial activity. No archaeological activity within confines of the trial pit.

TP 07

Size: 2.00m x 0.60m x 2.00m Orientation E-W

Description

Thin band of a dark greyish brown topsoil with a maximum depth of 0.15m, underlain by a greyish brown sandy silt with depth of 0.30m. The bottom deposit was again composed of river gravels and cobbles within a matrix of a greyish sandy silt. The trench was abandoned after a depth of 2.00m due to its unstable nature.

Interpretation

Thin band of topsoil followed by alluvial activity. No archaeological activity within confines of the trial pit.

TP 08 (Plate 4)

Size: 2.00m x 0.60m x 1.05m Orientation N-S

Description

Topsoil of a brownish grey sandy silt with a depth of 0.10m, underlain by a mid grey gravely sandy silt containing large volumes of small stone, depth of 0.35m. At the base there were large boulders within a orangey grey sandy silt, depth of >0.35m.

Interpretation

No archaeological activity was identified within the confines of the test pit.

TP 09

Size: 2.00m x 0.60m x 1.20m Orientation E-W

Description

Dark brownish grey sandy silt to a depth of 0.15m underlain by a brownish grey silty sand with frequent small stone and gravel, coarse grained sand, depth of >1.10m.

Interpretation

No archaeology within test pit.

TP10

Size: 2.00m x 0.60m x 1.30m Orientation N-S

Description

Greyish brown silty sand with depth of 0.10m, followed by a reddish brown sandy silt with maximum depth of 0.45m. Base of trench contained river gravels, pebbles and cobbles within a greyish brown coarse silty sand, depth >0.75m.

Interpretation

No archaeology.

TP 11 (Plate 2)

Size: 2.00m x 0.60m x 1.00m Orientation E-W

Description

The surface layer was a greyish brown sandy silt with a depth of 0.10m, underlain by a slightly lighter greyish brown with very occasional small angular stone. Base of trench contained river gravels, pebbles and cobbles within a greyish brown coarse silty sand, depth >0.60m.

Interpretation

No archaeological activity within confines of test pit: topsoil was thin, followed by colluvium leading to river cobbles.

TP12

Size: 2.00m x 0.60m x 1.00m Orientation E-W

Description

Mid greyish brown sandy silt with depth of 0.10m, the underlying deposit was a light brownish grey silty sand with some orange flecking with a depth of 0.40m. Base of trench contained river gravels, pebbles and cobbles within a greyish brown coarse silty sand, depth >0.60m.

Interpretation

No archaeological activity was identified within the confines of the trial pit.

TP 13

Size: 2.00m x 0.60m x 1.30m Orientation NE-SW

Description

The upper layer was a mid brownish grey silty sand with an orange tint and depth of 0.30m, underlain by a darker brownish grey within river gravels, pebbles and cobbles. The water table was reached at a depth of 1.00m and trench was abandoned at a depth of 1.30m due to unstable nature.

Interpretation

No archaeological activity was identified within the confines of the trial pit.

TP 14 (Plate 3)

Size: 2.00m x 0.60m x 1.00m Orientation NE-SW

Description

The upper layer was a brownish grey sandy silt with a depth of 0.15m, underlain by a brownish grey, coarse silty sand containing frequent river cobbles, depth of >0.75m.

Interpretation

No archaeological activity was identified within the confines of the trial pit.

Test Pits 7, 10 and 13 were originally going to be machined to a depth of 3.00m but due to the unstable nature of the ground the geologist conducting the machining operation aborted them at a safe depth as the trench sides were collapsing.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

A total of 9 test pits were monitored. No archaeological activity was identified within the confines of any example, although TP 08, 09 and 11 were quite close to a dismantled railway line that originally formed the main line from Dolgellau to Bala and therefore may have had lineside structures associated with it dating to the 19th century. The GI programme did inform us of the varying geological activity across the site, including the location of shallow river gravels and alluvia. The results were for the knowledge of areas suitable for the extraction of soils for the creation of flood defence banks for a flood alleviation scheme within the local area. This information may assist in the understanding of exposed stratigraphy during any future archaeological mitigation phases.

7.0 ARCHIVE

The archive consists of historic maps and plans, along with four sheets of field notes and 36 digital images taken during the watching brief.

Three copies of the bound report will be sent to the SNPA archaeologist, and a further copy sent to the HER Archaeologist at the curatorial division of Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, Bangor, for deposition in the Regional HER. A copy of the report will be provided to the National Monument Record, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales, Aberystwyth.

The archive is currently held at GAT under project code **G2119**

8.0 BIBLIOGRAPHY and SOURCES

8.1 Primary Sources

Gwynedd Archives, Dolgellau

ZM/3667 *Map of Houses and Lands near Dolgelley, the Property of the Nannau Estate* (1794)

ZM/86 *Plan of Part of the Town of Dolgelley; Survey of the Llwyn Estate* (1820)

Map of Meadows near Dolgelley

National Library of Wales

MAP 7425 *Map of Several Estates in the County of Merioneth Belonging to Griffith ap Howell Vaughan Esq.* (1760)

Other

Client drawing **B1362900/GI/100 (Rev. 01)**

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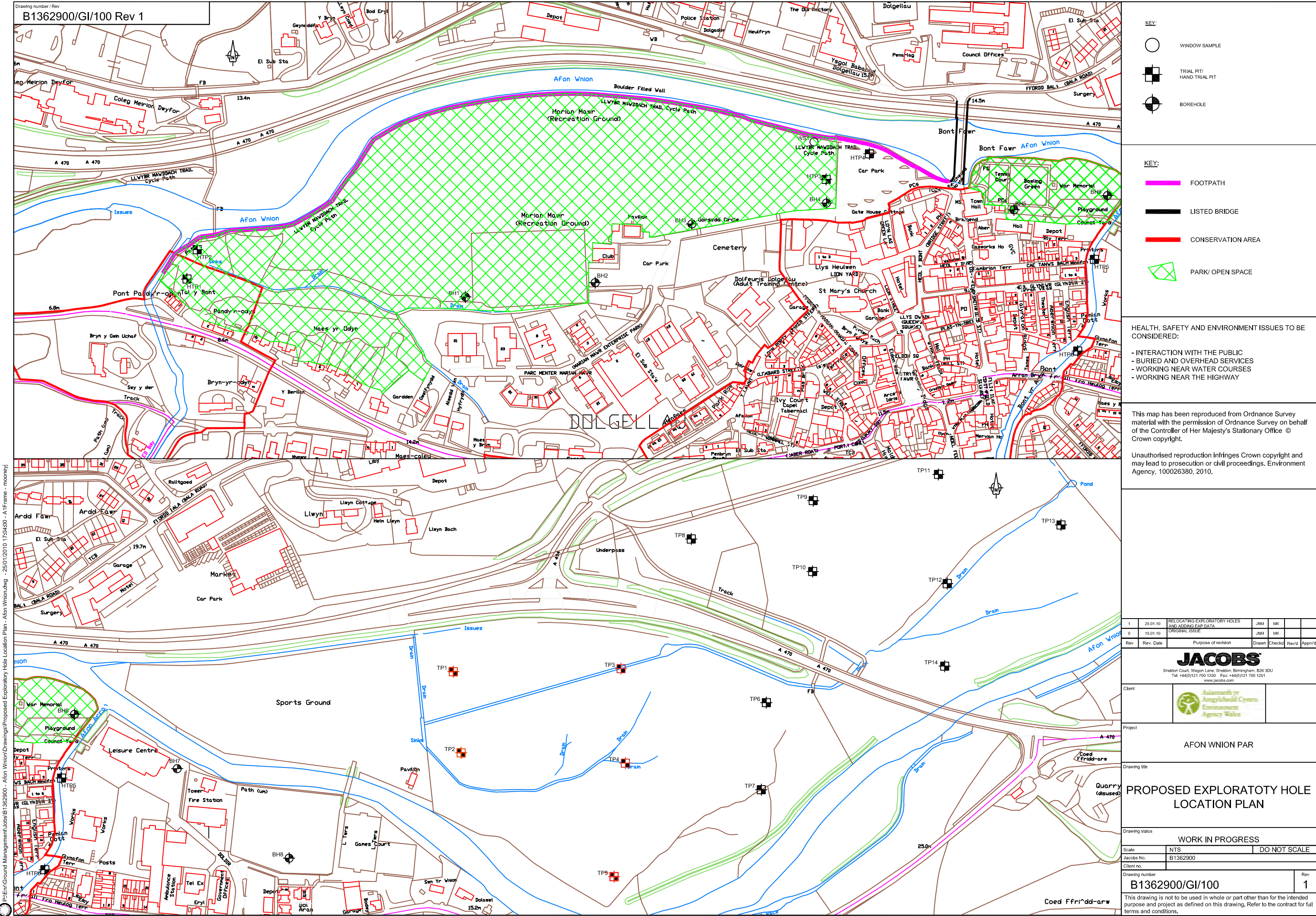


Fig. 1 Test Pit Location Map, shown on Client Map B1362900/GI/100 (Rev. 1). Test Pits Not Excavated Shown in Red

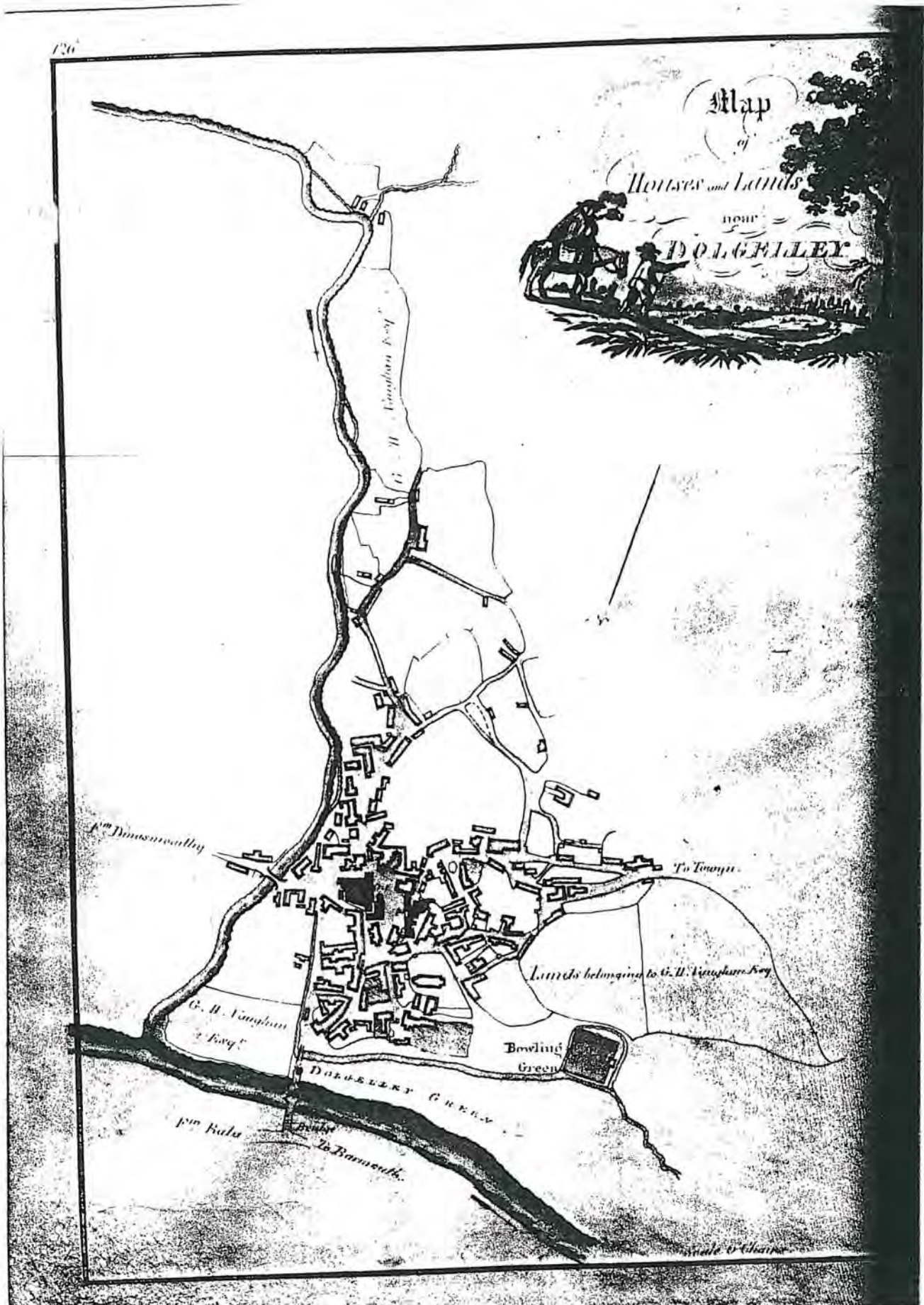
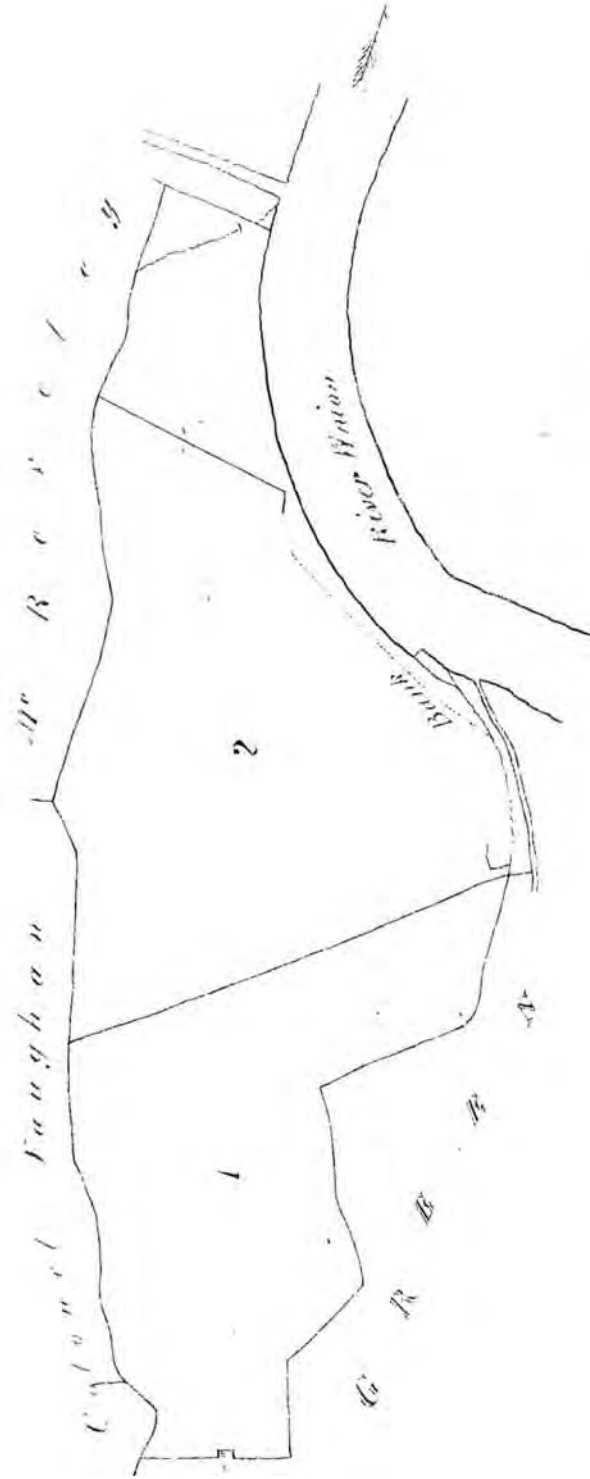


Fig. 2 Nannau Estate Map of 1794, showing the Marian Mawr as 'Dolgelley Green' and as Land Owned by Griffith Howel Vaughan Esq. (Gwynedd Archives ZM/3667).

N:4



MAP OF
NEADONWS
near
DOLGELLWY

Fig. 3 The Marian Mawr in 1820, from the Survey of the Llwyn Estate (Gwynedd Archives ZM/86)



Plate 1 Site Location



Plate 2 Test Pit 11 under excavation



Plate 3 Test Pit 14 after excavation



Plate 4 Test Pit 8 after excavation



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