



Amgueddfa Forwrol Llŷn Maritime Museum

Report on St Mary's Church and Priory

Amgueddfa Forwrol Llŷn Maritime Museum: Report on Findings

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Introduction

This report details the archaeological survey undertaken by Bangor Archaeology Society in May 2022, its findings and the additional historical research undertaken on St Mary's Church, Nefyn (now Amgueddfa Forwrol Llŷn Maritime Museum) to ascertain whether there was an Augustinian Priory at the site, its likely location and duration. The report will also suggest reasons for the lack of visible archaeological remains and potential further avenues of research, both physical and desktop.

The report has been split into three sections as follows: the first details the archaeological survey, its findings and a brief overview of the historical research undertaken on the church and its environs; the second section details the history of the church in Nefyn and the documentary evidence pointing to the existence of a priory. The final section sets out the conclusions drawn from the wider historical research and suggests avenues for further investigation.

The survey work was undertaken in May 2022 by students from Bangor Archaeological Society supported by Dr Gary Robinson and Dr Kate Waddington from Bangor University.

For reasons of clarity, the report will use St Mary's Church, Nefyn, when referring to the location.

1.1 Location of Church and Extent of Survey

This section will situate the church and the field surveyed, the tools used in the survey and the reasons for choosing the location for survey.

Bangor Archaeological Society was asked by Amgueddfa Forwrol Llŷn to survey the field located to the south of the church, as during archaeological works undertaken by CR Archaeology in 2015 on church grounds, a medieval wall was discovered running towards the field. As historical documents point to the existence of a priory attached to the church during the medieval period, it was hoped that geophysical surveys of the field might reveal traces of the lost structures.

The survey undertaken by the society covered the following areas:

Graveyard to the rear of St Mary's Church / Amgueddfa Forwrol Llŷn located at

NGR: SH30870 40646

Lat/Long: 52° 56' 07.6"N

04° 30' 57.7"W

Playing field to rear of St Mary's Church / Amgueddfa Forwrol Llŷn located at:

NGR: SH 30903 40608

Lat/Long: 52° 56' 10.7"N

04° 31' 03.3" W

Only the area of the field closest to the church was surveyed, starting 3 metres from the fencing running along the stream bed towards the footpath dissecting the width of the field, and from the footpath starting at the churchyard wall towards Mynydd Garn. Within the churchyard a truncated 10-metre grid was surveyed, starting from the churchyard wall adjoining the footpath and working towards Stryd y Llan / Glynllifon Terrace and from the rear wall of the church towards the boundary wall. This was truncated due to the presence of a metal shed adjacent to the rear boundary wall which affected the survey equipment.

1.2 Tools Used and Settings

The survey was conducted using a single Fluxgate Gradiometer FM256 over a roughly square area where all sides of the square were 20 metres. Alignment was done at the base left corner of the area to be surveyed. The sampling pattern was set at 1-metre intervals, to ensure best results, a single person (Olivia Skipsey) walked the grid as this ensured a regular stride throughout the survey area. The results were processed by Dr Kate Waddington and Dr Gary Robinson using Geoplot and added onto a map. The results are given below.

1.3 Geophysical Survey Results and interpretation

The information recorded by the Fluxgate Gradiometer was downloaded and processed by Drs Waddington and Robinson and plotted onto a map¹ and the likely anomalies plotted onto this.² While the data recorded from the churchyard proved unusable due to interference from the metal shed and an associated utilities channel, that taken from the field appears to show one or possibly two rectangular buildings, located in the lower right quadrant of the survey area. Further analysis using the UK's public LiDAR scans also seems to show rectangular traces in the same location.³

1.4 The Survey results and their relation to historic and modern maps of Nefyn

The original grant to Haughmond Abbey in the 1140s detailed the area as "*the land between two rivers*".⁴ The anomaly discovered during the geophysical survey is within the area of land originally granted to Haughmond Priory in the 1140s and aligns roughly with the supposed trajectory of the medieval wall discovered in 2013/2015. This may therefore indicate an association with the priory. However, to establish whether the anomalies may be modern, historic and contemporary maps of Nefyn were consulted.

¹ See Figure 1 at the end of this section. A larger version can be viewed at Appendix 2 Figure 1.

² See Appendix 2 Item 2 for the raw data downloaded.

³ See Figure 2 at the end of this chapter for a plot of the anomalies. A larger version of this can be found in Appendix 2 Map 2. The LiDAR image can be found in Appendix 2 Map 3

⁴ The charter drawn up by Cadwaladr ap Gruffudd and the likely location of the two rivers is discussed fully in section 2 of this report.

The 1964 report by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments Wales examines St Mary's Church, and in addition to noting the names of the two adjacent fields (Cae Mynach and Tir Mynach) notes that 'foundations are said to exist there, particularly beneath the slightly raised area now utilised as a children's playground.'⁵ In order to test whether other buildings have been located in the same area, searches were made of the tithe maps held by Bangor University Archives and online historic and modern maps held by both Digimap ([Digimap \(edina.ac.uk\)](http://Digimap.edina.ac.uk)) and The National Library of Scotland ([National Library of Scotland - Map Images \(nls.uk\)](http://National Library of Scotland - Map Images.nls.uk)).

The area surveyed formed part of the initial grant to Haughmond Abbey in 1140. To establish whether other buildings had been erected on the land surveyed, the ownership of the land has been traced through to the dissolution of the monasteries and into the present day.⁶ This research indicates that the land surveyed remained in the possession of the church until St Mary's Church ceased to function as a place of worship. At this point, the area currently used as a playground passed into the control of the parish council, who maintain the playground and the paths. However, I have been unable to ascertain whether the rest of the land is held by the parish council or remains the property of the Church in Wales.

By consulting the tithe maps for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries held in Bangor Archives⁷ it is possible to see that no buildings, whether domestic, commercial, or agricultural have been built on the surveyed area; it was assessed for tithes simply as 'land belonging to the church'; it is possible that the church let it for grazing purposes or simply kept it as common land. No maps show evidence of a building or earlier dwelling in that location.⁸

The next search area was the historic maps held by both Digimap and The National Library of Scotland. These show that the land remained devoid of buildings into the 1960s, but by the mid-1970s, a single rectangular structure appears on maps of the area, very close to the area

⁵ Royal Commission Ancient Monuments: Wales and Monmouth, Caernarvonshire Vol III West (1964) pp. 84

⁶ The relevant tithe maps are Item BMSS 26410.

⁷ In addition to the tithe maps, Items PYA 13559a, PYA 13559b and PYA 13559c in the archives map areas of Nefyn and the various landowners. Item PYA 13559c covers Nefyn, although the key is lost, and the church is not shown.

⁸ See Appendix 2 for maps relating to this area.

surveyed.⁹ This structure had disappeared by the late 1980s / early 1990s. In an attempt to identify this structure both Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (GAT) and Gwynedd County Council (GCC) Planning Offices have been contacted. GAT had no records from the period,¹⁰ while GCC Planning were unable to confirm the nature of the building.

1.5 The Survey Results and the search for the 'priory'

The survey results, taken with the LIDAR and map results, suggest that there may be remains of a building in the field SH 30903 40624.

The historic map from the 1970s was checked against the modern map to see whether the structure which appears on it is within the surveyed area. As far as can be ascertained, it sits just behind the survey area, between the base line and the line of the river. However, it may stray into the base region of the survey area.

The above notwithstanding, the anomalies shown on the geophysical results¹¹ are all within the area of land granted to Haughmond Abbey and close to the current boundary wall of the church. Equally, at least one appears to be on the same alignment as the medieval wall discovered during the earlier works and is within 13 metres of this.¹² These factors, together with the information from a rental charter of 1342, mean that there is a strong possibility that the anomalies may reflect medieval remains. Local tradition places the 'priory' within the area surveyed, while the evidence from ecclesiastical and secular records shows that there were no other buildings on the site after the priory fell into disuse, until the 1970s.

Unfortunately, unlike other monastic orders such as the Cistercians, Augustinian foundations adapted their construction plans based on locality and available funds. This means that we are unable to say with any certainty how many buildings, or what type, would have been present. Locally, the closest comparison would be the house of canons at Aberdaron which later became a dependent house of Enlli. Both Enlli and Haughmond were Augustinian

⁹ See Appendix 2 Figure 4 for the location of the 1970s 'structure' discussed.

¹⁰ Personal communication between Sean Derby, GAT and Siân Evans, 20th March 2023.

¹¹ See Figures 1 and 2 at the end of this chapter and the larger images in Appendix 2.

¹² On-ground measurements were taken on 15th April 2023.

establishments and while the foundation at Aberdaron was far larger than Nefyn, it may offer some comparisons. The land occupied by the canons at Aberdaron now forms part of a farm and has not been surveyed, but the UK's open LiDAR website has a good overview of the site¹³ and the likely situation of the buildings in relation to the church. This shows a rectangular anomaly of a similar size to that in Nefyn, and in a similar position in relation to the standing church remains. The priory at Penmon on Ynys Môn is also Augustinian, and while far later (being founded in 1220), we may also be able to use the buildings there as a guide to those deemed necessary.

However, Haughmond Abbey also held a proprietary church at St Leonards¹⁴ which followed a similar pattern of holding as that identified at Nefyn. The plans of this church and small priory may therefore be more relevant. An attempt has been made to approximate the plan of Nefyn using those of St Leonards, Norton Priory and Aberdaron as a guide.¹⁵ Using this plan it suggests that the Nefyn establishment would have comprised a wall enclosing the church and up to 4 buildings – a sacristy, chapter house, cloister range (containing the refectory and dormitory) and a gatehouse that may have functioned as accommodation either for the prior or for pilgrims. The fact that the stream which forms the boundary between the field and the housing estate of Cae Mynach appears to have been subjected to control, turning a sharp angle within a channel lined with dressed stone suggests that some degree of water management was being undertaken.

Archaeological digs at other Augustinian foundations, including Norton Priory, Portchester and St. Leonards indicate that the initial building phase of both the larger and smaller foundations was in wood;¹⁶ while the later buildings of larger foundations were usually entirely of stone, those of smaller foundations either retained their original wooden buildings or a combination of materials. It is likely, given the short duration of the foundation in Nefyn, that the buildings were a combination of stone with wooden or wattle and daub walls sitting on top of or alongside the stone course.

¹³ The LIDAR survey of Aberdaron is included at Appendix 2.

¹⁴ J. P. Greene, *Norton Priory* (Cambridge University Press, 1989)

¹⁵ See plan at Figure 3 below.

¹⁶ J.P. Greene, *Norton Priory* (Cambridge University Press, 1989)

A charter of Haughmond Abbey from 1342 provides some detail on building materials.¹⁷ The charter is a rental agreement between the abbey and Gruffydd ap Dafydd ap Madoc White for 3 acres in the field known as “the field of Nevin” (sic) together with another acre adjoining the church. This charter is key to determining what happened to the fabric of the monastic buildings, as it stipulates that Gruffydd use the stones from the canon’s residences (*‘capiendo lapides pro parietibus de domibus virorum religiosorum’* or *‘the dressed stone from the houses of the religious men’*)¹⁸ to build houses on the land granted to him. The location of the “field of Nevin” (sic) is not clear, although given the date of this charter it is possible that it refers to the grazing land mentioned in charter no. 789;¹⁹ the additional acre mentioned in the charter as ‘adjoining the church’ would seem to be the land now forming part of Glynllifon Terrace. The key phrase from the charter however is that relating to the re-use of the stone from the monastic buildings. This not only confirms that the priory buildings were made of stone, but also explains the lack of any surface remains – the stones had been taken away to be reused in the new buildings.

The next section will draw together the evidence from both documentary and archaeological sources to determine whether there was a priory in Nefyn, and if so, its likely duration and location.

¹⁷ See Appendix 1: The charters relating to Nefyn for the full text of this charter and the lands allocated to Gruffydd. For further discussion of the terms of the charter see section 2.

¹⁸ This wording is taken from charter number 802 of Haughmond Abbey, titled *‘Dismisso trium acrarum terre ibidem’* and dated to 30th June 1342 by the opening clause. A copy of the charter is in Appendix 1 and is taken from Rees, *The Cartulary of Haughmond Abbey*.

¹⁹ This charter was issued by Llywelyn ap Iorwerth between 1230 / 1240. In addition to confirming the earlier charters, it gives the canons the right to pasture their animals in the “royal” pastures in Nefyn; as they already held rights of pasture it is possible that the canons simply assumed ownership of the land after the conquest; alternatively, the land may have passed into the hands of Edward, The Black Prince. I have been unable to trace the location of the pasture. See Appendix 1 for a copy of the relevant charter.

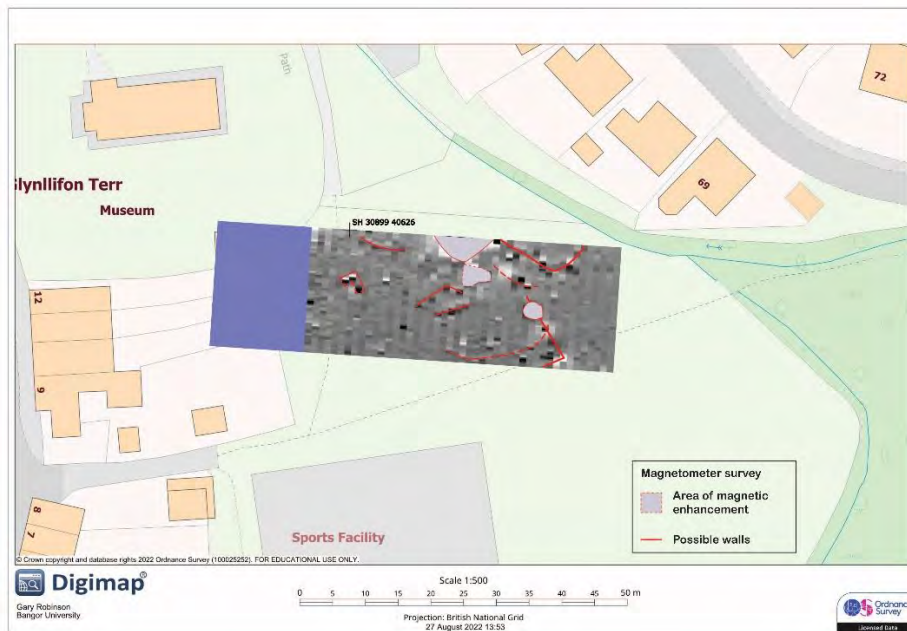


Figure 1: Magnetometer data plotted onto street-level map of Nefyn. Observed anomalies outlined. Data compiled by Dr Gary Robinson and Dr Kate Worthington, September 2022. Anomalies plotted by Dr Kate Worthington and Siân Evans, 4th April 2023. Map taken from Digimap ([Digimap \(edina.ac.uk\)](http://Digimap.edina.ac.uk))



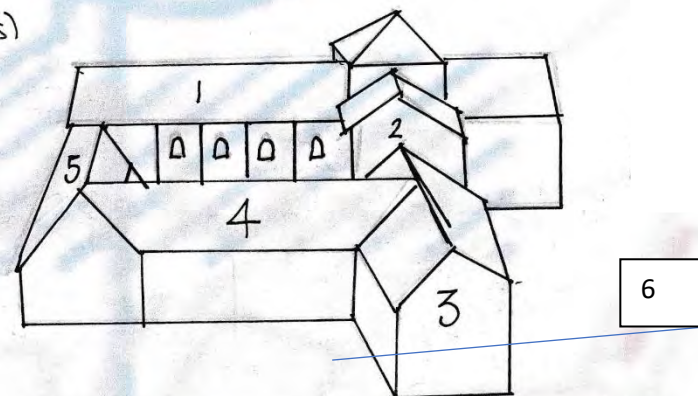
Figure 2: Anomalies observed in the magnetometer data, overlaid for clarity. Prepared by Dr Kate Worthington and Siân Evans, 4th April 2023. Map taken from Digimap. ([Digimap \(edina.ac.uk\)](http://Digimap.edina.ac.uk))

Available area (using modern road as southern boundary and bend in river ② as Northern)

↕ W: 258.7m ↔ L: 206.7m
= 56,178.4m² / 13.9 acres

river ①

River ②



1. Church.
2. Sacristy / warming room / night stairs.
3. Chapter House.
4. Cloister range: dormitories / refectory.
5. Gate house / prior's or pilgrims lodging.
6. Approximate Line of medieval wall found in 2013/15.

The foundation may not necessarily have had these buildings but there is sufficient space within the granted area to accommodate them, and at the same approximate sizes as those found in Norton and Portchester Priors at the same period.

Figure 3: Plan of Norton Priory in the Twelfth century superimposed over area donated to Haughmond Abbey in the charter of 1170. Plan taken from J. P Greene *Norton Priory* (Cambridge University Press, 1989) pp. 87

This is the line of modern
Stryd y Mynach / Glynllifon
Terrace

Section 2: The Church in Nefyn from the Eleventh Century to the Conquest

This section will examine the earliest evidence for the church in Nefyn, making use of both chronicles and charter sources. It will demonstrate that while the first documentary evidence is in the form of a charter transforming it from a Welsh parish church to a proprietary church of the (Norman) Abbey of Haughmond in Shropshire, the terms of the charter show that it was already well established. To understand why the church was granted to the abbey, it will also examine the reformist movement within the Church and growth of monastic orders as well as the political background both within Wales and in Britain as a whole, before moving on to examine whether there is evidence that a priory was established, and if so, the size of the foundation. Following on from this, the section will use the evidence from governmental and ecclesiastical records to establish the position of the foundation in Nefyn at the Edwardian Conquest in 1282.

2.1 The Earliest Church in Nefyn.

Unfortunately, no documentation has survived from eleventh and early twelfth century Gwynedd that details how and when the church in Nefyn was founded. However, archaeological finds indicate that there may have been at least some area of focused religion. During the nineteenth century, part of an early inscribed stone cross was discovered being used as the lintel of a door in a farm at Boduan,²⁰ there is also a holy well noted within the town. Outside the ecclesiastical sphere, there was an early-Norman motte and bailey castle in Nefyn by 1085, and it was here that Gruffudd ap Cynan landed during one of his early attempts to wrest back control of Gwynedd.

What is clear is that by the first quarter of the twelfth century, a small ‘*llys*’ had been established in Nefyn, with it becoming the centre of the commote of Dinllaen.²¹ When

²⁰ The inscribed stone is mentioned in the 1964 R.C.A.M. Wales and Monmouthshire, Vol III West: Caernarvonshire as item 1683 on page 84; it is also mentioned in the CR Archaeology report under item 5.2 Early Medieval.

²¹ D. Moore ‘Gruffudd ap Cynan and the Medieval Welsh Polity’ in K. L. Maund (ed) *Gruffudd ap Cynan: A Collaborative Biography* (Boydell, 1996) pp 13 - 19 discusses the campaigns for control of the Llŷn Peninsula (and wider Gwynedd, Môn and Meirionydd) of Gruffudd ap Cynan, culminating in his ‘receiving’ Llŷn from Henry I at some point after 1100. Given that R. R. Davies in *The Age of Conquest: Wales 1063 – 1415* (Oxford, 2000) p163 also discusses the importance of Nefyn to the income of the Princes of Gwynedd, it is likely that the ‘*maerdref*’ referred to here had been established at some point between Gruffudd ap Cynan’s original conquest of Llŷn in the last quarter of the eleventh century and the early years of the twelfth.

Gruffudd ap Cynan died in 1137, control of Gwynedd passed to his surviving sons Owain and Cadwaladr. In the division of lands that followed, Cadwaladr seems to have been granted control of Meirionydd and Llŷn together with the areas of Ceredigion under Venedotian control.²² At some point during this period, Cadwaladr also seems to have married into the Clare family, linking him to Earl Ranulf of Chester.

The politics of Wales, England, and the wider European stage during the period c. 1140 to 1150 are key in understanding why Cadwaladr might grant the church and lands in Nefyn not only to a reformed order, but to an abbey based over the border in England. From c1143, Cadwaladr was involved in intermittent feuds with his brother Owain that led to periods of exile, first in Ireland and then over the border in England. These coincided not only with the period of political upheaval in England known as “The Anarchy” but also to a period in which lay patrons such as the Earl of Chester were founding Augustinian religious foundations in Cheshire and the Marches. As discussed by Nigel Trentham,²³ the period from around 1115 saw a pattern of Augustinian abbeys and priories being founded in the dioceses of Chester / Coventry and Lichfield.

Huw Price discusses an additional link both to Earl Ranulf and the Augustinians in his article on the church of Trefeglwys,²⁴ pointing out that Bishop Meurig of Bangor, who witnessed both the charter granting Trefeglwys and that of Nefyn had been referred to as ‘*his bishop of Bangor*’ in a charter issued by Earl Ranulf at Lincoln, sometime between 1140 and 1145.²⁵ It is interesting to note that Meurig had also fallen foul of Owain Gwynedd and was exiled at roughly the same period as Cadwaladr, spending enough of his exile with Earl Ranulf to earn the epithet above.

²² T.F. Tout, ‘Cadwaladr’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (1886) accessed 18/4/2023.

²³ N. Trentham, ‘Trentham Priory (Staffordshire) in the Twelfth Century: Foundation and Re-Foundation’ *Midland History* (2021) 46: 1 p.14

²⁴ Huw Price, ‘The Church of Trefeglwys and the end of the Celtic Charter Tradition in Twelfth Century Wales’ *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 25 (1993) pp 15 – 54. This article also discusses the spread of the Augustinians in the diocese of Worcester in the same period as discussed in the article by Trentham. It appears therefore that the Augustinians were seen as an order that could thrive in the marches of Wales. Some of the rationale that may have lain behind this will be discussed in the body of the text.

²⁵ Huw Price, ‘The Church of Trefeglwys and the end of the Celtic Charter Tradition in Twelfth Century Wales’ *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 25 (1993) p.46

By the 1140s therefore, it is possible that Cadwaladr had been influenced not only by his wife's family but also by the choices of people such as Earl Ranulf of Chester, Hywel of Arwystli and Bishop Meurig of Bangor in his choice of religious order. It may also be pertinent that during the same period, Cadwaladr had reconciled with his brother Owain, after initially invading with a force of Irish mercenaries.²⁶ In light of this, Bishop Meurig may have felt that handing over a church in one of his key commotal centres was a suitable penance.

The above links notwithstanding, by 1143 at the latest, the church in Nefyn, together with 'all the lands between the two rivers'²⁷ had been gifted to Haughmond Abbey in perpetuity.

2.2 Ecclesiastical Reform and the rise of new monastic orders.

The late eleventh and early twelfth centuries were a period of great change within the Latin Church. From the reforms of clerical practice introduced by Pope Gregory VII to the growth of new religious orders, it changed the landscape and practice of Christian religion from Italy to the Irish sea coasts. It has been the practice to refer to the early Church foundations along the Irish Sea coasts between Scotland, the Isle of Man, Ireland, North-West Wales and Cornwall as '*clas*' or '*Celtic*' in form, with the Roman form of worship being the Latin. However, as Nancy Edwards states, the term '*clas*' comes into use from the twelfth century, with its meaning still being ambiguous.²⁸ This ambiguity notwithstanding, to be able to differentiate between the two forms of worship I will use '*clas*' in the discussion that follows.

Some of the first moves to reform the Latin Church had come in the mid-eleventh century, in the writings of Cardinal Humbert. However, the so-called "Investiture Contest" between Pope Gregory VII (1073 – 85) and the German King Henry IV over the right to choose bishops and other officers of the church²⁹ had far reaching consequences. These included the idea that

²⁶ Trout 'Cadwaladr' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (1886) accessed 18/4/2023.

²⁷ Una Rees, '*The Cartulary of Haughmond Abbey*' (Cardiff, 1984) charter 784. The actual phrasing within the charter is '*...et concessi deo et ecclesie sancti Johannis evangeliste de Haghmon' et canonicis ibidem deo servientibus in puram et perpetuam elemosinam ecclesiam de Nevyn cum omnibus pertinentiis suis et totam terram que est inter duos rivulose inter quos predicta ecclesia sita est...*' A copy of the charter can be found in Appendix 1 Item 1.

²⁸ N. Edwards, 'The Early Church in Wales and the West' in N. Edwards and A. Lane (eds) *The Early Church in Wales and the West; Recent Work in Early Christian Archaeology, History and Place Names* (Oxbow, 1992) p3.

²⁹ For a full discussion of the 'Investiture Contest' and the Papacy, see M. Barber *The Two Cities: Medieval Europe 1050 – 1320* (Routledge, 2007) pp84-92.

the Pope was Head of the Latin Church, and the push for conformity of practice throughout Christendom that was a feature of Gregory VII's letters to other leaders throughout Europe. As Barber says, 'an indispensable concomitant of reform therefore was the achievement of uniformity of practice and belief under papal direction.'³⁰

Alongside the changes in governance of the church, there was a movement within monastic circles to return to what was seen as "true" monasticism as set out by St Benedict in his Rule; as Southern states, by the late eleventh century the Benedictines had ceased to be the main monastic order.³¹ Both the Cluniacs and Cistercians had begun to make headway by the beginning of the twelfth century, closely followed by the numerous orders of Augustinian Canons. Table 1 below shows the number of houses founded in Wales alone between 1050 – 1199.

Table 1: Houses founded in Wales between 1050 - 1199.

Order	1050– 1199	Order	1050 - 1199
Augustinian	3	Cluniac	1
Austin Friars	-----	Dominican	-----
Benedictine	18	Franciscan	-----
Bonhomme	-----	Knights Hospitaller	1
Carmelite	-----	Premonstratensian	1
Cathedral Priory	4	Savignac	2
Cistercian	10	Tironensian	1
Total by Period	41		

Note: table compiled from information in Butler, L and Given-Wilson, C, *Medieval Monasteries of Great Britain* (London, 1993) pp.406 – 407; and Burton, J and Stöber, K, *Abbeys & Priories of Medieval Wales* (UoW Press, 2015) with the addition of Nefyn.

Another impulse for the patronage of and granting of lands to monastic foundations was the increasing belief that it was wrong for lay persons to hold churches as personal property.³²

³⁰Barber *The Two Cities* p. 92. For a full list of the areas listed by Gregory VII as being under the control of the papacy, see R. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in The Middle Ages* (Penguin, 1990) pp.102.

³¹ Southern, *Western Society and the Church* pp.240.

³² For discussions around this topic see Southern, op.cit but also Burton, Janet, 'A Tale of Two or More Abbeys: The Welsh Cistercian Abbeys of Valle Crucis and Strata Florida and their appropriated churches' *Studia Celtica* LV (2021) especially pp. 31 where she states that 'lay people wished to divest themselves of ecclesiastical possessions that were becoming something of an embarrassment'. Further discussion on how the changes in

While the great foundations such as the Cistercians may have had large property portfolios, the Augustinian order increasingly drew its income from churches granted to it.³³ As Lawrence argues, for the lay patron with only a handful of churches or small parcels of land to offer, the Augustinian Canons were an obvious choice.³⁴ The various forms that the canons took, whether as enclosed or as canons administering cathedrals or parish churches, they were a far cheaper alternative than the larger orders. As far as Cadwaladr was concerned, the political alliances mentioned earlier may have influenced his decision on the order, which, as Lawrence pointed out, eventually overcame the Benedictines with the largest number of foundations – two hundred and seventy-four foundations as against the two hundred and nineteen Benedictine.³⁵

The situation within the wider Christian and Latin church during the early twelfth century, as well as the political upheavals both within and outside Wales therefore make it easier to understand why St Mary's Church, Nefyn, may have been granted to an alien abbey.³⁶

2.3 The documentary evidence for a Priory rather than just a church

Of all the charters to have survived that mention St Mary's Church, Nefyn, there are two that are key to proving that there was a priory, however small, at the location.

The first is a charter of 1252, between the Augustinian foundation of Aberdaron and the Abbey on Ynys Enlli. Among the witnesses to this charter is '*teste Domino Willelmo Priore de Nevyn*'.³⁷ However, by the time Haughmond Abbey rents out lands in Nefyn to Gruffydd ap David ap Madoc White in June 1342, the buildings are obviously obsolete. We can see this as

religious thinking affected Wales during the late eleventh and early twelfth century can be found in G. Williams, *The Welsh Church from Conquest to Reformation* (Cardiff, 1962) pp. 19 – 24. Additionally, T. Jones-Pierce discusses the issues facing the church in Wales during the late eleventh and early twelfth century in T. Jones-Pierce, *Medieval Welsh Society* (Cardiff, 1972) pp.393 – 497.

³³ Southern, *Western Society and the Church*, pp.245.

³⁴ C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (Longman, 2001) pp.164 – 165.

³⁵ Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism* pp 164.

³⁶ Further discussion surrounding the links between Cadwaladr, Earl Ranulf and the Angevins and the choice of Haughmond can be found in H. Pryce, *The Acts of Welsh Rulers 1120 – 1283* (Cardiff, 2005) pp. 330. What is clear from the charter evidence is that Haughmond continued to be favoured throughout the twelfth century, with grants not only in and around Nefyn but also in the border lands held by Cadwaladr and his descendants.

³⁷ The charter and name of the Prior is quoted in R.C.A.M Wales and Monmouthshire: Vol III Caernarvonshire, pp 84.

the terms of the rental include not only land but the stones from the canon's 'houses', as follows:

*'.....una acra iacet iuxta ecclesiam de Nevin inter curiam dictorum virorum religiosorum ex parte una et pratum eiorumdem virorum reliosorum et idem Griffinus edificabit superdictam terram domos competentes capiendor lapides pro parietibus de domibus dictorum virorum religiosorum.'*³⁸

'an acre between the church in Nevin (sic) and the walls of the houses of the religious men .. and the said Griffith as detailed above to build houses from the dressed stones of the houses of the religious men' (my own translation)

It follows therefore that at some point between 1252 and 1343, the priory in Nefyn fell into disuse, with Haughmond Abbey simply receiving rents and other dues from their lands in the town and surrounding area.³⁹

2.4 The political situation in Wales 1252 – 1282 and how that impacted on Nefyn.

To understand what might have caused the priory to fall into disuse, it is necessary to understand the political situation within and outside Gwynedd during the period 1252, the last point at which we have documentary evidence for a prior, and 1342, when the ruins are rented out.

During this period, Gwynedd moved from a period of stability under Llywelyn ap Iorwerth (Llywelyn Fawr) to a period of internecine fighting for control of Gwynedd, the highpoint of Venedotian control of 1266 and ultimately a period of increasing alienation from the English Crown which led to the eventual conquest of the whole of Wales in 1282-3.

While the situation in Llŷn may have been stable enough to maintain a house of priors throughout the middle years of the thirteenth century, by the early 1270s the abbots of Haughmond were obviously becoming wary. This is demonstrated in a charter of 1272/73, in

³⁸ Rees, *The Cartulary of Haughmond Abbey*, charter. No.802. For a copy of the relevant charter see Appendix 1: The Charters Relating to Nefyn, item 3.

³⁹ This can be seen in the copy of the 'Lleyn Ministers Accounts of 1350 – 51', reproduced in the *Bulletin Board of Celtic Studies*, Vol VI, (1933) pp. 257 and compiled by T. Jones-Pierce. These clearly show the division between manorial income being granted to Nigel Loryng and that due to Haughmond Abbey. No mention is made of any conventual buildings being present; from this it seems that Gruffydd ap David ap Madog White had cleared the ground.

which they seek confirmation from the Bishop of Bangor of their holdings in Nefyn and Trefeglwys.⁴⁰ The instability that followed Llywelyn ap Iorwerth's breaks with the English Crown in 1277 and his humiliating defeat, together with the increasingly heavy taxation demands that he was making of the people of Gwynedd, may have persuaded the abbot that maintaining a priory in the far reaches of Llŷn was unsupportable. The abbey had been given the right to appoint vicars for the church as early as 1196; eighty years later it may have seemed sensible to simply appoint a vicar to minister to the flock and a steward to gather their dues. What is certain is that by the time of Edward I's celebratory jousts held in Nefyn in 1284, the sources are silent on the presence of a prior.

⁴⁰ Rees, *Cartulary of Haughmond Abbey*, charter 796. For a copy of the relevant charter, see Appendix 1: The Charters Relating to Nefyn, item 2.

Section 3: Conclusions.

3.1 Documentary Evidence.

After the initial grant of the church to Haughmond Abbey in 1140, successive Princes of Gwynedd, as well as other commotal officers and even local people made additional grants,⁴¹ until Haughmond held lands and rights not only within Nefyn but across a large area of central Llŷn. With the politics of Wales being as fractured as they were with constant internecine warfare, the Abbots of Haughmond periodically approached the Bishop of Bangor, requesting that the ecclesiastical authorities confirmed grants made by the secular.⁴² This was to stand them in good stead after the final Edwardian conquest, when they were able to retain control of all their holdings, even as the rest of Gwynedd's lands were being parcelled out.

It is likely however that it was the period of instability following the death of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth that saw the end of the canon's residence at Nefyn. The last time a prior can be traced in the record was in 1252, when, as detailed above, the resident Prior witnessed a charter of the Abbey of Aberdaron. There are several possible scenarios for the ending of the physical presence of canons at Aberdaron, as follows.

- A. After witnessing the charter of 1252, but before 1282, the deteriorating situation in Gwynedd meant that the prior and canons resident in Nefyn were recalled to Haughmond Abbey.
- B. At some point between 1252 – 1282, the prior of Nefyn died. Given the unrest within Wales, the Abbey decided not to appoint a new Prior. Any canons resident at this point were given the option to return to Haughmond or to relocate to Aberdaron or Enlli, both Augustinian foundations and closer to Nefyn.
- C. The church becomes a parish church, with the canons being withdrawn, as happened in Trefeglwys. The history of Trefeglwys, from foundation to dissolution, seems to

⁴¹ See Rees, *The Cartulary of Haughmond Abbey* (various charters) for details of these, also the section on Gwynedd in Pryce, *The Acts of Welsh Rulers* pp.321 - 657

⁴² The Bishop of Bangor is witness to the original charter; charters survive from 1177 onwards periodically re-confirming the validity of the charters right through to the charter of 1272 / 73. There is also a later charter, from c. 1372, confirming that Haughmond hold the right to appoint the chaplain of the church. See Rees, *The Cartulary of Haughmond Abbey* nos. 791- 798.

mirror (fairly closely) that of Nefyn.⁴³

As the priory was likely to have recruited from the locality after the first canons were sent to Nefyn from Haughmond, it is possible that even were the prior recalled to Haughmond, some may have preferred to relocate to Aberdaron (or indeed Enlli) rather than travel to Shropshire. It is equally possible that any Prior would have preferred to seek refuge in the closest house of his order rather than risk travelling through a region in turmoil. What is certain is that by 1284, there were no canons left in Nefyn. Any buildings that existed would therefore have been left to the mercy of the elements.

The history of Nefyn since 1284 means that not only were any standing remains of the priory ruinous by the mid-fourteenth century, but that as the town itself was razed during the revolt of Owain Glyndŵr, those stones that were reused after 1342 were likely to have been used again to rebuild the town. Consequently, tracing them in the standing fabric of Nefyn is likely to be impossible. The dissolution of the monasteries and the subsequent fires of Protestant iconoclasm mean that any church fittings that had managed to survive into the sixteenth century were lost. As the town rose again from the ashes of revolt and grew again into a thriving fishing community, its growth meant that buildings overlaid the lands once held by the canons.

The final blow to whatever remained of the medieval layout came during the Victorian church revival, when the medieval church was demolished to make way for the current building, its boundaries and graveyard. This meant that all trace of the medieval foundation had not only been lost but also forgotten, except for the names of two fields and the roads surrounding the church. That is, until the archaeological works that began in 2013 discovered a medieval wall and cist burial.

⁴³ The conversion of the priory in Trefeglwys to a parish church is discussed in Edwards, 'Identifying the archaeology of the early church' p.60. The foundation itself is discussed in Pryce, 'The Church of Trefeglwys' pp.15 – 54.

3.2 Archaeological Evidence.

The surface geophysical survey has identified several anomalies, one of which appears to follow the supposed trajectory of the medieval wall discovered in earlier archaeological works. However, by mapping other similar Augustinian foundations onto the area gifted to Haughmond Abbey, it appears that the priory buildings would have occupied the land now forming part of the graveyard, Tir Mynach and Glynllifon Terrace. The medieval wall discovered during the 2013/15 works is likely therefore to be part of the priory: either forming part of the boundary wall or of one of the monastic buildings that were reused after 1342. The above notwithstanding, it may still be possible to find evidence of the priory, in three ways:

1. Conduct a geophysical survey of the area now used as a car park by Amgueddfa Forwrol Llŷn. This area remains untouched on later maps of Nefyn until the housing estate was built in the 1960s; this, together with modern archaeological techniques may mean that traces of the priory *could* be discovered. As the car park is alongside the artificially 'channelled' spring, this area offers the best potential for finding such remains. Magnetometer surveying may however prove difficult due to the use of metal fencing and railings along the boundaries.
2. Conduct test pits over some of the anomalies discovered in May 2022 to ascertain whether the medieval wall can be picked up again and if so, if its line can be followed to a "return" which will give an indication of the size of the priory enclosure.
3. Conduct a proper survey of the walls of the current church. Described as 'rubble' in the 1964 R.C.A.M survey,⁴⁴ some are clearly worked stone and may represent a re-use of the fabric of the medieval church.

While it may not be possible to find any trace of the priory within the archaeological record, it has however been possible to trace its existence in the historical record. This may enable the museum to create a 3-D model of how the priory may have looked and its location in relation to the modern St Mary's Church / Amgueddfa Forwrol Llŷn.

⁴⁴ R.C.A.M Vol III p.84

3.3 The duration and likely size of the Augustinian Priory at Nefyn.

The charter evidence discussed in chapters 2 and 3 point to a priory that lasted between 100 – 140 years at most.⁴⁵ During the first part of that period, it is evident that Haughmond Abbey, the ‘mother house’ of the priory, remained a favourite of the Venedotian ‘aristocracy’; grants were made of lands not just within Gwynedd but also in the Marcher lands held by successive members of the family. The income from these donations was evidently deemed important enough to Haughmond for the abbey administration to ensure that the grants were confirmed by the ecclesiastical as well as the secular powers. Successive Bishops of Bangor issued confirmatory charters, with the latest issued in 1272/73, just prior to the final outbreaks of hostilities between Gwynedd and England.⁴⁶

That the canon’s accommodations were built at least partially of dressed stone is confirmed in the rental charter of 1342, where their removal forms part of the terms. However, it is likely that they would have been a combination of stone and wood, especially to begin with. The church is likely to have been a standard two-cell church with a chancel arch.⁴⁷ It is also likely to have been small; as Pryce states, even the cathedral church at Llandaff was only 40 feet (12.2m) long in 1120.⁴⁸

When it comes to assessing the number and size of buildings that comprised the canon’s accommodation we are hampered by the lack of a common plan. While I have chosen to utilise the plans of Norton Priory and St Leonards to create Figure 3, it is equally possible that the layout mirrored that of the small cell on Ynys Tudwal⁴⁹ or the priories of Aberdaron or Penmon. The only constraints as to number and size of accommodation were those of funds

⁴⁵ This assumption is based around an initial charter date of circa 1140, the evidence that Trefeglwys became a parish church instead of a priory in the mid-thirteenth century and the parallels with Nefyn, the last documentary trace of a prior (1252) and the fact that the documentation relating to the Edwardian Joust do not mention any canons. There is reputedly mention of the priory being ‘ruinous’ in a taxation record dating to between 1306 – 1340 but I have been unable to confirm this, as the only local copy is held in the county archives which are currently closed to researchers.

⁴⁶ A copy of this charter can be found in Appendix 1: Charters. The charter itself is in Rees, *The Cartulary of Haughmond Abbey*, no. 796.

⁴⁷ Butler, ‘A Landscape White with Churches’ p.106

⁴⁸ H. Pryce, ‘Ecclesiastical Wealth in Early Medieval Wales’ in in Edwards, Nancy and Lane, Alan (eds) *The Early Church in Wales and the West* (Oxbow, 1992) pg. 26

⁴⁹ This foundation is also known as St Tudwal’s and is listed as such in records of Welsh monastic institutions.

and land. The initial grant of land would have given sufficient space for a foundation of similar size to Norton; given Nefyn's location on the main pilgrimage route to Enlli it is highly likely that there would have been both sufficient funds, and need, for a foundation of that size rather than the smaller foundation of Ynys Tudwal.

When it comes to determining the likely location of any remaining archaeological features, there are three main considerations:

1. the position and orientation of the current church.
2. the likely position and orientation of the medieval foundation; and
3. the extent of the lands granted to the priory.

The current church sits at an orientation of 70° E/NE;⁵⁰ this is well within the mean alignment of churches in Gwynedd as surveyed by Allen.⁵¹ The position of the cist burial⁵² uncovered during the archaeological work, however, means that it is possible the medieval church was on a more easterly alignment. If this is the case, the wall found during the archaeological survey work in 2013/15 may represent part of the claustral range. Measurements taken on the ground⁵³ between the position of the wall and some of the anomalies discovered in 2022 also suggest that they may be linked.

3.4 Conclusion

Taking into account both the documentary evidence and archaeological anomalies, it is therefore becoming apparent that there was, indeed, a priory in Nefyn. It was a short-lived daughter house of Haughmond Abbey in Shropshire; founded by Cadwaladr ap Gruffudd ap Cynan about 1140, it flourished for around 150 years before being reduced to the status of a parish church. The canons of Haughmond would continue to hold the church and significant lands in and around Nefyn until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1540 brought an end to 400 years of landholding tradition on the Llŷn Peninsula.

⁵⁰ Orientation of current church confirmed by on location surveying, 15th April 2023.

⁵¹ A. Sassin-Allen, 'Church Orientation in the Landscape: a Perspective from Medieval Wales' *Archaeological Journal* 173:1 p.158

⁵² Full details of the position of the cist burial can be found in the report by C.R. Archaeology.

⁵³ On location surveying conducted on 15th April 2023.

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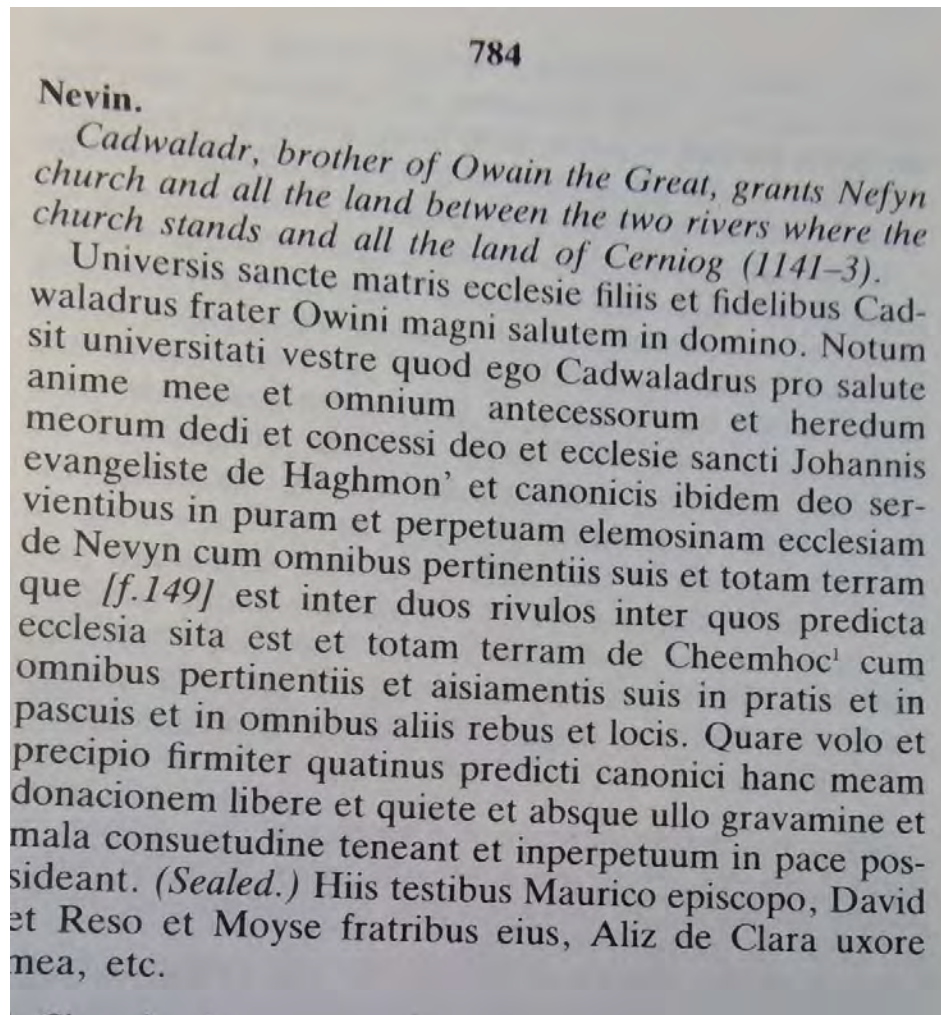
Appendix 1: The Charters Relating to Nefyn

The following images are taken from the Cartulary of Haughmond Abbey⁵⁴ relating to Nefyn. Those included are those specifically referenced within the text. All images created by Siân Evans between 20th November and 6th December 2022.

1. Charter of c.1140 being the original grant of the church and lands to Haughmond Abbey.
2. Charter from between 1272/73 being a confirmation by Bishop Anian of Bangor of the grants of Nefyn and Trefeglwys churches.
3. Charter of 1342 renting lands to Gruffudd ap David ap Madoc White.
4. Charter of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth granting rights of pasture.

⁵⁴ U. Rees, *The Cartulary of Haughmond Abbey* (Cardiff, 1984)

1. Charter of c. 1140, granting the church at Nefyn together with lands to the Abbey.



2. Charter of circa 1272/73 confirming the grants previously made to the Abbey.

796

Alia confirmacio dictarum ecclesiarum.

Anianus (I), *dei gratia* bp. of Bangor, confirms the grants and confirmations of Bps. Maurice, Guy, Alan, Cadugan, and Richard concerning Nefyn (*Nevin*) and Trefeglwys (*Treveglus*) churches. The wording from *Cum* to *suscipimus* is identical with that of no. 794. (*Sealed.*)

Dated: at Haughmond anno gratie millesimo cclxxii; xviii Kal' Februarii (15 Jan. 1272/3).

3. Charter of 1342 granting the lease of lands in Nefyn to Gruffydd ap David ap Madoc – crucially details that Gruffydd is to remove all stones from the canon's buildings.

802

Dimissio trium acrarum terre ibidem.

The abbey leases to Gruffydd ap David ap Madoc White for life 3 a. in the field of Nefyn for 2s. annual rent. Within 2 years he shall build houses there, using the stones from the walls of the canons' houses (30 June 1342).

Die dominica in crastino festi apostolorum Petri et Pauli anno r.r. Edwardi tercii a conquestu xvi ita convenit inter religiosos viros abbatem et conventum de Haghmon' ex parte una et Griffinum ap David ap Madoc White de Nevin ex altera videlicet quod dicti viri religiosi tradiderunt et concesserunt predicto Griffino ad totam vitam suam libere tres acras terre in campo de Nevin quarum una acra iacet iuxta ecclesiam de Nevin inter curiam dictorum virorum religiosorum ex parte una et pratum eorundem virorum religiosorum ex altera et alie due acre iacent ex altera parte ville de Nevyn inter terram burgencium dicte ville et terram Madyn Hager nativi domini Regis ex altera. Reddendo inde annuatim prefatis viris religiosis duos solidos argenti ad festa Sancti Michaelis et annunciacionis dominice per equales porciones et idem Griffinus edificabit super dictam terram domos competentes capiendos lapides pro parietibus de domibus dictorum virorum religiosorum pro edificacione predicta infra biennium post datum presencium et dictas domus in bono statu sustinebit durante termino predicto. Nec licebit, etc.

4. Charter of 1230/1240 issued by Llywelyn ap Iorwerth (Llywelyn Fawr) granting rights of pasture.

789

Confirmacio predictorum.

Llywelyn the Great confirms the grants made in nos. 784–8. He also grants that the canons and their men may pasture their animals with those of his own men at Nefyn, Morfa, and Botacho (1230–40).

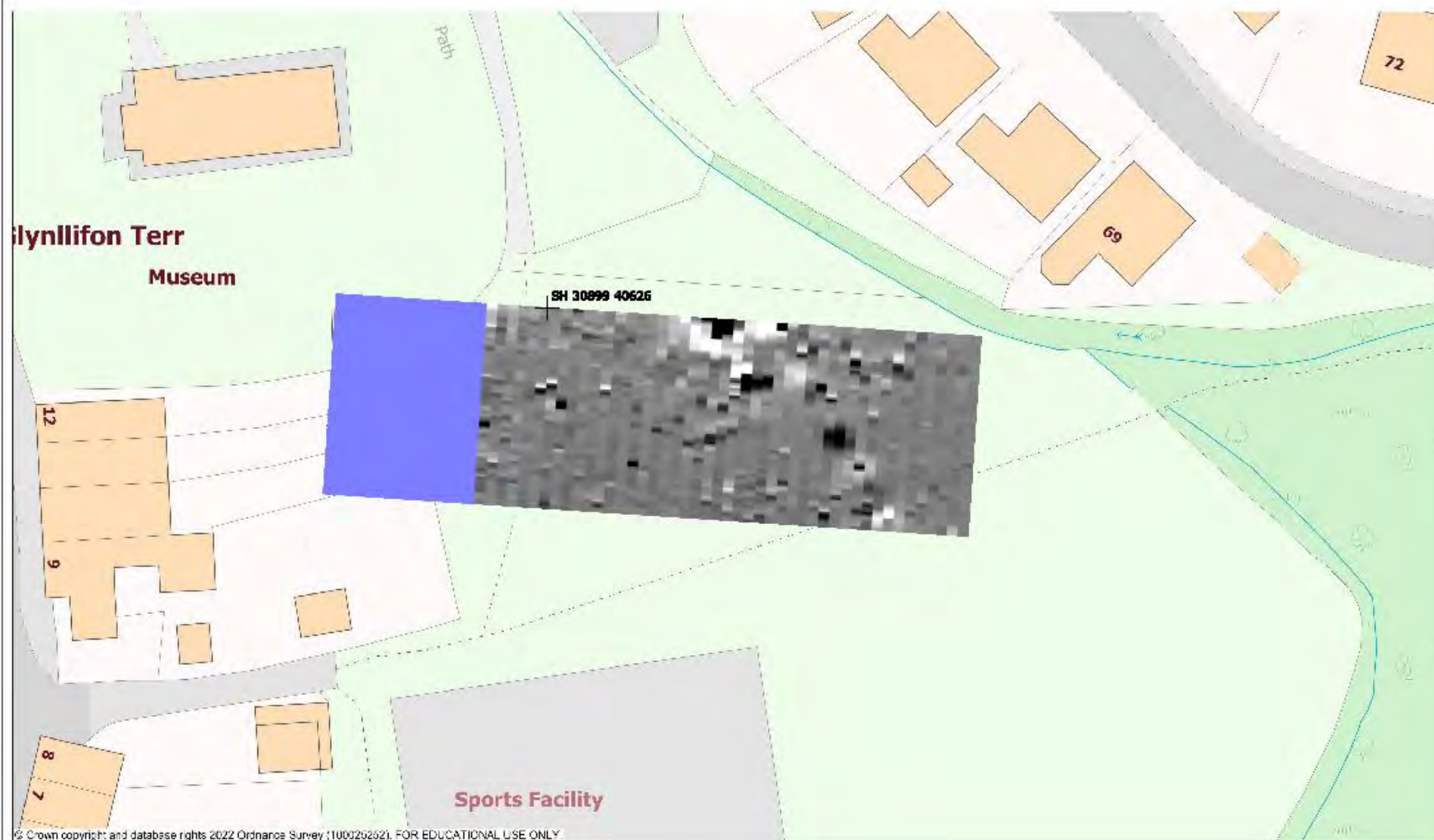
Llewelinus princeps de Aberfiau dominus Snawdini omnibus has litteras visuris vel audituris salutem eternam in domino. Noverit universitas vestra nos concessisse et presenti carta nostra confirmasse deo et ecclesie sancti Johannis evangeliste de Haghmon' et canonicis ibidem deo servientibus pro salute anime nostre et antecessorum et heredum nostrorum ecclesiam de Nevyn cum omnibus pertinentiis suis tam infra villam quam extra tam in terris quam in aliis rebus videlicet totam terram inter duos rivulos inter quos predicta ecclesia sita est. Et a domo Griffri predit [sic] cum prato usque ad domum Waspatlilan. Et tres acras terre quas Wyon cocus eisdem canonicis dedit. Et duas porciunculas terre quas leprosus calvus aliquando tenuit iuxta Penodrayt. Et illam terram quam Troytbrimmet aliquando tenuit de terra Bodanewe et Cadugus filius [sic] Johannis Sturry cum uxore sua et liberis suis et omni substantia sua et cum tota terra sua apud Morvad villam. Concedimus eciam predictis cano-

Appendix 2: Maps and Gradiometer Data.

Map 1:	Results of the magnetometer survey plotted onto street level map of modern Nefyn	2
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All sources and access dates for maps in the appendix are shown on the items themselves.

Map 1: Result of the magnetometer survey plotted onto a map of modern Nefyn using Digimap ([Digimap \(Digimap \(edina.ac.uk\)\)](http://Digimap.edina.ac.uk) created by Dr Gary Robinson and Dr Kate Waddington, September 2022.



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Digimap®

Gary Robinson
Bangor University

Scale 1:500
0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50 m

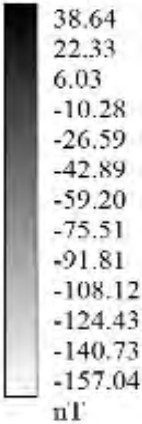
Projection: British National Grid
27 August 2022 13:53

Ordnance
Survey
Licensed Data

Geoplot 3.0 - Gradiometer Data - c:\geoplot\comp\nefyn\nefynf.cmp

Data Set:
Top Left Corner X,Y: 1, 1
Bottom Right Corner X,Y: 80, 60

Display Parameters
Shade Plot (Clip)
Minimum: -3
Maximum: 3
Contrast: 1
Units: Std Dev
Palette: grey55.ptt
Palette Option: Normal
Plotting Scale: 1:2000
Printer Resolution (X): 300dpi
Printer Resolution (Y): 300dpi



Item 2: Raw gradiometer data transferred from the magnetometer by Dr Gary Robinson and Dr Kate Waddington, September 2022

Map 2: Anomalies observed in magnetometer survey data, plotted onto a modern map of Nefyn ([Digimap \(edina.ac.uk\)](http://Digimap.edina.ac.uk)) and highlighted in red. Prepared by Dr Kate Waddington and Siân Evans, 4th April 2023.



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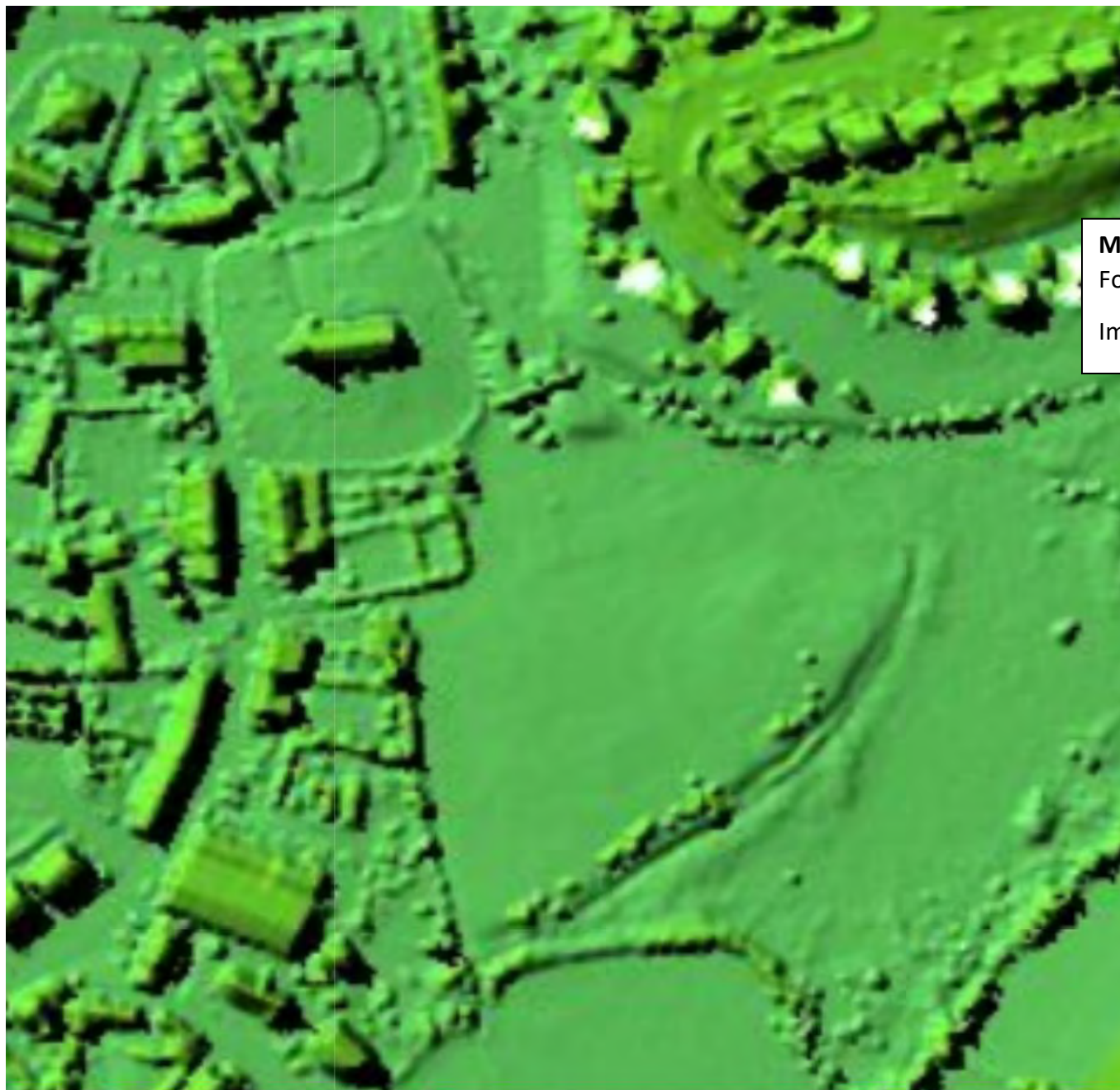
Digimap

Gary Robinson
Bangor University

Scale 1:500
0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50 m

Projection: British National Grid
27 August 2022 13:53

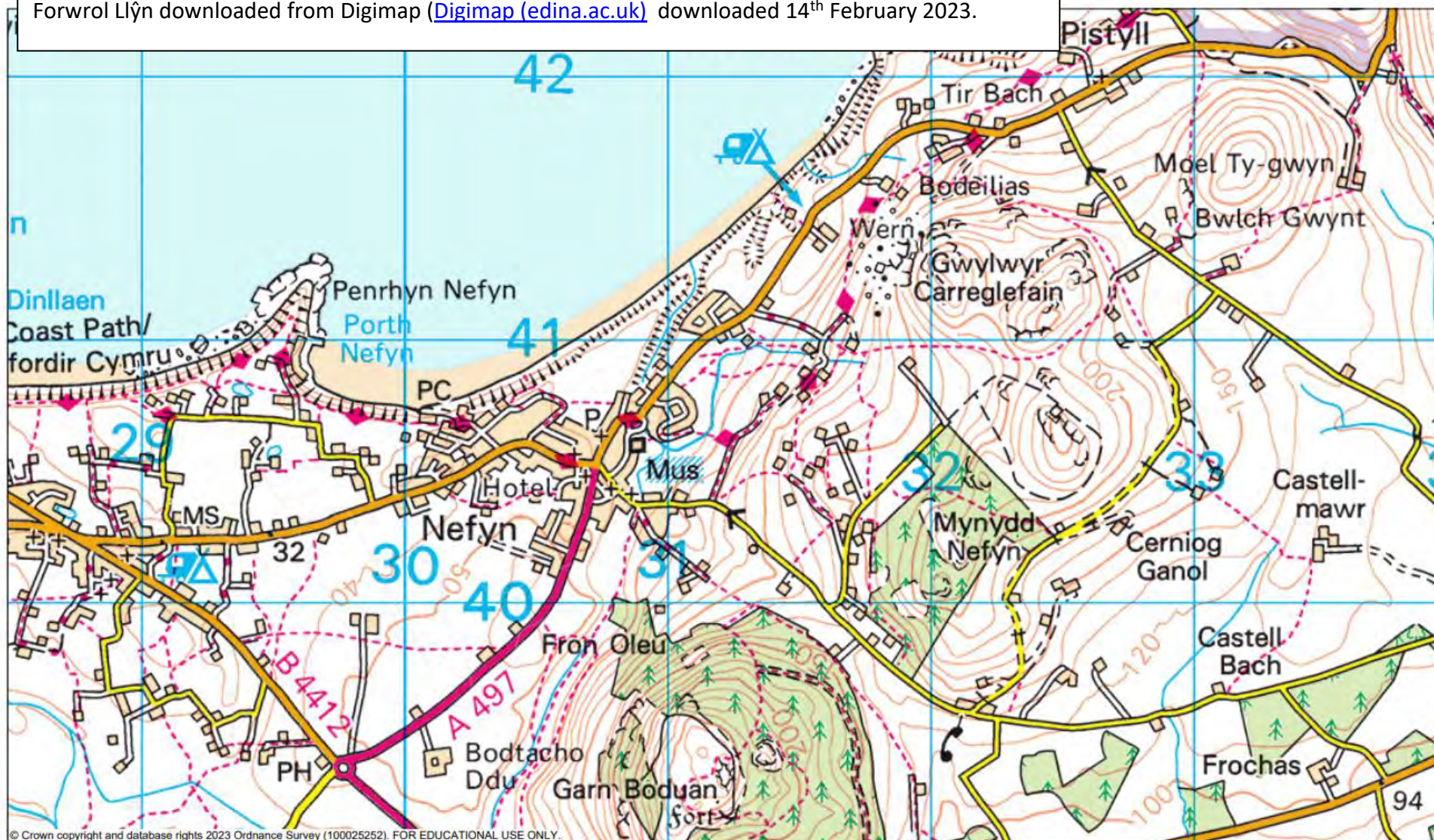
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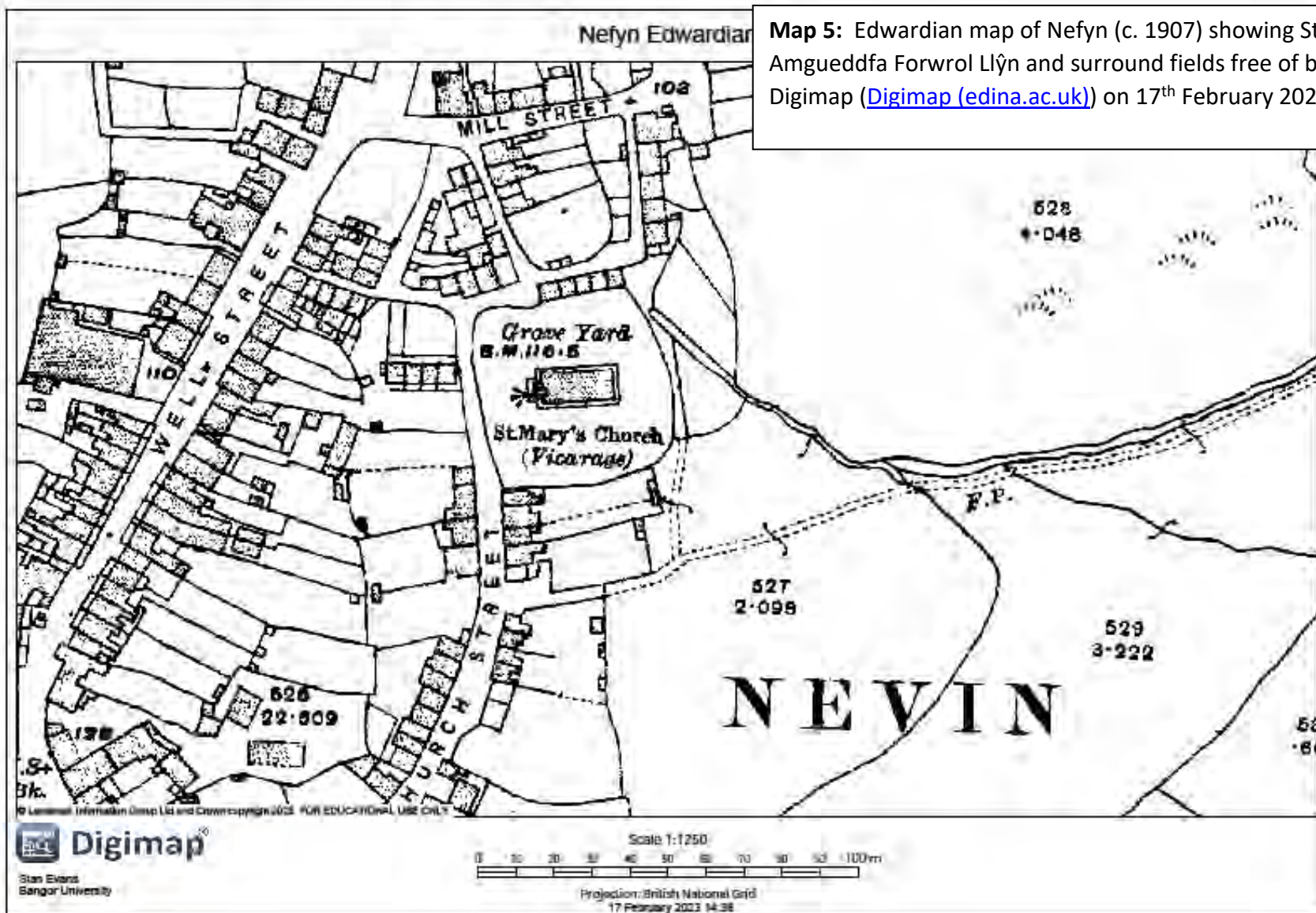


Map 3: LiDAR image of St Mary's Church / Amgueddfa Forwrol Llŷn.

Image taken from [LiDAR Map UK](#) 17th September 2022.

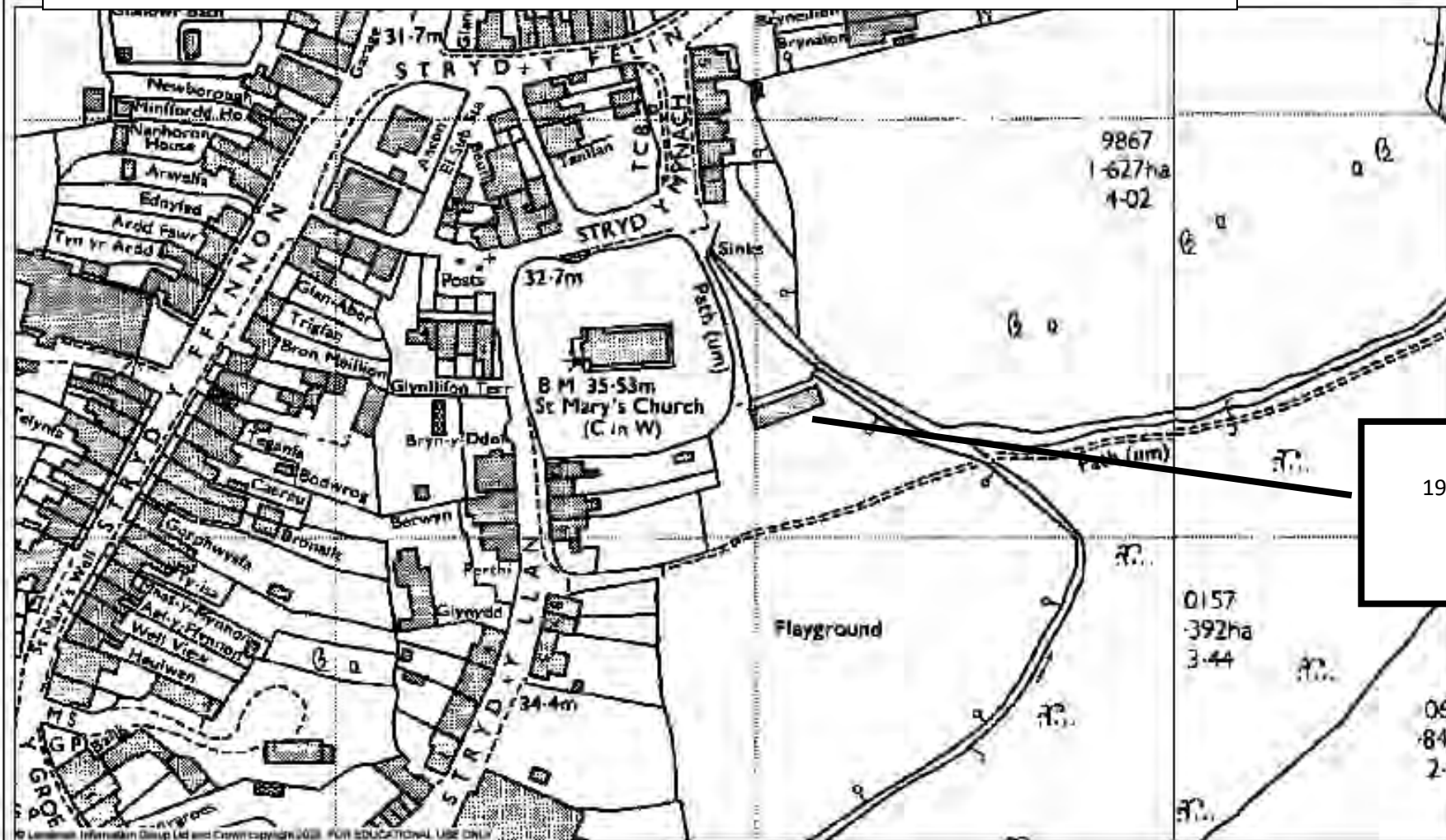
Map 4: OS section map of modern Nefyn showing the position of St Mary's Church / Amgueddfa Forwrol Llŷn downloaded from Digimap ([Digimap \(edina.ac.uk\)](http://Digimap.edina.ac.uk)) downloaded 14th February 2023.





Map 5: Edwardian map of Nefyn (c. 1907) showing St Mary's Church / Amgueddfa Forwrol Llŷn and surround fields free of buildings. Image taken from Digimap ([Digimap \(edina.ac.uk\)](http://Digimap.edina.ac.uk)) on 17th February 2023.

Map 6: View of Nefyn during the 1970s (c.1976) showing a structure in the field adjacent to St Mary's Church/ Amgueddfa Forwrol Llŷn. Image taken from Digimap ([Digimap \(edina.ac.uk\)](http://edina.ac.uk)) on 17th February 2023.



1970s Anomalous Building

Map 7: Street level map of modern Nefyn showing St Mary's Church / Amgueddfa Forwrol Llŷn and surrounding area. Image taken from Digimap ([Digimap \(edina.ac.uk\)](https://digimap.edina.ac.uk)) on 17th February 2023.



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Digimap[®]

Stan Evans
Bangor University

Scale 1:1250
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100 m

Projection: British National Grid
02 April 2023 17:15

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Map 8: LiDAR image of a field to the left of the church in Aberdaron showing visible anomalies. Downloaded from [LIDAR Map UK](#) on 17th September 2022.

