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**Comisiwn Brenhinol Henebion Cymru**  
**Royal Commission**  
**on the**  
**Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales**



**LLWYDFAEN MEDIEVAL CHURCH AND TOWNSHIP**

**County:** Conwy

**Community:** Caerhun

**NGR:** SH7904 7266 (church)

**NPRN:** 404665 (Church); 404664 (township)

**Date of Survey:** May 2008

**Surveyed by:** Toby Driver, RCAHMW, David Hopewell (GAT), David Longley (GAT)

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**Illustrations:** Toby Driver & David Hopewell

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## A medieval church and township rediscovered at Llwydfaen, Caerhun, Conwy (SH 7904 7266)

### Summary

In the dry summer of 2006, cropmarks of a plough-levelled medieval church were discovered during Royal Commission aerial reconnaissance along the northern reaches of the Vale of Conwy/Dyffryn Conwy, at Llwydfaen. This unusual discovery correlated with a documentary record for a medieval township of the same name on the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust's (GAT) Historic Environment Record (HER). The land formed part of the Bodnant Estate and was managed within a Tir Gofal agri-environment scheme. The site was revisited in May 2008 by the Royal Commission and GAT for the purposes of undertaking a detailed magnetometry survey. The church may have been established around 1088 during attempts by Hugh of Avranches, earl of Chester, and his cousin Robert of Rhuddlan, to extend Norman control into Gwynedd; the pristine outline of its buried foundations suggests that the church may never have been completed beyond its footings.

### Location and circumstances of the discovery

The medieval township of Llwydfaen (NPRN 404664; PRN 7371) is preserved as a place-name in the present Llwydfaen farm which lies some 5km due south of Conwy in the lower reaches of the Conwy valley (Figure 1). The site of the township occupies a fairly level river terrace in the bend of the Conwy river at 10m above O.D., bounded by salt marsh to the east and steeply rising ground and woodland to the west. The Conwy river here would have been navigable in medieval times. The present *Llwydfaen* is a nineteenth-century estate farm of the Bodnant Estate, but just under a kilometre to the south-west is the medieval motte of Bryncastell (NPRN 303128) at Tal-y-cafn which overlooks and commands a bridging point of the River Conwy. Further to the south-west, some 2.5kms away, is the Roman fort of Kanovium (NPRN 95640) which incorporates, in its north-east corner, the church of St Mary's Caerhun (NPRN 43767) – believed to have medieval origins although much altered in later times.

The summer of 2006 saw a prolonged drought across much of Wales, which persisted into early August and brought extensive parching of grassland along many valleys and inland hills (Driver 2006). Such exceptional conditions for the formation of cropmarks and parchmarks is only occasionally seen in Wales, the previous severe drought summers including 1975/6, 1984 and 1995. A silage crop (long grass) had been grown in the fields during June rendering the field green and featureless when overflowed on the 9<sup>th</sup> June 2006 during all-Wales vertical aerial photograph coverage for the National Assembly of Wales by Bluesky. With the later cropping of the grass, followed by a continuing drought, cropmarks were first spotted during Royal Commission aerial reconnaissance on the 25<sup>th</sup> July 2006 by an observer travelling with and assisting T. Driver, Chris Musson; the site was orbited and several photographs taken. The clearest photography was obtained nearly three weeks later on 14<sup>th</sup> August 2006, the last Royal Commission flight of the summer (Figures 3-5). An initial field visit was made to the site on 11<sup>th</sup> July 2007 which confirmed that no surface remains were visible above ground. The Royal Commission and the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust returned to the site on 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> May 2008 to undertake two days of magnetometry across the church and its immediate surroundings (Figures 6 & 7), as part of filming by Element Productions for a forthcoming television series entitled 'Hidden Histories'.

### **Description of the church (figures 5-7)**

The cropmarks in grass stubble from 2006 show the foundations of a simple medieval church, built on a slight eminence or river terrace overlooking lower-lying ground to the east. The church is aligned NNE/SSW, with an apse at southern end. No doorway is visible around the perimeter of the foundations. The overall dimensions of the church are 19.5 (20m; 65ft) NNE/SSW by 8m (26ft). The nave measures approximately 14m long internally. The apse measures approx. 4.1m deep and 4.3m wide internally. The plan of the church was confirmed during magnetometry by David Hopewell for GAT on the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> May 2008. The wall-plan is identical to that revealed by parchmarks on aerial photographs except for a gap in the wall revealed on the south-west outer edge of the apse; aerial photographs show a continuous wall-line here. Magnetometry may also show a partial floor surface surviving in the southern two-thirds of the nave. The presence of an apsidal end to the church is also indicative of the presence of a shrine.

In David Hopewell's opinion, the magnetic signal from the buried stonework is exceptionally high and may suggest that the wall stubs had been burnt. If so this has particular significance to the archaeology of the church. No convincing remains of a churchyard or walled enclosure, circular or otherwise, are visible either on aerial photographs or the magnetometry. There does appear to be a slight wall- or fence-line on the west side of the church, parallel to the church wall. In addition, cropmarks show five stony buried features just to the south-west of the church, conceivably buried stone slabs or graves. One particular magnetic signal, perhaps from a buried stone or slab, some 7.5m west of the apse matches the evidence on the aerial photograph and might indicate a particular fragment of masonry, or a slab or burial, close to the church.

### **Description of the township (Figures 2-4)**

The visible remains of the township chiefly occur in a single, large field to the north of the present Llwydfaen farm which contains the buried church at its southern end, and parchmarks of a metalled road and occasional building foundations in the central and northern part (Figure 2). The central part of the field is bisected by parchmarks of an east-west former road or trackway, now buried beneath the ploughsoil (Figure 2, C). It is metalled in its central and eastern part, but appears to survive as a sunken holloway in its western part. At its eastern end it splits in a 'V' shaped junction. In the adjacent field to the west (SH 7880 7285), the holloway has a junction with a southern track and faint cropmarks may show the remnants of house platforms or other structures here. Other prominent remains in the main field showing as cropmarks comprise remains of two building foundations at SH 7892 7282 and to the north at SH 7901 7289 (Figure 2, B). To the east, in the lower-lying part of the field in fairly boggy ground are cropmarks of an angular enclosure against the lower field wall, with two rectangular stone features in its southern half, conceivably buried slabs or stony foundations (Figure 2, D). Short lengths of at least two further north-south metalled roads can be seen in the southern part of the main field, between the main east-west road and the church. No above-ground remains of the buildings or road were noted during fieldwork, although the farmer noted that the east-west road was sometimes visible at ground level during droughts. Two fragments of possible dressed stone incorporated into the south-eastern field wall have been recorded but neither are terribly convincing as examples of medieval masonry.

### **Discussion**

This area of Gwynedd was in the vanguard of early Norman attempts to win territory from, and exert control over, native Welsh rulers. Following the Norman conquest of Britain in 1066, Hugh of

Avranches, earl of Chester and his cousin, Robert of Rhuddlan, had established themselves east of the river Clwyd by 1086. Over the following four years they drove west and quickly established early timber castles at Degannwy, Bangor and at sites further north and west. The Norman occupation of this part of Wales was short-lived and by 1094 Gruffudd ap Cynan had regained control and drove the Normans back. David Longley considers it likely that Llwydfaen church could have been built around the year 1088, as a very early attempt to exert Norman control and establish a settlement in the lower reaches of the Conwy valley barely seven kilometres inland from Degannwy Castle. The very clear outline of the church foundations, both on aerial photographs and magnetometry, is problematic if we consider that the church was ever finished in stone and used by the community. If a standing building has gradually collapsed through time, and been reduced to its foundation level by stone robbing, one would expect a ragged, disturbed outline resulting from centuries of stone theft and digging-out. The outline of the Llwydfaen church foundation is too neat and undisturbed to support this thesis. Coupled with the probability that the stone foundations had been subjected to burning, yielding a high response on the magnetometry, one scenario would be that the newly established site of the Norman church was destroyed during an early phase in its construction. That said, cropmarks of buried stone slabs close to the church (light and dark shapes to bottom left of church, Figure 5) could represent the sites of graves indicating the church was used for a time. Therefore, it may have taken the form of a timber building standing on stone foundations before its eventual destruction. The extent and permanence of the surrounding township, which clearly once was served by a metalled road, is uncertain. The church never appears to have been augmented with a permanent churchyard, or even an approach path; whether it was a contemporary structure within this township development, or whether the township was developed later, could only be tested by excavation. The precise relationship between Llwydfaen church and township, and the nearby motte at Tal-y-cafn, also remains difficult to establish without further dating.

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **References**

Driver, T. 2006. RCAHMW Aerial Reconnaissance 2006, *Archaeology in Wales* 46, 143-152.

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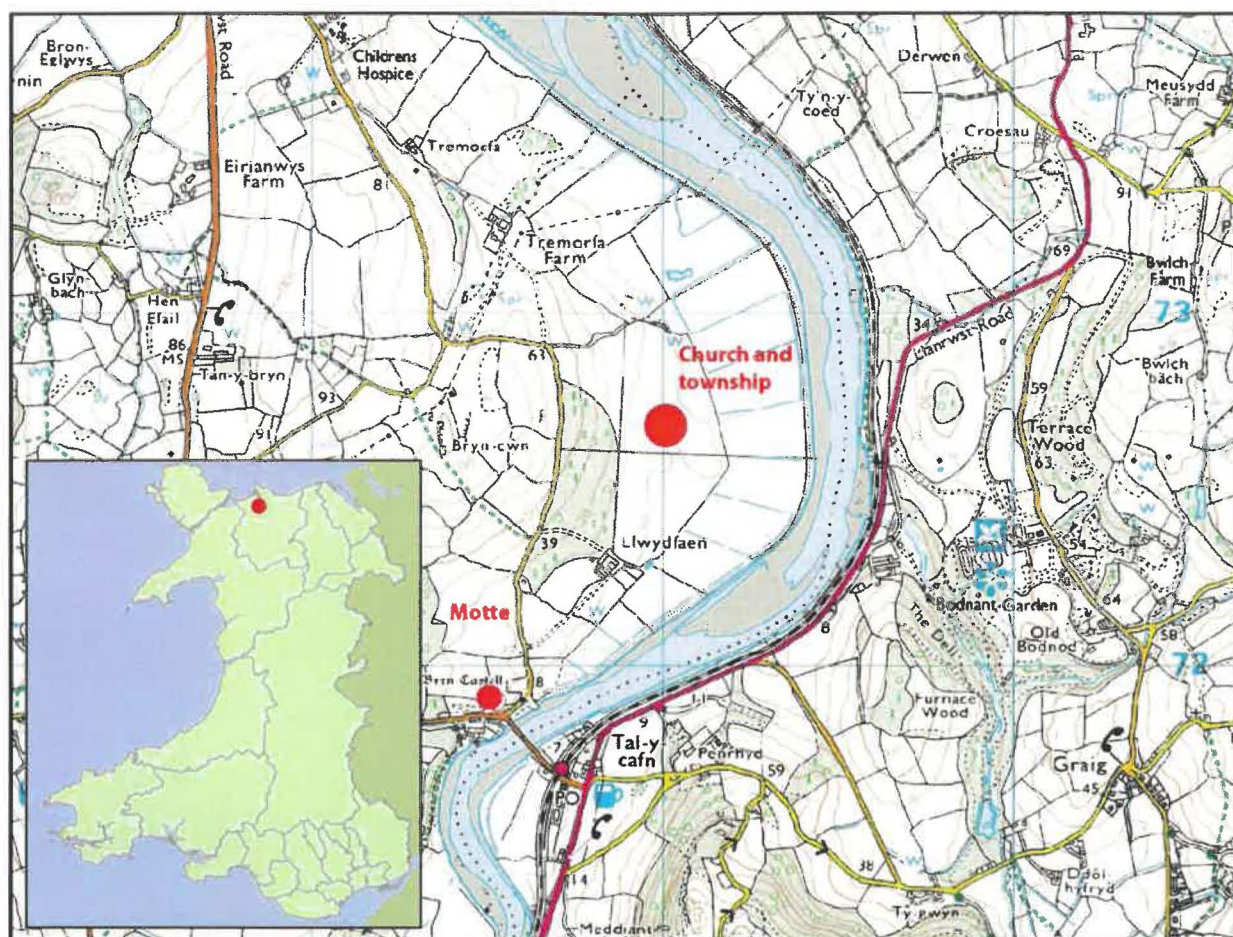
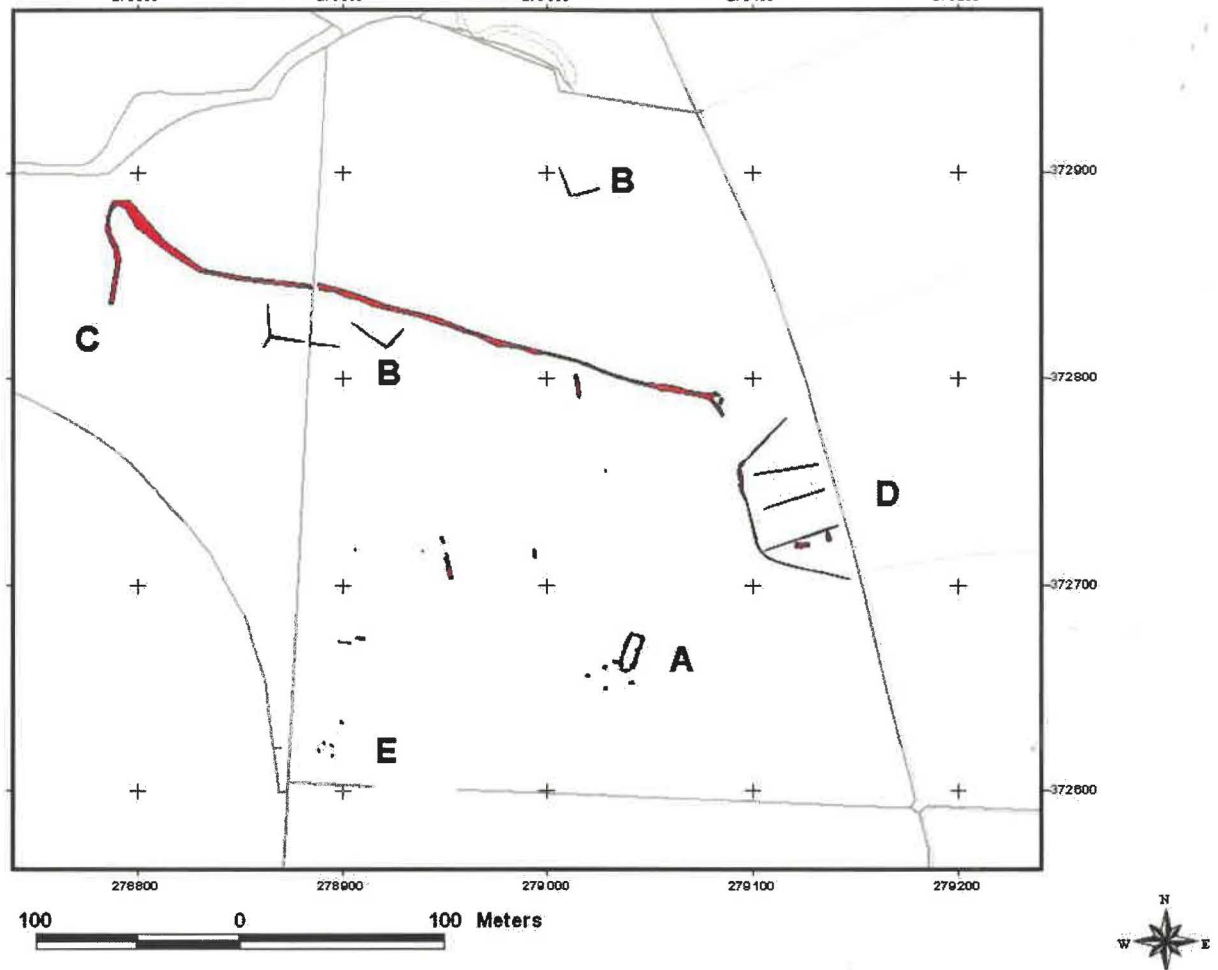


Figure 1. Llwydfaen medieval township. Location map showing Bryncastell motte to the south-west of Llwydfaen, and the alluvial terrace occupied by the church and township (Crown Copyright RCAHMW, Licence No. 100017916).



*Figure 2. Llwydfaen medieval township; air photo mapping of the principal features revealed as parchmarks on aerial photographs including (A) medieval church, (B) angular building foundations, (C), east-west metalled road serving township, (D) polygonal walled enclosure with buried stones or slabs and (E) areas of buried stones or slabs (Crown Copyright RCAHMW).*





*Figure 3. Llwydfaen medieval township from the north-east, showing parchmarks of the church (centre-left), the east-west road (lower-centre to upper-right) and some of the remains of building foundations (e.g. square-sided parchmark lower-right). (Crown Copyright RCAHMW, AP\_2006\_4250).*

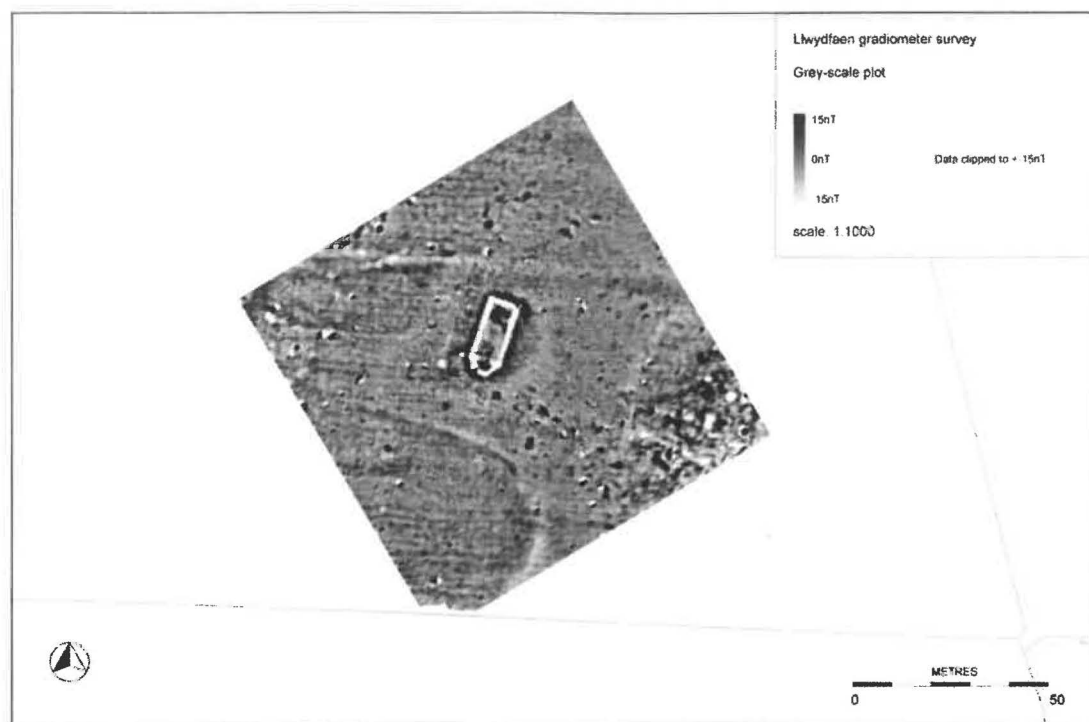


*Figure 4. Llwydfaen medieval township from the south, with the church in the foreground (Crown Copyright RCAHMW, AP\_2006\_4255).*

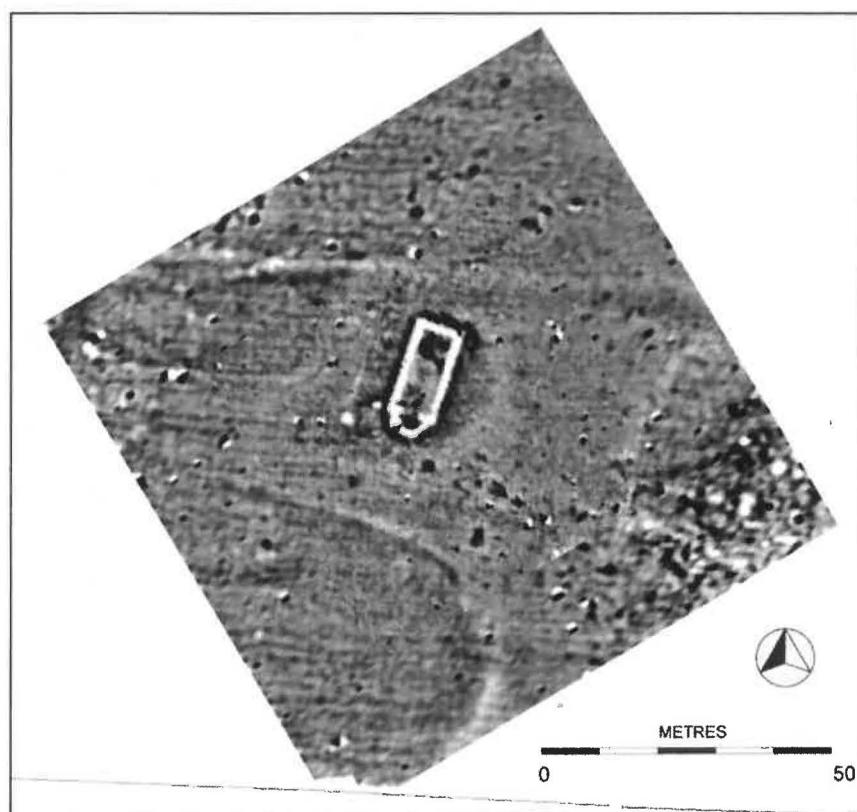


*Figure 5. Llwydfaen medieval church; view from the south showing the church occupying a low alluvial ridge (green, deeper soil) and with two cows for scale (upper-right). (Crown Copyright RCAHMW, AP\_2006\_4256).*

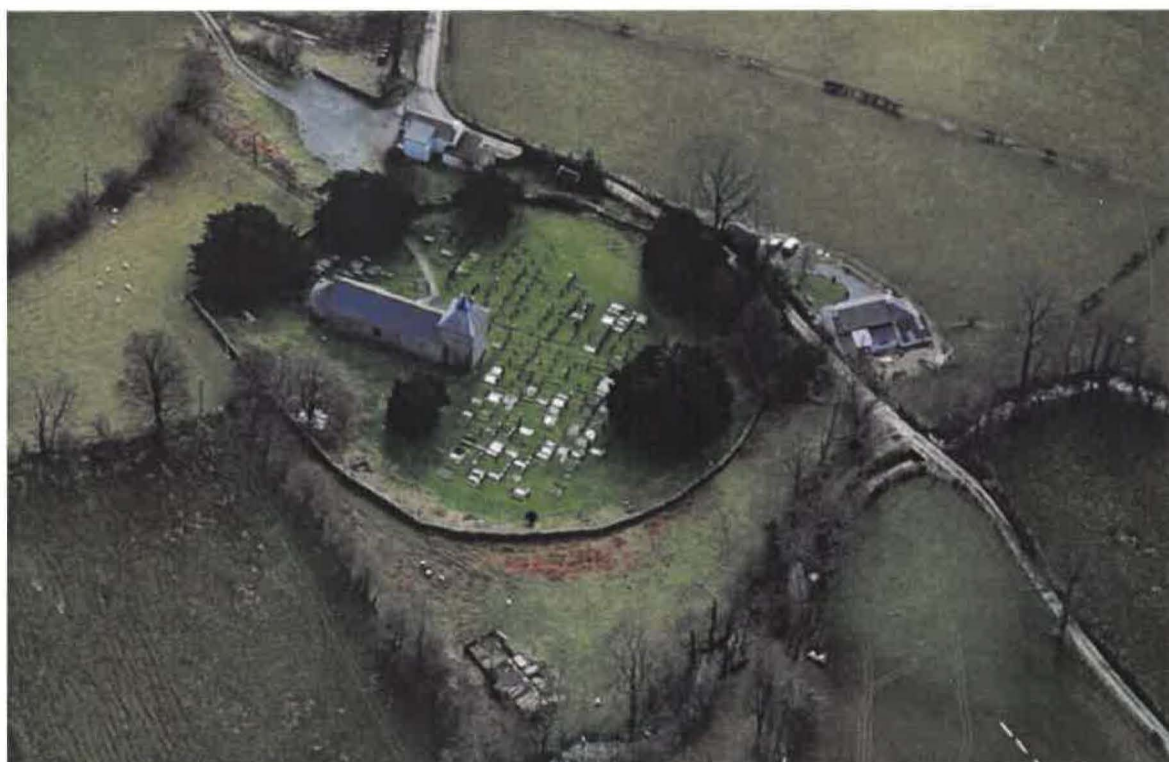




*Figure 6. Llwydfaen medieval church; magnetometry survey by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust plotted in relation to local field boundaries. (Copyright GAT).*



*Figure 7. Llwydfaen medieval church; detail of the magnetometry survey by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust. (Copyright GAT).*



*Figures 8 & 9. Two views of the medieval St Melangell's Church (NPRN 160381), Pennant Melangell, in Llangynog, Powys. The nave and apse of the church are of comparable dimensions to the intended building at Llwydfaen; the tower, porch and windows are all later additions. No churchyard enclosure has been identified at Llwydfaen. The church contains fine medieval wall paintings (Crown Copyright RCAHMW, (upper) DT2004\_164, (lower) GTJ25776).*