CPAT Report No 1331

The Llys and the Maerdref in East and North-East Wales

Cadw

Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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SCHEDULING ENHANCEMENT PROGRAMME

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February 2015

Report for Cadw

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Cover photo: Cefnllys old castle, Radnorshire

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Introduction

Historians have written extensively about kingship, the court as a physical and social focus and entity, and the Welsh legal codes, in other words the documented history of such institutions and their development across the centuries prior to the intrusion of the Normans into the west. For this we should go back to Sir John Lloyd and Paul Vinogradoff, and earlier still to Frederic Seebohm, whilst moving into the later 20th century T. Jones Pierce, Glanville Jones, R. R. Davies, T. M. Charles-Edwards amongst other eminent historians come to mind.

When in 2000 the University of Wales Press published a massive volume entitled *The Welsh King and his Court*, based on a conference held at Gregynog in 1993, it was dedicated as a memorial volume to the historical geographer, Glanville Jones, formerly a professor at the University of Leeds. He had died in 1996 but had contributed a paper to the conference on the subject of the *llys* and the *maerdref*, an interlinked pair of topics on which he was without doubt one of the foremost authorities, at the forefront of enquiries into their form and nature, and one of very few who in their studies merged the disciplines of history and historical geography in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

No one can doubt the integrity of Glanville Jones' work and the advances that he made in an understanding of the *llys* in particular, but his was unquestionably document-based research. From an archaeological and landscape perspective Glanville Jones frustrated and continues to frustrate, concentrating for his arguments and descriptions on a small number of exemplars, rather than researching the larger number of *llysoedd* and *maerdrefi* that he knew existed and that he occasionally referred to in passing, and pinning down their locations. Indeed, the entire concept of the *llys* is primarily historical rather than archaeological and topographical, and this becomes wholly transparent when the index of *The Welsh King and his Court* is analysed: the only entries pertaining to *llysoedd* as actual physical places or locations are the examples referenced in Jones' own paper, one of 24 papers in a volume that ran to over six hundred pages.

Part of the problem, I think, is that during the 1980s and 1990s Jones was the sole authority that editors turned to for informed articles on 'Dark Age' settlement and agrarian issues. Whether it was the Cambridge *Agrarian History of England and Wales* (1972), Baker and Butlin's *Studies of Field Systems in the British Isles* (1973), or Huw Owen's *Settlement and Society in Wales* (1989) Glanville Jones was the expert on Wales. Even archaeologists focussing primarily on the material remains of the past relied on Glanville Jones as the solitary commentator, as evidenced in Della Hooke's edited volume on *Medieval Villages* (1985) and John Manley and his colleagues' production of *The Archaeology of Clwyd* (1991). The result, it hardly needs to be pointed out, was the creation of a specialism that amounted to the equivalent to a closed shop, often with the same underpinning material re-packaged with occasional fresh examples for a new audience.

Yet, it is very clear that Jones was able to draw on evidence that he had encountered during his research but which he felt needed little or no elaboration. Thus in 1991 he casually remarked: 'sometimes the *maerdref* became the site of a borough as at Chirk, Wrexham, Rhuddlan, Denbigh or Ruthin. Other *maerdrefi*, with their demesne lands granted even before the Edwardian conquest to Welsh noblemen, as was the case at Dinerth and Llysaled, were consolidated…' (Jones 1991, 202). There was little elucidation and no subsequent commentaries on any of these was published, as far as can be established. Even in Hooke's 1985 volume on *Medieval Villages* where the theme of the underlying conference and the majority of the contributions were archaeological or historical-geographical in form, Jones remained faithful to his historical concepts, and specific examples were tacked on the end of the paper, almost as afterthoughts (Jones 1985).

One or two earlier historians had trodden a similar though marginally different path. Sir John Lloyd (1912) at the beginning of the century examined the tribal divisions of Wales, referring to many of the pre-Conquest commotes and in passing occasionally cited the royal courts that lay within them, though occasionally at first sight these appear to be more traditional than real (e.g. Caersws in Montgomeryshire, though see Pen-prys below which one might assume he was referring to); and on other occasions it is impossible to differentiate between the court and a stronghold as may be the case with Tafolwern, also in Montgomeryshire. And in passing we might ask too how much credence should be given to Nicholas Carlisle's *Topographical Dictionary* (1811), a source occasionally cited by Lloyd in his consideration of the tribal divisions, but one not consulted here. Yet it appears to me that amongst the general histories of Wales it was Lloyd who presented the fullest listing of putative *llysoedd* in the country and is one which still stands. It is difficult not to compare it favourably with Professor Charles-Edwards' *Wales and the Britons* (2013), the most recent volume in the Oxford 'History of Wales' series, who barely gets further than Aberffraw, Dinefwr and Rhuddlan in his references to the courts of the Welsh kings and princes.

With the exception of David Longley (1997, 2010 etc), archaeologists, perhaps understandably, appear to have been reluctant to engage with the concepts of the *llys* and *maerdref*. Chris Arnold for instance, in his assessment of early medieval Wales alludes to Aberffraw and, not surprisingly, to Mathrafal where he had excavated, but the former appears to be introduced largely to demonstrate how elusive are the archaeological remains of arguably the best known and most important of *llys* sites (Arnold and Davies 2000, 158), and was a point that Glanville Jones would probably have disagreed with (Jones 1989, 183). Nevertheless, with a specific geography in mind David Longley has pointed out that 'it can reasonably be argued that the royal administrative centres of the successive kings and princes of Gwynedd have a claim to be considered as the most important secular complexes in the north Welsh landscape in the centuries before the Edwardian conquest' (Longley 1997, 41), which makes their recognition in the landscape all the more important.

Some other sites that might have functioned as a court in the early medieval era have subsequently been rejected. Perhaps the most obvious is Brecon Gaer where Mortimer Wheeler posited a post-Roman phase based on the nature of the final defences. This has been soundly dismissed by modern academics, primarily by Jeff Davies (in Edwards and Lane 1988, 24), and less emphatically by John Casey (in Burnham and Davies 2010, 204).

Llys and maerdref: definitions and explanations

Any discussion of the *llys* and *maerdref* should inevitably start with the Welsh law codes which provides the theoretical base for the creation and existence of these two institutions. The law book known as the Book of Iorwerth which pertained to north Wales determined that in any commote two vills were reserved for the use of the king or prince, and it was the commote (or *cwmwd*) and not the larger (and older) *cantref* that was the significant administrative unit (Smith 2014, 193). One vill took in the waste and summer pasture land, the other was the land associated with the *maerdref.* Jones saw the vill that contained the *maerdref* as an essentially lowland phenomenon and that the prince's court (or *llys*) lay adjacent to the *maerdref* and its bond settlement or very close to it (Jones 1985, 159).

Amongst the various descriptions that have been prepared by historians, the best and most succinct definition of these high-status settlements and their support structures has, in this writer's view, been provided by Beverley Smith: 'the *llys* or court was located at the *maerdref,* the township where the demesnes [or demesne land] *(tir cyfrif*) and the princes' other assets would be administered by *maer* and *cynghellor*. But the *maerdref,* on occasion the site of an earthwork castle, was also the administrative focus of the commote, the seat of the commote court and the centre where the fiscal obligations of the community were fulfilled. It was thus the place where the authority of the princes' representatives in the commote, the *rhaglaw* and *rhingyll,* was centred. The resources concentrated at

the *llys* of the commote could vary considerably, both in their nature and extent, and those located upon productive lands at the heart of the princes' lordship were evidently well-frequented by prince and entourage' (Smith 2001, 32). The only qualification that should perhaps be recognised is that this description is primarily applicable to a late stage in the development of the Welsh princedoms, and would not have been entirely applicable in earlier centuries. From the viewpoint of the archaeologist, David Longley's expositions on the various elements that are described in the law books are also worth consultation, both because they are fuller and are also clearly laid out (2001; 2004).

There is a further institution that needs to be mentioned here. The *maenol* or *maenor* has been considered in detail by various authorities. Helen Watt (2000, 5) has stated that in the pre-Conquest era 'the classic *maenor* had three elements: demesne land (*tir bwrdd*) which was worked by the tenants of an unfree township (*maerdref*) to supply the site of an itinerant prince's court *(llys*) where food renders were collected and services performed for the whole commote'. There is thus a firm belief amongst at least some historians of the early medieval era that the presence of a *maenor/maenol* was a clear pointer to a *maerdref* and it follows that place-names incorporating the element *maneol* or some derivative of it could be helpful guides. Defining a *maenor*, however, is primarily a mapping exercise, perhaps something that might be attempted in selected parts of east Wales in due course. For the present this assessment is restricted to the *llys* and the *maerdref.*

This is all reasonably straightforward, but David Stephenson has warned in correspondence that 'the concept of one *llys* (and, therefore, one *maerdref*) per commote is one that should be examined critically and in some detail. The "one commote, one *llys"* idea is derived from the lawbooks, and it must be emphasised that they set up idealised types. In reality the situation was often more complex. At the most basic level it seems that in some parts of Wales the commote was a relatively late arrival in the hierarchy of administrative units. The primary administrative area was the *cantref* or the kingdom/lordship. [In other words], many petty realms covering only a single *cantref* existed, and it is unlikely that they required more than one lordship centre, as long as there was only one acknowledged 'king' or lord, as in the case of, say, Hywel ab Ieuaf in Arwystli, c.1132-1185. I have suggested that the division of Arwystli into two administrative areas, *Is Coed* and *Uwch Coed*, probably took place only after Llywelyn ab Iorwerth of Gwynedd annexed it, along with southern Powys, in 1208-10 and again in 1216-40. At some point, probably 1216, it became convenient to split the administration, and so two centres were established, Penprys and Talgarth (Stephenson 2005, 33-35). The older of the two is clearly Talgarth. In the case of a place such as Penprys, it will have functioned as a centre for the collection of dues, and it is possible that there existed provision for a lord to stay there when necessary, but we may not be dealing with a full-blown festive and administrative *llys* of the type described in the lawbooks. So we begin to face the prospect that in reality there were probably several different types, or "grades" of *llysoedd* (D Stephenson: pers. comm.).

A further complicating factor which undermines the simple 'one commote, one *llys*' equation is summed up by Stephenson in the following terms: 'the probability is that several lords of "royal" descent jostled each other within a single commote, and each will have had a residence that he will have considered to be a *llys*. We see this phenomenon repeatedly in the thirteenth century, largely as a result of the increasing volume of evidence in that period. In areas like Mechain, Elfael, Ceri etc we have a clear view of multiple lordship within very restricted territory (see Stephenson, 2007, for the case of Ceri)'.

The llys

For the *llys* itself, the Book of Iorwerth identified seven buildings that would go to make up the court and would be built by the king's bondmen: the hall, the sleeping chamber, the refectory, the kitchen, the brew-house, the stable and the privy. The list was 'over-schematized' as Glanville Jones himself put it (1989, 181), and other buildings went unmentioned, at least directly, in the law books and included a porter's lodge, a mead chamber and the queen's chamber, to which might be added a chapel which features in the South Wales law books. All these lay inside an enclosure. Outside it were the barn and

the kiln, and according to the *Book of Iorwerth* these would be erected 'on the *maerdref*'. Lawrence Butler has done his best to examine the descriptions of buildings given in the laws in relation to the material remains as revealed by archaeology (Butler 1987).

William Rees (1967, 25) emphasised the role of the *llys* as an administrative centre, using the term 'court-house', and hinting at a quasi-legal rather than a domestic role. The *rhaglaw*, according to Rees held the court of the commote, the *mawr* (reeve) collected the dues of the bondsmen and the *rhingyll* was answerable for those of the freemen. More recently Thomas Charles-Edwards has provided a more rigorous analysis of this, pointing out that a *llys* was first and foremost 'the royal centre of an administrative district', that over time it also acquired the sense of a royal entourage (i.e. those people who accompanied the king or prince on his travels), and that also over time but particularly in the 13th century it might become a place where legal cases were heard, but was not in itself a court of law (Charles-Edwards 2004, 96), which appears a subtle distinction (*cf* Smith 2014, 195).

There was not only a chronological dimension to the distribution and prevalence of *llysoedd*, but a hierarchical one as well. Some courts might be elevated as chief courts: Davies cites Gruffudd ap Cynan whose biographer stated that the king 'constructed large churches in his chief courts' (*op cit*, 62), while Beverley Smith in his monumental biography of Llywelyn Ap Gruffudd (Smith 2014) refers regularly to the three principal courts of Wales central to the three historical kingdoms – Aberffraw (Ang) for Gwynedd which was pre-eminent, Mathrafal (Monts) for Powys and Dinefwr (Carms) for Deheubarth – but rarely mentions any other courts in a way that suggests that by the 13th century the latter were of little significance (2014, 17). Yet Smith also reflects on the likelihood that Llywelyn ap Gruffudd 'maintained a court which was itinerant for at least part of the year' (2014, 220), and lists places such as Dinorben and Dinbych, but also Clocaenog in Colion and Sychdyn in Coleshill where Llywelyn was to be found (2014, 221).

But what is perhaps more important for the landscape historian was the itinerant life-style of a Welsh prince. As long as a prince circuited his lands, moving from regional centre to centre and consuming their resources, the *llys* with its supporting *maerdref* was an absolute necessity. As one place in the princedom became the *de facto* capital and centre, so the role of the others declined, but for the present this is an issue for the historian rather than the archaeologist.

A further and as yet unanswered question is whether the lesser aristocracy might aspire to courts. Smith (2014, 113) refers to the 13th-century lords of Mechain, Edeirnion and Dinmael, all parts of Powys, but it is not clear whether they too had courts, and it takes us back to the comments of David Stephenson at the end of the last section.

The maerdref

Jones assumed that the settlement lying within the *maerdref* would be a hamlet or village for it would be occupied by inhabitants of all social groups. Not only would the bondmen live there, but also the steward or reeve and, when the king was in residence, his troops, a bard, the chaplain and others (Jones 1985, 161). Beverley Smith was of a similar view, that 'a *maerdref* [was] necessarily a nucleated settlement' (2014, 243). This one might suggest is inductive reasoning – no map survives to reveal a *maerdref* at a time when it was functioning and as far as I am aware no excavations have taken place that have convincingly exposed a *maerdref*; it goes without saying that no settlement that contemporaries would recognise as a *maerdref* has survived to the present day. Though the bond settlement of the *maerdref* is consistently presented as a hamlet in the writings of Glanville Jones and has been taken up by others, and while this might appear to be a logical progression that would facilitate the efficient working of the demesne, there is very little substantive evidence either in historical documents or archaeologically to support the contention.

The *maerdref* was more than a settlement. Rees Davies translated it as the 'demesne estate'. The *maerdref* was first and foremost a township, an area of land. Within this or close to it was the *llys* or court and also a bond settlement which also on occasions went under the name of *maerdref*. Pratt has argued that contemporary protocol required that the *llys* should lie in a free township, not a bond vill, citing the examples of Wrexham, Marford and Llanarmon-yn-Iâl. It is not clear whether this was a universally applicable rule or a late feature found only in this part of medieval Powys.

The settlement within the *maerdref* was in effect a focus of administration and thus as Davies and others have pointed out each district would have its own centre (2000, 62).

Locating the courts

With the exception of the north-west of Wales, little archaeological and landscape work has been done on *llysoedd* and *maerdrefi*. This is reflected in the entries in the HER and NMR. On Coflein only four *llys* sites are registered under site type (although there are 409 entries where the name incorporates the element, *llys*), none of them in the Clwyd-Powys region. There are three in the regional HER: the Glys is a poorly located place-name in Glasbury (Brecs) which the HER claims could be a derivation of 'llys', although it is not clear where this idea originated; Llysfain near Connah's Quay (Flints) whose origins are equally obscure and whose inclusion in the HER is nowhere explained; and Whitford Wood palace whose authenticity and place in the HER owes everything to an observation by the late 18th-century antiquary, Thomas Pennant, and has not been verified since.

Maerdref is also a recognised site type in the thesaurus of indexing terms, yet neither the HER nor Coflein registers any hits when queried. The free-text field in Coflein reveals no more than five entries for *maerdref*, only one of which, Chirk, is in east Wales.

It has long been recognised that a number of defensible sites could have operated as strongholds in the period immediately following the historically attested Roman withdrawal in the early 5th century AD. Whether such strongholds could be classed as nascent *llysoedd* is a matter best left to historians, but in east Wales such sites might include New Pieces (Monts) and in the north Dinorben (Denbs).

Pinpointing where the courts and their supporting settlements existed has been led by the work of GAT in north-west Wales, particularly David Longley, following some earlier and intermittent attempts by Glanville Jones amongst which his work on Aberffraw stands out (as in Jones 1985). An internal research report was prepared by Longley entitled *Town, Llys and Maerdref*. Undated but seemingly attributable to 1991, it set out the framework for Gwynedd and listed over twenty commotes and their constituent *maerdrefi* with the supporting claim that the names of 'most *maerdrefi* in Gwynedd are known' (Longley n.d., 6). This was followed by a conference paper in 1994 (Longley 1997). Meanwhile a GAT project, including some excavation, under the supervision of Neil Johnstone looked first at Anglesey (1992-3) and was then extended to Caernarfonshire and Meirionnydd (Johnstone 1997).

What has been achieved in Gwynedd, however, does not hold for other regions. As far as can be established no attempts have been made to list, systematically, the *llysoedd* and *maerdrefi* of east Wales. There are no comprehensive surveys and information is scattered across a wide range of books, papers and reports, as might be inferred from the bibliography and reference section at the end of this assessment. Some potentially useful sources have not been tapped: David Stephenson has mentioned to the writer the potential of medieval Welsh poetry as a sometimes inadvertent guide to the presence of a court, but it is a potential that has yet to be tested.

What sources there are can be too vague to be of real significance. Frustrating for instance is William Rees' *Historical Atlas of Wales* (1967). If his 1932 map of South Wales is problematic because of the sporadic absence of known data to support a particular mapped assertion, the *Historical Atlas* is considerably worse. Plate 28 purports to show the *cantref* and commote boundaries for the whole of

Wales together with symbols, some labelled with names, some without, which the former tend to suggest are *llysoedd*. It is a pointless exercise trying to determine where the unnamed examples might lie, and the factual basis for the appearance of some named examples is completely unclear. What is the rationale behind Llanfair Dyffryn Clwyd, for instance, and does the highlighting of Prestatyn tally with the farm of Llys now in Meliden immediately to the south of the coastal town? Yet one further point does need to be made. From this, the only source of guidance for Wales as a whole, it can be inferred that information relevant to the present study is scanty for south and mid-Wales compared with the north of the country.

A further source, as unsatisfactory as Rees' *Historical Atlas*, is a short paper by Melville Richards on commote and cantref names, which appears to mix historically documented assertions with guesswork, though without an explanatory text that might provide helpful clarification. What should we make for instance of the statement for Is Mynydd in Elfael (Rads) that 'if we are looking for a caput in Is Mynydd one might tentatively suggest a site not too far from the most important church, Glasbury' (1964, 14). On the face of it this is no better than speculation, but one might wonder whether Richards had Llyswen in mind, some three kilometres up river.

It comes as no surprise either that other authors have attempted to identify individual *llys* sites in published papers. The late Ken Lloyd Gruffydd, a local historian in Flintshire has written about Bistre, without, I think, making any substantive contribution to pinpointing the prince's court. Paul Courtney (1991) in studying the medieval settlement at Beili Bedw and attempting to place it in the context of the lordship of Gwyrtheyrnion, noted the farm of Bwlch-y-llys to the east of Rhayader but because of its height, around 380m OD, and its location on the edge of unenclosed waste, was evidently uncomfortable with the idea that this could be the site of a court. In this he was undoubtedly correct (see below).

Another equivocal clue is provided by the location of courts in times immediately following the Edwardian Conquest. Roberts (1893, ix) lists the courts (i.e. judicial centres) of the first quarter of the 14th century in the lordship of Ruthin: apart from Ruthin itself there was Dogveylin, Colyan, Llannerch and Aberquilar, with lesser courts at Clocaenog and Trevor. It is asserted elsewhere in this assessment that Ruthin and Clocaenog were *llysoedd*, and that Llysfasi was in the commote of Llannerch, but what of Aberwheeler and Trevor?

On a more positive note David Longley has posited that 'it is likely that *llysoedd* and with them their accompanying *maerdrefi*] would be low-lying, accessible, on lines of communication, riverine and coastal, and perhaps, from the eighth or ninth centuries, undefended. It is possible, however, that the important buildings might be enclosed. This is in apparent contrast to their counterparts of the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, for which current evidence suggests that fortification was appropriate' (Longley 2004, 294). It appears that Longley is generalising about Wales as a whole in this statement, if only because it appears in a publication distinctively south Walian. The map that accompanies his Gwent study, but geographically ranges more widely than modern-day Monmouthshire, includes two 'sites' of interest in Breconshire for which no other source material has been forthcoming: two *maerdy* place-names lie in or close to a tributary valley converging on the Usk (Longley 2004, 310), but a cursory trawl through early Ordnance Survey maps has failed to pinpoint their locations, and no substantive details as to their significance have emerged during the course of this study.

How much weight should be attached to place-names. A solitary place-name carries in itself little weight. A *llys* name could have been introduced at almost any time, right up to the 19th century as David Stephenson has pointed out to the writer in conversation, a symbol of the owner's status, aspirations or pretension. Certainly, there are small farms in the hills of Radnorshire where a *llys* affix might look to be the Welsh equivalent of the ironic English names such as 'castle' or 'hall' that were given to small upland dwellings, the antithesis of what they actually were. Such, for instance, is Bryn-llysiau in St Harmon, though the outstanding example of this is Bwlch-y-llys in Nantmel (Rads), where probably

because of the name the Radnorshire historian Jonathan Williams was able to posit a court or 'palace' in a field adjacent to the moorland-edge farm where boulders lay scattered around which he felt formed the vague outline of a building. Not content with this discovery, Williams invoked Vortigern as the likely occupier. Ordnance Survey surveyors at the end of the 19th century were sufficiently impressed to mark the site of the 'palace' on their larger scale maps and it was only the Royal Commission's field investigator in the early 20th century who took a more critical stance, dismissing the stones as natural, hill-strewn boulders. Even he was inclined to see the name as originating at an early date (RCAHMW 1913, 118), something that we would do well to question now. For there is another possibility. The term *llysiau* can also mean herbs or perhaps vegetables, and that might account for some of the more remotely located place-names such as Bryn-llysiau and Craig y Llysiau (both in Radnorshire) in List E below (D Stephenson: pers. comm.).

A name that goes back for centuries as for instance is the case with Llysfaen in Denbighshire (now Conwy) which appeared as *Lleswaen* in 1254 will almost certainly have more credibility than a *llys* label that cannot be traced back further than the 18th century, but in itself cannot be given much credence in the absence of a documentary signpost or archaeologically distinctive physical remains. And in the case of Llysfaen even local tradition seems to be quiet on the presence of an important centre. With *maerdref* it may be different, not least because titling a property with such a name would surely have introduced less prestige, so where it does occur there is a greater chance of it being authentic. Whether the same is true of *mardy* is more difficult and David Stephenson has expressed reservations on this point. In the end it is where there are pockets of names that carry more confidence, and if *llys* and *maerdref* appear in proximity, so much the better.

Field-names are, I think, are rather less likely to provide inspirational guidance to a former court or its demesne. Put simply there is little to suggest that as a general rule 19th-century and modern field-names go so far back into the medieval era that they could be relevant in pinpoint the locations of courts that were in existence nearly a thousand years ago. As an exercise, the tithe maps were checked for Llandrinio, Llanfihangel-yng-Nwynfa, Manafon (all Monts), Llandefaelog-fach (Brecs), Bodfari (Flints), Llanarmon-yn-Iâl and Llanfihangel Glyn Myfyr (both Denbs), all parishes that had known or possible courts within their boundaries. Only two - Llanfihangel-yng-Nwynfa and Llanfihangel Glyn Myfyr – yielded names of any interest in the context of this study.

R R Davies pointed out that 'even in the older Marcher lordships of the south, Norman halls were often founded on the site[s] of Welsh *llysoedd*' and cited examples in Glamorgan and Monmouthshire. 'In this respect as in so many others, the Marcher lords entered fully into the inheritance of their Welsh *antecessores*'. Even more was it 'obvious in the recently conquered Marcher lordships of the north-east: in the lordship of Denbigh the main concentrations of bond tenants were to be found near to the four demesne centres of Dinorben, Denbigh, Ystradowen and Cilcennis; in Dyffryn Clwyd the three major demesne centres (all of which were almost certainly native in origin) at Ruthin, Llysfasi and Maesmynan were served by neighbouring bond settlements at Maerdref, Derwen and Aberwheeler respectively; and in Bromfield and Yale the bond population were centred around the lord's demesnes at Marford, Wrexham and Llanarmon' (Davies 1978, 110, 380).

A further pointer which has surfaced is the feasible association of the *maerdref* with the Norman motte. Longley has flagged this up in his assessment of Gwynedd: 'the recurring conjunction of motte and *maerdref*, particularly west of the Conwy (but noticeably absent from most of Anglesey which barely came under Norman control) and the demonstrable associations of these sites with documented eleventh-century Norman campaigns suggests that earthwork castles may be one indicator of *maerdref* locations and that a number of our known *maerdrefi* were functioning in this capacity as early as the eleventh century' (1997, 43). Johnstone (1997, 61) also stresses the point, commenting that many of the commotal centres in the north-west and particularly in Merioneth appear to have been located in the vicinity of a motte. Furthermore, he takes an extremely positive attitude as to how such sites might be

discovered arguing that 'through a detailed analysis of documentary, antiquarian, place-name and topographical evidence, it has proved possible to locate a number of the *llysoedd* of Gwynedd and their adjacent *maerdrefi* on the ground (1997, 67).

Gwynedd archaeologists are not alone in flagging up the geographical association of later castles of Norman origin with earlier Welsh *llysoedd*. Higham and Barker felt that an examination of the relationship of Welsh castles to existing *llys* sites would be of interest (1992, 64), noting a sense of institutional continuity where Norman castle succeeded Welsh court, whilst Lawrence Butler (2010, 29) has seen the placement of Norman castles as a mechanism for physically dominating existing undefended *llys* sites.

Dating the courts

It is virtually a truism that those *llysoedd* referenced in academic works are of a late date, either from or around the time of the Conquest (whether that be the Norman Conquest of the late 11th century in the east, or the Edwardian Conquest of the later 13th century in the north-west). The *llysoedd* of an earlier period are rarely if ever mentioned, and even in Gwynedd this is a subject that receives relatively little attention (see for instance Longley 2010). Thus Denbigh is cited as a *llys*, its Welsh name, Dinbych, incorporating the element *dinas* signifying a 'rocky fortress', and a meeting of 1230 implicitly occurring at Llywelyn ab Iorwerth's court there in 1230, nearly fifty years before Edward I's invasion (Butler 2007, 5).

However, the concept of the court as the occasional residence of the king or prince goes back much further. Glanville Jones noted the monk Gildas' comment that Maelgwn king of Gwynedd in the earlier part of the 6th century AD had a royal court at *Llys Rhos* where he died of the plague in 547. Jones was keen to locate this court in the vill of Dinorben Fawr in Rhos Isdulas and suggested that at or near Fardre was the likeliest spot (Jones 1989, 181). Wendy Davies was more cautious, accepting that the neighbourhood of Dinorben was the seat of aristocratic power for many centuries, but carefully avoiding (probably wisely) any mention of a precise location for this centre (Davies 1982, 44). But as far as I can establish such early allusions are rare. Historians have generally seemed uncomfortable with labelling known locations, preferring to deal in generalities and concepts.

Reflecting his background as an archaeologist, David Longley has however been a little more forthcoming, particularly in terms of progression: 'The evidence currently available suggest that defended sites in defensible locations – like hillforts – are characteristic of the fifth to eighth centuries, but from the eighth century and later there would seem to have been a preference for lower-lying, undefended locations. Defended settlements are indicative of the high status of those who control them. It might be reasonable to suppose a legal restriction on fortification. This was the case in early Ireland, where only the highest grades in society were entitled to fortify their residences. In both Ireland and Wales, although the evidence from Wales is of a later date, the bond men of a lord of king were required to undertake building works on the ramparts of the lord's *dun* or the enclosing wall of the king's *llys*. Access to the labour services required for such works is an indication of status. The presence of a later native Welsh castle is a potential indicator of a former royal site…. In addition, many Norman earthwork castles of the conquest period in north and west Wales appear to have been sited on or adjacent to, Welsh commotal centres as an expedient means of controlling the existing infrastructure' (Longley 2004, 298).

Beverley Smith in correspondence has advocated a more conservative approach. 'My own inclination is to avoid being too venturesome, the pattern that we have by the period of the princes, and indicated in the post-conquest record, being that of a seigniorial demesne associated with a commote organisation. And if we take that back to the early twelfth century (giving us an opportunity to use the Domesday material) it is as far as we can reasonably go in search for the origins of what we find revealed later.

There may be opportunity for exploration here and there, and Glanville Jones`s suggestions regarding Dinorben (1961, 129-30) certainly deserve notice. I would obviously respect a link with the archaeology, but I would be loathe to voice an opinion' (Beverley Smith: *pers. comm.)*.

The decline of the court

When did the court fade as an administrative and political centre? As Wales was in a perpetual state of flux during the 11th through to the 13th centuries, the Welsh kingdoms and princedoms fighting amongst themselves as well as against (and sometimes with) the Norman and later Anglo-Norman interlopers, the court gave way to the defensive stronghold, usually in the form of a castle. This though was a gradual process, presumably driven by need rather than ideology. The *llys* was still in operation well into the 13th century as work in Gwynedd shows. But to identify 15th-century Sycharth, lying in the hills to the west of Oswestry as Glyndŵr's *llys*, as has been done in at least one publication, is to entertain an anachronism perpetuated by a medieval poet: Rees Davies referred to Sycharth as the 'chief estate', the 'moated manor house', and the 'principal residence', but was specific in differentiating it from 'the site of the court (W. *llys*) of the native Welsh lord of the area in earlier days….' (Davies 1995, 131). Owain Glyndŵr's lifestyle, it must be argued, was not the itinerant round of his princely predecessors.

By the 13th century if not before it is places like Ewloe (Flints) and Dolforwyn (Monts) that are recorded in documentary sources, but only as strongholds. Similarly Castell Dinas Brân (Denbs) was important, 'a symbol of the territorial integrity of Powys Fadog' (Smith 2014, 31) but nowhere was it classed as a *llys*, and other places such as Gwerneigron on the banks of the River Elwy and Llannerch (both in Denbighshire) though mentioned as important meeting places, did not warrant the title of court. There are, however, anomalies. Tafolwern (Monts), a motte and little more, was recorded as being used by the court of Gwenwynwyn, and in the absence of any known adjacent site, it presumably was that motte at the river confluence that functioned in this capacity as David Stephenson has suggested in conversation with the writer. Broadly though, the *llys* disappears from the record in the 13th century and it has been argued that in terms of its role, as a centre of a local district, the defensive fortress was not a straight replacement for it (Butler and Knight 2004, 30).

More generally, it has been argued by Longley that 'the administrative framework based on *maerdrefi* was, to some extent, in decline by the thirteenth century' (Longley 1997, 43). This view was, of course, specific to Gwynedd. In areas where the intrusion of the Normans came earlier, the breakdown of the Welsh system will have been rather earlier.

Here it is also worth noting Beverley Smith's caution that as the age of the princes drew to a close in the 13th century if not before, 'the classic pattern of direct seigniorial exploitation of a central demesne manor at a *maerdref* with subsidiary demesnes at other *tir cyfrif* townships, had been considerably modified both by changes in the status of some bond communities (making them contributors to the prince's needs by their fiscal obligations rather than mainly by their labour) and by ceding to freemen fractions of townships or entire townships' (Smith 2014, 223). It is a point made, too, by other recent commentators.

Misleading names

As with many other place-names, the occurrence of *llys* and *maerdref* may on occasions, one suspects, provide unreliable leads. Attention has already focussed above on the imagination of the late 18th-century Radnorshire historian Jonathan Williams and his interpretation of Bwlch-y-llys. To this we cn add Palmer and Owen who cited the name of two fields in Bersham near Wrexham which in the year 1750 were called *Llwyn y fardre* or 'the maerdref grove'. They pointed out that they were not so known in an earlier survey of 1620, and were 'almost certainly a late and fanciful name' (1910, 100). More generally, David Stephenson has warned against the uncritical acceptance of isolated *llys* place-names,

and also *mardy* names, in that the former and perhaps the latter could have been introduced at any point in the past, whether recently or many centuries ago (D. Stephenson: pers. comm.), but elsewhere in this paper it has been suggested that it was *llys* which was much more likely to be appropriated as a descriptive name. This may be borne out by the significant number of minor names in List E below which cannot be associated with any other form of verification.

Llys and Maerdref in the landscape

On first assessment the number of *llys* and *maerdref* sites that can be attested on the ground is woefully small. Virtually every *maerdref* in east Wales, known or suspected, is recognisable through either a place-name or a historical document. We can propose that there was a *maerdref* at or close to Y Faerdref on the western edge of the Berwyn Mountains overlooking the higher reaches of the River Dee, but we cannot discern it on the ground, and would not know where to excavate in order to find its buried remains. The same holds true for Chirk, while the *maerdref* of Wrexham is assumed to lie beneath the modern town and there is no guarantee that it would be identifiable even if excavated.

With *llys* sites it is different, although recognition relies on the presence of some form of earthwork defences being present. At Cefnllys (Rads), Llanarmon-yn-Iâl (Denbs) and Ystrad Owain (Denbs) it is the presence of a motte which may be a successor, whether Anglo-Norman or native Welsh, to the *llys*; but whether the motte itself was the site of the *llys*, as perhaps at Tafolwern (Monts) and Cefnllys, or was constructed over the *llys* as has been suggested by Quinnell for Twt Hill at Rhuddlan (Flints), or was close to it, as appears to be the case at Llanarmon serves to indicate the range of possibilities. A number of authorities have argued the physical and geographical link between the Welsh *llys* and the newly inserted Norman motte, a statement of successive governance which no doubt reflected a psychological motive as well. Bronllys (Brecs) presents a potentially excellent example of the process, and a number of potential *llysoedd* – Llanfair (Builth), Marford, Overton and Sycharth – could all fall under the same heading.

With Cwrt Llechrhyd (Rads), Llys Edwin (Flints) and Mathrafal (Monts) it is the enclosures, conventionally rectilinear in their layout, that appear to indicate the positions of *llysoedd*, but it has to be stressed that what little excavation has taken place has failed to verify an early date for the earthworks. Indeed Mathrafal with its enclosure has been cited as a political symbol in the 12th century more than a high status residential court of long-standing.

Inevitably there are potential *llys* sites that really do not fit into any recognisable category. Llys Fechain (Monts) and Treflys (Brecs) both conform to this description, and there are others that might be suggested through a more speculative assessment as could be the case with Llysun (Monts).

In the end however, we have to admit that at present there is not a single site where we can claim with unwavering confidence that what we are looking at was a prince's court.

Final observations

The *llys* and the *maerdref* were intimately connected. The latter supported the former, and the implication is that one would not have a *llys* without a *maerdref*, nor perhaps vice versa. Both were also a function of the inherently itinerant life-style of the pre-Conquest Welsh prince.

Theoretically each commote had a *llys* and a *maerdref*. One implication from the lists below is that in practice many remain to be identified. Melville Richards' map (1969, fig 1) identifies perhaps forty-seven commotes in eastern Wales.

The majority of *llysoedd* and *maerdrefi* recognised from documentary sources are late in date, say from the 11th through to the 13th centuries. This is not to say that individual places don't have earlier, perhaps

much earlier, origins, but identifying those with long histories is next to impossible on the evidence currently available. Nor can it be assumed that a *llys* would hold the same location over the centuries; it is logical to assume that at least some involved settlement shift over time.

The evidence for *llys* and maerdref is heavily weighted towards the north of the region, in large part because this was the last part of Wales to succumb to English rule. However, by and during the 13th century, the concept of the court seems to have been fading.

On the face of it this is all reasonably straightforward, but in reality the issues are likely to be rather more complex, as Dr David Stephenson has made clear to me. Firstly, the essential background to the *llys* and the *maerdref* is provided by the Welsh laws, and particularly those that relate to Gwynedd (*Llyfr Iorwerth* or the Book of Iorwerth). It is not clear whether the emphasis might reflect at least in part the primacy of the research by Glanville Jones, T. Jones Pierce and David Longley in the north-west, or alternatively that that research has been encouraged by the better availability of data for that region. What seems to be in no doubt is that the Welsh laws depict an ideal that may not always (even often) have been achieved in practice. Linked to this is the fact that no laws have survived for the kingdom of Powys, assuming they existed at all. Whether they would have reflected precisely the same ideals can be no more than speculation.

Secondly, at a more factual level, Powys may have had a looser system of governance and control during some periods in the early medieval era. One implication could be that the spread of court sites and their supporting 'demesnes' was not as extensive or comprehensive as Gwynedd is believed to have been, and that furthermore in the absence perhaps of a weak centralised kingdom, the greater lords of the kingdom might have exercised more power and themselves have had courts in different places.

Thirdly, the location of these central places may not have been static over hundreds of years. The circumstances that influenced the positioning of a *llys* might have changed, and while historically the name may have remained the same, the geographical location of the *llys* could have shifted.

Then there is the potentially late origin of the commotes, long after the *llys* with its supporting *maerdref* became a key element of the administrative landscape. Would the number of *llysoedd* have increased as the commotes became the administrative units, or again is this simply an ideal that was simply not mirrored by reality.

Acknowledgements

Except in Gwynedd, llysoedd and maerdrefi have been very much the preserves of the historian. Moving their study to the border regions of east Wales has involved a degree of blind faith on the part of the writer, but I have benefitted greatly from the wise advice of Professor Emeritus J Beverley Smith in Aberystwyth and Dr David Stephenson of Bangor University in compiling this study, the latter in particular contributing on a scale completely beyond what I could have anticipated. Their thoughts and observations have been incorporated into this report, and into the gazetteer below though not always with individual detailed citations. The reader will, I'm sure, appreciate that it would have been very much the poorer without their help.

Lists

A) Llys and Maerdref Sites with physical remains

Bronllys	Brecs	Llys	SO14933463
Cefnllys	Rads	Llys	SO09206302
Cwrt Llechrhyd	Rads	Llys	SO02635318
Llanarmon yn Iâl	Denbs	Llys/Maerdref	SJ193562
Llys Edwin	Flints	Llys	SJ23706933
Llys Fechain	Monts	Llys	SJ17912083
Manafon, Henllys	Monts	Llys	SJ12000313
Mathrafal	Monts	Llys	SJ13171079
Rhuddlan	Flints	Llys	SJ02637768
Tafolwern	Monts	Llys	SH89100264
Treflys	Brecs	Llys	SN93644908
Ystrad Owain	Denbs	Llys	SJ06226478

B) Llys and Maerdref Sites identified through documents

Bistre	Flints	Llys	SJ278626
Bryn Euryn	Denbs	Llys	SH832798
Chirk	Denbs	Maerdref	SJ27963807
Clocaenog	Denbs	Llys	SJ083541
Derwen	Denbs	Maerdref	SJ070507
Llysfasi	Denbs	Llys	SJ14805205
Cynwyd	Mers	Llys	SJ05604110
Y Faerdref	Mers	Maerdref	SJ04453881
Denbigh	Denbs	Llys/Maerdref	SJ0566
Dinorben/Fardre	Denbs	Llys/Maerdref	SH96267543
Llandefaelog, Henllys	Brecs	Llys	SO02613263
Llanfair (Builth)	Brecs	Llys	SO035506
Lledrod	Monts	Llys	SJ22422975
Llys	Flints	Llys	SJ23297390
Llysaled	Denbs	Llys	SH94056444
Llysbedydd (Bettisfield)	Flints	Llys	SJ46283600
Llysdinam	Brecs	Llys	SO008585
Llys Dinmael	Denbs	Llys	SJ00884535
Llysfaen	Denbs	Llys	SH89277735
Llyswen	Brecs	Llys	SO133380
Maesmynan	Flints	Llys	SJ11887205
Aberwheeler	Flints	Maerdref	SJ09956996
Marford	Denbs	Llys/Maerdref	SJ356557
Overton	Flints	Llys	SJ373417
Pen-prys, Caersws	Monts	Llys	SO00979199
Ruthin	Denbs	Llys/Maerdref	SJ1258
Sycharth	Denbs	Llys	SJ20532587
Sychdyn, Coleshill	Flints	Llys	SJ2466
Talgarth	Monts	Llys/Maerdref	SN96229020
Tomen-y-Rhodwydd	Denbs	Maerdref	SJ17705160
Welshpool	Monts	Llys	SJ2107

Wrexham & Erddig	Denbs	Llys/Maerdref	SJ3350

C) Llysoedd and Maerdrefi – other potential sites

Llanfair DC	Denbs	Llys	SJ134544
Llyssun	Monts	Llys	SJ03261022
Maerdy	Monts	Maerdref	SJ25901680
Pen-llys	Monts	Llys	SN99885861
Plasau/Llysyn	Monts	Llys	SN96509818
Prestatyn, Llys	Flints	Llys	SJ062815

D) Rejected Llys and Maerdref sites

Bwlch-y-llys + palace	Rads	Llys	SN99196644

E) Place-names and minor names derived from 1st Edition Ordnance Survey maps

Bron-llys	Monts	Llys	SO05748751
Bronllys	Rads	Llys	SO10307161
Brynhenllys	Brecs	Llys	SN75851242
Bryn-llys	Denbs	Llys	SJ25244298
Bryn-llysiau	Rads	Llys	SO00287613
Cae-llys Farm	Fints	Llys	SJ27566852
Cefn Llys	Denbs	Llys	SH93035809
Coed Bryn llys	Flints	Llys	SJ22525669
Craig y Llysiau	Rads	Llys	SN89016145
Dol-llys	Monts	Llys	SN96228569
Gladlys	Fints	Llys	SJ21387430
Henllys	Denbs	Llys	SH90866958
Henllys	Denbs	Llys	SJ08505161
Henllys	Brecs	Llys	SO02613263
Henllys	Rads	Llys	SO02835491
Llys Anne	Denbs	Llys	SJ02314611
Llys coppice etc	Monts	Llys	SJ17522182
Llys Dymper	Denbs	Llys	SH89625936
Llys Meirchion	Denbs	Llys	SJ01786817
Llys y Pigyn	Denbs	Llys	SJ06565512
Llys	Denbs	Llys	SJ04885787
Llys	Denbs	Llys	SJ15935957
Llysdin	Rads	Llys	SO16966884
Llys-fynydd	Flints	Llys	SJ17646447
Llys-newydd	Denbs	Llys	SH94686521
Llys-uchaf	Monts	Llys	SJ16982086
Llyswen	Monts	Llys	SJ22451356
Llys-y-coed	Fints	Llys	SJ17026721
Llys-y-fenlli	Denbs	Llys	SJ15495991

Llys-y-wern	Rads	Llys	SO31576719
Maerdref	Denbs	Maerdref	SJ127584
Moel llys y coed	Flints	Llys	SJ15126550
Mynydd llys	Rads	Llys	SO06487593
Nant llys	Monts	Llys	SJ10642971
Nantlys	Flints	Llys	SJ08187123
Nant-y-lys	Brecs	Llys	SN89293438
Pen-llys	Monts	Llys	SJ10311506
Tomen y Maerdy, Llangedwyn	Denbs	Maerdref	SJ14872397
Ty-llys-hope	Brecs	Llys	SO24884064

Gazetteer of Llysoedd and Maerdrefi Sites

Bettisfield (Flints) SJ 462598

Bettisfield is not an obvious candidate for a court and in Domesday Book it appears as *Beddesfeld*. But in the 14th century an alternative name surfaces, namely *Llysvaesbedydd* (1356) and in variant forms appears at least four more times into the early 16th century. A claim that there was a farm in the vicinity called *Coed-y-llys-bedydd* in 1879 has not been substantiated. It is suggested too that a manorial court was held at the old Bettisfield Hall (SJ 4629 3598), though the relevance of this observation is debatable. It might be assumed that a *llys* prefix would not have originated seventy years after the Edwardian Conquest of the areas further to the west, and to be of rather earlier currency, but it should be recalled that post-conquest poets continued to use the word *llys* to describe the residences of leading *uchelwyr* for some time after the 13th century. The Hanmers of Bettisfield, though a family of English origin, integrated well with their Welsh neighbours, and this perhaps could have justified the use of the term.

Palmer and Owen record that within the parish there was a township or hamlet which was recorded in a Minister's Account for 1405-6 as *llysbeddyt*, but was an alternative name for another place, perhaps the *Burwardestone* of Domesday Book. Notwithstanding these observations, there is little concrete evidence for an early medieval court and *maerdref* here.

Owen and Morgan 2007, 29; Palmer and Owen 1910, 247; D. Stephenson: pers. comm.

Bistre (Flints) SJ 278 626

Dorothy Sylvester stated that Bistre in Moldsdale, the former *Biscopstreu*, was once a *llys* of the princes of Gwynedd, and Glanville Jones was also adamant on this point, noting that when surveyed in 1086 [Domesday book] Bistre manor itself extended into five distinct settlements and eight outlying berewicks, among them Gwysaney where a priest resided. If Gwysnaey was the *llan* (church) of the complex, Bistre itself was the *llys* (court) for we are told that the prince Gruffydd ap Llywelyn had one manor here. In this manor he "had 1 plough demesne and his men 6 ploughs". Even more significantly, we are informed that "when the said king came thither, every plough rendered him 200 *hethas* [sic], and one vat full of beer and one vessel of butter". This ambulatory feeding must be attributed to the period before 1063 when King Gruffydd died'.

This picture is complicated, however, by a previous entry in Domesday Book which notes that "before 1066 Bistre was a manor of Earl Edwin's. It never paid tax, nor was it hidated. It was then waste, and was likewise waste when Earl Hugh acquired it". It is clear that both Edwin and Gruffydd had manors in Bistre prior to the Conquest. Thacker sees Bistre corresponding with 'the great ancient parish of Mold", and consisting of a large discrete estate with numerous berewicks, one group of these berewicks held by the king in demesne, the other six by tenants who paid customary food rents when the king visited.

This is convincing but pinpointing the location of the *llys* is a more difficult task. Bistre Farm overlooks the Alun Valley and lies just to the south of Buckley and south-east of Mold, but it is not clear whether this is modern nomenclature, for it is not named as such on the 1st edition of the Ordnance Survey map, appearing only on the second edition. On the earlier Ordnance Survey mapping from 1834 it appears to be one of several farms in the vicinity to which the name Bistre was attached, so it is perhaps best to assume that the original centre was in the neighbourhood but cannot currently be pinpointed more

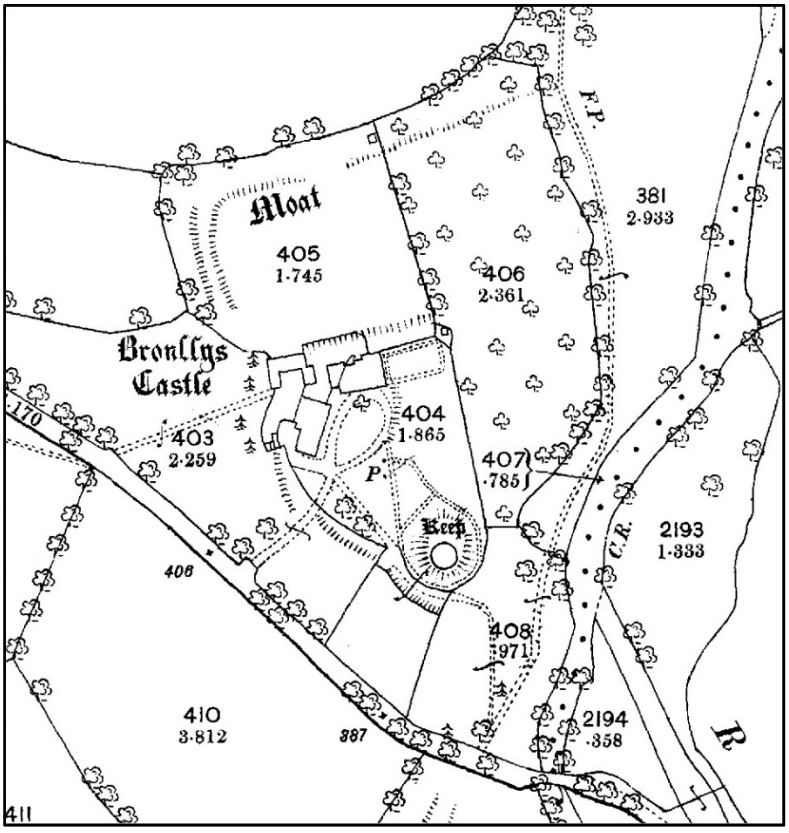
closely. As an alternative Ken Lloyd Gruffydd has plumped for Tyddyn Farm (at SJ 253 633), but the evidential backing for this looks as flimsy as anything else.

Gruffydd 2002, 3; Jones 1972, 308; Morgan 1978, 269b; Sawyer and Thacker 1987; Sylvester 1983-4, 36; Thacker 1987

Bronllys (Brecs) SO 1492 3472

The name cannot be traced back earlier than the beginning of the 13th century, but modern place-name authorities are happy to translate this as the 'court of Brwyn', thus detecting what is probably a personal name, though they also remark on the possibility that the first element could mean 'rushes'. The personal name has been identified in the otherwise unknown *bruin o bricheinauc* (Brycheiniog), though there is no specific reason to link the two.

The 12th-century stone castle sits within earthworks that are not entirely reminiscent of a typical bailey, though undoubtedly their layout has been influenced by the form of the natural topography. LiDAR hints that a small inner enclosure, almost polygonal with the motte and tower at one apex, sits eccentrically within a larger and rectangular enclosure which Cathcart King described as a 'large and weak outer bailey'. Certainly it appears more mutilated and could perhaps be earlier. By far the best description of these earthworks is Helen Burnham's unpublished report to Cadw in 1995. At best the remains offer no more than a speculative pointer to a pre-Conquest *llys*.



Bronllys Castle and its earthworks as mapped on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of 1888

It should be noted here that the more traditional site of the royal court was at Talgarth from where Brychan himself is said to have ruled. The legend, and it seems to be no more than this, comes from the late 11th century *Life of St Cadoc* which is not recognised as one of the more reliable of hagiographies, and into which the Talgarth episode has been inserted.

King 1961, 76; Knight 2013, 122; Lloyd 1912, 273; Owen and Morgan 2007, 49; *Silvester: forthcoming*

Bryn Euryn (Denbs) SH 832 798

The name Llys Euryn was given to a late medieval house on the slopes of the hill below the stone-ramparted hill known as Bryn Euryn in Llandrillo-yn-Rhos. The former is, however, a 19th-century antiquarian creation and to Thomas Pennant in the previous century it was *Llys Maelgwyn Gwynedd* which arguably is of no greater assistance. Other speculation links it to the 6th-century tyrant Cuneglasus mentioned by Gildas, but this is equally unproven.

Glanville Jones claimed that Dineirth, the medieval township surrounding the hill, was the *maerdref* of Uwch Dulas, though Longley appears dubious. What does seem to be agreed is that the link between the hill and the township can be established, reflected in the name, the British *Dineirth* meaning 'citadel of the bear'.

Jones 1991, 202; Lane in Edwards and Lane 1988 27; Longley 1997, 47

Bwlch-y-llys, Nantmel (Rads) SN 991 664

Courtney singled out this farm in the lordship of Gwyrtheyrnion as a site of importance. It had previously been mentioned by the early 19th-century Radnorshire antiquary Jonathan Williams and put on the map by William Rees in 1932. But its exposed position at a height of 380m OD on the edge of former unenclosed ground did not convince him that this was a court site. Williams preferred a site on the north side of the hill away from the farm house, claiming 'seven or more large heaps of quarried stones, arranged east and west, and placed in positions opposite to each other. There can be little doubt of this place having once been a court of judicature…'. The Ordnance Survey surveyors took Williams's views at face value and on late 19th-century large-scale maps, the site of a 'palace' was marked. But at the beginning of the 20th century, the Royal Commission were unconvinced and were dismissive of this identification.

It seems more logical to assume that with a putative mother church at Nantmel less than 5km away in the valley of the River Dulas, Bwlch-y-llys reveals one of those topographical terms that has emerged to signal a *llys* in the general neighbourhood but not at that specific location. In other words the name was probably a toponym which was subsequently adopted for a farm, and the *llys* was perhaps on lower ground close to the river and to the Roman road than ran down the valley. However, David Stephenson's suggestion that the term *'llys'* could have an entirely different meaning is perhaps even more valid.

Courtney 1991, 245; Davies 1905, 280; HER; Rees 1932

Cefnllys (Rads) SO 0921 6304

Lloyd saw this as the court in the commote of Dinieithon, one of the three commotes in the cantref of Maelienydd, where the area took its name from the royal court. Stephenson believes the *llys* to have been located where the earthwork of Old Castle was subsequently thrown up, 1.5km to the north of the spectacular ridge which is now known as Cefnllys, an interesting location in that the *clas* church at Llanbadarn Fawr and Old Castle are intervisible. Old Castle was identified by Tony Brown in 1972 as the first castle in the area, set in a 'low lying position in Old Castle Field close to a ford over the River Ithon'. It is set on the southern side of a spur with an apparently steep scarp down to the river, with the spur deflecting the river; the sites overlooks the flood plain, hardly a strategically defensive location, but probably an attractive one.

Paul Remfry has identified the motte as *Dinieithon*, reported to have been built by Ralph Mortimer between 1093-5. It has been termed a ring motte but has no convincing bailey, although the Ordnance Survey thought traces might survive. No physical traces of a *llys* have been recognised here. Stephenson has opined that the castle became a *llys* site in the periods when the Mortimers were pushed out of Maelienydd, but is considerably more cautious about claiming it as a pre-Norman llys.

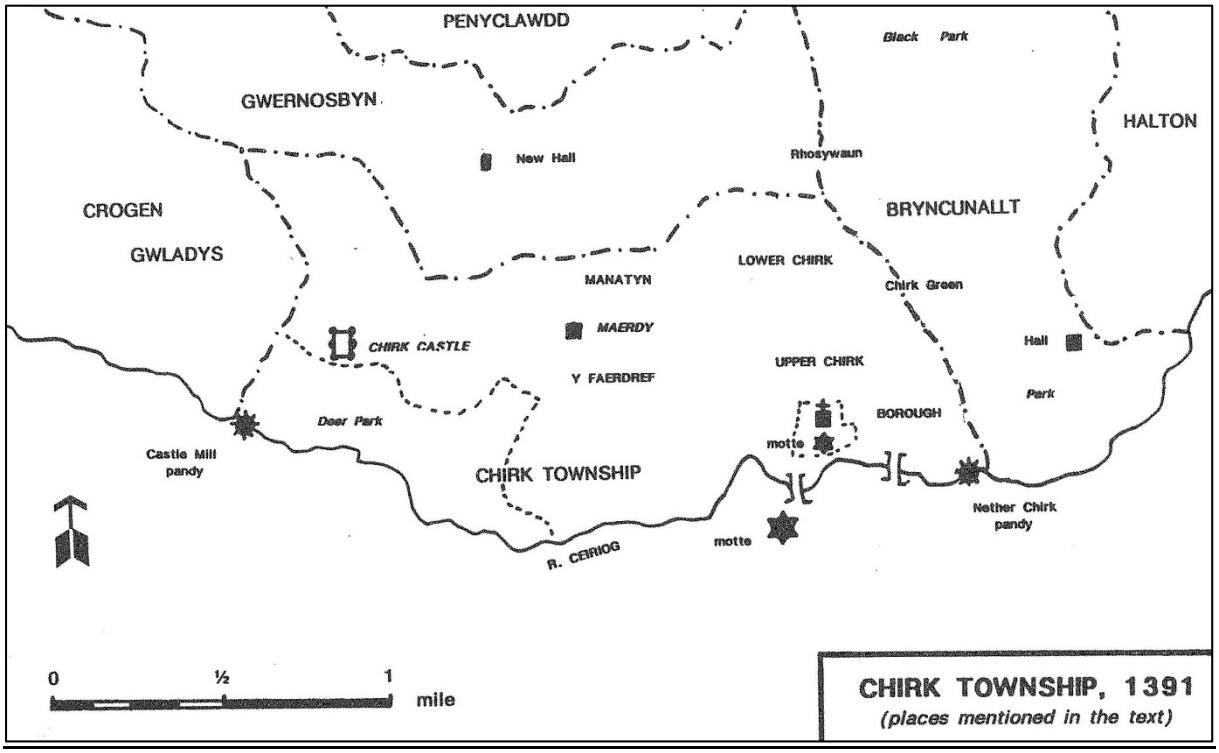
Cefnllys old castle, with the River Ithon showing in the top left corner.
CPAT 86-mb-364

Brown 1972; Coflein; Lloyd 1912, 255; Remfrey 1996; D. Stephenson: pers.comm; Wood with Stephenson 2007

Chirk (Denbs) SJ 2911 3768

Derrick Pratt has made out a solid case for a *maerdref* at Chirk based on the presence of the name *Y Faerdre*, a sub-township name, which he believed indicated a nucleated settlement here in pre-Mortimer days, and in the term *Y Waun a'r Faerdre*, an occasionally used name for Lower Chirk. Additionally, the dwelling known as Llwyn-y-cil (SJ 2796 3807) lying between and equidistant from the castle and the town was formerly named *Maerdy* or *Mardy*. Melville Richards on the other hand claimed *Y Faerdref* as a full township. The 1391 survey of Chirkland records that both the free tenants and the bondsmen (*nativi*) at Chirk were responsible for maintaining the hall, chamber, kitchen and grange of the lord at Chirk, which sounds very much like the situation that would have obtained in the time when the lordship was in Welsh hands.

For Pratt these were the toponymic remnants of a classic 12th-century *maerdref*, and the *llys* (though he did not use this term) was the earthwork motte (or at least its site) in the grounds of the 'The Mount'' on the edge of Chirk village, though he also envisaged that the motte would have been discarded in favour of something less restrictive than the motte top well before the Edwardian Conquest. This information in outline, speculative as it is, has been repeated in the NMR (Coflein).



Chirk *maerdref* (after Pratt 1997)

NMR; Pratt 1997, 36; Richards 1969, 68

Clocaenog, Derwen and Llysfasi (Denbs) SJ 083 541; SJ 070 507; SJ 1480 5205

Beverley Smith in discussing the courts that Llywelyn ap Gruffudd used in the third quarter of the 13th century remarked that in the four cantrefs east of the Conwy, the prince was recorded as using a centre

at Clocaenog in Colion, but admitted that evidence was slight. In a footnote he reinforced his argument by pointing out that the vice-chamberlain attended the prince at Clocaenog.

Llysfasi was one of the post-Edwardian Conquest lordship's infrequent manorial holdings in Dyffryn Clwyd. R. R. Davies noted the significance of the name, and argued for this as the court in the commote of Llannerch. Now an agricultural college, the farm of Llys-Fasi lay in the shadow of the topographically distinctive gorge of Nant-y-garth gorge as it carries a stream off the limestone hills above, and, as Llinos Smith has pointed out to the writer, just opposite it is the farm of Faenol.

This would be straightforward but for the fact that Derwen was cited by R. R. Davies as the *maerdref* that served Llysfasi. The village of that name lying to the south-west of Ruthin would be the obvious contender, but for the fact that it is listed by Melville Richards as a parish in the commote of Colion, and it lies nearly 8km away to the west-south-west of Llysfasi. Furthermore north-east of the village of Derwen are farms termed Hendre-Derwen, 2.5km to the north-north-east at SJ0874 5239 (with Derwen Hall a similar distance north-east at SJ 0931 5168) and Henllys 1.75km north-east at SJ 0851 5161. This complicated picture is not simplified by the presence of a group of *maerdy* names in a valley 3.3km south of Derwen at SJ 0699 4740.

The mix of sparse documentary references and potentially significant minor place-names does little to pinpoint either the *llys* (or perhaps the *llysoedd*) and one or more supporting *maerdrefi*. But it does appear likely that the place-names, assuming them to be authentic indicators, could point to two separate court complexes.

Davies 2000, 62; Richards 1969, 57; Smith 2014, 221

Cwrt Llechrhyd (Rads) SO 0263 5318

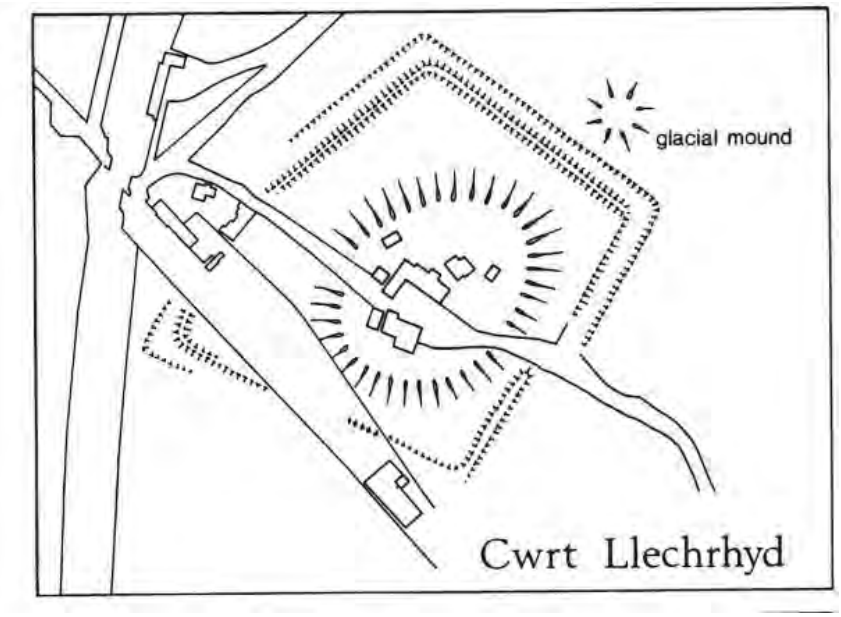
Cwrt Llechryd is a distinctively rectilinear enclosure defined by what is conventionally termed a moat, though this creates a moated site on an unusually large scale: including its defences it comes in at 2.48ha or over 6 acres. Over half of the interior is taken by a large natural mound. A full description is provided in print by Spurgeon and is not repeated here. It lies close to the River Wye, above Builth Wells, and apparently just above the flood plain, lying back from the river in a re-entrant that may owe something to the converging Dulas Brook; the Radnorshire hills rise behind it on the east. This location is well brought out in Mullis' coloured digital terrain model (2010, fig 1). Limited excavation took place in 1983, providing detailed information on the make-up of the bank and the fill of the shallow moat, and a radiocarbon date for material from below the bank which at a 95% level of probability could be calibrated to between AD 733 and 1017. Later archaeological work – a watching brief in 1993, trial trenching outside the enclosure in 1995, a geophysical survey in 2007 also outside the enclosure followed by extensive trial trenching – has added further structural detail but little in the way of new evidence for function and date, even though the watching brief yielded scraps of medieval pottery.

750m to the east-south-east is the motte known as Castell Caemardy, while 1.6km to the north is the farm called Henllys (SO 0284 5490)

Spurgeon whilst dismissing some of the more outlandish interpretations (a motte and bailey or a Roman fort) in 1971 subsequently hedged his bets by suggesting it could be a medieval moated site or a 'Dark Age native or Mercian stronghold' in 1981 and again in 1988. He argued that the scale of the defences were sufficient to view the site as a 'fortress', and he isolated a group of six other atypical earthworks, Mathrafal included, that he felt could be comparable. Separating them into two groups, he argued that

Cwrt Llechryd, Mathrafal and a third site at Plas-yn-Dinas overlooking the Meifod Valley were of Welsh build, but then went further by suggesting that they could be of 10th-century date with their construction influenced by English burghal forts. Arnold and Huggett have however preferred to treat the radiocarbon date from Cwrt Llechrhyd as no more than a *terminus post quem*, and in doing so giving less credibility to a pre-Conquest origin for the site.

Mullis has reiterated many of the general points that underpin the varying explanations for Cwrt Llechrhyd, but also fosters the *llys* interpretation. In Castell Caemardy he sees a corruption of *maerdy*, the reeve's dwelling, but this is virtually the only fresh evidence that he brings to the discussion and is hardly new for the Royal Commission made the *maer* connection a century ago.



The earthworks at Cwrt Llechrhyd (after Musson and Spurgeon 1988)

Arnold and Huggett 1995, 71; Mullis 2010; Musson and Spurgeon 1988; RCAHMW 1913, 84; Spurgeon 1981

Cynwyd and Y Faerdref (Denbs) SJ 0448 3879

Cynwyd has been seen as the centre of the commote of Edeirnion in the later Middle Ages, although it has also been contended that an earlier centre may have lain in the vicinity of Rug, slightly lower down the Dee Valley. Melville Richards half a century ago was cautious, favouring Rug in the sub-division of Edeirnion known as Is Alwen, but noting the alternative claim of Cynwyd as published in the county journal, and Tony Carr and Beverley Smith have also emphasised the importance of Cynwyd but have stopped short of declaring that there was a *llys* here. Independently, it has been pointed out that a place termed Y Faerdref lies to the south-west of Cynwyd, 2.5km higher up the Dee valley, presumably signalling one of the two medieval townships known by that name which were in the ecclesiastical parish of Llangar, but previously, according to Richards had been in more distant Gwyddelwern. And there is also Rhos y Maerdy, about a mile due east of Plas y faerdref.

David Stephenson contributes the following views. I think that the matter is put beyond doubt by Cynddelw's poem of 1160, composed after the deaths of Madog ap Maredudd in February of that year

and of his heir Llywelyn shortly afterwards. The poem has been edited, *inter alia*, by R. G. Gruffydd in 2004, accompanied by an excellent discussion. The key sections in Gruffydd's translation are:

ll. 11-12: When we were summoned to Cynwyd Gadfor
Our counsel was proffered.....

Cynddelw is speaking as one of the war-band, probably that of Llywelyn ap Madog, who was charged with guarding the frontier against a Gwynedd attack. The key point is that it was to Cynwyd (Gadfor ? = Gad Fawr The great battle?) that they were called to give the ruler counsel, indicating that the court was at Cynwyd.

In subsequent lines the poet bids farewell to the region – which was occupied by Gwynedd forces up to a point, perhaps a mile or so downstream, where an Anglo-Welsh relief force called up by Madog in his last act, occupied or made a castle – probably Rug – and held the line. One of his farewells goes as follows,

ll. 53-56: Farewell to Cwm Brwynog
And the buildings and recognised boundaries
And the place where no distinguished warrior is turned away,
And the church [*llan*] above Madog's court.'

This takes us south of Cynwyd, to the area of the *maerdref* names, and away from Rug. There are aspects of the translation that I'm unhappy about, but the main thrust is fine, as is the explicit reference to *llys Fadawg* in l. 56.

Carr and Smith 2001, 147; Gruffydd 2004; Palmer and Owen 1910, 102; Richards 1964, 13; 1969, 55; D. Stephenson: pers. comm.

Denbigh (Denbs) SJ 05 66

Denbigh or *Dinbych* is generally held to be a court site. A meeting between the chancellor of England and Llywelyn ab Iorwerth was held here in 1230; also Dafydd, brother of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd had a short-lived stronghold at Denbigh in the late 1270s and this is assumed to have functioned as a *llys*. The surveyor charged with producing the data which was to be recorded in the *Survey of the Honour of Denbigh* in 1334 stated that in the time of the princes both bond and free tenants had built and maintained a hall at Dynbych, an 'en-suite chamber', a chapel and an enclosure around the prince's court. But whether its function can be taken back well beyond the 13th century has yet to be demonstrated, relying only on an assumption of hypothetical continuity rather than on fact.

According to modern place-name authorities, the place-name has yet to appear in any document before the beginning of the 13th century (*Dunbeig* is referenced in 1211), but David Stephenson has pointed out that this is incorrect. The pipe rolls from the 1190s refer to a castle at Denbigh, as in 1196 when *Meurico de Powis qui custodit castellum de Dinebech.....*

There are references during the 13th century to the *maerdref* of Dinbych. Huw Owen noted that 'the prominence of Dinbych in the pre-conquest [i.e. pre-Edwardian] period explains the selection of this township as the administrative centre of the new lordship established in 1282', and Stephenson notes the lost Red Book of St Asaph identified Denbigh as an administrative centre, the base of a *rhingyll*, of the Welsh princes in the 13th century.

Butler 2007; Owen 1978; Owen and Morgan 2007; Richards 1964, 11; Smith 2014, 226: Stephenson 2014, 209, 216; D. Stephenson (pers. comm.)

Dinmael (Denbs) SJ 003 450

As noted above Dinmael appears to have been a lordship in the 13th century. It is also recorded as being a commote by Richards and one of its parishes – Llanfihangel Glyn Myfyr – had a township named Llysan.

Several farms with potentially significant names – Llŷs-Dinmael-uchaf (SJ0011 4503), Llŷs-Dinmael-isaf (SJ0035 4508) and Llŷs-Dinmael-bach (SJ0088 4535) – all lie on a broad spur formed by the confluent Afon Ceirw and its tributary the Nant Rhyd-y-moch. A few hundred metres to the east on the other side of the stream is the hamlet of Maerdy (SJ 0165 4460). A field-name check of the tithe survey uncovered a further name – *Llyster* – towards Bettws Gwerfil Goch at SJ 0232 4614. Its significance is not clear.

Richards 1969, 59; Smith 2014, 113

Dinorben (Denbs) SH 9626 7543

The great hillfort of Dinorben produced material that was no earlier than the late Roman period and could be of early medieval origin. From this, however, it should not be inferred that the earthworks were utilised as an early *llys*, although this remains a possibility. Glanville Jones argued that the *llys* for the commote of Rhos Is Dulas was located at a farm half a mile south of the hillfort in the 14th century with the bond settlements around Dinorben responsible for the construction of the court buildings; Carr on the other hand referred to just one demesne hamlet. But this was in the 13th (if not the 14th) century, and a transfer from one site to another in an earlier century is far from impossible. It has been noted for instance that Dinorben makes an appearance in the 13th-century *Stanza of the Graves* (though of 10th-century origins) implying its long history, and Jones expounded on the agrarian history of the Dinorben estate at great length in 1973.

Jones, however, went further and suggested that a much earlier *llys*¸ one traditionally associated with Maelgwyn Gwynedd in the 540s and where he reputedly died of the plague in 547, existed at or near the farm of Fardre. Although it is the *Welsh Annals* that provide us with the name of *Llys Rhos,* there is no evidential base for this assertion other than Glanville Jones himself!

Sylvester drew attention to a reference in the *Red Book of Hergest* (attributed to the late 14th century) which stated: *Llan drallanw drallys Dinorben* or ‘the church beyond the flood beyond the *llys* of Dinorben’. Smith noted that the surveyor charged with producing the data which were to be recorded in the *Survey of the Honour of Denbigh* in 1334 described features that ‘bore the unmistakable signs of a *maerdref* of the period of the princes. There was by then no mention of the hall at which Prince Llewelyn would have been accommodated upon his coming to Rhos Is Dulas, but there were other buildings – two granges, a byre and a granary among them – which reflected the needs of demesne cultivation’. Palmer and Owen noted too (in pre-National Grid Reference days) that in the adjoining township of Cegidog ucha (which was in the parish of Llansansior or St George) was a house called Y

Faerdre. I have not been able to determine whether this could have related to the same *maerdref* or one that was entirely different.

Carr 1992, 22; Edwards and Lane 1988, 66; Jones 1972, 291; Jones 1989, 181; Longley 1997, 46; Smith 2014, 224-5; Sylvester 1983-4, 31

Glyndyfyrdwy, nr Corwen, (Merioneths) SJ1273 4309

The inclusion of Sycharth below, poetically alluded to as a *llys* in the 15th century, demands that another of Owain Glyndŵr's homes, Glyndyfyrdwy, be included here. Two hundred metres apart in an attractive spot on the south side of the Dee are a motte and a moated site, both normally prefixed in the literature with Glyndŵr's name. Furthermore, as with the secular/ecclesiastical association of Sycharth and Llansilin, so the mother church of Corwen lay only five kilometres to the west. None of these factors offer incontrovertible proof that there was a *llys* here at any time in their history: it is simply a speculative suggestion.

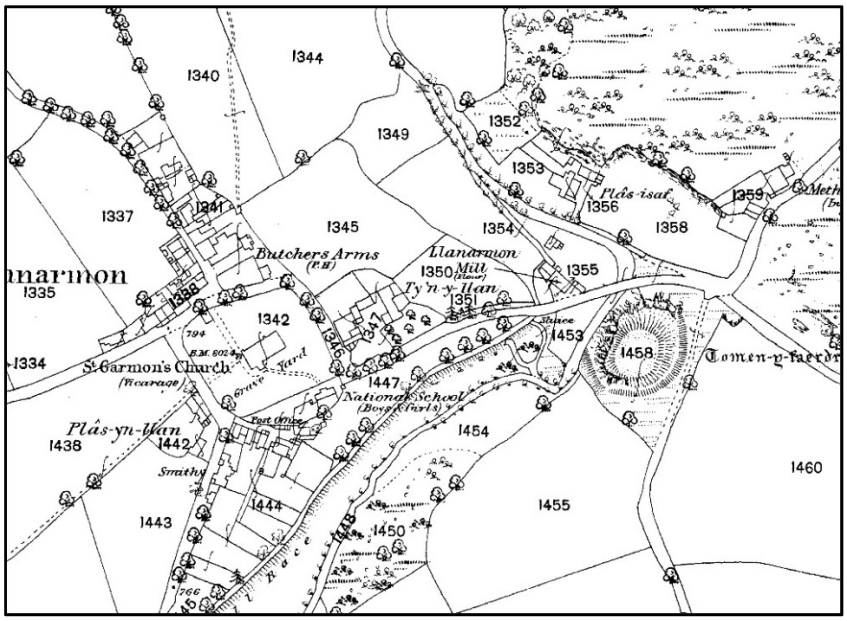
W. Davies: pers. comm.

Llanarmon-yn-Ial (Denbs) SJ 193 562

'In a militarily precarious and heroic society, the court was bound to have a prominent military aspect – hence its frequent association with a motte (Welsh *tomen, twyn*), as in Tomen y Faerdref at Llanarmon (Iâl)'. In these words Rees Davies explains the motte here, rather than as the sign of a Norman imposition on an earlier site, and the Royal Commission back in 1914 argued that the motte itself would have been the *llys*. On the other hand a plausible argument can be made for an earlier, pre-12th-century *llys* in the immediate neighbourhood, with the motte being its deliberately positioned post-Conquest successor. Beverley Smith has cautioned against a simple equation, and points to a 'strong possibility that the motte was of Norman origin', not least because Domesday Book points to intrusion into Iâl from the earldom of Shrewsbury by 1086, and perhaps too other commotes of Powys Fadog displaying mottes erected close to *maerdref* locations such as Erddig, Chirk and Sycharth.

A potential issue, however, is that the motte appears to lie not in the *maerdref* but in a free township. This apart the court makes a late appearance in the First Extent of Bromfield and Yale in AD 1315, for freeholders and bondmen alike were responsible for the maintenance of the 'hall, chamber, stable, grange and cattle-shed, each 64 feet long and thatched with lathes instead of straw' (Ellis).

Glanville Jones argued that on the western side of the river around the church was the *maerdref* or bond settlement in an area known as Tre'r Llan. The unfree bondmen provided the local labour on the lord's demesne attached to the *llys* on the east side of the river. The presence of the motte known as Tomen-y-faerdre, translated by Pratt as 'the mound at the bailiff's township' is explicable in terms of a *maerdref* being both an area (or township) and a settlement name. Pratt, however, does highlight another issue, though appears to gloss over it, by noting that the motte was, strictly speaking, in the free township of Creigiog Is Glan. Palmer and Owen have complicated the picture by claiming that the castle mound at Llanarmon was surrounded by an ancient park (Park Creigiog) which was part of the lord's demesne when this was a medieval manor, but in the Welsh period that preceded it, it would have been the *maerdref*.



Llanarmon-yn-Iâl as mapped by the Ordnance Survey in 1874. The motte lies to the east of the little River Alyn, and the field to the north on the opposite side of the lane being the tradition site of the *llys*. The village to the west of the river supposedly reflects the nucleated *maerdref* or bond settlement.

There are grounds for believing, though it is unsubstantiated in any written report, that excavations were undertaken in the field to the north of the lane by Celtic Warrington Projects under the guidance of Mark Olly in the period 2003 to 2005. Nothing is known of the findings. The adjacent cave was also subjected to some excavation, and here it is reported that material was recovered.

Davies 2000, 62; Ellis 1924, 30; Jones 1991, 193; Palmer and Owen 1910, 168; Pratt 2004, 19; J. B. Smith 2015: pers. comm.; D. Stephenson: pers. comm.; Watt 2000, 5

Llandefaelog, Henllys (Brecs) SO 0261 3263

The parish of Llandefaelog-fach lies on the Honddu a few kilometres upstream of Brecon. Beside the church with its late 10th-century cross-slab is a scheduled motte, in the grounds of Llandefaelog House. West of the motte by 750m is the farm called Henllys. There is nothing to confirm that a *llys* and *maerdref* were positioned here, but it is a possibility.

Llanfair (Builth) (Brecs) SO 035 506

Sir John Lloyd believed Llanfair, now represented as Builth Wells, was probably the court site for the commote of Is Irfon, and that the later motte and bailey castle was subsequently developed on the spot. David Stephenson points out that a problem with this line of thinking is that there is no evidence to indicate that the division of Builth into commotes had taken place by the time of the Edwardian conquest; all references to officials etc are simply to Builth, as an undifferentiated lordship.

We have encountered nothing else that might support this contention.

Lloyd 1912, 253; D. Stephenson: pers. comm.

Lledrod, Llansilin (Monts) SJ 2242 2975

In the period after the war of 1277, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd ap Madog, ruler of a part of northern Powys that included Cynllaith and Nanheudwy, complained to Edward I that the men of Oswestry had committed various enormities against him, including the appropriation of the court (curia) that had belonged to him and his ancestors at Lledrod, and in another letter written at the time that the Oswestry men had plundered and totally destroyed his court (*curiam meam dirripuerunt et funditer everterunt*), thus establishing it beyond doubt as a physical court rather than curia in the sense of a judicial assembly.

Now one of the townships in the parish of Llansilin, Llysdinwallon is occupied largely by a single farm, Lledrod on which was found about 1930 an odd 'conical' stone tentatively identified as a cresset-stone. This remains in the possession of the landowner. The reference has a very obscure allusion which need not detain us now but which we should discuss in the future.

Llysdinwallon/Llystynwallon is an old name – there is a reference to it in Cynddelw's work of the 12th century in a poem about the great nobleman Rhiryd Flaidd of Pennant Melangell fame.

Archaeologia Cambrensis 1932, 403-4; Pryce, 2005, nos 534-535; D Stephenson: pers. comm.

Llysaled, Llansannan (Denbs) SH 9405 6445

Llysaled is something of an unknown. It is referred to by Glanville Jones as though the presence of a court and its *maerdref* were well-established, but this is certainly not the case. A farm called Llŷs-Aled exists today beside the Aled River above Llansannan. One kilometre to the north-east is another farm Llys-newydd (SH 9468 6522). Llys Aled was also the name of a township in the parish. Whilst it is a reasonable assumption that the court was in this general area, there is nothing at present to pinpoint the location.

Jones 1991, 202; RCAHMW 1914, 150

Llys, Coleshill (Flints) SJ 2332 7390

Llys is a small farm on the north-western fringes of Flint. In the *Flintshire Inventory* in 1912, the Royal Commission wrote that the farm 'in the township of Coleshill Fechan, which (coupled with that of 'The Manor House' near at hand) seems to support the conjecture that this township was the caput and special demesne of the tribal chieftain. In the year 1240 David ap Llewelyn granted a charter to the monks of Basingwerk from *Colsull*, by which Coelshill Fechan (then including the site of the present town of Flint) was probably meant, and near which the original dwelling of the chieftain may be expected to have been situated'.

A little over one kilometre to the west-south-west is the site of Hen Blas Castle, excavated by local historian J. B. Leach in 1957 and now a scheduled ancient monument (Fl062). This promontory site has a pair of enclosures and the inner one appeared from the excavations to have been fashioned from a

small, deliberately levelled motte at some point in the early 13th century, creating an open area for a series of sill-walled timber buildings enclosed within a palisade, where there had previously been a bailey. The remains of further structures were excavated in the outer court, including a probable chapel with some good dressed stone. The whole complex according to Leach was abandoned by the early 14th century. This probably represents the strongest contender for the Coleshill that was documented throughout the 13th century and will certainly have been in Welsh hands for a large part of that time. We should probably adopt an ambivalent attitude as to whether it was a *llys* or perhaps a fortified manor house, but there are certainly physical parallels with some of the structures at Llys Edwin (*q.v.)*.

W Davies: pers. comm.; Leach 1957; Lloyd 1960; RCAHMW 1912, 42; Spurgeon 1991, 162-3

Llys Dinam, Llanafan Fawr (Brecs) SO 0090 5850

Sir John Lloyd believed Llysdinam facing Newbridge-on-Wye (Rads) across the river to be the court or centre of the commote of Dinam, one of the four sub-divisions of Buellt. It was apparently the home of Dafydd ap Maredudd, praised by the poet Lewis Glyn Cothi in the 15th century who eulogised Llys Dinan (sic) as *Gorau llys rhwng Gwy a'r Llan* (the best court between Wye and the *llan*, the latter presumably being at Llanafan Fawr. Interesting is the continuing use of *llys* as a description of a 'gentry' residence.

In the 19th century was classed as a hamlet within the ecclesiastical parish of Llanafan Fawr, and had a chapel, dependent on Llanafan Fawr, which William Rees depicted on his map that reconstructed 14th-century South Wales. What, however, the implications of the term 'hamlet' are in settlement terms is unclear.

As a place-name, *Listinan* is first referenced in 1299 and *Lystynan* nine years earlier (Llysdinam appears only in 1672). The elements of the name are *llys* and *dinam*, a 'stronghold'.

Llysdinam is presently the location of a large country house of 19th-century date, and there is no clear indication as to the nature or type of settlement that might previously have existed in the vicinity. One kilometre to the west is the farm of Pen-llŷs and a couple of hundred metres to the south of this the spot where the Ordnance Survey at the end of the 19th century located the chapel. In addition there is also a small D-shaped enclosure, now scheduled (Br096). It is classed as a ringwork (864) – Remfrey terms it a half ringwork - and by common consent is small and weak; Cathcart King regarded it as the feeblest in the county. The former quality is emphasised by the fact that its internal dimensions are only 13m north-east to south-west and 12m north-west to south-east. Cathcart King reported on it in 1961 and the Royal Commission carry typescript notes from a visit by W E Griffiths in 1970.

Identification then is down to a combination of tradition and minor place-names, though no one would argue against the attractiveness of the spot occupied by the present house overlooking the Wye Valley. Substantive evidence is elusive, and it is difficult to know how much weight should be attached to attach to the close geographical association between the ringwork, the suspected chapel location and the suggestive name.

King 1961, 90-1; Lloyd 1912, 253; Remfrey 1999, 190; Silvester 2010; D. Stephenson pers. comm.

Llys Edwin, Northop (Flints) SJ 2370 6933

This site lies less than a mile to the north-west of Northop, and back from the coast by just over 3km. Rising ground to the south-west is broken only by the sharp defile of the small watercourse known as Afon Conwy while flattish ground to the north-east constitutes one of the natural shelves in the landscape above the Dee Estuary.

In name it is associated with an 11th-century historical figure, Eadwine (or Edwin) of Tegeingl who appears in Domesday Book (1086). The entry for *Castretone* was assumed by T A Glenn to be synonymous with Llys Edwin and that appears to have been accepted without question by more recent authorities (e.g. Rumble and Morgan). Ellis Davies referred to a nearby plantation as Coed Llys, and further north, about 500m to the north east of Llys Edwin is Llŷs Farm, but it is entirely unclear how far back in time these *llys* names can be taken.

A succinct description was provided originally in the Royal Commission's *Inventory* for Flintshire in 1912 which described a near-square enclosure with an inner ditch and outer bank, a mound in the north-east corner of the enclosure which had a separate bank and ditch around its west and south sides. For the Royal Commission this was a small motte and bailey, but one that was not positioned in a strong natural location. Further earthworks lay to the west.

In 1931 T. A. Glenn excavated Llys Edwin on behalf of Lady Daresbury, publishing his results three years later in a privately published volume entitled *The Family of Griffith of Garn and Plasnewydd*, though it was also re-printed as a separate publication. Because of the relative scarcity of this volume, more extensive notes have been made than for many of the other *llysoedd* reported on here. The excavation of the mound revealed that Llys Edwin did not have a motte. T. A. Glenn exposed the remains of a stone hall, probably of the first half of the 13th century, but with timber predecessors. From the excavation report of three years later it can be gathered that Glenn identified at least four phases, as well as activity, indicative presumably of robbing and disturbance, and artefacts from Tudor times onwards. Spurgeon has pointed out that neither the stratigraphy nor the finds were described adequately, so all of Glenn's conclusions and assumptions have to be accepted at their face value.

The moat was 10m wide and revetted in stone, and the outer bank, supposedly in part for retaining water, had a palisade, some charred posts from which were found in the moat. On the north-east side an earlier phase of the motte was identified beneath the outer bank.

Ingress to the interior of the enclosure seems to have been on the north-west side where excavation revealed a gate flanked by square projecting towers and opposite on the far side of the moat, a stone bridge abutment. Sufficient remained of the gateway for the identification of the location of a portcullis, and the former gave on to a cobbled yard. South-east of this were a hall, kitchen and pantry, and a further square tower occupied the north angle of the moat. North-west of the yard were further rooms. A stone wall ran from the hall block south-westwards to another stone tower, producing an entire stone façade along the north-west side of the moated enclosure. On the other sides this was reproduced as a timber palisade.

Subsidiary buildings were found inside the moat on the south-east and south-west sides and were said to include a forge and stables, the latter apparently large enough to accommodate twenty or more horses, with a 'detached tower of great strength' close to the stables.

All these remains were of stone. Glenn considered that the hall complex had been partially rebuilt probably in the earlier 13th century, that the first stone phase replaced a half-timbered predecessor, and that this had in turn succeeded a timber building defined by post-holes. He was adamant that 'not a

stone found in position [during the excavations] was unnecessarily disturbed, and the entire area excavated was finally filled in at the levels as found, and the site sown with grass' (1934, 2). This does not entirely accord with his subsequent assertion that the post-holes of the earliest phase 'were found under walls, and for those portions of the house such as the kitchen, which were retained timber built until the end'.

On the south-west side of the site was a second moat (or ditch), this one wider, and, as shown on the Ordnance Survey plan, extending further to the north-west than the moated enclosure, other than its south-western side which also runs on, following a parallel course. Early commentators saw these as outworks but the Ordnance Survey in 1962 were inclined to the more prosaic view that they were fishponds. The Ordnance Survey field investigator also recorded a further anomaly in that the north-eastern ditch of the enclosure continued towards the south-east, halting abruptly at the edge of the field, but suggesting more complexity to the earthworks than acknowledged by Glenn.

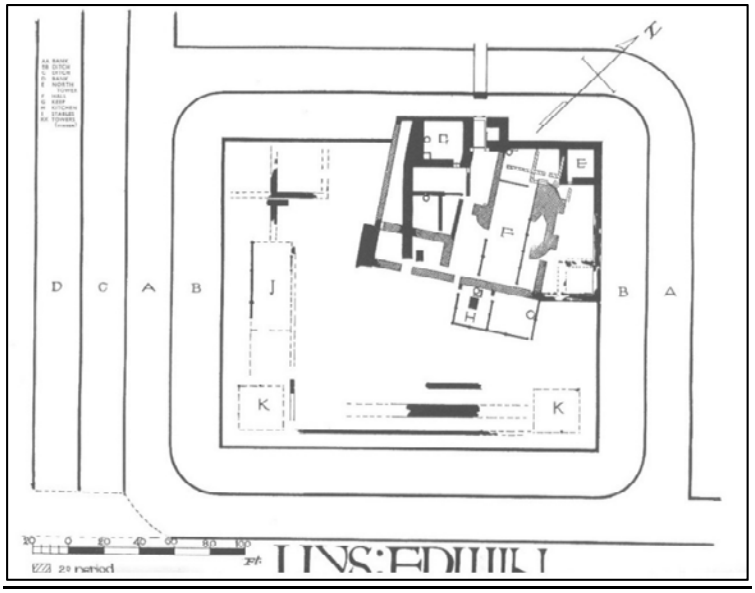
The finds assemblage from the site was varied but, including some objects commensurate with a high status complex, but not it would appear particularly prolific. Most of the pottery was attributed to the late 13th or early 14th century (although there are hints of earlier material from the earlier phase of thre moat) , there were iron utensils (a butcher's cleaver, a pot handle) and objects (two keys, a lock), shards from glass vessels, whetstones, a small piece of a bronze bowl, fragments of weapons (a sword blade, three javelin heads, and a steel spur) and horseshoes, as well as more utilitarian materials such as slates, animal bones, charcoal and a quernstone.

On the immediate associations of Llys Edwin, Glenn has little to say. A cobbled road reportedly led from a gate on the north-east side of the field in which the Llys Edwin enclosure stood in the direction of Coleshill, the area around Flint some three to four kilometres to the north, and a branch led off towards Pentre near Flint. Another gate, claimed to have been defended was set into the south-west side of the field, opposite the first. How far these trackways were traced, and indeed the evidence for them is not clarified, and the nature of the 'gates' is unexplained. Elsewhere Glenn suggests that the field was the location of the retainers' houses, 'the whole form[ing] the hamlet of a medieval vill under the protection of the fortified house of the lord'. A spring some '200 yards [to the south-west of] the site' fed the enclosure ditch.

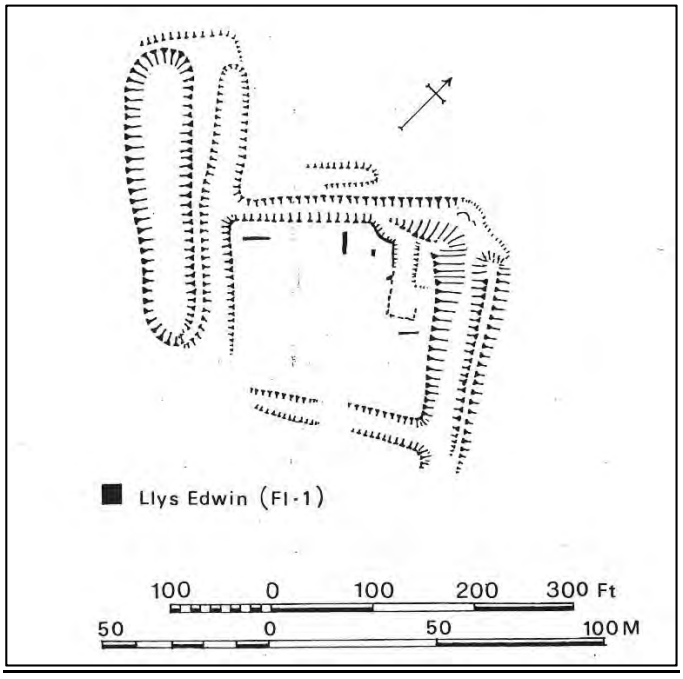
There are several aspects of Glenn's report that cause unease. Spurgeon's comments on the stratigraphy and finds have already been noted; Glenn's claims that each of the ditches and the banks was '26 feet wide' is worrying, because on the basis of the Ordnance Survey plan they clearly were not. And it is also instructive to contrast Glenn's plan with its series of stone walls, sharply defined, with the Ordnance Survey field investigator's plan from thirty years later where virtually all of the excavation details have been erased or obscured.

What is clear, assuming the ceramic dating is broadly correct, is that Llys Edwin was in use in the period around the time of the Edwardian Conquest which brings into question its terminology for if post-Edwardian it would be unwise to term it a *llys*. On the other hand Glenn claimed four phases which ought to take the occupation of the site back to a time when Welsh lords held sway in Tegeingel – in this context it would be a very strong contender for a *llys*. To associate Eadwine with his Saxon name with a *llys* seems at first sight to offer difficulties. But if Glenn's text has been correctly understood, Eadwine might have been the progeny of a half-Welsh father and a Mercian mother, and ultimately a descendant of Hywel Dda. What is not clear is when the site first acquired the affix, *llys*. Furthermore David Stephenson has pointed out that Edwin was a name that appears to have been used in Wales, often in royal circles. An interesting reference is from *Brut y Tywysogion* in the year 1115 when a Powysian expedition into North Wales went to help an ally who held Rhos and Rhufoniog, against the

sons of Owain ab Edwin ap Goronwy, from north-east Wales, who had support from Chester. This places Edwin in the late 11th century.



Llys Edwin as excavated (after Glenn 1934)



Llys Edwin as surveyed by Spurgeon (after Spurgeon 1981)

In addition to Llys Edwin itself, the NMR carries a brief statement on features in a field near Coed Llys which lies to the west, the given NGR indicating that they are about 250m away from the scheduled site (NPRN 308650; SJ 2348 6944). They are interpreted as a circular feature, about 35m in diameter, set within a square. The interpretation on Coflein is tentative, perhaps garden earthworks associated with the court.

A new plan of the site was prepared by Jack Spurgeon and published in 1981.

Cadw; Davies 1949, 290; Glenn 1934; Jones 1952; NMR; Ordnance Survey card Flint 9SE1; Rumble and Morgan 1978, FD 7.2; Spurgeon 1981, 47; Spurgeon 1991

Llys Fechain¸Llanfechain (Monts) SJ 1791 2083

This was so-called by Sir John Lloyd who believed it stood on the banks of the River Cain to the east of Llanfyllin and was probably represented by the motte known as Tomen Gastell. There is, however, no inherent reason for this, other than the perceived conceptual associations between earlier court sites and later mottes, and CPAT has long argued that the cropmark enclosure with its palisade, adjacent to the farm of Llys, was a more likely candidate.

Early forms of the farm and area names are elusive. Documents in the Powis Castle archives (NLW), authenticated by the association of Llys with nearby Bodynfoel, take it back to 1792 and in the Bryngwyn archives to 1775.

Llanfechain: Llys Farm lies in the centre foreground with the single-ditched enclosure thought to be the court site in the centre and overlapping an earlier double-ditched enclosure. CPAT 84-c-0188

Adjacent is Llys Farm, strengthening what is currently only a possibility at present, that the later enclosure is an early medieval court site. The likelihood that the court was here rather than close to Tomen Gastell on the southern side of the Cain is reinforced by other minor place-names: Llys-uchaf 900m to the west, Penllys (formerly Pen-y-llys) less than 500m to the north with Llys Cottage a similar distance a little further to the east, and Llys Hill and Llys Coppice, 1.2km to the north-west. But one further possibility cannot be entirely ignored, and that is a shift in the physical location of the *llys* from lower to higher ground, the motte marking the site of a later court. But then again, there is nothing substantive to support such a theory.

Stephenson sees Llanfechain as the centre of the realm of Owain Fychan ap Madog ap Maredudd, lord of Mechain, and periodically of Mochnant is Rhaeadr, Cynllaith, and parts of western Oswestry lordship, who ruled from 1160-87.

The enclosure (PRN 7053) has not been tested by excavation but the visual evidence from aerial photography suggests that it cuts a double-ditched enclosure of earlier date. It consists of a clear outer ditch, seemingly less wide than those of the other enclosure, and a narrower inner ditch which it is tempting to see as a continuous palisade slot. On the ground a slight scarp mirrors the outer ditch and may reflect the residue of the enclosure bank with the palisade slot on top of it. In outline it appears to be virtually D-shaped, with the nearly straight northern side conforming to the road and adjacent boundary that separates the field in which the enclosure lies from the scarp that drops down to an unnamed stream, a tributary of the River Cain which flows along a shallow valley just to the north. That the field boundary probably incorporates in some form the bank of the earlier enclosure can be inferred from the former's slightly convex line, and the discernible re-alignments in its course where the two sides of the enclosure meet it.

Lloyd 1912, 247; Richards 1964, 13; Silvester 2003; D. Stephenson: pers. comm.

Llysfaen (Denbs) SH 8927 7735

According to Owen and Morgan tradition asserts that there was a royal court in the area, but this substantive evidence appears to be lacking. Ednyfed Fychan, seneschal or chief minister of Llewellyn the Great, is said to have had a court here which was reputedly later burnt by Owain Glyndŵr's forces, though it should be said that there is no physical evidence of its existence at this spot. The term *llys* was, it is thought, only added in the 19th century for previously it had been termed *Bryn Euryn.* Bryn Euryn itself may have been fortified in the 5th or 6th century AD, a stronghold in the cantref of Rhos and a centre of power and status.

Owen and Morgan 2007, 300

Llyssun (Monts) SJ 0322 1021

A small motte and bailey castle surmounts a natural knoll on the valley floor at Llyssun (SJ 0320 1024), just over the river from Llanerfyl, and if Samuel Lewis (1833) is to be believed, there was also a gentry home, probably of medieval date, called Llŷs Wgan near the present farm of Llyssun. The former existence of a large deer park behind Llyssun suggests that there may be some truth to Lewis' story (Silvester and Hankinson 2014, 64). The *Herbert Correspondence* (Smith 1968) dating from the 17th century reveals, inadvertently, that Llyssun was one of the two or three key Herbert family manors in Montgomeryshire at that time. However, to take this further and suggest that there was a court here in earlier centuries is something that has yet to be achieved.

David Stephenson notes that 'there are traditions recorded in several 19th-century sources that Maredudd ap Cynan of Gwynedd (d.1212), an opponent of Llywelyn ab Iorwerth, was driven out of his lands in southern Gwynedd by the prince and was given refuge by Gwenwynwyn and given lands amounting to a small lordship in the region of Llyssun, Coedtalog, Neuddwen etc. The details vary somewhat in different sources, but the general location is standard. The story is not only plausible, but serves to explain many otherwise puzzling issues, and if correct in outline, it is pertinent: Maredudd would have

needed a court, and would presumably have been settled in an area where there was one or the potential for one'.

Lewis 1833; Silvester and Hankinson 2014, 64; Smith 1968; Stephenson 2007; D Stephenson: pers comm.

Llyswen (Brecs) SO 133 380

Translated as the 'white court' Llyswen is first documented in *c.*1127 as *Lisewan.* Local tradition saw it as 'the gorgeous palace of the Princes of South Wales' (or more precisely, from another local source, as that of Rhodri Mawr) and located it in the *Warren Field near Ddrew*. Owen and Morgan do not however acknowledge the source of their local tradition on 'the gorgeous palace'.

About 0.5km to the west of the church is a large multivallate enclosure scheduled as Br085. The Royal Commission have referred to the unusual shape of the enclosure and signalled the possibility that some of the earthworks could result from an early medieval phase of construction, pointing out, though without elaboration, that Llsywen was an important place for the adjudication of legal disputes between the princedoms of Gwynedd and Deheuarth.

Owen and Morgan 2007, 301; RCAHMW 1986, 112-115

Maesmynan/Maes-mynan (Flints) SJ 1188 7205

Maesmynan was one of the major manorial centres of the Greys, lords of Ruthin and Dyffryn Clwyd in the 14th century, and Rees Davies argued that it was probably a Welsh centre before the Edwardian Conquest. Seemingly in support of this contention, Edward Lhuyd's correspondent at the end of the 17th century referred to it as *Lhys mynnan, als Lhys maes mynnan*. Maesmynan as it appears on maps today is one of the great archaeological and historical unknowns in Flintshire: the building and its grounds did not appear in the HER until 2011, nor in the NMR until 2009 and 2006 respectively, and even then the documentation is sparse. Nor does it feature in the Clwyd *Parks and Gardens Register* (1995). There should be little surprise then that its earlier history is decidedly sparse and that no work, as far as we know, has been attempted on its *llys*.

Aberwheeler (Aberchwiler), considered by Rees Davies to be the bond settlement within the *maerdref* for Maesmynan is somewhere over 3km to the south-west where the Cwhiler valley opens out to join the vale of the Clwyd. Modern maps are misleading for the name has now been applied to what in the late 19th century was the hamlet of Waen. Aber-Chwiler farm lay 700m to the north-east. What should we make of the farm named *Llys* (SJ 1089 6995), lying 950m to the east of Aber-Chwiler farm, and below the hill which supported the medieval deer park of Maesmynan; its absence from the 1821 Ordnance Survey surveyor's map suggests a 19th-century creation. The NMR is more accommodating, noting that the farmhouse is a fairly large one, albeit not earlier than the 19th century. The suggestion, which seems to have emanated from the Denbighshire *Inventory* published at the beginning of the 20th century, is that it, or more accurately its predecessor, could have represented the residence of the steward of the manor of Aberwhiler, and documents are cited attesting its importance in the medieval period. It might be assumed from this that the place-name potentially signified an even earlier locale. Yet it is an

oddly peripheral location for an estate centre, whether manorial or commotal, as David Stephenson has obseverd in correspondence with the writer.

Davies 1978, 380; RCAHMW 1914,11; Silvester 2014, 67; D. Stephenson: pers. comm.

Manafon, Henllys (Monts) SJ 1198 0311

Henllys is a prime candidate for a *llys* site, except that there are no documentary references to establish its authenticity. The farm bearing the name lies towards the base of the northern slope of the valley overlooking the River Rhiw, less than 300m away. Its position immediately below a small and somewhat isolated knoll is suggestive. A second farm with the same name lay higher up the slope 500m away, though its name has now been altered to Tan-y-glog. Modern maps name this area as Manafon-llys which Richards classed as a township, and is a name that can be traced back at least into the 18th century, although as a township name a medieval origin might be assumed. It's probably also legitimate to query whether it is more than a coincidence that the tract of woodland below the higher *Henllys* was and still is called Lord's Wood. Documents in the National Library take the name *Henllys* back at least as far as 1626.

If Henllys is indeed the site of an early court, it is possible that Manafon was the *maerdref* that served it, lying less than one kilometre to the south-west and conforming to Glanville Jones' model of bond settlements being nucleated settlements with churches in them. A motte lies on the opposite bank of the river to the village, and in the 19th century access was provided by a ford supplanted by a bridge only in the 20th century. One further point to note is that Manafon lies in the commote of Cedewain and no court appears to have yet been identified for this district (see for instance Pryce 2005, 6), though David Stephenson favours Betws Cedewain for this role (see below).

The mother church for the region lies a few kilometres downstream at Berriew.

LiDAR; National Library of Wales: Glansevern archives; Richards 1969, 153; Spurgeon 1966, 32; D. Stephenson: pers. comm.

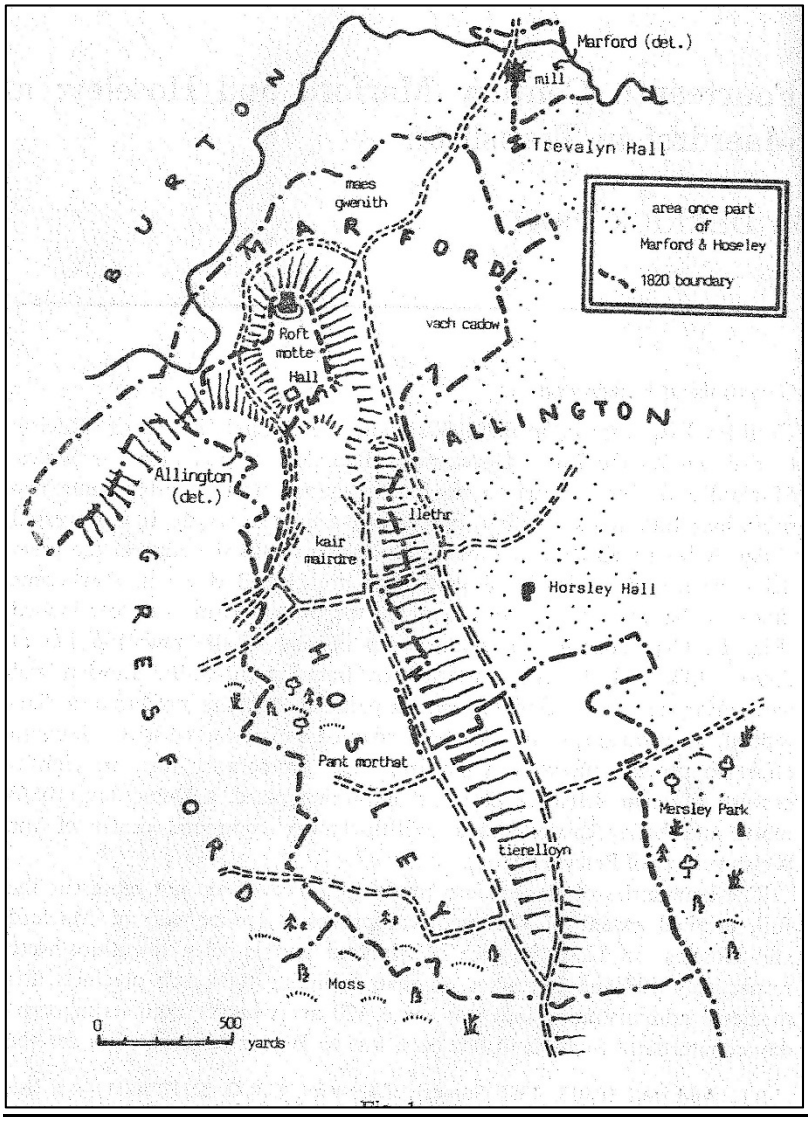
Marford (Denbs) SJ 356 557

The *llys* at Marford appears in various documents in the Middle Ages, and arguably is one of the more fully researched *maenol*. Masquerading as a manor, it is recorded in the First Extent of Bromfield and Yale in AD 1315, where unfree tenants from three neighbouring townships including Marford itself were responsible for the maintenance of the 'hall, chamber and cookhouse, thatched with straw' (Ellis).

Pratt variously identified a motte within the Iron Age hillfort known as the Rofft as the *llys* for the commote of Marford during the rule of the prince of Powys, Madog ap Maredudd, and the *curia* (or court) of the Norman lord Osbern Fitz Tesso who held at nearby Hoseley at the time of Domesday (1086). By the time of a survey of Marford in 1315, a manor house had been erected in the bailey of the motte and later Roft Hall was also within the hillfort in *c*.1575. South of the hillfort defences which cut across the neck of the peninsula was *Cae'r faerdref*¸ although this does not identify where the bond settlement itself was.

The earthwork castle and much of the hillfort were partially destroyed by a railway in the 1840s and finished off by sand and gravel workings in the years between 1927 and 1958. The motte and bailey,

the Iron Age defences and Roft Hall have all gone. *Cae'r faerdref* has been built over. In addition Palmer and Owen noted that there was a Mardy in Merford [=Marford] township, but gave no more details and in passing we should note that their use of the past tense suggests that it was no longer extant or traceable. Notwithstanding this, they considered that the twin townships of Marford and Hoseley formed the *maerdref* within the commote of Marford. The morphology of Marford *llys* and *maerdref* can thus be reconstructed only from historical documentation.



Marford llys and maerdref (after Pratt 1992)

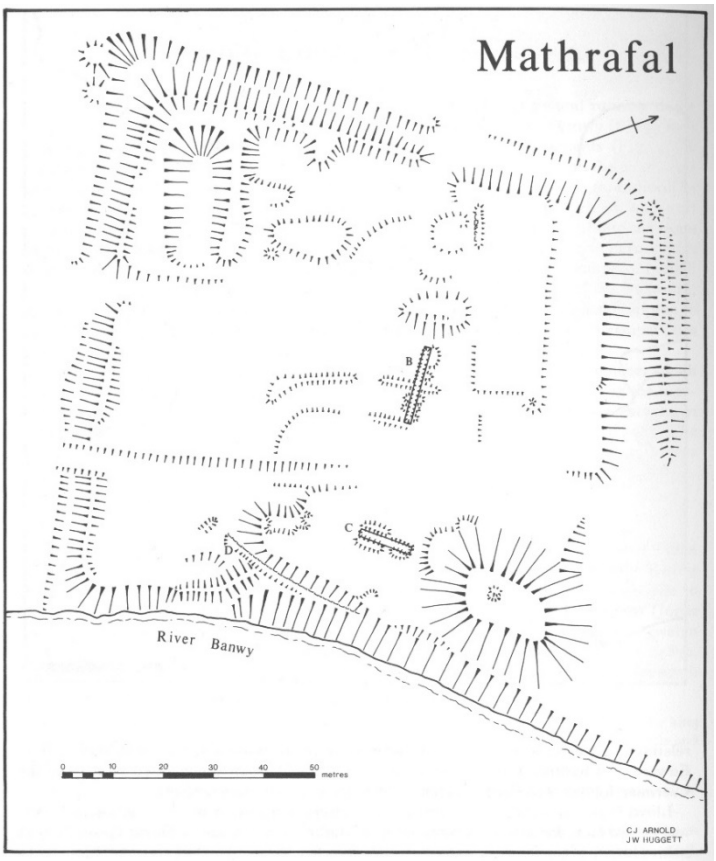
Ellis 1924, 31; Palmer and Owen 1910, 101; Pratt 1994; Pratt 2004, 18; Watt 2000, 5

Mathrafal, Llangyniew (Monts) SJ 1317 1079

A quadrangular enclosure defined by a bank and ditch, except above the scarp dropping down to the River Banwy where they are intermittent, lies at the head of the Vale of Meifod and had a motte and bailey set within in it by the early 12th century. Full descriptions of the earthworks exist in the works of Spurgeon, Arnold and Huggett, the Ordnance Survey and Cadw, and for this reason are not repeated here. Excavations by Chris Arnold in 1985 uncovered nothing to suggest that any of the earthworks

were earlier than AD 1200, but equally nothing that convincingly proved that they weren't. Further work in 1989, however, appeared to indicate that the defences of the rectangular enclosure though refurbished on several occasions could not be dated any earlier than AD 1200, and on the basis of a single radiocarbon date had fallen out of use by or during the 14th century.

There is a persistent link with the princes of Powys from the 16th century, and documents of the 13th and 14th centuries group it with Aberffraw (Anglesey) and Dinefwr (Carmarthenshire) as the great royal seats in Wales before the Edwardian Conquest, though as Huw Pryce has shown in an in-depth analysis of the sources 'there is…no evidence that Mathrafal was regarded as enjoying special status as the chief court of Powys before the thirteenth century'. He considered it likely that 'Mathrafal was named by Venedotian jurists [in Gwynedd] so as to provide Powys with a chief court similar to Aberffraw and Dinefwr…', but as to why it 'was chosen in preference to any other place in Powys, we can only guess. One consideration could have been the site's proximity to the church of Meifod'. The claim that its emergence was a result of the Welsh being forced out of Shropshire by Offa in the 8th century was recognised by Sir John Lloyd long ago as a 16th-century creation.



Mathrafal showing the first season's excavation trenches (after Arnold and Huggett 1986)

The earliest appearance of the name is in an ode to Madog ap Maredudd who died in 1160 by the poet Cynddelw (*fl.* 1155-1200). *Castell mathraval* is referred to in an elegy from the later years of the 12th century and the *Brut y Tywysogyon* records that Welsh princes laid siege to the castle then in Anglo-Norman hands in 1211-12. Later references include those that indicate that Mathrafal was the principal manor of Owen ap Gruffydd in 1293. Collectively then, references to Mathrafal being a *llys* are late in date, and even as a stronghold it does not feature before the 12th century. Pryce argued that 'the place's alleged pre-eminence appears to have been the creation of Venedotian propagandists of the earlier thirteenth century'.

Arnold 1990, 75; Arnold and Edwards in Edwards and Lane 1988, 92; Arnold and Huggett 1986; Arnold and Huggett 1995; Arnold 1990, 75; Lloyd 1912, 249; Pryce in Arnold and Huggett 1995, 61-65; Spurgeon 1966, 9; D. Stephenson: pers.comm.

Overton (Flints) SJ 373 417

Huw Pryce has suggested that in the 13th century the rulers of northern Powys had Overton as one of their chief bases, a view which appears to be supported by passing comments in some of Derek Pratt's papers. Lilley refers to its appearance as a manor in Domesday Book, but this perpetuates an error made by Soulsby for the reference is to a different Overton, one in Cheshire. That Overton was an English royal castle, controlled by the powerful brothers Jonas and Roger de Powys, is clear from the Pipe Rolls. By the middle of the 16th century Leland was to record that most of it had disappeared through erosion effected by the River Dee.

Lilley http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/atlas_ahrb_2005/atlas; Pryce 2005, 37; Soulsby 1983, 211; D. Stephenson pers. comm.; Suppe 2002

Pen-prys, nr Caersws (Monts) SO 0097 9199

Melville Richards suggested this as the original centre for Arwystli, with Talgarth becoming important only at a later date, while to Sir John Lloyd Caersws was the royal manor or court of Arwystli Is Coed. No other references to the significance of this site have been encountered, but David Stephenson seems confident that this was the site of a court, but that it was much the younger of the two. Pen-prys (or Pen Prys) first appears in the 1293 *Inquisition Post Mortem* of Owain ap Gruffudd ap Gwenwynwyn. It was at that date the manorial centre of Arwystli is Coed and was thus the administrative centre of that commote. It is probable that Arwystli was not divided into commotes until the 13th century – possibly *c*.1216, having been previously a single cantref/kingdom with a single administrative officer. But in a record of *c*.1216 when the territory had been seized by Llywelyn ab Iorwerth of Gwynedd, it is noted that he had two stewards of Arwystli, and Stephenson believes that this was when Talgarth became the court/centre for Arwystli uwch Coed, and Pen Prys the court/centre for Arwystli is Coed, going on to suggest that there is an important point lurking here: in the 13th century many *llysoedd* were frequently administrative centres, probably very rarely visited by the ruler's entourage, rather than festive/ceremonial centres.

Today, Pen-prys is represented by the farm of Park, which was previously Park Penprice and before that Penprys. As such it was part of the Earl of Leicester's holdings in the later 16th century.

Two kilometres to the west of Caersws, and only a short distance to the north of the road that ran westwards from the Roman fort, Penprys lies immediately above the plain of the River Severn (about 1.5km to the east) where a small stream, the Colwyn Brook, drops to the valley. It thus has all the topographical hallmarks of a carefully selected location. In material terms, however, nothing of historic interest, has come to the attention of the archaeological records.

Bridgeman 1868; Lloyd 1912, 249; Richards 1964, 14; Stephenson 2005, 33; Stephenson: pers.comm.

Rhuddlan, Flints SJ 02 78

The strategic location of Rhuddlan on the Clwyd, with marshes lying to the north as far as the sea, has long been recognised. After originating as an Anglo-Saxon *burh* known as *Cledemutha* in the early 10th century, Rhuddlan became a Welsh centre in the 11th century; some authroities refer only to Gruffudd ap Llywelyn' use of Rhuddlan from the 1050s but Quninnell has claimed that it was Llywelyn ap Seisyll who constructed a *palatium* (or palace) here in 1015. This then appears to have been a royal seat of Gruffudd ap Llywelyn prior to 1063, but in that year the *llys* was attacked and burnt by Earl Harold Godwinson. About ten years later the Norman Robert of Rhuddlan built a motte here now known as Twt Hill, but by the mid-12th century Rhuddlan was back in Welsh hands, before falling to Edward I in the 1270s. In outline, this is a simple description of complex events that over three and a half centuries must have left many marks on the landscape. It is not surprising then that have been some variations in interpreting both the surface and the excavated evidence (contrast Manley 1987 and Quinnell *et al* 1994 with a partial balancing of the arguments by Nancy Edwards in 1988).

In all this Gruffudd's *llys* has played something of a subsidiary role to other issues. Edwards, citing longstanding traditions puts the court in the place where Robert subsequently built his motte, an acknowledgement perhaps of its strategic setting but also a deliberate act of Norman domination. Quinnell went further and suggested, though without any stratigraphical support, that the unusual raised earthworks of the Twt Hill bailey could have incorporated the earthworks of the *llys*, but also acknowledged that some elements of the Norman borough defences could have a Welsh context. Despite various excavations over the years in Rhuddlan, the Welsh element remains elusive.

Barlow 2002, 68; Edwards and Lane 1988, 112; Edwards 1991, 139; Longley 1997, 45; Quinnell 1994, 8, 213.

Ruthin (Denbs) SJ 12 58

Claims of a Welsh stronghold or *llys*, 'the Red Fort', beneath or close to the later castle, are not backed by any solid evidence, but nor can they be ruled out. However, we might note that while Davies refers to Ruthin, its appearance in the general context of *llysoedd* is ambiguous, particularly with Llysfasi only a short distance to the south (although their commotal locations, it should be admitted, have not been assessed).

It has also been suggested that prior to the Edwardian Conquest in the second half of the 13th century, Ruthin was a *maerdref*, the administrative centre of the commote of Dyffryn Clwyd; and a Welsh settlement of some size could have developed in the area of modern Well Street, formerly 'Welsh Street'. This though is speculative.

Davies 1978, 110; Jones 1991

Sycharth, Llansilin (Denbs) SJ 2053 2587

Sir John Lloyd suggested that Sycharth was the *llys* in the commote long before it became the home of Owain Glyndŵr, with the mother church of Llansilin nearby. There is no direct evidence to confirm

claim as far as I am aware, but David Stephenson points out that the charter of 1206/7 issued by Madog ap Gruffudd of northern Powys from 'the *castellum* in Cynllaith', can only refer to Sycharth, and establishes it as a court-site. The motte and bailey was originally built by the Normans, and Domesday records their lordship in Cynllaith, in terms that suggest an on the ground presence rather than over-lordship. But with the Normans out of mid-Wales after 1102 such sites were obviously capable of being turned into very effective *llysoedd.* The proximity of a putative *llys* and a *clas* is also suggestive.

Smith assumes that Glyndŵr's establishment at Sycharth should be classed as a *llys* and that there was also a supporting *maerdref*. Whether Sycharth at the beginning of the 15th century should be so-termed is an issue that the writer is not sufficiently qualified to speak on, but in Iolo Goch's poem praising Sycharth when it was Owain Glyndŵr's home it is repeatedly called a *llys*, and in one instance, explicitly a *llys barwn* (a baron's court). From my position of ignorance, might this reflect a deliberate attempt by Glyndŵr himself to revert to the usage and customs of an earlier age, or by his poet to anchor Glyndŵr and his entourage in a heroic Welsh past.

Lloyd 1912, 247; Pryce, 2005, no. 504; *Smith 2003, 22, 31; D. Stephenson: pers. comm.*

Sychdyn (Flints) SJ 24 66

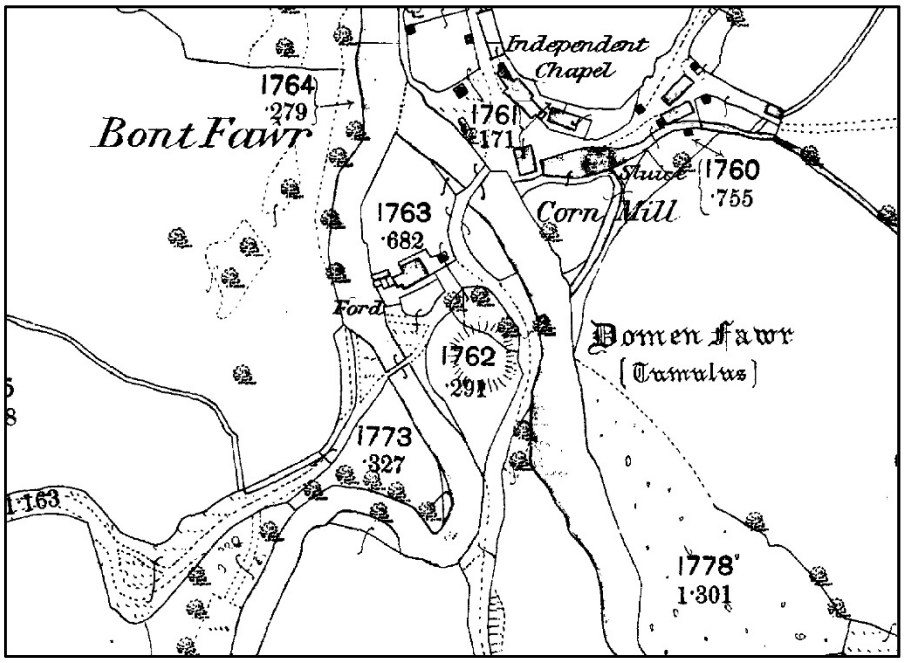
Beverley Smith in discussing the courts that Llywelyn ap Gruffudd used in the third quarter of the 13th century remarked that in the four cantrefs east of the Conwy, the prince was recorded as using a centre at Sychdyn in Coleshill, but admitted that evidence was slight, and that there were potentially several localities that might represent the site including Sychtyn near Ewloe, Sychtyn near Mold, and perhaps Mold itself.

Smith 2014, 221

Tafolwern, Llanbyrnmair (Monts) SH 8910 0264

Tafolwern is presented as a significant place in medieval poetry. There is a motte – Domen Fawr – on the site which is low-lying and close to the junction of several small rivers, and indeed is sandwiched between two converging ones as shown below. An adjacent property is called Llys Ywen on Ordnance Survey mapping, but this is a modern name, and in 1763 the building was simply Tafolwern corn mill.

Brut y Tywysogion suggests that Tafolwern was a new castle in 1162 and had been built by Owain Gwynedd – a result of the Gwynedd invasion of Powys in 1160. Charter references make it clear that this was the site of a court in the later 12th century with charters issued from Tafolwern in 1185, 1187, 1191 and 1200. The first three were issued by Gwenwynwyn before he took over the principality of Powys from his father Owain Cyfeiliog in 1195 and, presumably, before Gwenwynwyn had access to other courts.



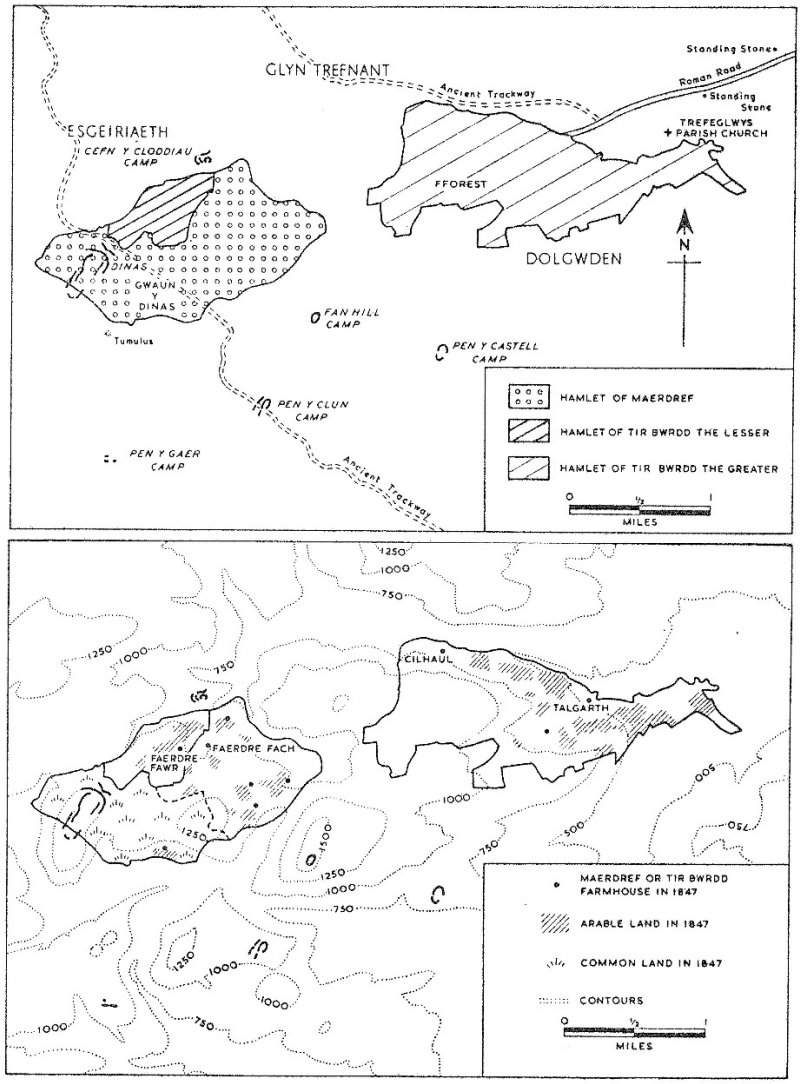
Domen Fawr, Tafolwern as depicted on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of 1887.

NLW Wynnstay Vol 1 (1763); Pryce 2005; D Stephenson: pers. comm.

Talgarth, Trefeglwys (Monts) SN 9622 9020

Huw Pryce has drawn attention to the probability of the *llys* at Talgarth, half a mile south-west of Trefeglwys, being the principal court of Hywel ab Ieuaf, (d.1185), lord of Arwystli, which extended over what is now western Montgomeryshire. A poem by Cynddelw who was active in the second half of the 12th century provides the direct link between Hywel and Talgarth.

Examined in detail by Glanville Jones in 1964, Talgarth was considered to associated with one of the few upland *maerdrefi* in north-west Wales. It lay in the commote of Arwystli Uwchcoed and in 1294 was simply described as a manor 'with certain nearby hamlets'. Here, however, the term 'hamlet' reflects not a nucleated settlement, but a tract of land, even a township, as Glanville Jones' 1964 plan makes clear (for which see below).



Talgarth Maerdref (after Glanville Jones 1964)

The ‘village’ of Y Faerdref was named and so described as late as the 17th century, but for Jones the settlement was sited too high at 700’ OD to have been a demesne that provided all the provisions for the ‘king’s table’ and he linked it to Talgarth which lay at a lower altitude below 500’. Several hillforts lie in the vicinity of Y Faerdref including the vast hillfort of Y Dinas which according to Glanville Jones was impinged on by some of the common pastures of Y Faerdref, the implication, though unstated, being that one of the hillforts might have housed an earlier *llys.* Jones argued for the ‘integration of upland and lowland in one organisational complex’, a tentative view of bond settlement that he considered, in poetic phraseology, might be ‘rejected in an orgy of scepticism’. He was not willing to attribute a period of the early medieval era to the floruit of Talgarth as a bond settlement, nor its locational relationship to the *llys* (see above). But it is interesting that Talgarth lay on the edge of a medieval hunting forest, that of Trefeglwys, whose background history is unknown.

The present house at Talgarth lies on the south bank of the River Trannon at SN 9622 9020, but if this was a court in the 12th century there is nothing confirm it on the ground as far as can established. Faidre-fawr lies about 4.6km to the west at SN 9166 8973, with Fairdre-fawr three hundred metres to the east.

Jones 1964, 36; Pryce 2005; Silvester 2010, 146; Stephenson 2005; D. Stephenson: pers. comm.

Tomen-y-Rhodwydd, Llanarmon-yn-Iâl (Denbs) SJ 1767 5164

Longley is adamant that in the north-west of the region only Tomen-y-Rhodwydd 'can be shown to have been *built by the Welsh* (his emphasis) on a *maerdref*'. The basis for this statement is not revealed. There is admittedly a farm called 'Court' about 1.5km to the east (SJ 1924 5180), but in the absence of any corroborative material it would be unwise to place too much emphasis on its occurrence. Notwithstanding, one of Edward Lhuyd's correspondents writing of Llandegla noted that 'tis said there was formerly a Town by Court (a house in [Llanarmon] at a field called Karreg y Dre newydh'. Llandegla village lies only 700m down the Alyn from Court.

Added to this we should take note of Beverley Smith's comments. 'Built by the Welsh, certainly, but surely not on a *maerdref*. It is exceedingly unlikely that a *maerdref*, with its demesne lands and associated buildings and conceivably a *llys*, would have been located at that height and so distant from recognizable habitation. The site of Tomen y Rhodwydd is essentially military and of the nature of a frontier stronghold. *BT* tells that in 1149 Owain Gwynedd `built a Castle in Iâl`. It was an exceptionally aggressive act directed at Madog ap Maredudd (d. 1160) of Powys, Owain otherwise showing marked restraint from offensive action against Powys while Madog lived. Whether Owain attempted to take possession of the commote of Iâl is uncertain and probably unlikely; it certainly did not lead to any prolonged occupation of the commote, if any. His objective would seem to have been limited to the construction at Tomen y Rhodwydd of a frontier fortress to protect Gwynedd, and particularly Dyffryn Clwyd, from attack from Powys. It is an impressive earthwork, but one which has not been shown to be related to any other settlement remains. A *maerdref* at that site seems most improbable. Negation of that suggestion goes hand in hand with a realisation of the undoubted location of the *maerdref* for the commote of Iâl at Llanarmon-yn-Iâl'.

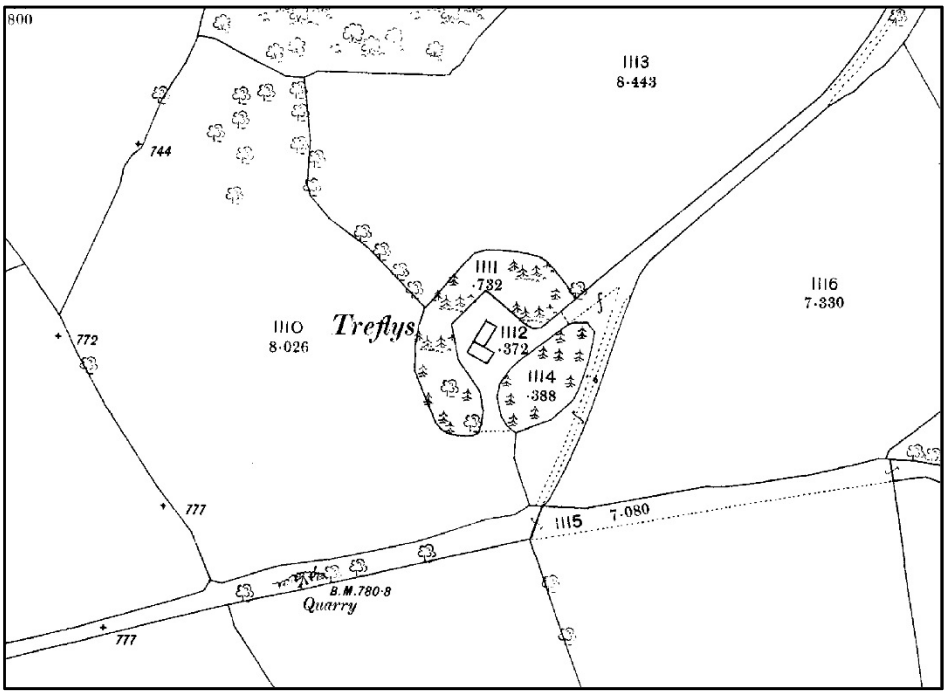
Lhuyd 1911, 146; Longley 1997, 43, 52: Smith 2015: pers. comm.

Treflys, Llangammarch Wells, Brecs SN 9364 4908

Treflys was formerly a township in the ecclesiastical parish of Llangamarch as recorded (as *Treflus*) by Edward Lhuyd in the late 17th century. Willaim Rees went further, however, and saw it as commote. Rees also pinpointed the name on his map of *South Wales in the Fourteenth Century* (1932). What significance can be attached to this is not clear, but Richards cites *Treflas* in an *Inquisition Post Mortem* of 1359 and *Trefflys* in the Ministers' Accounts for the years between 1360-7, documents which mention both Owen ap Cad', the 'beadle' and Hoel ap Richard, the reeve of Treflys. It was similarly named on the Ordnance Survey surveyor's drawing of 1820, though this was an annotation that could be later than the given date.

Treflys is also the name given to an isolated farm, now ruined, astride a broad ridge a little less than 2km to the north of the village of Llangammarch. Its appearance as *Treflis* in the census of 1851 implies it was then occupied. On the late 19th-century large-scale Ordnance Survey map, the farm was encompassed entirely within a broad shelter belt composed primarily of conifers; given the exposed location its presence is of little surprise, but its mapped appearance is slightly curious because of the width of the shelter belt relative to the area that it surrounds.

The relict earthworks of one or perhaps two enclosures, their circuits incomplete, survive on the hill top, marking to some degree where the later shelter belt lay. On the south and east sides these take the form of a reasonably substantial bank, albeit denuded, together with a ditch hollow. On the north, there is a bank that is less pronounced. The earthworks appear complex and have not been systematically recorded or surveyed, but one possibility is that an elliptical 'inner' enclosure is abutted by a larger 'outer' enclosure on its north side. But in addition aerial photography by the Royal Commission in July 2006 (2006-3650-51) displays the parchmark of a further larger enclosure which on the east at least encompasses the earthworks. It is unclear but perhaps unlikely that these features are all of one period. Undoubtedly a full earthwork survey coupled with aerial photograph transcription would be beneficial in understanding the complex, but regardless of this, Treflys is a very strong contender for a court site that has surviving features.



Treflys near Llangammarch Wells as depicted on the
1st edition Ordnance Survey map of 1889.

Lhuyd 1911; Ordnance Survey drawing 310 (1820); RCAHMW 2006; Richards 1969; Richards – Place-name database

Welshpool (Monts) SJ 21 07

Huw Pryce suggest that in the later 12th century rulers of southern Powys such as Owain Cyfeiliog had Welshpool as their principal base, with the abbey of Strata Marcella nearby reflecting Owain's patronage. References in *Brut y Tywysogion* and *Brenhinedd y Saesson* suggest that they may have used what was probably a Norman-built motte, one of a string of mottes that show the Normans working up the northern, as well as the southern, bank of the Severn, and then up the Rhiw – including Manafon. All of these were lost to Welsh rulers after 1102.

Pryce 2005, 37, 41: Stephenson 2007; D. Stephenson: pers. comm.

Wrexham and Erddig (Denbs) SJ 33 50

Pratt argued that in the commote of Wrexham, the motte and bailey at Erddig served as the *llys*, and that this was known as *Castell-y-Glyn* in medieval documents. David Stephenson has argued that Erddig was the stronghold in which Owain Cyfeiliog's brother Meurig was held, by his uncle Madog ap Maredudd, and from which Owain's men rescued him in 1156.

Palmer and Owen followed by Watt argued that Wrexham itself was an unfree township which contained demesne land and thus constituted part of the *maerdref*, with Glanville Jones citing Wrexham as one of those bond settlements that subsequently developed into a borough.

Davies 1978, 380; *Jones 1991, 202*; *Palmer and Owen 1910, 104; Pratt 2004, 19; 2007, 23; 2014, 28; Stephenson 2008; D. Stephenson pers. comm.; Watt 2000, 5*

Ystrad Owain (Denbs) SJ 0622 6478

Smith noted that the surveyor charged with producing the data which was to be recorded in the *Survey of the Honour of Denbigh* in 1334 remarked that Ystrad Owain (Ystradowen) was the only demesne in the commote of Ceinmeirch. Comparable with what the surveyor noted at Dinorben, Ystrad Owain was stated to have a cluster of buildings that included two granges, a byre and a sheepfold, with a *manerium* that consisted of a demesne of 267 acres of arable and smaller areas of meadow and pasture. In a historical context, this claimed as the home of Gwenllian (d.1281), the illegitimate daughter of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth who, following the death of her husband William de Lacy (d. 1233), may have resided at Llys Gwenllian on the royal manor of Ystrad Owain in the commote of Cinmeirch, 'supported from lands in that neighbourhood granted to her by her father, and from her dower lands in Ireland' (NLW). The Royal Commission also pointed out that the dominant position of the manor of Ystrad was reflected in the fact that the de Lacy's survey of 1334 commenced with the assessment of this particular manor.

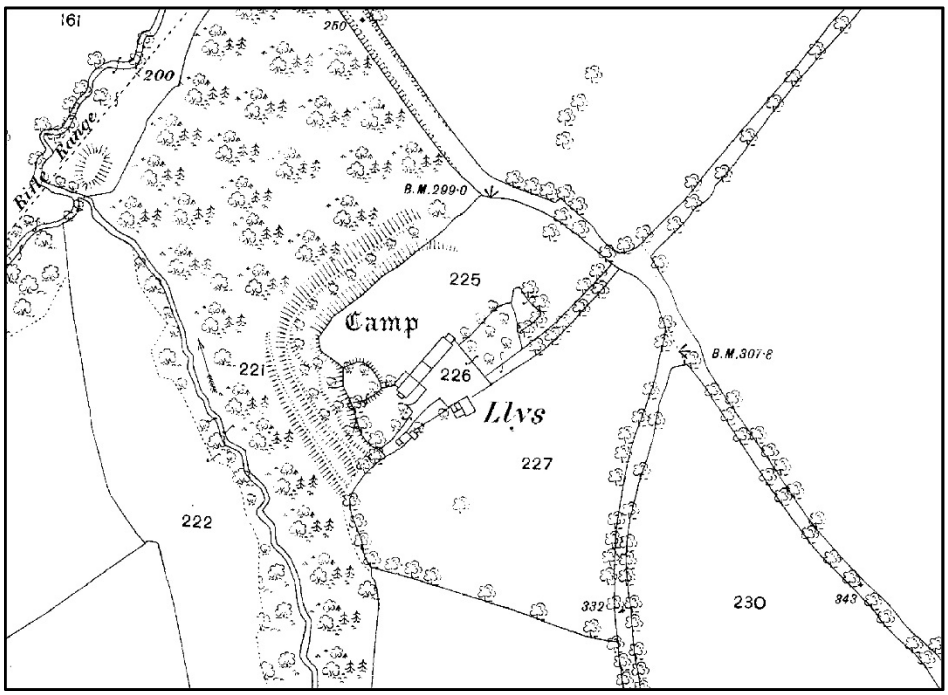
It has also been claimed as the predecessor of medieval Denbigh, the site lying about 1.4km to the south of the town, and this may have led to its reputed appellation of Hen Ddinbych.

None of the writings choose to locate Ystrad Owain with any degree of precision, other than in one paper by Glanville Jones. He associated Ystrad Owain with the surviving earthwork known as Llys Gwenllian (SJ 0566 6438), producing a plan of the site in 1991 (though surprisingly he failed to discuss it in the accompanying text – perhaps it was edited out?). He may have confused the picture a little, however, by labelling the illustration of the *llys* with the *maerdref* or manorial details that covered the granges, sheepcote etc and also identified bond cottages here with crofts, but all drawing on the same 14th-century source. Perhaps it is possible that the *maerdref* surrounded the *llys* but it seems more likely that it was at a distance.

About 700m to the north-east and down river is Ystrad Hall, lying back from the Afon Ystrad, a tributary of The River Clwyd and with the projected but unproven line of a Roman road passing close by, has two farms called Ystrad to north and south. More intriguingly, it lies near the centre of what appears to be a sub-oval enclosure, some 17 hectares (or 42 acres) in extent, its purpose and origin unknown. It could be a park, albeit a small one, associated with the hall, but could perhaps be earlier.

Llys Gwenllian itself is a motte and bailey castle sited on a broad spur formed by a stream converging on the Ystrad. The bailey is curiously sub-rectangular with rounded corners, its dimensions around 80m

by 60m originally according to the HER, but much of the southern side has been removed by the expansion of the farm called Llys. Existing Ordnance Survey plans, however, suggest that its overall measurements are closer to 164m from north-east to south-west by 95m north-west to south-east, that the lane on its north-east side logically probably follows the ditch, and that the curvature of this lane could indicate that the eastern side was rather longer (and the enclosure therefore much bigger) than is currently specified (see early Ordnance Survey plan below). The motte at the western end of the bailey is about 6.5m high and 16m in diameter, and is surrounded by a shallow moat. The whole complex is considered by authorities to have been built in the 13th century, but without much thought be given to the possibility that the earthworks might have had an earlier origin. It should perhaps be added that the affix Gwenllian appears to be of relatively modern origin: as yet it has not been encountered prior to the 20th century.



(Reproduced from the 1st edition 25" Ordnance Survey map of 1875)

Davies 1978, 110; HER; Jones 1972, 341; Jones 1991, fig 178; Jones 2000; National Library of Wales: Welsh Biography on line; Rees 1967, pl 28: RCAHMW 1914, 136; Smith 2014, 225

Other names and sites of potential relevance

Betws Cedewain: David Stephenson favours Betws as the location of a *llys* for the commote of Cedewain was at Bet[t]ws Cedewain, based on the following: a) it is central in the lordship; b) that it looks like one of the court/castle/church complexes that are common in mid-Wales, with Betws church and Caer Siac on a ridge above; and c) an early 17th-century record contains the interesting description of Betws as containing a close of meadow and arable called *Yr Orsedd* where 'the lord of Kedewen had a house built to keep his courts and law days' (Jones 1955, 270).

Henllys (Brecs): 800m west-north-west of Llandefaelog Fach church (at SO 0260 3264). Named as such on Ordnance Survey mapping of 1817, and in Tredegar documents of the 1780s.

Llanfair Dyffryn Clwyd (Denbs): William Rees distinguished Llanfair as the *maerdref* that existed in the commote of Llanerch before the Norman Conquest. The evidential base for this view was not provided by Rees, and Llanfair (at SJ 135 554) is sufficiently close to Llysfasi to raise the possibility of some confusion between the two.

Llys (Flints): just beyond the southern boundary of Prestatyn is Llys Farm in the parish of Meliden (at SJ 0620 8148). We should note here that William Rees identified a *llys* at Prestatyn in his *Historical Atlas* (1967), though possibly there is some confusion with a Norman castle, held until 1167 by the Banastre family. As a landholding Llys Farm can be taken back to at least 1720 on the basis of an inventory entry in the National Library of Wales, but Spurgeon (1991, 168) has claimed it too as a former seat of the bishops of St Asaph, suggesting a higher status, and the Royal Commission were quite clear that this was the centre of a medieval manor belonging to the bishopric, and that the farm house incoproarted architectural details of the late 16th or early 17th century. The Commission (1912, 24, 57) claimed this as *Llys yr Esgob* reflecting the fact that the bishopric of St Asaph held much land in Meliden. They went further by suggesting that three field names in Diserth, near Diserth Hall – *Maes y llys ucha, Maes y llys canol* and *Maes y llys isa* – were linked to the Meliden *llys* by dint of the bishop holding land in this parish as well.

Llystynwynnan nr Llangadfan: now lost, so impossible to define a grid-ref for it, but very prominent in the extents of the Powys lordship in 1293/1309. Possibly a former llys site.

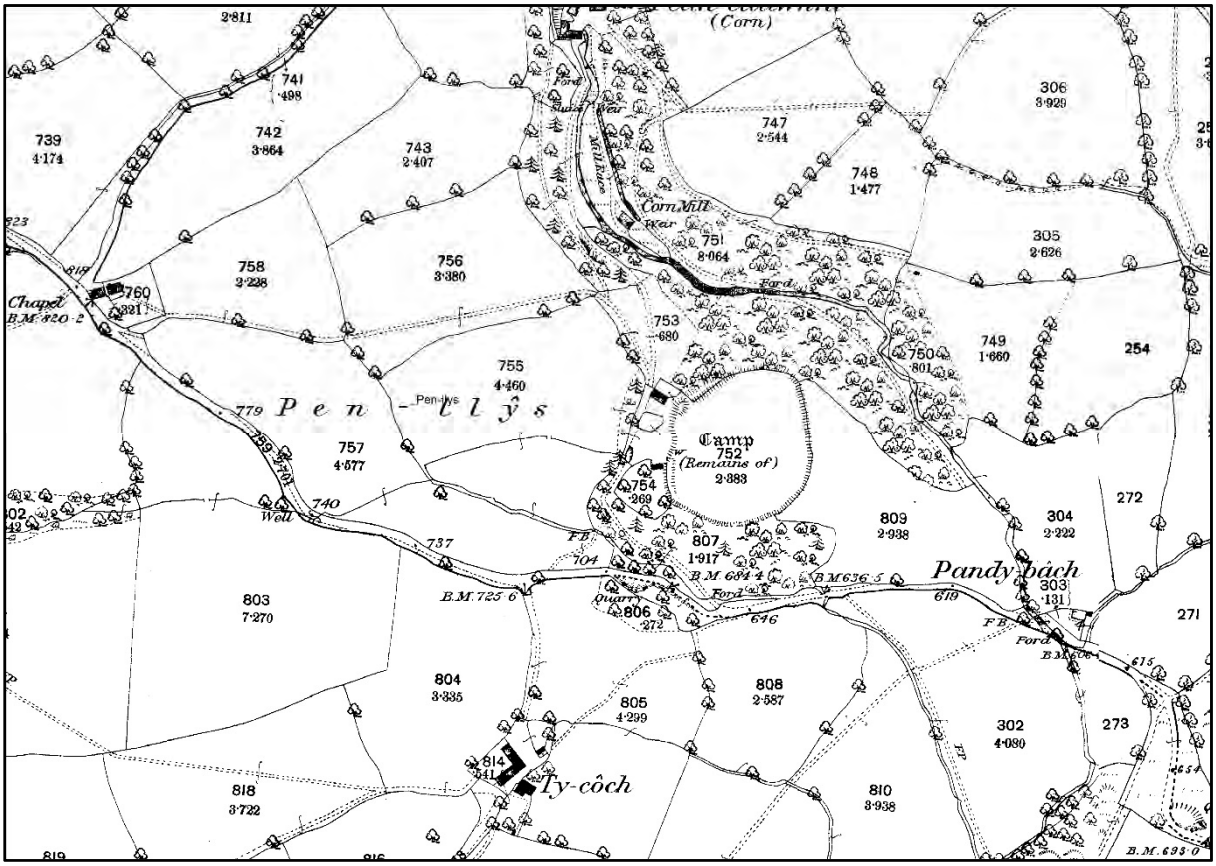
Llysyn (Monts): One of the three historical townships of Carno, lying in the Garno valley north-west of Caersws, Llysyn is assumed to be a derivative of *llys*. Jones (1972, 203) also pointed out that two field names within the township near the farm known as Plasau (SN 9650 9818), about 1.5km north of Carno church, were termed 'maes llysyn'.

Maerdy (Monts): On the boundary of the parishes of Llandysilio and Llandrinio where the higher ground meets the Severn plain is Maerdy Farm (SJ 2589 1679) which has undoubtedly influenced the naming of Maerdy Mill, Maerdy Bridge and others. Whether it also gave its name to Maerdy Brook or the reverse happened is less clear. Unclear is whether this was the farm that Palmer and Owen (1910, 101) alluded to in Llandrinio parish, for which a modus rather than a tithe was paid. They saw it as part of an early demesne holding and thus a likely indicator of a *maerdref*.

One kilometre to the north-north-west is Rhysnant Hall with its small motte in woodland. There is no documentary evidence to indicate that the *Rhys* element is a corruption of *llys*; it is just speculation on the part of the writer.

Maerdy names. Longley (2004, Fig 12.2) shows two *maerdy* names towards the mouth of Dyffryn Crawnon in Llangyndir parish in Breconshire. His map utilises the same symbol for both a *maerdy* name and for a Domesday hardwick but this was an area not under Norman control in 1086 so a latter attribution is unlikely. It has not been possible to track these *maerdy* names on the late 19th-century large-scale Ordnance Survey map coverage, unless there is a presumption that the name Pwll Court (SO 1479 1921) is of relevance.

Pen-llŷs (Monts): roughly equidistant between Meifod and Llanfihangel-yng-Ngwynfa to the north-west is the hill known as Pen-llŷs. The 1820 Ordnance Survey surveyor's plan of 1829 reveals that the name was formerly attributed to a cottage or small farm which, on a spur projecting below the hill, sheltered against the bank of an egg-shaped enclosure which is scheduled as Mont 230. We may suspect that the cottage name is a back-formation from the hill itself, so the place-name apart there is presently no other evidence for a *llys* here, and the geographical proximity of the name and enclosure could be nothing more than a coincidence. The tithe map indicates that in the mid-19th century the enclosure had the name *Cae pen y llys* while a lower lying field two hundred metres to the east was termed *Erw y llys.*



Pen-llys enclosure, Llanfihangel-yng-Ngwinfa (Monts). *Erw y llys* is field 272.
(Reproduced from the 1st edition 25" Ordnance Survey map of 1887)

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