

TY'N TWR, BETHESDA
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION (GAT 1173)

INITIAL REPORT NO. 96

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

TY'N TWR, BETHESDA
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION (GAT 1173)

prepared for CADW

by D. Hopewell

illustrations by H. F. Riley

March 1994

Gwynedd Archaeological Report No. 96

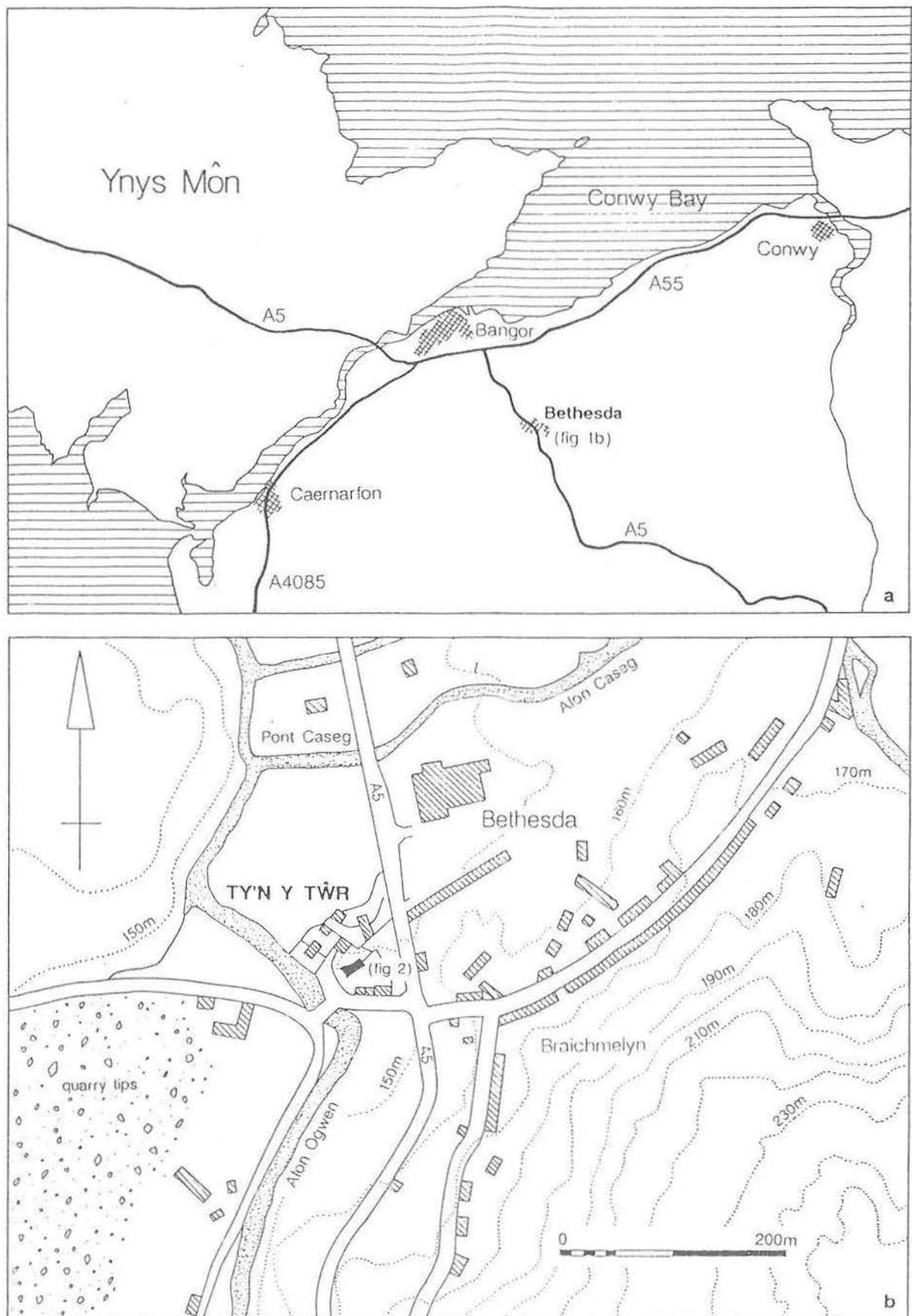
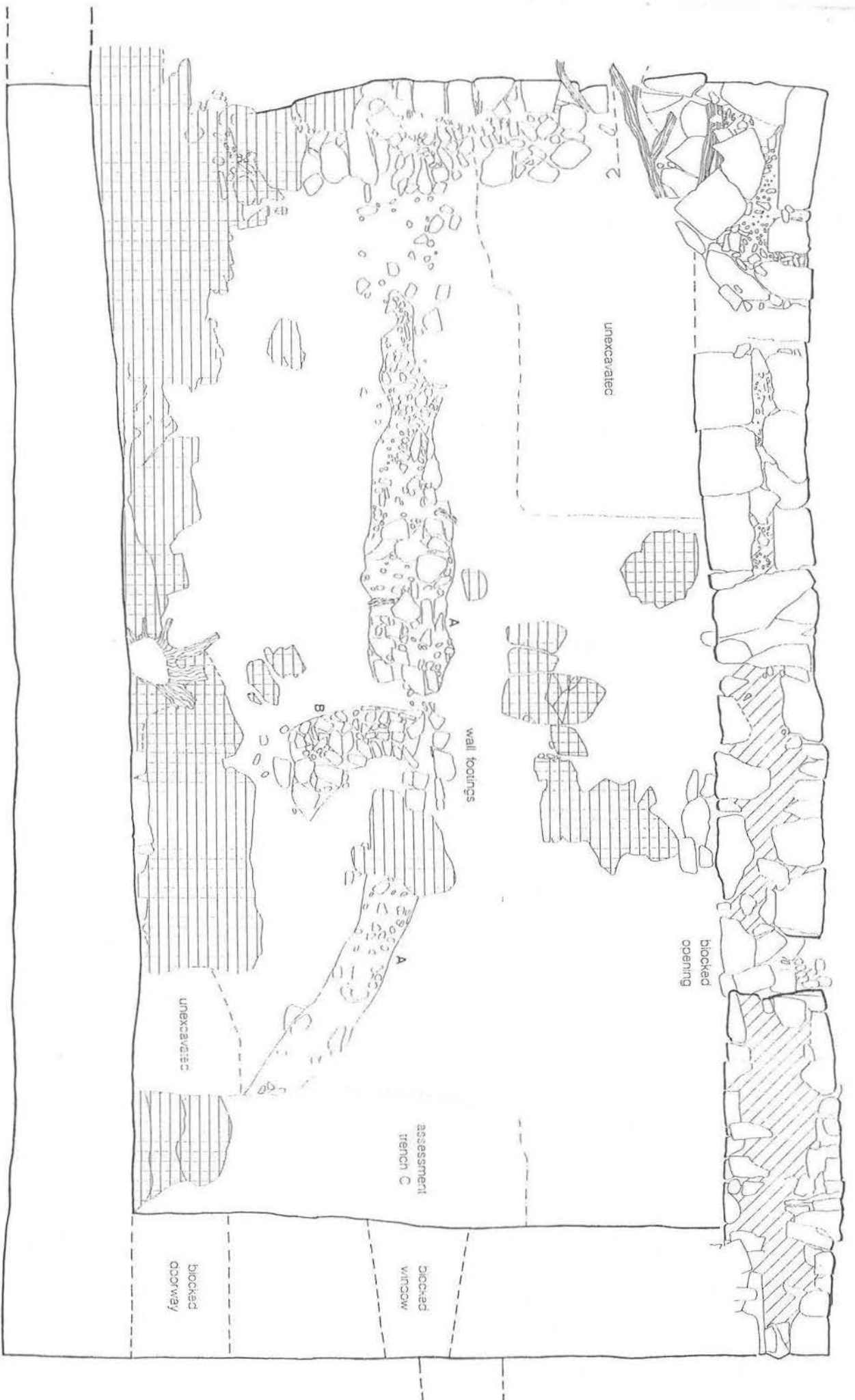


Fig. 1 Location maps.



Fig. 3 Total station survey of Ty'n Twr and surrounding area.



Bedrock



Rubble/wallcore



TY'N TWR: INTERIM REPORT

In January 1994, Gwynedd Archaeological Trust carried out the excavation of the remains of a building located on a rocky outcrop (NGR SH62616601) to the south-east of the medieval cruck framed house, Ty'n Twr, on the outskirts of Bethesda (Fig. 1). The excavation was prompted by the potential threat to the area posed by the impending sale of a parcel of land including the building and the grounds to the south and east of it. The work was funded by Cadw and was carried out by G.A.T. staff, members of Cymdeithas Archaeoleg Llandygai a Llanllechid, students of U.C.N.W. Bangor and interested members of the public under the supervision of the writer. An earlier assessment excavation, funded by the Welsh Office (Highways Directorate), identified a three phase building consisting of a rectangular structure at the north-west (phase I) and two phases of irregular walling at the south-west. Several sherds of 13th to 16th century pottery were recovered but no relationship was demonstrated between the medieval pottery and the building.

In December 1993 the site owners, Welsh Office (Highways Directorate), demolished the upper part of the north-west wall and northern corner of the building as the masonry was unsafe. The wall was reduced by a maximum of one metre, much of the demolished masonry was modern but between 0.2m and 0.8m of more substantial, earlier stonework was removed leaving the inner face standing to a height of around 0.6m.

EXCAVATION

An initial area of approximately 12m x 6m was excavated (Fig. 2), being the interior of the more substantial, rectangular portion of the building identified as phase I in the assessment. A 3.2 x 2m bank against the north-west wall, supporting two trees, was left unexcavated.

The whole area was covered by 0.2m to 0.4m of humic garden soil containing sherds of medieval and 19th and 20th century pottery. This was removed revealing several rock outcrops just below the modern ground surface. These were generally rounded and weathered but had in places been quarried away leaving angular and unweathered surfaces.

On completion of topsoil removal several context groups could be identified;

(i) A surface constructed from three reused roofing slates with typical dimensions of 0.90m x 0.63m x 0.01m. This context was only identified at the northern corner of the building. The levelling material, sealed by the slate slabs, produced medieval and 19th century pottery.

(ii) Two lengths of probable wall footings (A and B, Fig 2) consisting of loose small stones. Several sherds of 19th century pottery were recovered from these features.

(iii) A demolition horizon consisting of a series of mixed dumps containing broken slate, mortar, shells and sherds of medieval pottery. This horizon was confined to the north-east of the building and was beneath the slate surface and it's associated levelling.

(iv) A horizon of large (typically 0.4m in length) mixed stones dumped against the north-west wall and northern corner of the building. The stones gradually petered out to the south-east being replaced by redeposited dull orange and greyish brown subsoil. These contexts were located beneath and in a similar area to the demolition horizon.

(v) The presence of a wall at the south-west of the building, postulated in the assessment, was confirmed. The wall only survived at the north-west of the site and was bonded into the north western wall. It could also be seen to be in line with a straight joint in the south-eastern wall, which was built to a good face at this point, suggesting that the two walls had not been bonded together. The south-western wall was built on bedrock that had been quarried away to form a face level with the wall face. Uniform grey silty clay containing numerous slate chips abutted the wall and bedrock.

(vi) The south-western end of the building was characterised by the presence of greyish orange subsoil, becoming bright orange with depth, which yielded no finds and is probably natural.

The large rocky outcrop and part of the adjacent raised area to the south-east of the building were cleared of vegetation and humic topsoil. This revealed a modern concrete surface and 20th century garden debris.

STRUCTURAL REMAINS

The rectangular structure investigated in the excavation has internal dimensions of 6.0m x 10.6m. The walls survive to a maximum height of 2.5m and are up to 1.2m wide. They are constructed from roughly coursed, irregular, blocks of local greywacke and slate and were originally mortared, although mortar only survives below ground level at the present time.

The upper courses of the walls exhibit evidence of rebuilding as they contain a higher proportion of slate (including some reused roofing slates) than the lower courses, which are predominantly greywacke. The lower courses (c. 0.5m) of the north-western and north-eastern walls at the northern corner of the building are bonded together, whereas the upper courses of the north-western wall abut the north-eastern wall, again suggesting substantial rebuilding. The south-western and north-western walls are bonded together but the south-eastern wall shows evidence of abuttal at both ends. This wall is built directly onto the bedrock and is generally less well built than the rest of the structure, perhaps suggesting a later rebuild.

There is a central window and a blocked doorway in the standing gable-end and a further blocked opening in the north-western wall.

Further walling stands to the south-west of the rectangular building but this is generally narrower and less well built and is considered to be a later phase of building.

A total station plan was made of the area around the site (Fig.3). The top of the outcrop is about 5.0m above the fossil valley to the east. The sides of the outcrop appear to be steep but have been revetted at the north-east and south-west and terraced at the north-west with a variety of styles of mainly dry-stone walls. The majority of this walling is probably 19th century but the revetment at the north of the outcrop, built to a height of about 2m out of massive greywacke blocks may be earlier.

ARTIFACTS

The pottery assemblage recovered from the excavation contained material from the 13th to 20th centuries. The majority of the medieval pottery was recovered from the demolition layer at the north-east of the building. Initial examination of this pottery, which includes several sherds of Saintonge ware suggests, a 13th or 14th century date but a specialist report is pending. Several small sherds of Buckley and blue printed wares were recovered from the internal rubble wall footings suggesting a 19th century date.

DOCUMENTARY

The earliest known reference to a tower in this location is a conveyance dated November 1st 1458 (Penrhyn 226) held in the U.C.N.W. archive, which records the conveyance of a parcel of land;

'Iuxta messuagium vocatum le towre de Abercassek'
'Next to the messuage called the Tower of Abercaseg'

with an additional entry referring to the land being sold:

'Dol Carreg Arthen iuxta le tour Aberkasseg'

'Dol Carreg Arthen next to the tower Aberkasseg'

Dol Carreg Arthen can no longer be traced, but the above appears to be valuable confirmation of the antiquity of the tradition of a tower at 'Ty'n Twr'.

Research on the daily role of the household of Edward I currently being undertaken by Dr. R.F. Walker revealed that (PRO. E101/351/13) Edward visited Dolwyddelan on July 1st 1284, Gumbadolph on July 2nd, Abercaseg on July 4th and Caernarfon on July 5th. This implies that there was a structure of some importance present at Abercaseg at this time.

The Penrhyn survey of 1768 locates the parcel of land 'Ty'n Twr' as being the 133 acres bounded by Afon Caseg to the north and Aber Ogwen to the west and centered on the present hamlet of Ty'n Twr.

The site is mentioned by two antiquarian sources;

Pennant: *Tours in Wales*, vol II, 1783.

'I must not omit that the passage through this dreary bottom was once defended by a fort about a mile from the Benglog, called Tyn y Twr: but at present there is not a vestige to be seen'.

Clearly any structure was lost or much ruined at this time. The site is again mentioned in H.D. Hughes *Hynafiaethau Llandegai a Llanllechid* 1866;

'Y Twr; Safai hwn ar glogwyn o graig rhwng shop Mr D Thomas, Pont y Twr, a Thy'n Twr, ac yr oedd ychydig o hono yn aros oddeutu 80 neu 100 mlynedd yn ol, fel y dywed hen ysgrif sydd yn meddiant yr ysgrifenydd...'

'The Tower; It stands on an outcrop of rock between Mr D Thomas' shop, Pont y Twr and Tyn y Twr and some of it was still visible some 80 to 100 years ago according to a manuscript in the possession of the writer...'

A note in the margin of a copy of *Hynafiaethau Llandegai a Llanllechid* containing further notes by H.D. Hughes was discovered and translated by G. Caffell.

'At the site of the tower... a good sum was found it is said, of *arian daear* (Literally; money or silver from the ground) which raised the person who found them to very comfortable circumstances, but this is being kept from the crown and the land owner...'

The site is mentioned in the R.C.A.H.M.W. Inventory, although no mention is made of the present ruined building.

'The tower whose name survives in Pont y Twr and Ty'n Twr was perhaps a motte formed by revetting a boss of rock E. of the bridge (SH62616600). Possible traces of early wall can be detected on the N.E., but the ground is now too much built over for certainty.'

The site was revisited by the Commission in 1992, the ruined building was not thought to be agricultural and the thickness of the walls was considered to be suggestive of a medieval date.

The present ruined structure can be seen on the following maps;

Penrhyn mss 2188 of 1855 shows the outline of the building including the extended walling at the south-west.

The 1888 1:2500 OS map shows the outline of the structure along with several internal partitions, clearly indicating that the structure was ruined at this time.

CONCLUSIONS

The present building and its surroundings have been very disturbed. The wall footings and slate surface in the interior are probably associated with the internal divisions shown on the 1888 1:2500 O.S. map. The original building was clearly ruined at this point and it seems probable that the most recent rebuilding in the upper courses of the walls took place at this time, the structure subsequently being reused as a walled garden.

The two phases of building low in the northern corner of the structure suggest that this corner and much of the gable end have been built on earlier foundations. This phase of building includes the window and blocked doorway in the gable end.

The earliest phase of the building is represented by the lower courses of masonry on three sides of the building, the south-eastern wall being a possible rebuild. The ground in the north-eastern end of the building was levelled after the walls had been built. The bedrock is standing 0.3 to 0.4m above the upper horizon of the levelling so it must be assumed that much of the infill and the subsequent floor level has been lost. If it is assumed that the layer of debris containing 13th and 14th century pottery is the top of the surviving levelling, the building must have been constructed during or after the 14th century and possibly after the demolition of a nearby, earlier structure. However, the demolition layer could also be interpreted as a layer of disturbance associated with demolition of an earlier structure represented by the lower courses of the north-west wall and the foundations beneath the gable end. The high level of disturbance within the building and lack of dating evidence from the lower infill horizons do not allow any firm conclusions to be drawn. The dimensions of the building (6.0m x 10.6m) are consistent with those of a small medieval hall house, c.f. Barry Village 'House A' (South Glamorgan), and are not dissimilar to the dimensions of the medieval tower at Dinas Emrys (9.7m x 7.0m). No hearth was discovered but the disturbance in the interior of the building would have destroyed a central hearth and a lateral fireplace could have been lost during the rebuilding of the south-eastern wall.

Clearly few firm conclusions can be drawn from the excavation results but it does seem certain that there was considerable medieval activity on the site. The building that was investigated may not be the earliest building on the site but much of the area on the boss of rock is masked by later landscaping, leaving the site open to further investigation.

The documentary evidence is more conclusive. The place name and references from the 13th and 15th centuries clearly suggest that there was a tower present in the area, around the 13th century. The find of *arian daear* and the visit of Edward I suggest a high profile site. The exact position is less clear but a location on the boss of rock is most likely as this is the only defensible site associated with the name Ty'n Twr. In the 13th century the rock would have been more prominent, being bounded by the now mainly infilled fossil valley to the east and the river to the west (Information supplied by K. Morgan)

The combination of structural evidence, the circumstantial association of artifacts, documentary references and historical association clearly support the tradition that a tower or some building of considerable significance stood on the boss of rock at Abercaserg in the 13th century. Much of the area has been masked by 19th century garden features but the small area so far investigated has revealed valuable evidence of medieval occupation. It is the recommendation of the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust that serious consideration be given to the provision of statutory protection at this site.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to T. Roberts who brought much unpublished documentary evidence, from U.C.N.W. archives and elsewhere, to the attention of G.A.T. Acknowledgements are also due to Dr. R.F. Walker for allowing access to his current research on the daily role of the household of Edward I, to G. Caffell for her documentary work and assistance with the organisation of the excavation, to K. Morgan for his landscape analysis, to H. Riley who drew up the figures and to all the volunteers who worked on the excavation.