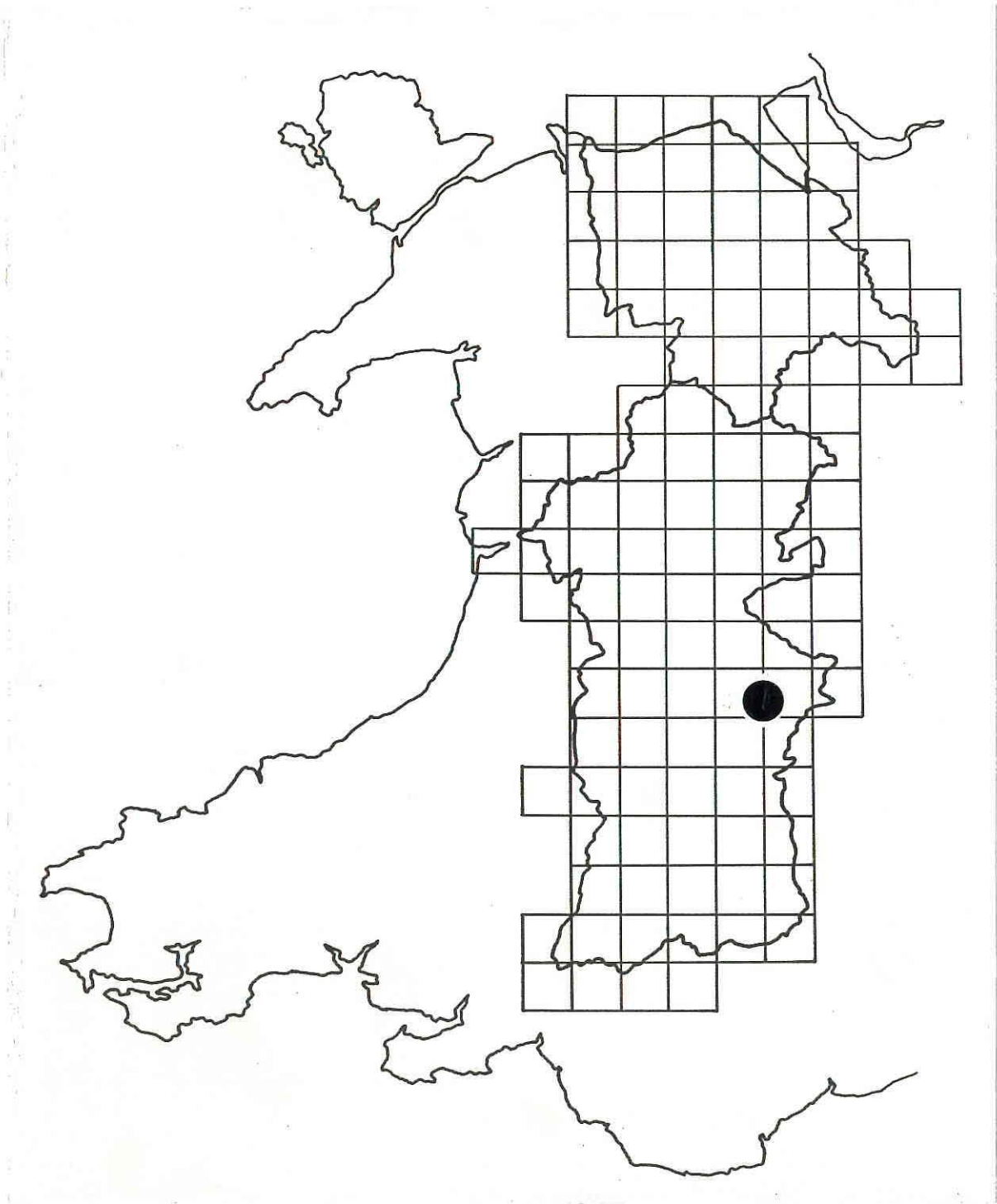


The Radnor Forest Survey



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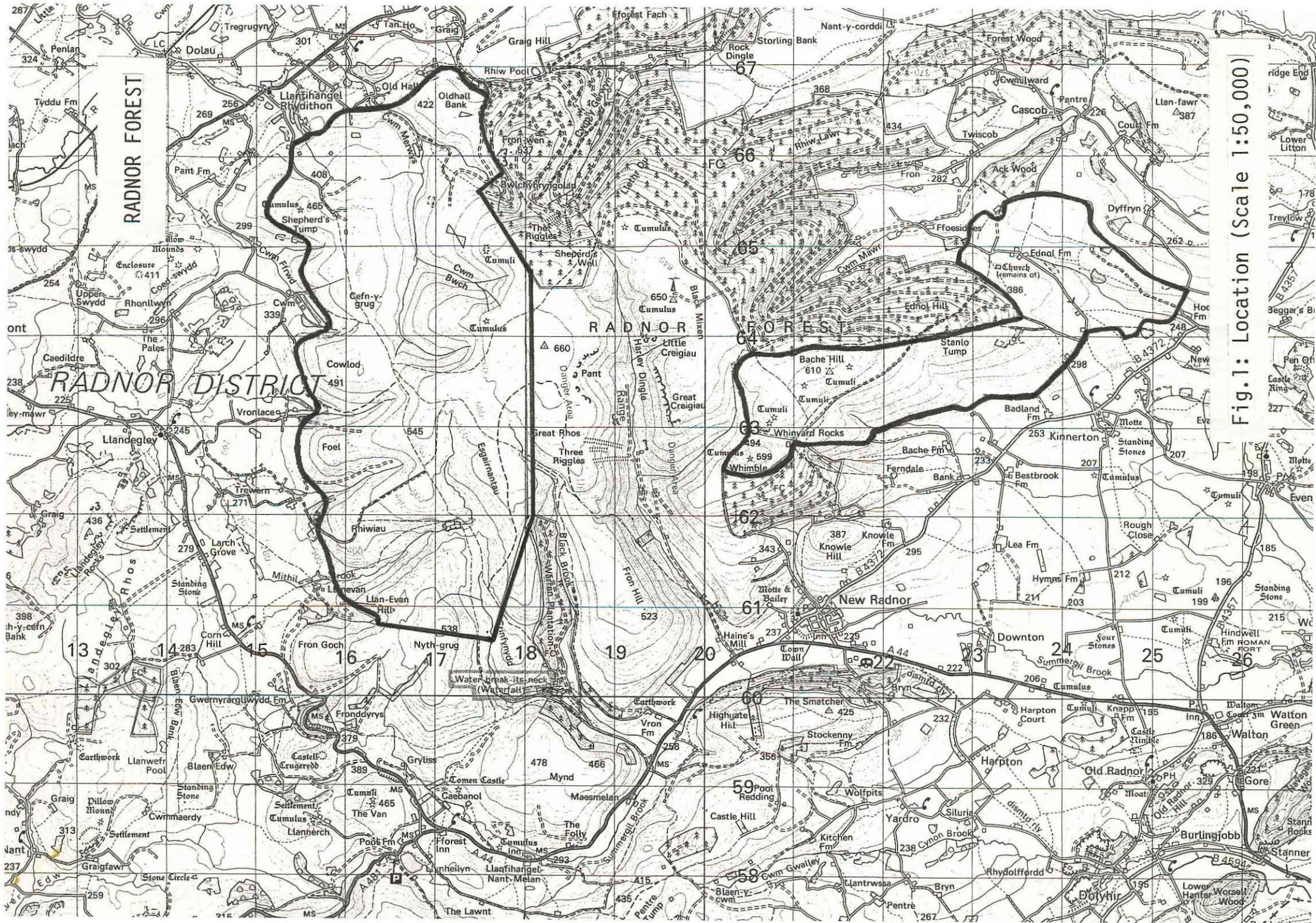


Fig.1: Location (Scale 1:50,000)

RADNOR FOREST SURVEY 1992: INTERIM REPORT

Background to the Survey

Two and a half years ago, the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust published a report on the uplands in their region which highlighted the inadequacy of the existing archaeological record and advocated a programme of rapid field surveys in specific upland zones, designed to assess the scale of the problem (CPAT 1989). Additionally, it was felt that such sample surveys might pin-point areas that would yield an academic return from further, more extensive, fieldwork and provide data on the effect of long-term modifications to the landscape resulting from changing patterns in farming and forestry. With 75% of Powys and 35% of Clwyd lying above the 244m (800ft) contour, it seemed unrealistic in the first instance to argue for a comprehensive survey of our uplands with the limited resources currently available.

The first sample survey resulting from these proposals - on the eastern flank of the Cambrian Mountains to the north-west of Newtown in Powys - was funded by Cadw/Welsh Historic Monuments and completed in the spring of 1990. An interim review was issued a few months later (Silvester 1990), and a full report dealing with specific aspects of that survey is currently being drafted. Further funding from Cadw permitted the Trust to embark on rapid survey in two more areas during the 1991/92 financial year: the Berwyn Mountains in south-west Clwyd (Silvester 1992) and Radnor Forest in central Powys.

Introduction

Radnor Forest is an historically distinct upland area first defined in 1461 as a bounden forest of 3000 acres. In 1564, it was further described as an area containing 2000 acres of 'wild, foggy and marish ground', 800 acres of 'lowe shrubs and bushe of small hazill and thornes' and '200 acres fit for pasturage' (Davies 1905,358).

At the present time, the name Radnor Forest is applied to a more extensive area which can be satisfactorily defined by the 350m contour line. Geographically, it is bounded along its western edge by an 8km stretch of steep slopes ascending some 150m from lowlands that are continuous with the Ithon valley. Similarly steep escarpments also define the southern, northern and north-eastern edges.

In the south, this geographical boundary crosses the watershed of the River Edw and the Summerhill Brook at Fforest Inn and then eastwards following the edge of the Walton basin. The northern, north-eastern and eastern edges are defined by Cwm Nant Wylan, the Llugwy valley and the Cascob valley respectively.

Radnor Forest consists of Silurian shales, siltstones and mudstones often horizontally bedded. The softness, friability and ease of cleavage of these beds has resulted in extensive weathering and erosion, forming deep V-shaped cwms and dingles whose steep sides often have gradients of 1 in 2 or less. This gives an impression of gently rolling plateaux and broad saddles between several rounded summits that are generally above 450m OD, the whole block being deeply dissected by the valleys.

The underlying geology supports soils that vary from peats and podzolised peaty loams at the higher altitudes to accumulations of clayey and sandy loams on the lower slopes and valley bottoms.

The Survey

Two transects, A and B, were specified for detailed fieldwork. Transect A, an area of approximately 5.75 sq km was about 4.5 km long extending along an east-west line from the ridge overlooking the Cascob valley at the eastern end to Ystol Bach Dingle in the west. The northern limit of this transect followed the boundary of the Forestry Commission plantations whilst the southern edge was generally defined by the bases of the escarpments and slopes above the Walton basin. All the land in this transect is privately owned by farms based in lowlands around New Radnor and Kinnerton. Approximately 20 ha of heather moorland to the north of Whinyard Rocks constituted a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Transect B followed a north-south line which was approximately 5.5 km long and 2.3 km wide. It extended from the foothills above Llanfair Rhydithon on the northern edge to a line at the southern end centred approximately on the triangulation station on the summit of Nyth Crug. The western limit of the area followed the lower edge of the escarpments along the Ithon lowlands whilst the boundary on the east partly followed the edge of a Forestry Commission plantation in the north and further south ridge crests from Cwm Bwch to Crinfynydd. Of the 1250 ha included, approximately 920 ha was privately owned by ten farms based on lower lying land to the west and north of the transect area. The remaining 330 ha, which included a part of Crinfynydd and the whole of Cowlod, was registered Common Land with rights of grazing apparently shared by five of the farms mentioned above.

That two separate survey areas were selected was due to factors of current land-use. Thus, Forestry Commission plantations to the north of Transect A and to the east of a part of Transect B were obvious factors in determining boundaries. An extensive area of land between the two transect areas, privately owned by an explosives testing company (I.M.I.(Kynoch) Ltd), was a factor effectively excluding fieldwork there.

Fieldwork was carried out in March 1992 by a basic team of two people supplemented by a third member on an occasional basis. It is estimated that approximately 38.5 man days were taken to complete the fieldwork element of the survey.

Fieldwork techniques developed during the two previous surveys (Silvester 1989; 1992) were used and modified to meet the different topography of Radnor Forest. Basically, coverage of the ground was accomplished by transects approximately 30m wide with variations introduced according to vegetation type and local topography. One factor influencing the intensity

of ground survey on the Berwyn range, for example, was the presence of extensive areas of deep peat and blanket bog (Silvester 1992), but such conditions did not feature to the same extent in Radnor Forest. Instead very steep escarpments with a vegetation cover of low-growing heather, bilberry and grass were frequently encountered. These areas could not be ignored for their archaeological content but they could for reasons of clear visibility be examined satisfactorily using wider transects of about 50m. This factor, together with easy access to the survey areas and a relatively high proportion of intensively cultivated land within them speeded up the rate of survey in direct contrast to the conditions encountered in, for example, the Berwyn survey.

Vertical, colour aerial photographs produced by Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography in 1990 were used in the field particularly for location purposes and for the recording of vegetation types. Together with the relevant 1:25000 Ordnance Survey Pathfinder maps and, when necessary, a compass, these proved to be quite adequate particularly as these were areas where clear reference points such as fence lines and well-defined natural features were abundant. However, because of the hazy weather conditions current on the day that the aerial photographs were taken, they proved to be of limited value for purposes of site identification.

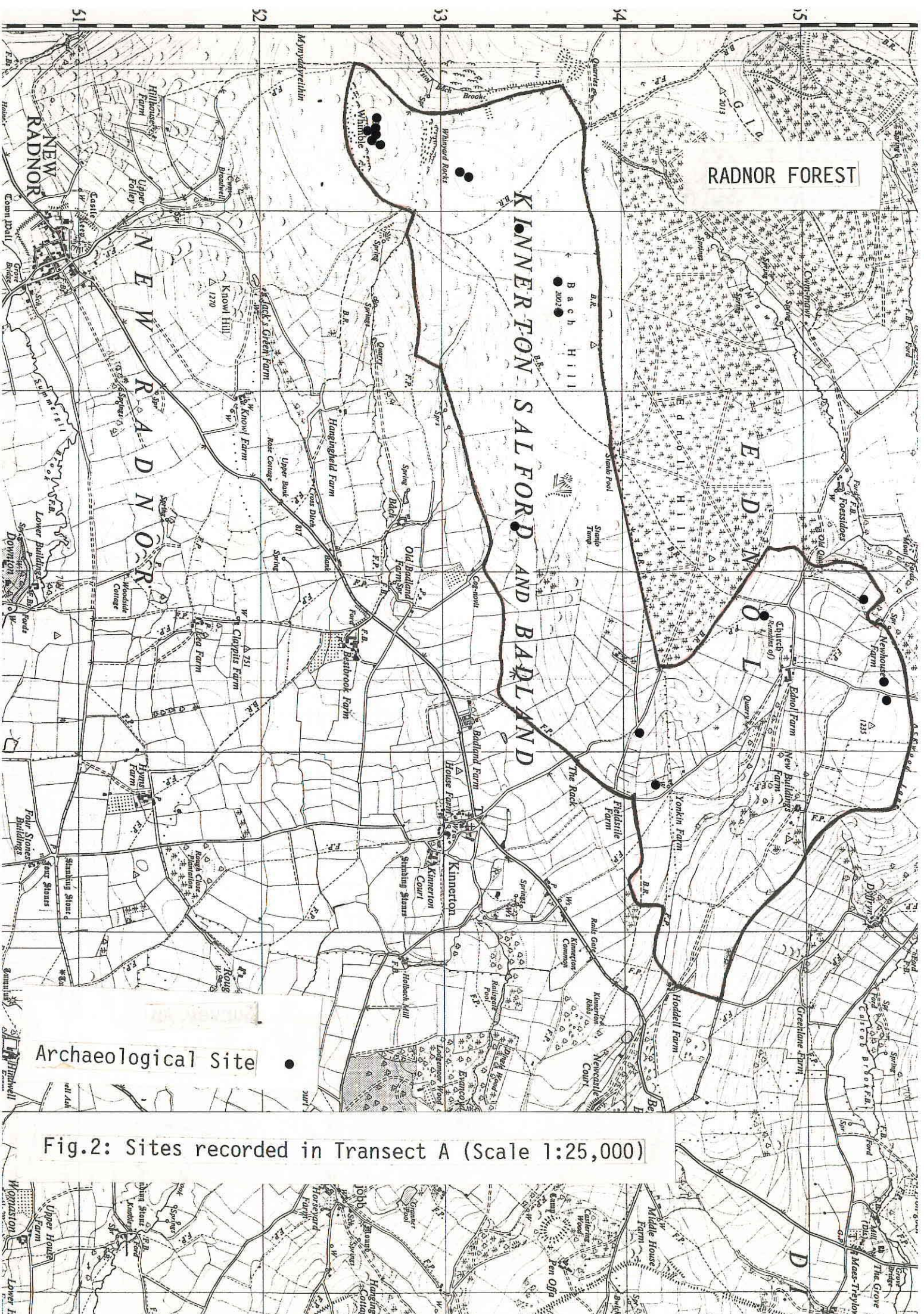
Archaeological sites located in the field were plotted on the relevant aerial photograph and recorded on standard A4 site visit forms. Where appropriate, sketch plans with overall measurements were appended. In the majority of cases one or more colour slides were taken of a particular feature, supplemented by more general photographs of the landscape from various points.

Fieldwork information together with annotated data from aerial photographs were transcribed on to A1 plastic drawing film at a scale of 1:10000.

Land Use and Vegetation

Basic similarities in past land-use have occurred in both transect areas and this is shown in the zonation of vegetation types which are themselves largely the product of the geology and topography of the Radnor Forest area.

Soils are freely draining and only a few areas found where the presence of rushes indicated impeded drainage. Up to relatively recent times cultivation and improvement was limited to the lower lying areas immediately adjacent to the bottom land. For example, in both transects the relative proportions of cultivated/improved to unimproved land is virtually the same in both the 1891 and the 1963 editions of the O.S. sheets. In Transect A this accounted for approximately 63% of the total area whilst in transect B such land of long-standing agricultural use accounted for only approximately 4% of the total area. In more recent times improved access and cultivation techniques have allowed significant inroads to be made into the conversion of heathland to pasture. Thus, in Transect A 80% of the total area is now either grassland or arable whilst in Transect B approximately 40% of the total area is in this class. In both areas, only zones of relatively deep peat, inaccessible areas and common land remain unimproved and retain the natural moorland vegetation consisting of



RADNOR FOREST

KINNERSTON Salford and Badland

NEW RADNOR

NEW RADNOR

EDMUND HILL

Archaeological Site

Fig.2: Sites recorded in Transect A (Scale 1:25,000)



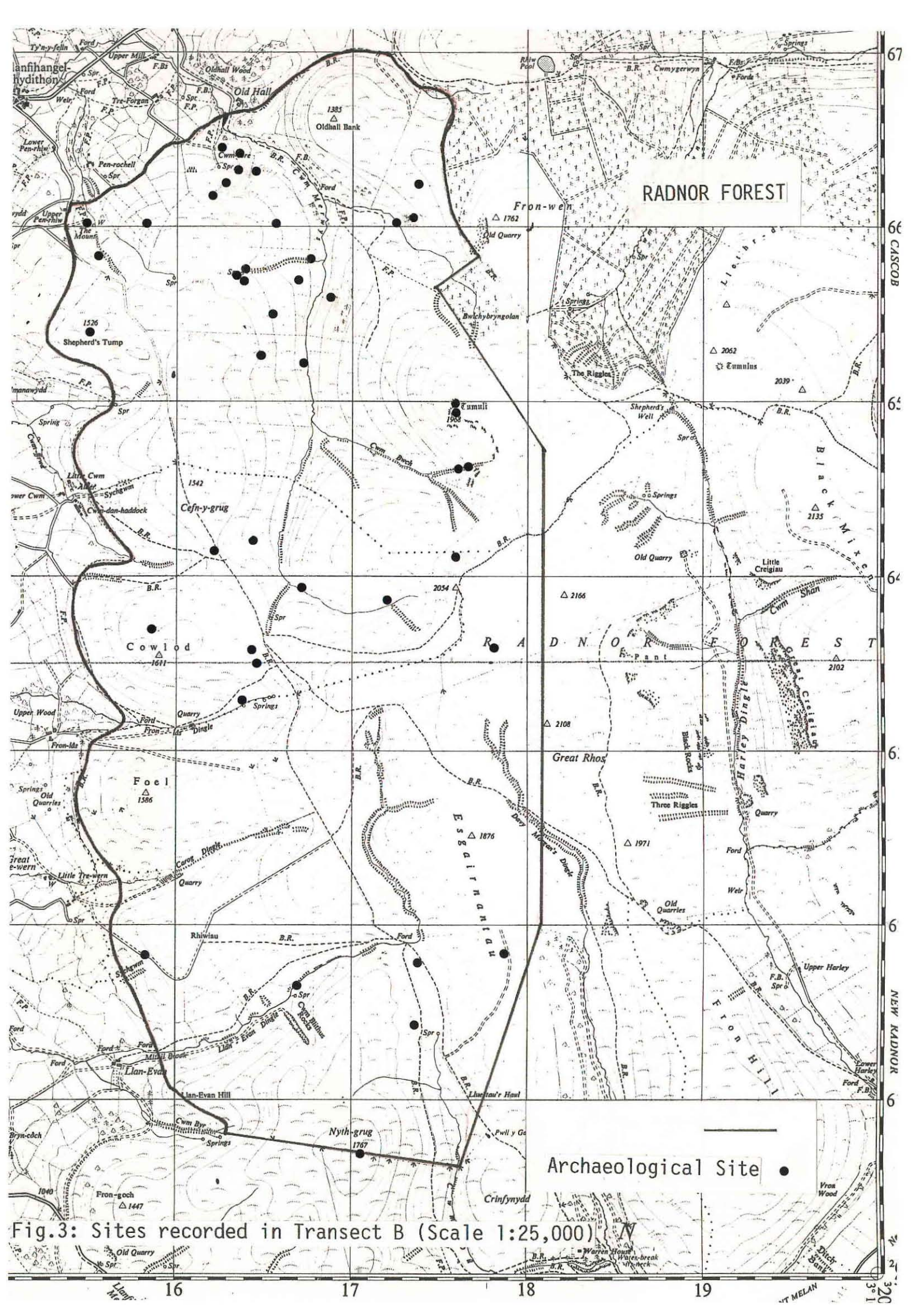


Fig.3: Sites recorded in Transect B (Scale 1:25,000)

heather, bilberry and natural grass species in proportions that vary according to aspect, soil type and other factors. Woodland accounts for less than 2% of the total area although at the time of survey approximately 60 ha of heather moorland on Esgairnantau and Lluestau'r Haul was being prepared for conifer plantation.

One aspect of past land-use that would have affected the archaeology of large areas of Radnor Forest, particularly in some of the area examined in Transect B, is its intensive use as a military training ground during the Second World War. Evidence of this on the ground is still commonplace with mortar emplacements, infantry foxholes and shell blast holes visible. Farmers locally still report the frequency with which mortar shells in particular are ploughed up and during the course of the survey a single unexploded mortar shell (subsequently reported and disposed of) was discovered.

Quarrying, generally on a small-scale, has been widespread. The sedimentary rocks cleave readily and usefully into fragments that could be utilised for both structural and roofing purposes. Of particular note are the quarry-scoops found on the summit of Whimble which cover an area of approximately 0.4 ha and which are accompanied by trackways leading to them. It has not proved possible to date these particular quarries other than to say that they are later than a presumed Bronze Age barrow (PRN 4464) largely destroyed by the quarrying activity.

Archaeology and Landscape

A total of 61 sites were recorded in the two transects, ranging from isolated Bronze Age cairns to ruinous farmsteads of recent date. Also included were two areas of peat cutting in Transect B.

Of particular interest were several hut platforms all of which were situated in grassland areas but which had survived the effects of cultivation, some to a remarkable degree.

Prehistoric Activity

Transect A Within this area there were several previously recorded cairns or barrows of presumed Bronze Age date, all of which were in summit or ridge-crest positions at altitudes of around 600m OD. Two ring cairns (PRN 1996, 4464) had previously been recorded on the summit of Whimble, although the most westerly of the two is of uncertain authenticity owing to extensive later quarrying activity. Additionally however, a curvilinear bank (PRN 6831; 6874) cut by a later trackway and a second discontinuous circular bank (PRN 6875) were found. Both these features were possibly broadly contemporary with the cairns although, clearly, this could not be substantiated by fieldwork alone. Although it seems most likely that the trackway was associated with the quarrying activity and not with the curvilinear bank a direct association, now obscure, cannot be precluded. The function of the bank is uncertain and it can only be suggested that it may represent the marker bank of an unfinished defensive earthwork.

Apart from these and five other summit or ridge-crest burial monuments (PRN 1991; 1992; 1994; 1995; 2184) previously recorded, no other features that

could be classed as being of prehistoric origin were discovered, although a scatter of flint objects (PRN 6835; 6836), including a leaf-shaped arrowhead, were found on cultivated ground at Newhouse Farm on a ridge-crest position at a lower altitude. These were not associated with any visible settlement or other feature in the vicinity.

Transect B The distribution of sites of probable prehistoric origin was similar to that found in Transect A, all being located at high altitudes and in summit or ridge-crest positions. Again, the six sites that were recorded were burial monuments, either cairns or barrows. Of these, four were previously known (PRN 1638; 994; 995; 1642) and two new examples were found (PRN 6832; 6873).

Medieval and Post-Medieval Activity

Transect A Five sites, all situated at low altitudes were recorded in the survey of this area which with some degree of certainty could be ascribed to these periods. One of these, Ednol Chapel (PRN 1077), now in a ruinous condition, is of medieval origin whilst the others (PRN 6837; 6839; 6840 and 6841) are of a more uncertain date.

No structures or earthworks other than several trackways occurred at an altitude above 350m OD.

Transect B Until the 1950s, very little - some 4% - of the western side of Radnor Forest was cultivated although the enclosure of 4420 acres by fences did proceed a century earlier (Watkins 1934,25; Mostyn 1948,71). Even so, there was settlement of the heathland mainly towards the northern end of the transect area in Cwm Merwys. Here, a total of 12 hut platforms (PRN 6844-6849; 6851-6854; 6858; 6859), either single or double, and each one cut into the hill-slope formed a distinct group. All but one of them were on the north-facing slopes and close to a source of water, either a spring or a stream. Altitudes ranged from 320 - 430m OD and all of them were either in recently improved ground or on land that was clearly pasture of long standing. Eight of the platform sites were associated with enclosures, field banks or terraces, suggesting a degree of permanence and perhaps evolution from seasonal hafotydd. It is difficult to ascribe a date to this type of feature but there is every possibility that some, if not all of them, have their origins in the medieval period. Generally in isolated positions, and again difficult to date were other smaller structures which might be regarded as temporary shelters or shepherds' huts.

In comparison, the southern half of this transect contains very few habitation sites. A hut platform at the head of Fron-las Dingle (PAR 6870) and an isolated site consisting of two platforms and an enclosure (PRN 6861) on heather moorland on Great Rhos were the only examples recorded. The placename Lluestau'r Haul - an approximate translation of which is 'Shelters in the Sun' - might, for example, have been expected to have yielded several sites of summer habitation. However, none were found despite the southerly aspect, good shelter, and deep soils.

Also possibly dating to the medieval period are the three linear dykes recorded in the transect. Two of them occupied ridge-top positions (PAR 993; 6862) whilst a third (PAR 6871) may have originally risen from the head of Fronlas Dingle on to the saddle above it. A fourth dyke (SO 188651) is sited near Shepherd's Well, outside the transect and occupying another ridge-top position. As a group it is difficult to regard these as anything other than defining a distinct territory, possibly the 3000 acre extent of the original Radnor Forest. The 1461 description includes some reference points which are useful in this respect. On the western edge, Cume Colloyd (which may be equated with Cowlod) and Llaneyan may form limits, and Tomeny-castell (SO17275891) is referred to on the southern edge. Otherwise the placenames mentioned are either obscure or had fallen into disuse before the first useful map of the area was made by the Ordnance Surveyor in 1817. Nevertheless, if these three placenames are used together with the positions of the dykes, the area included amounts to approximately 3000 acres.

Historically, turbarry in the Radnor Forest has been practised since Elizabethan times and extended at least until 1864 when it was noted (Watkins 1934,24). that peat for the parish of Llanfair Rhydithon was extracted from the Mawn Pits, possibly the Old Mawn Pits referred to on the Ordnance Surveyor's drawings of 1817 and centred approximately on SO168637. In this area there is evidence of peat cutting together with several trackways leading from the turbarries. A similar area of peat cutting was seen on the ridge to the NE of Cwm Bach (SO176650) again associated with trackways.

Within the transect area there were no occupied farmhouses, the owners of land farming from bases in the lowlands immediately to the north and west. A single ruined farmstead known as The Mount (PAR 6865) was situated at the extreme northern edge of the area, but otherwise there was no indication that the area had been settled other than by the hafodydd and hut platform sites. Again, field boundaries, apart from those bounding small-scale enclosures associated with the platform sites and hafodydd, were clearly of post-enclosure date and associated with ownership from outside the area.

Conclusions

Some general observations can be made on the survey of the two areas. Undoubtedly where pasture improvement has taken place much of the archaeology has been erased from the landscape. For instance, two cairns noted on the Ordnance Survey sketch maps of 1816, one on Llanevan Hill (SO163610) and the second on Stanlo Tump (SO22706385), cannot now be traced. Both are in areas of improvement and additionally the natural summit of Stanlo Tump has been quarried. Similarly, the north-facing slopes of Cwm Merwys have been entirely improved, mainly in recent times and it is probable that further phases of improvement have reduced the platform sites on these slopes to an unrecognisable form. Destruction of such sites may well have already occurred on the lower more accessible slopes where cultivation has been most intense over the years and stock levels have been highest year round. Here, several hollows and ridges occur which have to be regarded as being probably natural. They may, however, be former hut-platforms and enclosure banks now almost completely eroded and infilled.

A second factor of destruction not encountered in previous upland surveys carried out by the Trust is that resulting from military activity. In Radnor Forest this seems to have been concentrated within and around Transect B. The extent of activity was widespread and, from local information gained during the course of the survey, was most intense during the period 1943-45. It is, of course, impossible to estimate the scale of destruction except in the most general terms but it is most certainly a factor that clouds any resolution about site distribution in the area. Even so, a general estimate can be made of the numbers of sites at different altitudes. There are many below 430m OD, but above this level habitation sites give way to other classes of archaeological site such as prehistoric burial monuments and dykes which probably define territorial areas.

Acknowledgements

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