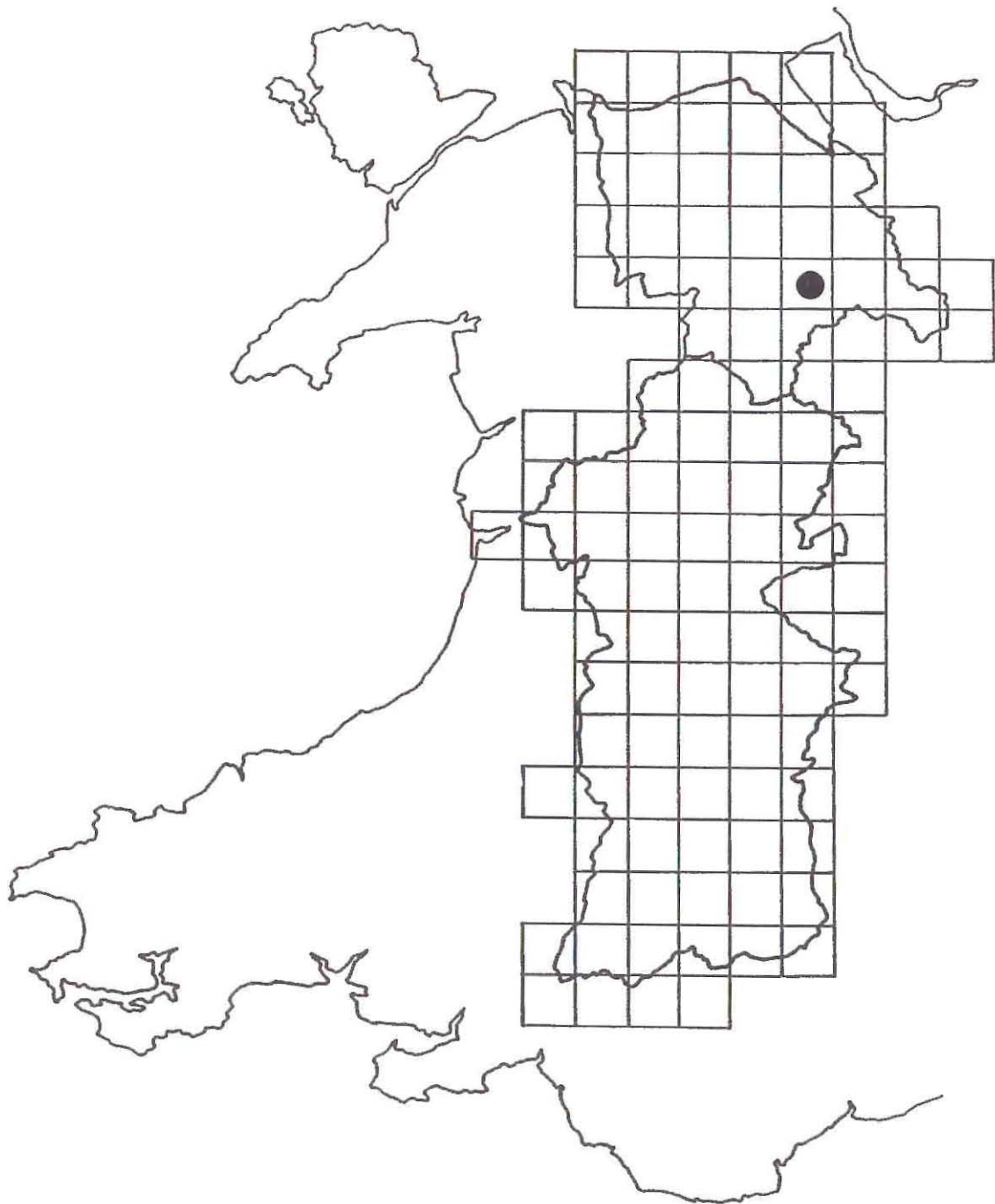


Ruabon Mountain Uplands

FIELD SURVEY



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RUABON MOUNTAIN FIELD SURVEY 1994/95

1 Introduction

1.1 The area which for the purposes of this field survey and its accompanying report, has been given the collective title of Ruabon Mountain is composed of the easternmost upland moors lying to the west and south-west of the town of Wrexham in Clwyd. Individually, these moors include Cyrn-y-Brain, Esclusham Mountain, Ruabon Mountain, and Eglwyseg Mountain, and are centred at SJ 2545).

1.2 The upland block overlooks the Cheshire/Shropshire Plain, which assures expansive views to the east and north-east. The area is perhaps best known for its topographical features; in particular, the spectacular limestone escarpment of Eglwyseg forms the south-western boundary of the survey area and towers over the deep cut of the Dee Valley, while to the west, the Horseshoe Pass at 417m OD separates Cyrn-y-Brain from the adjacent Llantysilio Mountain.

2 The Survey Area

2.1 The survey of a sample area of the Ruabon Mountain region formed part of CPAT's short-term strategy to assess the nature and density of the archaeological resource in twelve distinct upland blocks of Clwyd and Powys (see Dorling et al 1989). Previous surveys have examined the Carno/Dwyrhiw uplands in Montgomeryshire, Radnor Forest, Y Berwyn, Mynydd Hiraethog, the uplands around Lake Vyrnwy, and those around the Elan Valley; and a series of interim reports have appeared since 1990 describing the results of these programmes of fieldwork.

2.2 Funding for the survey was provided by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales (RCAHMW) under the Uplands Initiative scheme, the current emphasis of which is to identify the archaeology of sample areas in the Welsh uplands through rapid field survey.

2.3 A roughly L-shaped block of moorland measuring approximately 7km north/south by 5.5km east/west overall was defined in the original project proposal, within which it was determined to survey 14 square kilometres (Fig 1). The southern arm mirrored the limestone escarpment of Eglwyseg as far as Craig y Forwyn. At this point an arm diverged to the west to incorporate Cyrn-y-Brain, the highest point of the survey area at 565m OD. The area where the two arms met covered the north and east facing slopes of Ruabon and Esclusham Mountains, from Mountain Lodge in the south, as far as the southern boundary of Park Farm in the north.

2.4 The vegetation of these moorlands was a significant factor which influenced the area ultimately chosen for survey; it was evident that the height of the heather cover - up to 1m - in certain areas was too great to permit satisfactory field survey. A significant proportion of less well-defined sites would undoubtedly have escaped recognition, leading to an

unquantifiable bias in the results. Despite avoidance of the worst vegetation it was still necessary to traverse large areas of fairly deep heather, and this should be taken into account when the results of the survey are evaluated. A valuable illustration of this factor occurs in the case of two boundaries, PRNs 19615 and 19617, which were easily detected in areas denuded of heather, but become untraceable once they entered the adjoining heather covered areas.

3 Geographical Background

3.1 The terrain in the area is dominated by the main mountain mass, which rises to a maximum elevation of 565m OD on Cynr-y-Brain. The east facing slope of the mountain is long and uniform, little affected by fluvial action. However, to the west, the terrain is entirely different, with deep, steep-sided stream and river valleys dissecting the higher blocks of upland.

3.2 The most abundant rock type encountered in the area is Carboniferous Limestone, incorporating the normal features of limestone geology, such as sink holes and limestone pavements. Overlying the limestone is Cefn-y-Fedw sandstone, also of the Carboniferous period. The change in terrain to the west is marked by a corresponding change in the underlying geology, which is represented by Palaeozoic slate, mudstone and siltstone deposits, upon which the limestone rests unconformably. Rock outcrops are common in the limestone country, but rare elsewhere.

3.3 In some circumstances the soils are particular to the underlying rock type. This is demonstrably the case for the coarse loamy and peaty soils belonging to the Anglezarke Soil Association which are derived from the sandstone, and the shallow loamy soils of the Wetton Soil Association derived from the limestone. In general, however, the area is covered by more common loamy and peaty soils of the Manod, Hafren and Wilcocks 1 Soil Associations, with a small amount of deep peat soil belonging to the Crowdy 1 Soil Association on the highest ground (Rudeforth et al 1984).

4 Land Use

4.1 The area of the survey witnesses only a small amount of agricultural activity in the form of sheep grazing on land of poor quality. Land improvement has taken place on the periphery, but has not encroached onto the moors to any great degree. Instead, sporting interests dominate the management of this block of grouse moor. The result is that much of the ground is covered by a thick carpet of heather, relieved in places by small areas of juncus, bracken and grassland. Patches of older heather are burnt off annually, but the scale of this activity is not sufficiently large to facilitate our methods of survey.

5 The Survey: Methodology

5.1 It was not possible to commence the field survey in the first six months of 1994/95 because of the game-bird breeding season. Thus, fieldwork was carried out intermittently between October 1994 and the end of March 1995. The team generally consisted of two people, although on occasions three-person teams were employed.

5.2 Fieldwork techniques adopted were generally those developed during previous upland surveys carried out by CPAT. Except in areas which warranted less intensive examination, the ground was covered at 30m-intervals with the transect alignments determined by recognisable natural or artificial features, or failing that, by means of compass bearings. The extreme height of the heather cover experienced throughout much of the survey area has been referred to above. In many cases the owner's agents had mown parallel strips through the heather and these were used for transect alignment wherever possible.

5.3 Vertical, colour aerial photography produced by Geonex at a scale of 1:10,000 in 1992/3 was used in the field for location purposes, for the recording of vegetation types, for the planning of transect lines and for identifying archaeological features. In combination with a compass, the aerial photography proved to be perfectly adequate for the task required.

5.4 Archaeological features located on the ground were plotted on the relevant aerial photograph, details of their structure, siting, surrounding vegetation type, and other relevant data were then recorded on standardised site visit forms, to which sketch plans were appended wherever appropriate. The information from the site visit forms was subsequently transferred onto a computerised database for incorporation in the Clwyd Sites and Monuments Record. Photographic recording of a particular feature took the form of one or more colour slides, and, in addition, slides were taken of more general landscape scenes in order to illustrate topographical features encountered in the survey area. The locations of the features identified were transcribed from the aerial photographs onto sheets of A1 plastic drawing film at a scale of 1:10,000, one sheet mapping the archaeological and landscape features, the second depicting the current vegetation by means of colour conventions.

5.5 Limitations on fieldwork consisted not only of the vegetation, but also the presence of old mine workings. Certain areas were avoided because of the possibility of unrecognised shafts and the dangers that these posed. In combination these factors were responsible for the irregularly shaped area of survey (Fig 2). In all, 14.11 square kilometres were examined.

6 Archaeology and Landscape

6.1 A total of 136 archaeological features or groups of features were recorded during the survey (Fig 2). Twenty-eight (21%) of these had been previously identified, giving a ratio of about 1:4 for known to unknown sites.

6.2 These figures need to be qualified, however. They include a substantial number of relatively modern features, such as shooting butts and marker cairns and stones. Important to an overall appreciation of the moorland landscape, they will not be perceived to be of such significance to the current generation of archaeologists and landscape historians as say prehistoric cairns. This viewpoint will change as time progresses.

6.3 Post-medieval Five post-medieval farms were recorded, one of which was a converted 19th-century hunting lodge (PRN 2544) previously recorded, while the ruined Fron Lwyd (PRN 19664) may have begun as a late medieval/sub-medieval hall-house subsequently extended at least twice.

6.4 At least nine sites relate to stock maintenance. Sheep folds and shelters are common enough in most upland regions of Wales and the examples recorded on Ruabon Mountain are reasonably typical of the general types. One, however, is anomalous. PRN 19603 is named as a sheepfold on the earliest Ordnance Survey maps, but the ground remains consist of a regular rectangular structure with mortared walls, perhaps too well constructed to be a fold. A short distance to the south are the ruins of Sir Watkin's Tower surmounting a prehistoric cairn (PRN 101129), and some sort of 'lodge' or 'summer house' associated with the former folly seems distinctly possible. Interestingly, PRN 19603 could also have been built upon an earlier cairn.

6.5 Traces of earlier peat-cutting were extensive on Cynr-y-Brain suggesting exploitation by the farms and other dwellings in the valleys to the north and south; hollow sled-ways were common, pitching down the hillsides, though other features such as platforms and mounds sometimes associated with this subsistence industry were largely absent. Ruabon and Esclusham Mountains showed fewer signs of exploitation, but dense heather in many places hindered recognition.

6.6 Mining was widespread on these hills (Frost 1994). Some shafts are depicted on modern Ordnance Survey maps, many others and in particular the smaller ones are not. Fig 3 attempts to show the location of shafts noted during the survey. These were not recorded individually, and the plan offers only a general guide: it cannot be claimed as a comprehensive depiction of the extent of mining here.

6.7 Several boundary stones were noted, the majority if not all incised with the letters P U. Initially, these were recorded individually (e.g. PRNs 19602 and 19661, and previous recordings: PRNs 101132 and 101748), but in all 18 were encountered and because of their uniformity later discoveries were simply noted on the record maps.

6.8 Individually or collectively, 32 shooting butts were recorded, a few of them still actively used as evidenced by the presence of wooden pallets. Their locations are mapped on Fig.4. Some variation in their morphology is apparent and while most appear to be primarily of turf, some appear as stone-lined depressions (e.g PRNs 19619-19624).

6.9 Other, miscellaneous, post medieval and recent features include a rain gauge (PRN 19616), a brick and concrete

observation post with bunkers (PRN 19699) from the Second World War, several leats (PRNs 19706; 19662 and 19668) the last of these appearing to relate to Fron Lwyd (see above para 6.3), the remnants of a triangulation station (PRN 19674), rubble from which had been utilised in the construction of a recumbent cross (PRN 19673), three probable limekilns (PRN 19677, 19678 and 19686) .

6.10 Medieval A few hafotai, potentially of medieval or early post-medieval date, were encountered during the survey. In improved pasture beside the ruins of the farmhouse known as Cae'r Hafod (PRN 19610) are the eroded remnants of enclosure boundaries, platforms and clearance cairns (PRN 19609). These together with the suggestive farm name, on high ground above a valley, points to a seasonally occupied site. A small rectangular embanked feature with rounded corners (PRN 19607) is typical of a number of fairly diverse sites in these uplands. Others include PRNs 19642, 19667 and 19676.

6.11 Prehistoric A broad shelf of rough grazing land below Cynr y Brain is traversed by three cross dykes (PRNs 19604, 19605 and 19606), 71m, 47m and 42m long respectively, and 180m and 90m apart. 'Inside' these dykes there are only a couple of hafod-like features (PRNs 19607 and 19667) neither of which need be contemporary. Indeed there is no direct dating evidence for the dykes and little comparable evidence from the region. These could be prehistoric, perhaps Bronze Age (cf cross-ridge dykes in England), but at present there is nothing to signal such a date period here.

6.12 Field and enclosure, putatively of prehistoric origin, have been noted from time to time on the limestone uplands of north Wales (e.g. above Minera quarry on the northern lip of Esclusham Mountain, and on Halkyn Mountain). These are perhaps more widespread than the sporadic records suggest. PRN 19617 is a length of stone bank, 150m long, on Minera Mountain; PRN 19631 is approximately 140m long on the western edge of Eglwyseg Mountain. Others include PRNs 19635 and 19641. These boundaries tend to be set on the edges of the massif, are slight in form and are usually revealed because of optimum ground conditions: PRN 19617 shows for instance because the local vegetation has been inhibited by detritus from the adjacent lead mines.

6.13 A significant number of Bronze Age cairns and barrows, nearly 20 in number, were already known from the survey area. One major cairn (PRN 19669), 17m diameter and 1.8m high, and several smaller ones (eg PRN 19705: 9.2m diameter and 0.4m high) have been added to the list, together with a number of small mounds resulting from stone clearance. It cannot be established how many of these might be associated with enclosures and boundaries of the type detailed in the previous paragraphs.

7 Conclusions

7.1 The existing record that pre-dated the survey was weighted heavily in favour of a combination of prehistoric funerary monuments and early modern mining sites. In this respect alone the survey has been justifying in providing a more balanced view of the uplands to the north of the Dee Valley.

7.2 A small number of newly identified sites, together with some previously recognised appear to be of sufficient importance to warrant statutory protection. These will be recommended to Cadw/Welsh Historic Monuments for scheduling in due course.

8 Acknowledgements

CPAT would like to thank the following landowners for their permission to carry out the survey on their property:-

The Wynnstay Estate, Plas-yn-Cefn, St Asaph, in particular the estate manager, Captain T. Bell; and also the local gamekeeper Mr Ian McNeish for useful information and advice

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captions/contracts disk/07 March 1994

Fig 1 Location of Ruabon Mountain Area

Fig 2 Archaeological Sites within Survey Area Scale 1:25,000

Fig 3 Known Mine Shafts within Survey Area Scale 1:25,000

Fig 4 Shooting Butts within Survey Area Scale 1:25,000

