

THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

Lake Vyrnwy Uplands Survey (IV)
FIELD SURVEY



CPAT Report No 416

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March 2001

Report for Severn Trent Water Ltd

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CPAT Report Record

Report and status

CPAT Report Title	Lake Vyrnwy Uplands Survey (IV)		
CPAT Project Name	Vyrnwy survey 2001		
CPAT Project No 906			CPAT Report No 416
Confidential (yes/no)			draft/final

Internal control

	name	signature	date
prepared by	R. HANKINSON		07/03/01
checked by	R.J. SILVESTER		07/03/01
approved by	R.J. SILVESTER		07/03/01

Revisions

no	date	made by	checked by	approved by

Internal memo

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This section of the report draws heavily on that in the Lake Vyrnwy Uplands Survey (III) study, produced in March 2000, and provides a useful background to this survey. When the Liverpool Corporation constructed the Vyrnwy reservoir in the 1880s, they also purchased more than 13,000 acres of surrounding land in order to protect the water supply and to control activities that might be detrimental to the successful operation of the waterworks (Rowlands 1996, 18). Subsequent acquisitions in the earlier part of the twentieth century increased the size of the estate to about 21,300 acres (8,620 ha), a substantial tract of upland, much of it unenclosed, in north-western Montgomeryshire (now Powys) where it borders Gwynedd.
- 1.2 The history of this area is not well known and relatively little research has been conducted on Llanwddyn since the Reverend T. H. Evans produced his history of the parish in the 1870s (Evans 1874), though the adjacent parish of Pennant Melangell which ran down to the north side of the Vyrnwy valley, prior to the reorganisation of the county into communities, has received rather more attention in recent years (Britnell 1994; Evans 1994). A desk-top assessment of known archaeological sites in the Berwyn Mountains Nature Conservation Review Site, conducted on behalf of the Countryside Council for Wales in 1992, encompassed the western part of the lake and its surrounding hills and appeared to demonstrate how little archaeological information had been recorded at that date (Silvester 1992). Yet it was a reasonable assumption based on detailed studies of other parts of upland Wales that the upper Vyrnwy valley would have witnessed considerable occupation and activity, not only in the Middle Ages but also at various times in the prehistoric era. That the landscape held considerable potential for identifying and interpreting the physical remains of earlier communities who chose to work in and around the valley was adequately demonstrated two years later when two blocks of land within the Vyrnwy estate, one on the north side of the lake, the other to the west, were systematically examined by an archaeological team funded by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, normally abbreviated to RCAHMW (Silvester 1994a). Over 150 archaeological individual and groups of features were identified, less than 13% of which had been recorded before. Of particular interest was a chambered cairn of Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age origin which had been fortuitously preserved in improved pasture (Silvester 1994b) and this, together with several other prehistoric sites, were recommended to Cadw:Welsh Historic Monuments for protection by scheduling them as sites of national importance.
- 1.3 A shortage of resources prevented the immediate extension of the field survey to other areas around the lake, but in February 1996 Severn Trent Water agreed to fund two pieces of survey work during the 1996/97 financial year - an area survey on the north side of the lake and a measured survey of the medieval Hospitium complex to the south of it. The Hospitium, an earthwork complex which can be identified as a *camera* (or grange) of the Knights Hospitallers, in use from the late twelfth century, and as such a rare and significant survival in Wales, was surveyed in June 1996. An initial report was issued immediately afterwards and the definitive report appeared a year later (Silvester 1996; 1997). With the agreement of Severn Trent Water and the tenant farmer it was rapidly scheduled (SAM Mg). The area survey on the north side of the lake to the west side of the Cedig Valley formed the subject of a separate report (Silvester and Hankinson 1997), which revealed evidence of a secondary area of settlement in the vicinity of Ty-uchaf; this was probably related to the medieval occupation of old Llanwddyn village, associated cultivation evidence is discussed in Silvester (2001, forthcoming).
- 1.4 On the basis of these preliminary studies it became evident that the environs of the upper Vyrnwy valley had a significant archaeological potential for identifying and assessing the nature of historic occupation and land use in the more remote hill lands of northern Powys. It was thus hoped that a systematic study of the whole Vyrnwy catchment area would provide an invaluable and unmatched overview. These aspirations were backed by funding from Severn Trent Water in subsequent years, enabling two further programmes of archaeological study to be carried out on the Vyrnwy Estate. In 1997/98 an area survey (Hankinson and Silvester, 1998) was carried out on the north-east side of the reservoir, to the north of the Lake Vyrnwy Hotel, and on a small area on the north-western boundary of the estate. In the following year resources were provided for a survey of the afforested portions of the estate (Hankinson and Thomas, 1998); this survey was primarily a desk-top exercise involving the study of primary and secondary records, though the initial study was followed by visits to the archaeological sites which had been identified.

- 1.5 A further survey of land around the north-western side of the reservoir was carried out in early 2000 (Hankinson, 2000), again with funding from Severn Trent Water. This survey was located to the north of the minor road to Bwlch-y-Groes and was centred on the Afon Eiddew valley and the adjoining Moel Eunant ridge.
- 1.6 The present report describes the results of the most recent programme of field survey and recording which was carried out in early 2001. This work centred on the Bryn Mawr ridge and Afon Hirddu Fawr valley, to the south of the minor road to Bwlch-y-Groes; part of the Cefn Glas ridge was also surveyed. The area adjoined those examined in 1993 and 2000. The opportunity was also taken to carry out a less detailed survey of the remote ground which forms the western boundary of the estate; this area ran from Bwlch-y-groes in the north to the summit of Carreg y Big in the south, and covered land which had been avoided by previous surveys. Unfortunately, as a result of the foot and mouth outbreak in February 2001, fieldwork had to be discontinued before the survey was completed, leaving a somewhat arbitrary southern boundary which bears little resemblance to local topography. It is unfortunate that the premature end of the survey has meant that related areas which were due to be surveyed this year, in particular the remainder of the Cefn Glas ridge, the Afon Hirddu Fach valley and the remaining land in the vicinity of the confluence between the Hirddu Fawr and Hirddu Fach rivers, have had to be deferred. The extent of the present and all previous surveys carried out on the non-afforested land owned by the Vyrnwy Estate are depicted on Fig 1.

2 LOCATION AND TOPOGRAPHY

- 2.1 The detailed survey area encompassed a discrete block of land covering approximately 4.2km², to the west of the lake, centred at NGR SH 955 216. The western boundary extended as far as the 293,000m easting, while the northern extent of the survey was formed by the southern and eastern boundaries of the Trwm y Fawnog survey area (western section), surveyed in 1993-4, and the lower part of the Afon Eunant. The eastern boundary was formed by the forestry plantation fence which runs between the Afon Eunant and Afon Hirddu. As has been noted above, work had to be curtailed as a result of a foot and mouth disease outbreak, leaving an irregular southern boundary; from its eastern end this followed the Afon Hirddu upstream to the confluence between the Hirddu Fawr and Hirddu Fach, then encompassed much of the eastern end of the Cefn Glas ridge, before crossing it northwards and following the Hirddu Fawr upstream until the western boundary was met.
- 2.2 The main survey area was concentrated on the Bryn Mawr ridge which separates the Eunant and Hirddu valleys, rising to a maximum elevation of almost 540m OD. The north-facing section of this ridge which lies to the east of the Trwm y Fawnog survey area was also examined, down to the Afon Eunant at approximately 270m OD. With the exception of that section of the survey area on the eastern end of the Cefn Glas ridge which rises to approximately 510m OD, the southern boundary of the area is formed by the Afon Hirddu Fawr, which merges with the Hirddu Fach to form the Afon Hirddu. The upper reaches of the watercourse are at approximately 500m, falling to 305m OD at the south-eastern boundary of the survey area. The area is largely open moorland used for a limited amount of grazing, though Ffridd Fach on the north is enclosed but has been left ungrazed; it contains an area of natural woodland which is evidently of ecological importance.
- 2.3 In addition to the main area of survey, the opportunity was taken to carry out a less detailed survey of the remote western edge of the estate, covering a total area of approximately 2.9km², which was designed to link with areas previously surveyed on the Moel y Gadfa and Bryn Mawr ridges. The northern end of this area was defined by the boundary of the Trwm y Fawnog survey area (western section) and the road leading to Bwlch-y-Groes, where it reaches a height of 480m OD. The boundary of the survey ran south from the point where the estate boundary fence crosses the road, following its line as far south as the summit of Carreg y Big, at an elevation of 589m OD; this section forms the watershed between the headwaters of the Dovey and Vyrnwy rivers. Part of the north-east ridge of Carreg y Big was surveyed, linking up with the western edge of the area of more detailed survey carried out this year and following this until it joined with the western extent of the Trwm y Fawnog survey area.
- 2.4 The vegetation cover of the survey area is mixed. The higher parts often have a dense covering of heather and bilberry, although there are places on the slopes of the Bryn Mawr

ridge where significant areas of wet, boggy, ground mixed with areas of rushes and grassland are present; this vegetation pattern occupies much of the lower south facing slopes of the ridge. On the Cefn Glas ridge, to the south of the Hirddu Fawr, the vegetation is mainly heather and bilberry, with occasional pockets of bracken and grassland on the higher ground. In the vicinity of the confluence between the Hirddu Fawr and Hirddu Fach, the vegetation is dominated by bracken, mixed with grassland and lesser areas of boggy ground with some rushes. The area of less detailed survey is more remote, with difficult ground largely covered in deep heather, though a few areas of grass and rush cover were encountered.

- 2.5 The results of the previous year's survey demonstrated that the more sheltered parts of the valleys within the survey area could be expected to reveal evidence relating to settlement in the post-medieval, and possibly medieval periods. Limited evidence relating to past land-use of the survey area was available in the existing archaeological records, but it was evident, both from examination of Ordnance Survey maps and aerial photographs that there had been some past enclosure of the south-facing slopes of Bryn Mawr and Creigiau'r Llyn, probably focussed on the former farmstead of Hafod Fudr.

3 THE FIELD SURVEY

- 3.1 The survey was undertaken by a team of two people, a necessity due to the remoteness and difficult nature of the terrain. Fieldwork occupied 14 man-days, in January and February 2000.
- 3.2 The fieldwork method adopted generally involved the systematic walking of regular transects, of the order of 30m-50m apart, except where topographic conditions dictated otherwise. All sites which were encountered have been described and photographed, where appropriate, and have been located with the aid of a GPS receiver. The sites have been plotted using a GIS database within the Mapinfo software package and have been fed into the Regional Sites and Monuments Record.
- 3.3 In addition to the recording of discrete archaeological sites, an attempt has been made to define the nature of other landscape features which relate to past land-use, such as abandoned field boundaries and trackways. Tables which define these features have been created in Mapinfo to assist in the understanding of enclosure patterns, even though many remain undated features of the landscape.

4 SUMMARY OF THE ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE BOTH SURVEY AREAS (Fig 2)

- 4.1 A total of thirty-five archaeological sites were recorded within the combined survey area of 7.1km², an average of five sites per km². Five of the sites had been previously recorded, while thirty new sites were revealed by this survey. Of the five known sites, four were believed to represent Bronze Age funerary monuments (round barrows), while the fifth was the post-medieval farmstead of Hafod Fudr. The distribution of all sites is shown on Fig 2.
- 4.2 Close examination revealed that three of the existing sites recorded as round barrows were more likely to be a result of mis-interpretation of vegetation-covered, natural rock outcrops, while the exact nature of a fourth was uncertain, though it, too, could be of natural origin. Despite the fact that the authenticity of the known prehistoric funerary and ritual monuments was brought into question by the survey, it was notable that five new sites of this type were revealed; a marked contrast with the lack of evidence of this nature provided by the previous year's survey.
- 4.3 A brief description of the evidence relating to the archaeological evidence recorded within the discrete topographic zones of the survey area is given below.
- 4.4 **Area 1 - South side of Cwm Eunant.** Only one site was present in this area, namely the bridge (PRN 81500) which crosses the Eunant stream at Eunant house; this is a relatively modern feature. It is interesting that there was a notable lack of occupation evidence in this area; this may be explained by the name of Ffridd Fawr which is given to the area on the

modern Ordnance Survey 1:25,000 map, suggesting that it was historically used as pasture bordering on open grazing land.

- 4.5.1 Area 2 - Crest of Bryn Mawr and Creigiau'r Llyn ridge.** A total of nine sites were recorded in this area. The majority of the occupation evidence was found to be of prehistoric date, consisting of a group of three circular barrows (PRNs 81504-81506) representing Bronze Age burials, and two standing stones (PRNs 81502 and 81503) which are probably of a similar date. A further site (PRN 7888) is also potentially a circular barrow, though the interpretation is less certain. Evidently this ridge was an area of some importance during the Bronze Age, which contrasts with the lack of evidence in the previously surveyed areas to the north.
- 4.5.2** In addition to the evidence of prehistoric activity on the ridge, there are two post-medieval or later cairns (PRNs 81513 and 81514), probably marking a boundary, the line of one or more trackways, or shooting positions. The only other site on the ridge is a hut or fold (PRN 81501) of probable post-medieval date.
- 4.5.3** Unlike some other upland plateaux around the lake, no certain evidence of peat cutting was revealed by the survey within this area. However, the presence of a trackway leading from Cwm yr Hafod onto the ridge strongly suggests that the crest of the ridge was utilised for peat extraction.
- 4.6.1 Area 3 - Hirddu Fawr valley.** This area contains a total of five sites. Unusually for the north-west end of the lake, two sites appear to represent dwellings of medieval date, namely the platforms (PRNs 81511 and 81526); PRN 81511 appears to have been occupied by a wooden building, whereas PRN 81526 has traces of a stone building. The morphology of an earth banked boundary, which demonstrates that the south-facing slope of the valley above PRN 81511 was enclosed, suggests that part of it may have defined a landholding associated with the platform. Perhaps this landholding was appended to an existing one centred on Hafod Fudr.
- 4.6.2** A stone-built barn (PRN 81510) is also present in the lower section of the valley, and is located above an abandoned trackway which passes it, having originated from Hafod Fudr at the upper end of Cwm yr Hafod. The building could have been used as a byre, a place to store feedstuffs for animals in the more remote parts of the Hafod Fudr landholding, or may even have been used to store peat cut on the crest of the Bryn Mawr ridge.
- 4.6.3** The two remaining sites in the valley are a post-medieval or later cairn (PRN 81515), probably of similar origin to those recorded on the crest of the Bryn Mawr/Creigiau'r Llyn ridge, and an anomalous stone-built structure (PRN 81512). The structure appears to be of at least three phases and its location, on easily flooded ground adjacent to the stream, is particularly difficult to interpret. The physical remains of PRN 81512 suggest a fold which may have been built on the site of an earlier habitation, though it is unlikely that it could have been occupied for any length of time without encountering serious flooding problems.
- 4.7.1 Area 4 - Blaen Cwm yr Hafod.** This area encompasses the upper part of the Afon Hirddu and the confluence between the Hirddu Fawr and Hirddu Fach. Only a small portion of the area was surveyed. The surveyed section contains a total of five sites, centred on the farmstead of Hafod Fudr (PRN 6813). The existing buildings at Hafod Fudr are of late 18th- or early 19th-century date, though the farm name suggests that they are on the site of an earlier, possibly late medieval, seasonal habitation; possible corroborative evidence for this is provided by the earth banked boundary which is referred to in paragraph 4.6.1.
- 4.7.2** The base of the valley contains many redundant field boundaries, most of which are likely to be of post-medieval date and relate to Hafod Fudr. The complexity of the boundaries suggests that there is probably more than one phase of activity which is represented in their construction; perhaps the earliest phase might have been enclosures associated with a medieval hafod.
- 4.7.3** There are three bridges in the vicinity of Hafod Fudr (PRNs 81507-81509), two of which are largely intact and relatively modern, while the third is probably of post-medieval date and would have provided a link between the farms of Llest-wen and Hafod Fudr. A small area of peat cutting (PRN 81529) was recorded near the confluence of the Hirddu Fawr and Hirddu Fach.
- 4.8.1 Area 5 - Cefn Glas ridge.** A total of five sites were recorded on the eastern end of this ridge. Three prehistoric round barrows (PRNs 4893, 4902 and 4903) had already been recorded in

this area, but examination of the topography demonstrated that these sites were vegetation covered rock outcrops which had been mis-interpreted as archaeological features. A small sub-square structure (PRN 81527) built against a rock outcrop at the eastern end of the ridge is likely to have been a shelter built for occasional use by someone engaged in pastoral agriculture, perhaps a local shepherd.

- 4.8.2 The remaining site in the area is a single abutment for a bridge (PRN 81528), in a particularly unusual situation near the crest of the broad ridge. It was probably a narrow clapper bridge crossing a rivulet originating from a small pond on the ridge to the north, though it is unlikely that there would ever have been any significant flow of water involved. The structure lies at the point where the course of a trackway crosses an abandoned boundary bank; the trackway then continues into the unsurveyed area to the west; it is most likely that a trackway of this form leading towards the ridge crest was used for transporting peat from peat cuttings on the ridge.
- 4.9.1 **Area 6 - Dovey/Vyrnwy watershed lying between Bwlch-y-Groes and Carreg y Big.** This area was subjected to a less rigorous programme of survey, due to its remote location and difficult terrain; a total of ten sites were recorded. Nine of the identified sites were boundary stones (PRNs 81516-81522 and 81524-81525), which are probably all contemporary and of post-medieval date; these would appear to define the western extent of a landholding at the north-western end of the lake. The tenth site, which is the relatively recent cairn (PRN 81523) located on the summit of Carreg y Big, was probably also constructed as a boundary marker and forms the south-western corner of the landholding.

5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 This survey forms part of an on-going programme of archaeological survey work within the Lake Vyrnwy Estate, and complements four previous surveys (Silvester 1994a, Silvester and Hankinson 1997, Hankinson and Silvester 1998, Hankinson 2000) undertaken on the north and west sides of the lake; much of this area has now been examined.
- 5.2 There is evidence of prehistoric activity in the survey area. The five sites which relate to funerary and ritual use of the Bryn Mawr/Creigiau'r Llyn ridge are of particular interest, which is in marked contrast to the lack of information on the period produced by the preceding (2000) survey. In particular, the group of three round barrows on the crest of the ridge might be considered to be of considerable importance.
- 5.3 The distribution of sites in the survey area was not found to be particularly dependent on location, despite the presence of valleys separated by ridges of high moorland. This is not typical of the Vyrnwy estate as a whole and is largely a result of factors which are not readily apparent from examination of cartographic sources. An area which appears to be particularly anomalous is the Hirddu Fawr valley which only contains five sites, despite its apparently favourable topography. The valley is broad and shallow and has settlement in its lower reaches, but the remainder of the valley is largely devoid of archaeology as a direct result of the wet and boggy nature of the ground, which renders access particularly difficult and would no doubt have deterred any attempts at occupation.
- 5.4 The evidence of settlement which has been identified by the survey is concentrated in the western end of Cwm yr Hafod and the lower section of the Hirddu Fawr valley. Much of the surviving evidence relates to post-medieval activity centred on Hafod Fudr, but there is evidently an earlier, medieval, phase related to the platforms PRNs 81511 and 81526. It is quite possible that the settlement at Hafod Fudr, though not the present buildings, is also of medieval origin.
- 5.5 The majority of the area examined during the survey appears to have been part of a landholding on the north-west side of the lake, defined by a number of boundary stones present on the watershed to the west. This division must have predated the construction of the reservoir but is likely to be of post-medieval date.
- 5.6 Communications within the area are represented by bridges over the valley floor streams; occasionally these are associated with trackways which ascend the sides of the adjacent ridges.

These trackways probably had their origin as peat cutters' tracks, connecting the valley floor settlements with cuttings on the ridge crests.

- 5.7 It is notable that the enclosures which were recorded during the 2000 survey, and are believed to relate to an early phase of pastoral activity, have not been found within this survey area. Perhaps, in this year's area, the higher ground was closer to centres of population, and stock could be more easily brought down to the settlement sites in the valleys. The wet nature of the ground in the upper parts of the Hirddu Fawr valley may also have been a disincentive to more intensive grazing.
- 5.8 The results of this survey, coupled with those from earlier work, demonstrate that the picture of settlement and land-use through time is continually being refined for the Vyrnwy Estate. It is worth repeating, that the archaeological sites, which are almost all previously unknown and unrecorded, add to an already considerable resource which is worthy of careful management, particularly in view of the on-going heather regeneration work which is being carried out. This information is also potentially useful as a source of information for educational purposes.

7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 7.1 The writer would like to thank: Severn Trent Water for funding the survey and Mr C. Abrahams for expediting this; Mr Graham Evans for his assistance in facilitating access to the survey area; Mr M Walker of the RSPB at Lake Vyrnwy for his help and advice; and his colleagues Mr G Owen and Mr G Davies for their assistance with the fieldwork.

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9 OTHER SOURCES

Vertical Aerial Photography of Montgomeryshire 1984 (Geonex for Montgomeryshire County Council: 11-84-006, 008, 010, 091, 093.

Ordnance Survey 1:10560 2nd Edition map of 1901 (Montgomeryshire VII NE)

Appendix 2: Management of the Archaeological Resource

The archaeological and historic landscape resource of the Welsh uplands is both fragile and finite. Even in remote areas successive phases of land use and occupation are imposed on each other to form a palimpsest, building up to produce the complex pattern that is visible today, yet a pattern that can be all too easily damaged or even destroyed by unsympathetic treatment.

The Vyrnwy valley and its environs reveal one such complex pattern and the features that have been identified during the current programme of survey merit consideration in terms of resource management.

The following issues are recommended to Severn Trent Water for consideration:

- i) it is considered by CPAT that, utilising the criteria adopted by Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments there are three adjoining sites in the survey area that may merit designation as scheduled ancient monuments (i.e sites of national importance). These are the group of three Bronze Age round barrows (PRNs 81504-81506) on the crest of the Bryn Mawr/Creigiau'r Llyn ridge.
- ii) in order to facilitate the recognition and appreciation of the archaeological and historic landscape resource CPAT will pass data digitised during the present survey to the RSPB in their capacity as managers of the Vyrnwy Estate.
- iii) all the elements identified here are integral parts of the Vyrnwy historic landscape, and any works that impact on those elements should be assessed prior to implementation. CPAT can advise on such matters where necessary.
- iv) the educational significance of the historic landscape should not be undervalued. Where footpaths or way-marked trails are laid out, historic landscape elements can assist in the general appreciation of the area and its environs. Again CPAT can assist in such matters if required.

R J Silvester
Head of Field Services
CPAT

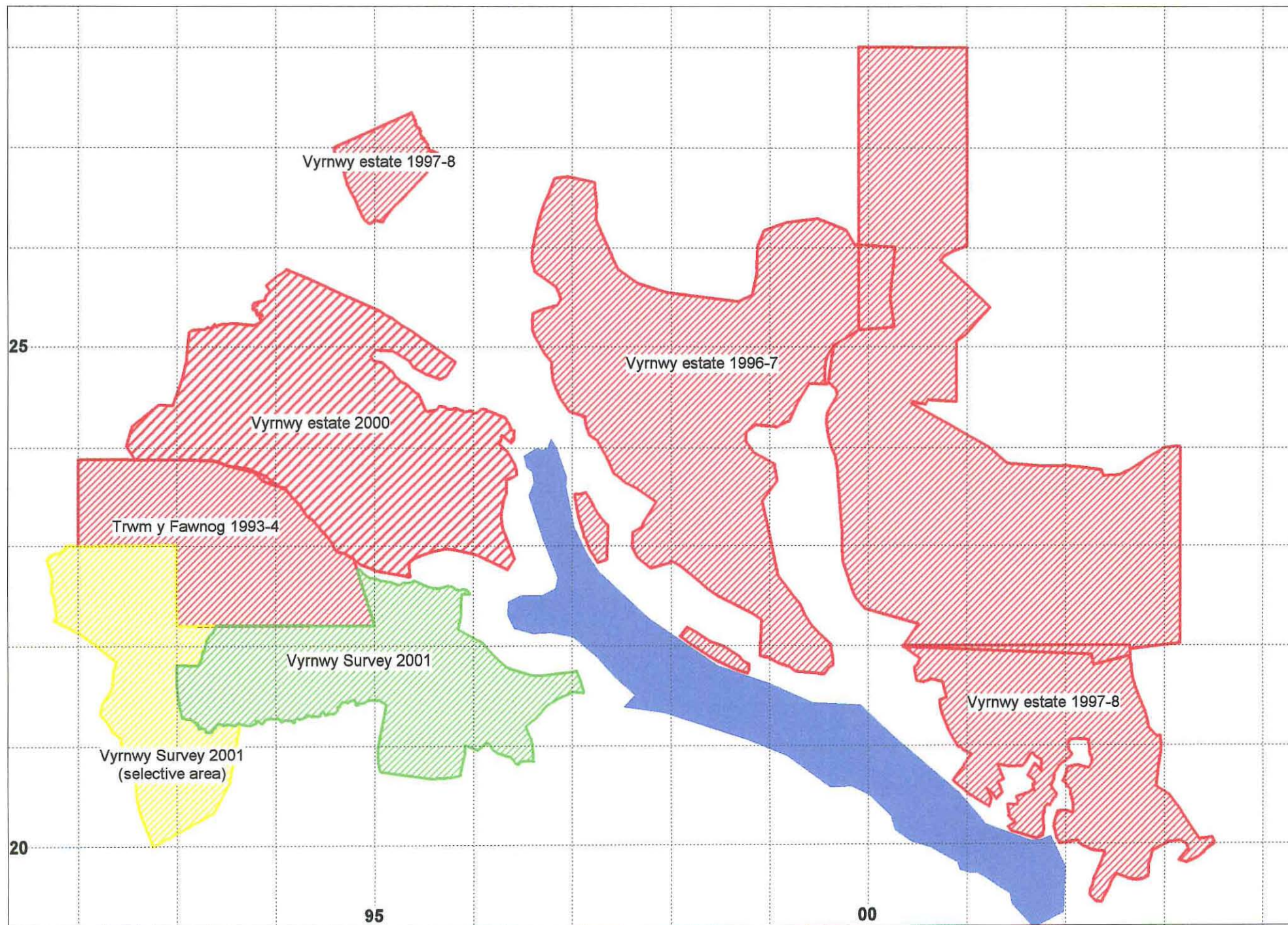


Fig 1 Location of survey area (2001) in relation to previous surveys (Scale 1:50,000)

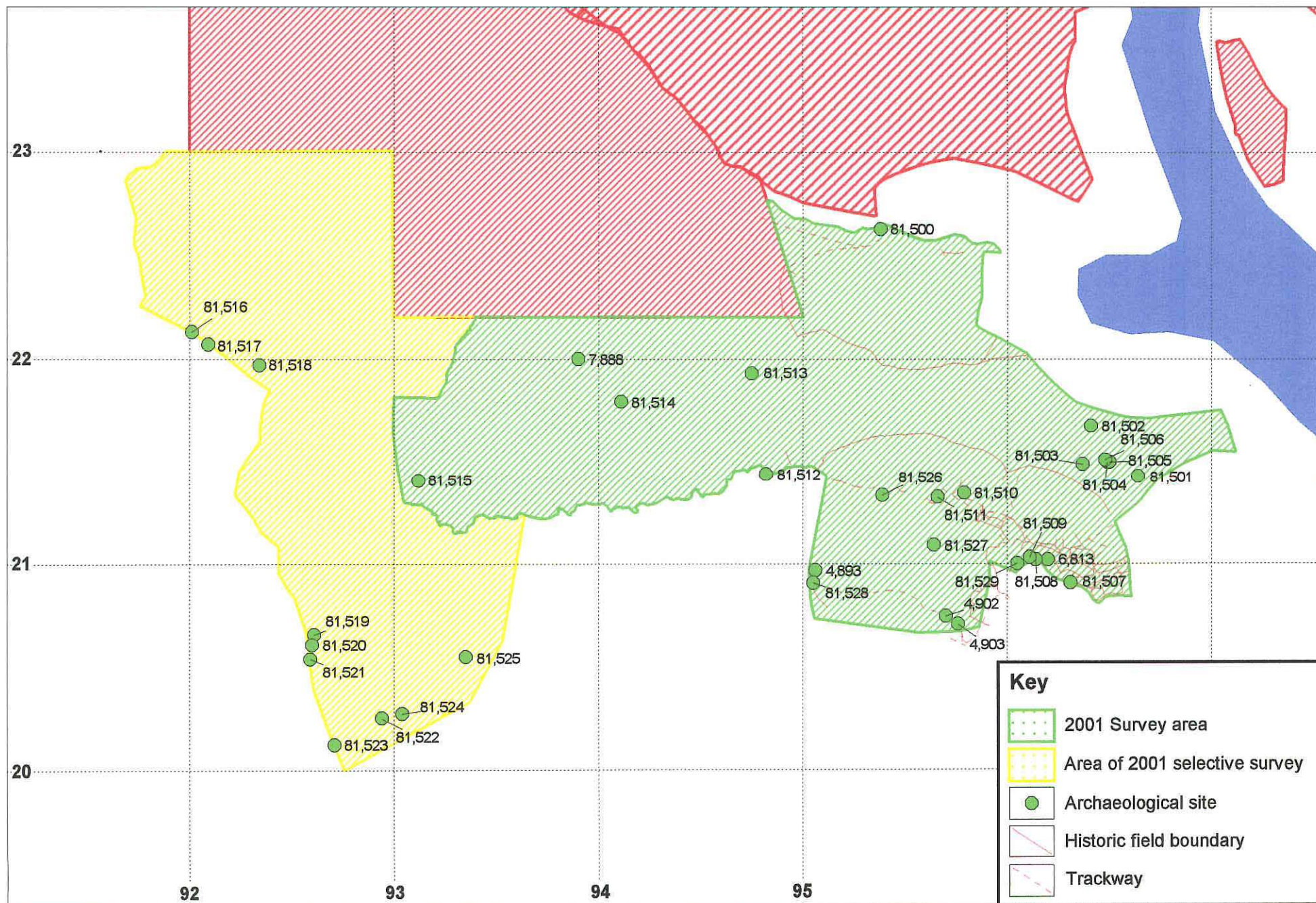


Fig 2 Archaeological sites and features recorded during Vyrnwy 2001 survey (Scale 1:25,000)



Plate 1 Site of former bridge (PRN 81507), from E.



Plate 2 Platform (PRN 81511) from E.



Plate 3 Stone structure (PRN 81512), possibly a fold built on the site of an earlier building, from N.



Plate 4 Boundary stone (PRN 81518), from SE.