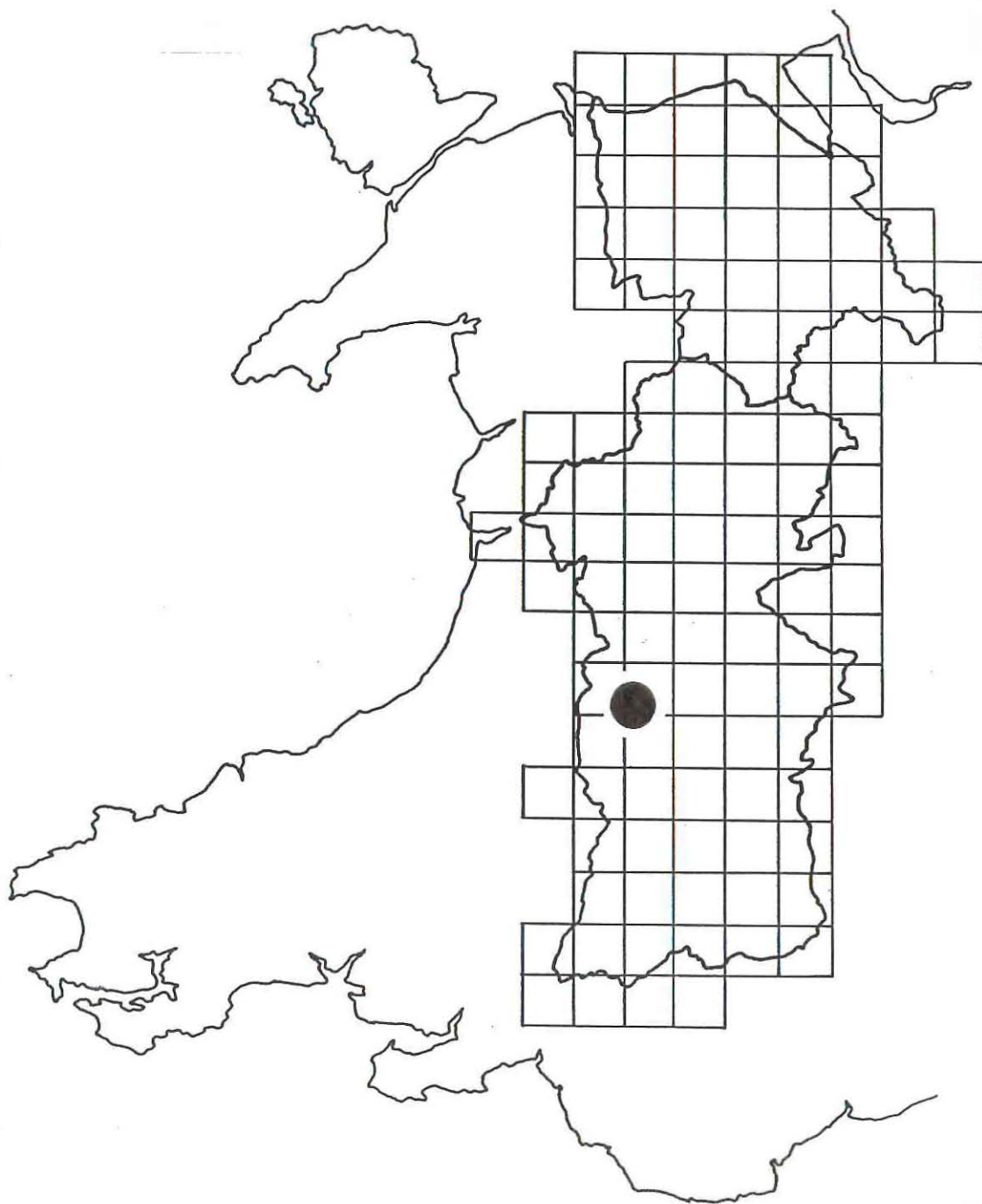


THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

*Elan Valley Uplands, Powys*

FIELD SURVEY



CPAT Report No 97

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*Elan Valley Uplands, Powys*

**FIELD SURVEY**

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Report prepared for RCAHMW

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## ELAN VALLEY UPLANDS FIELD SURVEY 1993/94

### 1 Introduction

1.1 The group of lakes collectively known as the Elan Valley reservoirs which provide water for Birmingham, lie in the heart of the Cambrian Mountains on the boundary between the old counties of Radnorshire and Breconshire and close to the border with Dyfed. Afon Elan with its tributary, Afon Claerwen, debouch into the Wye, two miles to the east, the nearest town being Rhayader, a mile or so higher up the Wye.

1.2 The terrain in the vicinity of the reservoirs is one of broad rolling plateaux interrupted generally by sharp V-shaped valleys, an exception being the broad U-shaped pass of Rhos Saith-maen which presumably reveals glacial action. Unenclosed moorland predominates, and only in the valley bottoms are there working farms, although a certain amount of slope land has been converted from rough pasture to improved grassland.

1.3 The region is composed largely of rocks laid down during the Ordovician and Silurian eras: shales siltstones and mudstones are interbedded with conglomerates and gritstones. Rock outcrops are common leading to frequent talus (scree) deposits, some of which are liable to confuse the archaeological record. Soils are primarily brown earths and peat of the Crowdy 1 and Hafren 1 Associations (Rudeforth et al. 1984).

### 2 The Survey Area

2.1 The survey of a sample area within the Elan Valley region forms 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 area of Montgomeryshire, Radnor Forest, the Berwyn, Mynydd Hiraethog, and the Lake Vyrnwy area, and a series of interim reports have appeared since 1990 describing the results of these earlier programmes of fieldwork.

2.2 The Elan Valley marked a departure from normal practice inasmuch as it was conceived as a joint project with the regional archaeological staff of the National Trust. Funding for CPAT's involvement in the survey was provided by the Royal Commission for 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. The National Trust were able to commit equivalent resources for their half of the survey.

2.3 A single survey transect was defined on an east/west axis to the south of Afon Claerwen, entirely within Breconshire. Sufficient flexibility was allowed in the project design to allow for minor modifications to the original transect layout, but in essence it was defined as a block of land about 10km long and 1.4km wide. The area of 14 square kilometres brought it into line with other sample areas worked by CPAT in previous years (see above 2.1) allowing direct comparison with the results from other upland areas in Clwyd and Powys.

2.4 In practice it proved impossible to complete the transect. The National Trust were unable to maintain the agreed level of input into the project, and although the CPAT field team was able to make-up much of the shortfall, the area eventually covered was about 13.5 square kilometres.

2.5 The transect extended across the Elan Estate of Welsh Water which covers the reservoir catchment area and, further east, Abergwesyn Common which is owned by the National Trust. Tenants farm the Elan Estate lands while there are commoners' rights over the National Trust's holdings. Except for the eastern end of the transect, all of the survey area falls within the large Elenydd Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and the whole of it lies within the Cambrian Mountains Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA).

### **3 Land Use and Vegetation**

3.1 The transect was designed to take in a minimum of improved grassland, and only on the north-facing slopes above Caban-coch reservoir were pasture fields relating to the farms of Marchnant and Llanerch-cawr examined. The rest - well over 95% of the total - is unimproved and is utilised as sheepwalk. It ranges from peat deposits of over a metre thickness supporting heather and bilberry and broken up by peat hags, as around Llyn y Ferlen, and wide areas of tussock grass, through bracken-covered hillsides, to plateaux covered with short, cropped grassland. Inevitably there are zones of inhospitable bog, but equally there are better-drained valleys and drier plateaux, more attractive for modern farming use as well as the activities of past communities.

3.2 In the vicinity of Llyn y Ferlen, the land rises to 570m (1870') OD, but generally most of the plateaux in the survey area do not exceed 500m (1640') OD. At lower altitudes very little land below 300m (985') OD was examined during the field programme.

### **4 The Survey: Methodology**

4.1 Fieldwork was carried out intermittently between November 1993 and the end of March 1994, the weather over the winter playing a significant role in delaying the completion of the project. A minimum of two people made up the fieldwork team, but on occasions two two-man teams were at work concurrently. We estimate that 50 man-days were taken to complete the fieldwork element of the survey.

4.2 Fieldwork techniques adopted were those developed during previous upland surveys conducted by CPAT. Generally, except in areas of bog and deep peat which required less intensive examination, the ground was covered in transects at 30m intervals, the transect alignments being determined by recognisable natural or artificial boundaries on enclosed land or, where such boundaries were not visible, by means of compass bearings.

4.3 Vertical, monochrome aerial photography produced by ADAS at a scale of 1:10000 in 1987 was used in the field for location purposes, for the recording of different vegetation types, for the planning of systematic transect lines and for identifying archaeological features. Together with a standard compass the aerial photography was perfectly adequate for the purposes required.

4.4 Archaeological features located in the field were plotted on the relevant aerial photograph and details of structure, siting, surrounding vegetation type and other relevant data were recorded on standardised A4 site visit forms, the information from which was subsequently transferred to a computerised database for incorporation into the Powys Sites and Monuments Record. Sketch plans with overall measurements were appended to the forms where appropriate. One or more colour slides was usually taken of any

particular feature, supplemented on occasions by more general, landscape photographs. The fieldwork data were subsequently transcribed from the aerial photographs on to A1 plastic drawing film sheets at a scale of 1:10,000, one sheet mapping the archaeology together with any landscape features, the second depicting the current vegetation by means of colour conventions.

## 5 Archaeology and Landscape

5.1 A total of 126 archaeological features or groups of features were recognised during the transect survey. Twenty-four (19%) of these had previously been recorded, giving a ratio of 1:4.25 for known to unknown sites. It should be noted, in addition, that the existing record was weighted heavily towards prehistoric sites: of the 24 recorded, more than 70% probably fall within that period category.

5.2 Cairns predominate in the prehistoric record. Some of the summit cairns such as those on the ridge above Rhos Saith-maen (PARs 879-881) have been known for many years, referred to by Lewis in the 19th century (Lewis 1833). Others are the result of more recent identifications by the Ordnance Survey and the RCAHMW. The group of cairns known collectively as Carnau Cefn-y-fordd, for instance, had their numbers increased as a result of work in the 1970s.

5.3 That fieldwork even on these easily recognised monuments has been selective is demonstrated by a number of new sites found during the current survey. A fine ring cairn (PAR 16586), some 12m in diameter, lies close to Nant-y-ceiliog. It is clearly visible as a stone heap in an otherwise homogeneous tract of stoneless grassland from a distance of more than 500m. Even the record of Carnau Cefn-y-fordd is not complete. The survey recorded several small new cairns, one admittedly an outlier (PAR 16545), another a satellite (PAR 16521) within 6m of a much larger and more impressive cairn (PAR 891). We are also convinced of mis-recordings within this group. One or two cairns have previously been wrongly located - a problem largely rectified by utilising the vertical aerial photography - while in one case (PAR 889) a natural talus deposit has been identified as an archaeological feature. This is not altogether surprising. The talus deposits in this area take some curious forms which were fully appreciated by the survey team only after several days in the field. A casual visit to Carnau Cefn-y-fordd would almost certainly have resulted in the recording of spurious archaeology.

5.4 Other cairns were rather less prominent. On Hafen a ring cairn (PAR 16549) had been utilised for a much later shelter. Robbed of much of its stone the cairn is now barely discernible. Two low cairns (PARs 16576 and 16577), each less than 7m in diameter, were identified on gently sloping ground above Nant Dyrys. Unexceptional when viewed from a distance, both had been disturbed, perhaps by the men who worked the quarries and mines in the locality. Each had a fine, if empty, cist about 1.0m by 0.6m and constructed of the local rock which cleaves into large flat slabs.

5.5 There are a few broadly contemporary 'ritual' monuments in the area, including the standing stone (PAR 3363) on Waun Lydan and the row of stones that make up Saith-maen (PAR 878). But the standing stone recorded a few hundred metres to the north-east of the latter could not be readily identified, and few new examples within this general class of monument were recognised.

5.6 As in other areas of Powys and Clwyd (see Silvester 1993, 4), Bronze Age domestic sites are rarely encountered. Thus the discovery of a low stone-walled enclosure (PAR 16540), up to 25m and perhaps with a small circular hut

abutting its inner face, is of some significance, though whether it is Bronze Age or of later prehistoric date remains unknown. Even more does this apply to the flattish plateau above Craig y Llysiau where three circular hut circles and an enclosure were located. Two of the huts (PARs 16590 and 16592), 11.4m and 9.9m in diameter respectively, lay on either side of the 16m-diameter rubble bank (PAR 16591) that made up the enclosure.

5.7 Some of the valley-floor farms may well have had their origins in the medieval era: Llanerch-cawr, on the banks of Afon Claerwen and just beyond the northern limits of the survey area, has late or sub-medieval features (Smith 1988). Yet almost without exception the Middle Ages is seemingly represented in the fieldwork area by hafotai alone. How many of these extrinsically undatable structures can be incontrovertibly tied to the medieval era rather than later needs to be resolved by more widespread excavation.

5.8 The hafotai in the Elan Valley are almost invariably on valley floors close to streams. Frequently they are isolated structures, rectangular in shape, up to 9m long with low stone foundations, though some are accompanied by a second walled feature, perhaps a fold such as that beside the higher reaches of Rhiwnant (PAR 16582), or an ancillary building such as the similarly sized structure than partners a hafod (PAR 16573) beside Nant Dyrys.

5.9 Two spots within the survey area have groups of hafotai. On a spur beside the stream known as Chwefri, overshadowed by Bryn Melys and with an excellent outlook over Rhos Saith-maen, are several structures within a hundred metres or so of each other: a three-cell sheep fold (PAR 16507), a small rock shelter (PAR 16508) and five rectangular and sub-rectangular buildings (PARs 16509-16514) in varying states of preservation. A more mixed group occupies flattish ground beside Nant Rhyd-goch. It includes the putative prehistoric enclosure (PAR 16540) and at least five hafod-like structures (PARs 16534-16537; 16539).

5.10 Post-medieval and early modern activity has created a predictable range of landscape artefacts. Turbaries are widespread and have been mapped in only the most general way. Only one possible peat platform has been recorded (PAR 16500) while PAR 16587 was applied to a mound of peat standing within a distinctive cutting with a small clearance cairn resulting from peat digging nearby. Peat was still being cutting on the mountain above Llanerch-cawr until two years ago.

5.11 Shelters, sheepfolds and a couple of now abandoned upland farms are recorded in the site list (Annex 1). The flat top of the ridge above Llanerch-cawr was brought into cultivation at one point, perhaps in the early 19th century. Low ridges run up to a terminal bank (PAR 16568) and in turn appear to be overlain by a substantial boundary bank.

5.12 These valleys also witnessed a considerable amount of industrial activity. Rock outcrops along the valleys have been quarried (PARs 16525 & 16570), loading platforms sometimes remaining. Four mines (PARs 5511-5513 & 18994) have recently been examined during a general assessment of such sites in Powys (Walters 1993), but detailed mapping of their relict features is required for a full appreciation of these complexes.

## 6 Conclusions

6.1 Over one hundred new sites have been identified during the survey. As much of the fieldwork was conducted in open moorland beyond the bounds of the post-medieval farmscape, this is a very good return from limited resource input.

6.2 Annex 1 reveals that quite a number of archaeological sites had previously been identified in the area. The current survey has not only filled in the gaps, but has demonstrated some of the inadequacies of the existing record: obvious prehistoric monuments have gone unrecognised (e.g PARs 16586; 16590-16592); features of medieval and later date have largely been ignored; and confusion in the record has been generated because of lack of familiarity with the terrain and problems of locating sites in open terrain (e.g. Carnau Cefn-y-fordd).

6.3 The archaeology of the region can be classified according to two very different types of terrain. The valleys witness extensive use, both farming and industrial, from the medieval period onwards while the flattish interfluves reveal much less activity, but where prehistoric evidence is available it is likely to come from this zone.

6.4 At least half a dozen newly identified sites or groups of sites appear to be sufficiently significant to warrant statutory protection. These will be recommended for scheduling in due course.

## 7 Acknowledgements

7.1 Thanks are due to the Mr A.Baker and the Elan Estate, together with their tenant farmers, Mr D.L.Edwards of Rhiwnant, Mr G.Edwards of Llanerch-cawr and Mr R.Lewis of Marchnant, for access to the land during the survey. Thanks are also due to RCAHMMW for funding the survey.

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- Walters, M. 1993 Powys Metal Mines Survey (CPAT Report 89, Welshpool)

## Annex 1

Prn	Ngr1	Type1	Period1	Altitude
806	SN89695990	Cairn	Bronze Age	500
878	SN94956026	Stone alignment	Prehistoric	400
879	SN94406122	Cairn and Shelter	Bronze Age and	605
880	SN94366141	Cairn	Bronze Age	590
881	SN94356140	Cairn	Bronze Age	590
882	SN91956182	Ring Cairn	Bronze Age	400
889	SN95626068	Cairn ?	Undated	400
890	SN95726053	Cairn	Bronze Age	420
891	SN95776052	Cairn	Bronze Age	420
892	SN95696044	Cairn	Prehistoric ?	420
893	SN95326171	Cairn	Bronze Age	560
5450	SN93146004	Sheepfold	Medieval/Post-medieval	450
5462	SN93556057	Sheepfold ?	Medieval/Post-medieval	460
5484	SN93896148	Cairn	Prehistoric ?/Modern ?	580
5486	SN95906051	Cairn	Prehistoric ?	430
5506	SN95446064	Bank	Prehistoric ?	410
5511	SN88566079	Copper/Lead mine	Early modern	310
5512	SN87436060	Lead mine	Early modern	410
5900	SN95676065	Cairn	Prehistoric ?	405
5902	SN95466062	Standing stone	Prehistoric ?	410
5903	SN95716061	Cairn	Bronze Age ?	410
5904	SN95486058	Cairn	Prehistoric and	410
5905	SN95696044	Shelter	Post-medieval	420
16500	SN95706147	Peat platform	Post-medieval	400
16501	SN95256082	Shelter ?	Medieval/Post-medieval ?	430
16502	SN94686117	Opencast Mine working	Post-medieval	585
16503	SN94686122	Cairn ?	Bronze Age ?	600
16504	SN94206094	Shelter wall	Post-medieval	550
16505	SN94266093	Fold	Post-medieval	550
16506	SN93656137	Boundary markers	Modern	570
16507	SN93625997	Sheepfold	Post-medieval	400
16508	SN93016000	Shelter	Post-medieval/Modern	470
16509	SN93136007	Hut	Medieval ?	450
16510	SN93176006	House ?	Medieval/Post-medieval	445
16511	SN93186009	House	Medieval/Post-medieval	445
16512	SN93146009	Hut ?	Medieval ?	450
16513	SN95216008	Hafod	Medieval	440
16514	SN93296006	Landform	Non Antiquity	435
16515	SN93436058	Shelter	Medieval ?	500
16516	SN93436061	Sheepfold	Medieval/Post-medieval	500
16517	SN95666150	House platform ?	Medieval	410
16518	SN95786088	Farmhouse	Post-medieval	360
16519	SN95906100	Farm Holding	Post-medieval	350
16520	SN95696088	Sheepfold	Post-medieval	390
16521	SN95806054	Cairn	Prehistoric ?	420
16522	SN95676058	Cairn	Undated	410
16523	SN95746067	Cairn	Post-medieval ?	405
16524	SN95636089	Hafod ?	Medieval/Post-medieval	400
16525	SN90706040	Quarry	Early modern	380
16526	SN90746013	?House platform	Post-medieval	395
16527	SN90786016	Fold and shelter	Medieval/Post-medieval	400
16528	SN96076138	House	Post-medieval	345
16529	SN90986106	Fold	Post-medieval	390
16530	SN91226154	Barn	Post-medieval	370
16531	SN91206168	House ?/Hafod	Post-medieval ?	350

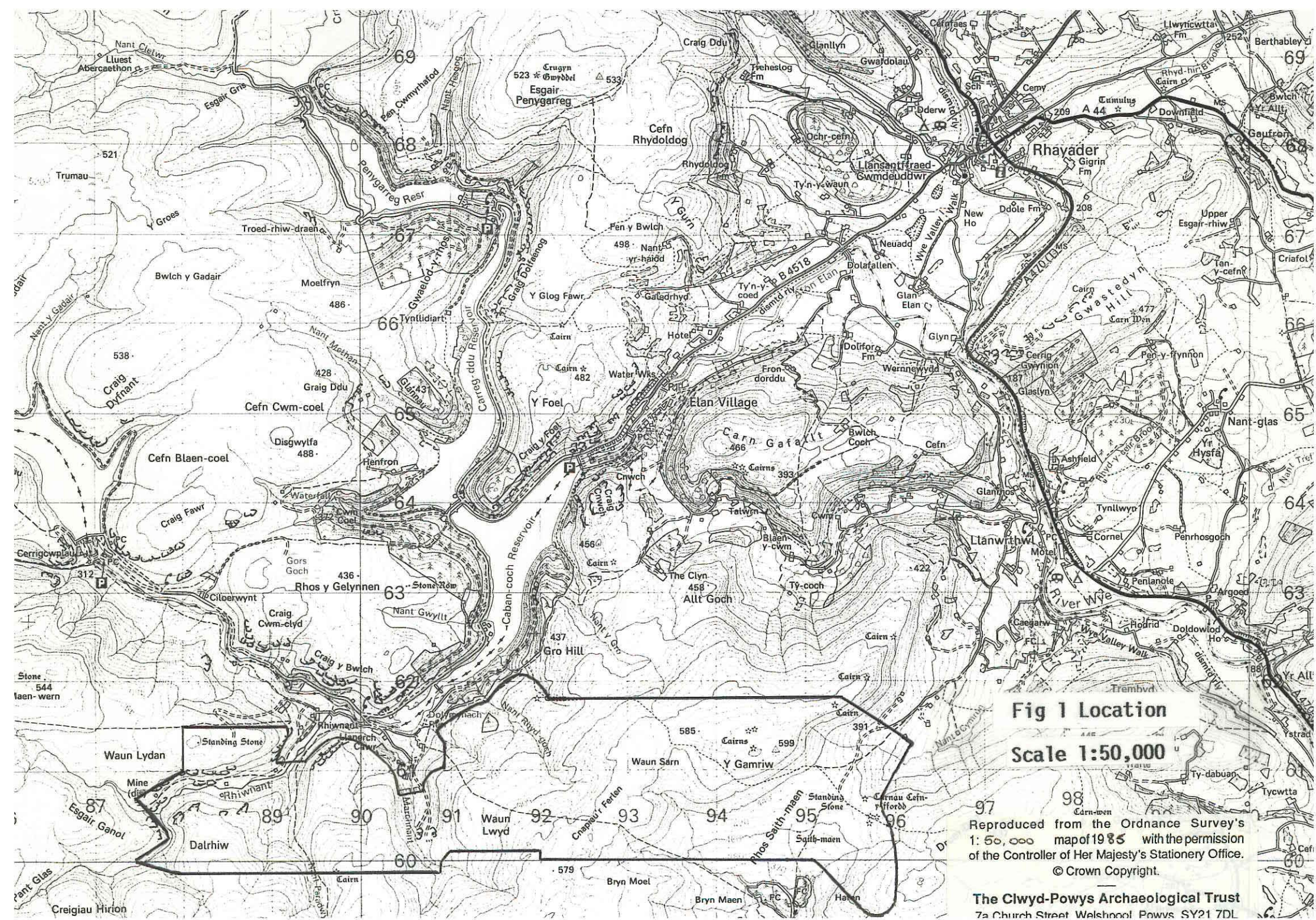


## Annex 1

Prn	Ngr1	Type1	Period1	Altitude
16532	SN91596141	Cairn	Prehistoric ?	400
16533	SN91546121	Cairn ?	Undated	430
16534	SN91886138	Hafod ?	Medieval/Post-medieval	410
16535	SN91856143	Hut platform ?	Medieval ?	400
16536	SN91826146	Hafod	Medieval/Post-medieval	400
16537	SN91796150	Platform/Structure	Medieval	390
16538	SN91826155	Enclosure/fold	Prehistoric	390
16539	SN91806156	Hafod	Medieval	390
16540	SN91786157	Enclosure	Prehistoric	390
16541	SN92026150	Cairn	Bronze Age	430
16542	SN92396091	Shelter ?	Post-medieval	510
16543	SN92086156	Standing stone ?	Prehistoric ?	430
16544	SN92006191	Cairn	Bronze Age ?	380
16545	SN95326056	Ring cairn ?	Bronze Age	415
16546	SN95545967	Hut circle/Shelter ?	Undated	440
16547	SN95505961	Ring cairn/Shelter ?	Undated	435
16548	SN95405956	Cairns	Bronze Age ?	430
16549	SN95485949	Shelter and Ring cairn	Post-medieval and Bronze	445
16550	SN91406086	Cairn	Bronze Age	460
16551	SN91256074	Shelter	Modern	470
16552	SN91336063	Boundary bank	Prehistoric ?/Medieval ?	475
16554	SN90556056	Sheep pens and dip	Early modern	350
16555	SN90645989	Shelter	Post-medieval	415
16556	SN90755995	Hafod ?	Medieval ?	400
16557	SN90755999	Hafod ?	Post-medieval ?	395
16558	SN90706004	Structure ?	Undated	390
16559	SN95815995	Shelter ?	Medieval/Post-medieval	450
16560	SN95845993	Shooting butt	Post-medieval	460
16561	SN95805962	Shooting butt ?/Shelter	Post-medieval	480
16562	SN96185983	Quarry ?	Undated ?	500
16563	SN96185987	Shelter and fold	Medieval/Post-medieval	500
16564	SN96396018	Shelter	Medieval/Post-medieval	505
16565	SN96446000	Shooting butt	Post-medieval	500
16566	SN96655992	Shelter	Medieval/Post-medieval	500
16567	SN89826126	Field barn	Post-medieval	395
16568	SN90106102	Field system	Post-medieval	390
16569	SN89316120	Hafod ?	Medieval/Early	285
16570	SN89226075	Quarry	Early modern	330
16571	SN89166056	Hafod	Medieval/Early	345
16572	SN89176045	Fold	Post-medieval	360
16573	SN88936021	Hafod/Hafotai	Medieval/Early	395
16574	SN88956031	Shelter	Medieval/Post-medieval	375
16575	SN88916032	Building ?	Undated	375
16576	SN89136066	Cist cairn	Bronze Age	345
16577	SN89146070	Cist cairn	Bronze Age	345
16578	SN89166093	Trial shafts	Post-medieval	300
16579	SN88696060	Quarry	Early modern	360
16580	SN87185980	Hafod	Medieval/Early	420
16581	SN87125985	Hut/Fold	Medieval/Post-medieval	425
16582	SN87636005	Hafod/Hafotai	Medieval	400
16583	SN87676010	Sheepfold	Post-medieval	405
16584	SN87786016	Fold	Medieval/Post-medieval	400
16585	SN88496085	Fold	Post-medieval	325
16586	SN89796063	Ring cairn	Bronze Age	415
16587	SN89626011	Peat cutting	Post-medieval	480

## Annex 1

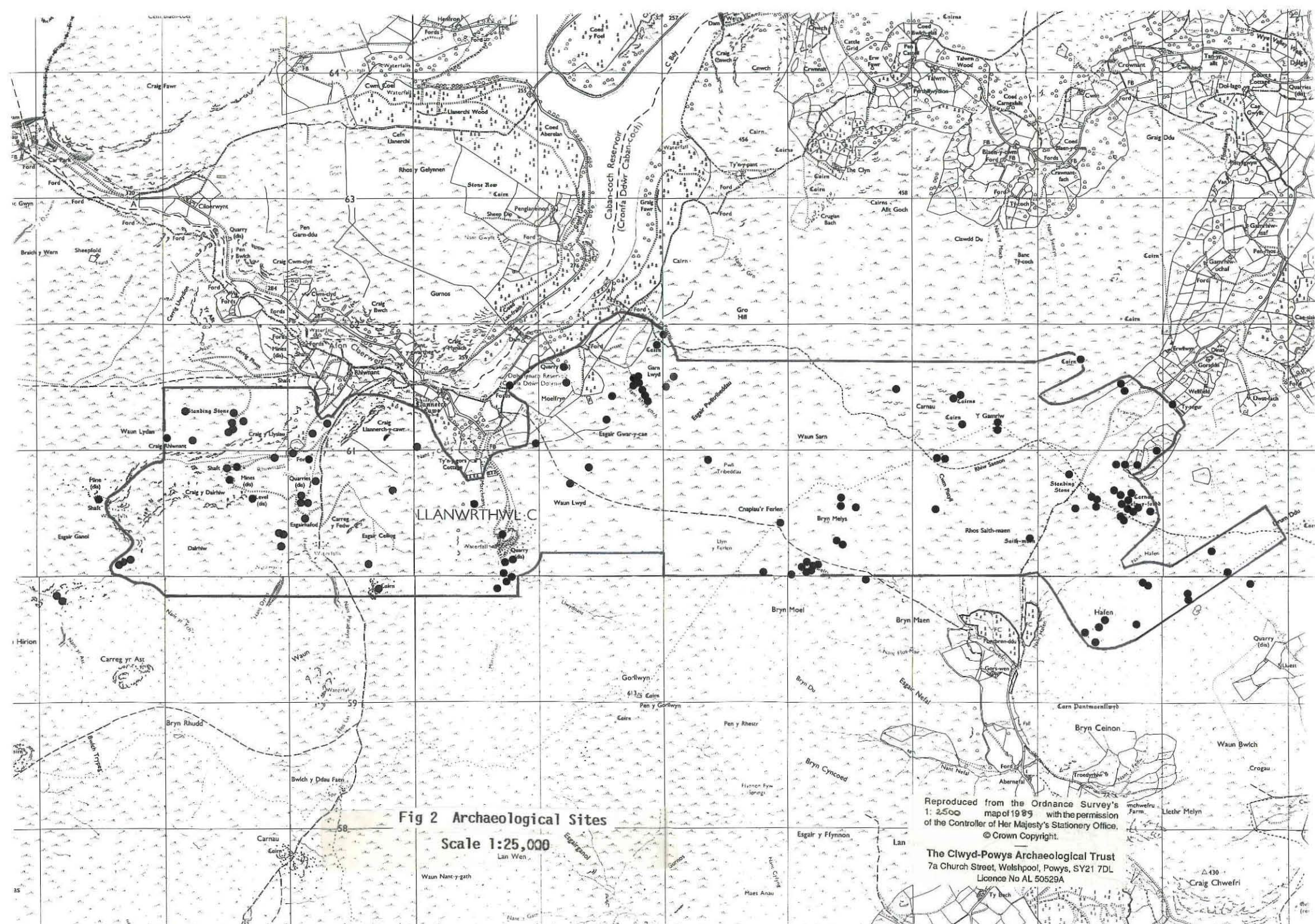
Prn	Ngr1	Type1	Period1	Altitude
16588	SN88636124	Hut Circle	Prehistoric	465
16589	SN88566132	Cairn ?	Undated	465
16590	SN88566124	Hut Circle	Prehistoric	470
16591	SN88556120	Stock enclosure	Prehistoric	470
16592	SN88526117	Hut Circle	Prehistoric	470
16593	SN88236110	Shelter	Post-medieval	480
16594	SN88036109	Shelter	Post-medieval	480
16595	SN88896093	Hafod?	Medieval/Post-medieval	285
16596	SN88896093	Dipping Pool ?	Post-medieval	295
16597	SN94186050	Cairn ?	Undated	445
16598	SN93436022	Cairn ?	Undated	440
16599	SN93396024	Shelter ?	Medieval/Post-medieval ?	445
16600	SN92886047	Stone Setting	Undated	555
16601	SN92776005	Enclosure	Post-medieval	535
16602	SN90786153	Farmstead	Post-Med	270
18994	SN88676090	Copper/Lead mine	Early modern	315



**Fig 1 Location**  
**Scale 1:50,000**

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**Fig 2 Archaeological Sites**

Scale 1:25,000

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Wauan Nancy-gath

Craig Chwefri