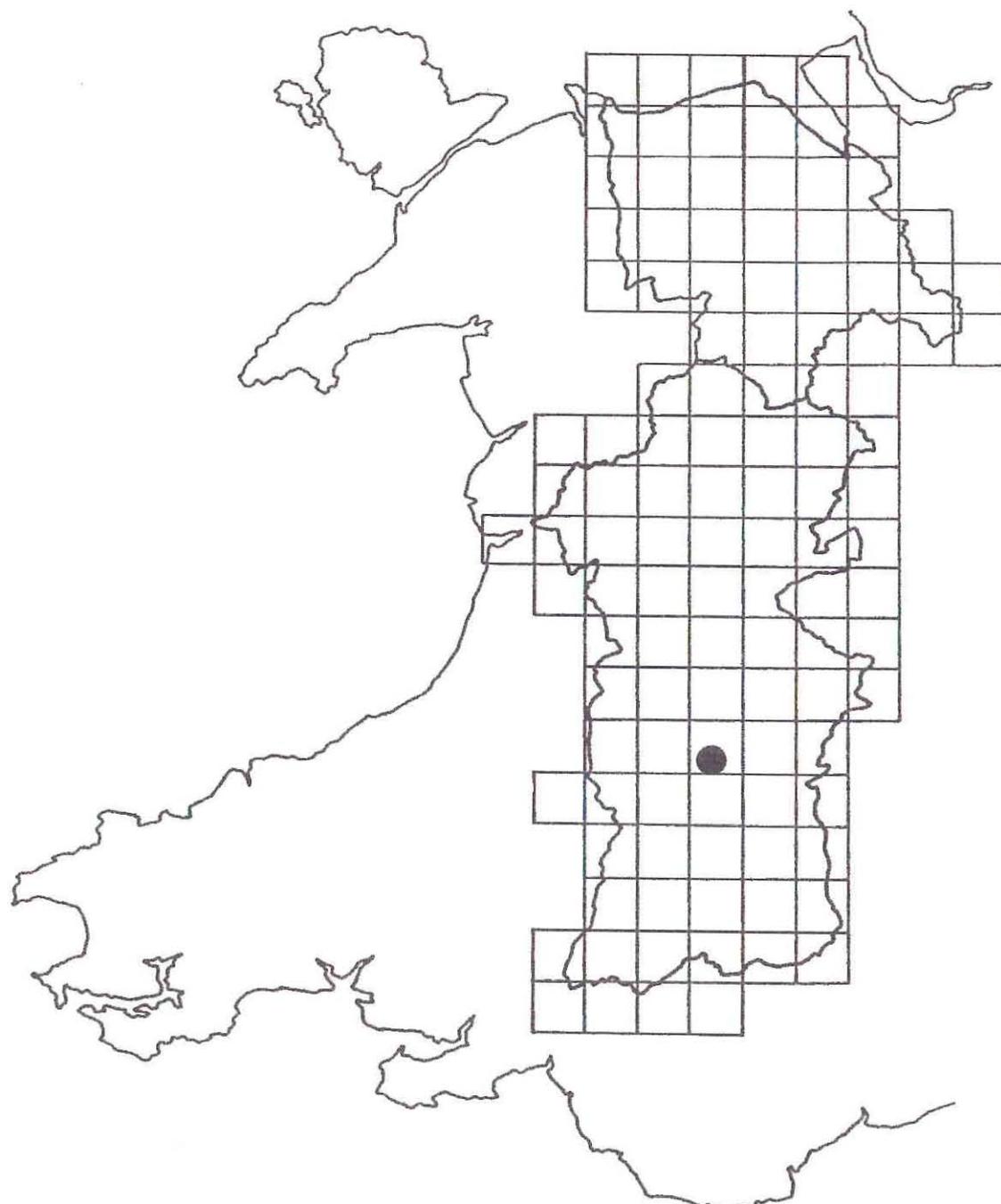


The Archaeology of Llanellwedd Rocks

FIELD SURVEY



CPAT Report No186

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Report prepared for Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 Llanelwedd Rocks represent the south-western extremity of a craggy upland ridge that stretches northwards past Carneddau to Gilwern Hill and beyond. The quarry (centred at SO 050 521) which has removed some of Llanelwedd Rocks and is the stimulus for this study lies on the north flank of the River Wye with the Royal Welsh Showground on lower ground immediately to the west and the market town of Builth Wells less than one kilometre away on the opposite bank of the river (Fig. 1). The river here forms the boundary between the two historic counties of Radnorshire and Breconshire, now both part of Powys.
- 1.2 That part of Llanelwedd Rocks that remains unquarried presents an appearance of rocky outcrops, frequently linear in form, interspersed with level or gently sloping terraces that run along the contours. Together these rise up to give a tiered effect, broadly lying on a north/south axis. On the northern edge of the area under consideration the ground drops into a dry valley which separates Llanelwedd Rocks from Carneddau Farm, and on the east by a valley carrying a small stream southwards.

2 Quarrying at Llanelwedd

- 2.1 Llanelwedd Rocks are of Ordovician age and comprise igneous lavas, ashes and tuffs (Davies *et al* 1983, 107). Basalt is the main rock quarried and there are shales and some sandstones around the periphery. The overlying soils are classed within the Malvern Association of typical brown podzolic soils in shallow drift that are widespread over igneous rocks in western Britain (Rudeforth *et al* 1984). The Rocks are of some interest for their flora and a major part has been classified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).
- 2.2 The extraction of stone from this hillside for local works probably has a long history but is unlikely to be properly documented. Certainly by the time the first large-scale Ordnance Survey map was produced for the region in 1891, there were small-scale quarries being worked along the edge of the old track that ran along the western edge of the hill and preceded the turnpike road (the present A483T) as the main route northwards towards Newtown. By the early years of the present century the exploitation, though still on a limited scale and restricted to the south and west fringes of the hill was sufficient to warrant the use of travelling cranes.
- 2.3 It was probably only after the Second World War that quarrying started to make substantial inroads into the hill. By the mid 1960s the British Quarrying Co Ltd was exploiting the 'Llanelwedd Granite Quarries' at several places, north of the road from Builth Wells to Kington (A481). Sometime after this date quarrying rights were acquired by Amey Roadstone Corporation, and subsequently passed to ARC South Wales. More recently the registration of an Interim Development Order (IDO) outstanding from the late 1940s and its acceptance, subject to certain conditions, by the Mineral Planning Authority for Powys has defined the area within which the quarry can expand up until the year 2042.
- 2.4 Ultimately the quarry may extend 1.3km north from the A481, the northern end being almost in line with Carneddau Farm, with a maximum width of around 600m where it is defined by existing public rights-of-way to east and west. In keeping with standard quarrying practice there will be a 'buffer zone' between the quarry edge and the perimeter of the permission zone. It should also be noted that ARC South Wales also has the right to extend the quarry eastwards to Geuallt and in line with the farm called Gelli Gadwgan. This area is not included in the current archaeological study.

3 The Present Situation

- 3.1 ARC South Wales have a leasehold tenancy on that part of Llanelwedd Rocks for which they have planning permission. The owners are the Howell Family through their solicitor, Mr T. Howell of Caversham, Berkshire, and the grazier is Mr Hackley of Carneddau Farm nearby.

- 3.2 The rate at which the quarry is expanding is not uniform. Extraction is inevitably led to some extent by demand, and if a major contract was awarded, for say a new local road, it would be extended rather more quickly than the present rate of progress.

4 Previous Archaeological Research

Note: the term PRN stands for Primary Record Number whereby each archaeological site and find in Powys is given a unique reference number. Data for that archaeological site or find is referenced by that number in the computerised Sites and Monuments Record for the county which is held at the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust's (CPAT) offices in Welshpool.

- 4.1 There are no known antiquarian records of archaeological sites on Llanellwedd Rocks. That features of interest on the hillside were recognised appears to have been due to the interest shown by the local rector, the Reverend D. Edmondson Owen, who can be credited with the discovery of a number of features, probably in the early years of this century.
- 4.2 In 1906 Owen opened a cairn which from the description that appeared in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (AC) in 1911 must be one of the extant sites on the hill (PRN 1611). A central cist was discovered beneath a large capstone and while there can be little doubt that this is a Bronze Age burial cairn, the absence of a 'vase' in it (Owen 1948, 6), permits no further deductions.
- 4.3 Owen also recognised several long mounds which he assumed were barrows of an earlier date, though with hindsight we know them to be 'pillow mounds', a slightly idiosyncratic term applied to a range of earthworks which were constructed as artificial rabbit warrens, generally in the post-medieval era (RCAHMW 1982; Williamson and Loveday 1988). One such mound (PRN 1610) was dug into by Owen prior to 1909. A trench across the mound revealed a rough stone trench which reportedly ran the full length of the earthwork. Earth in the bottom of the trench was black and under the microscope "was found to contain burnt bone" (Howell 1909). This bone was subsequently identified as human, though by whom and on what basis is unknown, because unfortunately the sole copy of a report on the excavations was lost after it had been submitted to the editor of *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (RCAHMW 1911, xiv). Owen's notes were passed to W.E. Aubrey Thomas by his widow but his published commentary (Owen 1948) contains no additional information.
- 4.4 No reference to the number of mounds that he had encountered on Llanellwedd Rocks was made by Owen, but only a couple of years later the Royal Commission in its Radnorshire Inventory stated that there are "a number of long low mounds which have been reputed to be sepulchral barrows. They occur in groups of eight or ten together, and as a rule are ranged side by side. Their average length is 14 feet, with a breadth of from 3 to 4 feet" (RCAHMW 1913, 83), and often had a stone showing at each end. This constitutes the sole indicator of how many pillow mounds may once have been constructed on the lower slopes of the hill. Conceivably we might assume a minimum of 18 mounds though later commentators utilising the Royal Commission's statement have assumed a single group and quoted a figure of 8 to 10 while Howell (1909) cited a figure of between 10 and 12.
- 4.5 By 1965 many of the mounds had been destroyed, but a surviving example under threat from the proposed expansion of the quarry was brought to the attention of the Royal Commission and they were invited to excavate it by the then Ministry of Public Buildings and Works. Two further mounds were subsequently identified and excavated, all by C.J. Spurgeon.
- 4.6 The first mound (PRN 1623), 27.5m long by 5.5m wide, consisted of two layers of gravel sandwiching a complex pattern of stones, indicative of the artificial burrows found beneath other pillow mounds in Wales; it also had shallow side ditches. Beneath one end of the mound was a shallow pit containing more than 100 sherds of Neolithic pottery, an apparently isolated indicator of occupation in that excavation beyond the edges of the mound produced no further material, though general statements on the work note the discovery of flint flakes as well (Spurgeon 1969). The excavator's favoured interpretation is that the lower part, at least, is Neolithic in origin. The second mound (PRN 4101) also contained a pattern of stones. Details on the third mound (PRN 33864) are sketchy. 10.6m long and only sampled, its make-up consisted solely of small stones (RCAHMW 1982, 319), but even its location was not recorded.

- 4.7 These excavations, like their predecessors, have never been written up and published, and no plan of the Llanelwedd Rocks area is known to exist showing the location of the excavated sites. There is however, a report in typescript on the pottery (Lynch and Darvill 1981), and a short article on a pollen sample from beneath one of the mounds (Crampton 1967).
- 4.8 During the 1960s staff of the Royal Commission were actively recording the remaining archaeology on the hill, though their records, now in the National Monument Record at the Royal Commission's headquarters at Aberystwyth, demonstrate some differences of opinion on the authenticity of specific sites and incidentally highlight the difficulties in distinguishing man-made from natural features. One investigator recorded an unopened cairn just to the south of PRN 1611 and at least two other about 100m to the north-west. These were all rejected by one of his colleagues, though one may be an extant cairn (PRN 33881: see below). Three hut circles - the 'old Goidel hut' of a note in the *Transactions of the Woolhope Field Club* in 1937 in the rocks (PRN 3789) were referred to in Owen's notes (Owen 1948), but again dismissed as natural, while an upright stone (PRN 3790), 0.61m high, might have been the stump of an ancient monolith but its authenticity was uncertain. A small ruined building (PRN 33860) was depicted on early Ordnance Survey maps and was visited in the 1960s. This like the fine earthwork of a cockpit (PRN 3787) has now gone. Other sites that have entered the record may be no more than misattributions: an example is the cairn circle referred to in 1948 (Howell 1948, 7) was thought by a Royal Commissioner investigator to be a wrongly located reference to the opened cairn (PRN 1611).
- 4.9 Further visits to the area were made by Field Investigators from the Ordnance Survey in the early 1970s, and by staff of CPAT's Radnorshire Archaeological Survey in 1978. By the time of the latter some of the sites previously noted by the RCAHMW had been destroyed by the quarry.
- 4.10 The archaeology of Llanelwedd Rocks has never been well recorded on large-scale Ordnance Survey maps, but a recent edition of the 25" map does depict a 'mound' at SO 0481 5233 which is almost certainly PRN 4101. The uncertainty surrounding this particular earthwork highlights a problem which is particularly acute at Llanelwedd Rocks, namely the difficulty of achieving precise locations for the features mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs: it is one of the enduring problems encountered by every researcher.

5 The 1996 Archaeological Survey (Figs 2- 4)

- 5.1 The absence of a clear statement on the nature of the surviving archaeology of Llanelwedd Rocks coupled with the realisation that much of what remained was likely to disappear as the quarry was extended under the 1992 IDO registration, resulted in proposals from Cadw and CPAT for a detailed assessment of the archaeology on the undisturbed ground to the north of the quarry. ARC South Wales and the landowners readily co-operated in allowing access and the survey was undertaken in June 1996. Two stages were envisaged in the study. The first comprised a rapid but methodical examination of the land within the quarry permission zone but outside the current quarry boundary, using fieldwork techniques developed by CPAT in upland work over several years. This was followed by a measured survey of the archaeology using an electronic distance measuring equipment (EDM), the results from which are given in the plans accompanying this report.
- 5.2 In what follows the archaeology is discussed by site type in order to facilitate analysis. Where a site found during the survey could be definitely equated with a previously recorded feature (e.g. PRN 1611), the number has been retained. For reasons outlined above (para 4.10), it has proved difficult to equate earlier records with what is now visible, and where there are any doubts (e.g. PRN 33881), a new number has been allocated. Brief descriptions of both the lost sites and those recovered during the present survey are to be found in the gazetteer at the end of this report.
- 5.3.1 Burial Cairns Two cairns, probably of Bronze Age date, survive within 120m of the present quarry boundary. That dug into by the Reverend Owen in 1906 (PRN 1611) is immediately recognisable because of its displaced capstone and open cist (Figs 3 & 5). It lies on level ground at the north end of a linear rock outcrop, just above a former cultivation terrace.

- 5.3.2 A second cairn (PRN 33881), 140m to the north-west on a lower cultivation terrace, reveals no distinguishing features other than a hollow in its top and a fan of spoil to the west indicating that it too has been dug into at some point in the past. As with the first cairn, this earlier investigation appears to have concentrated on a central burial, though there is no indication that it was ever found and the remainder of the mound is apparently undisturbed.
- 5.4 Pillow Mounds No mounds survive in the unquarried area.
- 5.5.1 Buildings Less than 200m to the north of the quarry perimeter is a group of three structures (Fig 4), now separated by modern fences but possibly parts of the same complex originally. The focal structure of the group is likely to be PRN 33887 which, terraced into the slope and with its fireplace still discernible, is almost certainly a house, perhaps medieval but more likely to be post-medieval in date.
- 5.5.2 Thirty metres or so the west of PRN 33887 are the disturbed foundations of a second rectangular structure (PRN 33883), its west end formed by a natural rock scarp, its sides showing as discontinuous drystone wall bases, but its east end destroyed by a track. Both of these lie partly inside and partly outside the quarry permission zone.
- 5.5.3 Forty metres to the south is the drystone walling of a third structure, terraced, perhaps quite deeply into the slope, and perhaps having two rooms, the second at a lower level than the first (PRN 33882).
- 5.5.4 Field and/or enclosure boundaries (see below) appear to provide links between these three structures without necessarily demonstrating their contemporaneity. Again some of these lie partly within and partly outside the quarry permission.
- 5.5.5 An isolated rectangular structure (PRN 33888) with orthostatic foundations is placed adjacent to a field wall on the extreme northern edge of the quarry permission. A field barn is perhaps the most logical interpretation.
- 5.6 Boundaries These take various forms including earthen banks, stone revetted banks and, on the western perimeter, a stone wall. The majority relate to the field pattern that was in place when the first large-scale Ordnance Survey maps were drawn up towards the end of the last century, even if they have now been abandoned or superseded by wire fences. A small group of banks (Fig 4), frequently stone-faced, run along and across the terrace occupied by the group of three buildings noted above. They do not form a truly coherent pattern and in places have been obliterated by later activity. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that a single system is represented.
- 5.7 Cultivation terraces Broad, relatively flat and largely stoneless terraces are found in several places, most noticeably on the west flank of the hill in the vicinity of the burial cairns (PRNs 1611 & 33881) and the clearance cairns (PRN 33861). The date of the earliest cultivation in this area is unknown. It could have occurred prior to the construction of the Bronze Age cairns, but this cannot be demonstrated from fieldwork alone. Such terraces could have been utilised at different times, right up to the early modern era. An apparent association with clearance cairns exists in places.
- 5.8.1 Clearance cairns These fall into two groups. A group of three lie on the terrace south of the second cairn (PRN 33881) and within 60m of the quarry boundary. The terrace here shows signs of pasture improvement in the past, and it is quite possible that the cairns relate to a phase of improvement, not necessarily the most recent, but again probably not of any great age. Dumped stone occurs elsewhere on these terraces, and these cairns are just the most obvious manifestations of local stone clearance.
- 5.8.2 A second group are widely distributed in a field of improved pasture, 250-300m to the east, and there are others scattered in fields to the north. Again, though such features are inherently undatable, it seems likely that they are relatively recent in origin.
- 5.9 Shelters A pair of small platforms (PRN 33885) against natural rock faces and with stones defining their edges are set just above one of the terraces. A post-medieval date for what were probably simple shelters (for shepherds?) seems plausible, and there is a further somewhat more substantial example (PRN 33886) north of the building complex, in the field immediately to the north of the permission.

- 5.10 Tracks West of the quarry are at least two hollowed trackways running tangentially down the slope. The more obvious example (PRN 33884) runs along the uphill side of what was once a field boundary though few traces of this now remain.
- 5.11 Palaeoenvironmental potential There are two boggy, rush-filled lows just to the west of the building complex, and further boggy areas in improved pasture on the ground just above the eastern valley. None of these, however, appears to have an obvious peat component, and their palaeoenvironmental potential is thus limited. Much more useful in this context would be the boggy basin beyond Caer Fawr, about 400m north-east of the northern edge of the quarry permission. More likely are buried soils beneath the cairns and these together with deposits beneath the field banks could provide significant palaeoenvironmental data.
- 5.12 In summary there are two cairns of putative Bronze Age date, both of which appear to have been partially disturbed. However, the early excavations almost certainly focused solely on the primary cists and the remainder of the cairns appear undisturbed. It seems likely that the stratigraphy of the mound and any secondary burials remain intact and that the ground surface beneath the cairns, which could contain evidence of earlier activity, will be well preserved.
- 5.13 There is also a complex of structures, perhaps comprising a farm with associated enclosures, which may be early post-medieval though they could go back to the medieval era. The level of preservation is variable but the main structure appears to be in relatively sound condition with the back walls standing to a height which could be in excess of 1m.
- 5.14 Finally there is a range of features which are undated but probably post-medieval/early modern in date, including some field boundaries, clearance cairns and trackways.
- 5.15 Brief descriptions of all these features can be found in the gazetteer at the end of this report while full descriptions are incorporated in the site archive prepared by CPAT and housed at their offices in Welshpool.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1.1 It is evident that the more important surviving archaeological features on Llanelwedd Rocks - the two prehistoric cairns and the complex of buildings with their apparently associated enclosure banks - will be destroyed or disturbed by quarrying in the not too distant future, almost certainly within three to four years, and possibly sooner, on the basis of information from the quarry manager.
- 6.1.2 This destruction will occur, not during stone extraction, but as a prelude to it when surface material is stripped off, usually by outside contractors whose timetable is only broadly determined by the quarry operators.
- 6.1.3 There is no obvious means of preserving this archaeology, and full excavation of the cairns and selective excavation of the buildings and their associated enclosures would seem to offer the only realistic alternative.
- 6.1.4 Such a programme should also allow for the possibility that archaeology may exist in the space between the cairns and along the terraces beside them, and it would be appropriate to introduce a sampling strategy to establish the potential of the terrace areas.
- 6.2 Palaeoenvironmental data from the excavations together with information from the earlier study by Crampton (1967) should be tied into a framework which could be established by sampling the peat deposits in the basin to the north of Caer Einon, thereby enabling the archaeology to be placed within a broader context of cultural landscape development.

7 Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Mr M.Frampton and Mr C.Nottage of ARC South Wales, and Mr T. Howell on behalf of the landowners for facilitating the field survey; to Mr J. Spurgeon and information on his excavations of pillow mounds in the 1960s; to the staff at the NMR for assistance in locating relevant information; and to Ms A. Caseldine for advice on the palaeoenvironmental aspects of the work. The EDM survey was undertaken by N.W.Jones and W.J.Owen of CPAT and the illustrations were prepared by B.V.Williams.

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a) Printed Works

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NMR Files, Aberystwyth (various dates)

SMR Documentation at Welshpool (various dates)

c) *Maps*

Ordnance Survey 1891 1:10560 1st Edition Radnorshire 32NW

Ordnance Survey 1904 1:2500 2nd Edition Radnorshire 32.01

Tithe Map of Llanelwedd Parish 1842

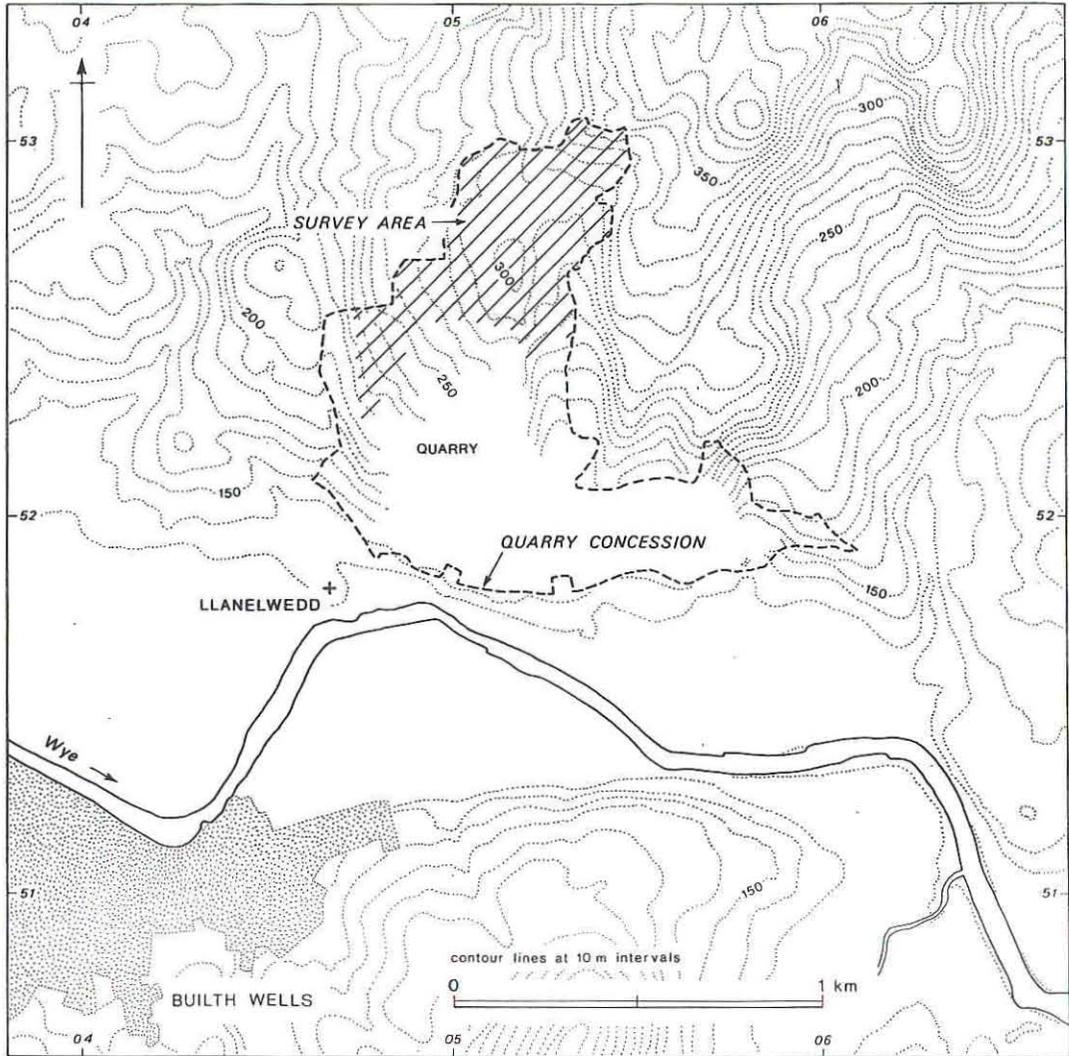


Fig 1 Llanelwedd Quarry: Location map

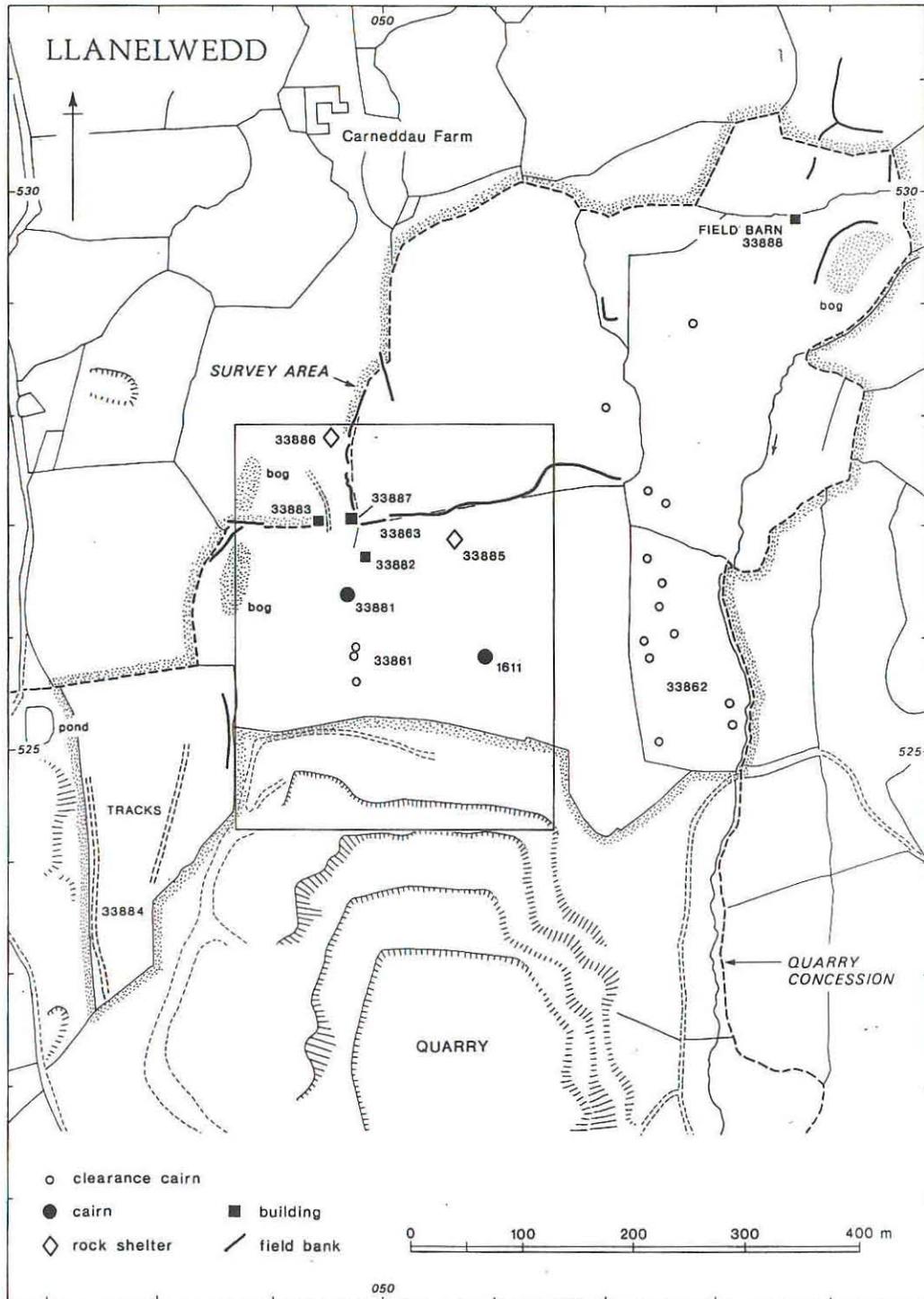


Fig 2 Llanelwedd Quarry: Existing quarry and archaeological sites

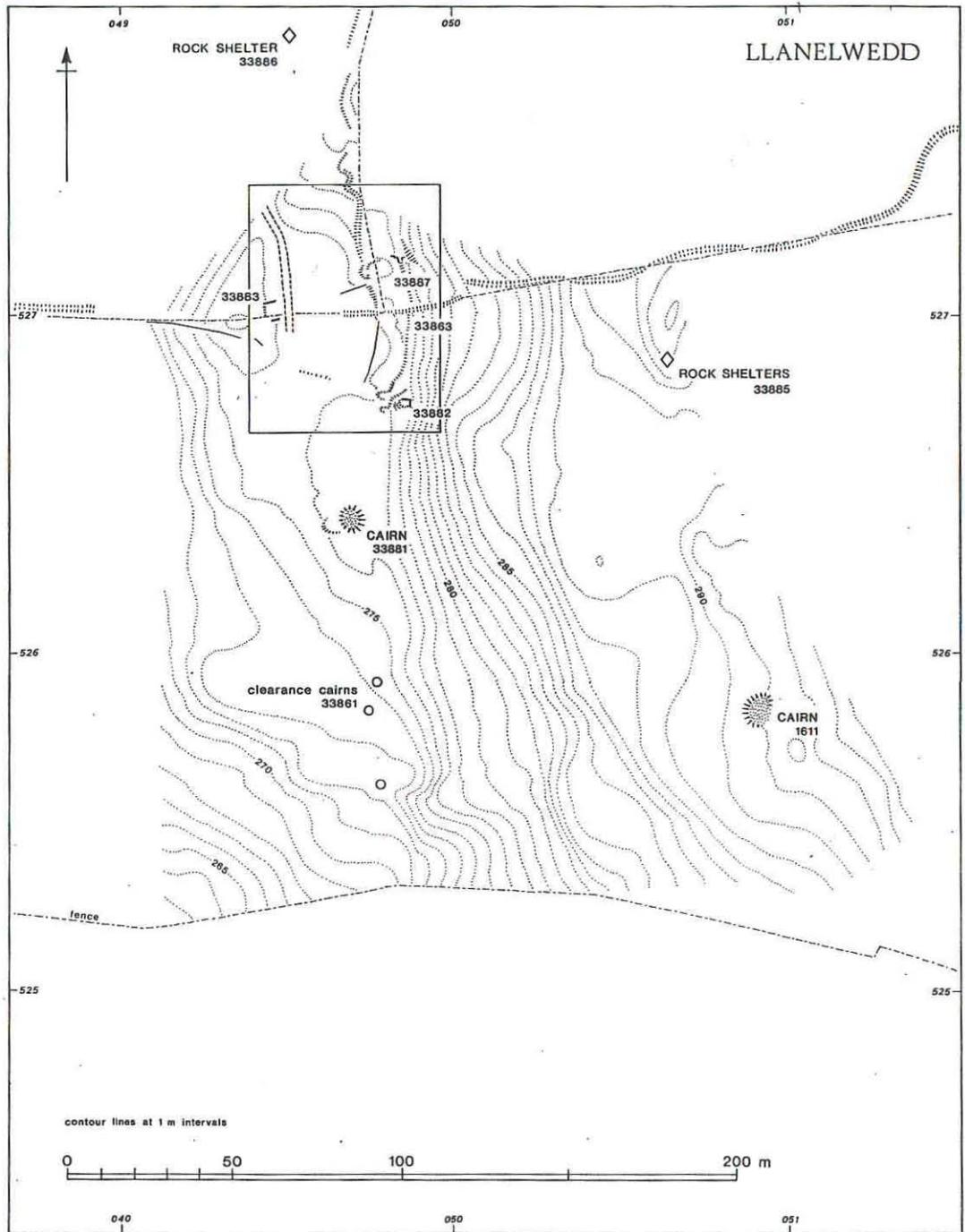


Fig 3 Llanelwedd Quarry: Sites immediately north of the quarry

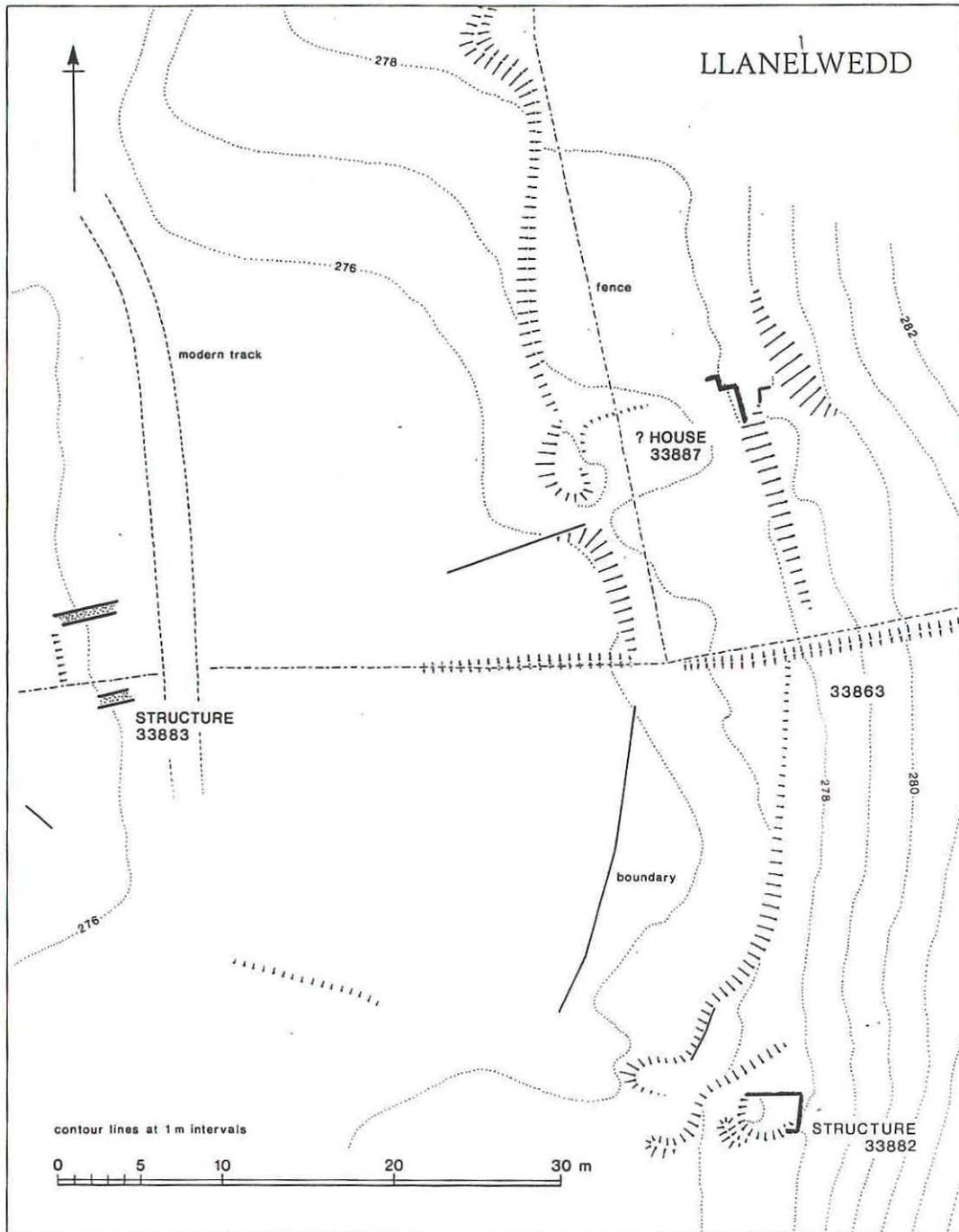
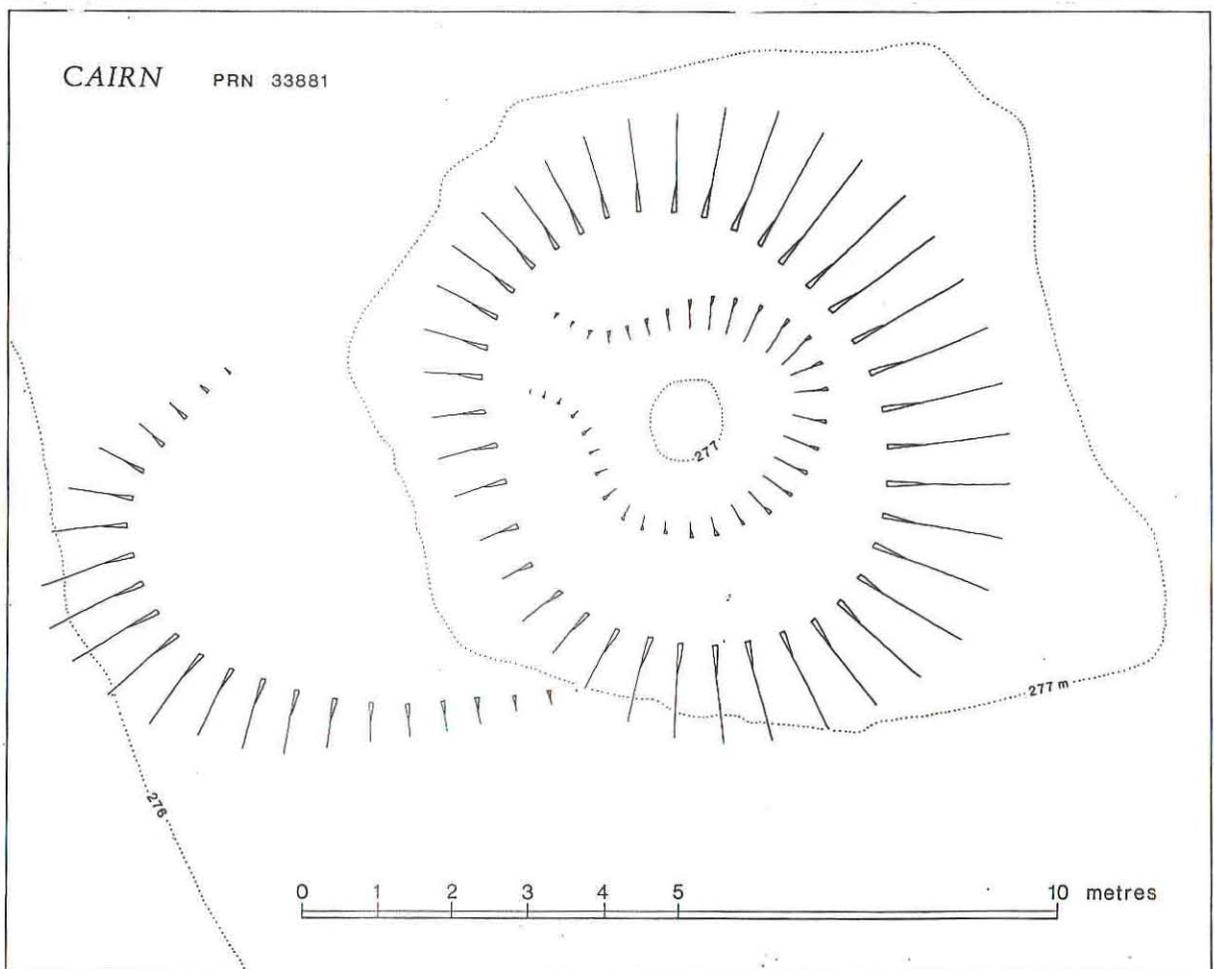
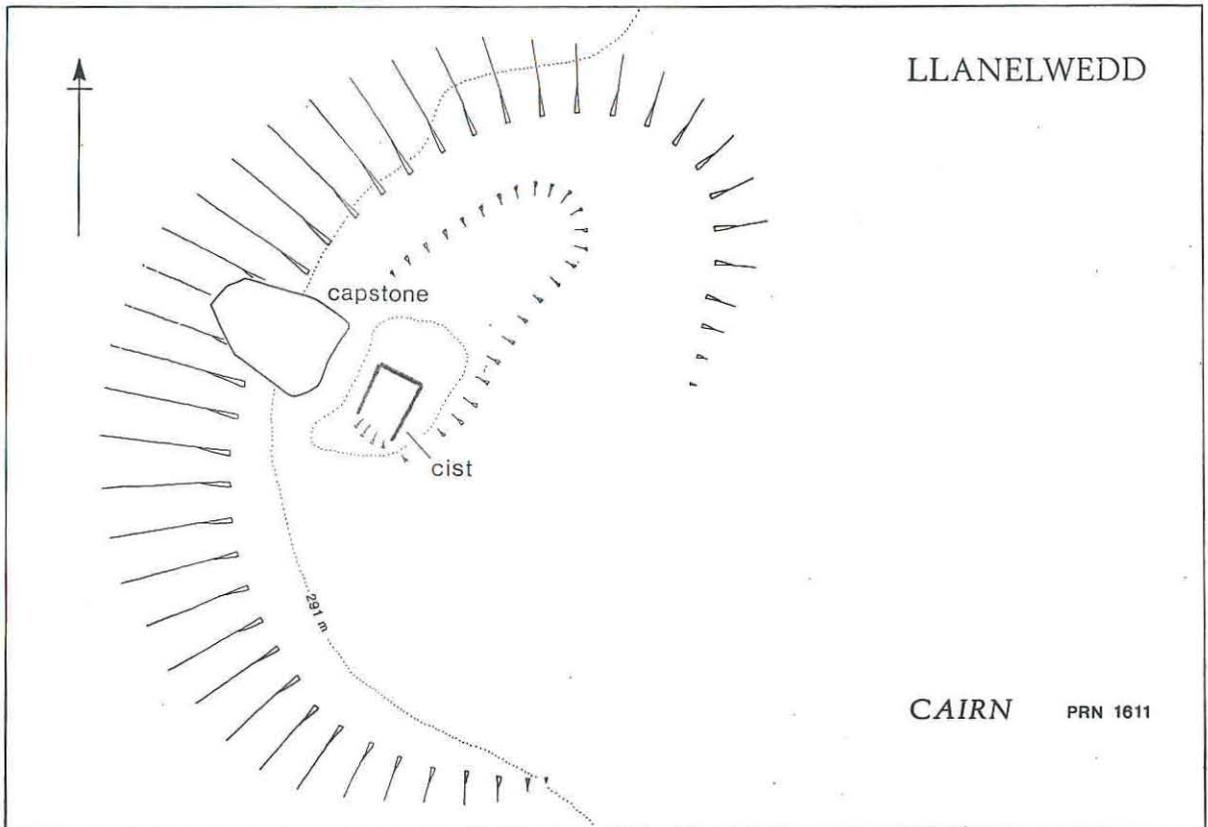


Fig 4 Llanelwedd Quarry: Buildings north of the quarry



GAZETTEER: EXTANT SITES

1611 Llanelwedd Rocks Cairn SO05095258

Round cairn Bronze Age

Cairn. c.11m NE-SW x 8m NW/SE x 0.7m high. Open cist, not centrally placed with capstone lying to NW. Further disturbance to NE could indicate second cist though there is no report of such a find. Site excavated in 1906 by local rector, but nothing found in cist.

3790 Big Wood Stone SO05285248

Boulder Unknown

Volcanic boulder, pyramidal in shape and perhaps the base of a standing stone; set on a slight rise. Consensus view is that it is unlikely to be a genuine antiquity.

33881 Llanelwedd cairn SO04965264

Round cairn Bronze Age

Medium sized cairn about 9m NW/SE by 7m+ NE/SW, with a hollowed centre and fan of spoil to the west of the mound, indicating that it has probably been opened in the past. Set on a level terrace in improved pasture.

33882 Llanelwedd structure SO04985267

Outbuilding Medieval?

Disturbed remains of a rectangular structure consisting of a hollowed are with one wall face showing on the N side, and dumped soil and stone to west which may mark an extension of the structure. Appears to be associated with one or more enclosure boundaries. Date uncertain but could be medieval.

GAZETTEER: EXTANT SITES

33863

Llanelwedd enclosure walls

S004965271

Bank

Post-medieval

Group of enclosure or field boundaries, generally fragmentary, in vicinity of PRNs 33882, 33883 and 33887. Frequently stone faced, some appear as earthen banks, other as scarps, and occasionally only the facing stones are visible. Grid reference given is a central one.