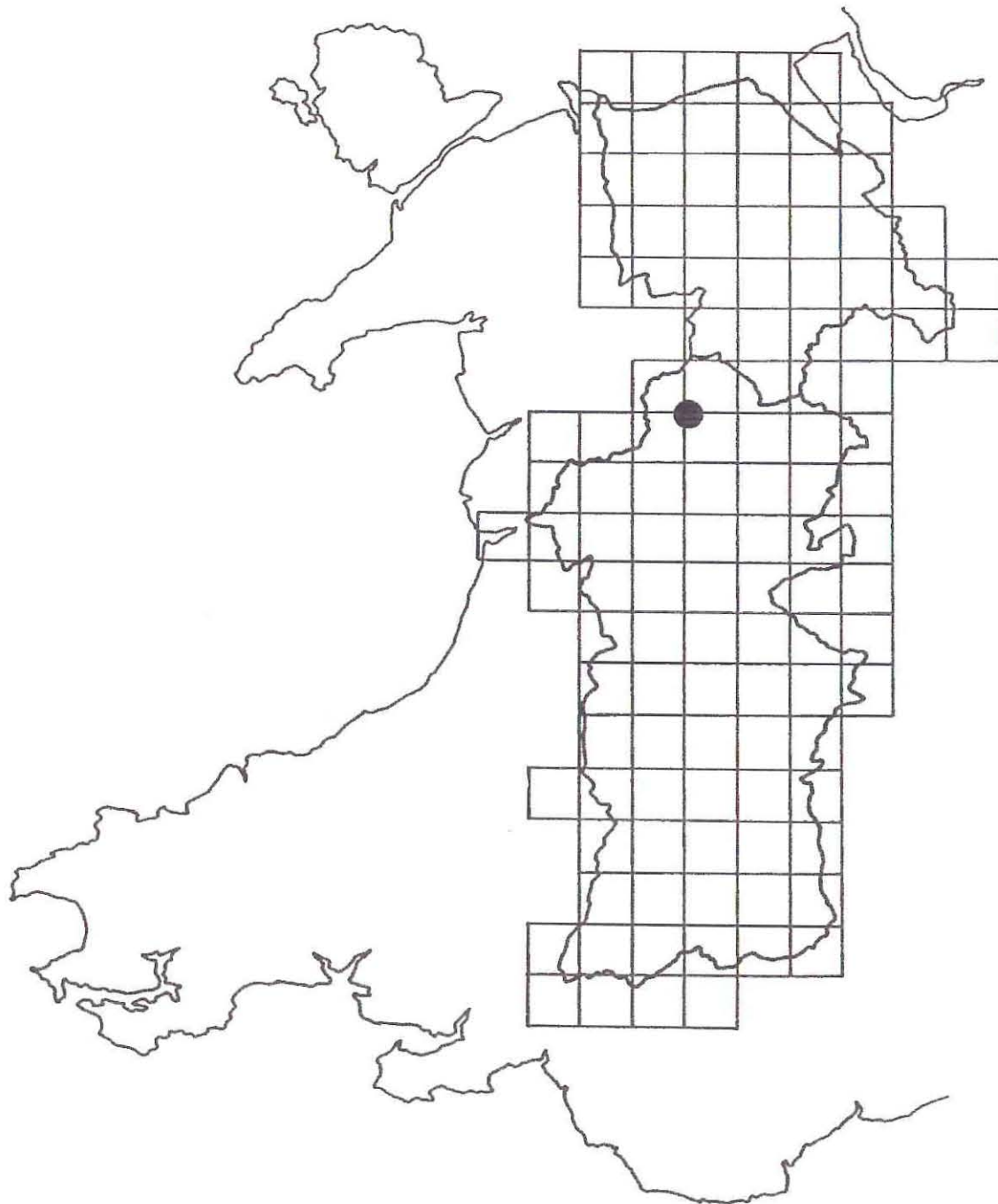


THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

*The Llanwddyn Hospitium, Powys*

FIELD SURVEY



CPAT Report No 187

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Report prepared for Severn Trent Water Ltd

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## 1 Introduction

1.1 The Hospitium at Llanwddyn on the ridge south of Lake Vyrnwy in western Montgomeryshire (Fig 1) has been signalled on larger-scale Ordnance Survey maps since the second half of the 19th century. It has been variously referred to as a hospice (PMFWI 1989, 122), a manor or manor house (Knowles and Hadcock 1953, 248; Rees 1947, 92), and a small [religious] house (RCAHMW 1913, 134; Morris 1982, 136), a confusing and unsatisfactory range of descriptions resulting from the acknowledged association with the Order of St John of Jerusalem, more generally termed the Knights Hospitallers, and in contrast the absence of a detailed examination of the site itself.

1.2 That the stone foundations of a rectangular building together with a 'well' have long been evident is clear from the Royal Commission description (1913,134), but even a cursory examination of the immediate area reveals the presence of well-preserved earthworks, clearly discernible on vertical aerial photographs, which go a considerable way to clarifying the role of the hospitium in the pre-Reformation era. Such sites are rare in North Wales. The standard work on the Knights Hospitallers in Wales by William Rees reveals only six holdings, and a full record of this site is thus all the more important. Catchment land around the lake is owned by Severn-Trent Water and as part of a wider programme of archaeological assessment they have funded a full survey of the hospitium site. The results are considered below.

## 2 The Background History

2.1 Little is known of the history of the Llanwddyn hospitium: the date at which the land was acquired by the Hospitallers and its function during the period that it was directly in their hands are not recorded. Of course the history of the Knights Hospitallers is well known. A fighting order of monks established in the Holy Land in the early 12th century, their first base in Britain was founded at Clerkenwell on the outskirts of London in c.1144. But in comparison with documentary survivals for the main religious orders, the records of the Hospitallers, especially for their remote holdings in the Welsh upland are sparse indeed (Rees 1947, 66). What can be said is that it was in their hands in 1338 when the Prior of the Order in England produced a detailed survey of all the Hospitallers' estates in England, Wales and Scotland (Rees 1947, 18). The administrative unit employed by the Order was the commandery (earlier known as the preceptory) each one acting as a focus for outlying estates, and as Aston (1993, 82) has pointed out these were more like contemporary manor houses than the monasteries of the contemplative orders. Llanwddyn came under the control of the preceptory of Halston which lay near the village of Whittington, a few miles to the east of Oswestry in western Shropshire. While it is conceivable that at an earlier date Llanwddyn may have fallen within the bailiwick of Dolgynwal (otherwise known as Ysppyty Ifan) in the upper reaches of the Conwy valley in north Wales, political rivalries between the secular rulers of Powys and Gwynedd make this unlikely and anyway by 1338 Dolgynwal had been merged with Halston (Rees 1947, 66).

2.2 By this time, too, the Hospitallers no longer had a direct interest in Llanwddyn but had leased it out for the sum of £5. It was still under lease, to a certain Mor[ice] ap David Lloyd at an annual rent of £7, two hundred years later when the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* was compiled, the lessee in 1535 enjoying 'the manorial prerequisites and the right to hold courts' (Rees 1947, 66).

2.3 Following hard on the dissolution of the great monastic orders, the Hospitallers were suppressed by Henry VIII in 1540. In 1559 the manor of Llanwddyn together with the church and its advowson were granted to George Lee and Thomas Bowyer (NLW: Aston Hall Deeds 2060); by c.1596 it was in the ownership of the Herbert family (Evans 1874, 67), from whom it descended to the Earls of Powis (Rees 1947, 92), and thence on the construction of Lake Vyrnwy in the late 19th century to the Liverpool Corporation Water Works and subsequently to Severn Trent Water.

2.4 In later centuries the site of the hospitium and its surrounding lands on the unenclosed waste above the River Vyrnwy seems to have remained only in local memory; the well if not the building may have continued to exert some importance, though there is no indication that it had particular healing properties (Jones 1992, 202). The 1559 grant mentions land called 'Tethyn y ffynnon', but unlike more recent centuries, nothing to tie the land to the monastic Order of St John. Lewis (1833) refers to St Wddyn's church as belonging to the Hospitallers but makes no mention of the estate lands to the south. However, the earliest Ordnance Survey maps, both the first edition of the 1" map (1837-39) and its manuscript predecessor, the Surveyors' original drawing (1832-3) depict Cefn Tre Ysppyty and Ffridd St John.



Clearly the Ordnance Surveyors encountered local information that maintained the tradition of monastic ownership and involvement centuries before.

2.5 That the exact site of the hospitium remained familiar to local people is demonstrated by a report in 1874 from the vicar of Llanwddyn which described the hospitium building, briefly recording its dimensions as 42 feet long by 15 feet wide. Later, in 1913 the Royal Commission described the ruins as being 'much overgrown with bracken and fern, but they appear to consist of an oblong building 40 feet by 20 feet. The walls stood 4 feet high within living memory but in the year 1875 they were thoughtlessly pulled down and the stones carted away to build a neighbouring non-Conformist chapel. In 1910, a fragment of what appears to have been a fluted stone pillar was found by Miss Maud Williams, Llanwddyn Vicarage, amongst these ruins. Immediately to the south side of the Hospitium there is a bank of earth and stone, enclosing a piece of ground 42 feet square, which was probably the garden of this lonely establishment.. Ffynnon y Myneich is an abundant well of copiously-running water immediately to the south..' (1913, 134).

### 3 The Site (Figs 2 & 3)

3.1 The hospitium is located on a broad interfluvial ridge between the drowned valley of the Vyrnwy on the north and a rather smaller valley carrying one of its tributaries, the Cownwy on the south. The ridge undulates with hillocks and hollows and feeding down to the Cownwy are a number of increasingly steep-sided valleys carrying small streams. Near the head of one of the more prominent streams, Nant y Ddwy Wern, is the hospitium occupying a natural bowl-like depression in the south-facing valley side. On an relatively inhospitable ridge which rises from 350m to over 500m OD this is certainly one of the more attractive positions.

3.2 As the Royal Commission recognised at the beginning of the century, the hospitium itself (Fig 2, A) now comprises only the foundations of the building. Loose stone is scattered across the artificially created platform as a result of the 19th-century destruction, but it is still possible to discern the outline of a rectangular stone building about 17m long and 6.5m wide. The back wall (on the north-west) has been almost wholly obliterated and in the long walls which rarely rise much above 0.3m in height there are two breaks that could define original entrances but equally might be the result of stone robbing. The structure is terraced into a gentle slope just above a damp rush-filled hollow extending down to the stream, and banked up around the terrace is a low ridge which forms the standard 'hood' of the medieval platform house (cf Gresham 1954).

3.3 Associated with the hospitium is a small rectangular embanked enclosure (B) immediately to the south, its entrance apparently on the side facing the building. There can be no doubt that this is the piece of ground interpreted as the garden by the Royal Commission (1913, 134). A second less regular plot is defined by a curving bank (C) beyond the hospitium platform.

3.4 Though what is described above is undoubtedly the main platform on the site there are three others in the immediate vicinity. A small platform, its end partially disturbed by the passage of traffic, lies 454m to the north and overlooks the hospitium site (F). With overall dimensions of around 17m by 8m, this platform almost certainly supported a structure of which there is now no surface trace. However, adjacent is a scatter of stone and though this has little form to it there are suggestions of a wall edge largely covered by turf. If this is the case it points to a later building partly overlapping the platform.

3.5 Another platform (G), 120m to the north-west of the hospitium, is set into the south-east facing flank of a small hillock just outside the hospitium's enclosure (H; see below). A little smaller than the previous example with overall dimensions of c.14m by 8m, this too shows no trace of a structure, and its location might suggest that there is no direct association with the hospitium.

3.6 The fourth platform is different in that the scoop in the slope contains a small embanked enclosure (E) with overall dimensions of 7m by 5m and considerably smaller internal measurements. Oval in shape with a small entrance gap on the south-west, this bank may well represent the collapsed foundations of a small structure, perhaps a hut, and as the scoop in which it is set appears to have been cut through medieval ridge and furrow (P), it too may not be part of the hospitium complex.

3.7 The other well-known feature is Ffynnon y Mynaich (or Myneich on earlier Ordnance Survey maps). Contrary to its name it is not a well but a spring (D), which traditionally produces considerable quantities



of water. Though heavily overgrown with rushes and other vegetation, it comprises a vertically sided pit less than a metre deep with a relatively shallow depth of water, and leading off it a channel the base of which appears in one place appears to have been shaped and flat slabs laid down.

3.8 Surrounding the hospitium building is a bank and ditch defining a rectangular enclosure of about 3.4ha (H). Both of its long sides fade out before reaching Nant y Ddwy Wern which almost certainly formed the southern side of the enclosure, and though there are intermittent stony banks (R) beside the stream these are not associated with the hospitium. In general, the bank is considerably less than one metre high and its accompanying ditch is relatively shallow; where the earthworks become more pronounced it is as a result of later re-use as on the east where a cross-ridge agricultural boundary (L) adopts the hospitium boundary, and on the west where the ditch appears to have been deepened through its utilisation as a trackway (M). The enclosure bank is in no way a defensive earthwork though no doubt it could have supported a substantial fence to offer some protection to the hospitium and its inhabitants.

3.9 The enclosure is divided into almost equal parts by a smaller bank (J), sometimes little more than a scarp accompanying by a shallow gully which fades out as it reaches the hospitium site. Its function appears to be to separate the upper, cultivated, section of the enclosure, from the lower part which is largely clear of all features but does contain Ffynnon y Myneich and is bounded by the stream. Cultivation of the upper part is revealed by insubstantial ridge and furrow (P) now visible over an area of about 0.57ha, though perhaps originally extending to the edges of the enclosure. The ridges are between 4.5-5.5m in width but rarely much more than 0.2m high. The absence of features to the south of the dividing bank points stock use.

3.10 Two features outside the main enclosure warrant attention. On the southern slopes above the valley of Nant y Ddwy Wern, east of the enclosure, is extensive ridge and furrow (Q). This can be traced for over 300m, almost to the edge of the enclosure surrounding the small post-medieval intake of Pant y Ffynnon. While there can be no absolute certainty that this larger tract of cultivation ridges is directly associated with the hospitium, the proximity of the two is strongly suggestive.

3.11 Any approach to the hospitium from the south necessitates crossing Nant y Ddwy Wern which flows down a steep-sided cut that inhibits easy crossing. The present track through the hospitium enclosure and on to the ridge to the south is not depicted on the earliest Ordnance Survey maps though this cannot be taken as clear evidence that it did not exist at the beginning of the 19th century. However, the bridge (N) that takes it across the stream is interesting because of its fine construction: well made drystone walling carry seven large flat capstones and the whole structure at 4.8m is unusually wide for an upland bridge. The possibility that it was built to facilitate traffic to the hospitium should not be discounted.

## 4 Discussion

4.1 Llanwddyn is usually termed a hospitium and because of this long-standing convention it will continue to be used in this report. It appears as such on maps and in written descriptions, yet it is misleading to interpret this term as a hospital. Some of the Hospitallers' preceptories might indeed have had infirmaries, as did many monastic establishments, but a more appropriate description would be a hospice, not in the modern use of the word, but in its original sense as a place of hospitality (Rees 1947, 22). However, whereas the Halston preceptory could legitimately be classed as an hospitium, there is no substantive evidence to indicate that the term was applied to Llanwddyn before the 19th century. Furthermore as Rees points out the fact that the holding was leased out in 1338 implies that it was unlikely to have functioned as a hospice (Rees 1947, 66).

4.2 In the hospitium building itself there is little sign of sophistication either in the form of the building or the materials used. The discovery of a fragment of a fluted stone pillar in 1910, and now presumed to be lost, is difficult to equate with what can currently be seen on the ground, and although it is conceivable that all of the better material has been robbed out, such an argument carries little conviction. Rather the evidence that remains points to a medieval stone house which was in no way out of the ordinary.

4.3 The limited range of buildings and other remains displayed on the site as whole - the crofts or small enclosure enclosures associated with the main structure, the sub-divided enclosure with evidence to indicate different functions for the different areas, the limited cultivation ridges within the enclosure and the much more extensive cultivation outside it, and the incorporation of a main water supply - all point to



a small self-contained farming establishment. Thus what we observe at Llanwddyn is a grange rather than a hospitium, the centre of an estate that initially provided produce for the commandery at Halston. That it had been leased to a lay tenant by the second quarter of the 14th century was not only a reflection of the times but also perhaps the clearest indicator of its remote location. Even as the crow flies Halston was 35km to the north-east, and in view of the difficult terrain that intervened the true distance was certainly much further.

4.4 There can be no certainty that the morphology of the site as it appears on the ground provides a clear representation of the grange as developed by the Hospitallers, for some of the features now apparent may have emerged during the lay tenancy. However, comparable sites in the Montgomeryshire uplands are rare, and nothing approaching the evidence from Llanwddyn has been encountered during fieldwork elsewhere around Lake Vyrnwy (Silvester 1994) or in the uplands further south (Silvester 1990; Owen and Silvester 1991). This suggests that the integrated medieval holding at Llanwddyn may well be in large part due to the Hospitallers.

## **5 The Future**

The Llanwddyn hospitium represents a discrete and relatively well-preserved farming establishment which was developed by the Hospitallers more than six hundred years ago. It has remained largely undisturbed since the Middle Ages, apart from the one documented episode of stone robbing in the Victorian era, and some current damage caused by four-wheel drive vehicle trials. The level of preservation and the historical associations with the Hospitallers combine to confer an unusual degree of importance on the Llanwddyn hospitium and it is to be hoped that Severn-Trent Water and their tenant can institute a management scheme that will ensure the protection of the earthworks. CPAT also considers that the site is of sufficient quality to merit statutory protection, and in this context appropriate recommendations will be made to Cadw.

## **6 Acknowledgements**

Thanks are due to Severn-Trent Water for funding the survey and to the former manager of their Lake Vyrnwy Estate, Mr Mike Duggleby, who facilitated the work; to the tenant farmers, Mr Brian Ellis and Mr Wyn Evans; to my colleagues, Nigel Jones, Richard Hankinson and Gareth Davies for their assistance with various aspects of the survey; and to Brian Williams for preparing the illustrations.

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## 8 Sources

### a) Aerial Photography

1994                Geonex 1:10000 Montgomeryshire: No. 10 84 193

### b) Maps

1832-3    Ordnance Survey Surveyor's Plan 332    Scale 2" to 1 mile.

1836                Ordnance Survey Sheet 60    Scale 1" to 1 mile.

1838                Ordnance Survey Sheet 74    Scale 1" to 1 mile.

1846                Tithe Map of Llanwddyn Parish    Scale 1" to 6 chains.

1887                Ordnance Survey Montgomeryshire 8.15    Scale 25" to 1 mile.

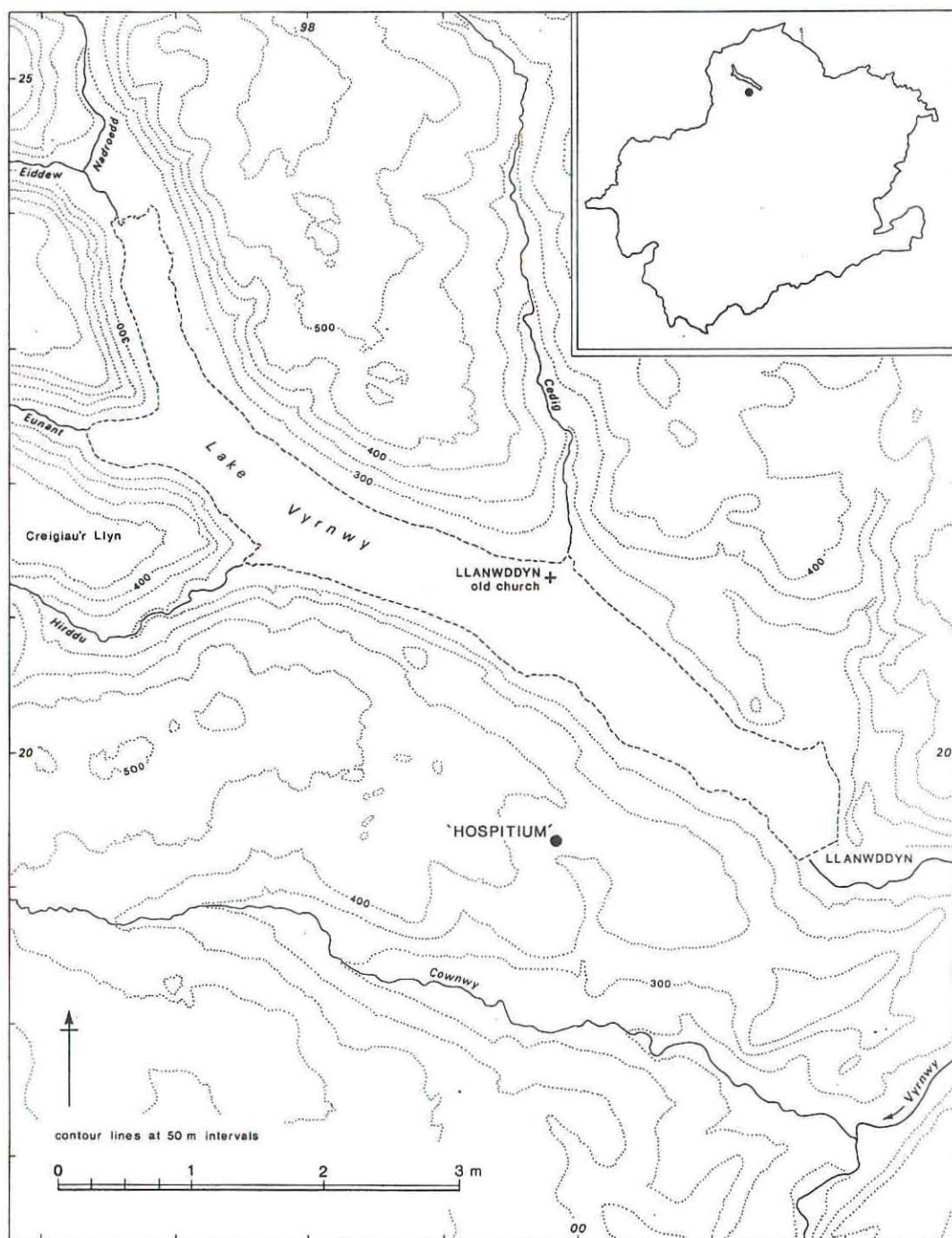
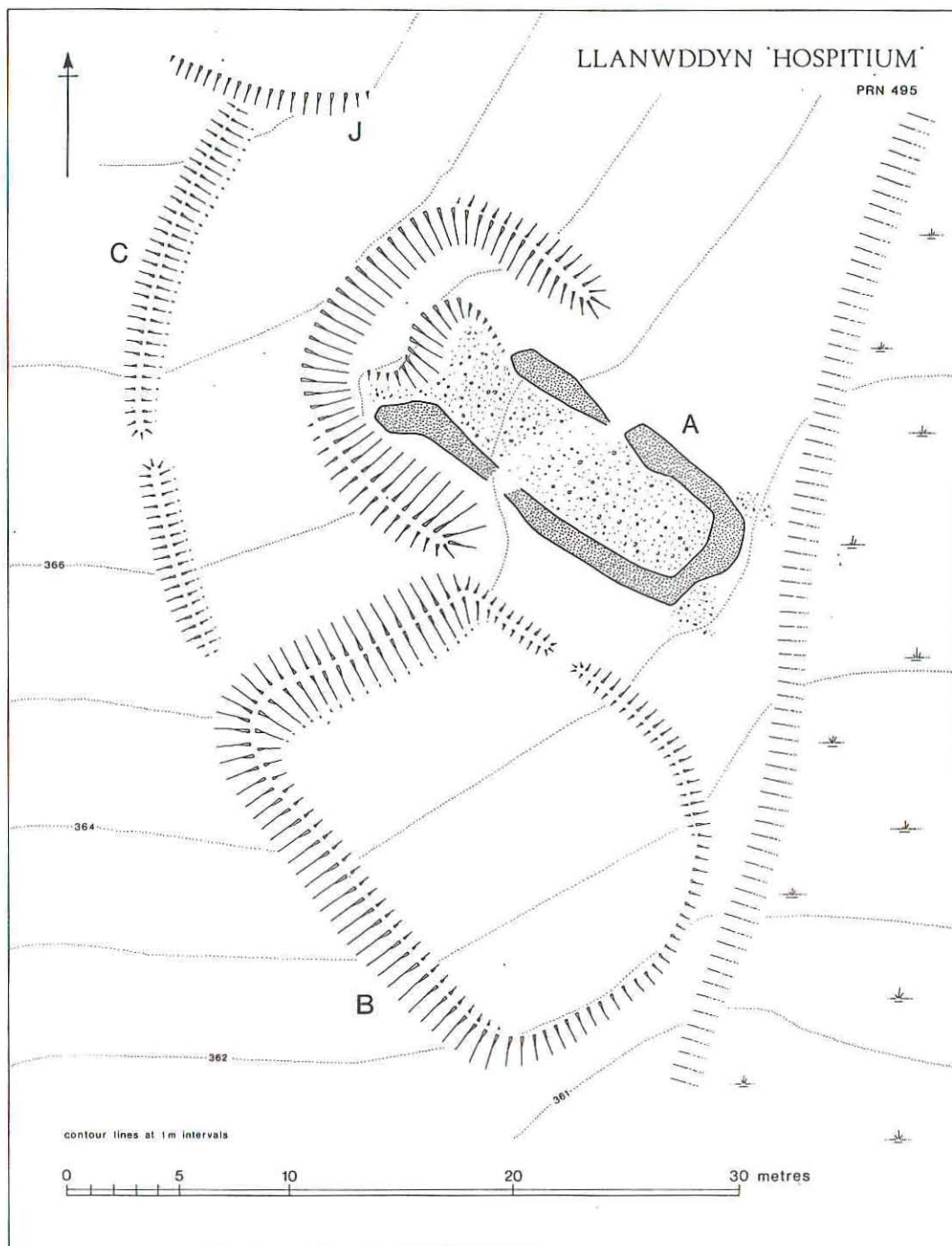


Fig 1 Llanwddyn Hospitium: Location





Fig 2 Llanwddyn Hospitium: General plan of the site



13 Llanwddyn Hospitium: Plan of the main structure and its associated earthworks