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# Observation Building Trawsfynydd Military Camp

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## Archaeological Survey

GAT Project No. G1974

Report No. 709

December 2007



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Report No. 709

Prepared for The Snowdonia National Park Authority

December 2007

By

Tanya Berks



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## **Archaeological Survey. Observatory building, Trawsfynydd Military Camp (G1974)**

### **SUMMARY**

*An Archaeological Survey of an early twentieth century artillery observation post at Trawsfynydd Military Camp (PRN 18286) has been undertaken in advance of renovation and consolidation works. The structure is located to the east of the main military camp(at Rhiw Goch) near Llyn Gelli Gain and is currently in a state of disrepair. Gwynedd Archaeological Trust has conducted a photographic and digital survey of the structure, with a view to recording the main architectural features. Particular attention has been paid to the materials used, the orientation of the structure and its location within the local landscape.*

*The observatory structure is one of a number of buildings that made up the artillery range constructed during the first decade of the twentieth century by the Ministry of Defence and serves as a useful example of its type.*

### **1.0. INTRODUCTION**

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust has been asked by the curatorial archaeologist of the Snowdonia National Park Authority (SNPA), on behalf of the Tir Eryri scheme, to undertake an archaeological survey of an early twentieth century artillery observation post at the location of the former Trawsfynydd Military Camp and Firing Ranges, near Trawsfynydd, Gwynedd. The structure is located at NGR SH739329 to the southeast of Trawsfynydd and to the east of the Llyn Gelli Gain. (Figure 1). The structure has been built into a steep hillside and forms part of a larger complex of twentieth century military structures attached to the camp.

The structure is drystone built from locally sourced stone and utilises the local topography to provide suitable shelter from artillery fire. The proposed renovation work includes the reconstruction of the east facing entrances, viewing area and protruding protective canopy which have partially collapsed. The canopy is constructed from stone, with reused railway I-beams acting as lintel supports. Figure 4 shows the extent of current collapse, with detail of the material used. Internal access was prohibited due to the state of collapse.

### **2.0 SPECIFICATION AND PROJECT DESIGN**

No detailed was prepared for this work by the Snowdonia National Park Authority (SNPA), but guidance was given in the form of a summary of requirements. Gwynedd Archaeological Trust would like to thank John Griffith Roberts, the SNPA's Archaeologist, for his advice and assistance during this project.

The SNPA requested a detailed photographic and digital survey of the observation post. The survey was limited to the exterior of the structure as internal access was inhibited by the state of collapse. The requirements are roughly commensurate with a Level 2 record (English Heritage 2006 Understanding Historic Buildings *A guide to good recording practice*).

This comprised:

- A photographic survey;
- Measured plans;
- Written description of structures;
- Contextual summary of function and setting;
- Preparation of full archive report.

### **3.0 ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS**

#### **3.1 Archaeological and Historical Background**

The observation post is one example of many twentieth century military structures located across the Afon Gain valley associated with Trawsfynydd Military Camp (Regional Historic Environment Record Primary Record Number 18286) and artillery ranges. A small military camp was established at Bryn Golau, on the southern outskirts of Trawsfynydd village at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1905, a larger, more permanent site was established at Rhiw Goch further south: the War Office bought land from the locals and the camp developed. The ranges were originally used seasonally during the summer; tents were used to accommodate soldiers in the early years. In 1911, a military railway station adjacent to the existing one at Trawsfynydd and road were built to ease the conveyance of guns, trucks, wagons, horses and personnel to the camp. The military road went from just south of the present junction of the A470 and A4212 north-east to the station, and made transportation much easier. During the First World War the camp became a busy centre as an artillery range, prisoner-of-war camp, as well as accommodating soldiers. A small, purpose-built village was established west of the camp and was named after a nearby farm, Bronaber, although it became known locally as Tin-town. It comprised a collection of metal huts accommodating cafés, shops and petrol stations, and was used by both soldiers and locals. The camp prospered and an observatory was built on the top of Craig y Penmaen (<http://www.heneb.co.uk/Trawsfynyddhlc>).

By World War II, more-permanent structures had replaced the tents as accommodation, and Rhiw Goch house, an early seventeenth century building with earlier fabric and origins, had been converted into the camp's Officers' Mess. Once again it was also used as a prisoner-of-war camp, though this time mainly for Italian, rather than German, prisoners. After 1945, the camp gradually lost its importance but was used more as a firing range for unused ammunition disposal, conveyed by rail to Trawsfynydd and then by lorries to Rhiw Goch. A map drawn up in 1948 (Dolgellau Archives, ZP/12/10) shows the extent of the 'Trawsfynydd Artillery Range' at some 8403 acres ('land owned by the War Department'), stretching from c. Orsedd-lâs farm (SH700313) in the west to c. Foel Boeth (SH778343) and Moel y Slates (SH785365), in the east. A public enquiry was opened in November 1949, as the Ministry of Defence was looking for an extra 5120 acres to provide a 'practical training area' using live ammunition under tactical circumstances (Daily Post, 18/11/1949). The Ministry of Defence claimed that the land, mainly upland additions to the eastern extent of the area, was of no great agricultural or tourist wealth. By 1950, no decision had been made, and protests were held against the expansion in 1951 (<http://www.heneb.co.uk/Trawsfynyddhlc>).

The camp was finally closed as a military establishment in 1957-8, and was re-opened almost immediately to accommodate over 800 non-local construction workers involved with building the Trawsfynydd power station. When this was finished, the land was gradually sold. 'Tin-town' was largely demolished in 1971, during the widening of the A470, although a few buildings still exist to the east of the road (<http://www.heneb.co.uk/Trawsfynyddhlc>).

#### **3.2 The observation building**

A military map dated 5 September 1911 lodged in the Dolgellau Archives (Z/DDQ 102) shows a number of observation structures (labelled as Splinter Proof Shelters) showing that they were built very early in the ranges' history, possibly as early as 1906. Britain was engaged in the second Boer War at the time and the Cain valley was considered a suitable stand-in for the terrain and landscape of South Africa for training purposes. Interestingly, the 1911 map refers to sheepfolds/enclosures within the ranges area as 'kraals', a Boer word. Curiously, there is nothing shown on the map at the location of the observation building which is the subject of this report. However, a 'Splinter Proof Shelter' is shown a little distance away to the south east, closer to the road through the valley. There is no trace of the latter on the ground today and it seems likely that the observation building was simply incorrectly located during the original survey, and that it does in fact date to c 1906.

Other military structures from the ranges' long history, including phone boxes, 25lb gun emplacements and a magazine survive. The building, was built in the lee of the local topography as protection. It was



open with a canopy shelter and fore-wall at the east facade to allow viewing. A narrow look-out tunnel is presumed to have allowed a line of sight to some kind of communication or warning system such as a flag indicating the start or completion of shelling.

#### **4.0 Survey and description of the observatory building**

The recording of the observation building was undertaken on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 2007. The recording was completed using a reflector-less Leica TCR805 EDM (Electronic Distance Measurer), digital photography (Nikon D40X) and written records. Topographic data was captured by John Griffith Roberts, SNPA, using a beacon-linked Trimble sub-1 metre accuracy GPS.

The observatory is a neatly constructed kidney shaped dry stone walled structure built from locally sourced stone and utilises the local topography to the west to provide suitable shelter from artillery fire (Figure 2). The walls are approximately 1.5m thick built to resist heavy artillery fire. There is a view hole in the south wall, presumably to observe communications to the west and a canopy covered opening facing east to observe the live shelling. The canopy is constructed from stone, with reused railway I-beams acting as lintel supports. This canopy has now collapsed due to the railway I-beams supports corroding and buckling under the weight of the stone above (Figure 4). The railway I-beams are held in place by three timber support beams, one of which has collapsed. (Figure 3) Access to the interior of the observatory was not possible due to the collapse of the canopy. Opposed entrance passageways lead to the central shelter void from the south east and north east corners of the structure. A paved area can be seen at the entrance to the south of the canopy (Figure 3).

#### **5.0 CONCLUSION**

The survey of the observation post provided a useful opportunity to analyse and record an example of early twentieth century military architecture. Of particular use was the information obtained on the materials used and details of its construction.

The project archive is held at Gwynedd Archaeological Trust and a copy of this report lodged in the Regional Historic Environment Record (also at Gwynedd Archaeological Trust). A copy of the digital archive (survey plans, photographs and report) along with paper copies of the report will be provided to the SNPA.

#### **6.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

We are grateful to Mr Keith O'Brien of the SNPA and resident of Trawsfynydd for drawing attention to the 1911 military map and for information relating to the history of the ranges.

#### **7.0 SOURCES CONSULTED**

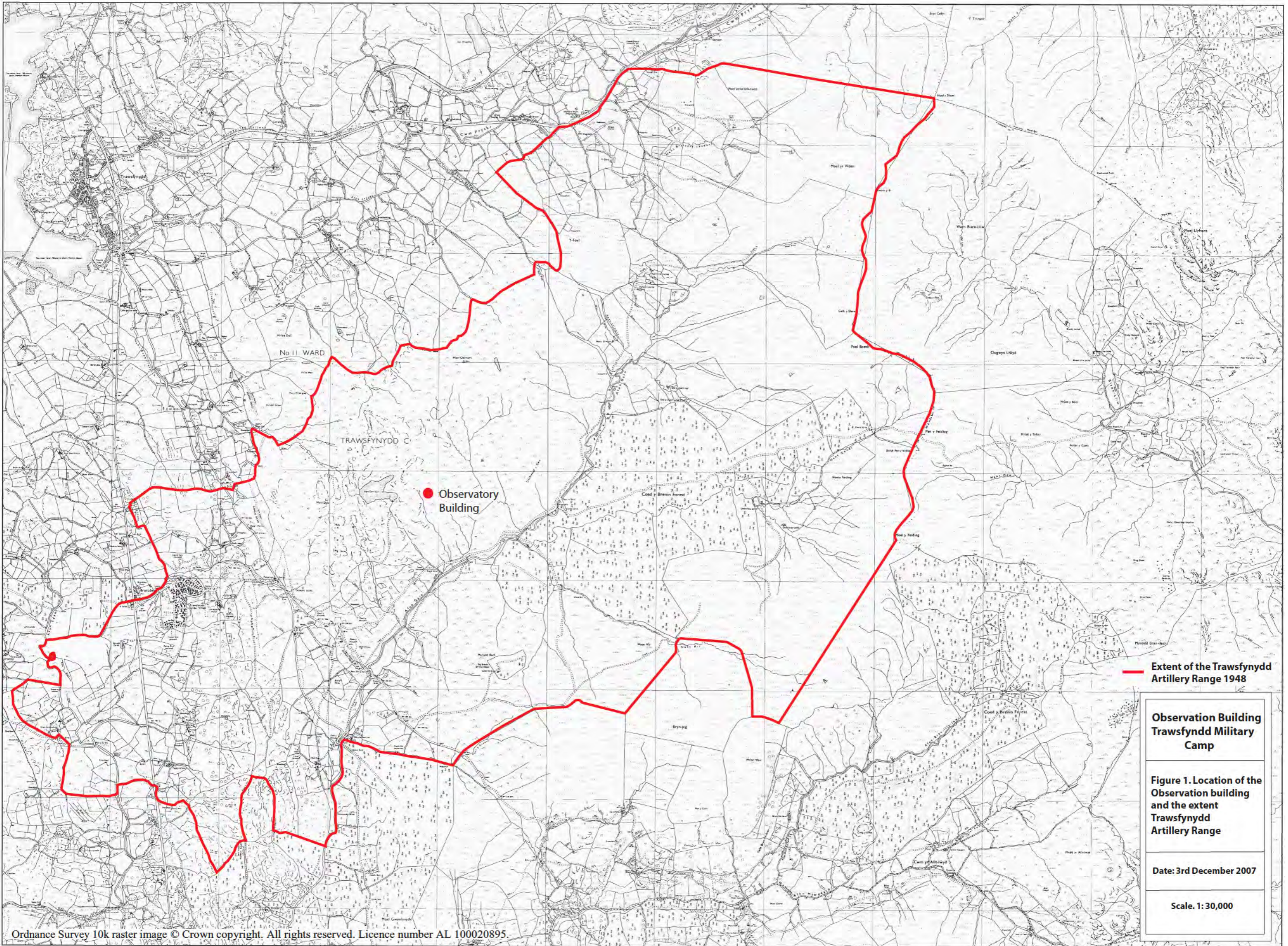
Burnett, M, 2006, 'The sacking of the Gain Valley', *The Welsh Internationalist*, Issue 178,41-50.

English Heritage, 2006, Understanding Historic Buildings A guide to good recording practice.

Dolgellau archive. Maps ZP/12/10 1948 map and Z/DDQ 102 1911 map

<http://www.heneb.co.uk/Trawsfynyddhlc>

<http://www.archivesnetworkwales.info>

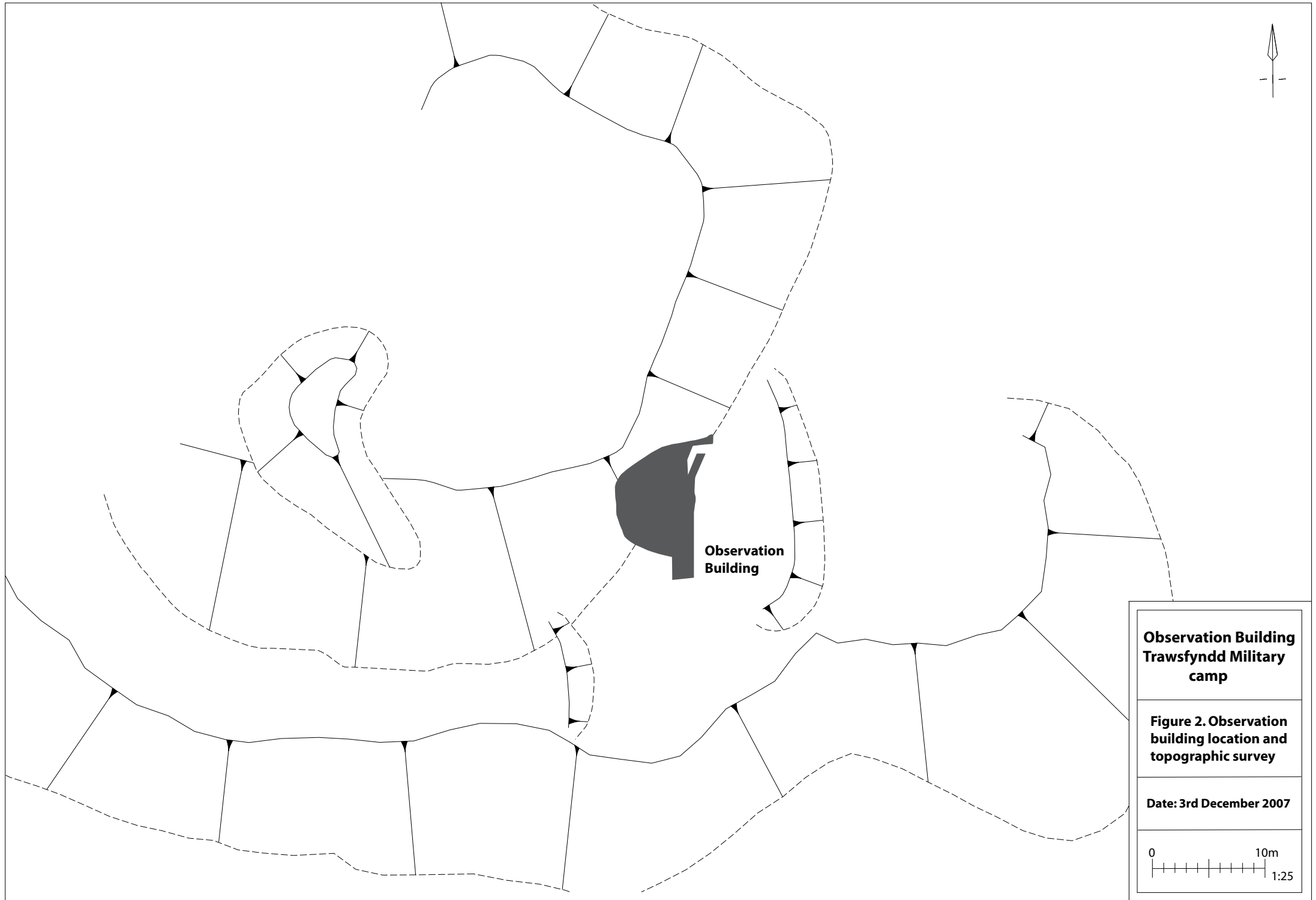


**Observation Building  
Trawsfynydd Military  
Camp**

**Figure 1. Location of the  
Observation building  
and the extent  
Trawsfynydd  
Artillery Range**

**Date: 3rd December 2007**

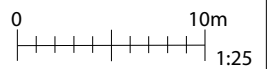
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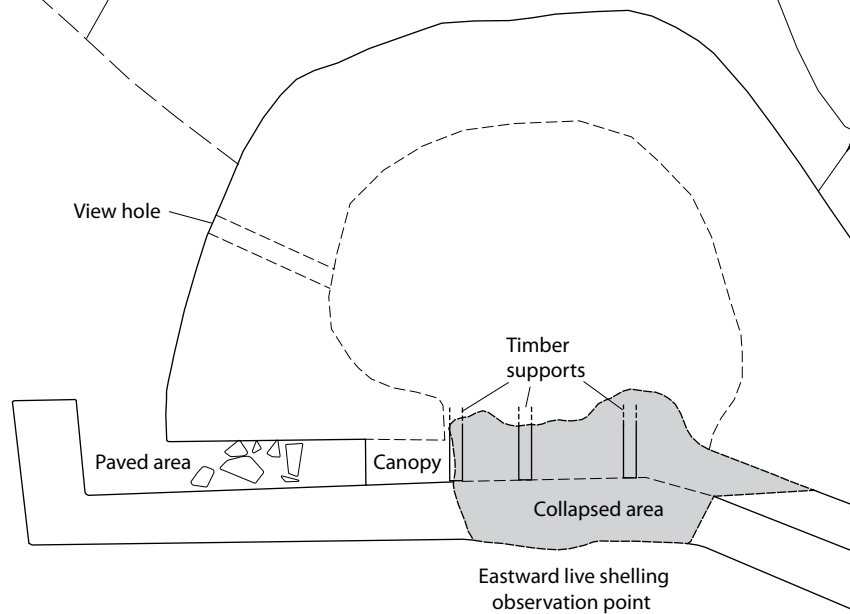
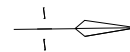


**Observation Building  
Trawsfynydd Military  
camp**

**Figure 2. Observation  
building location and  
topographic survey**

**Date: 3rd December 2007**

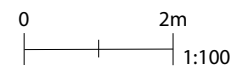


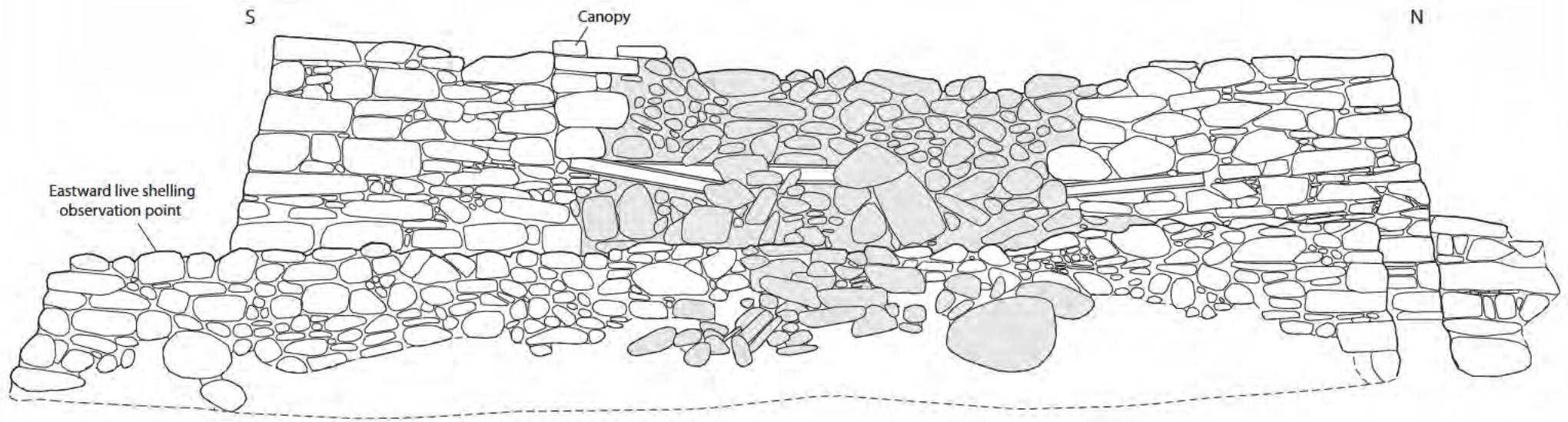


**Observation Building  
Trawsfyddd Military  
camp**

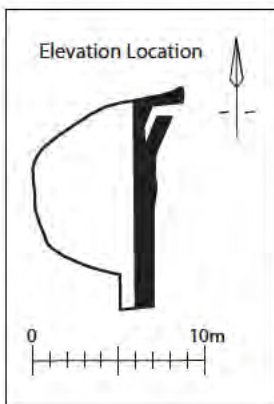
**Figure 3. Plan of the  
Observation  
building.**

**Date: 3rd December 2007**





■ Collapsed Masonry

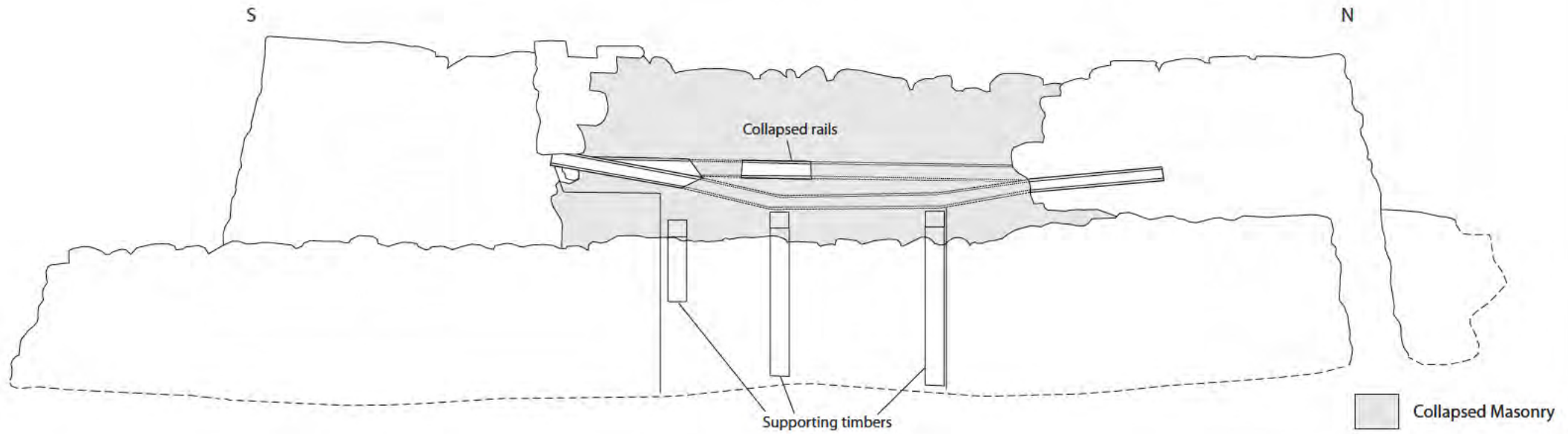


**Observation Building  
Trawsfynydd Military  
Camp**

**Figure 4. East facing  
elevation of the  
Observation building.**

**Date: 3rd December 2007**





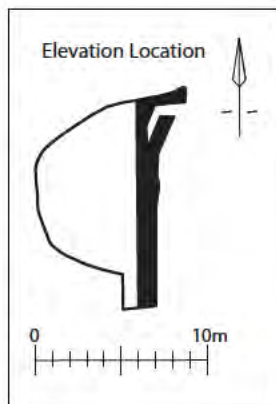
Collapsed Masonry

**Observation Building  
Trawsfynydd Military  
Camp**

**Figure 5. East facing  
elevation of the  
Observation building  
showing collapsed rails  
supporting timbers**

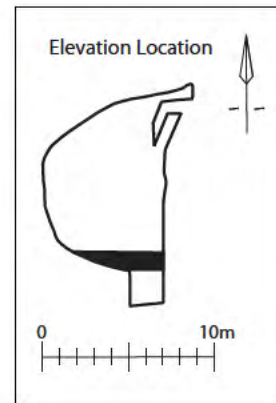
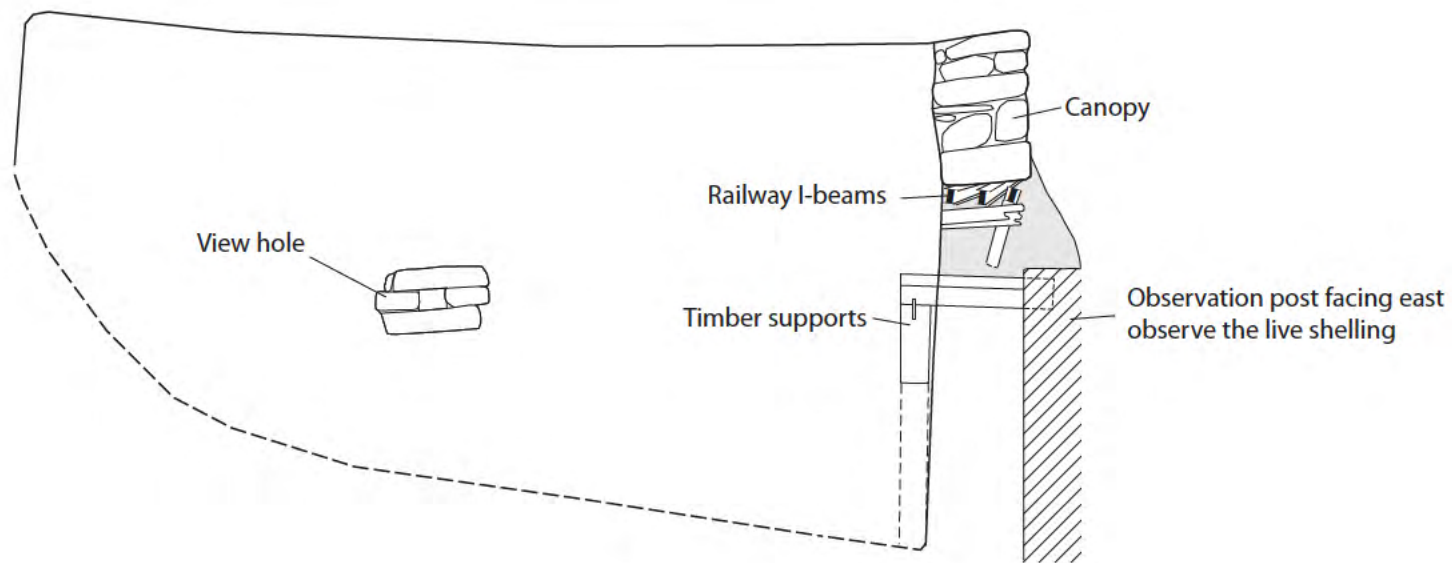
**Date: 3rd December 2007**

0 1m  
1:50



Elevation Location

0 10m



Collapsed Masonry

**Observation Building  
Trawsfynydd Military  
camp**

**Figure 6. South facing  
elevation of the  
Observation building  
showing collapsed rails  
supporting timbers**

**Date: 3rd December 2007**





Plate 1. Post card. Trawsfynydd, Military Camp 1914. ([www.oldukphotos.com/merionethshiretrawsfynydd.htm](http://www.oldukphotos.com/merionethshiretrawsfynydd.htm))



Plate 2. Post card. Trawsfynydd, North Camp. ([www.oldukphotos.com/merionethshiretrawsfynydd.htm](http://www.oldukphotos.com/merionethshiretrawsfynydd.htm))





Plate 3. North west facing image of the Observation building showing the collapsed canopy.



Plate 4. West facing image of the Observation building showing the collapsed canopy and railway I-Beams.



Plate 5. West facing image of the Observation building showing the collapsed canopy and railway I-beams.



Plate 6. East facing image of the Observation building.



Plate 7. North east facing image of the Observation building showing the observation hole.



Plate 8. North facing image of observation hole presumably used to observe communications to the west



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