

## Recent Work in Welsh Landscape History

Conference, Cardiff, Saturday 19th October 2019

This well-attended day of lectures was held in association with the Society for Landscape Studies at **John Percival Building, Cardiff University**. Bill Britnell, our *Archaeologia Cambrensis* editor, started the day off with a discussion of Neolithic monuments in the Walton Basin. He was followed by Peter Guest and Leah Reynolds of Cardiff University who examined the impact of the Roman army on the landscape of Wales. Moving through time, we next heard from David Austin, one of our previous Presidents, who talked about the Strata Florida Sacred Landscapes Project. Maritime landscapes occupied us after lunch, with Evan T. Jones of the University of Bristol considering the Severn Sea (and the Newport Ship) in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. We then moved to the world of the gentry. Shaun Evans of Bangor University talked about the work of Bangor's Institute for the Study of Welsh Estates, and Philip Nanney Williams provided an entertaining account of 19th-century estate architecture on his ancestral Nannau estate. The very enjoyable day concluded with an examination of the buildings of the *werin*, with Eurwyn Wiliam, former chair of RCAHMW, looking at the Welsh long house. Reports of their presentations, kindly prepared by the Society for Landscape Studies, are given on following pages.



## ***Location, Location, Location: Neolithic monuments in the Walton Basin***

**Bill Britnell, Research Associate, Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust**

Bill Britnell introduced us to the remarkable set of Neolithic monuments in the Walton Basin of mid-Wales. The basin, which is the former bed of a post-glacial lake, is located on the interface of Lowland and Upland Britain and the eastern section contains a causewayed enclosure, two cursus monuments, three timber circles including one which is far the largest one known in Britain, a stone circle and the largest ring ditch in Wales. These monuments, which are the result of a millennium of activity from the early Neolithic through to the Bronze Age, have been pieced together over a number of years. Bill used three questions to discuss the importance of these monuments within the landscape; why were they built there, who built them and were there any connections between these and other similar landscapes within Britain?

Bill contended that these monuments are clearly regionally significant. There are no other similar concentrations of monuments in neighbouring regions so this landscape appears to be important for a large area surrounding it. He also drew attention to a potential economic background to the complex and how this may help to understand its location in the landscape. Drawing comparisons with examples from Norway, he postulated at the migration of large ungulates through the area, which is a natural corridor, with people following them. There is a clear relationship between the monuments and the detailed local topography; the causewayed enclosure for example being located on a prominent drumlin. The shorter of the cursus monuments appears to be aligned on two peaks at the edge of the basin and mirrors the route through the basin, whereas the large cursus appears to be a barrier controlling the route. The timber enclosures have a more explicit relationship with the water in the valley. This appears to be a landscape of the living - there are no funerary monuments, so this is a very different landscape to the chambered-tombs landscape of the Black Mountains 20km away.

There is little evidence in the landscape for who built these monuments. They are located in the eastern section of the basin whereas flint finds seem to show more settlement to the west of the basin with the shorter cursus being the divide between the two. We don't know how many houses there were but there might have been hundreds of dwellings. We can work out from the size of the monuments the magnitude of the labour force but we don't know how long it took to build them. It does appear from the landscape that it was created by a dispersed and transient population who came together for certain events at certain times of the year.

These are clearly common types of monuments elsewhere in Britain although the concentration of them in the Walton Basin is unusual, drawing parallels with the Stonehenge-Avebury landscape. There are parallels in the number, age and types of monuments, plus the open grazing in the area. Long distance contact at this time is well known in Britain, and so it isn't surprising to have similar landscapes being created, although the Stonehenge-Avebury area, with its national significance, would have eclipsed regional centres like the Walton Basin.

*Phil Davies (Society for Landscape Studies)*

## ***The impact of the Roman army on the landscape of Wales***

**Peter Guest, affiliated to Barbican Research Associates**

Peter Guest is well known for his work on Roman numismatics, as a lecturer at Cardiff University, and as a former manager of the Roman Legionary Museum at Caerleon (known to Romans as *Iscā*). Much of the material in his talk was based on a project conducted with Richard Madgwick of Cardiff University and others to explore food production and supply to the legionary fortress at *Iscā* by examining strontium isotopes present in excavated animal teeth. The underlying principle is that 'you are what you eat': in other words, the geology of the area in which a human or animal is raised is reflected in the vegetation and water consumed by that individual, which in turn is reflected in strontium isotopes present in dental enamel. In

theory, by mapping strontium isotopes against background geology, you can tell roughly where a person or animal came from in the country, or indeed further afield.

Dr Guest, however, soon revealed flaws in the current methodology, most notably in the currently-available mapping of strontium isotope levels across Britain, which fails to appreciate the high degree of variability on a very local scale: for example, almost the full range of isotopic values was represented across samples taken from modern vegetation within a five-mile radius of Cardiff, meaning that a tooth with an isotopic value currently modelled as coming from as far away as north-west Scotland may in fact have originated much closer to home in areas of similar geology, such as the Malvern hills. In short, we cannot say with confidence (based on current methodology) where the animals whose teeth were sampled came from.

All things considered, however, Dr Guest believed that several (perhaps 1 in 5) of the 44 animals examined from Roman *Isca* were 'non-local' and seem to have been supplied from southern England rather than Wales. Such 'non-local' animals were most common in the earlier phases of Roman activity at *Isca* (c.100 AD), when the number of troops present was perhaps at its highest. In conclusion, more studies of strontium isotopes in Roman human and animal teeth are needed, and there is certainly scope for a wider research project on how the Roman army was provisioned across Britannia, incorporating the wealth of data from Hadrian's Wall. Those interested in finding out more are encouraged to read the article 'On the Hoof' published in the journal *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences* in September 2017, and available at <https://tinyurl.com/wgdlt9m>.

*Simon Draper (Society for Landscape Studies)*

### ***The rural landscape of Roman Wales***

**Leah Reynolds, Cardiff University**

Leah Reynolds is currently completing her PhD thesis at Cardiff University entitled 'Roman Rural Settlement in Wales and the Marches'. Her research focuses on regional settlement patterns, the economic basis of rural settlements and the extent to which they were integrated into the wider Roman world, including the ways in which the inhabitants of rural sites constructed their identities. The underlying data for her study comes principally from the recent 'Rural Settlement of Roman Britain' research project conducted jointly by Cotswold Archaeology and the University of Reading, which has transformed our understanding of the distribution and density of Roman rural settlement across Britain, particularly through its online map and datasets (see <https://tinyurl.com/uxfumgt>).

Through a series of maps, Leah revealed that the greatest concentration of Roman rural settlement in Wales was in the south-east of the country, particularly along the 'M4 corridor', with a smaller area in the north-west fringing the coast. Most of the hilly interior of the country is devoid of evidence, presumably reflecting a real absence of romanised settlement and a potential disconnect between its peoples and the wider Roman world. Settlement patterns also changed over time. In the period up to AD 150, villas were closely related to Roman roads and military sites, but AD 150–300 saw an increase in their number and distribution, coinciding with a decrease in military sites, followed by a general decline in romanised settlements after AD 300, although with some reoccupation of coastal forts. Distributions of Roman or Romano-British pottery show a close link with military and coastal supply networks, and Roman coins are generally rare on Welsh rural sites, perhaps suggesting that any taxes were paid in kind. In conclusion, there seems to be a correlation between Roman military activity and romanised rural settlement in Wales, with only the south-east of the country seemingly participating in the wider politics, economics and society of Roman *Britannia*.

*Simon Draper (Society for Landscape Studies)*

## ***Strata Florida: the Sacred Landscapes Project***

**David Austin, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter  
- Principal Investigator, AHRC Sacred Landscape Project**

David Austin piqued our curiosity with an initial image of a cemetery that he assured us had become an obsession - but what was it?

Strata Florida Abbey is located in the upper Teifi valley; its holdings were extensive. The Strata Florida Research Project (begun in 1989) has now been absorbed into the AHRC project 'Sacred landscapes of medieval monasteries', which will compare three different monastic landscapes - Valle Crucis Abbey and the Eglwyseg valley, Kirkstead Abbey and the central Witham valley, and Strata Florida Abbey and the upper Teifi valley.

The four key narratives for Strata Florida are: the Abbey itself (1164–1539); its antecedents (c.2000 BCE to 1164); its successors - the mansion and the great estates, 1539–1746; and the history of the landscape. How typical of Welsh Cistercian houses was the Abbey, and how did the circumstances of its foundation differ from English houses? Was the re-founding of the Abbey in 1184 on a new site intended as a deliberate act of affirming Welsh identity? In 1171, the Lord Rhys, who had long been a thorn in the side of Henry II, agreed to submit to the King as his overlord; in exchange, he was given the title of Justiciar - effectively being granted self-rule.

The Normans had reorganised the Welsh church at the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, reducing the power of some central sites such as Llanbadarn Fawr and Llandeilo Fawr and creating new bishoprics such as St Asaph. By founding new Cistercian houses, was Rhys attempting to create a state church for Deheubarth as part of a plan to create a proto-state in Wales? The Cistercians' commitment to seeking out desert places and making them fertile resonated well with the identity of the Celtic church. Furthermore, they were largely independent of diocesan control.

The land granted by Rhys to the Abbey covered a huge area - the Abbey precinct alone encompassed 120 acres (49 ha) - much larger than Fountains Abbey's. The location and layout of the Abbey were conscious acts of cultural and political design. The Abbey sits at the junction of two transmontane routes: from Rhayader and from Abergwesyn, then westwards to Aberarth, the port for Ireland. Most excitingly, the location and layout of the Abbey respect and celebrate a site long sacred to the Welsh - hence David's obsession. Underneath the Cistercian abbey lie the remains of Tai Cynfelyn, a Celtic monastery, together with a 10<sup>th</sup>-century cemetery. Under the Cistercian church is what appears to be a holy well. Walls in the Cistercian church and monastic precinct seem from their alignment to be acknowledging or celebrating the valley of the Afon Glasffrd, running south from the Abbey, with five more holy wells. The reservoirs for Strata Florida's water supply were sited in the valley of the Glasffrd, called Dyffryn Tawel, which can be interpreted as 'Valley of Silence'. Further on, there are Bronze Age monuments and a system of footpaths, perhaps ritual paths in a landscape where water was being celebrated.

Also central to the study of the Strata Florida landscape is the wetland of Cors Caron in the Teifi valley, part of the Abbey's foundation land grant. Palynological studies have revealed a Dark Age agricultural landscape that has disappeared. A large wood was planted there on good agricultural land. Farms carry high-status names in *maer* (steward) and *llys* (court). Underneath Abbey Wood lies a *ffridd* landscape with field systems, houses and farms.

These features led David to suggest that the meanings conveyed by (existing) landscapes have social and political aspects which inform and influence decisions about places, land use, access and approach over and above the simply economic or legal hierarchy. By combining the approaches of the student of religion, the historical geographer, and the architectural historian, we arrive at a notion of centrality in localities and regions, which is not simply about markets and production but also about identity, wellbeing and social wealth.

Summing up, David described the process of landscape development at Strata Florida as “a serial re-designing, but with continuity”.

*Mike Headon (Society for Landscape Studies)*

### ***The Severn Sea in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries***

**Evan T. Jones, Senior Lecturer in Economics and Social History,  
University of Bristol**

The Newport medieval ship, built in the Basque country about 1450 with a cargo capacity of about 170 tons, was wrecked in Newport in 1468. Its discovery and subsequent excavation in 2002 has been the catalyst for research into medieval ships, voyages and trade in the wider Severn area, a conference in 2014, and publication in 2018 of Evan's co-authored book *The World of the Newport Medieval Ship* (University of Wales Press).

Dr Jones has used the detailed records of customs taxes (which provided 40% of all crown revenues) in his research. These records identify the ships, the ports from which they sailed, their masters and owners, and their cargo - exports of cloth and hides from England and Wales, olive oil, salt and wine imported from Spain and Portugal, and timber and other goods from the Baltic.

The Severn Sea, or Mor Hafren, a term used in 1540 by Roger Barlow, the Pembrokeshire merchant, geographer and explorer, defines an area from Haverfordwest down to the Scilly Isles and across to the Somerset coast and up the tidal reaches of what we know call the Bristol Channel (then known as the Gulf of Bristol) as far as Worcester. Although Bristol in late medieval England was the most populous town or city in the west of England or Wales (with about 8000 inhabitants), the inhabitants of the smaller ports and towns of the Severn Sea and its hinterland collectively numbered more, emphasising their importance not only as sources of raw materials and markets for traded goods but also for the provision of manpower to work in the land-based and maritime trades.

To modern eyes, the Bristol Channel and the seas off the Welsh and west of England coast are an obstacle to travel and transport, but to our forebears, the Severn Sea was a highway facilitating trade and travel. In medieval and Tudor England and Wales, transport of goods by land was slow, awkward and expensive. By contrast, ships could take advantage of the strong tidal currents and the 10m tidal rise to reach inland ports such as Worcester (17 miles up the River Severn), Bristol, Bridgnorth and Tewkesbury to facilitate faster and cheaper trading. Indeed, the maritime nature of Tewkesbury and Worcester was such that robbers taken up in these places could be charged with piracy and tried in the Admiralty Courts!

Trade from and across the Severn Sea was not just in goods: people used the Sea as a highway to the major ports. Bristol merchants took their apprentices not only from their city, but also from towns across the Severn valley area and from Wales. The merchant class, rich and influential, also provided the city with its governing élite. Many of the merchants and Bristol mayors had Welsh names, reflecting their origins. Their experience in making, trading and exporting their goods gave them a wider perspective than the affairs of their city. They had an interest in, and knowledge of, not only the Severn Sea, but the Mediterranean and Baltic regions and, of course, the newly discovered lands across the Atlantic.

*Jenny and Richard Pope (Society for Landscape Studies)*

## ***Estate landscapes in Wales***

**Shaun Evans, Director of the Institute for the Study of Welsh Estates,  
Bangor University**

There is a vast resource of estate archives in Wales, yet until recently this has been underused in developing an understanding of Welsh history. The Institute for the Study of Welsh Estates (ISWE), based at Bangor University, is taking a fresh look at landed estates, and the heritage collections that they contain.

As well as being collections-based this 'Wales-wide' research is founded on partnership and collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and public and community engagement. Ambitiously describing itself as 'a new force in the cultural and intellectual life of Wales', this is a long-term, wide-ranging programme of research with a large number of themes, including gardens, rural protest, land use, and the Welsh country house. Landscape too is an important theme, and the project is beginning to unlock the potential of estate maps. For example, ISWE were partners in the organisation of the *Carto Cymru 2017* symposium on the development of estate mapping and its use in interpreting landscapes. The institute also supported the work of the *Cynefin* project to digitise more than 1000 Welsh tithe maps, and has worked with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales on its creation of a place-names index, using place-name data found in estate archives.

With the exception of work on the development of estates in the medieval period, estate landscapes represent a significant gap in the historiography of Wales. This contrasts with the situation in England, where, for example, the impact of Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton on the development planned polite estate landscapes is well known. Given that 90% of land was owned by estates and the critical role that these played in Welsh society, it is important to understand how their landscapes were shaped, used, managed, adapted and contested in the post-medieval period. The work of ISWE is bringing together a new body of knowledge in this area of scholarship that will both challenge and refine existing interpretations and perceptions of the past in Wales. See <http://iswe.bangor.ac.uk>.

*Anthony Robinson (Society for Landscape Studies)*

### ***Nannau: a case study of an estate landscape***

**Philip Nanney Williams**

Following naturally on from the previous presentation, Philip Nanney Williams gave an enthralling account of just one estate; a microcosm of rural Wales, hidden away at the head of the Mawddach estuary near Dolgellau in Merioneth. Although the current house at Nannau is Georgian the estate has a much longer pedigree, and has been the seat of two families, the Nanneys and the Vaughans, whose histories are entwined with that of Wales. For example, in 1404, Hywel Sele the 8th Lord of Nannau was killed by Owain Glyndŵr who hid the body in a hollow tree. The tree survived until 1813, and its remains were turned into souvenirs, including some candlesticks that are in the possession of Philip today.

Sir Robert Williames Vaughan, Second Baronet (1768-1843), was responsible for much of the designed landscape at Nannau into which he incorporated many picturesque features including several stone arches. Reputedly, four tenants who were in arrears with their rent were used to drag a stone ten miles for use as the lintel of 'the Great Stone', an arch that was erected to celebrate the extension of the estate. At 55,000 acres and with 500 farms it had become one of the biggest in Wales.

Another feature of the estate are the remains of 'rock cannon', a North Wales speciality used to celebrate special events. Constructed by boring deep holes into natural rock, into which black powder is then poured, the canon at Nannau were fired to celebrate the coming of age of the Third Baronet in 1824.

Other stories from the thousand-year history of Nannau can be found in Philip's book, *Nannau: a rich tapestry of Welsh history*.

See <https://nannau.wales>.

*Anthony Robinson (Society for Landscape Studies)*

***Building a house on sand: D Lleufer Thomas, Iorwerth C Peate, and the creation of a national architecture for Wales***

**Eurwyn Wiliam, independent scholar**

Eurwyn Wiliam gave a well-researched and amusingly delivered presentation about how the humble Welsh longhouse had become a symbol of Welsh nationalism.

Many upland regions of the UK had historic longhouses where the dwelling was split between a living part for people and a byre for cattle and other animals. The Welsh version is distinctive in two ways, with a chimney at the byre end of the human-inhabited part and a cross passage between the two parts that provides the only access to both the part for people and the byre. In addition the byre is often slightly smaller in width than the human part and close inspection often shows that the byre has been added to the human-inhabited part as a separate add-on. The Welsh longhouse is often built in a downslope location where enclosed land meets the common land grazing for cattle.

Some longhouses were originally a timber structure that was later rebuilt in stone although the byre sometimes remained as a timber add-on. After a century or two, the cattle were moved out from the byre to a separate barn and the byre was converted into additional living space for the owners of the house.

Eurwyn explained the history of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century academic research into traditional Welsh buildings including the longhouse. This research included recording the typical working life of the occupiers of longhouses, planning the layout of the typical longhouse and identifying the change in usage and architecture over time. The first academic interest in rural Welsh living was by Eurwyn's hero, D Lleufer Thomas, who planned and photographed Welsh longhouses for a report by the Royal Commission on Land in Wales that was published in 1896.

From the 1930s to the 1950s two academics, Cyril Fox and Iorwerth C Peate, published studies of Welsh traditional buildings including longhouses. These studies over-developed the idea of the architectural culture of these buildings. Subsequent studies during the 1960s and 1970s by J P Smith, Peter Smith, Richard Suggett and others provided a better interpretation of the Welsh longhouse. This modern interpretation is that the Welsh longhouse evolved from peasant hall houses of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century to which the cross passage and byre were added later. The defensible byre may have been a reaction to the endemic cattle rustling in 16<sup>th</sup> century Wales.

Finally, Eurwyn showed how the Welsh longhouse has become an architectural symbol of Welsh nationalism and how estate agents currently use the phrase to describe houses for sale even where they are modern barn conversions and even new builds.

*Alastair Ainsworth (Society for Landscape Studies)*