

Strata Florida, steeped in Welsh history and surrounded by dense, ancient woodland, offers a unique environment for detailed ecological and topographical surveying. Unlike using modern digital tools, we are focusing on manual drawing techniques to capture the essence of the forest—its spatial structure, plant life, and subtle landscape features.

Our goal today is to combine traditional cartographic methods with artistic observational drawing to produce a comprehensive field survey that respects the tactile experience of the forest and records details that satellite images or GPS data often miss.

Arriving at the site by 9:30 AM, the team unloaded the equipment: Sketchpads, pencils, and rubbers

I began with a baseline measurement – I decided to measure using how long my strides were. Using this baseline, I planned to triangulate key features in the survey area.

I set up my sketchpad on a portable drawing board, The initial drawing was a scaled map of the baseline, noting the direction using a compass.

Along the baseline, I marked several fixed points:

- A large oak tree with visible old carvings
- A moss-covered stone wall, likely medieval boundary marker
- A small spring bubbling out near the path

From each of these, I began sketching relative positions of trees and terrain features using compass bearings and pacing distances.

Standing next to the oak, I started a contour sketch of the immediate area, using a clinometer to estimate the slope gradients around the base. The land dips slightly eastward, leading to a small natural depression which collects water during rains.

Moving systematically from the baseline, I sketched groups of trees as clusters, marking species where possible—oak, ash, and some rowan. I used symbolic representations to differentiate species:

- Circles with a dot in the centre for oak

Understory plants like brambles, ferns, and wildflowers were indicated by smaller marks and notes.

By noon, the sun had come out fully, warming the forest floor. We paused for lunch near the ruins of the old Strata Florida Abbey, reflecting on how the manual drawing process deepened our connection to the place.

Surveying by hand requires patience and close attention – more so than GPS or laser scanning. It demands you observe carefully, interpret spatial relationships, and translate them visually. This also allows recording ephemeral details like light quality, colour shifts, and textures elements often lost in digital surveys.

Nearby, we found fragments of medieval pottery shards scattered among the leaf litter. I sketched these fragments and documented their locations on the map.

Using drawings to survey the Strata Florida woods was an immersive and rewarding process. It forces you to slow down and really look—interpreting shapes, shadows, textures, and spatial relations with the eye and hand.

While modern technology offers speed and precision, drawing provides a rich, interpretative record that blends science, art, and history.

1. Baseline Map

A straight line 100 meters long, marked with compass bearings and distances to key landmarks along the path.

2. Oak Tree Contour Sketch

Detailed profile of the oak and surrounding slope contours, showing ground gradient and plant associations.