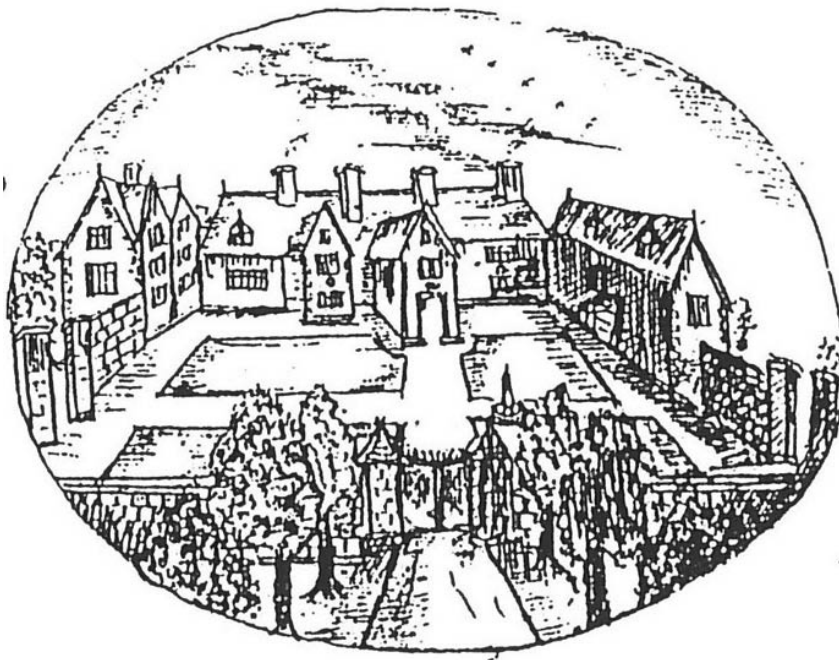


Neolithic Landscape Characterisation of Llanllyr, Talsarn

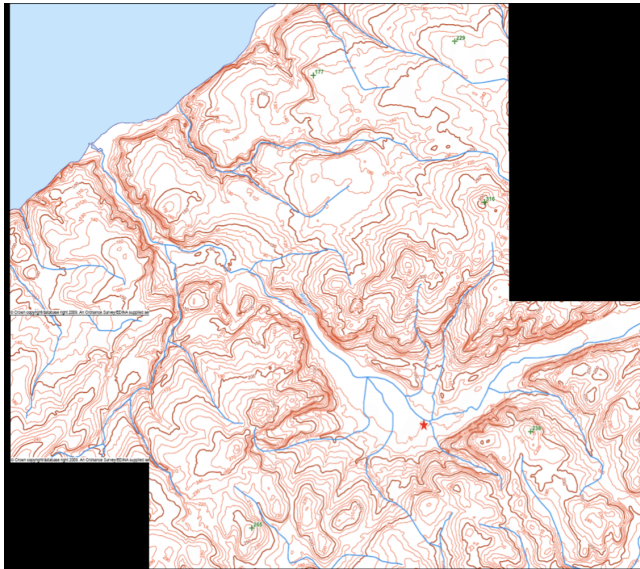
This piece will be constructing a Neolithic landscape around Llanllyr estate in the Aeron valley. To do this, it is important to consider the artefacts found at the site along with the history of the area and the landscape that surrounds it.

Llanllyr sits at the bottom of a valley between the towns of Lampeter and Aberaeron (fig. 2). The estate is mostly known as the site of a Cistercian nunnery which was established around the year 1180 by Rhys ap Gruffudd, also known as Lord Rhys (Dyfed Archaeological Trust). Lord Rhys was the ruler of Deheubarth which covers the modern counties of Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire. The nunnery faced dissolution in 1537 and it is presumed that the nunnery's buildings were converted into a house (fig. 1) although no surface evidence survives of the nunnery nor the house (Murphy, 2014-2015). After the site was passed to the crown, it was leased to Gruffydd ap Henry ap Ieuan of Glyn Aeron. His daughter Siwan married Hugh Llewelyn Lloyd and the estate remained in the Lloyd family until 1688. In 1720, Llanllyr was sold to John Lewes, a Carmarthen merchant (National Library of Wales). The Lewes family built the current house around 1830, replacing the old house and most authorities consider that the earlier house was built on or near to the site of the medieval nunnery (Murphy 2014-2015). The estate has been in the Lewes family ever since.



(fig.1) Possible drawing of Llanllyr Mansion by Thomas Dinley in 1684

The origin of the valley possibly predates the quaternary but it was more than likely significantly modified around 30,000 years ago during the last glacial maximum (Glasser et al, 2018). The major flow of ice would have run down the hills and formed a lake at the basin of the valley, bringing sediment that would form the ground as it is today. It is hard to imagine past landscapes when looking at its current form as it has been changed dramatically by people, agriculture and grazing animals. Although, there are clear and some not-so-clear signs that a lake did reside at Llanllyr.



(Fig. 2) A map of the Aeron valley - star is Llanllyr, Talsarn
Courtesy of Martin Bates

One of the clear signs is the flora found at the site. There is a clear difference between the higher, flatter ground and the lower, boggy ground. The lower ground boasts thick and dense reeds that are not only found in large patches but in slim river like shapes across the fields. These boggy grounds are the remnants of the former lake and streams that would have stood at Llanllyr after the last ice age. On the higher ground, excavations have taken place on mound one and two due to Mesolithic and Neolithic people often settling on the edges of water sources (fig. 3). The excavations on trench 10, 10a and 10b on mound two has brought up many pieces of red-brown flint as well as exposing a burning episode (fig. 5). The charcoal patch has been dated to the early Neolithic with the flint finds forming a line towards the north-east (Brummage et al. no date). The flint in itself is proof of humans travelling through the Aeron valley as it is not a naturally occurring material in Wales, but the charcoal patch being dated to the Early Neolithic is further proof that Neolithic people roamed this land. Due to the sharpness of the flint as well as the mapping of flint finds, it is clear that they have not travelled from elsewhere. If they were to move due to a flow of water, then it is expected that the flint would have rounder edges from the tumbling and they would have been found in a more random pattern. Therefore we can say with some certainty that the flint has not moved since its knapping around 6,000 years ago.



(Fig. 3) Arial view of Llanllyr - Mound 2 on the left, Mound 1 on the right
Courtesy of Martin Bates



(Fig. 4) Clay mounds at trench 10b: evidence of ploughing in WWII



(Fig. 5) Example of red-brown flint found at trench 10b

While excavating trench 10b, clay mounds were found underneath the soil (fig. 4). The clay is a sediment, it has travelled from elsewhere before settling at the basin of the Aeron valley. It is possible to detect clay by rubbing it between our fingers or rolling the clay and pulling it apart. As clay is very fine, there will be no grit when feeling it and the clay will stretch when pulled. This is the easiest way to determine whether the material is clay or silt. The settling of clay at Llanllyr is very likely the outcome of the travelling water from the glacial melt. As it is very fine, clay is easily transported. Therefore the settling of clay indicates the presence of still or very slow moving water, such as a lake. The clay mounds discovered while excavating trench 10b are evidence of agricultural ploughing, probably during World war II but could be dated earlier.

Wetlands that are primarily formed through the accumulation of silts and clays are called minerogenic wetlands. As they have access to groundwater, they benefit from waterborne nutrients that are brought into the ecosystem (Van de Noort et al. 2006). The nutritious plants often mean that the wetland hosts a plethora of animals such as waterfowl, fish and molluscs. This would be very appealing to the Neolithic people as they start giving up their hunter-gatherer lifestyle and start forming permanent and semi-permanent settlements. As well as a healthy ecosystem, Llanllyr has a spring whose water is filtered through the clay and gravel washed down in the glacial melt. The reliable access to clean water would have been a valuable asset to anyone

living in close proximity to the valley and it's not hard to see why the Neolithic people took advantage of this area.

The British Neolithic has long been discussed as a sedentary phenomenon and has been equated with the start of agriculture (Whittle, A. 1997). The timeframe of when Neolithic people started forming permanent settlements has been debated for years. It is very possible that they would have led a semi-nomadic life before becoming completely sedentary. Archaeologists have tended to assume that farming necessitates staying in one place as cultivation requires regular inputs of labour and the growing crops need to be protected (Whittle, A. 1997). Although in a very detailed study of the British Neolithic in the south, Thomas argues that the Neolithic population of Britain did not reside in the same place year round, they did not go out to labour in fields of waving corn and that their day to day food may have been provided by wild crops (Thomas, J. 1991). This could explain the lack of evidence of a sedentary community at Llanllyr. The assemblage found on the site does not have the typological signature of a large hunting or settlement camp as there is an absence of scrapers, awls and piercers (Brummage et al. no date). This could imply embedded mobility in which a territorially restricted group visits the same places each season or even a short term stop at the site. More excavations will have to be done on the site at Llanllyr to get a broader picture. Although it is assumed there wasn't a permanent settlement on site, it is possible that the task based scatter is on the edge of a settlement not yet excavated (Brummage et al. no date).

To conclude, it is not certain whether the presence of Neolithic people at the Llanllyr estate was a permanent or a non-permanent event. There is evidence to suggest a task based visit to the site with regards to the mapping of flint finds and the lack of evidence of a permanent settlement. Although, there could possibly be a settlement at the site that has not yet been excavated. What is certain is that Llanllyr has undergone significant changes from the last glacial melt to today. The water and sediments that the ice age carried down the valley has been the backbone to all people and wildlife that have resided on this land. From the Neolithic to the Medieval nunnery to Llanllyr's spring water bottling plant. What we have uncovered is only a small part of a long history in this valley. A piece of flint is the outcome of a second's moment in a history that dates further than the Neolithic. The flora, the landscape, buildings, wildlife and people have all changed. It is incredibly important to use our imagination and overlay past landscapes over what we see today.

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