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A NEWLY-DISCOVERED ROMAN CAMP AT GWANAS-FAWR, BRITHDIR AND LLANFACHRETH, GWYNEDD

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SUMMARY

A rectangular earthwork was discovered from the air in October 2007 at Gwanas-fawr, 4.5km south-east of Dolgellau (NPRN 406840, SH 7711 1645). Initially thought to be an early fort, the earthwork has now been tested by ground survey, magnetometry and trial excavation and found to be a Roman camp. This interim note describes the main features of the site and its discovery in advance of a fuller report.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE DISCOVERY

The characteristic earthwork of a probable Roman fort was first recognised from the air by Bob Jones, a pilot from Welshpool Airport with long experience of archaeological aerial reconnaissance, and photographed from the air on 8th October 2007 by Toby Driver of RCAHMMW. The potential significance of this discovery was obvious and a field visit was made to assess the monument on 17th October 2007 by Toby Driver, Jeffrey Davies, Hugh Toller, John Griffith Roberts and John Burman. The site lies on land belonging to Gwanas which is within the Tir Gofal agri-environmental scheme.

DESCRIPTION

The visit confirmed that the earthwork had all the attributes expected of a Roman fort. Its topographical position, bounded by streams on the north and south sides and the River Clywedog on the west and with excellent all-round views, is classic in terms of Roman military castramentation. The earthwork is centrally placed at the opening of three valley passes; to Dinas Mawddwy and central Wales to the east, to Tal-y-llyn and the Dysynni valley to the south-west, and north-west to the opening of the Mawddach estuary at Dolgellau. In terms of its relationship to other known Roman monuments in the area, it lies 2.4kms south of the Roman fortlet at Brithdir (White 1978), and 2.4kms south-west

of the line of the Roman road which rises from Bwlch yr Oerddrws to the east (Crew and Musson 1996) and runs north-east past the probable watch-tower at Lletty-canol (NPRN 54526) towards the fort at Caer Gai some 18km to the north-east. The Roman fort of Tomen-y-Mur lies almost due north, some 23km distant and that of Cefn-Gaer, Pennal some 19km to the south-west.

Initially an alternative date for the earthwork could not be ruled out as it once lay within the lands of Cymer Abbey, and close to a recorded medieval township of Gwanas/Wonas (PRN 9859) as well as the presumed site of a medieval hospice or grange at Dol Ysphyty (PRN 4135). Further investigation took place in February 2008. This comprised of a detailed earthwork survey of the above ground remains by the Royal Commission, a magnetometry survey by David Hopewell and John Burman, and a small scale excavation by John Griffith Roberts and Jeffrey Davies in the interior and across the inner bank on the east side, which produced no finds.

The results of this work have provided us with a more detailed picture of the monument and confirmed the initial interpretation of a Roman date. The enclosure is rectangular in shape, with rounded corners, enclosing an internal area 141m east to west by 124m north to south or 1.74 hectares (4.42 acres). It is defined by a double bank with a median ditch and has four entrances, one placed centrally in each side. The bank was some 3.5m wide with an inner and outer turf revetment with a mixed infill of soil, stone and dumped turfs. Although not examined the outer bank is of slighter character and appears to be a counterscarp. Along the western side, the rampart only partly survives along the line of a recently-dug drainage ditch bounded by a former hedge bank, and a recent plantation of deciduous trees. The northern rampart and north-east angle of the site have been lost to cultivation and were only confirmed by magnetometry; a steep scarp edge about 20m into this field suggests the former position of the destroyed rampart. It is worth noting that had the entire enclosure been similarly plough-levelled, the chances of its rediscovery from the air would have been slight. Cropmarks are not prevalent in this upland area and thus any similar plough-levelled monuments in comparable locations are only likely to be rediscovered through ground intervention.

The fact that the magnetometry survey failed to provide any proof of permanent internal structures and that the enclosure is defined by a much slighter rampart than that of an

auxiliary fort has led to its reclassification. Despite the fact that the surviving entrance gaps show no sign of the characteristic devices for protecting the gates, namely a *clavicula* or a *titulum* the site is more likely to have been a small temporary camp probably dating to the period of the Flavian conquest in the AD 70s. A fuller report is in preparation.

Acknowledgements

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References

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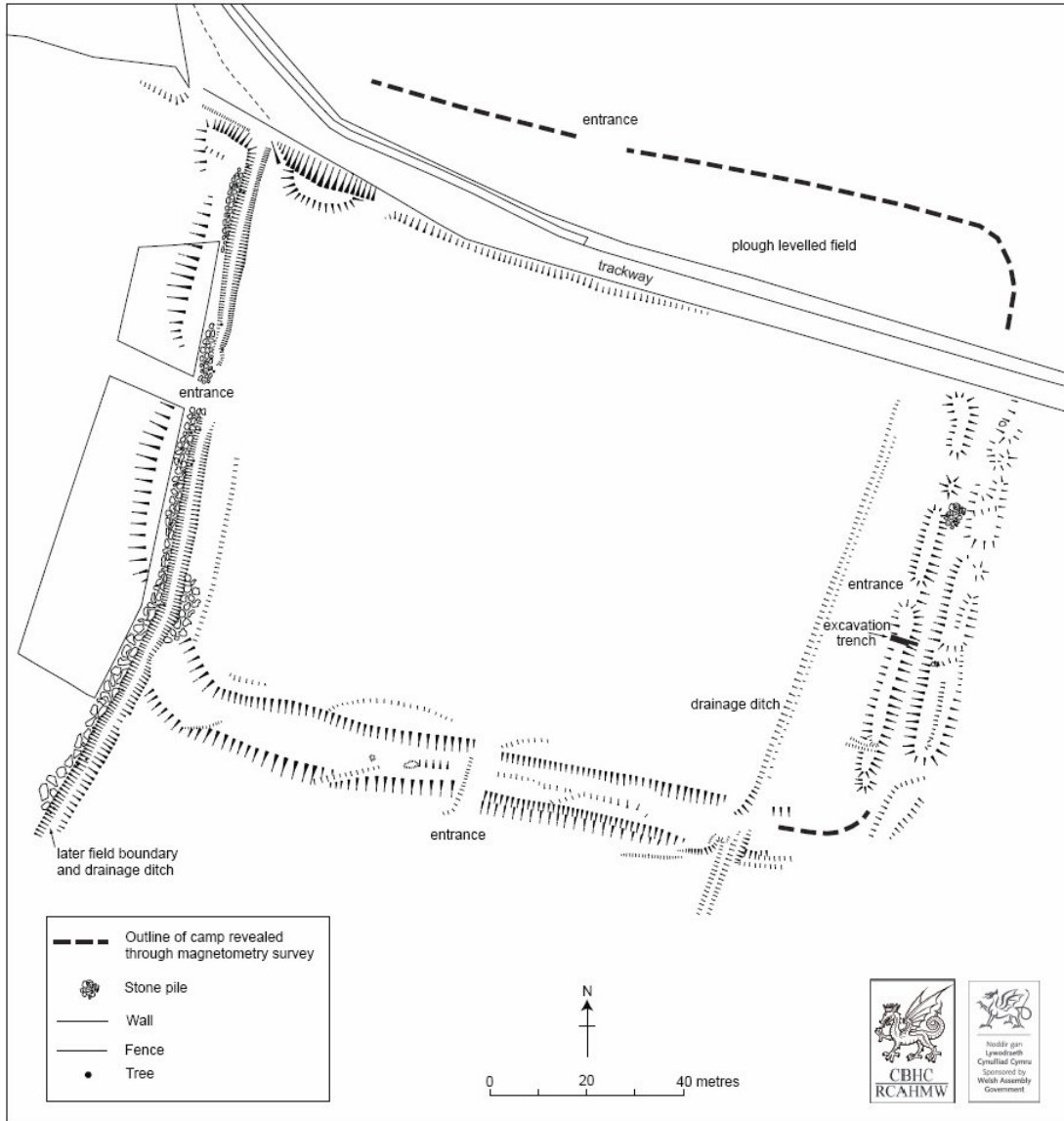
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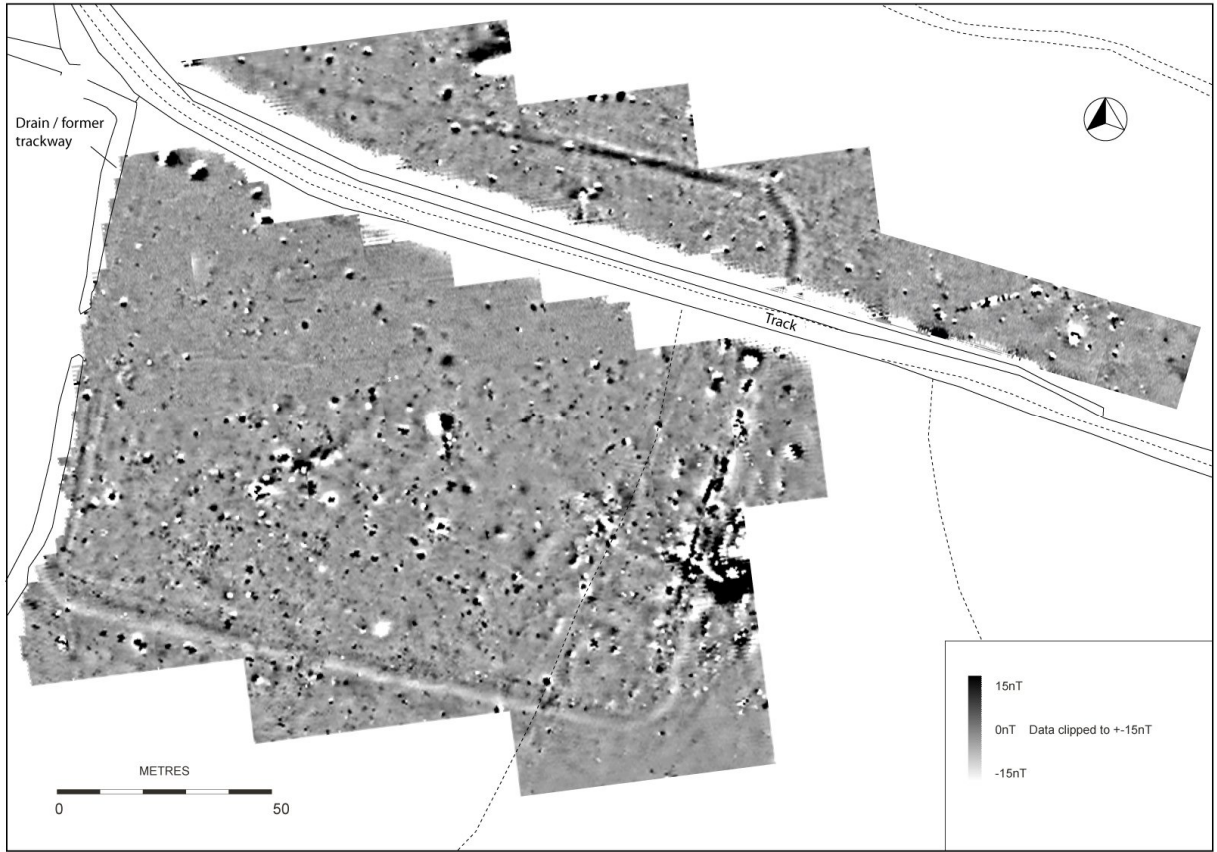
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Gwanas-fawr Roman camp, topographic survey (Crown Copyright RCAHMW).



Gwanas-fawr Roman camp, magnetometry. (Copyright, Gwynedd Archaeological Trust).