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Royal Commission
on the
Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales



Porth-y-dwr, Rhuthin

County: Denbighshire

Community: Ruthin

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Porth-y-dwr, Ruthin, Denbighshire

Summary

Dating from the mid-fifteenth century, Porth-y-dwr is a building that has undergone a number of changes over its 600 year history, taking the house from a timber framed open medieval hall and storeyed cross-wing to a storeyed, bricked and glazed 20th century shop. The original mid-fifteenth structure was probably the home and trading shop for a wealthy merchant perhaps of the Moyle family. The name of Porth-y-dwr suggests the house is associated with a Watergate, i.e. the west gate of Ruthin town, being close by, being close by the Avon Clwyd.

The position of Porth-y-dwr, which is visible from the Market Square looking down Clwyd Street, and being just inside the main west gateway, would have provided a prime trading position.

Its east-west cross-wing of four bays had chambers at first-floor above a parlour to the west and a merchant's shop with open-bay to the east (used as a place to show merchandise?). The parlour at the west end is situated behind a dais-partition adjoining the hall and service north-south range. The dais-partition has evidence for a dais- canopy and would have had a dais-bench, where the head of the household sat facing the open hall. From this position one could oversee access, including a view of the shop bay through the doorway to his left. The open hall was probably entered beyond a central hearth, as a cross-passage at the south end of a two-bay hall with services /kitchen bays beyond.

The Royal Commission were invited to record Porth-y-dwr amid a renovation project. During the course of this project new areas of timber framing were exposed and small finds uncovered that have



shed new light on the buildings function and development, leading to the first full evaluation and interpretation of this site.

The following report aims to provide an understanding of the development of Porth-y-dwr through the detailed analysis of the buildings structure and form and to set this within a historical context in Wales.

Historical Background

Documentary references

1. The name Porth-y-dwr is mentioned in 'An Account of the Castle and Town of Ruthin' by Richard Newcombe, 1829'. In this article the owner of a nearby former mill 'the mansion of an ancient family, now extinct, of Moyle or Mule in the precincts of the mill and adjoining Porth-y-Dwr', may be associated with our building. In this article he explains that 'about thirty years ago the ruins of a magnificent arch called Porth-y-Dwr or the Water-Gate were demolished to make way for the bridge adjoining the county gaol'. He asserts that tradition speaks of the 'Gates of the Town' implying the town was walled and that there was more than one gate.

2. Thomas Pennant, Tours in Wales, vol II, London, 1810. Here Pennant describes his entry to Ruthin thus, *Reach Ruthin, and enter under Porth y Dwr, its only remaining gate*, indicating its existence prior to 1810.



Fig.1a. DS2013_386_001



Fig.1b.

Fig.1a. View of hall/service bays to left and cross-wing beyond with 17th century first-floor balustrade balcony and chimneys, viewed from Mill Street. Fig.1b. East elevation and projecting balustrade balcony and later shop (2008).



Site Description

Porth-y-dwr is situated in Ruthin town at the lower end of Clwyd Street opposite the former county prison and the junction with Mill Street. The Afon Clwyd runs from the west to the north of the site, with the Town Mill immediately south; with the leat historically bounding the property on its west. The building is presently divided into three properties and has later additions and alterations. These additions hide a mid-fifteenth century structure, consisting of a timber-framed hall-house and storied cross-wing, all of box-framed construction. The four-bay cross-wing is set at right angles to a smoke-blackened four-bay range with a two-bay open hall-house and a two-bay kitchen/service area open to the roof (see reconstructed plan). The cross-wing's east-end ground-floor bay is open on its three external sides, perhaps a sheltered area for displaying shop wares adjacent to a secure shop bay. The open bay's south side has had a seventeenth century timber-framed, open fronted projecting balcony (blocked) inserted at first-floor with moulded balustrade. The balcony provides a commanding view along Mill Street towards the former mill and the castle. The mill may have been in the same ownership and the balcony or window would have provided oversight of work at the mill.

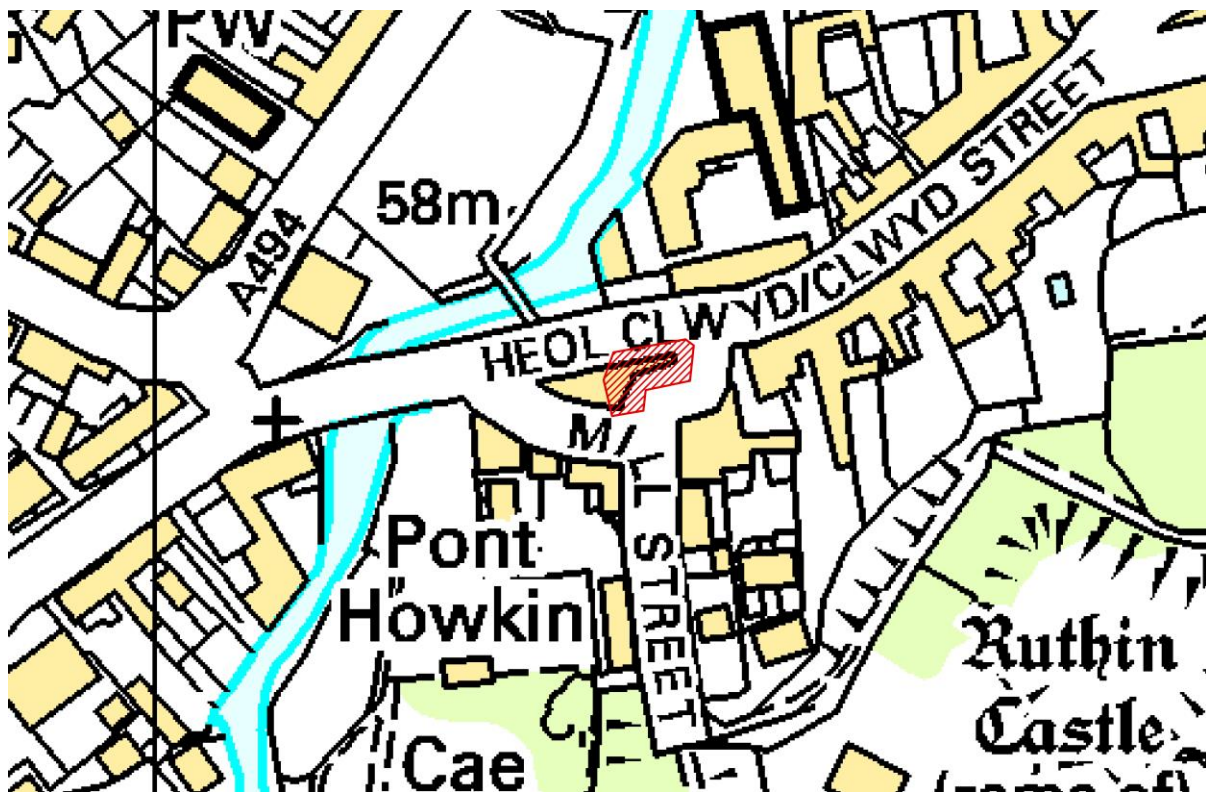




Fig. 3. Cross-wing, east gable-end. DS2013_386_018



Fig.4. Cross-wing arched-brace. DS2013_386_023



Fig. 5, Cross-wing arch-braced truss and wind-braces (note projecting pegs). DS2013_386_016

Timber frame details

All of the timber work is very plain, with cranked tie-beam and collar trusses and close-studded two-tier wall-framing with short mid-rails. However, the cross-wing has a fine butt-purlin roof, compared to the more usual trenched purlins of the hall/kitchen roof. The cross-wing also has elaborate curved and cusped wind-braces to the lower of two chamfered side-purlins and a ridge-piece, all with projecting pegs. At first-floor its two-bay east end has a central, open arch-braced truss indicating a principal-chamber. In comparison the hall/kitchen/service range collar tie-beam trusses have plain curved braces from haunched principal-posts to tie-beam. The central hall truss itself is similarly plain, but with larger arched braces, held in place by extra pegs. The smoke-blackened roof has three pairs of trenched side-purlins and morticed rafters at the apex. The position of the inserted late-17th-century stone fireplace against the hall's central truss indicates the usual plan pattern in Wales, that the cross-passage and dais-end of hall spaces are retained with a cross-passage behind the fireplace, and the fireplace heating the reduced hall.

The cross-wing's west end two-bay part against the hall has been partly removed by 19th century reworking but its cut-back central closed truss partly survives with studs between a collar and tie-beam. At ground-floor facing the hall the elaborate dais-canopy with chamfered arch-braced, beam and dais-partition behind, survive as part of the cross-wing's framing. The open hall is separately framed, but as the dais-canopy is within the cross-wing framing it appears to confirm they are coeval. A chamfered gothic arched doorway, set to one side under the canopy beam, provides access to the parlour from the hall through a doorway in the dais-partition and to the shop bay via another doorway in the cross-wing central partition. These two doorways have plain, flat lintels with



chamfered jambs. The gothic doorway jamb has mortice and chamfer evidence for a low partition between its post and the dais-partition, which once separated the dais-bench from the passage-way.



Fig. 6. Dais-canopy, view from hall with doorway to right providing access to shop bay and parlour behind, through the blocked dais-partition behind. DS2013_386_004



The cross-wing's east end, ground-floor open bay, has mortice evidence for braces to all the posts, with some braces remaining in-situ, showing that it was originally open on three sides. The adjacent shop bay cross-partition has evidence in its cut back ceiling-beam indicating a central wide seven mullion window (see section drawing). The ceiling over these two end-bays is unusual in having thick axial floor boards instead of joists and boards. In comparison the ceiling over the west parlour end has the more normal flat-section joists morticed to the dais-canopy beam over the dais-partition. The first-floor over the east-end bays has a central arch-braced collar-truss seated on the wall-plates, indicating a principal-chamber. Its east gable-end looking up Clwyd Street is close-studded with wattle infill to the first-floor, and evidence for post and panel below a central window. The north wall retains close-studded framing around a centrally placed chamfered three mullion window, once with a similar framing and window on the south wall, against the cross partition. The principal chamber has an inserted seventeenth-century axial ceiling-beam, with a plastered stop, and a plaster moulded ceiling and panelled walls. Its south façade has a projecting balcony with elaborately carved balustrading under a former window, now enclosed and underbuilt, once probably supported on corner-posts. Another example of balustrades to windows can be seen at 113/114 Frankwell, Shrewsbury. The east end of its south façade has a central external projecting seventeenth-century stone fireplace stack (see plan) with fireplace to first-floor, and to the existing altered pair of ground floor fireplaces.

The cross-wing's closed central truss partition has raking-struts and a central stud between collar and tie-beam for wattle and daub with altered framing below the tie-beam. Here there is a blocked doorway frame and mortices for arched-braces between tie-beam and principal-posts, which may indicate it was once open. At ground-floor there is a plane flat-headed doorway to access the hall and parlour. This partition's timber-framing at ground and first-floor has different assembly marks to the rest of the cross-wing and may indicate alteration. There are certainly a number of later openings, now blocked (see section drawing).

The hall's principal-post trusses are separately framed up against the cross-wing, and no assembly marks were visible at the time of survey. The dais-partition is set back into the cross-wing and has assembly marks similar to the rest of the cross-wing.



Fig. 8. Hall arch-brace.

The hall/service range has some surviving two-tier close-studded wall-framing in the hall's east wall, with some full height studs and mortice evidence in the wall-plate and principal-posts. The present floor over the north bay of the hall, consists of two late-seventeenth-century, angle stopped chamfered ceiling-beams with square-section joists, inserted when the stone fireplace was added. The side beams are pegged to the wall frame and supported on corbel brackets. The other bay floors to hall/kitchen range are nineteenth century with similar date fireplaces. Externally the entire hall/kitchen range walls are rendered and have early-nineteenth century machine dressed stone plinths, indicating it had further alterations at this period.



Fig. 9. Hall closed truss against cross-wing.

Discussion

1, The name Porth-y-Dwr does appear to relate to this building's position nearby the original town gate built of stone mentioned by Richard Newcombe in 1829 where he describes *'the mansion of an ancient family now extinct, of Moyle or Mule in the precincts of the mill and adjoining Porth-y-Dwr'* .

2. The original structure was probably the home and trading shop for a wealthy merchant perhaps the Moyle family¹. The usage of the cross-wing may have been as chambers over a merchants shop and parlour with its open bay used as a place to market products. Its parlour at the west end was behind a dais-partition with arch-braced jetty beam and doorway facing the hall. There would have been a dais-bench in front of the dais-partition, where the head of the household sat facing the open hall with a view of the shop bay. The cross-passage entry is likely to have been beyond a central hearth at the south end of the hall with services or kitchen beyond.

3. The cross-wing is separately framed from the hall range and odd rebates in the cross-wings central principal-post indicate there may have been an earlier structure prior to the present hall/service

¹ 'An Account of the Castle and Town of Ruthin' by Richard Newcombe, 1829'. In this article the owner of a nearby former mill 'the mansion of an ancient family, now extinct, of Moyle or Mule in the precincts of the mill and adjoining Porth-y-Dwr'.



range. The purlins of the hall part extend from the end truss into the cross-wing, each having a mortice with pegs for joining to a cross-wing. There are no corresponding linking timbers from the cross-wing, indicating they are of different periods. However, the substantial depth of the close studding and plain details in both may indicate they are co-eval. The building was visited by a dendrochronologist in 2013, who considered it was unlikely to date.

4. Comparisons relating to the cross-wing's ground-floor open bay are limited to: (a), A couple of examples formally in Leominster, at 16, Corn Square, and at 40 Broad Street (Liberty Hall). These both have three open bays (one narrower bay) with floor over supported by up-braced posts. They have similar close studding and plain details of market hall type appearance. (b), A shop/market hall structure in Debenham, Suffolk, has a timber-frame, close studded early two-unit market shop structure, each unit only 6ft 8" wide, with open arcading on the ground-floor, indicating a stall area². (c), At Goodramgate, York, NGR SE6052SW, the listed building account refers to a timber-framed house, where the ground-floor open bay is a gate-house with open passage way, re-built 1600. It has similar close-studded timber-framing over an open way under its first bay of a 2 or 4-bay structure.

5, The owners informed me recently that another dendrochronologist has been able to date the cross-wing.

² Leigh Alston in Eavesdropper 20th Anniversary selection, 2013, Early Market Stalls, p23.

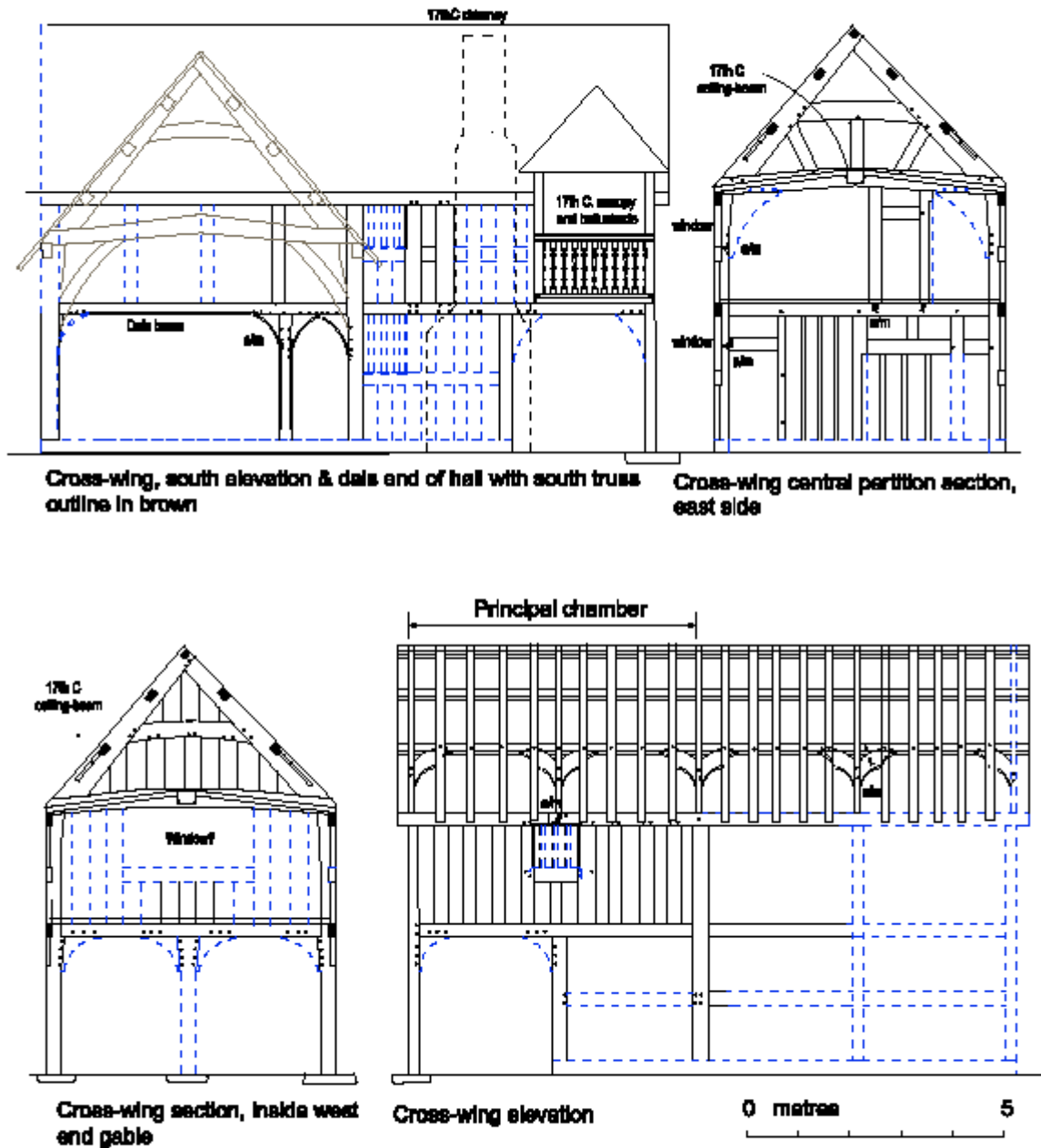


Fig. 10. Reconstructed drawings showing the cross-wing sections and elevations with the hall truss drawn in brown against the dais canopy and reconstructed details in blue dash line.

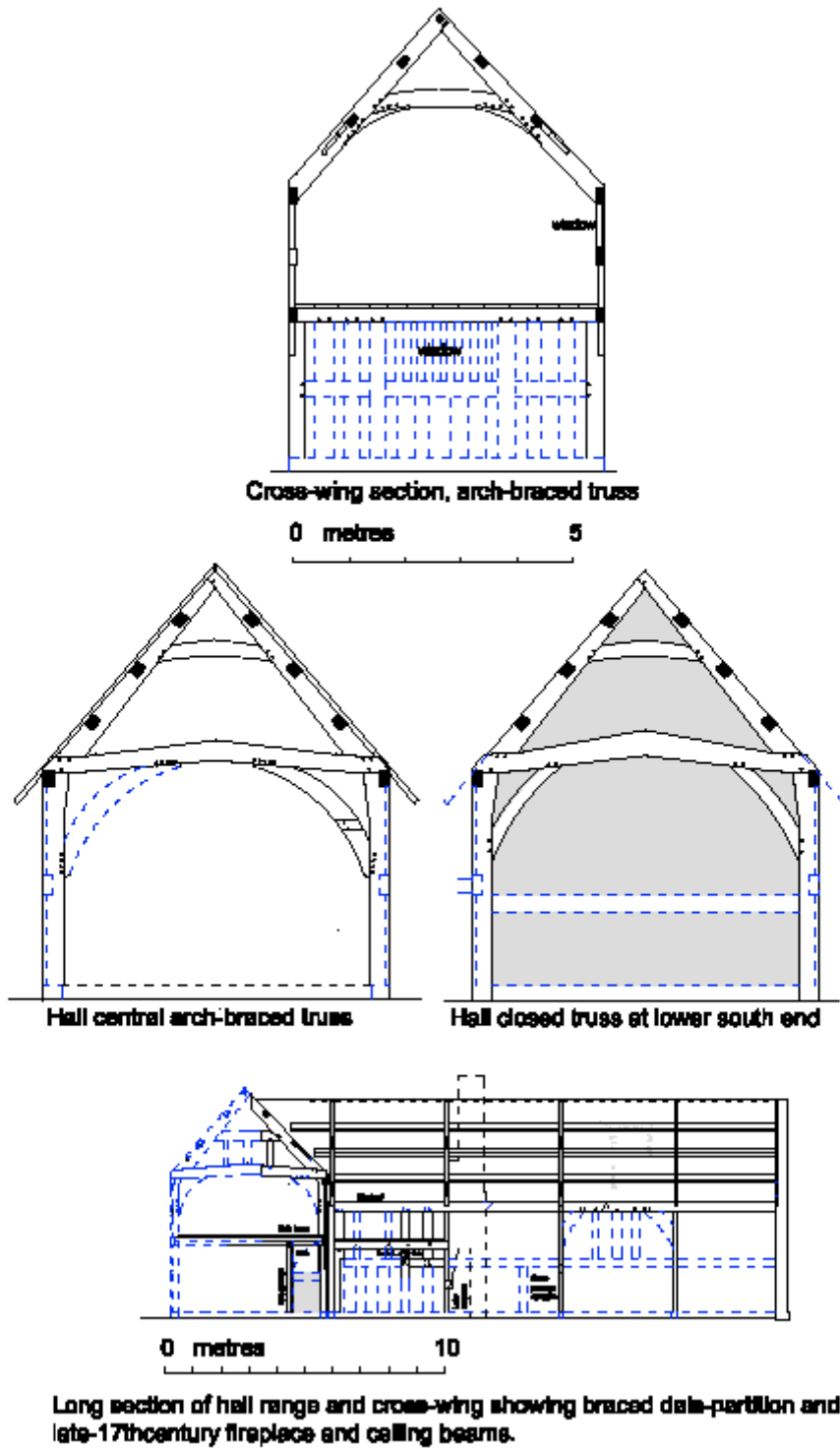


Fig.11. Reconstructed drawings showing the cross-wing arch-braced truss, with ground-floor window to open bay. Also the two hall trusses and a long-section through hall/kitchen/service and cross-wing.



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the owners, John and Carol Smith, Mike Barcuel and Roger O' Connah, for allowing access, and their helpful assistance and information.

Some Examples of parallels for the open-bay were noted by Duncan James of Insight-Historic Buildings Research, Presteigne.

There is further reference to the Mill/ bridge area from an unpublished history of Ruthin by Gareth Evans.

Methodology

Historic Building Record – This comprised of an interior and exterior examination of Porth-y-dwr, with photographic, written and measured records being produced:

The property was recorded by Ross Cook and Geoff Ward over the period Nov 2013 to April 2014, while the structure was undergoing repair and restoration.

Measured Survey - A digital metric survey was undertaken by Ross Cook in November 2013 using a Leica TCR407 Power Total Station, TheoLT and AutoCAD. Digital survey data was captured at 1:1 in scale and saved in an AutoCAD DWG format. A tape and rule survey was undertaken by Geoff Ward at the same date, from which the sections and elevations have been drawn.

Drawn Record – Plan, elevations and sections were produced from the both sets of survey data using AutoCAD 2011, produced at a scale of 1:1, but with recommended print scales of; Section 1:50 at A4; Plan 1:100 at A4. All drawings are saved in an AutoCAD DWG and DXF format for archiving, with .pdf being made available for Coflein.

Photographic Survey – A photographic survey was completed by Ross Cook and Geoff Ward in between November 2013 and April 2014. Equipment comprises of a series of high resolution digital exterior and interior photographs taken using a Canon Eos 450D 12.2MP SLR. Photographs includes both general and detailed. All photographs have been submitted for archived with the RCAHMW, detailing view, angle and photographer.

Written Record – The written record has been produced to accompany the Drawn Record and Photographic Survey, to interpret the data and provide an understanding of Porth-y-dwr through its phases and development.