

# Cwrt Llechrhyd, Llanelwedd: An Unusual Moated Site in Central Powys

By C. R. MUSSON and C. J. SPURGEON<sup>1</sup>

*SMALL-SCALE EXCAVATIONS in June 1983 at Cwrt Llechrhyd, Llanelwedd, an unusually large moated site in central Powys, showed the ditch to be shallow and flat-bottomed, with an internal bank of simple dump construction, lacking obvious signs of timbering or stone revetments. No artefacts were recovered, but charcoal from the base of the bank produced a radiocarbon result suggesting a Dark-Age date for the construction of the monument. The historical background and possible parallels to the site are examined in the light of this evidence.*

The site lies towards the E. side of the Wye Valley at Builth Road, about 3 km NW. of Builth Wells (SO 026 531).<sup>2</sup> The R. Wye lies some 500 m to the SW., across water-meadows barely lower than the interior of the enclosure. The lower parts of the Cwrt Llechrhyd enclosure lie at about 140 m O.D.; the buildings of Court Farm, which occupy its central mound, are at about 147 m O.D.

The most distinctive feature of the site is the rectilinear waterlogged moat and internal bank (Fig. 1), measuring between 125 m and 190 m to the peaks of the bank and covering an area of 2.48 ha (6.13 acres). Rather over half of the interior is occupied by a large natural mound about 120 m by 140 m across, and about 7 m high, which covers 1.28 ha (3.16 acres).<sup>3</sup> The rest of the interior forms a fairly level area, boggy in places, which varies from only 10 m or so in width at the SE., to as much as 60 m at the W. corner. The flattened top of the mound, about 85 m by 105 m across, is now occupied by the buildings of Court Farm.<sup>4</sup> The enclosure is overlooked by ground which gradually rises towards the NE., as well as by another natural mound immediately outside the defences on this side.

The moat now measures 6–7 m across from lip to lip, with gently sloping sides and a flat, marshy bottom 3–4 m wide. It is up to c. 0.50 m deep from the modern surface and c. 1.75 m from the peak of the bank. Along the NW. side (where not destroyed by the railway), and more intermittently elsewhere, there is a slight but distinct counterscarp bank, which may represent either an original feature or the product of periodic cleaning-out of the moat. The surviving bank is generally 6–7 m wide and about 1.25 m high above the interior; it has been levelled along parts of the NW. and SE. sides. The well-preserved W. corner rises a little higher, presumably to accommodate the additional spoil obtained from the ditch as it turned the corner. The size and strength of the site suggest the intention of creating a permanent

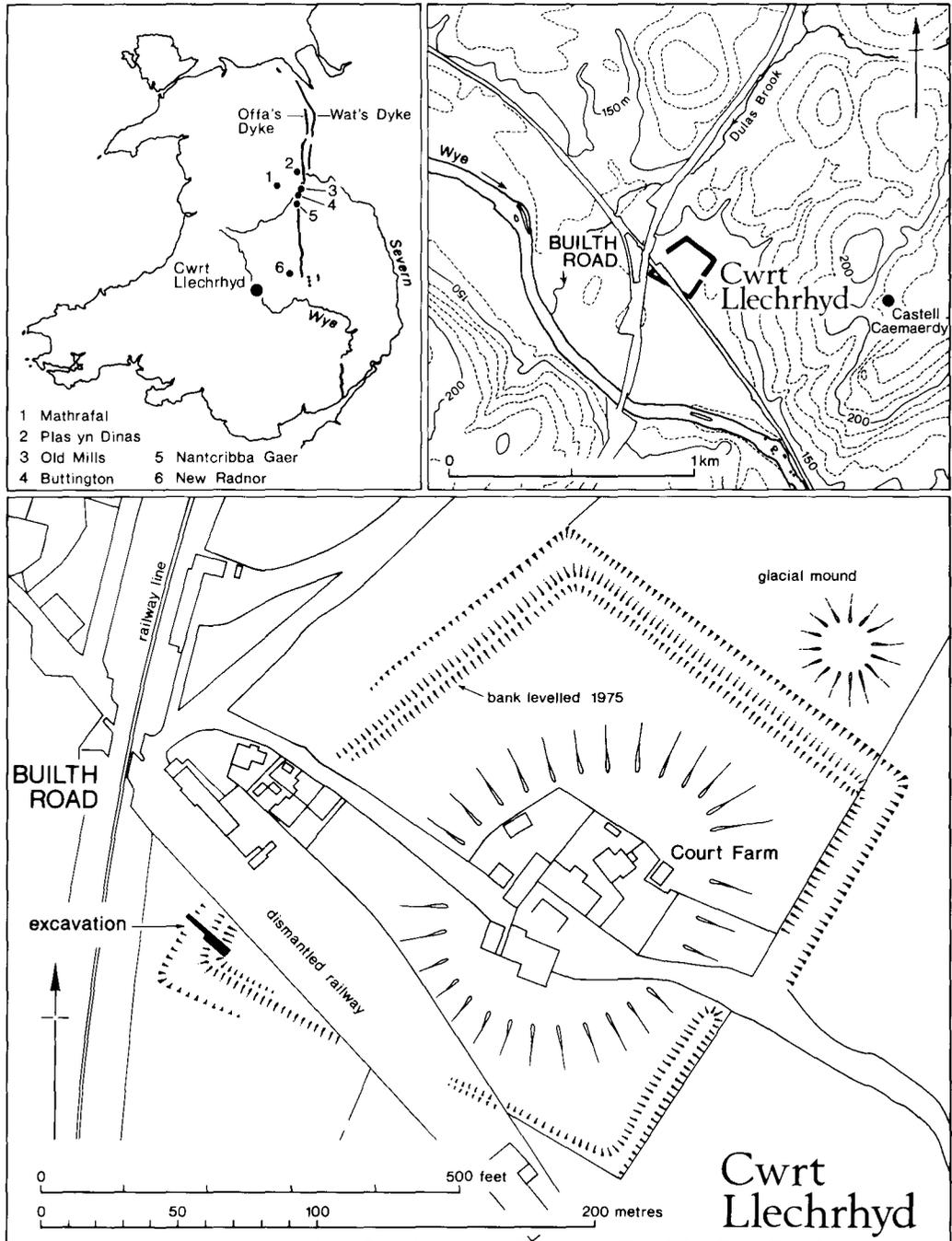


FIG. 1  
Cwrt Llechrhyd, Powys: location

fortress, at a place deliberately chosen to encompass the large natural mound. Despite the inherent weakness of the situation, especially along the NE. side, the inclusion within the defences of the prominent central mound suggests three possible motives: the provision of an elevated location for a leader's residence; a vantage point from which to direct defenders; or simply the existence of dry ground in what must have been a marshy area, without the need to level up the interior on any adjacent and tactically superior position. Each may have played a part.

The place-name is derived from the elements *cwrt* or court, and *-rhyd* or ford, which implies a nearby river crossing. The third element *llech* is less informative, being derived from either the Welsh *llech* — slate or slab, or from the Middle English *lache* or *leche* — sluggish stream or boggy land. Other antiquities in the area include a small Roman fortlet on Penmincae Farm, 2 km to the W.–NW. (SO 006 540), which is taken to indicate the Wye crossing of the Castell Collen-Llandovery road,<sup>5</sup> and the motte called Castell Caemaerdy, 750 m to the E.–SE. (SO 034 530), which has no recorded history. A small field 150 m SW. of the site (SO 025 529) is named 'cae yr Eglwys' (church field) on the tithe schedule, but a church here would seem unlikely, given the parish church of Llanelwedd, now vanished and replaced nearby, only 1.8 km to the SE. (SO 043 522).

Though of unusually large size, Cwrt Llechrhyd has recently been reassessed as a possible medieval moated site, or Dark-Age native or Mercian stronghold.<sup>6</sup> Earlier identifications are unacceptable: it is not a motte-and-bailey,<sup>7</sup> nor a Roman fort within a larger 'British' circular work,<sup>8</sup> and there is no clear authority for an association with the last campaign of Llewelyn ap Gruffydd in 1272.<sup>9</sup> One version of the *Brut y Tywysogyon*<sup>10</sup> uses the name of 'Llechrhyd' as the site of the battle between Rhys ap Tewdwr of Deheubarth and the sons of Bleddyn ap Cynan of Powys in 1088, but the reliability of this has been questioned.<sup>11</sup>

## THE EXCAVATIONS

By C. R. MUSSON

In June 1983, a machine-cut trench 3.0–3.5 m wide was dug across the bank and a c. 1 m wide section was cut across the ditch in the SW. corner of the enclosure (Fig. 1). The work was carried out over a period of two days in response to the construction of an access road to the concrete works which now occupies the abandoned railway line.<sup>12</sup> The section was set at an angle of 10–15° to the line of the defences, but the distortion caused to the dimensions quoted in the following text is likely to be minimal.

### *The enclosure ditch*

The ditch proved to be only c. 0.8 m deep from the modern surface (c. 1.2 m from the pre-bank turf level), and c. 2.7 m below the present peak of the bank, slightly higher here than around most of the circuit (Fig. 2). Its sloping sides and flat bottom closely reflected the present profile of the ground surface, the original width being about 7 m. Beneath brown topsoil and mud (200–250 mm), the ditch silts consisted of 300–350 mm of grey clay containing rust-coloured organic inclusions, mainly leaves in the lower parts; this merged into about 100 mm of similar but blacker material, again with plentiful organic remains; this lay above a basal deposit, c. 100 mm thick, of light grey clay. The deposits

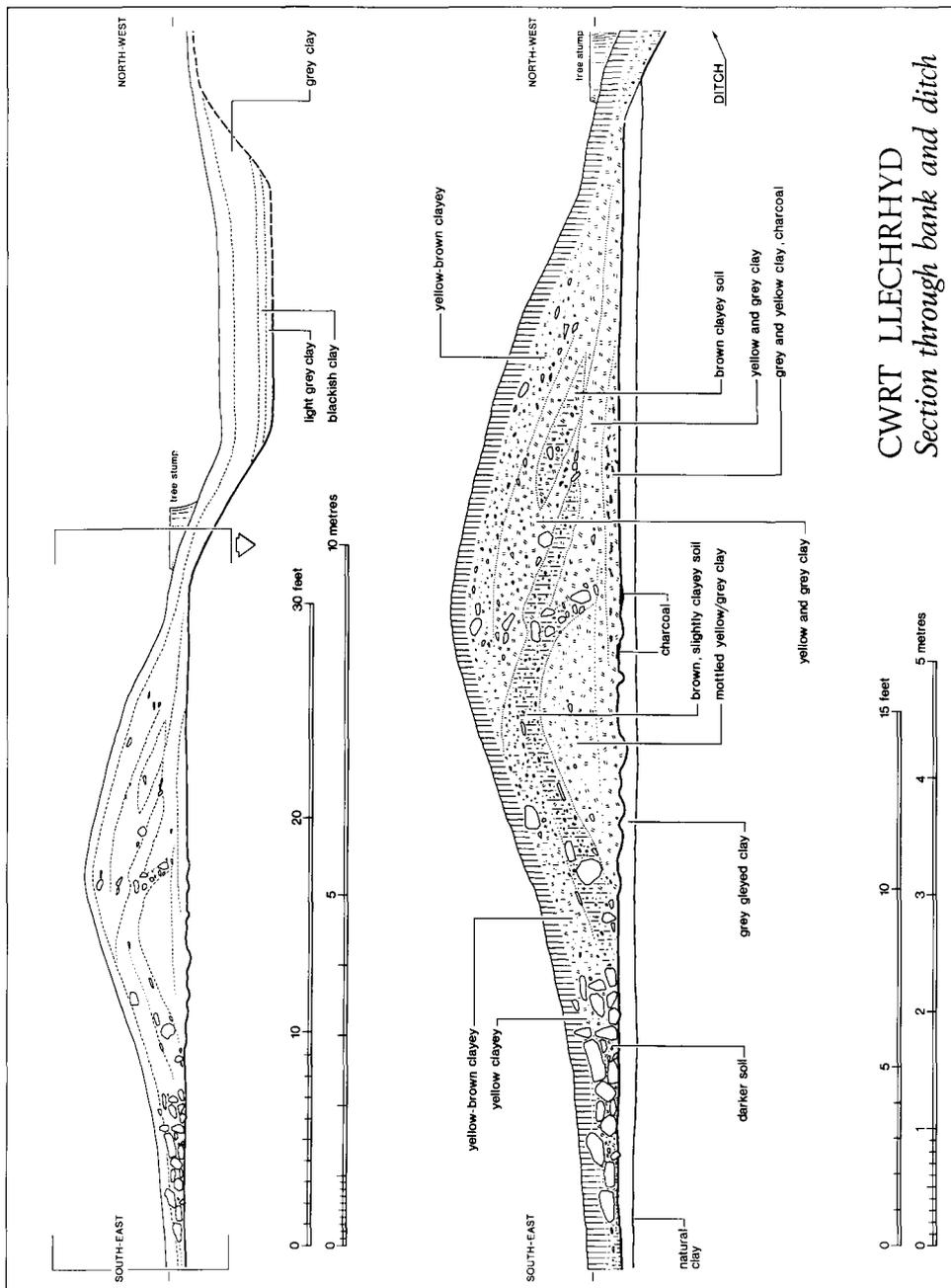


FIG. 2  
Cwrt Llechrhyd, Powys: sections through bank and ditch

appeared to be water-lain throughout, and were virtually stone-free. There was no sign that the ditch had been cleaned out, though the method of excavation precluded certainty on this point. The ditch had been dug through a layer of orange-veined yellowish clay to the surface of a glacial or riverine deposit, consisting of stony blue-grey clay with a fairly high gravel content, *c.* 1.2 m thick. Beneath this were further natural layers consisting of *c.* 1 m of very dark grey sandy gravel, above a deposit of lighter grey stony clay. The lower deposits were extremely wet and unstable, and it was necessary to refill the ditch section within an hour to prevent collapse, after basic details of the section had been recorded.

#### *The enclosure bank*

No trace of the counterscarp bank was present at this point. The internal bank was well-preserved, though partly masked by trees, which had recently been felled within the excavation area. Its upper surface, rounded here though flatish at other parts of the circuit, rose gently towards the W. corner of the enclosure.

The SW. face of the excavation showed the bank to be about 1.5 m high, and just over 9 m wide from the lip of the ditch to a rear edge formed by a band of pebbles. The NE. face of the trench (not illustrated) displayed an apparently undifferentiated dump of stony yellowish clay, presumably excavated from the adjacent areas of the ditch. The SW. section, on the other hand, presented a more complicated picture, with distinct and variably stony dumps of grey, yellow and brown clayey soil (Fig. 2). These seem likely to have been derived from different depths in the natural clay, and there was no suggestion of more than one period of construction. A broad band of large ovoid pebbles, about 2 m wide, lay against the tail of the bank across the full width of the trench, fading out to the rear from a maximum thickness of *c.* 0.40 m. The stones were interleaved with the rear of the bank in a way which suggested that they were a stabilizing deposit rather than a collapsed rear revetment or an internal road or path.

In such a speedy excavation conditions of observation were necessarily poor, and no evidence of timbering or internal stonework was encountered during the mechanical removal of the rampart core. More reliably, the natural subsoil beneath the bank, where trowelled *c.* 0.15 m below the ancient turf line, was clearly undisturbed by post-holes. This certainty cannot, however, be extended to a strip *c.* 1.5 m wide immediately against the lip of the ditch, where mechanical excavation was mistakenly carried somewhat deeper. Although post-holes spaced more than 3–3.5 m apart (the width of the trench) cannot be entirely discounted, neither face of the excavation showed any sign of vertical or horizontal subdivisions within the core, nor was there evidence of a continuous palisade-slot along the top of the rampart. If it had incorporated a palisade in its design, this would presumably have been supported on individual spaced uprights founded in the body of the bank. On balance it seems probable that the profile of the bank has changed little from that established at the time of its construction.

The profile shown in Fig. 2 hints at the possibility of a slight berm between the bank and the ditch. However, one of the lower tips in the bank clearly continued to within *c.* 1 m of the lip of the ditch (and, free of root disturbance, may well have continued further); it could hardly have occupied such a position if the bank had eroded to its present profile from a steep or even vertical face set further back from the ditch, and the former presence of a berm therefore seems unlikely.

A poorly-defined, 100–150 mm thick layer of light grey and yellow stone-free clay, with intermittent ironpanning at its surface, overlay the buried soil beneath the front half of the bank. Considerable quantities of oak charcoal were present in this area, both on the buried ground surface, and within the overlying greyish clay. The first sweep of mechanical excavation was halted *within* this clay; rapid cleaning by hand revealed veins of charcoal up to *c.* 0.40 m long, some of them traceable vertically, horizontally or obliquely downward as flat 'plates' of charcoal-flecked black soil. There seemed little doubt that these represented the remains of individual turves dug from the area of the ditch and then jumbled together as the first element in the bank's construction. After the next sweep of mechanical excavation, which took the excavated surface well into the natural clay, concentrations of charcoal were visible in section at and immediately above the buried soil, but not within the buried soil itself. A radiocarbon date for charcoal from this deposit is discussed below. Though, in strictest logic, the date merely provides a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the bank, the nature of the deposit strongly suggests tree-clearance immediately prior to the construction of the bank.

#### *The buried soil*

Below the bank was a well-defined buried soil-profile consisting of sticky, practically stone-free, light grey gleyed clay, 50–100 mm thick, overlying a similar layer about 50 mm thick but heavily mottled with iron staining. These deposits overlay a much denser, orange-veined yellowish clay subsoil. Undulations in the buried ground surface, as seen in section over a distance of *c.* 2 m beneath the inner

half of the bank, hinted at pre-bank ploughing (see Fig. 2), but local trampling of the turf-line by animals perhaps provides a more convincing explanation, since beneath other parts of the bank the surface appeared quite even and flat.

*Commentary upon the radiocarbon date*

Dr P. Q. Dresser, of the Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory in the Department of Plant Science at University College, Cardiff, reports that charcoal from the grey clay at the base of the bank produced a date of  $1130 \pm 60$  B.P. (CAR-672). Calibration of this date to the historical timescale using data published by Stuiver and Becker<sup>13</sup> results in three intersections with the calibration curve, at A.D. 895, 922 and 939. Taking account of the quoted error term, the sample has a calibrated date range of A.D. 781–984 at the 68% level of probability (1 sigma) and A.D. 733–1017 at the 95% level (2 sigma).

A small allowance, however, should be made for the age of the timber at the time it was burned. All the identified samples were of oak, the largest fragments being from timbers up to 60 mm in diameter, representing *c.* 50 years of growth (identifications by G. C. Morgan, Department of Archaeology, University of Leicester). It seems likely that larger-diameter fragments would have been identified if timbers substantially bigger than this had been present. Even allowing for the loss of some sap-wood (trimmed off or burned to ash), it appears unlikely that the original source contained wood more than 40–60 years old at the time of felling. This would be consistent with the idea of trimmings, burned after the larger and straighter timbers had been removed for structural use.

It could be argued that the date-range represented by the sample should therefore be shifted forward by 40–60 years to allow for the age of the timber. However, the bulk of the timber-volume in any branch comes from the outer (younger) growth-rings, and calculations suggest that an allowance of 20 years or so for samples such as these would be adequate; using this allowance for the age of the timber we arrive at a date range for the fire itself of *c.* A.D. 800–1000 at the 68% level of probability, and *c.* A.D. 750–1040 at the 95% level. Thus, assuming that the sample was derived from vegetation clearance which took place immediately prior to the construction of the rampart, the most likely date of construction falls within the 9th or 10th centuries A.D.; there is a much smaller chance that the construction date lay in the late 8th or early 11th centuries.

## DISCUSSION

*By* C. J. SPURGEON

Despite the limitations of radiocarbon dating,<sup>14</sup> the date reported here strengthens suspicions of a pre-Conquest date for the construction of the Cwrt Llechrhyd fortification, probably within the 9th or 10th centuries. Given the extreme rarity of proven Dark-Age sites in Wales, the implications are obvious; however tentatively, the purpose and historical context of the site should be considered in the light of this evidence, and an attempt made to identify possible parallels.

Cwrt Llechrhyd lies in Elfael, the southernmost *cantref* of the kingdom of Powys, in *Rhwng Gwy a Hafren* — ‘the land between Wye and Severn’. Buellt and Brycheiniog lay to the S., Maelienydd to the N., the Mercian enclave W. of Offa’s Dyke to the NE., centred on Radnor.<sup>15</sup> Elfael possessed a notable *clas* or mother church at Glaswcm, but the site of a *llys* or court has not been positively identified in either its northern commote of Uwchmynydd, which contains Cwrt Llechrhyd, or in its southern commote of Ismynydd. Colwyn Castle, 8 km to the E. (SO 107 539), became the *caput* of the subsequent Norman lordship established in Uwchmynydd; both Colwyn and Cwrt Llechrhyd contend as the site of the commotal *llys* of the pre-Conquest period.

Elfael was a remote *cantref* at the southern periphery of Powys, far from its main power-centre N. of the Severn, and no forts are recorded in *Rhwng Gwy a Hafren*. The

power of Powys was effectively extinguished on the death of Cyngen in 855, when it fell to Gwynedd. It failed to regain independent status as a separate kingdom until the late 11th century, and then only in its heartlands N. of the Severn.<sup>16</sup> The importance of Powys at this time was accentuated by its long and vulnerable border with Mercia, reflected in increasing evidence for Mercian settlement to the W. of Offa's Dyke.<sup>17</sup>

The defences of Cwrt Llechrhyd leave no doubt that it constituted a fortress. The deployment of the large work-force needed for the construction of its 660 m perimeter bank required the power and authority of a chieftain or military leader. Its siting was neutral, its defences man-made; nature provided no more than the water to flood its moat and compound the effort required. Without drawing too close a parallel, some idea of the potential importance of the site may be given by comparison with the formula applied, in theory at least, to the burhs of Wessex,<sup>18</sup> which would imply a force of some 528 men for its maintenance and defence.

Though battles and campaigns are frequent in the records of Wales between the mid 8th and the early 11th centuries, rarely are the precise locations of campaigns or fortifications stated.<sup>19</sup> Notable exceptions include Degannwy, mentioned in 823,<sup>20</sup> Butington in 893 and Rhuddlan in 921.<sup>21</sup> Alcock has stressed the need to define some basis for predicting likely fortifications of the early historic period,<sup>22</sup> though he noted the exceptional difficulties in making such predictions in Wales: historical records lacking clear topographical indications; the negative evidence, from numerous excavations, on all but two Iron-Age forts; and the failure to discern a characteristic lay-out to assist identification without excavation. He reduced to seven the list of accepted sites of the 5th to 7th centuries A.D. in Wales, all of which were hill-top sites on or near the coast. He rejected previously accepted evidence from four hillforts in the Welsh Marches,<sup>23</sup> not one of which he considered to have been certainly occupied in the Dark Ages.

If we are correct in attributing a Dark-Age date to Cwrt Llechrhyd, it is clearly worthwhile looking in more detail at the basic characteristics of the site and seeing if this may help in the identification of other forts of the period in the Middle Marches. Its basic features are a rectilinear plan; strong univallate bank and ditch, with ample water for wet defences; internal natural mound; neutral low-lying siting; proximity to a river and probable ford.

It is interesting to note Alcock's observation that battles of the period were most frequently at river-crossings,<sup>24</sup> and that a 'dominating central feature, presumably a citadel', is commonly found on early historic forts in Scotland.<sup>25</sup> The rectilinear lay-out may suggest the influence of those English burhs which were of regular form on open sites, but it would be rash to suggest any parallel with the only known Mercian burh in Wales, at Rhuddlan (or with that at Chirbury, close to the border near Montgomery). Rhuddlan, if correctly identified with the large rectilinear enclosure S. of the modern town, appears to have an area of as much as 30 ha (74 acres), comparable with the large burghal towns of England.<sup>26</sup> Aethelflaed's burh at Chirbury is yet to be securely identified; the tiny King's Orchard site excavated by Wainwright is doubtful, and more probable are the traces of a large rectilinear enclosure surrounding the adjacent village.<sup>27</sup> Comparison with smaller English

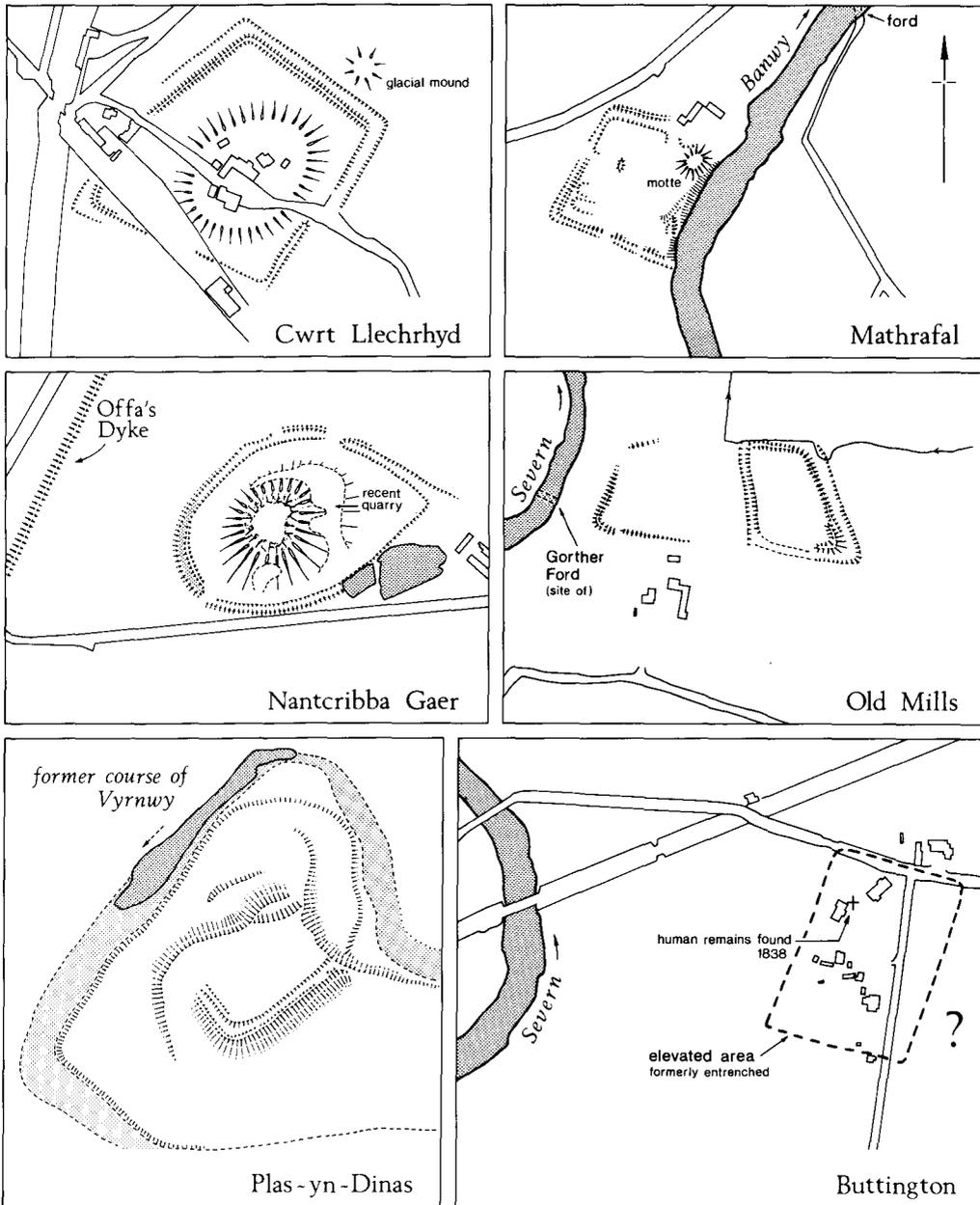
burghal forts might be more fruitful, and the form of Cwrt Llechrhyd and other sites may well be influenced by them.

*Possible parallels for Cwrt Llechrhyd*

Six other unusual sites in the Middle Marches show similarities with Cwrt Llechrhyd; some of these have locations, traditions or historical associations which may be relevant. Five are in N. Powys (formerly Montgomeryshire) — Mathrafal, Nantcribba Gaer, Old Mills Moat, Plas-yn-Dinas, and the vanished fort at Buttington (Fig. 3); the sixth, and altogether less obvious site, is New Radnor, in central Powys (Radnorshire, not illustrated).

*Mathrafal* (SJ 132 108) forms a square enclosure of 0.9 ha. (2.22 acres), its sides of 100 m, lying on the W. bank of the Banwy, 150 m above a ford.<sup>28</sup> An abrupt fall to the river forms its E. side, where a masonry revetment of large rectangular blocks is discernible, the other sides being defined by a bank and ditch. The site clearly pre-dates a motte inserted in the NE. angle, first recorded in 1212, but excavations in 1929 and 1930 produced no finds of medieval or earlier date. Two of the four trenches excavated, but not fully recorded at that time, were re-opened in 1985; a small bailey was identified on the SW. side of the motte, but no evidence has yet been found to confirm the pre-Norman date of the larger outer enclosure, in this intentionally limited and preliminary work.<sup>29</sup> Though lacking the internal natural eminence, and only a third of its size, Mathrafal resembles Cwrt Llechrhyd in situation, its strong defences (shown by excavation to have formerly been wet), and its weakness to the W., facing rising ground. The enclosure is certainly not Roman. Late medieval tradition equated it with Aberffraw and Dinefwr, as a royal seat serving the princes of Powys following the loss of *Pengwern* (Shrewsbury) to Offa. There are no early authorities for this tradition,<sup>30</sup> but the important *clas* church of Meifod, 3 km to the NE., was certainly the burial place of the 12th-century princes of Powys, and it contains an elaborate cross-slab attributed to the late 9th or 10th century.<sup>31</sup>

*Nantcribba Gaer* (SJ 237 014) at first sight shows little similarity to Cwrt Llechrhyd.<sup>32</sup> A lofty and impressive conical outcrop of igneous rock, with steep and partly precipitous slopes, dominates a rounded plateau thrust out from the S. end of Long Mountain. Upon its summit are the vestiges of a stone castle of the 1260s. Surrounding the rock, at a distance of 20 m to 30 m from its base, is a wide oval ditch. The area enclosed against the rock is level, except to the E., where the ditch descends a slight fall to form a right-angle about 80 m away. The ditch is wet to W. and S., where there is a continuous counterscarp bank. The absence of an internal bank, except for some 110 m around the W. side, is difficult to explain. The outline and large area enclosed by the ditch would seem inappropriate as the outer line of the very short-lived castle on the rock. Overall, the ditch encloses 1.95 ha (4.28 acres), of which the rock occupies about a third. The natural citadel of the rock provides the most interesting parallel with Cwrt Llechrhyd; in addition, it is on level ground, and had wet defences. Offa's Dyke passes only 110 m W. of the site, and it is surprising that Fox failed to mention a possible association with the Dyke. Being in the township of Wropton (*Urbetune* in Domesday), it was the obvious centre for the



0 1000 feet

0 300 metres

FIG. 3

Possible Dark-Age enclosures in the central Welsh Marches

pre-Norman settlement here, and a crossing of the Dyke may be indicated by the gap for the lane to the adjacent farm.

*Old Mills Moat* (SJ 277 129), though previously regarded as a medieval moated site, is unusual.<sup>33</sup> It occupies sloping ground between the foot of the Breidden Hills and the R. Severn, and consists of a strong quadrangular enclosure of 0.40 ha (0.99 acres), with a larger annexe of 0.85 ha (2.1 acres) on more level ground to the W., extending to within 32 m of the Severn. The smaller enclosure is defended on its upper E. side by a wide irregular bank, fronted by a massive wet ditch, 8 m wide. Here, the ground outside rises so steeply that the counterscarp of the ditch is up to 2 m higher than the top of the internal bank, but its steep scarp and the wet moat constitute a formidable obstacle. A rill feeds the ditch and flows along the N. flank, skirting a more modest bank. To the S., the strong upper E. bank and ditch turn to make a well-formed acute angle, but they continue to the W. for only 22 m, beyond which a marshy hollow defines this flank. A scarp and modest wet ditch mark the W. side facing the annexe. The interior, which measures 80 m N.–S. and 40 m to 60 m E.–W., is very irregular, but no certain traces of buildings are apparent. The annexe is subdivided by hedges and is much ploughed down, surviving only as a low bank outlining its W. half and no longer visibly connected to the upper enclosure. Until the 19th century, the ancient Gorther Ford crossed the Severn immediately beyond the annexe. The significance of this ford, on the W. boundary of Mercian territory (and the diocese of Hereford) in a long gap in Offa's Dyke, is discussed by Noble.<sup>34</sup>

*Plas-yn-Dinas* (SJ 218 189) is first recorded in the 14th century, as the residence of the lords of the mesne manor of Dynas in Mechain Iscoed, and although again a site which has been classed as a moated site, it is by no means a typical example.<sup>35</sup> A rectangular earthwork, enclosing 0.44 ha (1.09 acres), is set around the summit of a prominent glacial moraine, and almost completely surrounded by a marshy former loop of the R. Vyrnwy, which now cuts across the narrow neck about 100 m further E. The moraine has steep natural slopes to the NE. and NW., which form those flanks of the enclosure, the latter artificially scarped towards its crest. Lesser slopes to the SW. and SE. have been scarped down to a ditch, the quarried material forming a counterscarp bank. Its natural wet defences and the dominant position of the enclosure on the moraine are reminiscent of Cwrt Llechrhyd; there are, however, no other reasons to suggest a Dark-Age date: it lies 5 km W. of Offa's Dyke, well beyond any suspected Mercian settlement.

At *Buttington*, the Severn is crossed by an important ancient ford, Rhyd-y-Groes. Offa's Dyke seemingly joined the river here, its last surviving alignment after the descent from Long Mountain being only 150 m short of the river. An Anglo-Welsh army overtook the Danish host of Haesten here in 893 ' . . . and besieged it on every side in a fortress . . . encamped for many weeks on the two sides of the river . . . '.<sup>36</sup> The Danes were finally defeated and many of them slaughtered when they broke out from the fortress. In 1838, 400 skulls were found in three pits in the churchyard, 260 m E. of the ford. The pits had been lined with the long-bones, but though clearly reinterred, they were taken to be those of the Danes, many skulls showing signs of violent death. There is, however, an alternative explanation, for in 1039 this was the scene of the battle of Rhyd-y-Groes, the important initial victory of Gruffydd ap

Llewelyn over the English.<sup>37</sup> The churchyard, together with the adjacent vicarage and its garden, occupies a slightly elevated area above the flood plain. When the bones were discovered there were clear traces of rectilinear defences around this elevation (SJ 250 088), which were recorded again in 1899 and 1912. No signs of these defences are visible today, but descriptions suggest an enclosure of about 3 ha (4.94 acres).<sup>38</sup> The detailed account in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle makes no mention that the Danes built the fortress themselves: it may have already existed in 893, and like Old Mills Moat, it may have served to protect an adjacent river-crossing on the boundary of Mercian territory.

At *New Radnor* (SO 212 608) the shrunken medieval town may have seen pre-Norman occupation by Mercian settlers. Noble has shown that the Ditch Bank, a cross-valley Dyke closing the Radnor Valley 1.5 km SW. of New Radnor, was probably raised to mark the boundary of the Mercian sub-kingdom in this area by the time of Offa.<sup>39</sup> No Mercian settlements have been identified in the Radnor Valley, though Lloyd believed that the Welsh attack on *Maeshyfaidd* in 991<sup>40</sup> was on the vill and not the county of Radnor.<sup>41</sup> New Radnor is of prime strategic importance in relation to the topography of the Radnor Valley: it lies at the W. apex of a fertile low-lying triangle based on Offa's Dyke, 6.5 km to the E., and effectively blocks a narrowing of the valley between the encroaching heights of Whimble and the Smatcher, close behind the W.-facing Ditch Bank. New Radnor was undoubtedly the location of the *caput* of William de Breos, who was granted 'Radnor' before 1095. It was held by the king at the time of Domesday, and had been in Earl Harold's possession before the Conquest, which suggests that it existed as a Mercian base in pre-Conquest times. Viewed in this light, it is of interest that the castle of New Radnor is not a motte, but is scarped from a strong natural eminence which dominates the valley floor. Like Nantcribba rock, it may well have attracted the Mercians, particularly in view of its strategic position immediately to the rear of Ditch Bank. It might be noted that the W. end of the fortified borough, embracing the castle, is far more irregular than the E. This could be explained by a rectilinear expansion from the original site and across the Dingle Brook which flows through the town, a development probably coincident with the first mention of 'New Radnor' in the mid 13th century. Pre-Conquest 'Radnor' and the early Breos castle and borough of that name may well be represented by the irregular W. end of the town.

### *General conclusions*

Whilst the historical records of Powys provide no more than a general context for the seven sites discussed, the vanished enclosure at Buttington is recorded in the 9th century, and the radiocarbon date from Cwrt Llechrhyd suggests a date of construction in the 9th or 10th centuries. Powys was clearly most vulnerable in the 8th century, when Mercian kings were strong enough to range across Powys to ravage Gwynedd, Deheubarth and Dyfed. That the Welsh resorted to fortresses in the face of these attacks is shown by Ceolwulf's destruction of Degannwy in 823, the year he also subdued Powys. By then, it is possible to suspect that there may have been Mercian forts along the line of Offa's Dyke, providing models for the Welsh

during the last years of rule by the ancient dynasty under Cyngen (808–55). Thereafter, the motivation for fort-building perhaps increased with the Danish threat, and the Anglo-Welsh collaboration this encouraged in the time of Alfred. The construction of the burhs of Wessex and Mercia in the late 9th and early 10th centuries must be regarded as the most obvious source of inspiration for forts built then or later in Wales. The long period of formal participation in the affairs of the English Crown under Athelstan and his immediate successors (925–56) provides a further context for the adoption of English practices.

Against this background we may speculate that our seven sites might be divided into two groups, four which were perhaps Mercian and three which may have been Welsh imitations. The presumed Mercian sites are New Radnor, Old Mills Moat, Buttington and Nantcribba Gaer. If the speculative fort at New Radnor could be confirmed, it would stand apart from the others as a site serving forward settlements beyond the Dyke. The three others lie immediately behind the line of the Dyke, or on the R. Severn which continued its line N. of Buttington, two at important fords, the other at a suggested crossing point on the Dyke. The association of Wat's Dyke and eight fortifications on its line is now thought possible, though discounted by Fox.<sup>42</sup> These fortifications include several Iron-Age forts, the wet-moated rectilinear Llys Edwin, and Basingwerk, and they are spaced at an average distance apart of 8.5 km. On Offa's boundary, Old Mills Moat is 5 km NE. of Buttington, which is 7.3 km N. of Nantcribba Gaer. If presumed Iron-Age sites here were re-occupied, which only excavation could prove, one lies just 500 m within the line of the Dyke 5 km N. of Old Mills Moat at Crosswood (SJ 279 175), while another, which even Fox thought a possible Offan construction, is 1.3 km E. of the Dyke on the Sarn Ridgeway at Caer Dîn (SO 273 898), 12 km S. of Nantcribba. A possible intermediate site in this long stretch might be the motte at Brompton (SO 252 954), which has a strange unbanked wet-moated bailey, though this is very small.

Cwrt Llechrhyd, Mathrafal and Plas-yn-Dinas are more easily seen as Welsh works, though only Mathrafal offers slight evidence for this, with its traditions, and its hints of princely associations in the 12th century. For these sites there is no local place-name evidence for Mercian settlement, as there is in the areas of the other four sites. It seems reasonable to assume that they were built late in the Dark Ages, most probably in the 10th century, influenced by English burghal forts, but possibly earlier in imitation of Mercian forts associated with Offa's Dyke.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The authors can be contacted at the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales, Edleston House, Queen's Road, Aberystwyth, Dyfed, SY23 2HP. The report has been edited for publication by W. J. Britnell.

<sup>2</sup> Powys Archaeological Record no. PAR 1605. Scheduled Ancient Monument no. Radnorshire 140.

<sup>3</sup> There is no surviving evidence of the subsidiary mound implied by the barely intelligible description published in the *Radnor Inventory* (R.C.A.H.M. Wales, 1913), no. 331, 84.

<sup>4</sup> Although referred to as the site of a manor-house (*Archaeol. Cambrensis*, 11 (1911), 135), the monument has no known documentary history.

<sup>5</sup> J. K. St Joseph, 'Air Reconnaissance in Britain, 1969–72', *J. Roman Stud.*, 63 (1973), 240–41; *Brecknock Inventory*, Vol. 1, Part ii, (R.C.A.H.M. Wales, 1986), 173–75.

<sup>6</sup> C. J. Spurgeon, 'Moated Sites in Wales', in F. A. Aberg and A. E. Brown (eds), *Medieval Moated Sites in North-West Europe* (Oxford, Brit. Archaeol. Rep. Int. Ser. 121, 1981), 44–45.

- <sup>7</sup> *Radnor Inventory*, op. cit. in note 3, no. 331.
- <sup>8</sup> *Archaeol. Cambrensis*, 4th ser., 3 (1872), 380; 6th ser., 11 (1911), 135–36.
- <sup>9</sup> J. Williams, 'History of Radnorshire', *Archaeol. Cambrensis*, 3rd ser., 4 (1858), 607–08.
- <sup>10</sup> T. Jones, *Brenhinedd y Saesson* (Cardiff, 1971), 83.
- <sup>11</sup> J. E. Lloyd, *A History of Wales* 3rd ed. (London, 1939), Vol. 2, 398, note 136.
- <sup>12</sup> Grateful thanks are due to Mr A. A. Miles, the owner of the concrete works, for his help and cooperation during the course of excavation, and to Jenny Britnell and Peter Dorling of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust for their help in excavation and recording, supervised by C. R. Musson, then Director of the Trust. Publication drawings are by Brian Williams.
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- <sup>14</sup> L. Alcock, 'The Archaeology of Celtic Britain, Fifth to Twelfth Centuries A.D.', 48–66 in D. A. Hinton (ed.), *25 Years of Medieval Archaeology* (Sheffield, 1983), 50.
- <sup>15</sup> C. Fox, *Offa's Dyke* (British Academy, 1955), 164; F. Noble, *Offa's Dyke Reviewed* (ed. M. Gelling), (Oxford, Brit. Archaeol. Rep. Brit. Ser. 114, 1983), 50–52, 58–60.
- <sup>16</sup> W. Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1982), 110.
- <sup>17</sup> D. Hill, 'Offa's and Wat's Dykes: Some aspects of recent work, 1972–76', *Trans. Lancashire Cheshire Antiq. Soc.*, 79 (1977), 21–33; Noble, op. cit. in note 15.
- <sup>18</sup> H. R. Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest* (London, 1962), 135–36; C. A. R. Radford, 'The Pre-Conquest Boroughs of England, Ninth to Eleventh Centuries', *Proc. Brit. Acad.*, 64 (1978), 142.
- <sup>19</sup> Alcock, op. cit. in note 14, 52–53.
- <sup>20</sup> T. Jones (ed.), *Brut y Tywysogyon* (Peniarth MS. 20 Version) (Cardiff, 1952); T. Jones (ed.) *Brut y Tywysogyon* (Red Book of Hergest Version) (Cardiff, 1955), 6; Jones, op. cit. in note 10, 14.
- <sup>21</sup> D. Whitelock (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London, 1965), 2nd impression.
- <sup>22</sup> Alcock, op. cit. in note 14, 53.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 58–59.
- <sup>24</sup> L. Alcock, *Dinas Powis, an Iron Age, Dark Age and Early Medieval Settlement in Glamorgan* (Cardiff, 1963), 67–68.
- <sup>25</sup> Alcock, op. cit. in note 14, 52.
- <sup>26</sup> J. Manley, 'Cledemutha: A Late Saxon Burh in North Wales', *Medieval Archaeol.*, 31 (1987), 13–46; J. Manley, 'Rhuddlan', *Curr. Archaeol.*, 81, Vol. 7 (1981), 304–07; J. Manley, 'The Late Saxon Settlement of Cledemutha (Rhuddlan), Clwyd', 55–64 in M. L. Faull (ed.), *Studies in Anglo-Saxon Settlement* (Oxford, 1984); J. Manley *et al.*, 'Early Medieval radiocarbon dates and plant remains from Rhuddlan, Clwyd', *Archaeol. Cambrensis*, 134 (1985), 106–19.
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- <sup>32</sup> *Montgomery Inventory*, op. cit. in note 28, no. 175, 35–36; C. J. Spurgeon, 'Gwyddgrug Castle (Forden) and the Gorddwr Dispute in the Thirteenth Century', *Montgomeryshire Coll.*, 57 (1962), 125–36; C. J. Spurgeon, 'The Castles of Montgomeryshire', *Montgomeryshire Coll.*, 59 (1965–66), 35–36; Noble, op. cit. in note 15, 81–82.
- <sup>33</sup> *Montgomery Inventory*, op. cit. in note 28, no. 150, 30; Spurgeon, op. cit. in note 6, 30, 46, 53; Noble, op. cit. in note 15, 89–90.
- <sup>34</sup> Noble, *ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> *Montgomery Inventory*, op. cit. in note 28, no. 664, 131–32; Spurgeon (1965–66) op. cit. in note 32, 49–50.
- <sup>36</sup> Whitelock, op. cit. in note 21.
- <sup>37</sup> Jones, op. cit. in note 20 (Peniarth MS. 20 Version, 13; Red Book of Hergest Version, 22).
- <sup>38</sup> *Montgomery Inventory*, op. cit. in note 28, no. 145, 28; W. B. Dawkins, 'On Some Human Bones Found at Buttington, Montgomeryshire', *Montgomeryshire Coll.*, 6 (1873), 141–45; C. W. Dymond, 'On the Identification of the Site of "Buttingtone" of the Saxon Chronicle, Anno 984', *Montgomeryshire Coll.*, 31 (1899–1900), 337–46; E. S. Armitage, *The Early Norman Castles of the British Isles* (London, 1912), 51–52; Noble, op. cit. in note 15, 87–88.
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- <sup>41</sup> Lloyd, op. cit. in note 11, Vol. 1, 346, note 87.
- <sup>42</sup> Hill, op. cit. in note 17, 33.

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