

Conservation and investigation at Cwmhir Abbey, Powys

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

At the May 1895 meeting of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, Stephen Williams read a paper about his study of the Cistercian abbey at Cwmhir, and finished with these words:

And now, in conclusion, may I appeal to all Welshmen and lovers of ancient art to assist in preserving what little is left to us of this great monastic church, the burial place of our last native prince.¹

He would probably have been disappointed had he known that a century would elapse before the first conservation work started at the abbey, though it is, perhaps, not inappropriate that this work was completed exactly 900 years after the first Cistercian foundation. This paper is offered as a description of this recent programme which comprised the conservation of the standing masonry, as well as a geophysical survey of the site and field examination of the surrounding area.

The ruins of Cwmhir Abbey (Figs 1–2) stand in a remote, steep-sided and beautiful valley, by the banks of the Clywedog Brook, in a situation characteristic of Cistercian houses in Wales. Its riverside position was, of course, important for many practical reasons, and though remote, it is the only Welsh Cistercian house sited over, or rather at, 250 metres above Ordnance Datum—the *cwm hir* ('long valley') in which it was constructed provided access to east and west and was connected by a routeway to the house at Strata Florida. Surrounding the abbey site, the valley sides, rising steeply to 450 metres, are documented as having long supported substantial woodlands.²

The monastery was established in this border area as a daughter house of Whitland, Carmarthenshire, probably in 1176 by Cadwallon ap Madog, lord of Ceri and Maelienydd, who is quoted as the original founder in an early fourteenth-century petition,³ though the original charter has not survived. The tradition of an earlier, Norman, foundation date in 1143, based on late thirteenth-century documentation, is generally regarded as suspect or, at least, any such foundation would appear to have come to nothing. Its possessions were thereafter confirmed by the Mortimers in a detailed charter of 1200 when once more the area had passed into English control, and subsequently in 1215 and 1232 by Maredudd ap Maelgwyn, when the main part of Maelienydd had again passed into Welsh hands. The early victories of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth led to the supremacy of the Welsh in Maelienydd and the abbey remained in Welsh hands until 1240, though now under the control of the princes of Gwynedd rather than of Powys. Indeed the burial at the abbey in 1234 of Cadwallon ap Maelgwyn is the last mention of a descendant of Cadwallon ap Madog in the Welsh Chronicle.⁴

The maintenance of authority within this disputed area inevitably remained uncertain. The abbey, with its tendency to loyalty to the native cause yet with properties far afield in areas with other political masters, could easily fall into difficulties; an example is the story of the involvement of Cwmhir monks in a skirmish with an English force at Hay, for which a fine was exacted on pain of loss of one of its outlying granges. In 1240, the area, with its abbey, was retaken by the Mortimers; despite this, the abbot appears later to have supported the cause of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, and it was almost certainly to this abbey that the headless body of the last prince of Gwynedd was taken for burial after his final fateful encounter in the winter of 1282 at Cilmeri, near Builth, some 20 kilometres to the south.⁵



Fig. 1. Aerial view of Cwmhir abbey from the north in 1988 with the Home Farm to the right and the boating lake towards the background. *Photograph: CPAT 88-12-34.*

Successive benefactors, Welsh and English, granted the abbey lands and possessions both near, such as at Cefnlllys, Llaitthddu, St Harmon and Llanbadarn Fynydd, all good grazing county, and further afield to the east and south at Mynachdu in the Lugg valley and Gybalfa and Carnaf on the Wye, which provided important arable land. It was also granted property and rights of pasturage in Ceredigion, as at its grange at Nant-yr-arian,⁶ all of which, taken together, allowed the practice of a mixed agricultural economy. Gwern-y-go grange at Ceri (Kerry) itself practised a mixed economy, while the abbey's upland home manor at Golon, with sheep and oats as its main production, yielded the most significant contribution to Cwmhir's income.⁷ Some twenty years after its own foundation, Cwmhir itself founded a daughter house, as monks from the abbey settled at Cymer in Merioneth in 1198 under the patronage of Maredudd ap Cynan, but no further houses were established by either monastery.

Nothing remains visible now of any late twelfth-century build at Cwmhir, the surviving architectural detail on and off-site being best attributed to the early thirteenth century.⁸ Radford⁹ has postulated the size and form of an early monastic layout taking as his evidence the slight remains of a small cloister uncovered in the early nineteenth century and subsequently described by the Revd William Jenkins Rees¹⁰ and Stephen Williams (Fig. 3).¹¹ If this claustral plan is accepted it is obvious that its layout is unconventional in relation to the existing church walls. Whereas in the majority of Cistercian abbeys the eastern claustral range extends directly from the end of the south transept, at Cwmhir it would appear to have been a separate structure set further to the west; as well as this, the cloisters themselves seem considerably smaller in scale in relation to the church than those found in the standard monastic layout. Radford, while pondering this difficulty, suggested that these remains may have belonged to cloisters



Fig. 2. Survey work in progress on the north side of the nave of Cwmhir Abbey in 2000.

Photograph: CPAT 576.16.

contemporary with an earlier church, which, based on evidence from the early phases of the abbeys at Waverley and Tintern, could have had an aisleless nave extending along the full width of the claustral range. The existing church would, he argued, have been built as a new, longer structure considerably extending the original plan.

Geophysical survey carried out as part of the conservation programme provided tantalising evidence of wall lines which could be interpreted as belonging to an earlier—or at least, different—building, but, as will be described later, the results must be regarded as inconclusive. If there was an earlier masonry church it is extraordinary that no fragments remain of any twelfth-century work; the discovery of a rough twelfth-century corbel from Ty Faenor, the house owned, along with Cwmhir, by the Fowler family and to which monastic material was moved after the dissolution, remains the only physical evidence of an earlier building on the site.¹² The fact that no earlier dressed stonework was even found incorporated into the core of the thirteenth-century church certainly does not help in the search for a twelfth-century building on the same site though the Cwmhir core-work is unusual in the considerable size of the blocks used within the wall core. However, it is noteworthy that the existing church is sited on a platform partially cut into the slope on the north. It could be argued that the original church, be it of timber or masonry, would more conveniently have been set at the base of the natural slope; if a later, larger, church was constructed, in order to retain the existing cloisters it would have been necessary for it to extend northwards, thus requiring excavation into the slope. Whatever the position and size of an earlier church, assuming that it was considerably smaller than its successor, this would have allowed the construction of the new church around the original, as at Waverley,¹³ thereby ensuring that monastic services could continue uninterrupted.

Radford suggested that the ambitious scale of the existing early thirteenth-century church was politically motivated, a grand design by Llywelyn to make the abbey his spiritual centre for the whole

country.¹⁴ Whatever the motivation of the builder, whomsoever he was, the building programme resulted in an extraordinary fourteen-bay aisled nave measuring 78 metres by 24.5 metres. In its full cruciform plan it would have been the largest church in Wales. However, the church was at some stage apparently foreshortened. The uncertain political climate within Maelienydd after the fall of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd towards the end of the thirteenth century may have had a profound effect upon the ambitions of this Welsh house, but there is no evidence to give any specific date to this alteration. The transepts and chancel were either abandoned or dismantled, and the nave, quite long enough for normal monastic use, was made to serve as the entire church by the construction of an eastern wall between the western crossing piers. As previously described, Stephen Williams' plan (Fig. 3) suggests a claustral layout considerably smaller than would be expected, though this is based on tenuous, and, perhaps, multi-phased, evidence. Geophysical survey (see below) only partially supports this largely conjectural plan, though it certainly strengthens the supposition that it was unconventional in form. Whether the cloister remained in its original form from the beginning, never rebuilt and made to do during the various building phases of the church, or whether it was rebuilt on the more modest scale to suit the shortened church cannot be proven from surface evidence alone. The eastern five bays of the nave, presumably housing the monastic choir at this later stage, were bounded on the west by a screen, partly surviving in the mid nineteenth century and shown on Williams' plan, but no longer visible.

The later history of the abbey was uneventful, though it was apparently ravaged in 1401 by Owain Glyndŵr, or, at least, by one of the opposing forces during that troubled time. It survived in an

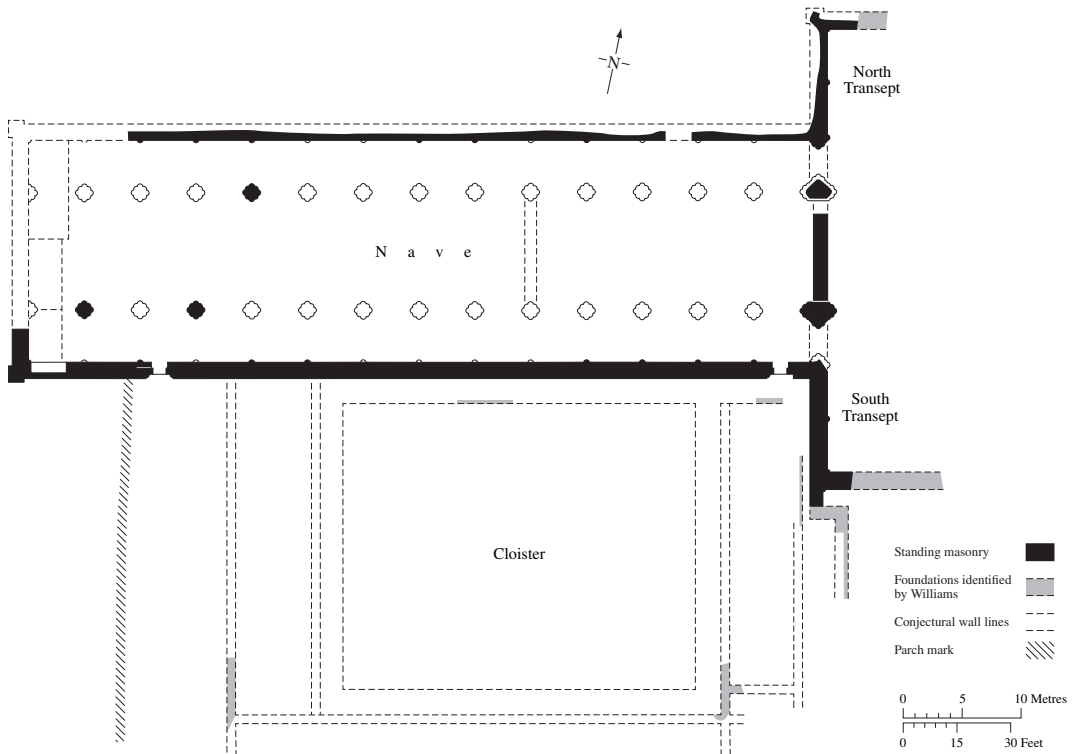


Fig. 3. Ground plan of Cwmhir Abbey based upon the plan of wall-footings made by Stephen Williams in the 1890s, parch mark visible in 1995, and a resurvey of the remains visible in 2000.

impoverished state to the dissolution, however, with two or three monks remaining. After the Dissolution, the site was granted to John Turner and, eventually, the entire possessions were sold and passed to various families, notably the Fowlers, who retained direct possession from 1565 until 1771, and then by descent until 1819.¹⁵ The first phase of the dispersal of the monastic masonry, largely to other churches, appears to have followed swiftly after the dissolution (see below) though in 1644 it could still be described as ‘a very strong house, and built with stone of a great thickness, the walls and outworks all very strong, the house having been in former times an Abbey of the Papists’ when the Royalist garrison there was taken by Thomas Myddleton.¹⁶ Whether the description of the violent storming of the ‘enemies works’ and the rendering of the garrison ‘unserviceable for the future’ really refers to the abbey buildings or to defensive works erected by the garrison is unclear, but the proximity of the two cannot have helped the survival of the monastic buildings and it may have been at this period that the second phase of serious depletion of the masonry from the site took place as it was abandoned in favour of a new Fowler mansion at Ty Faenor some way to the east. Subsequently stone was removed from the site to build Cwm Hir mansion just adjacent, completed in 1833 and rebuilt in 1867, and to Ty Faenor. It was also presumably used for the building of a parish church. The present church to the north-west, however, is an 1866 structure, a pair with the mansion. A number of architectural fragments from the abbey are still stored in or near these buildings, at the west end of the church and in a terrace wall and rockery and patio in the mansion. The abbey by the 1820s looked not dissimilar from how it does today. Three early nineteenth-century views certainly show more decorated dressed stone than survives now, but it is only, as now, the low walls of the nave that are shown as standing.

When the site passed to Thomas Wilson from London in 1821, the new owner energetically set about clearing the site. Before this, according to the Revd Rees who fortunately provided some record of this drastic and all-embracing activity albeit some twenty-four years later,¹⁷ there was nothing to be seen but some ‘ruinated walls, and the surface of the ground was of unequal heights’. When the work was completed the walls were more evident, if only briefly before neglect continued to take its toll, and the ground was as uniformly flat as the proverbial pancake. On purchasing the site, Wilson had engaged Layton Cooke to undertake a survey, the terrier for which survives, though unfortunately the accompanying map has been lost. A series of notes appended to the terrier by Wilson provides some insight into the works undertaken, confirming the use of freestone ‘used to build a good substantial dwelling-house, introducing some of the ornamented pieces’.¹⁸

The remarkable Stephen Williams undertook another of his timely rescue episodes as he surveyed the site in the 1890s and carried out some small-scale but what would now be termed problem-oriented excavations. After the nineteenth-century clearance and survey, the site was left to itself and became considerably overgrown and obscured, to the distress of visitors; Haslam commented in 1979 that ‘the state of the ruins . . . is melancholy. If some action cannot soon be taken to secure what remains, the last bits of carved stone will be pilfered, and a short time only will see the remaining walls broken down’.¹⁹

DISPERSAL OF THE ABBEY STONEMWORK

The Dissolution of the monasteries in the years after 1536 led not only to the widespread destruction of the churches and their accompanying buildings but also to the dispersal of moveable items regardless of their size. The Crown helped itself to bells and roof lead, while the purchasers of monastic establishments, often local lords and gentry, used the stone and timber and indeed were required to demolish the church and claustral buildings to ensure that they could not be reused.²⁰ Similarly, doubtless, ‘local people helped themselves to stone, timber and any useful items’.²¹

This dispersal of material was general to all monastic establishments in Wales in the sixteenth and subsequent centuries, but Cwmhir may be unusual in the number of items in churches and elsewhere that are attributed to it (Fig. 4). From the time of Jonathan Williams at the beginning of the nineteenth century, if not before, Cwmhir has been cited as the source of a range of unusual or exotic objects in the churches of the surrounding region, in a manner that finds a ready parallel in the legends about church roofs and screens that have germinated in many other parts of England and Wales.²²

Williams was probably the first, at least in print, to attribute some features in local parish churches to the demolition of Cwmhir Abbey. Of Llandegley church, he wrote, 'The antique appearance of the church renders the supposition probable that some parts of its structure are composed of the fragments of some despoiled monastery, perhaps of Abbey Cwmhir, and removed hither at a time immemorial'.²³ Samuel Lewis (or at least his researchers) made a similar claim for the screen in St Idloes' Church, Llanidloes,²⁴ while Edward Hamer detected windows from Cwmhir in St Curig's Church at Llangurig.²⁵ If all these claims were to be accepted at face value, the exploitation of the abbey would have been on a truly significant scale.

In fact many of these traditions must be dismissed, sadly in some cases, for they certainly add colour to the local folklore. If the attribution of the screens at Llananno,²⁶ Newtown²⁷ and Llanidloes churches had all been correct, Cwmhir abbey would indeed have been rich in late medieval woodwork. But Fred Crossley and Maurice Ridgway were adamant that these screens all fell within the regional style prevalent in the parish churches of the area, having been made in Montgomeryshire, and that it was wholly unnecessary to postulate Cwmhir as their source.²⁸ Also in this class of folklore are the two Llangurig windows, the main Perpendicular east window and the north vestry window which was re-sited from the

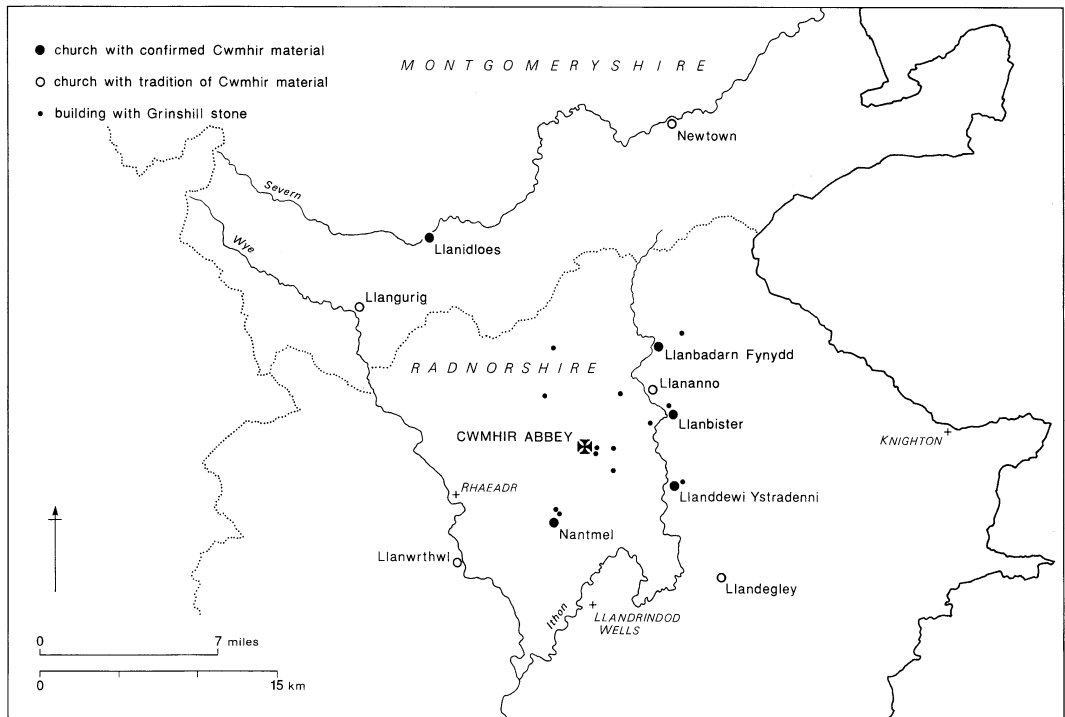


Fig. 4. The dispersal pattern of stonework derived from Cwmhir Abbey.

east wall of the north aisle during the restoration of the church in 1877–78. Because of their slightly unusual panel tracery, a tradition had emerged even before the restoration that they had been salvaged from either Cwmhir or Strata Florida, Cardiganshire.²⁹ Neither seems very plausible; the fifteenth century reputedly witnessed the enlargement of Llangurig church³⁰ and this, obviously, would have provided an appropriate context for the introduction of fine new windows at the east end of the enlarged building, but there is no reason to assume that these were derived from a monastic establishment, whether in the fifteenth century or at a later date. Similarly, at St Gwrthwl's, Llanwrthwl (11 kilometres to the south-west of Cwmhir), the font with its large base, circular in shape, and four heads projecting off the bowl, was thought locally to have been brought from Cwmhir. It is unlikely, however, that the abbey church would have contained a font, since the Cistercians were specifically forbidden by the statutes of their order from baptising infants.³¹ What is perhaps more surprising is that the three comparable fonts in the nearby churches of St Cynllo at Nantmel, St Garmon at St Harmon and St Clement at Rhayader (5, 7 and 8 kilometres from Cwmhir, respectively) which emphatically point to a local tradition in stone carving around the twelfth century, have not subsequently also acquired a specious tradition of derivation from Cwmhir.

More ambiguous are the doorways in St David's, Llanddewi Ystradenni and St Tecla's, Llandegley. The former church has a Romanesque priest's doorway that, on close inspection, is clearly a composite structure, possibly illustrating the survival and deliberate integration of architectural fragments from an earlier church on the site yet incorporating Grinshill stone dressings almost certainly from the abbey 6 kilometres away. The Decorated south doorway at Llandegley with its septifoil head is more unusual and its intricate design alone might point to its removal from a monastic site. However, little is known of the medieval church at Llandegley and there is a comparable multifoil south doorway at St Laurence's, Preston-on-Wye in Herefordshire for which there is no obvious monastic link. The Llandegley doorway is not of Grinshill stone but of pink sandstone³² further weakening the putative association with Cwmhir.

Several local churches preserve incontrovertible evidence of materials from Cwmhir Abbey. St Cynllo's, Llanbister and the churches at Llananno, Llanbadarn Fynydd, and Nantmel, already referred to, all contain blocks of Grinshill stone which are unlikely to have derived from anywhere other than Cwmhir.³³ Llanbister too contains many pieces of carved stonework: a stoup near the south door, decorative fragments built into the porch, a piscina carved from a capital which was found at Lower Caerfaelog farm (where other fragments of Grinshill stone have been recorded) just to the north of the village, and four Early English capitals and other dressed blocks used as corbels and springers to support the roof of the church tower that was put in place perhaps as late as the early eighteenth century.³⁴ Nantmel also has a stoup fashioned from a capital, and there are capitals, too, outside the porch at Llanbadarn Fynydd. But the most obvious beneficiary of Cwmhir's misfortune was also the most distant: St Idloes', Llanidloes. There can be no doubt that the five-bay arcade, its arches of six orders supported on heavily decorated capitals, was taken from the east end of the north arcade at the abbey between 1536 and 1542 and carted to Llanidloes more than 17 kilometres away.³⁵ The fact that the western crossing pier on the north, unlike that on the south, is robbed out simply strengthens the contention, as does the close similarity between the surviving architectural fragments at the abbey and the architecture at Llanidloes. And comparison of the masons' marks reveals that of the eleven still recognisable at the abbey, six certain (Fig. 6, nos 4–5, 8–11) and two probable marks (nos 1 and 7) can be paralleled amongst more than twenty detectable on the Llanidloes pillars. The Llanidloes arcade and also the south doorway of the church with its now eroded jambs and capitals serve to illustrate how splendid the church at Cwmhir must have been, even in its shortened form.

There are two other elements at Llanidloes for which a monastic origin has been mooted. The fine east window should probably be discounted, even though the total replacement of its dressings in more recent

times does nothing to clarify the situation; its appearance, however, is quite in keeping with the later Perpendicular windows being erected in town churches in the earlier sixteenth century. The hammerbeam roof in the nave at Llanidloes which it had been also been suggested may have come from Cwmhir has been recently shown by dendrochronological dating to post-date the suppression of the abbey.³⁶

It was not just to the local churches that Grinshill stone from Cwmhir was carried. Not surprisingly it was extensively used in local farms and houses around the village of Abbeycwmhir, such as Home Farm adjacent to the site, rebuilt by Thomas Wilson sometime between 1822 and 1833³⁷, the church (where there is a much eroded tympanum depicting what is now believed to be the Assumption of the Virgin),³⁸ and the mill on the opposite side of the Clywedog Brook, and Ty Faenor (where there is not only the twelfth-century corbel mentioned above but also considerable amounts of dressed stone). But it also appears further afield and Dr John Davies has identified Grinshill stone at Llanddewi Hall opposite the church at Llanddewi Ystradenni, in a building at the centre of Bwlch-y-sarnau, 4 kilometres to the north-west, and at Llinwent, 10 kilometres to the north-east.³⁹ Together these reveal the spread of debris from the abbey over considerable distances and finely worked materials such as the Llanidloes stonework travelling even further; and in the absence of good quality freestone in northern Radnorshire this pattern of exploitation of the abbey remains can be determined with a significant degree of confidence. More prosaically, there are nineteenth-century references to stone from the ruins being broken up for road-stone.

SURVEY, RECORDING AND CONSERVATION OF THE ABBEY RUINS

A detailed survey of the elevations, employing drawn and photographic recording, was undertaken in 1988 by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT).⁴⁰ The drawings were used again in 1993 to assess the rate of deterioration at the site which was judged to be unacceptably high. The south nave wall, though standing to up to 4 metres in places, was considerably overgrown with several trees growing out of the stonework; the higher surviving masonry largely comprised isolated fingers of weakened core-work, the face-work having already fallen. Of the north, west and east walls little was evident save for low grassy and tree covered banks with occasional stretches of face-work visible through the vegetation. What little decorated stonework remained was in a critical condition, the shafts against the south wall in particular being on the point of collapse with several individual stones being subject to severe cracking and lamination.

A programme of repair and recording was therefore organised in 1994. Despite the fact that the ruins were in private ownership, Cadw staff undertook emergency conservation of the masonry remains. At the same time, the CPAT was commissioned to update the drawn record of the elevations throughout the project as conservation gradually allowed examination and survey of masonry hitherto obscured with vegetation (Fig. 5).⁴¹ CPAT also undertook an archaeological survey of both the immediate surrounding area to cast light on possible remains of the monastic layout, and the wider environs to record any outlying structures connected with the operation of the monastery.⁴² The conservation programme was designed to be entirely non-intrusive and no excavation took place other than at discrete points within walling lines to allow proper record and understanding prior to masonry conservation. It was fortunate that at the same time Forest Enterprise was undertaking archaeological survey work on all its holdings, including the area of forestry around the abbey and, coincidentally, the Powys volume of the *Register of Landscapes, Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in Wales* was also being compiled.⁴³ Both these surveys contributed greatly to the overall study.

The surviving upstanding masonry is exclusively that of the church walling, that is, the nave and parts of the transepts, though conservation of the south transept walling revealed a decorated door-jamb

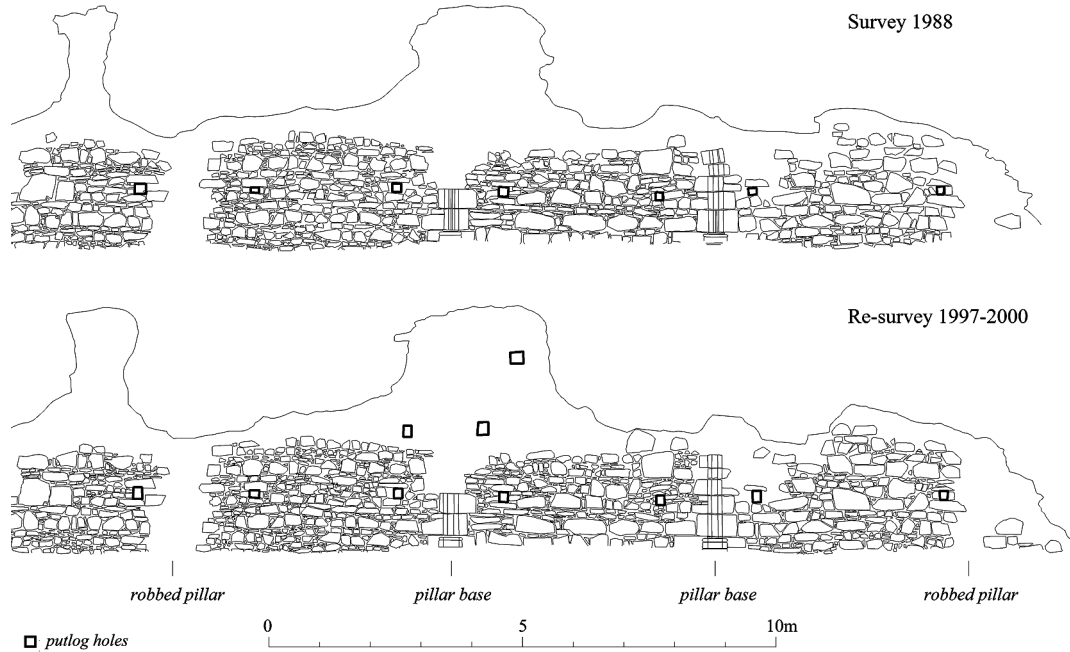


Fig. 5. Example of the recording of the elevation of the inner face of the nave of the Cwmhir abbey church before and after conservation.

belonging to the adjoining structure to the south. The walls are of a local grey gritstone fashioned into large face blocks. The quality of this work was fine, the thick walls constructed with good lime mortar and with characteristically large blocks used in the core-work as well as the face. Consistently positioned putlog holes were recorded, indicating that the masonry appears to have been constructed around timber scaffolding raised in vertical 'lifts' set 1.5 to 3.5 metres apart. In addition, eleven different masons' marks (Fig. 6) were noted and drawn; most were found inscribed on dressed sandstone blocks on the interior of the nave south wall, while three were on the exterior to the east of the east door and one was detected on the north side of the south-west crossing pier base. Fine dressed freestone for the piers and shafts, the only surviving decorated stone on the site, all window tracery having disappeared, is of Grinshill stone from the quarries to the north of Shrewsbury. The finest piece is undoubtedly the southern of the two western crossing piers, the north one having been removed. A number of pillar bases remain along the north and south walls of the nave, occasionally with the lower portion of their shaft intact, and spaced at intervals of approximately 5.2 metres. Of the arcade itself only three half buried pillar bases survive. Within the transepts further shafts and pillar fragments survive, spaced along the west walls, approximately 5.0 metres apart. The opportunity was taken to re-plan the abbey to show the position of surviving masonry (Fig. 3), and all elevations were redrawn (as the example in Fig. 5) to show the existing face-work and details such as putlog holes, masons' marks and other features hitherto unrecorded. A digital total station survey recorded the plan of the ruins and the outline of the core-work. Temporary photographic targets were attached to the face stones, their positions surveyed and the walls then photographed in an overlapping mosaic. The photographs were subsequently rectified and architectural details digitised to produce drawings of each elevation.

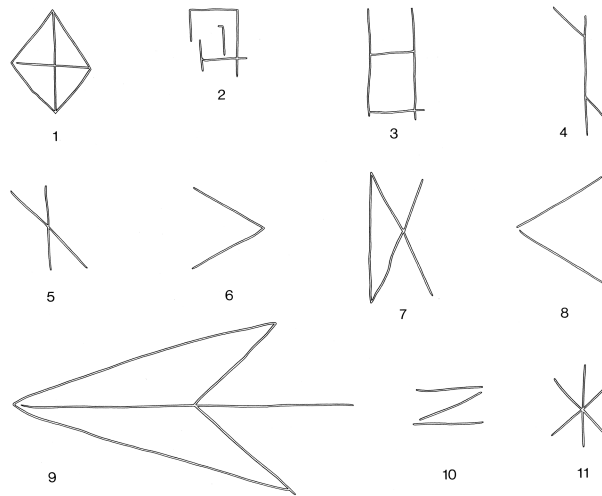


Fig. 6. Mason's marks recorded at Cwmhir Abbey.

The position of the two southern doorways shown on Stephen Williams' plan was confirmed, as dressed stone from both the south-west and south-eastern doors was revealed. A gap in the north wall masonry towards the east end was demonstrated upon excavation to be the result of post-dissolution disturbance, but elsewhere the masonry along the north wall was found to survive to at least two courses high, as the turf bank was taken back to reveal the masonry behind. The west wall, shown by Williams as a continuous line of masonry without a door, was not exposed and seems to have suffered more recent disturbance; however, its southern corner survives for two metres or so, sufficiently well to reveal the lowest remains of the external buttress. A draw-bar hole was noted on the west side of the south-west door and the possible remains of a corner buttress on the north-west corner of the north transept was found, though in the absence of surviving face work this must remain unproven.

An interesting feature hitherto unrecorded was a recess, approximately 2 metres long and presumably for a tomb, set into the south wall at the west corner. It was a secondary feature inserted into the wall, demonstrated by the fact that it was clay bonded in otherwise lime pointed masonry. The Revd W. J. Rees noted the remains of two apartments at the westernmost end of the nave, one at the south-west corner in the southern aisle with two doors, one leading to a vestibule to the north and the other into the church. Beyond the vestibule was a long narrow room extending for the remaining breadth of the nave, in which was an oven. The walls in the room were in part lined with decorated slabs depicting 'human beings and brute animals'.⁴⁴ Radford argued that these rooms conformed to no ecclesiastical usage and might be no more than post-Reformation sheds; the oven and decorated slabs (presumably grave slabs), certainly suggests a late use. However, it is possible that originally the rooms were in use in the later medieval period, given the discovery of the adjacent recess.

The undated east wall was stripped of turf and found to be 1.2 metres wide and roughly built of undressed local stone bonded with clay. It butted up against the southern pier and was continuous across the nave except for a section next to the northern pier which had presumably been robbed away when the pier itself was removed. Its standard of construction is in marked contrast with the rest of the fabric of the church, though presumably it may represent a sill wall which originally carried a timber partition. Nothing survives above ground of the wall shown by Stephen Williams as running parallel to this one between the ninth arcade bases blocking the nave and interpreted by him as the western screen bounding

the monastic choir. The Revd W. J. Rees noted the inferior build of these two walls and suggested that they were constructed from the start to form a temporary choir, intended to be demolished when the church was completed. In common with most early commentators, from John Leland onwards,⁴⁵ he believed that the eastern end of the church had never been completed.

Stephen Williams decided to test the assumption that the church had never been completed and undertook limited excavations on the line of the transepts. The north transept walling was found to continue as a foundation for a short distance beyond its present termination, while of the south transept wall he noted 'there are traces of foundations extending eastwards, and also southwards'.⁴⁶ The incompleteness of the stone footings led him to agree with Leland that the eastern end of the church had never been completed. The Royal Commission *Inventory* published in 1913, however, considered that the eastern end of the church including the transepts was likely to have completed in a conventional manner but was subsequently abandoned.⁴⁷ This appears to be confirmed by the recent identification by Stuart Harrison of a masonry fragment illustrated in Williams' report which he believes could only have come from a transeptal chapel.⁴⁸

It is possible that the eastern crossing piers may have collapsed or been damaged in some conflict and never been rebuilt, leading to the abandonment of the east end of the abbey. It was not uncommon for medieval churches and monastic buildings to suffer major structural problems and the areas under most stress were generally the crossing piers. At Bordesley Abbey, Worcestershire, for example, the northern and western crossing arches collapsed, were rebuilt and collapsed again.⁴⁹ The later blocking wall between the western crossing piers at Cwmhir does suggest that this was intended as a temporary measure, possibly with the intention of rebuilding and repairing any damage to the east end of the church, a process which, for whatever reason, was never completed, leaving the ruins to the depredations of time and stone robbers.

In an attempt to clarify this matter, geophysical survey was commissioned to investigate the supposed area of transepts and chancel (Fig. 7).⁵⁰ While the area of burning associated with the traditional bonfire site at this point considerably distorted the readings, significant lines of high resistivity readings aligned on the axes of the abbey provided good evidence of the survival of wall footings within this area. However, it is clear that none of these can be associated with the east end of the thirteenth century church and may instead represent foundations belonging to an earlier phase of construction, possibly along the lines suggested by Raleigh Radford,⁵¹ or even post-dissolution building on the site. Unfortunately, the results were not especially helpful and excavation will be required if the case is to be proven one way or the other.

During the conservation work on the ruins, the main nave walls were repointed with lime mortar, giving a white coloured matrix, while the clay bonded features—the eastern blocking wall and the inserted tomb recess—were pointed with a dark-coloured mix to emphasise the difference in construction. The work was, as planned, non-intrusive, confined to vegetation clearance, repointing, with some strengthening of areas of weak core-work and rebedding of loosened face stones displaced by vegetation, but opportunity was taken to replace any face-work shown *in situ* in the 1988 photographs but subsequently fallen. Resin repairs were undertaken on a few dressed stone blocks laminated by frost, largely those of shafts against the south nave wall and the southern of the western crossing piers.

No excavation was undertaken except for the test area opened in the gap in the north wall and the partial excavation of the tomb recess and hence no further elucidation of the internal arrangements of the church was obtained. That the walls of the church were plastered internally at least was only to be expected and, during the repair programme, traces of white plaster were found adhering to the walls in the north-west corner of the nave. As already stated, no reused moulded stone from any earlier build was found within the church fabric, though one reject from the existing build had been incorporated into the core of the north wall.

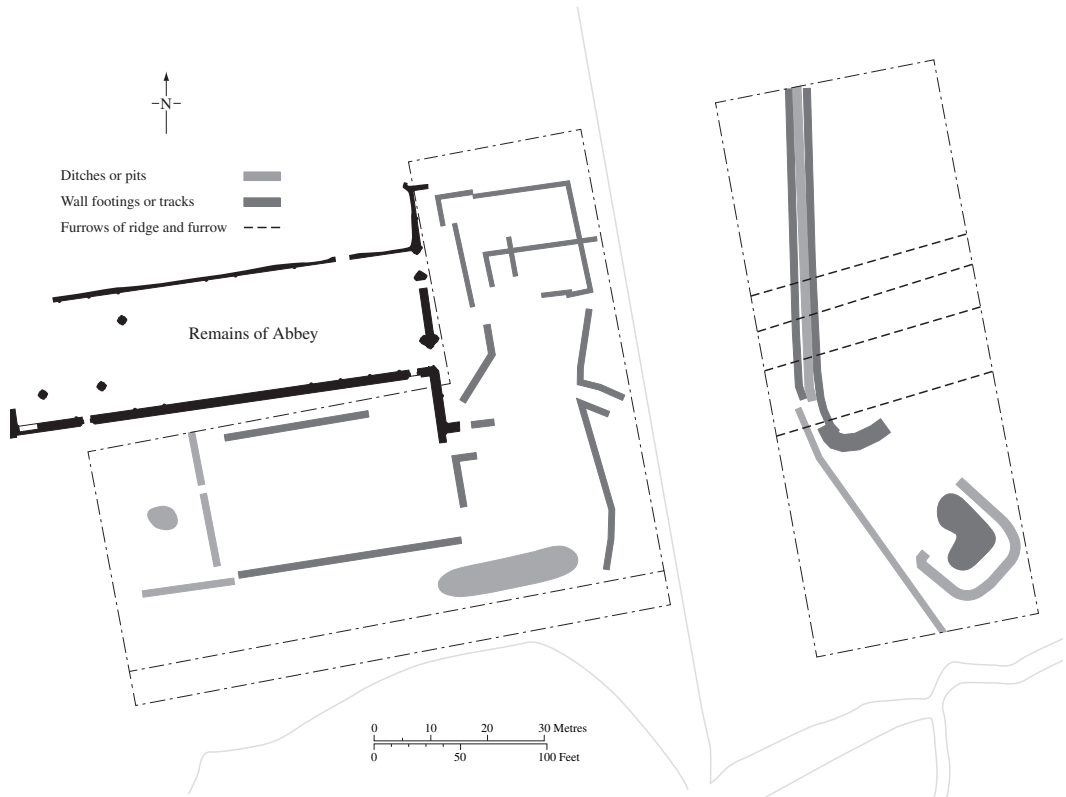


Fig. 7. Interpretative plan of geophysical anomalies at Cwmhir Abbey in 1998, shown in relationship to the visible remains.

The rather drastic clearance of the site undertaken by Thomas Wilson over a number of years from 1824 evidently uncovered post-dissolution collapse, as dressed and local stone, lead, ironwork and painted glass are mentioned; the great many human bones reported probably suggests that clearance went well beneath floor levels. During the excavations an inscribed tombstone was found, under which was a stone grave containing a complete skeleton, which predictably crumbled to dust upon exposure. Upon the stone lid was an inscription to Mabli; the lid still stands within the modern church at Abbeycwmhir. No mention was made of ceramic floor tiles in the reports on the earlier excavations, and likewise none were identified during the recent conservation work. However, a few pieces of broken worn stone floor slabs were uncovered in rubble in the south-west corner of the nave, suggesting that the nave may originally have been slabbed. No traces survived of the blocking screen wall between the ninth arcade piers, although a scarp is apparent at this point with the ground level rising slightly, suggesting the possibility of a raised floor in the nave at the east. However, the surviving pillar bases along both arcades show little variation in level and it must be assumed that as originally constructed the floor of the nave or at least the aisles would have been of one level.

The nineteenth-century clearance had also proceeded apace outside the church and the whole of the field to the south of the church was dug up and examined. The fact that the abbot's apartments, the refectory and dormitory and apparently a slaughterhouse, were discovered presumably means that stone

foundations or footings at least survived beneath ground level. Williams' excavations also uncovered foundations of what he surmised was the east wall of the dormitory range, and it was the eccentric position of this in relation to the church which suggested to him that a smaller church had preceded the existing nave. He also shows a small section of the north cloister walk and walling proceeding south from the south transept. The recent conservation work on the south transept revealed certainly that stone footings continued south of the transept, with a thirteenth-century shaft still surviving in the north-west corner of what may be the sacristy.

No other features associated with the claustral ranges are now visible above ground level, the field to the south of the abbey being remarkably devoid of feature or undulation, as the contour survey undertaken by CPAT has shown,⁵² but the geophysical survey went some way to confirming Stephen Williams' plan (Fig. 7).⁵³ A pattern of both high and low resistivity linear anomalies immediately south of the nave aligned with the abbey axes appear to enclose an area of about 35 metres square, the north, west and south linear anomalies roughly equating with the previously planned interior walls of the claustral buildings shown on Williams' plan. The survey was not able to provide any details of partitions within the claustral range, suggesting that preservation here is poor. Two substantial low-resistivity anomalies were detected in the cloister on the west and south-east, and were interpreted as possible silted wells or ponds. The anomaly on the southern side of the cloisters may reflect the position of a drain cut during the nineteenth-century clearance within which Williams recorded foundations, lead piping and a piece of paving slab, suggesting, perhaps that the cloister walk was slabbed. One has to remember the fact that the clearance undertaken then and earlier in the century was primarily undertaken to produce a fine landscaped garden for the new owner, work which may well itself have created features now silted or removed. A linear parch mark some 9 metres to the west of the outer wall of the west range and parallel to it (Fig. 3) showed dramatically in the dry summer of 1995 and is also visible on the aerial photographs taken in 1988. This lies just outside the area of the geophysical survey and, although the orientation might suggest an association with the claustral range, this remains unproven.

THE ABBEY ENVIRONS

The Revd W. J. Rees's early description of the clearance of the site not only dealt with the ruins themselves but attempted to assess the extent of the monastic enclosure. He mentions a 'strong dyke and entrenchment' running across the valley at equal distances eastward and westward from the church enclosing 10 acres (4 hectares) around the abbey. Apparently a great oven had earlier been found at the south-west corner of this enclosure, but had been removed in 1831. Recent survey work has brought to light some interesting features both in the wooded side of the valley opposite,⁵⁴ and in the fields immediately adjacent to the abbey, where scrutiny of aerial photographs, the tithe survey and some surviving earthworks suggests the position of the enclosure wall referred to above as a still visible bank running north to south across the field to the east of the abbey as far as the Clywedog Brook (Fig. 8). Adding to this the Clywedog Brook itself to the south, the Cwm Poeth Brook to the west, and the top of the hill to the north of the road, gives an area corresponding to the 10-acre enclosure described by Rees. This relatively small area may have been the inner of a two-court precinct. The northern boundary may have had earthworks prior to the road being shifted by Wilson who apparently cut down banks and filled a hollow-way to alter the course of the road to create a larger area of lawn for his house.⁵⁵

What may be the boundary of an outer court survives as a series of features noted from historic maps and aerial photographs outside the inner boundary though perhaps sharing the same northern boundary along the roadside (Fig. 8).⁵⁶ A stretch of bank north of the Clywedog Brook on the west of the ruins

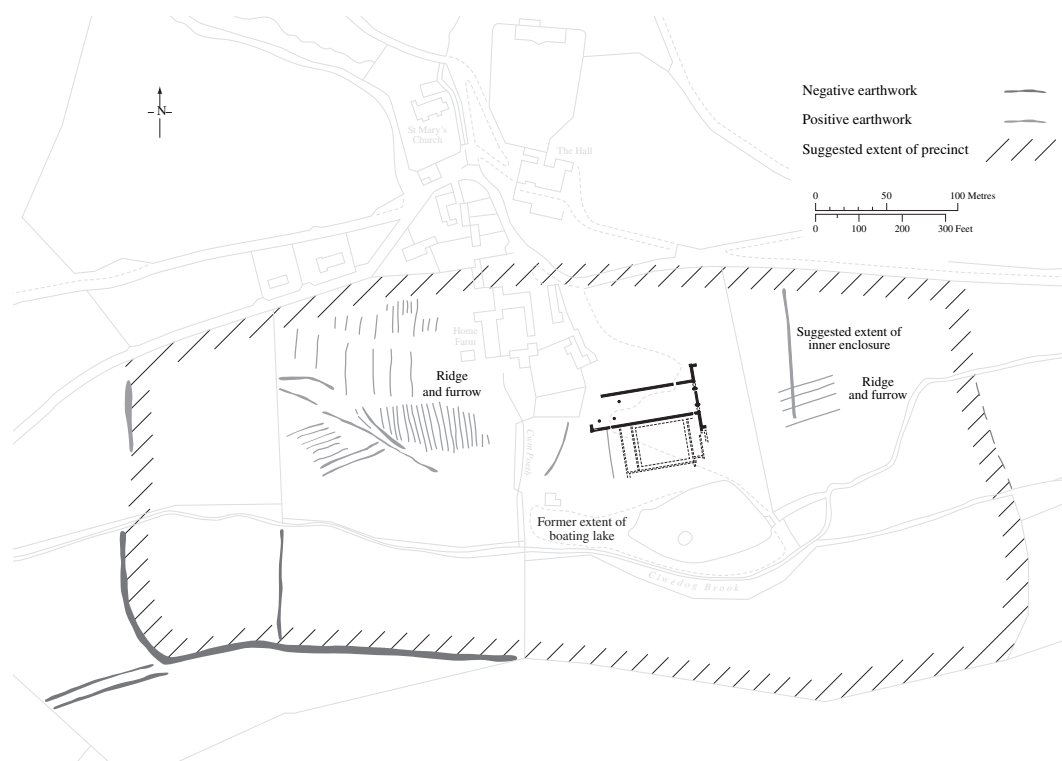


Fig. 8. The suggested precinct of Cwmhir Abbey.

lines up with a substantial bank and ditch which runs south from the stream, then turns eastwards into the modern forestry plantation before being taken up by a boundary shown on the tithe map and on earlier editions of the Ordnance Survey. The boundary then turns north to cut off the valley to the east of the abbey as far as the stream, beyond which no earthworks are traceable. This putative outer boundary (Fig. 8) encloses an area of 16.5 hectares including steeply sloping ground on the south and areas of ridge and furrow to the west, but its interpretation as the outer abbey precinct must, of course, remain conjectural.

The geophysical survey detected some interesting features to the east of the abbey ruins (Fig. 7).⁵⁷ A linear anomaly running north–south, the nature of which was consistent with an earth bank with stone revetment, or possibly a field wall, correlates with the faintly visible earthen bank depicted on the tithe survey and described above as perhaps representing the remains of the eastern inner precinct boundary. The linear anomaly running further to the south may represent a silted ditch or perhaps a land drain, while to the south east was detected a curving band of intense magnetization, about 15 metres in diameter, enclosing an area with high electrical resistivity. This could relate to the remains of a kiln or oven, such as that which was apparently discovered in the early nineteenth century by Thomas Wilson but apparently on the south-west side of the enclosure.

The Powys volume of the *Register of Landscapes, Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in Wales* has identified the garden and grounds of Cwm Hir Hall as a Grade II site, while the area of woodland to the north where lie the probable remains of the Little Park and Great Park is defined as lying within the ‘essential setting’ of the park.⁵⁸ The work is valuable in its assessment and description of the later landscape features of the Cwmhir park. The formal gardens of the hall extended down to include

the monastic ruins and Wilson's clearance of the ruins in the early nineteenth century should be seen in the context of the creation of his landscaped park. While the kitchen garden, driveways, croquet lawn and terraces were formed around the hall on the north of the road, the abbey precinct became part of the pleasure grounds, with a lake, trees and flower beds and a mount with spiral path. Wilson himself records that 'below the ruins to a considerable extent I have formed the river into a lake which much adds to its beauty'.⁵⁹ The extent of the lake has been altered on several occasions, having been extended to the west by the time of the Ordnance Survey revision of 1902 to form a boating lake, and has since contracted as a result of much alteration in more recent years.⁶⁰ The Revd Rees records that conventual buildings lay to the south-east of the abbey church and extended to the Clywedog Brook,⁶¹ which suggests that the construction of the lake may well have destroyed part of the conventual layout. The present course of the Clywedog Brook has also been modified, although after Thomas Wilson sold the estate in 1837, so that it now flows further to the south, partly following the original course of the mill leat, which was shortened by the expansion of the lake.

The flat-topped earthen mound complete with summit tree, which stands to the south west of the church may well be some of the excavation spoil landscaped into a lookout in the nineteenth century. The ruins became a popular picturesque subject for visits and sketches, and the use of the abbey precinct as pleasure grounds seems to have lasted until at least 1900. A level terrace at the top of the slope by the road may have been an early twentieth-century tennis court, while the flat area immediately outside the north wall of the church was presumably a levelled track providing access from Home Farm to the adjacent field to the east.

In the wooded slopes to the north of the valley, the boundaries of the probably seventeenth-century Little Park and Great Park survive intermittently as low banks about 0.5–1.0 metres high and 1.5 metres across within the conifer plantation (Fig. 9), and presumably equate roughly in position if not in area with the Convents Woods, part of which Phillip, abbot of Cwmhir in 1241, granted Roger Mortimer the right to enclose with hedges for the purpose of hunting.⁶² The recent survey of Forest Enterprise woodland⁶³ gave the opportunity for the examination of these outlying earthworks and a low stone ruin described as the 'Great Park Shed' on early Ordnance Survey editions, has also been surveyed. Though it seems likely that the ruin is one of the 'two deer-houses' noted by Jonathan Williams in his History of Radnorshire,⁶⁴ it is possible that originally it was built as a medieval hunting lodge, as its position, near to the highest point in the park, would be normal for this type of structure. The walls survive to 1.2 metres in height, and are formed of the same stone as the abbey; it was evidently roofed with slates and was probably still utilised until comparatively recently.⁶⁵

A quarry in the woods known as Fowler's Cave and long considered to have been the main source of building stone for the abbey was surveyed as part of the programme.⁶⁶ The quarried face stands up to 7 metres in height and overhangs in places, giving it its distinctive name. An inclined sled track of uncertain date runs from the quarry towards the abbey. There is some evidence for shot-marks within the quarry,⁶⁷ possibly resulting from later working, perhaps for episodes of rebuilding around the estate.

The original fishponds of the abbey are most likely to have been some 3.2 kilometres from the abbey along the present road to the north-north west where Thomas Wilson restored a pool of 3.5 acres known as 'the Monk's pool' in the 1820s.⁶⁸ Though there is no surviving trace of a pool here, the remains of a large dam still stand at the appropriately named Fishpool Farm. The distance from the abbey is perhaps best explained by the fact that this is the nearest appropriate marginal land in an area where agricultural land was at a premium.

Though the repair of the masonry has been completed, inevitable problems of management remain. CPAT's survey work has now led to statutory protection of some of the outlying features with the full cooperation of Forest Enterprise. The site of the abbey itself remains in private hands but may be freely

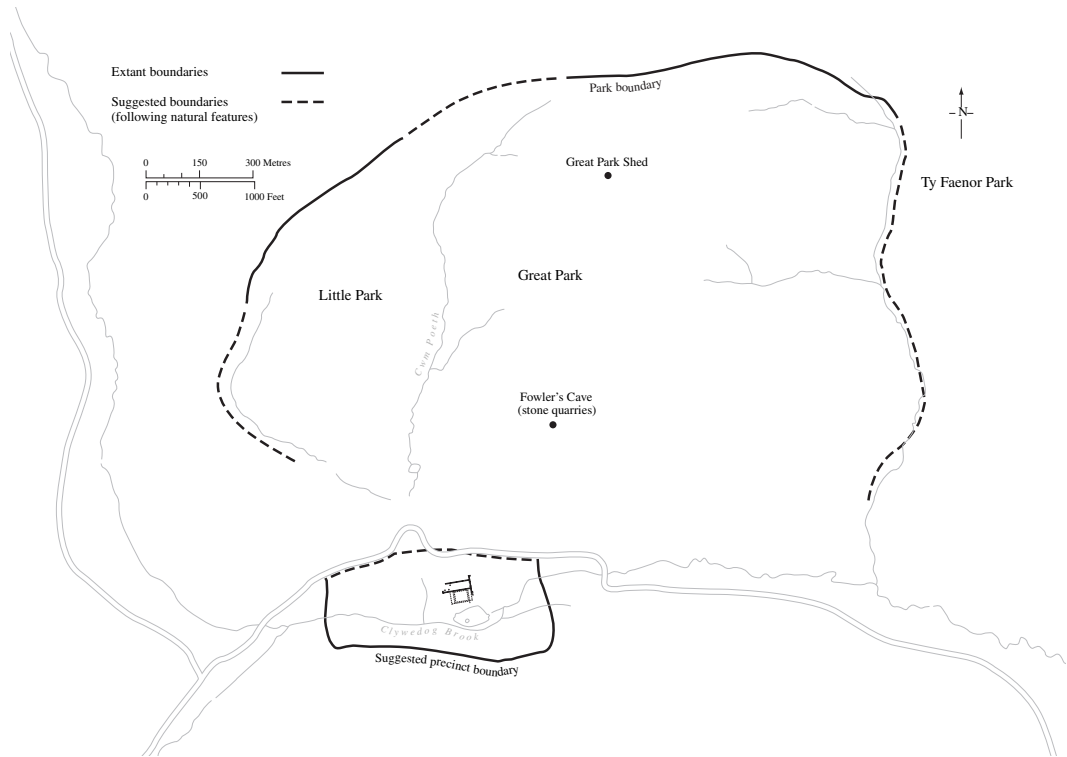


Fig. 9. Suggested precinct and park boundaries of Cwmhir Abbey.

visited at any time via a permissive path made available by the landowner. The ruins stand in a field used for sheep and occasionally cattle and must continue to be monitored for signs of wear or erosion. A memorial stone for Llywelyn ap Gruffudd lies roughly at the position of the altar at the east wall, laid there some years ago by Cofiwn, the Welsh commemorative society. The Abbey Cwmhir Heritage Trust, set up in the 1980s, now maintains and looks after the slab and it is a focus for the surprising numbers of visitors who walk down the wooded slope from the road to look at the ruins. Many dead or damaging trees have been removed from the site which now inevitably looks somewhat denuded. Some new planting has been undertaken away from the masonry on the sloping ground to the north and two mature trees, treated with appropriate tree surgery, were judged suitable for retention despite their position close by the north transept. It is by their shelter that an information panel has been erected to inform visitors of the plan and history of the abbey. The interior of the church has been left to grass and the conservation and interpretation work has been as unobtrusive as possible. It hardly needs stating that in so remote and tranquil a position, the aesthetics of a site such as Cwmhir Abbey are of paramount importance; we trust that the recent conservation work has given further life to these ruins where the sense of peace is almost palpable and the guiding spirit of the Cistercians may well be appreciated.

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