

Llancayo Farm Roman marching camp, Usk, Monmouthshire

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INTRODUCTION

A large (20.2 hectare) Roman marching camp, the second largest in Wales, has been confirmed on land at Llancayo Farm in the vicinity of Usk, Monmouthshire, during archaeological aerial reconnaissance by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) between 2009 and 2011. The choice of siting of this Roman camp is of considerable interest. Firstly, it addresses a notable gap in the record being the first Roman camp to be identified in Monmouthshire, close to the legionary fortress of Usk. The second point of interest is the concentration of monuments at the same location. The camp entirely encloses the Gwehelog³ Roman temple, in what appears to be a unique occurrence in the United Kingdom. The northern and eastern ditches of the camp also bisect ring ditches of a linear Bronze Age barrow cemetery. This paper describes the extent of the identified features and discusses the potential significance of its setting. During the dry summer of 2013, the Llancayo Farm camp was joined by the second Roman camp in Monmouthshire at Killcrow Hill east of Caerwent (Figs 1 and 6). Similar camp discoveries are still expected close to the other key military bases at Cardiff and Caerleon (*Isca*) in south Wales, and Caernarfon (*Segontium*) in north Wales (Davies and Jones 2006, 8) although any near Caerleon would be expected to be of early Neronian date.

DISCOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT AT LLANCAYO FARM 1986–2012

The discovery of the Llancayo Farm Roman marching camp⁴ demonstrates the value of timely and targeted repeat archaeological aerial reconnaissance at even well-known sites in the knowledge that variations in season and crop condition, combined with crop rotation in particular fields, will rarely yield all potential information on a single visit. Prior to 2011 (when a solar farm was constructed on part of the site) virtually all the land on the river bend was cultivated; yet archaeological cropmarks have only been sporadically recorded. The Roman temple at Llancayo Farm was discovered during aerial reconnaissance by the Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography (CUCAP) in 1984 (Frere 1985; see below and Fig. 4), in what was a very productive summer for archaeological reconnaissance elsewhere in Wales (see James 1984). The Royal Commission's own programme of aerial reconnaissance did not commence until 1986. Cropmarks or parchmarks of the Roman temple have never been seen from the air since 1984, indicating a potential scenario that the buildings which showed so clearly on the CUCAP aerials may indeed have been lost to, or degraded by, plough erosion in the intervening years.

By chance the southern ditch of the Roman camp was first discovered in an archaeological evaluation by Monmouth Archaeology in the winter of 1999–2000 (Monmouth Archaeology 2000), under the direction of Steve Clarke, yet its wider significance was not fully realised. The evaluation was carried out for the landowner in advance of the construction of two new buildings in fields adjacent to, and to the south of, the Roman temple field. Three trial trenches measuring 20m × 1.8m were excavated in the

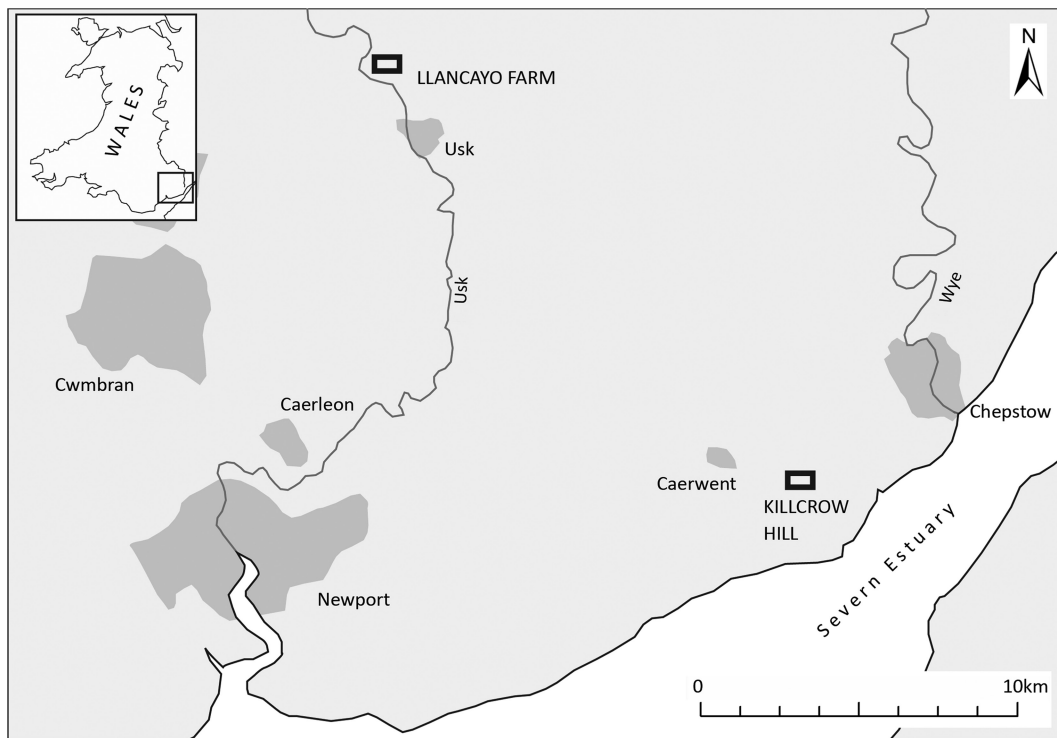


Fig. 1. Location map of south-east Wales. Locations of the two Roman camps currently known in Monmouthshire at Llancaiyo Farm and Killcrow Hill are shown as black rectangles. © Crown copyright, RCAHMW. Crown copyright and database rights (2014) Ordnance Survey (100022206).

footprint of a new long shed to the south of the temple which is now known to straddle the southern ditch of the camp. The line of the camp ditch was missed by the trenches and no other features were identified. However, Trial Trench 4 (marked on Fig. 2) also measuring $20\text{m} \times 1.8\text{m}$ was excavated immediately south of an existing lane and cattle shed and identified a V-shaped ditch 0.85m wide and 0.60m deep, crossing the trench diagonally. Plough truncation had removed the upper 1.28m of stratigraphy below the modern ground surface. The evaluation report correctly states; ‘This ditch is of a Roman style having parallel sloping sides . . . It seems most likely to be either that of a marching camp or a practice camp. The close proximity to Usk makes Llancaiyo an obvious site for practice camps by troops from the fortress’ (ibid. 8 and figs 12–13). Two residual flint flakes, a whetstone and a piece of iron slag were recovered from the ditch fill. The aerial photographic evidence which emerged nearly a decade later finally confirmed the character and significance of this site.

The Llancaiyo Farm Roman camp (Fig. 2) was first brought to wider attention when cropmarks of the north-eastern ditch and rounded corner were recorded during Royal Commission aerial reconnaissance on 9 July 2009. Some 300m of the northern ditch of the camp, including the rounded north-east corner, was visible together with a simple gateway gap mid-way along the north side, with no visible *titulus*. No corresponding gap has been detected on the eastern side. Part of the northern ditch was seen to bisect two prehistoric barrows.⁵ Later, on 23 July 2009, a repeat aerial visit yielded a further site, a univallate, polygonal enclosure with angled corners, measuring 63m north-south by 48m east-west.⁶ The date and

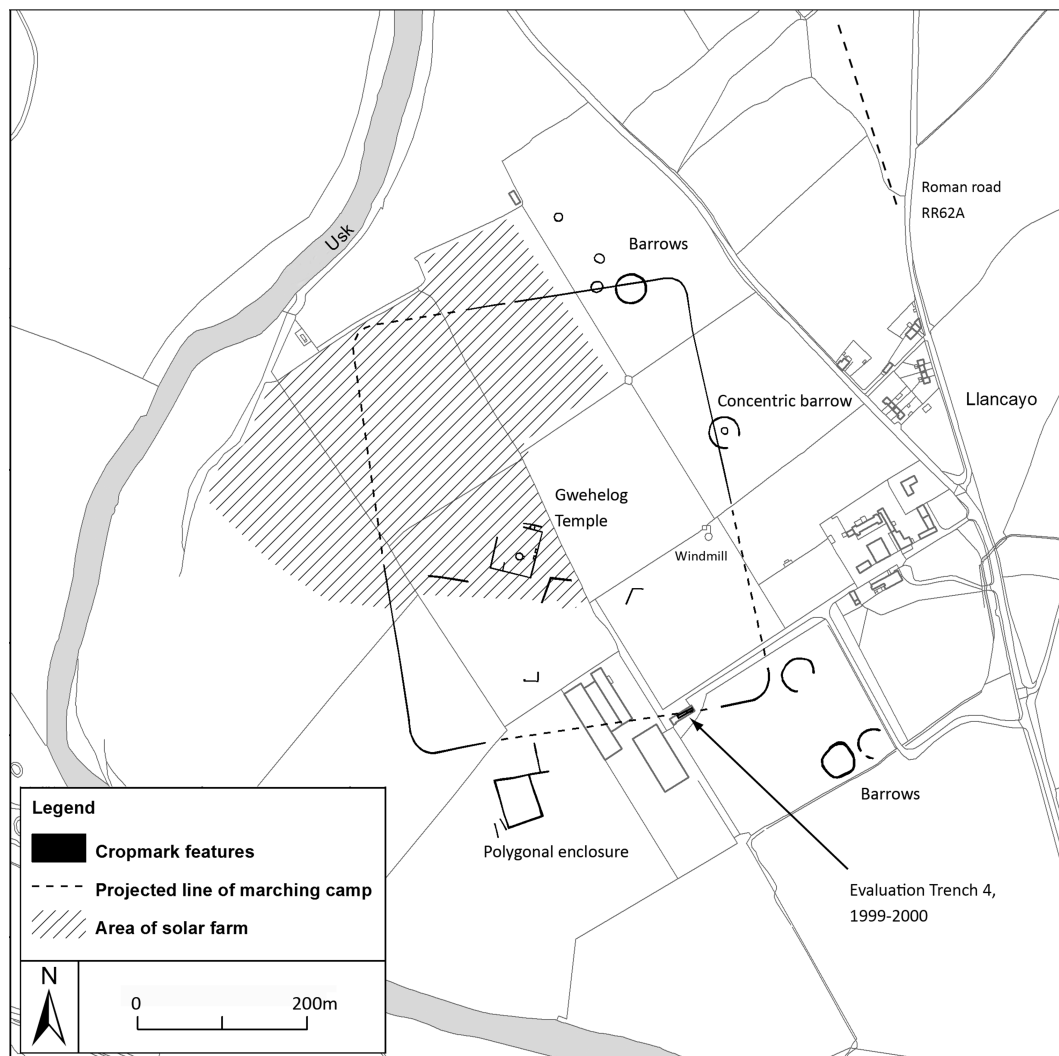


Fig. 2. Llanccayo Farm Roman marching camp, which encloses the Gwehelog Roman temple (centre), sited on rising ground on a bend of the river Usk. The northern and eastern ditches of the camp are aligned on, and cut across, pre-existing Early Bronze Age barrows of a linear cemetery. The projected course of the Roman road RR62A (upper right) is known from cropmark and LiDAR information. The position of the recent solar farm development is shown shaded. © Crown copyright, RCAHMW. Crown copyright and database rights (2014) Ordnance Survey (100022206).

character of this enclosure is uncertain but it may be Romano-British, perhaps related to the development of the temple complex and ancillary structures. Excavations at a similar site, the Hindwell Trapezoidal Enclosure which lies within the Hindwell Roman marching camp, Radnorshire, provided dates of *c.* 190–42 cal. BC (SUERC 52863) showing it may have been sited during construction of the camp (Jones 2014b, 12–13).

One rounded ‘playing card’ corner does not make a Roman marching camp, but the significance of the discoveries as a whole justified the initial publication of this probable new site (Driver 2009). The site was overflowed in June 2010 but none of the previous years’ discoveries were showing. There was surprise the following year when a very early spring drought in April 2011 yielded the elusive south-west corner of the Roman marching camp at Llancayo Farm, virtually the only cropmark of note on a wider flight over south-east Wales (Fig. 2). This allowed the full extent of the camp to be established.

In 2010 fieldwork for an MA coursework project by Thomas Wellicome from the University of Bristol was carried out over the site of the temple (Wellicome 2010). Wellicome employed a 1m gradiometer survey and 1m resistivity survey on a 30m × 30m grid over the site of the temple. These surveys were augmented by a 10m resolution magnetic susceptibility survey (ibid. 13–17). Perhaps due to the difficult weather conditions during the survey, which included fluctuating temperatures, ‘considerable waterlogging’ and freezing ground requiring constant recalibration of the equipment (ibid. 17), together with standing stumps of maize in the field, the results are very difficult to meaningfully interpret (ibid. figs 34–45). Surface finds noted during the geophysical survey include a sherd of Samian ware (unidentified), a quantity of slag, a number of water-rounded stones and a possible quernstone in a hedge boundary on the north-east perimeter of the temple field (ibid. 11). The coursework project stands as a good desktop assessment of the site, even if little new light was shed on the character of the Roman temple.

During the summer of 2011 development work commenced on site for a new solar farm (Fig. 2; Driver and Davis 2012, 16). It is one of the first such complexes in Wales and more than 22,000 photovoltaic panels have been erected on above-ground frames for large-scale electricity generation to power more than 1,100 residential homes. Originally intended to sit on rails, with minimal ground disturbance for cable laying, the development resulted in greater ground disturbance than was originally planned. This prompted rescue excavations by Steve Clarke and Monmouth Archaeology which revealed fragments of clay-bonded stone walls (Clarke and Bray 2012). The panels now entirely cover the site of the Gwehelog temple and much of the north-western quadrant of the Roman marching camp, effectively placing this part of the site beyond the reaches of future geophysical survey.

The gradual discovery of the north-east and south-west parts of the camp over three years had provided its maximum dimensions, and with hindsight provided a context for the initial find of the V-shaped ditch in an evaluation nine years earlier. However, there were additional discoveries on a subsequent drought flight on 28 March 2012 which yielded very clear germination cropmarks of further sections of the eastern defences of the camp, and a previously unrecorded concentric barrow on the line of the Roman ditch, adding to the evidence for an extensive early Bronze Age cemetery (Fig. 2). Taken together, the coincidence of Early Bronze Age barrow cemetery, Roman marching camp and Roman temple with a Gallo-Roman plan make Llancayo Farm, Usk one of the most interesting prehistoric and Roman monument complexes currently known in south-east Wales.

DESCRIPTION OF THE LLANCAYO FARM COMPLEX

The Roman marching camp⁷

The camp is sited to make full use of the central and northern part of a broad alluvial terrace which rises from 22 metres to 30 metres above sea level, set within a wide meander of the river Usk overlooked from the east by the 3.0-hectare hillfort of Llancayo Camp. Pre-existing round barrows of a wider early Bronze Age cemetery (described below) were apparently used for setting out the northern and eastern sides of the camp. The camp is located some 3 kilometres north-west of the Roman legionary fortress at Usk and is the first marching camp to be recorded in Monmouthshire. The camp measures 500 metres north-south

by 400 metres east–west, and encloses approximately 20.2 hectares. The size of the camp is significant. There are only five Roman marching camps in Wales and the Marches enclosing 12–20 hectares, and only three examples greater than 20 hectares; two, Cound Hall (*c.* 26 hectares) and Brampton Bryan (23 hectares) are in the Marches with only one, Blaen-cwm Bach above Tonna, Neath, in Wales at 26.79 hectares (Davies and Jones 2006, 59). Given Davies and Jones' (2006, 41–2, fig. 26) preferences for calculations of holding capacity of Roman camps in Wales, we can calculate that Llancayo Farm may have accommodated around 12,000 men. Further detail about the siting of the Roman camp, and its interrelationship to the other features, is discussed below. Although some internal linear features are visible it is considered more likely that these relate to the construction and use of the temple and any ancillary buildings, discussed below, than features contemporary with the life of the camp.

The barrow cemetery⁸

The Roman marching camp generally follows the alignment of an Early Bronze Age barrow cemetery which strikes across the river bend appearing to separate the riverine lowlands of the meander from the rising ground of the wider valley. The linear character of the barrow cemetery seems to be genuine and is not influenced by limitations in cropmark susceptibility here, as Figure 3 demonstrates. A localised hillock underlies the eastern side of the camp and may originally have made the barrows more prominent in the landscape. The northern and eastern ditches of the Roman camp were clearly set-out on two of the round barrows, which were probably deliberately levelled during camp construction.

As with the cropmarks of the camp, the barrow cemetery was steadily revealed during aerial photography from 2009–12. A group of four circular ditches, representing the remains of ploughed-out prehistoric barrows were identified as cropmarks in 2009 (Driver 2009, 76). The group comprised a larger enclosure or barrow, *c.* 35 metres in diameter,⁹ and three smaller barrows to the west and north ranging in diameter between 11 and 14 metres. The largest enclosure and a second barrow are bisected by the east–west ditch at the northern end of the Roman marching camp. Further aerial reconnaissance in 2011 revealed a second group of two roughly circular enclosures or barrows visible as cropmarks.¹⁰ Both were *c.* 35 metres in diameter and situated immediately outside of the south-east corner of the marching camp, but were only recognised as barrows when mapped from aerial photographs and seen in the wider context of the site. Aerial reconnaissance in March 2012 revealed a further concentric barrow measuring 36m in diameter (Fig. 3), mid-way between the two known groups and also bisected by the Roman camp ditch.

This is one of the larger lowland Early Bronze Age barrow cemeteries known in Monmouthshire and appears to have a deliberate relationship with the topography of the river meander. Its presence is one of the earliest indicators linking heightened ritual significance to this particular locale.

The Gwehelog Roman temple¹¹

Even before the recent aerial discoveries at Llancayo Farm, Gwehelog, the temple was described by Davies as 'potentially one of the most significant Romano-British sites in Wales' (Arnold and Davies 2000, 130). Despite this significance the site has remained relatively obscure and an accurate plan of the temple was not published until 2000 (mapped from aerial photographs by R. Moloney in Arnold and Davies 2000, fig. 11.2.A).

The architecture of the Gwehelog temple appears to be unique in Wales (Fig 4–5). The site has a circular stone Roman temple 9 metres in diameter externally. Presumably towered, it has a typical 'signet-ring' appearance, indicating a porched entrance to the east (Frere 1985, 263; Arnold and Davies 2000, 128–30). Miranda Aldhouse-Green (2004, 162) refers to the structure as a 'shrine' or 'sanctuary', and notes the easterly orientation of both the porched entrance of the sanctuary, and the gatehouse and eastern



Fig. 3. North-east corner of the marching camp from the south, March 2012, with Llancayo Windmill (foreground). Early germination marks show the eastern and northern side of the marching camp bisecting a concentric barrow (lower right) and barrow pair (top centre). The colour bands of the digital image have been rebalanced to highlight the archaeology. © Crown copyright, RCAHMW, AP_2012_1745.

entrance of the *temenos* (enclosure), potentially continuing the ritual importance of an eastward orientation also found in Iron Age and earlier houses and shrines. The temple is set asymmetrically within a large rectilinear *temenos*, 56 metres north-south by 50 metres east-west, with a probable gatehouse to the east (Wilson 1990, 16). A 20m-long additional east-west corridor or range of buildings, 5m wide, on the north side of the *temenos* can be seen on the cropmarks. These are associated with a pair of clear subdivisions within the corridor or range describing a room 5m square, and is matched by an offset solid footing of a further building or room 5m × 3m on the inner side of the north *temenos* wall. There are traces of other stone anomalies within the *temenos*, conceivably structural features or patches of collapsed stonework. One of the most interesting features is the clear but fragmentary remains of a large circular structure, 16m in diameter, partly visible in the southern part of the *temenos* to the south of the shrine but cut by, and presumably earlier than, the south *temenos* wall. This interesting structure provides an indication of



Fig. 4. The Gwehelog Roman temple, showing as a parchmark on a vertical aerial photograph taken by Cambridge University in 1984. Other parchmarks of stone footings, potential road surfaces and wall angles can be seen in surrounding fields. © Copyright reserved, Cambridge University Collection of Air Photographs, RC8HA8, 17 July 1984.

a possible pre-Roman cult building on the site. Given the prehistoric context for the site, it could also be considered to be the ditch of a levelled Early Bronze Age barrow.

The results of the recent geophysical survey (Wellicome 2010, 46–60) were of variable or poor quality, possibly because of weather constraints the time of the survey (see above) or indeed erosion of the features due to ploughing. Wellicome suggested the identification of several new features within the *temenos*, but the data is very difficult to meaningfully interpret. Other linear cropmarks close to the *temenos* and within the interior of the camp, presumably the remains of stone settings for buildings, field boundaries or other structures potentially related to the temple complex, are also apparent from aerial photographs. A sub-station trench inserted *c.* 20 metres south-east of the temple¹² during installation of the solar farm cut through one of these linear features (wall at lower right, Fig. 5). Recording by Monmouth Archaeology identified a stone and cob wall footing running south, terminating at the south end in a T-shaped arrangement with packing for two posts standing either side of the wall. Roman pottery and iron slag were recovered from the rubble fill but the overall character or function of the wall footings remains obscure, although it was postulated that it could be one terminal of a gateway (Clarke and Bray 2012).

In plan, the temple bears a close resemblance to the circular shrine at Hayling Island, Hampshire (King and Soffe 1998). Like Gwehelog, the Hayling Island temple consisted of a round inner structure eccentrically set within a rectangular open area. It was constructed in the late first century AD, but was preceded by a late Iron Age shrine of similar plan made of wood (*ibid.* 41). Davies postulates that the

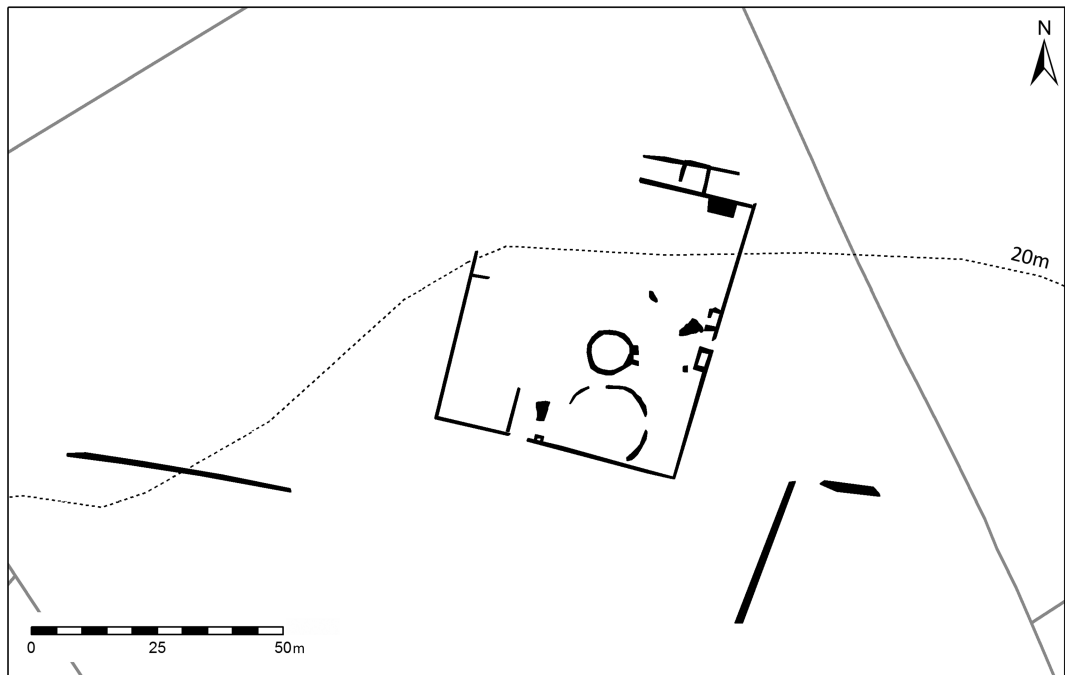


Fig. 5. Gwehelog Roman temple, plan derived from air photo mapping showing key features of the site. Note the footings of a 16m-diameter circular structure immediately to the south of the circular temple or 'sanctuary', conceivably a structure pre-dating the erection of the precinct wall, or perhaps a plough-levelled barrow. © Crown copyright, RCAHMW. Crown copyright and database rights (2014) Ordnance Survey (100022206).

Gwehelog temple may have been built as the result of 'the military patronage of a pre-Roman cult focus' or alternatively could have been a 'purely native temple of predominantly western Gallic architectural form' (Arnold and Davies 2000, 130).

Four known or suspected Romano-British *temenos* enclosures are recorded in eastern Wales, at Plasnewydd, Llanfair Dyffryn Clwyd near Ruthin, Denbighshire, Forden Gaer, Montgomery, Powys, Caersws *vicus*, Powys, and the architecturally unique site at Gwehelog. A further temple or high status building has been postulated on Portskewett Hill, Monmouthshire. A temple postulated at Wyndcliff, St Arvans, above the Wye Gorge appears on the basis of more recent aerial photographic evidence to be a Roman villa (Boon 1973, 44; Trett and Hudson 1993; Evans 2001, 140–1; Driver 2014, 162, and fig. 7). A Romano-British cropmark enclosure discovered at Broadheath, Presteigne in 1995 (Driver and Jones 2012) has recently been reinterpreted as a potential temple complex by Musson (2013, 23).

DISCUSSION

Siting of the Roman camp and its relationship with earlier monuments

The discovery of the Roman camp at Llanccayo Farm is timely. The exceptional size and capacity of the camp sheds some light on this period of conflict and assimilation in Roman Wales. Davies and Jones have

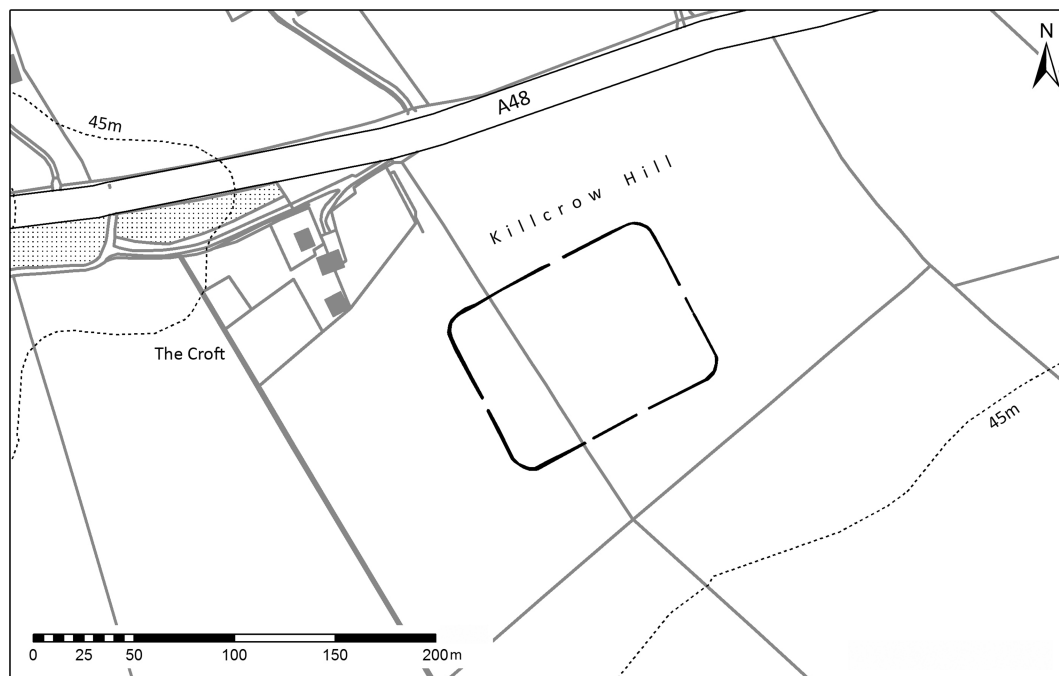


Fig. 6. Killcrow Hill Roman marching camp: air photograph mapping of cropmarks. © Crown copyright, RCAHMW. Crown copyright and database rights (2014) Ordnance Survey (100022206).

discussed the absence of evidence for marching camps in Monmouthshire, and elsewhere, which did not tally with the Roman record of campaigning in the region in the following terms (Davies and Jones 2006, 64): ‘given the literary evidence for the ferocity of the fighting between the Silures and the Romans We must conclude that . . . temporary camps must formerly have existed in these areas, but their remains await discovery . . . with not a single temporary camp being known [from the Usk valley] until Arosfa Garreg and Y Pigwn are reached on the very uppermost margins of the same’.

The early Neronian legionary fortress at Usk, founded in the mid 50s AD, was probably closed *c.* AD 66/67 following the departure of *Legio XIV* from Britain, but was not demolished until the mid 70s AD during the construction of the new fortress at Caerleon (Manning, in Burnham and Davies 2010, 188). Subsequent continuing occupation on the fort site may have been related to a function as a works depot serving Caerleon, or a continuing military interest from *Legio II Augusta* (ibid. 192). Alternatively, Llancayo Farm Roman camp, while of likely pre-Flavian date, could ante-date the establishment of the Neronian fortress (Jeffrey L. Davies pers. comm.). In July 2013 the second Roman camp in Monmouthshire was discovered during Royal Commission aerial reconnaissance at Killcrow Hill,¹³ a low ridge *c.* 2.7 kilometres east of Caerwent Roman town (Fig. 6). The camp measures 113m by 87m and encloses 0.98 hectares, making it the smallest camp in Wales and the Marches. The location of this newly-identified camp only 2.5 kilometres north-west of the Black Rock Roman crossing on the Severn Estuary, and some 3 kilometres north of Sudbrook camp promontory fort, suggests to that it might represent an invasion force penetrating Monmouthshire from the south, requiring a crossing of the Severn estuary (Jeffrey L. Davies pers. comm.).

Interrelationships between Roman camps and prehistoric features, as at Llancayo Farm, are not unknown in Britain. A number of Roman camps in Wales, and elsewhere, enclose or incorporate structures

from earlier periods (summarised in Davies and Jones 2006, 32–3). In Wales and the Marches these include barrow mounds incorporated in camp perimeters at Brompton (south-east corner) and Stretford Bridge. The Walton Roman camps in Radnorshire share a tract of level ground with pre-existing Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments (ibid. 140). The western rampart of Llanfor I incorporates a prehistoric barrow in its western perimeter (ibid. 120–2), which was presumably left standing with the Roman ditch skirting around it; the camp also encloses a second barrow together with a likely prehistoric pit alignment (Burnham and Davies 2010, fig. 7.38). In Scotland, a spectacular example can be found at Broadlea II whose south-west side is routed through the central area of a Neolithic henge. The fact that the camp gate lies at one entrance to the henge, and the camp corner at the other, strongly suggests that the henge was an upstanding earthwork when the camp was laid out (Jones 2012, 151–2).

At times pre-existing monuments may have been utilised by Roman armies on campaign. The north-east ditch of Hindwell I camp, on the valley floor of the Walton Basin, Radnorshire, aligns on the perimeter of a complex barrow (Davies and Jones 2006, 135–7; Jones 2014a). Aerial photography and geophysical survey of the barrow, which measures *c.* 30m diameter, revealed 12 or 13 radial anomalies initially thought to represent prehistoric burnt pits of posts set in or below the mound. Excavation showed that these pits were in fact Roman field ovens thought to be associated with the construction and use of the Hindwell I Roman camp between AD 48 and AD 60/61 (Jones 2014a, 12–13). This is an unusual example of Roman reuse of a prehistoric round barrow and its mound may have provided the ovens with a useful shelter from prevailing winds.

CONCLUSIONS

Llancayo Farm is a multi-period archaeological landscape in south-east Wales of some significance. Iron Age ritual activity is strongly suggested by the Gwehelog temple's parallels with the excavated Gallo-Roman example on Hayling Island. There is the possibility, as yet untested by excavation, that this was a pre-Roman cult focus. The watery, riverine position (Aldhouse-Green 2004, 164–5) and the existence of an earlier round barrow cemetery which demarcates the river bend from the wider landscape, are all suggestive of a ritual or cult focus here. The construction of a campaign period marching camp for some 12,000 men would have been a remarkable intervention if the shrine still retained local significance. Unfortunately, a lack of excavation evidence for the temple, and dating for the camp, means that the exact relationship between both monuments cannot be more thoroughly tested. However, the juxtaposition of Early Bronze Age barrow cemetery, potential pre-Roman cult focus, Roman marching camp and finally a Gallo-Roman temple and ancillary structures at Llancayo Farm on the bend of the Usk shows a sequence of events as yet unattested elsewhere in Wales, or Britain, and has the potential to shed light on the political tensions witnessed between 'native' and 'invader' in the early decades of Welsh history.

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Longer descriptions and online resources for the sites listed can be explored on <www.coffein.gov.uk> using the site NPRN or name to search. Combined records of all historic environment bodies in Wales can be viewed at <<http://historicwales.gov.uk>>.

NOTES

1. School of History, Archaeology and Religion, Cardiff University.
2. Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.
3. The Roman temple on land at Llancayo Farm was assigned the name of the parish, Gwehelog Fawr, by Professor J. K. St. Joseph.
4. RCAHMW, National Primary Record Number (NPRN) 409178.
5. NPRN 409179.
6. NPRN 409237, at SO 3635 0273.
7. SO 3629 0306.
8. SO 3640 0335.
9. At SO 2645 0332.
10. At SO 3668 0280.
11. SO 3632 0300.
12. At approximately SO 3635 0295.
13. NPRN 419220.

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