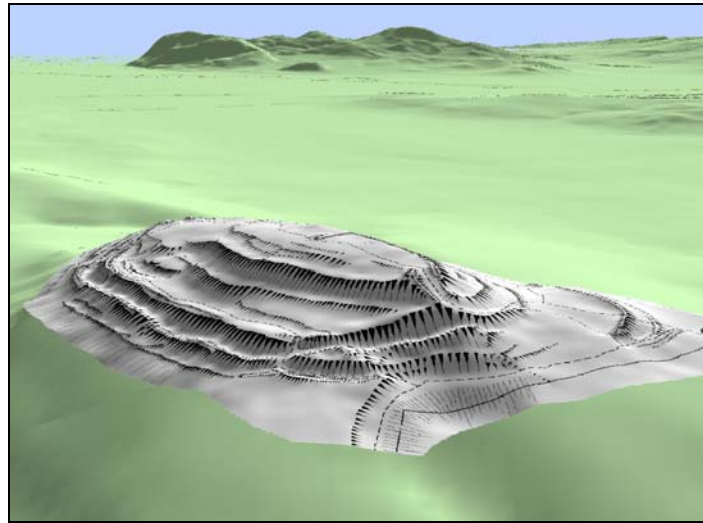


Comisiwn Brenhinol Henebion Cymru

Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales



GAER FAWR HILLFORT: AN ANALYSIS OF THE EARTHWORKS

County: Powys (Montgomeryshire)

Community: Guilsfield

NGR: SJ 22415 13020

NPRN: 306997

Date of Survey: January 2007

Surveyed by: Louise Barker, Daniel Jones, Dave Leighton, John Wiles

Report Author: Louise Barker

Illustrations: Louise Barker

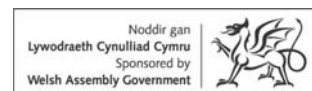
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1. Introduction.

In January 2007 staff from the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) carried out survey and analysis of the earthworks of Gaer Fawr, a hillfort situated in the central Welsh Marches, within the parish of Guilsfield, Powys (NGR: SJ 2242 1302). Little archaeological investigation has been undertaken of this remarkably well preserved monument. The main reason for this is that it lies hidden in woodland, and without the benefit of techniques such as aerial photography, it has been virtually impossible to visualise the overall plan of the monument, let alone any complexities or phasing within it (Fig. 1). In light of this, Cadw requested RCAHMW to carry out a detailed survey of the monument, following on from the work of the Defended Enclosures Project undertaken by itself and the Welsh Archaeological Trusts.



Figure 1: Aerial view of the densely wooded Gaer Fawr hillfort (foreground), with the Severn Plain and Breidden hills beyond. (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMW AP_2007_4037).

2. Geographical Setting.

Gaer Fawr, the 'Great Fort', occupies a prominent hill 1.4 kilometres to the north of Guilsfield (Cegidfa) and 5.4 kilometres north of Welshpool in the old county of Montgomeryshire, now Powys. The topography of this area is dominated by the River Severn, 4.7 kilometres to the east (Fig. 2). The hills flanking its wide river plain rise gently to the west and more steeply to the east and are cut by the tributary rivers which feed the Severn. A series of prominent hills rises above the general topography, most distinctively the Breidden, at 403 metres above sea level. Opposite the Breidden, on the west side of the valley, the rounded and tree-clad profile of Gaer Fawr hill dominates at 219 metres above sea level. Three geological systems cross this area, the igneous intrusions of the Breidden, the Silurian system of the Severn valley comprising sedimentary Ludlow and Wenlock bedrock, and the Ordovician system of Gaer Fawr, comprising sedimentary Caradoc bedrock over which lies well-drained fine loamy and silty soils.



Figure 2: Location Map. Gaer Fawr in relation to the local topography. (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMW. Licence number: 100017916, 2009).

Gaer Fawr hill is covered by semi-natural woodland, owned and cared for by The Woodland Trust. Most of the wood is ancient, with a diverse species composition, including areas dominated by sessile oak coppice, ash and sycamore, together with small patches of wet woodland and alder. The hillfort is on the summit of the hill and glimpses through the trees reveal what once would have been unimpeded and spectacular views, as commented upon by the artist, H. H. Lines:

‘I must mention that the view from the area of the camp over the valley of the Severn and the far-extending plain of Shropshire, with the Craig of Breidden uprising abruptly like an angry giant on the sunny vale of lingering Sabrina, cannot be surveyed without admiration; while, upon the west, all the peaks of the principality, from the Plinlimmon and Cader Idris to Snowdon, fringe the horizon with waves of mountains’ (1889: 338)

Closer to home, the hillfort overlooks directly the Guilsfield valley through which the Guilsfield (also known as Bele) Brook flows; it has a perfect view to the north-east, where the valley opens onto the wide floodplain of the Severn.

3. Historical Context.

The story of Gaer Fawr begins in later prehistory, during the first millennium BC. The Welsh border during this period is an increasingly well studied subject area and, before looking at Gaer Fawr in detail, it is important to place the hillfort in the context of the landscape at this time. The site lies in the northern half of a dense band of large-and medium-sized hillforts extending along the border between England and Wales: from the Wye Valley and tributaries of the Severn into the central Marches, and on by way of the Clwydian Range to the North Wales coast. In more local terms it is one of over 100 earthworks and cropmarks in the old county of Montgomeryshire and the western part of Shropshire thought to be later prehistoric in date. These range from major hillforts to minor strongholds, defended homesteads to lowland farms (Fig. 3). Across the Marches about thirty hillforts have been excavated to some extent or another; near to Gaer Fawr these comprise Ffridd Fadwyn in Montgomery, the Breidden, Llanymynech Hill on the Powys/Shropshire border and Llwyn Bryn-dinas above Llangedwyn (Musson 1991: 1-3).

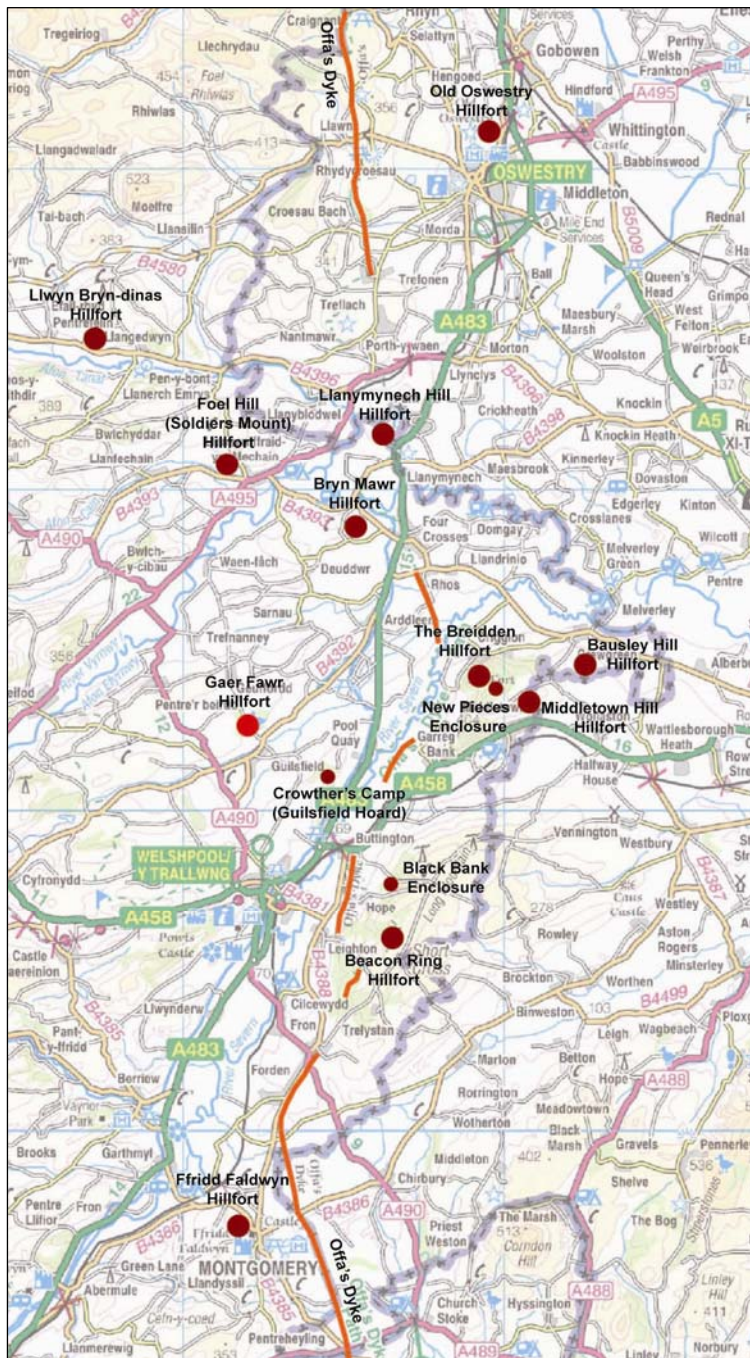


Figure 3: Location map showing hillforts in the vicinity of Gaer Fawr, together with selected sites mentioned in the text. (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMW. Licence number: 100017916, 2009)

Cultivation and agricultural improvement over much of the lower-lying river valleys from the medieval period onwards has effectively erased most lowland sites and thus brought to prominence the upland settlements of the region, leading to its early classification as purely a ‘hillfort zone’ and military frontier. The recent discovery and mapping of lower-lying settlements, most of which survive as cropmarks, has redressed this balance and we now see a settlement pattern of hillforts set within a landscape dominated by smaller enclosures. One reason for the form and type of settlement here relates to the diversity of the landscape, encompassing both the

hills and high moorland plateaux amongst which Gaer Fawr is situated, adjacent to low-lying land and river valleys, such as that of the Severn. Dated pollen sequences from the north Shropshire wetlands and Buckbean Pond on the Breidden, together with geoarchaeological evidence from the catchment of the upper Severn, illustrate that at the turn of the first millennium BC, the area was a partially open landscape, comprising a patchwork of cultivation plots, hill pasture, managed woodland and floodplain grazing. There is also evidence that by this date areas were being formerly divided up, although seemingly not as coherently and extensively as those in southern England (Wigley 2007: 179). Such a diverse landscape enabled a mixed farming regime, based on grain growing (emmer and spelt wheat, barley and oats) and sheep rearing, and it is this that is thought to

be one of the main reasons for the concentration of larger hillforts not seen anywhere else in Wales, suggesting a centralisation uncommon in predominantly pastoral areas, but very similar to that of south-east Britain (Cunliffe 2005: 437).

Hillforts start appearing in this area in the Late Bronze Age; excavations on the Breidden hillfort date the earliest phase of the ramparts to the ninth or eighth centuries BC, whilst those at Ffridd Faldwyn have been tentatively dated to the eighth and seventh centuries BC (Musson 1991: 173-5; Wigley 2007: 180). The hillfort was a new form of settlement, possibly a response to a climatic downturn in the Late Bronze Age, resulting in the reduction of agricultural yields that would have placed a severe strain on a well-populated area which relied heavily upon its mixed agriculture. The economic stress may have precipitated unrest, conflict and major changes in social organisation (Lynch et al 2000: 150).

One illustration of this Late Bronze Age crisis, but also an indicator of the wealth of the area during this period, comes from the Guilsfield Hoard. In 1862 labourers digging a drain adjacent to Crowther's Camp near Guilsfield, 3 kilometers to the south-east of Gaer Fawr, discovered a metalwork hoard (RCAHM 1911: No. 949). This is one of the largest and best known hoards in Wales and contained 120 pieces of metalwork, including palstaves, socketed axes, spearheads, ferrules, swords and chapes. The bulk of the hoard comprised material characteristic of the 'Wilburton Complex'. The majority was broken and the inclusion of an unsuccessful spearhead casting led to its classification as a scrap hoard. However, there were a number of later, non 'Wilburton' pieces, which, together with typological considerations, suggest that it was deposited between 750 x 700 BC. In addition to material from further afield providing evidence for contact and trade with far-flung networks, there were examples of local tools, possibly made at Guilsfield itself. Several other hoards from the Marches - Willow Moor, Bishops Castle and Broadward - contain similar 'local' equipment, but in the rest of Wales this material is rare (Savory 1965; Davies 1967; Lynch *et al* 2000: 182).

The main burst of hillfort building occurred in the early Iron Age between the sixth and fifth centuries BC and had reached its peak by the middle Iron Age (400-150 BC), both in terms of number and also form, exemplified by the emergence of the 'developed' hillfort. The function of such hillforts is frequently debated. They point to the existence of sizeable communities which must have been involved in their construction, although whether or not this was under coercion is unknown. It remains unclear whether the hillforts were inhabited by a large proportion of the community or by a dominant group, perhaps offering refuge in times of need. The main function of some may also have

been as the storage and redistribution centre for the wider community, most of whom lived in small enclosed farmsteads in the vicinity (Lynch *et al* 2000: 148; Cunliffe 2005: 437-439).



Figure 4: Photograph of New Pieces settlement and field system from the Breidden Hillfort. The banks of the field system can be seen in the centre of the photograph with the enclosure situated in the small area of deciduous trees before the track to the right. Behind New Pieces, the hillfort crowning the summit of Middletown Hill can be seen. (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMW DS2008_434_001).

The late Iron Age and Roman phase in hillforts is the least well understood. The definition of the tribal boundaries in the Marches is unclear, but it is likely it was part of *Cornovian* or eastern *Ordovician* territory, albeit with a much wider zone of interaction, particularly to the east (Cunliffe 2005: 305). The area was brought under Roman control after a short period of hard fighting during pre-Flavian campaigning, the turning point being the defeat and subsequent capture of the British ruler, Caratacus, in AD 51. The legionary fortress at Wroxeter was not far away, and there were massive troop concentrations around the area as it was a key node into the central Marches which allowed the upper Severn to be crossed and operations extend up that valley into central Wales or even north-west towards the Clwydian Range (Arnold & Davies 2002: 3-5). In terms of the settlement pattern there is more evidence for the continuation and establishment of smaller hillslope and lowland settlements along the valleys of the Severn and its tributaries than occupation of hillforts. An example of this is seen on the Breidden, where a new hillslope enclosure and

associated field system known as New Pieces (Fig. 4; NPRNs 94037 & 306995) was established next to the hillfort (O’Neil 1937: 107-112; Musson 1991: 6-7). Whilst excavation evidence from the Breidden and Ffridd Faldwyn does suggest that some hillforts were utilised into the first century BC, the occupation appears to have been on a much reduced scale, suggesting there was already some change in the settlement pattern prior to the Roman incursion (Lynch *et al* 2000: 160; Arnold & Davies 2000: 72).



Figure 5: *Offa’s Dyke runs from the Severn estuary near Chepstow northwards to Holywell, a distance of 225 kilometres. The photograph shows a tree-lined section striding across Chirk Castle Estate. (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMW DI2007_0646).*

With the collapse of central Roman imperial administration during the early fifth century, a new social order developed in Wales in the form of independent regional kingships. Gaer Fawr was situated in the kingdom of Powys and was located on the front line of intermittent border warfare that raged from the seventh century onwards between the kingdoms of Welsh Powys and Anglo-Saxon Mercia. The most obvious monument to this is Offa’s Dyke, which takes the name of the Mercian

king who reigned AD 757-796. The earthwork (Fig. 5) lies 4.5 kilometres to the east of the hillfort and whether seen as a boundary or a barrier was a forceful statement of demarcation. It is the most impressive monument of the early medieval period, all the more important to our understanding of a period when archaeological evidence is elusive and little is known about the settlements and population of this time (Browne & Redknapp 2008: 97). Surviving evidence indicates settlements were often situated in defended hilltop locations, sometimes reusing earlier hillforts. Degannwy in Conwy was destroyed by Ceolwulf in AD 823, the year he subdued Powys, and is a clear illustration

of how the Welsh had resorted to the use of fortresses against such attacks; it has been suggested that there may have been Mercian forts along the line of Offa's Dyke which were imitated by the Welsh on the opposing side (Musson & Spurgeon 1988). A sword fragment of medieval date is said to have been found at Gaer Fawr during the nineteenth century (RCAHM 1911: No. 237).

The earliest records associate Guilsfield or Cegidfa (Cegid-fan, meaning 'a place abounding with hemlock') with Theonus or Teon, a bishop of St Pauls in the middle of the fifth century and later with St Tysilio, who at one point in his eventful life was abbot at Meifod. Aelhaiarn, a late sixth-century saint to whom the church at Guilsfield is dedicated, was said to be the grandson of Cynddylan ap Cyndrwyn, king of Pengwern in Powys, and whilst there is no direct evidence for an early church here, the morphology of the churchyard and to some degree the siting suggest the possibility of an early medieval foundation. The early core of the present church is thought to date from at least the fourteenth century, whilst the font may even be twelfth-century in date (<http://www.cpat.demon.co.uk/projects/longer/churches/montgom/16786.htm>). The title 'Lord of Guilsfield' was first associated with Cyngen ap Eliseg, king of Powys in the early ninth century, and his descendent Beli y Garth or Beli of Cegidfa is the first named 'Lord of Guilsfield' to appear in the heralds' pedigrees for the tenth century. Garth in Guilsfield is said to have been the residence of the lords of Guilsfield, and it seems likely that Beli gives his name to the brook which runs through the village (Barton *et al* 1999: 2-5).

By the end of the twelfth century the early ecclesiastical parish of Guilsfield was created, carved out of the ancient commote of Ystrad Marchell. This was a large parish comprising a dozen or so townships and encompassing over 15,000 acres. Gaer Fawr gave its name to the township it was originally situated in, but this was later encompassed into the township of Varchoel (Simpson Jones & Owen 1900: 129). Until the mid-twentieth century the hillfort was part of the Garth estate, the hall itself situated 2 kilometres to the south-west within the township of Garth, although whether Garth Hall developed out of the early seat of the 'Lords of Guilsfield' remains unclear. In 1717 a tall brick house was built here by Richard Mytton, a member of the old border family of Mytton, who married the heiress of the estate, Dorothy, of the wealthy Wynn family from North Wales. This hall was subsequently replaced around 1809 by the Reverend Richard Mytton on his return to Wales, after making a fortune in India (Fig. 6).

The grounds of the Garth estate were extensive; around the hall was a roughly triangular-shaped park of some 81 hectares, whilst an 1873 survey of lands in Montgomeryshire notes that Captain Mytton of Garth owned 1,076 hectares (Barton *et al* 1999: 50), a large proportion of which lay within the Guilsfield parish, as illustrated by the Tithe survey of 1845. At the date of the tithe the

hillfort was situated in 'Garfor Coppis', being both owned and occupied by Charlotte Mytton, wife of the late Reverend Richard Mytton. This was a managed wood divided between three main parties, the summit area belonging to the Myttons and no doubt providing an important source of wood for the estate, whilst the area to the south was occupied by Evan Gittons of Gaer-fawr farm and John Fox from a farm near Tyddwyn (NLW: Tithe No. 878).



Figure 6. Photograph of Garth Hall in 1947: The hall was demolished in 1950-52. It was built at great expense in 1809 for Reverend Richard Mytton, chaplain to the Governor General of India, in a bold mixture of gothic and ecclesiastical styles by the well known garden designer and writer, John Claudius Loudon. (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMW DI2008_0839).

Charlotte Mytton died in 1872 and the estate passed to her son, Devereux. In 1909 during RCAHMW research for the Montgomeryshire Inventory, the hillfort was in ownership of Devereux's son, Major G. H. Mytton. It remained with the Myttons until 1939, after which the Hall was abandoned and used by the army during the Second World War as offices and a munitions dump. After the war the estate was sold to a property developer, W. Hale of Walsall, and the hall was auctioned for demolition in 1946, subsequently demolished during 1950-52, after which the site passed into the hands of the local council. Parts of the wider estate were sold to different owners: Gaer Fawr became part of the Halebrose Estates Ltd. before being sold in 1963 to Edward Calcott

Pryce, who was able to acquire other parts of the wood, with the intention of creating a recreational amenity for the people of Guilsfield. Following Pryce's death the wood was threatened with development, which led to the Woodland Trust's purchase of it in 1984 (Lloyd 1989: 38; Barton et al 1999: 82; Woodland Trust pers. comm.).

4. Research on Gaer Fawr Hillfort.

In the extensive discussions on the hillforts of Wales and the Marches, Gaer Fawr rarely features and when it does it tends to be at a basic classificatory level, most often as a dot on a map indicative of a medium-sized multivallate fort (Nash-Williams 1933; Ordnance Survey 1962; Forde-Johnston 1976).

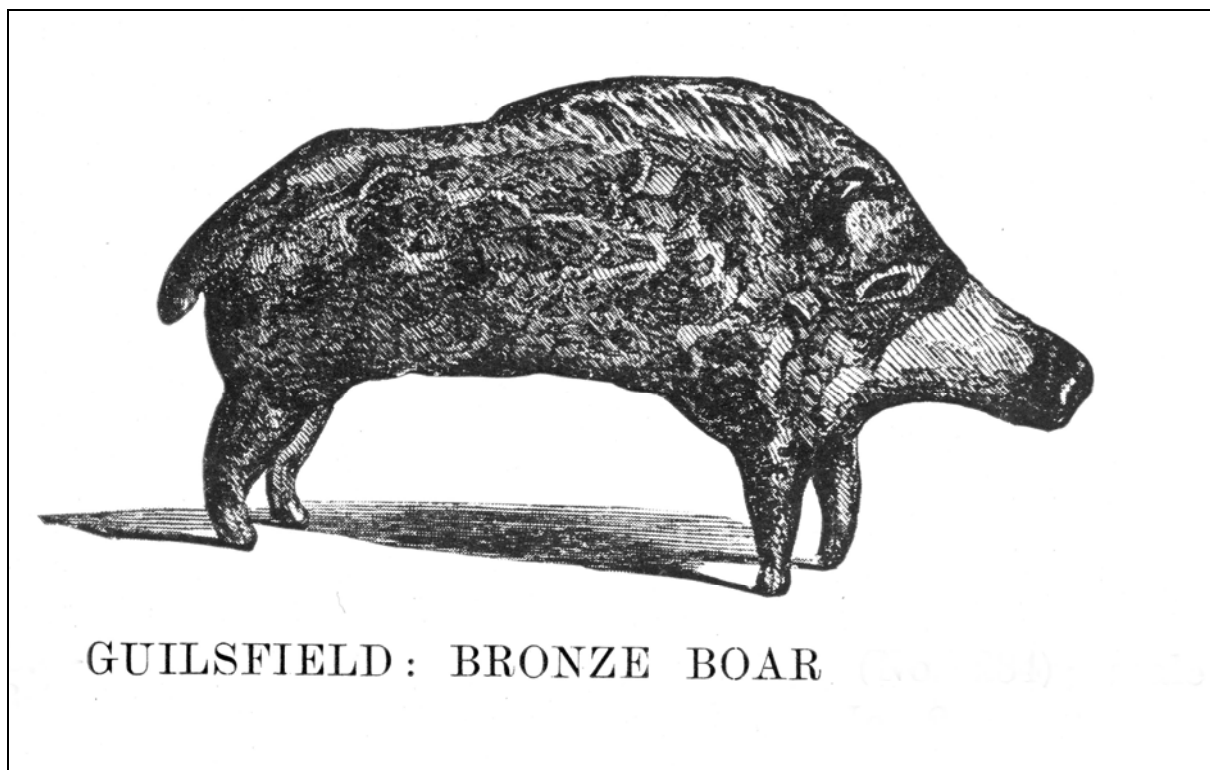


Figure 7: *The Guilsfield Bronze Boar. This drawing appeared in the RCAHMW Montgomery Inventory of 1911. It appears to be taken from a drawing by Arthur Gore, Esq. of Melksham as noted by Reverend Barnwell in a note on the boar published in 1871. (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMW DI2009_0042).*

There is no recorded evidence of any excavation having taken place. However, one tantalising discovery in the form of a bronze boar figurine (Fig. 7), now exhibited in the National Museum of Wales, was made at the turn of the nineteenth century, near to or at Gaer Fawr itself (RCAHM 1911: No. 234; Barnwell 1870: 449; Barnwell 1871). The boar is made of hollow bronze and

is 63 millimeters long by 35 millimeters high and its crude style suggests an Iron Age rather than Roman period date. A deep incision underneath the belly and running the full length of the animal suggests it would originally have been mounted, most likely as a helmet emblem (Foster 1977: 15).

This find certainly added significance to the hillfort and became a point of note on some early references to the site, such as that by Samuel Lewis (1833) in his topographical dictionary of Wales:

‘On a high hill, called the Garva (Gaer Vawr), not far from the village, are vestiges of a Roman encampment; and beyond it a Roman road may be traced for nearly a mile, on the road to Pont-yscowryd. Several ornaments of gold, supposed to be relics of the Romans, have been found near this camp: one is in the shape of a wild boar, about two inches long and one high, which probably decorated a helmet, and is now in the possession of D. Mytton, Esq.’

In contrast Robert Llwyd in his undated topographical notices of the nineteenth century writes (18??:312):

‘North of Guilsfied, on a hill called Gaervawr, is a small British encampment; but by some it is supposed to be a Roman encampment. There can, however be little doubt that a battle was fought between the British and Romans in the plains of Varchoel, as part of a Roman ensign has been found there’

In 1856 the hillfort was included on a list of ‘Early British Remains in Wales’, published in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (Jones 1856: 85). The following year, in the same journal, the first description of the hillfort was made, based on a visit by Charles Babington, in which its two main entrances together with the different styles in the defences on the south-east and north-west sides of the monument were noted (1857: 149). The most thorough account however, complete with sketch (Fig. 8), was made a few years later in April 1874 by the artist H. H. Lines. Lines combined his artistic skills with his interest in archaeology and made many sketching tours through Wales, leaving behind a large number of plans, together with archaeological papers on the remains, ‘..we gain some idea of the arduous nature of the struggle between the Britons for their liberty and the Romans for conquest, when we count up the camps which took part in the Silurian War’ (1889: 322). Lines lists some seventy-six border camps classifying them as Roman, British or both; ‘Gaer Vawr’ he lists as British and ‘in a most perfect state of preservation’. His sketch of the fort is excellent, clearly showing the two main entrances, together with additional internal features and the annexe outside the south-west gate that were omitted from the first edition Ordnance Survey published in 1886.

Importantly, Lines is the first writer to suggest that the hillfort was of more than one phase, 'I am inclined to think that the camp has been widened out on its north-west side...leaving the original area of the camp standing up as a terrace high above that part which has been added'. Lines looked carefully at the relationship of the fort with that of the Breidden and concluded, 'I am doubtful of this hill-fort having been a dependency of Breidden, being so completely cut off from that place by the Severn. Its garrison may have acted in conjunction with that of the Bridden, by protecting the left bank of the river while Breidden held possession of the right bank' (1889: 337).

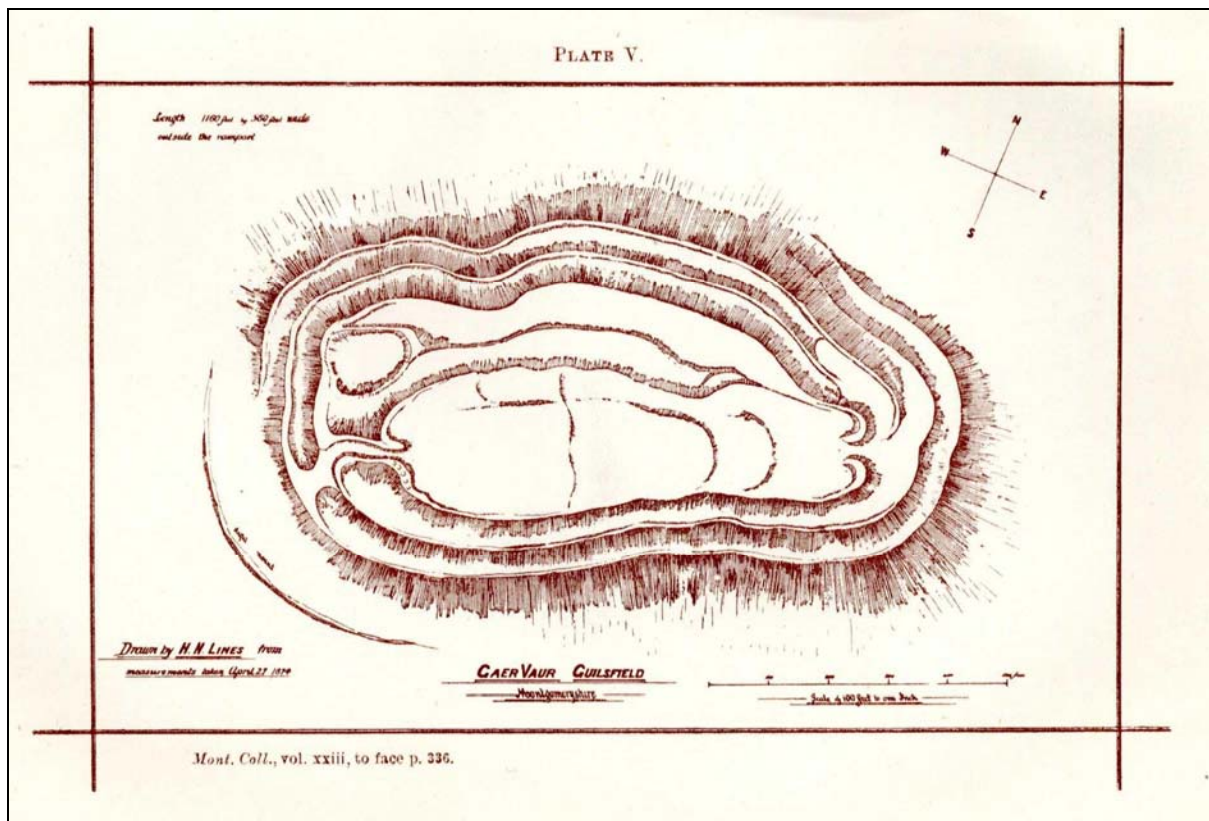


Figure 8. Sketch of Gaer Fawr by the artist H. H. Lines. (Reproduced from Lines 1874. The original could not be located)

The first measured survey of the hillfort was that published by the Ordnance Survey on the first edition 25-inch series map of 1886 (Fig. 9). One additional piece of information shown on this plan that was not included on Lines's sketch is the third entrance on the west side of the fort. This plan was used by the RCAHMW in their Montgomery Inventory published in 1911; the resulting description was based on a visit by Royal Commission investigators in July 1909 (RCAHM 1911: No. 214). In this description a point was made of the hillforts close similarity to that of Ffridd Faldwyn at Montgomery; this is perhaps something that might not be so obviously noted today.

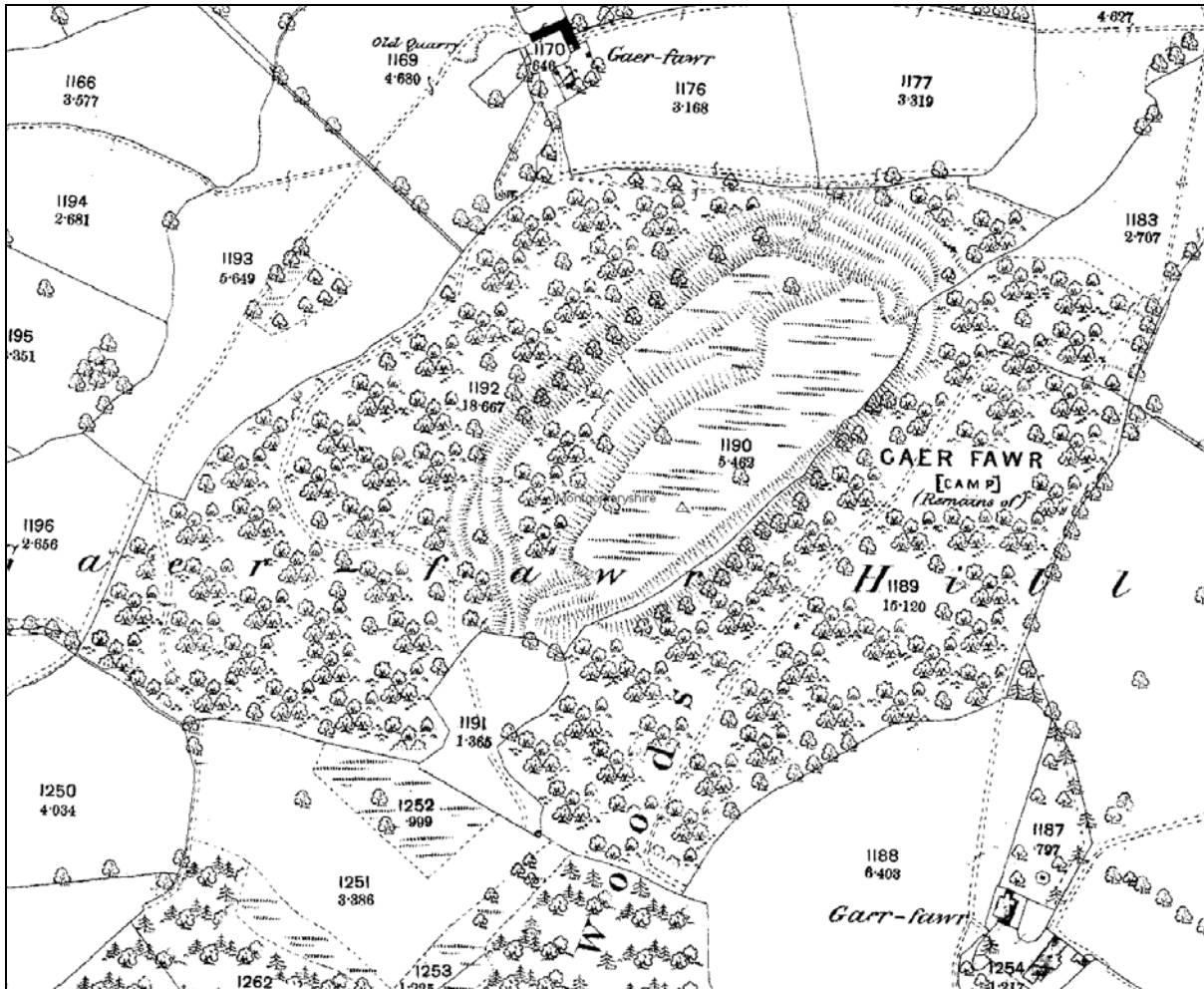


Figure 9. Gaer Fawr hillfort as depicted on the Ordnance Survey first edition 25-inch series map published in 1886. (reproduced from the 1886 Ordnance Survey map).

Aside from the work of Lines and the RCAHMW, the only subsequent individual study of the hillfort was that carried out by Ordnance Survey archaeologists and J. Spurgeon (1972: 321). Details contained on the Ordnance Survey 495 cards provide good concise descriptions of the fort, and place emphasis, as Lines had done, on its phasing:

‘The construction covered at least two main phases. The original hillfort, enclosing about 3 acres, was probably univallate with entrances at the NW and SW ends. The second phase consisted of enlarging the original fort by enclosing a further 3½ acres to the NW side at a lower level. The new outer defences were bivallate and included very complicated entrances on the NE and SW, probably on the sites of the original entrances’ (NMRW: OS 495 Card SJ 21 SW 1)

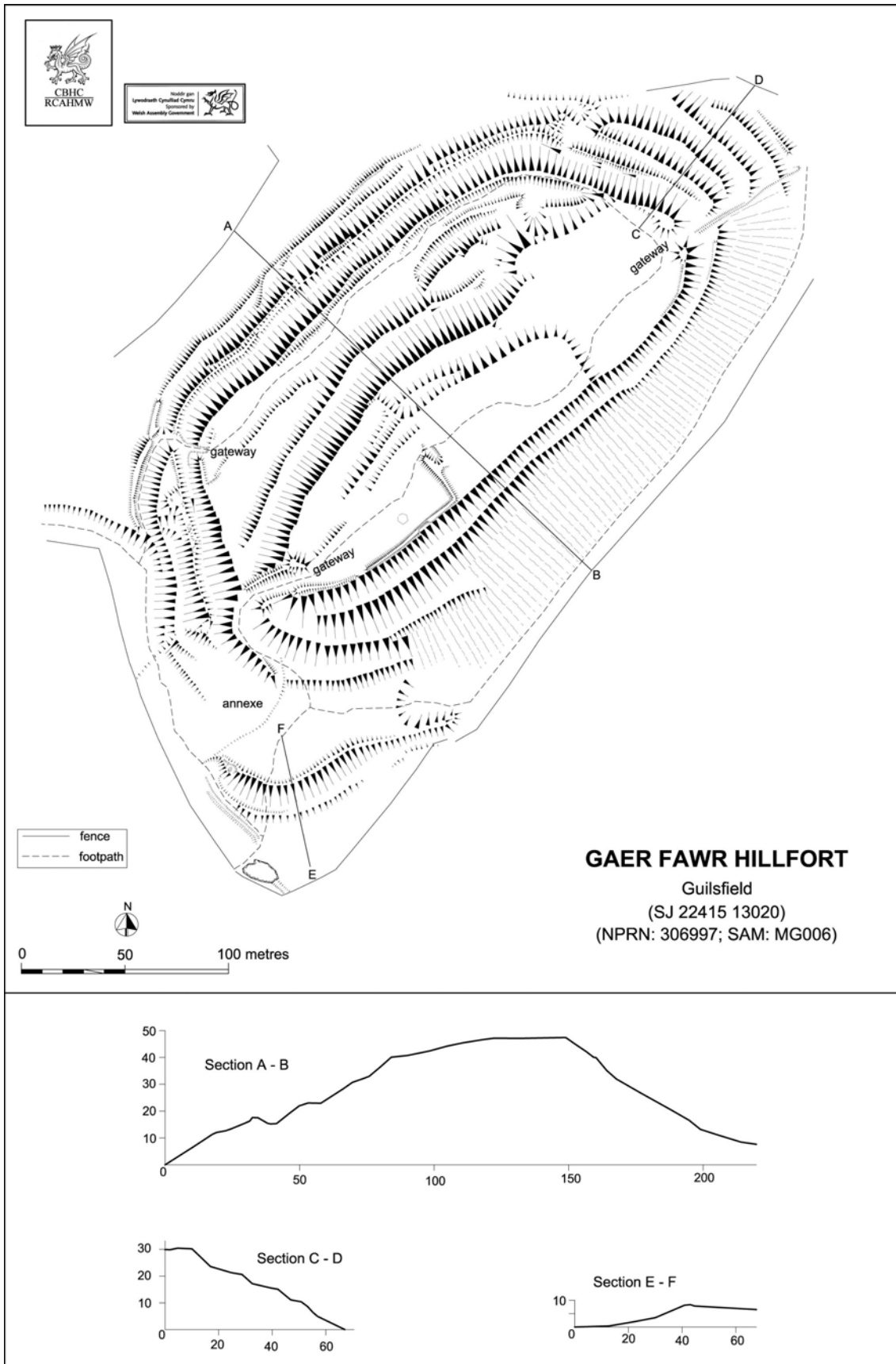


Figure 10. RCAHMW survey plan of Gaer Fawr Hillfort. Reduced scale, based on the original 1:1000 scale survey. (©Crown Copyright: RCAHMW 2008).

5. The Archaeological Survey.

Figure 10 is the RCAHMW earthwork plan resulting from the survey of 2007; the full archive plan, at 1:1000 scale, is available from the National Monuments Record of Wales, based in Aberystwyth (Catalogue No. C431928). In the following description words and letters which appear in **bold** are shown on the figures indicated at the beginning of each section.

Gaer Fawr is a multivallate hillfort set in a hilltop situation (Figs 10 & 11). It is roughly oval in shape with overall measurements 426 metres north-east to south-west by 180 metres north-west to south-east; a total area of just over 6 hectares. Ramparts essentially follow the contours of the hillside and enclose two interior spaces, one on the summit of the hill encompassing 1.3 hectares and the other set on a terrace below and to the west of the main summit, 0.44 hectares in extent. Two entrances lead to the summit interior, set at the north-east and south-west points of the fort, whilst a third smaller and less complex entrance is situated on the west side leading into the lower interior. Attached to the south-west end of the fort below the entrance is a roughly triangular annexe 0.4 hectares in extent, defined by a single bank and ditch.

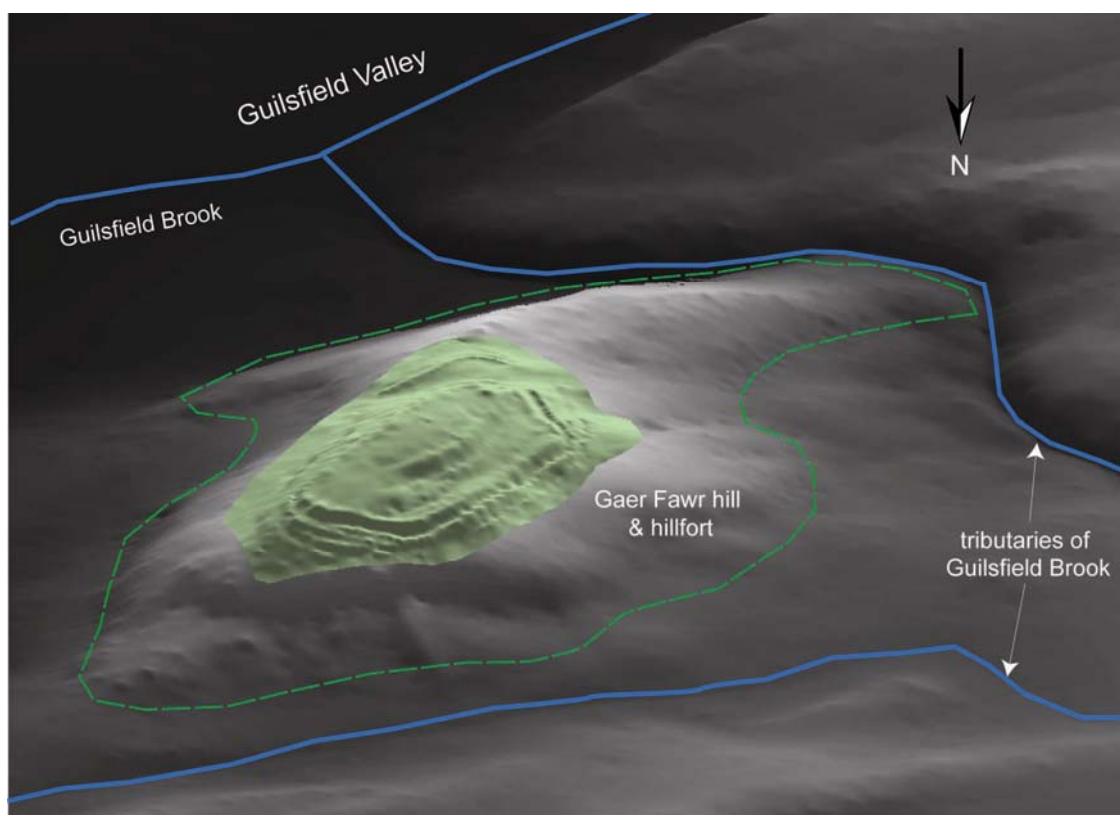


Figure 11. Digital terrain model showing Gaer Fawr hill and hillfort. Height information for the hillfort uses RCAHMW survey data. (©Crown Copyright: RCAHMW, 2008 and ©GeoPerspectives).

5.1 Ramparts (Fig. 12).

The forts ramparts comprise two lines to the east of the **summit** and four on the west. At the north-east and south-west ends of the fort, the arrangement becomes more complex as they feed into the respective entrances. There are two main styles of construction, those created through the sculpting of the natural slope and the more constructed form whereby a ditch was cut and bank constructed. The main factor defining these styles is the underlying topography.

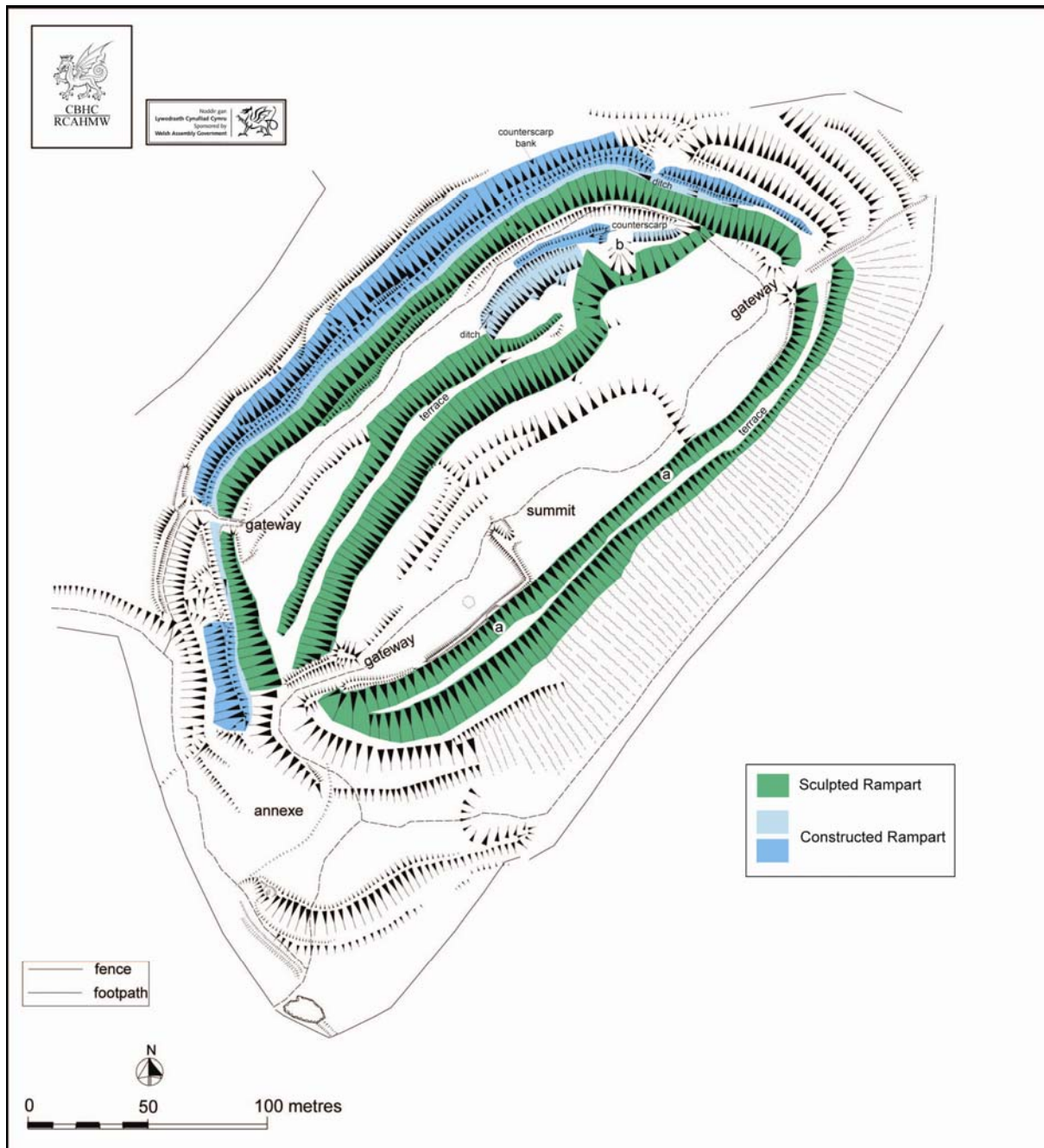


Figure 12. RCAHMW survey plan showing the construction and features of the hillfort ramparts. (©Crown Copyright: RCAHMW, 2008).



Figure 13. Photograph of the sculpted ramparts to the west of the summit. (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMW DS2008_177_012).

The summit interior is surrounded by very steep slopes and here the ramparts were created through the sculpting of the hill slope. They comprise a series of two scarp slopes with a **terrace** between. The inner rampart to the east is about 5.8 metres high and is separated from the second line by a terrace around 4.6 metres wide. Two obvious breaks in the scarp at **(a)**, relates to a later boundary which ran across the fort as depicted on the first edition Ordnance Survey of 1886 (Fig. 9). The second rampart line merges into the natural slope, which runs down to the river plain of the Guilsfield valley.



Figure 14. Photograph looking north-east along the ditch at the base of the ramparts to the west of the summit. (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMW DS2008_177_015).

To the west of the summit, the inner rampart is again the steepest about 7.5 metres high with a 4.5m wide **terrace** to the second line which then drops up to 6 metres to the lower interior (Fig. 13). The northern end of this arrangement is different, most likely due to the fact that the ground at this point slopes less steeply away to the north. Here, there is only one scarp slope, into which a later quarry (**b**) has been cut. To provide additional defence here a **ditch** was dug, 62 metres long by 13 metres wide and now just 0.3 metres deep, with evidence for a slight **counterscarp** bank (Fig. 14). This feature is critical to our understanding of the phasing of the hillfort, as it strongly suggests that the arrangement described above relates to an earlier phase prior to the addition of further defences to the west. This is discussed more fully below.



Figure 15. Photograph looking north-east along the ditch of the ramparts to the west of the lower interior. (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMW DS2008_177_005).

The rampart to the west of the lower interior is of similar form to those surrounding the summit, sculpted from the hillslope.

Here however the rampart runs into the base of a ditch and from bottom of ditch to top of rampart stands about 8.3 metres high. At this point the ground levels out and thus the ramparts required construction; a 'U' shaped **ditch** some 6 metres wide, provided material for a **counterscarp bank** 14 metres wide and up to 7.3 metres high on its external face (Fig. 15). The form of the counterscarp bank and evidence for a clear break of slope on the outer face, suggests that a barrier once topped the earthwork and is the only evidence of such across the whole hillfort. Elsewhere relatively small and loose pieces of stone can be seen, and it seems likely that what could be termed glacis-style defences with such height and angle (around 45°) may have simply been covered in loose scree. There may well have been a timber breastwork of some form around the summit and lower interior; however the surviving evidence does not suggest any form of major construction.

5.2 Annexe (Fig. 16).

The **annexe** attached to the south-west end of the hillfort is defined by a scarp/bank with external ditch, enclosing a roughly triangular area of 0.4 hectares. The enclosure runs off the main ramparts to the south of the **west gate** and from this point are again sculpted from the hillside. In contrast, the rampart defining the main annexe space on level ground to the south and east comprises a bank 14.5 metre wide by 0.7 metres high on its internal face and 4.25 metres high on its external face, where there are slight traces of a **ditch** and **counterscarp** bank. At the eastern end of this rampart there is a clear **terminal** at the point where the grounds falls steeply away into the Guilsfield valley (Fig. 17). This leaves a large 12m-wide gap up to the main hillfort rampart and presumably marks the **entrance** into the annexe. The middle section of the rampart enclosing the annexe is missing; however, it is felt that this was originally a continuous feature as there are no clear terminals to suggest otherwise. Further support to this idea is given on the first edition Ordnance Survey of 1886 which indicates the area was once a clearing in the woodland (Fig. 9). Evidence for the **boundaries** of this clearing can be seen running through the annexe, which thus suggests that the section of rampart was levelled at a later period.

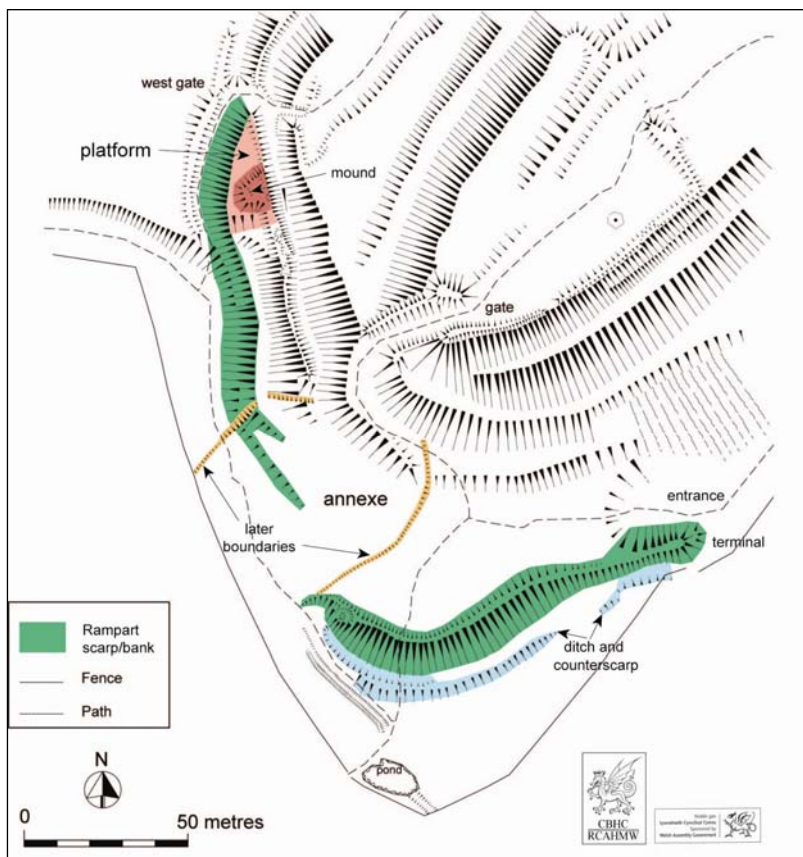


Figure 16. RCAHMW survey plan of the annexe. (©Crown Copyright: RCAHMW, 2008).

There are no obvious internal features within the relatively level space of the annexe. However, a note must be made of the area where the annexe joins the main fort ramparts near the **west gate**, where there is a 108-metre long stretch in which the hillfort is enclosed by three lines of ramparts. Here immediately to the south of the gate is a **platform**,

roughly triangular in shape, situated between the middle and outer rampart. The platform is 35 metres long and has a bank running along its east edge, and on the west looks down into the approach corridor leading to the west gate. Set on this platform is a **mound** roughly 11 metres

square, which may mark the position of a structure. The location of this platform suggests it would have performed a defensive function, perhaps as a strategically placed lookout post monitoring any approach to the west gate, or even an artillery platform which could be manned by persons with sling shots. What may be a similar feature lies at the northern end of the fort protecting the approach to the north-east gate and is described below (Fig. 22).



Figure 17. Photograph of the east end of the annexe showing the rampart terminal. (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMW DS2008_177_035).

5.3 Entrances.

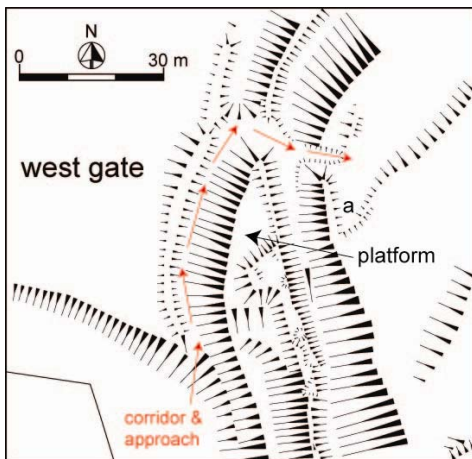


Figure 18. RCAHMW survey plan of the west gate. (©Crown Copyright: RCAHMW, 2008).

The two summit entrances are both complex and monumental arrangements, whilst that on the west side leading to the lower level interior might best be termed a postern gate, as it does not have quite the developed characteristics of the summit entrances. The **west gate** (Fig. 18) was approached from the south via a relatively narrow **corridor**, 50 metres long by 1.7 metres wide, which



Figure 19. Photograph looking north along the corridor approach to the west gate. (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMW DS2008_177_023).

is defined by a 0.6-metre high bank on the west and overlooked by the **platform** described above on the east (Fig. 19). At the northern end of the corridor the approach turned at right angles to the west and climbs to a 3.5-metre gap

through the inner rampart; the ramparts to the south of the gate overlook this final stage of the approach. The main gate is likely to have been located at this gap and here slight earthworks behind the main rampart, particularly obvious to the south of the entrance at **(a)**, might suggest an additional structure, perhaps a guard-chamber of some form.

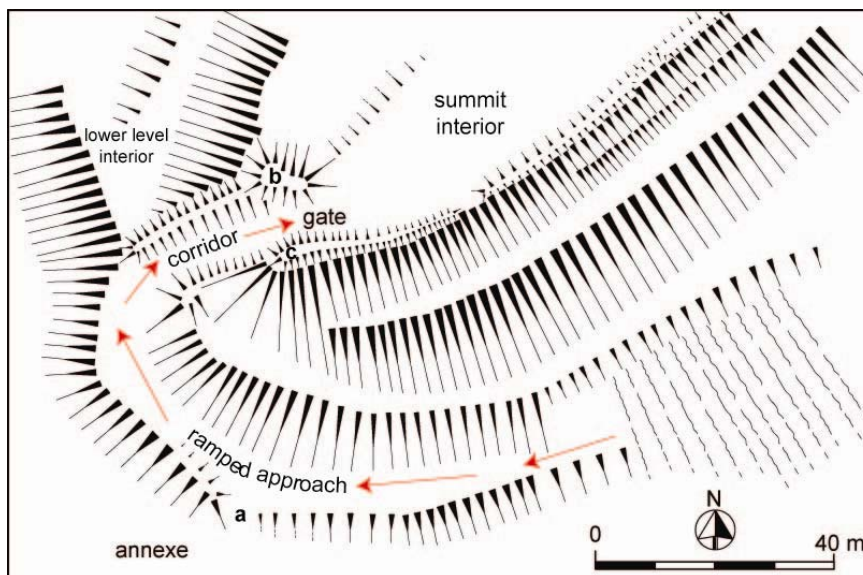


Figure 20. RCAHMW survey plan of the south-west entrance. (©Crown Copyright: RCAHMW, 2008).

The **south-west entrance** (Fig. 20) leading to the summit interior is particularly well preserved. This has been classified by Forde-Johnson as an out-turned type entrance and is similar to arrangements seen at both Hod Hill and Hambledon hillforts in Dorset (Forde-Johnson 1976, 232; Cunliffe 2005, 371). At Gaer Fawr a curving **ramped approach** runs in from the east side of the hill (Fig. 21). This is terraced into the hillside and is over 100 metres long, although access may also have been gained from the annexe at **(a)**. As the approach curves to the north-east the final 24 metres climbs through a 5-metre-wide **corridor**, defined by two earthworks up to 1 metre high. The section of bank on the west side of the corridor is particularly important as it prevented access into the **lower level interior**. The main **gate** would have been situated at a 5-metre gap on top of the inner



Figure 21. Photograph looking north up to the south-west gate. (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMW DS2008_177_033).

rampart. At this point to the north of the entrance there is an oval mound, **(b)**, measuring 16.8 metres east to west by 10.6 metres north to south and 0.8 metres high at the entrance gap; together with a corresponding mound, **(c)**, on the opposite side, which is attached to a bank running along the top of the rampart. This suggests that some form of structure was located here, possibly a guard-chamber or the supports for a bridge which once crossed the gate. One characteristic of the corridor entrances of south Britain, which recurs in the Welsh border sites, is the construction of a bridge over the gate, linking the ramparts either side of the entrance passage and providing obvious defensive advantages (Cunliffe 2005: 372).

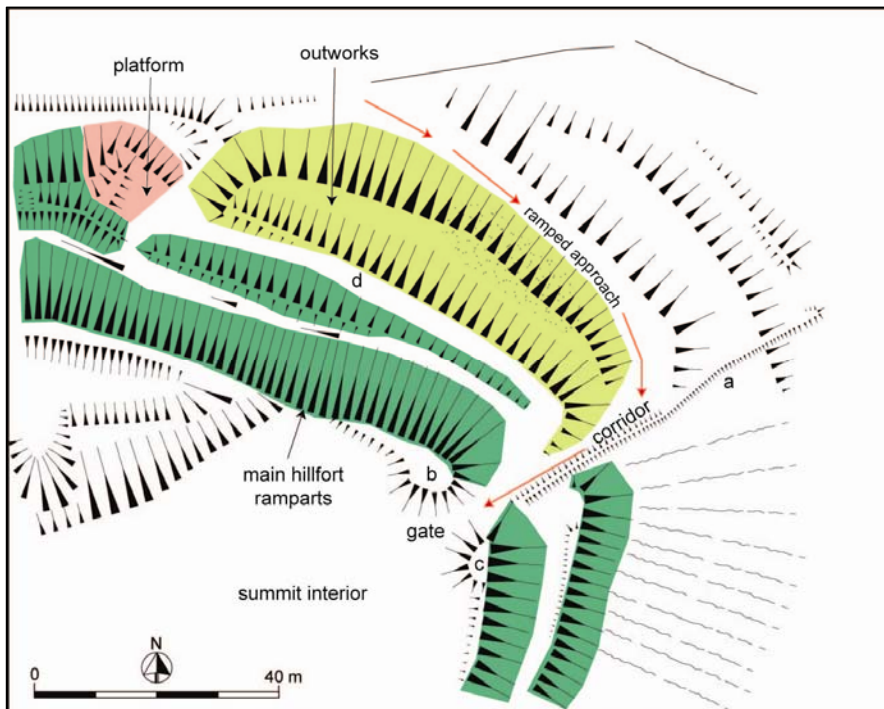


Figure 22. RCAHMW survey plan of the north-east entrance. (©Crown Copyright: RCAHMW, 2008).

The **north-east entrance** (Fig. 22) also leads to the summit interior, and is of a similar nature to the south-west entrance, albeit with evidence for more complexity. A curving **ramped approach** runs in from the west before turning to the south-west and climbing up to the gate via a **corridor** 38 metres long and 4 metres wide. A narrow bank along the southern edge of this corridor at **(a)** is a later boundary as depicted on the 1886 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 9). The main **gate** was situated at the 4-metre gap in the line of the inner rampart. Here clear terminal mounds **(b)** and **(c)**, 2.6

metres high on the north side and 1.7 metres high on the south again suggest the presence of some form of gate structure (Fig. 23).



Figure 23. Photograph looking north from the hillfort interior to the north-east gate and the terminal mounds to either side. (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMW DS2008_177_031).

Further complexity to the arrangement lies to the north-west of the gate where a **platform**, some 10 metres square, is attached to the outer rampart (Fig. 24). On top of the platform there is a bank along the western edge together with the continuation of the outer rampart along its southern edge. This may have performed a similar function to the platform previously described to the south of the west gate and would have been ideally placed to observe any approach from the west. Access to the platform is likely to have been along the terrace at **(d)**, running between the outer rampart and the additional outworks of the entrance. These **outworks** comprise two further lines cut into the hillside which effectively pushed the entrance approach further down slope.



Figure 24. Photograph looking south-west to the platform by the north-east gate. (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMW DS2008_177_028).

5.4 Internal Features (Fig. 25).

In contrast to the exposed and steeply sloping interior of the Breidden hillfort, the interior of Gaer Fawr would appear to be a very useable space on relatively level ground; yet, unfortunately, little evidence for occupation survives above ground. There are two interior spaces; the largest is the summit interior, encompassing 1.3 hectares, with a smaller space set on a terrace below and to the west of the main summit, 0.44 hectares in extent.

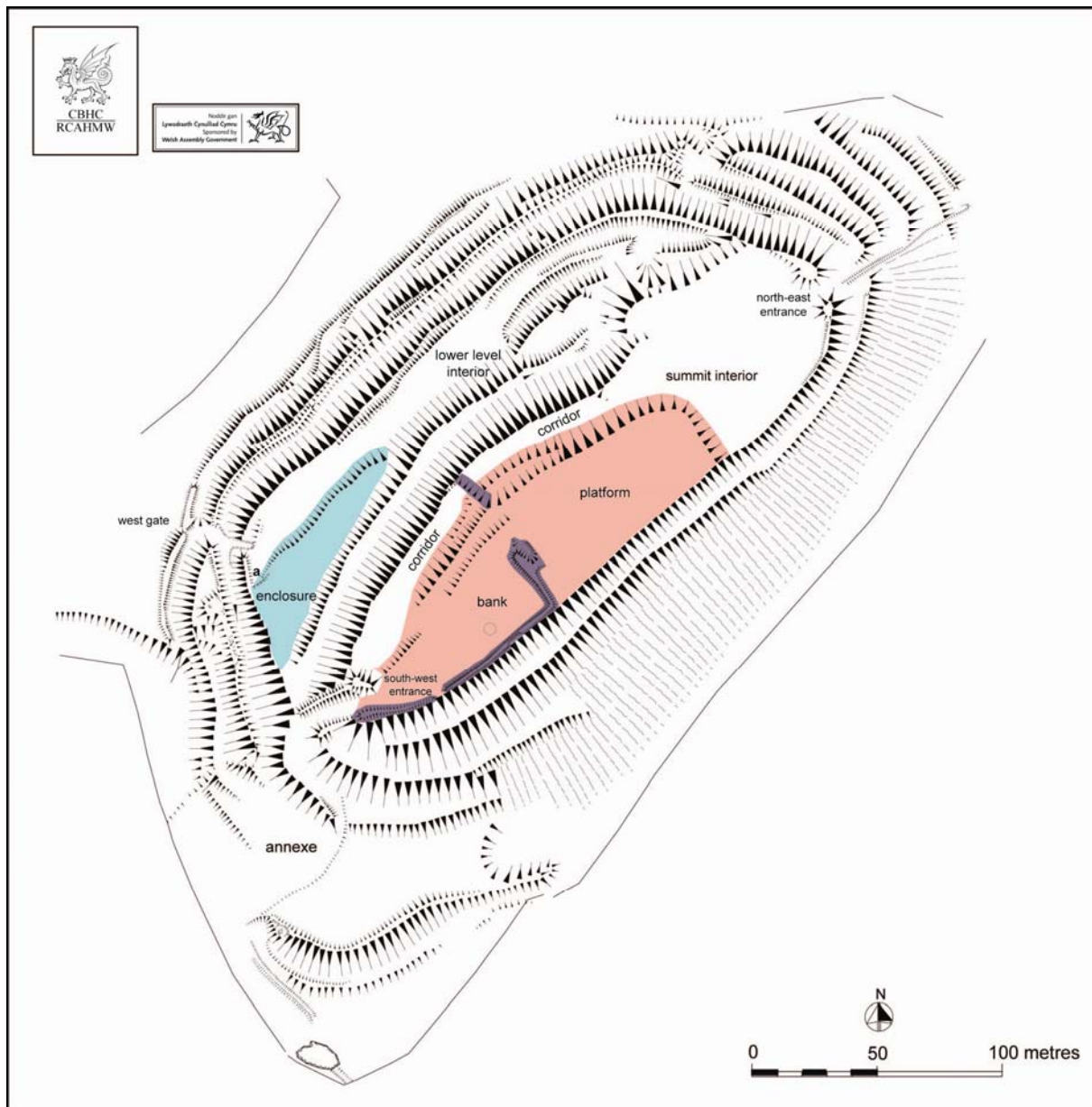


Figure 25. RCAHMW survey plan showing features within the interior of the hillfort. (©Crown Copyright: RCAHMW, 2008).

The **summit interior** is slightly domed, the south-west entrance takes you straight onto the summit plateaux, whilst that to the north-east is set slightly below the main summit and once through the gate a gentle rise takes you onto the main plateaux. This would have restricted visibility across the site and is a feature often seen at other hillforts, such as Hod Hill in Dorset (Forde-Johnston 1976: 102). Within the summit interior there are two features of interest, the first being the enhancement of the main summit of the hill, whereby the summit slope has been sculpted to provide a roughly rectangular level **platform** 160 metres long by 42 metres wide at the level of the south-west gate. This left a 8-metre-wide **corridor** between the platform and first line of defences to the west, perhaps offering a more sheltered position for habitation as seen at other hillforts such as the Breidden, where the quarry ditch directly behind the inner rampart provided one of the few flat and sheltered spots (Musson 1991: 181-84).

Crossing this summit interior from the first line of defence on the west to that of the east and then continuing southwards along the top of the rampart to the south-west gate is a low **bank** 3.8 metres wide by 0.3 metres high. This is a curious feature, it is the only place where an additional barrier has been constructed on top of the rampart and it effectively cuts the interior of the summit space in two. There is a gap in the bank as it crosses the middle of the fort, at which point it becomes more mound-like, with evidence for a hollow on its northern side; this is most likely the result of the erection of a trig pillar (now removed) as indicated on early Ordnance Survey maps.

Similarly, the only surviving feature within the lower level interior to the west of the summit, is a scarp 72 metres long and up to 0.7 metres high running across the south-west corner of the interior from just below the west gate and enclosing a roughly triangular area 0.12 hectares in extent. A 4-metre gap at **(a)**, where the earthwork meets the inner rampart just below the west gate, may mark the location of an entrance into the **enclosure**. This feature was noticed by Lines during his visit of 1874, when he comments 'I imagine this space was set apart for some special purpose, when a large assemblage had to be accommodated' (1889: 337)

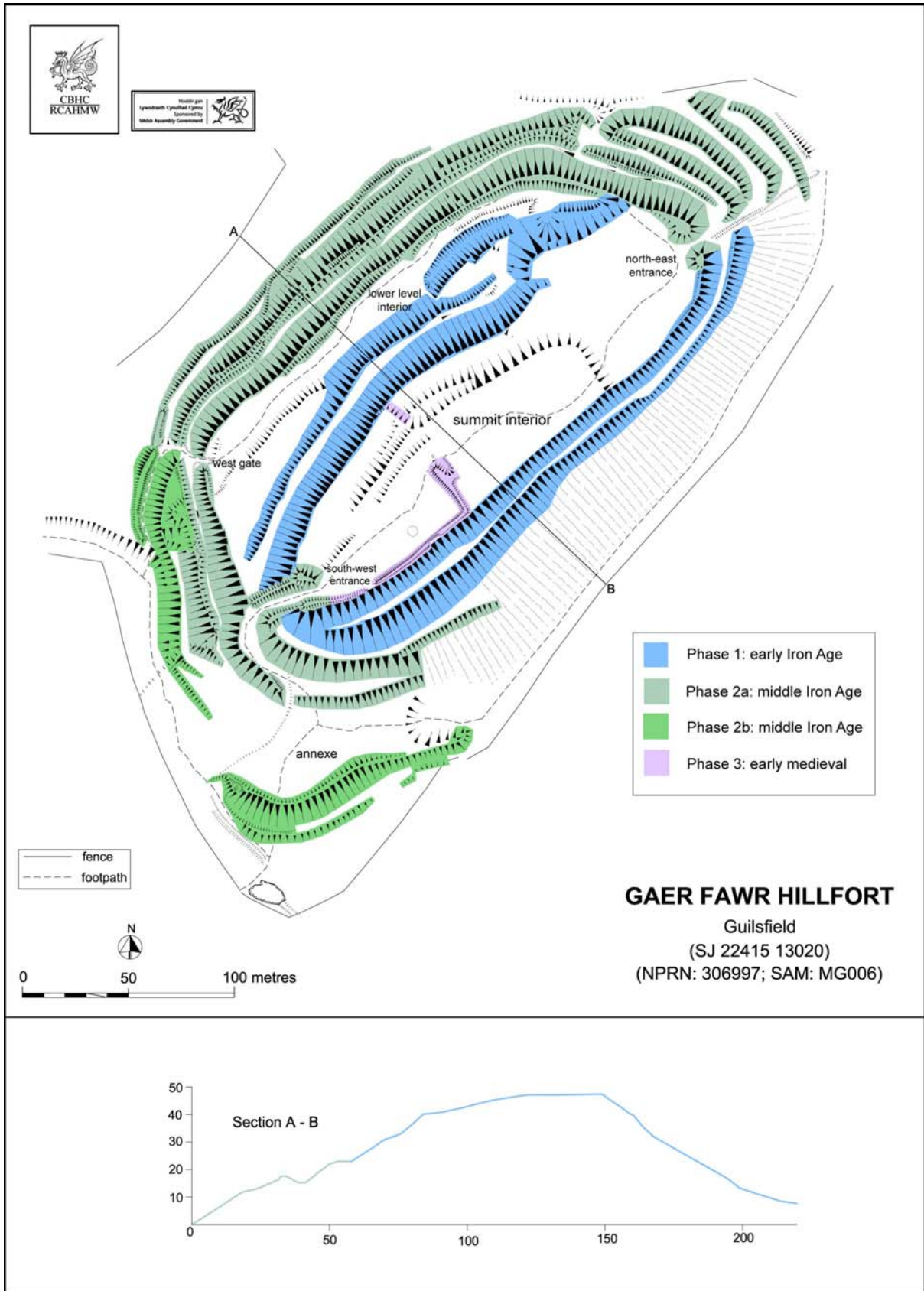


Figure 26. RCAHMW survey plan showing phases in the development of the hillfort. (©Crown Copyright: RCAHMW, 2008).

6. Discussion.

This report is based upon detailed survey alone, and whilst the earthworks reveal clear evidence of phasing, we can only speculate about dates or upon the nature of occupation through drawing on as much recent research and local comparisons as possible. To this end the work on the Breidden hillfort has been invaluable. However it remains that, without further investigative work, the story told here of Gaer Fawr remains speculative.

6.1 The development of Gaer Fawr Hillfort (Fig. 26).

The recent earthwork survey not only provides an accurate and detailed plan of the monument, but also clearly illustrates phases in its development. The earliest phase is that of the summit hillfort measuring roughly 293 metres north-east to south-west by 121 metres south-east to north-west and enclosing an interior space of 1.3 hectares. This comprised the main summit interior and the two rampart lines sculpted from the hillside around it, together with the section of ditch at the north-western edge. Evidence doesn't survive for the original entrance arrangement(s), yet they are likely to have been in the same position as those illustrated on the plan, at the north-east and south-west ends, but comprising a simple arrangement, most likely a single or possibly double portal cut straight through the ramparts, without any additional complexity. The most likely date for this phase of construction is the early Iron Age, between the sixth and fifth centuries BC, the period in which hillfort building took off in the Marches, as seen at Croft Ambrey, Midsummer Hill, Old Oswestry, the Breidden and Ffridd Faldwyn. Indeed, the early Iron Age phases of the latter two sites were re-established on earlier hillforts of Late Bronze Age date and it is possible that this may also be true of many other sites and thus tentatively for Gaer Fawr also. Excavation is the only way of verifying this, as in most cases the early Iron Age phase sits directly on top of the Late Bronze Age phase (Lynch et al 2000, 152; Cunliffe 2005, 349; Musson 1991).

The 'developed' form of Gaer Fawr is likely to belong to the middle Iron Age, 400-150BC. During this period a number of the early Iron Age hillforts were enlarged, most obviously seen at Ffridd Faldwyn, where the later phase hillfort totally encompasses the earlier hillfort. At Gaer Fawr the hillfort was first extended to the west, where a further two lines of ramparts were constructed to enclose a second interior space set below the main summit interior, and then to the south when an annexe was attached to the south-west end of the fort. This increased the size of the hillfort twofold, it now measured 426 metres north-east to south-west by 180 metres north-west to south-east, a total area just over 6 hectares.

Significant remodelling of the early entrances also occurred; these became more elaborate with outworks, approach corridors, platforms for lookout and/or artillery, and at the gate itself bridges and/or guard-chambers may have been constructed. In the borders timber guard-chambers became common from by the fifth century and were later replaced by stone chambers, such as those seen at Croft Ambrey where radiocarbon dates of the sixth to fifth century have been obtained. Two different types have been recognised: chambers added immediately behind the rampart, such as those at Moel Hiraddug and Dinorben in Denbighshire, and those built at the end of long corridor-like entrances such as at Titterton Clee and the Wrekin in Shropshire. What function these chambers served, whether for defence or not, is uncertain (Cunliffe 2005: 371-372).

Another significant feature added during this phase of development is the annexe to the south of the fort; whether this occurred in tandem with the enlargement of the main fort is unclear, but it certainly attaches itself to the later defences and thus is later in the constructional sequence, but how much later is unknown. Features of the west entrance, such as the approach corridor and the platform, also appear to be associated with the same phase as the annexe.

The later history of the hillfort, as with so many, remains uncertain. A tentative suggestion of possible reuse relates to the low bank which crosses the summit interior and runs along the edge of the inner rampart up to the south-west gate. This is of an entirely different character to the rest of the fort, and whilst on the one hand it might relate to the main phase of hillfort occupation, acting as a sub-division of the interior; another explanation might place it to a later phase of use, perhaps an Early Medieval fort situated on the frontline of the border wars between the kingdoms of Powys and Mercia (Musson & Spurgeon 1988).

6.2 The nature of occupation at Gaer Fawr.

What can be said about the nature of the occupation and use of Gaer Fawr? Whilst little evidence survives within the interior spaces, it is possible to draw out some general points of discussion. The layout of two relatively separate interior spaces would have been ideal for dividing the different functions often seen in hillforts; for example, separating industrial, processing and storage functions from the main living area. Such zoning is a common feature found in hillforts (Lynch et al 2000, 160) and at Gaer Fawr it can be suggested that the scarp which cuts off the south-west end of the lower terrace interior and the bank across the summit interior (if we accept it as contemporary with the main phase of occupation) are further subdivisions within the fort. The fact that the western entrance is the least elaborate of the three and this area was very much separate from the main summit interior might indicate it was utilised for the industrial, processing and storage functions, whilst the summit interior provided the main space for occupation and other formal activities which

involved access via the two main entrances. The annexe would also have been an additional space. A number of the Marcher forts have annexes, such as the complex subdivided one at Old Oswestry and the large enclosure attached to Croft Ambrey. Their function remains unclear, but most are thought to be associated with stock rearing (Cunliffe 2005: 438)

Excavations at the Breidden hillfort provide one example of what might be found at Gaer Fawr. Here there was evidence for quite extensive occupation, comprising several stake-walled roundhouses that were terraced into the hillslope on the narrow strip of reasonably flat land, immediately behind the rampart; not much of the fort's huge 28-hectare interior would appear to be sufficiently flat or sheltered for comfortable use (Fig. 27). Finds from the area included vesicular pottery, briquetage and metal work, together with evidence of agricultural activities and food processing. Further roundhouses were revealed in other areas of the interior, together with some fifty, four-poster and two, six-poster structures. It is generally thought that the roundhouses provided the living accommodation, whereas the four and six-posters were specialized store-buildings or granaries. It was concluded that it would not seem unreasonable to suggest an Iron Age population numbered in the thousands rather than the hundreds: 'the hillfort, in the 3rd and 2nd centuries bc may indeed have been a thriving 'hill-town', whatever other functions it may have served as defensive stronghold, seat of community power, or store-house and redistribution-centre' (Musson 1991: 184).



Figure 27. Aerial View of the Breidden Hillfort showing the exposed and sloping interior. (©Crown Copyright: RCAHMW GTJ25162).

One of the most noticeable features of Gaer Fawr is its defences; the scale is huge in contrast to the size of the area enclosed. Useable space totals just over 2 hectares, whereas the hillfort as a whole encompasses just over 6 hectares. As defensive features these would certainly

have been imposing and would have been visible for miles, with entrance arrangements clearly designed to control the movement of people, managing both how and who approached. The two platforms strategically placed adjacent to the west and north-east entrances may well have acted as additional look-out posts and could have been manned by defenders with slings. These are all overtly defensive characteristics, and whilst there is some evidence for warfare, such as the sling stone dumps at Castell Henllys in Pembrokeshire, or the widespread burning that affected the Breidden around 600 BC, possibly hinting at an attack on the hillfort, most evidence doesn't support widespread warfare (Lynch et al 2000: 160, Musson 1991: 177).

It is therefore important to see many of the features in the design of Gaer Fawr as an expression of power. They were essentially symbolic and ostentatious to show wealth, to impress and to keep up with neighbours; the Breidden hillfort would have been clearly visible from Gaer Fawr. This is an area that has been increasingly looked at in hillfort architecture not least by the recent study of the earthworks of Croft Ambrey (Field & Smith 2008). As part of this an ethnographic example of how enclosures might be used as defence was looked at. The palisaded enclosures of the Maori *pa* were to deter sneak attacks; battles instead involved hand to hand combat and an element of ritual. In the case of the *pa*, multivallation was of a symbolic nature (Armit 2007).

7. Methodology.

The earthwork survey was carried out by Louise Barker, Daniel Jones, Dave Leighton and John Wiles of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, based in Aberystwyth. The survey was carried out at a scale of 1:1000 using a Leica TCR1205 Total Station based on a system of linked traverses. The survey was calibrated to the National Grid using a series of control points and features. The report was researched and written by Louise Barker who also prepared the illustrations. The report was edited by David Browne and commented upon by Toby Driver.

The site archive has been deposited at the National Monuments Record of Wales, RCAHMW, Plas Crug, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, SY23 1NJ (under NPRN 306997), to where applications for copyright should be made. Photographs and plans are also available through *Coflein* the on-line database for the National Monuments Record of Wales at www.rcahmw.gov.uk.

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8. Acknowledgements.

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Tithe Map and Award No. 878 1845, Varchoel Township in the parish of Guilsfield.