

CPAT Report No. 1403

Hen Blâs, Flint




ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT



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Client name: Cadw
 CPAT Project No: 1926
 Project Name: Llysoedd and Maerdrefi
 Grid Reference: SJ 2216 7345
 County/LPA: Flintshire
 CPAT Report No: 1403
 Event PRN: 140103
 Report status: Final
 Confidential: No

Prepared by:	Checked by:	Approved by:
		
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16/03/2016	17/03/2016	17/03/2016

Bibliographic reference:

Hankinson, R., 2016. *Hen Blâs, Flint: Archaeological Assessment*, Unpublished report, CPAT Report No 1403.

Cover photo: Part of the inner bailey at Hen Blâs, from the west (CPAT 4129-0010)



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Summary

An assessment of the medieval site known as Hen Blâs has been carried out as a further element of the Cadw-funded study of Llysoedd and Maerdrefi. The site was excavated by the local historian G. B. Leach in the 1950s and reported on in the Flintshire Historical Society's Journal; the material from these excavations is currently held by Flintshire Museums Service.

The 1950s investigations made it clear that the site had a number of phases, probably beginning with a motte and bailey of likely 12th-century date, although early medieval origin for activity here cannot be ruled out owing to the methods employed. Significantly earlier activity hereabouts was implied by the discovery of a number of flint artefacts, but it is not known whether any of these were associated with archaeological features. A range of post-holes were identified which may define post-built structures belonging to the moated site, but there is insufficient evidence to attempt to reconstruct the layout. A stone-built chapel was identified in the outer bailey, containing moulded stonework dated to the late 11th and 12th centuries on stylistic grounds, although this has subsequently been postulated as a building erected by Llewelyn ab Iorwerth on the birth of his son, Dafydd, at Hen Blâs in the early years of the 13th century.

There seems to have been a hiatus of activity which ended with the partial levelling of the motte and the remodelling of the inner bailey to accommodate a number of buildings in the early 13th century; others were added in the 14th century. The buildings seem to have all been wooden sill-beam structures resting on low walls and had slate roofs with decorative ceramic ridge tiles. As far as can be determined the site went out of use at the end of the 14th century.

1 Introduction

- 1.1. The assessment of Hen Blâs forms one element of the further study of Llysoedd and Maerdrefi undertaken by CPAT, on behalf of Cadw, in 2014-15 (Silvester 2015). Llysoedd and Maerdrefi were essentially centres of power in the early medieval and medieval periods, and in basic terms, the *llys* was the place where the court of a King or Prince was situated, while the often nearby *maerdref* constituted the King's land in the district with its associated bond settlement. Both terms are dealt with in detail in the Welsh law codes.
- 1.2. During the original study Silvester identified a possible *llys* site at a small farm of that name on the north-western fringes of Flint (SJ 23297390; Fig. 1). He relates that in the *Flintshire Inventory* of 1912, the Royal Commission wrote that the farm name '... seems to support the conjecture that this township was the caput and special demesne of the tribal chieftain. In the year 1240 Dafydd ap Llewelyn granted a charter to the monks of Basingwerk from *Colsull*, by which Coleshill Fechan (then including the site of the present town of Flint) was probably meant, and near which the original dwelling of the chieftain may be expected to have been situated' (Silvester 2015, 28-29).

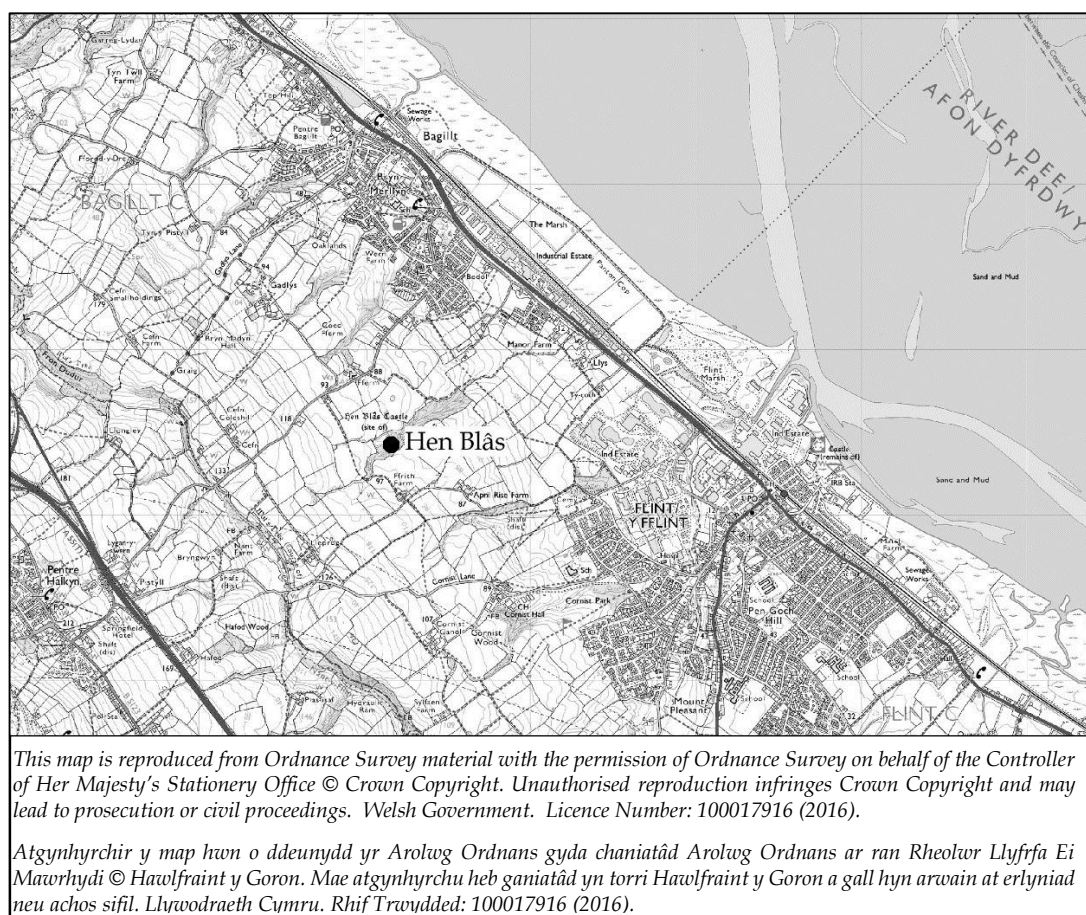


Fig. 1: Location of Hen Blâs

- 1.3. Hen Blâs lies a little over one kilometre to the west-south-west of the farm and it has been strongly suggested by Stephenson (see Section 2 of this report) that this was the

place from which Dafydd ap Llewelyn, in his capacity as the ruler of Gwynedd, issued the charter. Perhaps more significantly, Stephenson argues that Hen Blâs was the place where Dafydd was born in the Spring of 1212 and contends that he retained some affection for the site, perhaps particularly so as his birth is thought to have provided the impetus for the construction by his father, Llewelyn ab Iorwerth, of a chapel there soon afterwards.

- 1.4. Although nothing is known of its earlier history, an attempt to understand the origins of the site was made by the local historian J. B. Leach, who carried out excavations there between 1954 and 1957 (Leach 1957; 1960), by which time the site had already been designated as a scheduled Ancient Monument (Fl062). A range of evidence was revealed by the excavations, which is summarised and discussed in Section 3, below. Leach's site archive and finds are currently held by the Flintshire Museums Service.

2 Brief notes on the significance of Hen Blâs

by David Stephenson

- 2.1. Hen Blâs is a site of considerable interest and importance. As it lies within the township of Coleshill Fawr, it is quite likely that it served as the *llys* of the commote of Coleshill; it would be surprising if the commote and the township names coincided for any other reason (Richards 1969, 47).
- 2.2. The idea that Hen Blâs was a commotal centre is perhaps strengthened by the most notable event in its recorded history. In the course of a dispute over the celebration of divine service in the chapel of Coleshill in 1305 the abbot of Basingwerk claimed that Llywelyn ab Iorwerth ruler of Gwynedd from the late 1190s until his death in 1240, had taken to wife the sister of the then king of England [recte the daughter of King John, though also of course the half-sister of Henry III], and that in the course of time she 'gave birth at *Colsul* [Coleshill] to a certain boy, named David [Dafydd], on the occasion of whose birth Llywelyn had a chapel built there...' (Leach 1960, 13-60). It has been argued that the birth of Dafydd ap Llywelyn, who would rule Gwynedd in the years 1240-46, took place in the Spring of 1212 (Stephenson and Jones 2012, 21-32). It has been suggested that Llywelyn may even have engineered a situation in which the birth took place at this central location in the cantref of Tegeingl in order to emphasise his (partial) recovery from the humiliating agreement forced upon him by King John after the war of 1211, an agreement by which he appeared to have lost his hold on Gwynedd east of the Conwy (Stephenson and Jones 2012, 31-32).
- 2.3. It seems that Dafydd ap Llywelyn regarded Hen Blâs with some affection and perhaps emphasised its importance, for there can be little doubt that it was here that he issued a charter to Basingwerk abbey in July 1240. The charter was issued at Colshull, just over three months after Llywelyn's death on 11 April (Pryce 2005, Act no. 292). During some of the time between his succession to the principality and the issue of the charter to Basingwerk, Dafydd had been in England, attending a meeting with Henry III at Gloucester in May (Pryce 2005, Act no. 291). He had thus lost little time in holding court at Coleshill, where he issued the charter that, significantly, represents the only recorded act of monastic endowment of his principate. It is quite

possible that the 1261 agreement between Llywelyn ap Gruffudd (d.1282) and the southern ruler, Maredudd ap Rhys, dated at *Conssyl* [Coleshill] was also negotiated at Hen Blâs (Pryce 2005, Act no. 347). But Llywelyn ap Gruffudd had no reason to elevate the status of a place so closely associated with Dafydd ap Llywelyn, who had after all imprisoned Llywelyn's father and then handed him over to the custody of Henry III, a custody that would endure until Gruffudd's death in 1244. By coincidence, it was in that year that Henry III ordered the justiciar of Chester, John Lestrange, to strengthen 'castrum de Coleshull' with 'optimo garrillo et iii bretachiis ad minus' (Close Rolls 1242-47, 175). Cathcart King (1983, I, 157, n.10a) noted that the excavations at Hen Blâs 'show plainly that no such ambitious constructions were actually erected there.' But this is not proof that Hen Blâs is not the place concerned – because the area fell to Welsh forces soon afterwards, and in any case it remains uncertain what was meant by *bretasches* – in one form these temporary wall-mounted structures may not have left any remains that would show up in excavation; *cf* the *bretasches* that the holders of mottes in the Vale of Montgomery were ordered to install in 1225. A *garillum*, - a word that may mean something as rudimentary as a palisade – might not conflict with some of the findings of Leach's excavation. With the re-conquest of eastern Gwynedd by Llywelyn ap Gruffudd in 1256, it is probable that Hen Blâs was superseded as a princely residence, perhaps first and briefly by Ewloe castle and then by Mold castle (Stephenson 2015, 248). It is possible that Hen Blâs continued to be used into the late thirteenth century, but its importance had clearly diminished.

- 2.4. A problem of greater moment – and greater complexity – than the decline of Hen Blâs is posed by the issue of its origin. There appears to be little warrant for the confident assertions met in some quarters, apparently stemming from observations made by A. J. Taylor, that it was constructed in 1157 and destroyed in 1166 (Leach 1960, 36-40). The principal chronicle accounts relating to the construction in 1157 of a castle in the region refer to a castle of Basingwerk (Howlett 1889, 195; Hewlett 1886, 16; and Christie 1887, 22-23). While it is not impossible that this may have been Hen Blâs, it is far more likely (*pace* Taylor) that it refers to Holywell castle, which is much closer to the abbey of Basingwerk, the name of which presumably gives some indication of the area so designated. And the account of destruction in 1166 is found only in the *Brutiau*, where it is recorded that 'in that year Basingwerk [MS 'Dinas Bassin'] was destroyed by Owain ap Gruffudd [i.e. Owain Gwynedd] (Jones 1952, 64). This record, too, may relate to Holywell castle. This of course leaves us with a fascinating problem as to the date and circumstances of the construction of Hen Blâs. This might be conveniently solved by postulating a developed *llys* site of Welsh build but one of the first objectives must be a resolution of what place was meant by the recurrent notices of an important castle site at Basingwerk (See *Pipe Roll 12 Henry II*, 67, for a reference to the supplying of the castles of Rhuddlan and Basingwerk – and of Prestatyn). Basingwerk was clearly of importance to Henry's government. Cathcart King (1983, 155) noted that Basingwerk 'is sometimes identified with Holywell', but opted for an identification with his Flint No. 3 (Bryn Castell).
- 2.5. As a possible (and I would argue probable) *llys* site, and a structure with such strong connections to the thirteenth-century princes of Gwynedd (and beyond, for Dafydd ap Llywelyn styled himself 'prince of Wales'), Hen Blâs is surely deserving of further investigation. There is much to be done, in both archaeological and documentary terms, but the possible rewards are surely considerable.

3 An assessment of current knowledge

- 3.1. The site lies on an interfluvial promontory formed by the ravines carrying two incipient streams which merge immediately to the east of Hen Blâs and continue down to the estuary of the River Dee. That such small watercourses have been able to create large-scale erosion may be a comment on the nature of the soils in this locality, but it is interesting that the use of this location means the site as a whole occupies somewhat of a declivity which only has any distant views to the north-east. In this it seems to have parallels with the siting of the stone castle at Ewloe, 9km to the south-east, which lies on a similar spur at the confluence of the Wepre Brook and New Inn Brook. Ewloe is known to have a Welsh origin and it seems to be accepted that Hen Blâs has the same background.



Fig. 2: The ditch separating the inner and outer baileys (CPAT 4129-0012)

- 3.2. The layout of Hen Blâs (see Figs 3 and 4) comprises a broadly triangular inner bailey, 0.2ha in area, the shape dictated primarily by the ravines which define it on the north and south-east. At its west corner, the excavations carried out by Leach identified what was thought to be the remains of a small motte whose summit appeared to be bordered by a curving line of post-holes; he considered that the motte had been deliberately levelled, though only partially so, at some point in the early 13th century. Rather more difficult to explain was a curving ditch that only partly separated the motte from the inner bailey; the lack of a connection between it and the northern ravine to one side and between it and a substantial ditch forming the west-south-west defences of the inner bailey, on the other, seems anomalous. Leach bridged the gap with the inner bailey ditch by some post-holes that he considered to represent a palisade, but did not seem to find similar evidence linking the ditch to the ravine. Other post-holes appear to have shown that there was a palisade along the edge of the relatively intact inner bailey ditch, and there is a causeway across the ditch where

Leach's excavations identified a roadway of clay and stones in which material of late 12th and 13th-century date was found. Beyond the ditch there is a sub-rectangular outer bailey, 0.4ha in extent, defined by continuations of the ravines on its north-west and south-east and by a bank and ditch on its south-west. The interior of the outer bailey has an appreciable slope down towards the inner bailey and is divided by a track leading to the causeway. The south-western defences of the outer bailey, to the north-west of the track have been levelled in more recent times, as can be appreciated by comparing Fig. 3, from 1912, with the current situation, as depicted on Fig. 4. The latter is derived from a combination of field observation, LIDAR and the final plan produced by Leach (1960, fig. 1).

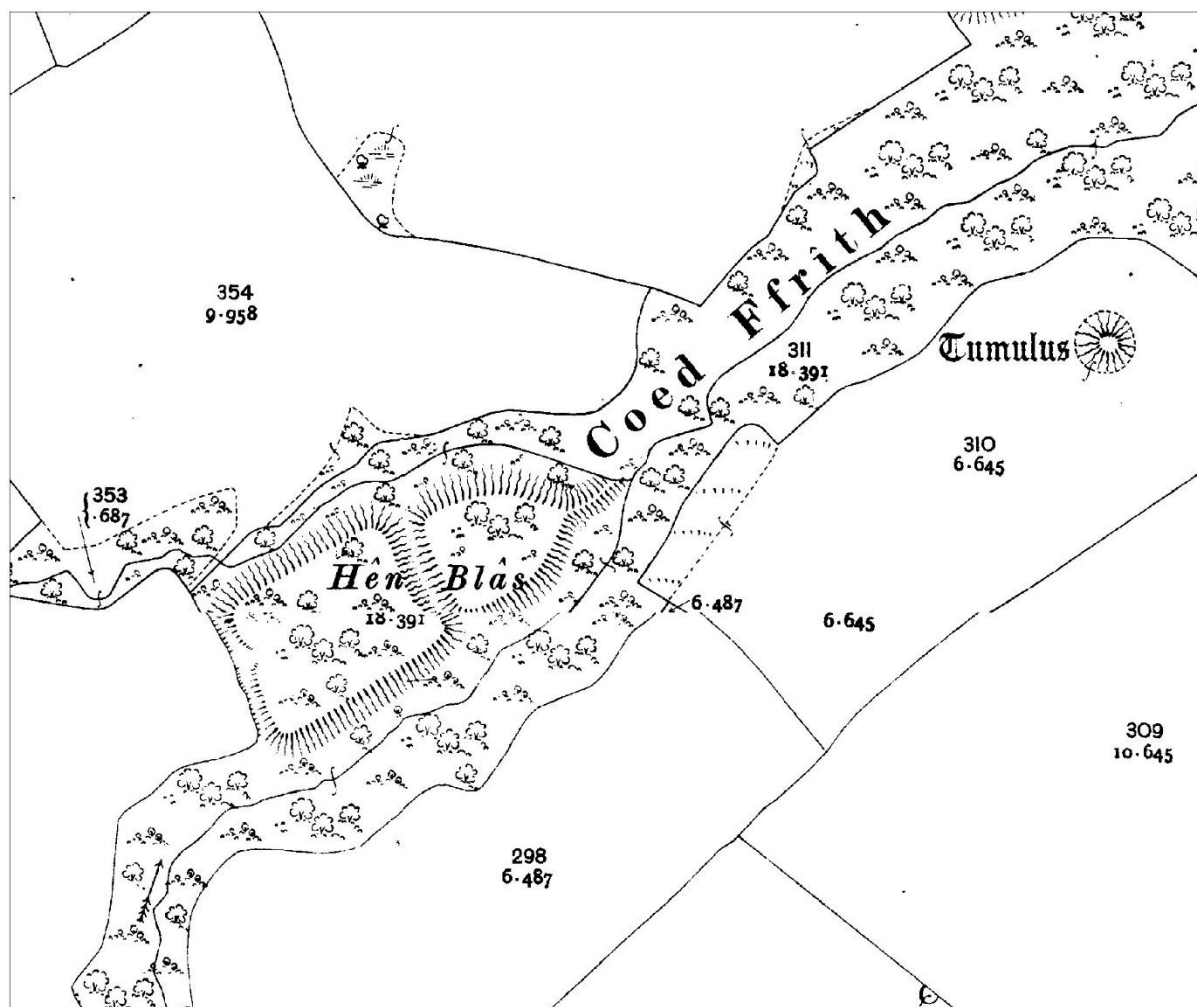


Fig. 3: Extract from the Ordnance Survey 25'' map of 1912. Note that the site marked as 'Tumulus' is the Bryn Castell motte mentioned above in para 2.4.

- 3.3. Leach describes the fill of the motte ditch as comprising an initial layer of 0.18m of silt overlain by up to 0.10m of charcoal and then sealed by a final fill of clay. The charcoal was identified as mainly birch, with some fragments of willow, pine, hazel, beech and ash; other material found in the ditch fill was dated to the first half of the 13th century. Leach concluded that the charcoal represented a phase of site clearance preceding the construction of two sill-walled timber buildings which he dated to the 13th century. One of the 13th-century buildings (his Building 3) overlay the filled-in motte ditch, while the second (Building 4) occupied what seemed to be a precarious

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- position on the edge of the northern ravine and appeared to have suffered some collapse as a result. It is not impossible that the two buildings may have been conjoined.
- 3.4. Leach identified two further buildings (1 and 2) in the inner bailey, which he considered to date to the 14th century. These buildings seem to have bordered an area of cobbles, which Leach speculated may have formed the floor of another building (5), of 13th to 14th-century date, represented by two parallel wall-foundations adjacent to his Building 1. A culvert beneath Building 1 went through one of the walls of Building 5 and appears to have drained a small chamber there into the northern ravine.
- 3.5. A large amount of roofing slate was recorded by Leach in the inner bailey and some of this was clearly present when the 13th-century buildings were constructed as it was employed in the foundations of the building edging the ravine. The slate is largely of purple colour, and almost certainly originates from the section of the Cambrian slate belt which runs from Bethesda to Dyffryn Nantlle; evidence of medieval quarrying from perhaps as early as the 12th century has been identified in documentary sources for this district and sea transport along the coast from Aberogwen, near Bangor, is the most likely supply route. Ceramic ridge tiles were also identified, so the appearance of the roofing materials can be readily reconstructed. A small number of carved blocks of sandstone were found, thought by Neaverson (Leach 1957, 15) to represent door jambs of relatively local origin. Two of these are still present on the site and look to be part of the same doorway, though they are loosely placed in a heap with other stones in the inner bailey so are clearly not in their original position.
- 3.6. The presence of a causeway across the ditch separating the inner and outer baileys has already been mentioned, and Leach saw this as being an original feature. Perhaps as a result he concluded on seemingly very scanty evidence that there had been a gatehouse on the inner bailey side of the causeway, also that this was contemporary with Buildings 3 and 4. If it existed this must have been a timber-framed structure resting on a low bank of stone, but that there was a gate on this side of the causeway seems certain as Leach identified two large post-holes with stone packing (Leach 1960, 18-19) beneath the cobbling of his gatehouse floor; he concluded that these dated to the period when the motte was extant. In the area to the south-east of the alleged gatehouse, Leach identified an additional building (6) which survived as lines of stones representing the sill-beam foundations of a timber structure.
- 3.7. In early 1957, Leach received a letter indicating that an architectural fragment he had found earlier in the excavations in the inner bailey could have come from a building of ecclesiastical function and this led to the rapid termination of work there and a transfer of attention to the outer bailey. A suitable building was identified, measuring about 13m by 6.5m and aligned approximately east/west, towards the south-western end of the outer bailey. This comprised a single, undivided, room with an altar built against its east wall; the south wall, perhaps originally at least 4.5m high, had evidently collapsed outwards as a unit and was found on its side to the south of the building, still containing the dressed stones of a narrow window opening to which Leach ascribed a late 11th or 12th-century date. The entrance to the building was found in the north wall, near its western end, where further moulded stonework was identified, thought to date to the last quarter of the 12th century on stylistic grounds. The slates so plentifully found in the inner bailey were practically non-existent at the

chapel. The location of the building is depicted on Fig. 4 and readily identifiable as visible sections of its walling are still evident.

- 3.8. A short distance to the west of the chapel, Leach excavated a limekiln cut into the bank at the south-west end of the outer bailey, immediately to the south of the track leading to the causeway over the ditch separating the inner and outer baileys (see Fig. 4). He considered this to be a primitive design but found no material which he could use to provide a date for its construction or use, although a layer of charcoal is noted at the base of the feature. Given that there is a possibility of the limekiln being employed to provide material used in the construction of the chapel, the recovery of charcoal for further investigation might be considered in the future.

4 Conclusions

- 4.1. The final report on the 1950s excavations at Hen Blâs (Leach 1960) makes it clear that the excavations in the inner bailey were terminated when it was realised that there was an opportunity to investigate the possibility of a chapel in the outer bailey. As a result there is a large section of the inner bailey which remains undisturbed, effectively comprising its south-eastern half with the exception of the southern corner. The same can be said for the outer bailey as work seems to have been concentrated at the chapel site and that of a nearby, but undated, limekiln. It also appears that only the eastern end of the chapel was excavated down to its floor level, so the remainder of the interior deposits should survive in-situ. In effect, this means that the excavations of the 1950s have left sufficient areas of the deposits undisturbed to allow for further investigation using modern techniques and resources; further work could be targeted to answer particular questions regarding the origin and sequence of events at Hen Blâs.
- 4.2. Leach devised a broad chronology of the site, comprising a first phase when it was occupied by a motte, inner and outer baileys. The chapel may have been of a similar date, although a range from the late 11th century up to the last quarter of the 12th century was suggested by Leach on the grounds of the moulded stonework; the few stones still visible on the site are indicative of an origin in 12th or early 13th centuries. On the face of it Leach's dating of the stonework seems to contradict the suggestion that the chapel was built following the birth of Dafydd ap Llewelyn in 1212, but in support of the suggestion, he revealed evidence in the inner bailey which implied that part of the site had been remodelled in the early part of the 13th century, and perhaps it was this remodelling that was meant by the documentary evidence. His investigations in the outer bailey were insufficiently broad in scope to reveal a similar pattern of activity in the area around the chapel.
- 4.3. It is interesting that Leach identified evidence of clearance and the burning of scrub on the site of the motte, which hints that it had seen a period of abandonment prior to the early 13th-century remodelling. While accepting the arguments put forward by Stephenson in Section 2, above, it has to be noted that this is not incompatible with the dates ascribed to Basingwerk Castle. If it is wished to resolve the dating issues, a case can clearly be made for the limited excavation of any surviving fill in the motte ditch, in order that clues may be gathered relating to the period in which the motte remained abandoned before the site was redesigned. Examination of the finds from Leach's excavations in the light of current knowledge may also prove worthwhile.

- 4.4. The inner bailey saw the most investigation in the 1950s and at least six buildings were revealed, all dating to the 13th and 14th centuries and presumably constructed during and following the redesign of the site. These buildings appear to have been wooden structures comprising sill beams resting on low stone walls and at least some were roofed in slate. Leach identifies a number of post-holes which predate these structures, but the piecemeal nature of his investigation of this earlier evidence means that it is difficult, if not impossible, on current knowledge to reconstruct a layout for buildings contemporary with the motte in the inner bailey.
- 4.5. One factor that is clear in this review of Hen Blâs is that it cannot be divorced from its surroundings, as it was an integral element in the complex political interactions resulting from the ebb and flow between Welsh and Norman control of the district around Flint in the medieval period. There are a range of additional sources to those already mentioned, such as references to a castle at 'Trewphennaun' (Holywell) in the Pipe Roll of 1210-12, which are seemingly distinct from those referring to the castle at Basingwerk in the 12th century, and into this can be added other potentially early sites, including the Bryn y Cwn motte at Mount Pleasant, 2.5km to the south-east of Hen Blâs, which is an alternative contender for the castle at Coleshill strengthened with bretasches in 1244 or may even be a relict motte of the primary Norman incursions of the late 11th century (Will Davies, pers. comm.). More immediately relevant perhaps is the Bryn Castell motte (Cathcart King's Flint no. 3; see Fig. 3), just 180m to the east-north-east of Hen Blâs; it might be speculated that the proximity of this site and its better defensive situation implies a direct connection.

5 Acknowledgements

- 5.1. The writer would like to thank the owners of Fferm, near Bagillt, for permission to visit the site. Also Will Davies, the Regional Cadw Inspector, for his contributions and his colleagues at CPAT, Bob Silvester and Nigel Jones, for their input and assistance with the report preparation. Particular thanks are also due to Dr David Stephenson for his contribution to the report.

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<http://www.llechicymru.info/IHist.english.htm>



Fig. 4: The visible earthworks at Hen Blås combined with the results from the 1950s excavations, the buildings identified by Leach in the inner bailey are numbered.