

A Fresh Look at Parc le Breos

by *David K. Leighton*

Introduction

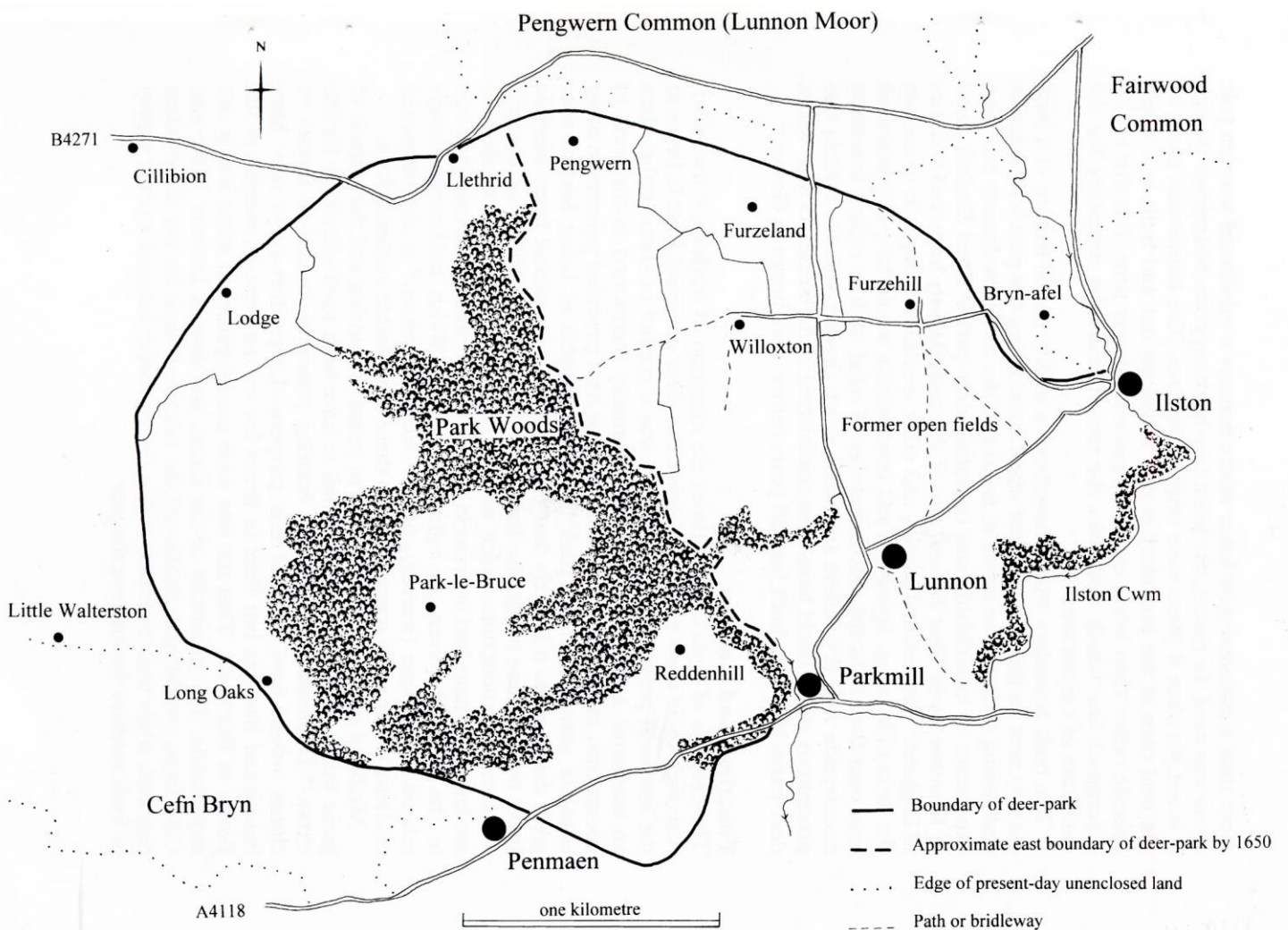
Parc le Breos is a location well known to those with interests in the history and landscape of Gower. The deer-park of the de Breos lords encompassed a large portion of the south Gower landscape, and it is the only certain example of its kind known to have been established in the medieval lordship.¹ Its physical identity, however, is now largely obscured in countryside given over to intensive farming. But in the medieval period deer-parks were familiar, and prominent, features of the landscape. Essentially they were securely-fenced enclosures in which deer were kept though they were usually exploited in a variety of different ways.² Deer-parks were supreme examples of demesne assets and were so important to the demesne economy that by the end of the thirteenth century, the heyday of parks, there were as many as 3200 of them in England alone. Deer enclosures have a long history and some 'deer folds' may have existed in Anglo-Saxon England, but the creation of parks only began in earnest after the Norman Conquest.³ Parc le Breos, therefore, did not exist as an isolated phenomenon but was part of an evolving tradition of park-building. Furthermore, it belonged to a small percentage of deer-parks which were exceptionally large. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that so little is known of its background. Even though the park has survived as a distinctive place-name for several centuries and, cartographically at least, it presents a strong landscape feature, there are very few historical records of it. Consequently, the park has remained an enigma. In an attempt to remedy this state of affairs an archaeological field survey has been undertaken. This has been combined with a review of the available documentary sources in the course of which some previously unrecognised references to the park have been identified. As a result of this work, and by setting Parc le Breos in the context of medieval deer-parks in general, new light has been shed on its history and development. As much remains to be worked out, this note is presented only as a summary of progress to date in the investigation of a complex but fascinating landscape.

Foundation and landscape setting

It is not known if deer-parks were established in Gower before the thirteenth century, but it is unlikely that they were. The history of the lordship throughout the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries was one of profound instability. Frequent attacks and devastation delayed the construction of masonry castles which were essential for security,⁴ so it seems certain that the undertaking of costly projects like deer-parks was also inhibited at this time. The first direct reference to the park appears in a charter of 1306,⁵ but a consideration of sources related to land transfers and land-use activity at, and near, Walterston monastic grange, adjacent to the park on the west, points to a date in the 1220s for the park's creation,⁶ a period of relative calm during the tenure of John de Breos (d.1232) as lord of Gower. Early manorial records have not survived but by the fourteenth century the park formed the greater part of the demesne manor of Lunnon, a sub-manor of Pennard.⁷ In its modern setting the park is bounded on the north by Pengwern Common (formerly Lunnon Moor), on the east by Ilston Cwm and the holding of Bryn-afel, on the south by the villages of Parkmill and Penmaen, and on the west by the lower slopes of Cefn Bryn and several holdings

including Walterston and Cillibion. It spans an area of some 2000 acres of farmland, mostly undulating limestone country, with a central core of woodland which is concentrated in a deeply incised branch-like gorge.

There is little direct evidence for the kind of land-use regimes which prevailed across this area at the time the park was created. Evidence from better-documented parks implies that agricultural areas were generally avoided in favour of less intensively used heath and moorland, particularly if they contained woodland.⁸ While it is an assumption that such a scenario applied here, the present-day setting suggests that this may actually have been the case. On the north and on the south-west the park boundary abuts unenclosed land which is likely to have been more extensive in the thirteenth century, at a time when the presence of woodland hereabouts is also documented.⁹



Plan of Parc le Breos in its present-day setting, showing also the principal eighteenth century holdings within it and the contemporary extent of woodland (compartments and trackways not shown).

The defining feature of the deer-park is the boundary itself. The enclosure circuit measures 10.8km (6.7 miles) in overall length. On plan it forms an oval, or egg shape, measuring 4.1 km (E-W) by 2.9 km (2.5 miles by 1.8 miles). Conventionally, a deer-park boundary, or 'pale', was formed by a wooden fence supported by a bank constructed by excavating a ditch on the inside. The pale had to be of sufficient size and strength to contain deer and to deter trespassers. Timber would not have been used exclusively, but the extent of its use would have been partly conditioned by the distribution of woodland in the imparked area and its proximity to the designated boundary. Indeed, the line of the boundary takes various forms reflecting both the availability of materials and local topography. A well-formed bank and ditch system survives on the north near Pengwern, but on the south-west embanked walling made use of stone available on Cefn Bryn. South of Bryn-afel the bank merges with, and is replaced by, the steep scarp-slope of a dry valley, but on the south-east the boundary was apparently formed by the river through Ilston Cwm.¹⁰ Elsewhere, the line is now little more than a post-and-wire fence where perhaps a substantial wooden pale alone was used. In places, the boundary bank supports hedgerows though it is not yet clear if these were original features. The impression given by the oval plan of the boundary is that it was set out and built in a single episode rather than being extended piece-meal over time. But this is also a compact line which optimises the use of resources necessary for the enclosure of a given area.

The built boundary would have been a highly visible feature of a kind entirely new to this locality. But when considering the park's foundation and setting it should be borne in mind that the de Breos dynasty had long experience of establishing and operating deer-parks. Their English *caput* at Bramber lay in West Sussex, one of the most densely imparked counties of England.¹¹ Professional parkers and other specialists brought in to oversee the tasks of locating, laying out and construction would have cast practised eyes over the landscape. Some features of relief such as rolling limestone countryside with dry valleys and steep-sided, densely-wooded ravines and precipitous cliffs, would have been reminiscent of the Sussex Downs where deer-parks had been built for 150 years before work began in Gower.¹²

Functions and land use

The creation of a park presupposes the intention of stocking it with deer. Although there is no explicit evidence that deer occupied Parc le Breos in the medieval period, deer husbandry was a symbol of status rather than an economic activity and so is not normally mentioned in the sorts of documents, mainly financial accounts, that have provided pointers to other land-use activities in the park. Deer are capable of being herded over great distances so it is likely that Parc le Breos was stocked from other de Breos parks. These might also have been the source of rabbits, or 'coney', a Norman introduction, which were often kept in parks. The de Breoses are known to have had warrens in Gower though there is no record of one in the park. However, an eighteenth-century Welsh field-name closely related to *cwningar* (warren), near modern Willoxton,¹³ is circumstantial evidence for an early warren though there is no visible evidence for it.

Medieval parks are usually seen in terms of hunting and the pursuit of game but most parks were too small to have been used effectively for the chase.¹⁴ Dedicated, unenclosed, hunting preserves known as forests or chases would have fulfilled this purpose. Large deer-parks may have functioned like this but Parc le Breos lay on the western margin of the Forest of Fairwood. That the two were used together in some

way is not improbable. The proximity of the forest, and also of Lunnon Moor and Cefn Bryn, would have facilitated the release of deer for the chase when required, while their retention within the enclosure ensured a ready supply of fresh venison throughout the year.

Whatever importance was placed on their sporting value, medieval deer-parks were usually adapted for economic uses. The evidence from documents and from archaeology indicates that this was the case at Parc le Breos. Unfortunately, there are no known documentary sources for the use of the park during the first century of its existence. Several financial accounts for the lordship are available from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and these give some indication of the kinds of land-use activity taking place there. The earliest are for 1337-8 when details for the park were included in the account for Lunnon,¹⁵ and for 1366-7 when the park had a separate account.¹⁶ The pasture of livestock, *agistment*, was clearly important, constituting the greater part of the income in 1367 for example. There are also entries for *pannage*, the pasture of pigs in oak-woods in the autumn for winter fattening, and for the sale of wild honey and ferns. Second only to *agistment* in importance was the sale of wood. Indeed, parks were often important reserves of demesne woodland. The sale of dead wood appears in accounts but the recorded sale of underwood implies the management of trees for the purpose of providing a regular crop. To that end, pollarding, lopping and coppicing were all practised in the medieval period.¹⁷ While the first two may well have taken place here there survives direct evidence for a coppicing tradition in what is now Park Woods. Today, Park Woods is a single expanse of woodland but it once comprised several individual woods each of which was separately enclosed. This arrangement is characteristic of coppices in which rotational cropping required the protection of new growth after cutting. They are a well-documented feature of parks where the production of wood was maximised by keeping it separate from pasture.¹⁸ Because of the historical importance of wood for fuel and building, coppice rotation, once established, usually continued for several centuries. The compartmented character of Park Woods was still apparent in the nineteenth century.

The paucity of documentary sources makes it difficult to chart the changing economic fortunes of the park in any detail and, inevitably, there are aspects of early land use that are likely to remain invisible. The former extent of woodland, for example, and its fluctuation through time are difficult to gauge as also is the extent to which pasture was partitioned in order to accommodate different grazing regimes. The park was an active economic asset and so its functions will have changed as economic needs dictated. But what may have been the most radical change in its land use, presaging its modern use, probably took place soon after the park's foundation, a change that has only become apparent through a consideration of its post-medieval history.

Later history

Despite its long survival as a geographical entity the earliest known description of Parc le Breos dates from as recently as the mid-seventeenth century. An intriguing feature of the park extent given in the Parliamentary Survey of 1650 is that it describes only the western half of the thirteenth century park.¹⁹ The east boundary now follows a line from Pengwern to Parkmill, or roughly the east margin of Park Woods. Even though the land beyond lies within the thirteenth century pale there is no reference in the survey to this area ever having been imparked. The disparkment mentioned refers only to the western half which by then had been divided into three

farms. Clearly, the contraction of the park had occurred some considerable time before 1650.

Marked differences in field patterns across the area indicate that the two halves of the deer-park had very different land-use histories. The dominant feature of fields on the west is their irregularity in both size and shape. Around Lunnon, by contrast, a pattern of elongated and rectilinear fields represents the relict features of a medieval open field system, the constituent parts of which can still be identified.²⁰ They were originally edged by lanes forming a network which is evident today in the modern arrangement of roads and bridleways. The date of its formation is unknown though a thirteenth century context is possible. Few open field systems were created after the beginning of the fourteenth century when the bringing in of new land for cultivation appears to have ended,²¹ at least for the time being. The expansion of demesne arable before 1300 and the high premium placed upon it means that partial disparkment in order to make way for cultivation on the gentlest gradients in the park was a likely course of events.²² The open fields do not appear to have extended across the entire eastern side of the park so it is not clear that reduction to its 1650 boundary took place in a single episode. But relict features of open field cultivation which occur sporadically around Pengwern and Furzehill may indicate expansion beyond Lunnon at an early date.

On the west, the deer-park continued to function. If the above chronology for the park's contraction is correct then, aside from the indirect reference to warrening, the fourteenth century sources already adduced must refer to land-use activity in the reduced park. After partial disparkment, a new pale would have been required on the east side. The line between Pengwern and Parkmill is far less regular than its predecessor, but the steep slopes of the limestone gorge would have provided a natural barrier supplemented in places by a still visible, sharply-profiled, bank. On the north a low bank lies at the foot of ground rising steeply towards Pengwern. That deer husbandry continued, at least until the end of the fourteenth century, is suggested by a record of repairs made to the pale from fallen oak trees in 1400,²³ but it is not clear when the keeping of deer ceased altogether. After the demise of the de Breoses in the 1320s, lords of Gower were usually absent from the lordship and seigneurial requirements in respect of deer farming would probably have diminished. The widespread destruction resulting from the Glyndwr Revolt in the opening years of the fifteenth century is unlikely to have left the park unaffected,²⁴ and the cost of rebuilding a deer-proof pale may not have been considered worthwhile. Even so, the park was referred to throughout the fifteenth century though indications as to specific land-use activities are not available.²⁵ It is not until the mid-sixteenth century that new developments are detected. The subdivision of the park by 1650 into three leaseholdings ('Longe oaks', 'Lytherid' and 'Parke Price')²⁶ is alluded to in a lease, granted by the earl of Worcester in 1551, which refers to houses 'now being built in the park' and to the making and repair of 'hedges and ditches customarily used'.²⁷ These holdings amounted to 500 statutory acres in 1650. The contraction of the park by then to almost half its original extent would therefore have left roughly another 500 acres of woodland. The farm leases contained covenants 'not to cut down or tapp any oake ash or elme', indicating the separate value which woodland still possessed for the demesne.

In contrast to the partitioning of the park on the west, the enclosure of former park land on the east took a more complex course. By the middle of the sixteenth century this area had already undergone nearly two centuries of intensive land use. Over what

period of time the open fields continued to function is uncertain. Hedgerow analysis has pointed to a date broadly before the mid-seventeenth century for enclosure around Lunnon.²⁸ But the modern field pattern there suggests that the open fields broke up gradually as adjacent blocks of strips (or ‘landshares’) were parcelled up to form closes, at the same time as dispersed strips of common field continued to be farmed, in a process that was still incomplete in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁹ To the north of Lunnon, holdings which formed the basis of the modern farmsteads were also taking shape during the sixteenth century. This was a time of great change in the countryside as landowners attempted to substitute large tenancies for small ones.³⁰ Documentary sources point to the existence of enclosed parcels around Furzehill and Pengwern before 1600,³¹ and enclosures around Willoxton were well-established by the time of the 1650 survey. That this process could result in conflict is illustrated by events surrounding the partitioning of a 100 acre parcel of demesne pasture called *Inlease*, probably modern Furzeland, in the 1580s. Customary tenants to whom the pasture had been let for money rent claimed the land as common, and when the Earl of Worcester’s officers tried to turn the land to his own use tenants ‘cast down’ enclosures and destroyed grassland. The outcome of the subsequent litigation is unknown but the entire parcel was leased soon after to an individual tenant,³² an event which probably saw the inception of the modern holding.

The outline of enclosure history presented here broadly charts the intensification of land use in the park as hunting and deer husbandry declined in importance to be replaced by more lucrative economic activities, mainly farming and wood management. Most medieval deer-parks were affected in this way, to some extent, from the late medieval period onwards, and many were obliterated by later developments. What is remarkable about Parc le Breos is that despite having undergone many changes over several centuries its identity has remained intact. This has come about largely because of the conservatism of the hereditary lords who owned the park in its more recent history, the earls of Worcester and their successors the dukes of Beaufort. Through their stewards they jealously guarded their ancient rights and privileges in Gower ensuring that the demesne status of the park was not forgotten until, in the mid-nineteenth century, large parts of it came into the hands of the Vivians who sought to create, once again, a hunting estate at Parc le Breos.

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- ¹ The park is centred on National Grid Reference SS53709000. Its setting in the present-day landscape, particularly in relation to field boundaries, is most readily appreciated on the Ordnance Survey Pathfinder (1:25000 scale) map for Gower.
- A park at Clyne was referred to in 1306, though there is no evidence that it was actually built, and there is a passing reference to a park at Trewyddfa in 1400; see D.K.Leighton, 'The land-use history of Clyne Wood and the evolution of the Clyne landscape', *Studia Celtica*, 31 (1997), 135-59.
- ² L.M.Cantor and J.Hatherly, 'The medieval parks of England', *Geography*, 64 (1979), 71-85.
- ³ O.Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (London, 1990), ch.8.
- ⁴ Summarised in Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, *An Inventory of the Ancient Monuments in Glamorgan: The Early Castles* (London, 1991), pp.24-31.
- ⁵ G.T.Clark, *Cartae et alia munimenta quae ad dominum de Glamorgancia pertinent* (Talygarn, 1910), 3, 990-1000.
- ⁶ L.A.Toft, 'To the vill of Penmaen', *Journal of the Gower Society*, 40 (1989), 34-7.
- ⁷ The boundary of Lunnon is described in a late medieval survey, National Library of Wales [NLW], The Badminton Papers (manorial records), MS.5533.
- ⁸ Cantor and Hatherly, 'Medieval Parks', p.72.
- ⁹ Clark, *Cartae*, 2, p.466.
- ¹⁰ As deer are able to swim it is possible that the scarp edge of the cwm wall was itself used in the boundary.
- ¹¹ L.M.Cantor, *The Medieval Parks of England: a Gazetteer* (Loughborough, 1983).
- ¹² Countryside Commission, *The Landscape of the Sussex Downs AONB* (Cheltenham, 1996). A de Breos deer-park existed at Bramber before 1086; see L.M.Cantor, Forests, chases, parks and warrens' in Cantor (ed), *The English Medieval Landscape* (London, 1982), pp.56-85 (p.76).
- ¹³ 'Upper Cynnygar' and 'Lower Cynnygar' on a map of Willoxton and Furzeland Farm, Beaufort Estate Maps (1801) at Swansea City and County Record Office, D/D Beau E/1.
- ¹⁴ O.Rackham, *The History of the Countryside* (London, 1986), p.125; most parks were between 100 and 200 acres in extent.
- ¹⁵ Arundel Castle Archives, W1; see J.Conway Davies, *Schedule of Ministers' Accounts, Court Rolls and other Documents Relevant to Wales and the Marches on temporary loan from Arundel Castle*. (NLW, 1943).
- ¹⁶ NLW Badminton (manorial records), MS.2611.
- ¹⁷ W.Linnard, *Welsh Woods and Forests* (Cardiff, 1982), ch.3.
- ¹⁸ P.Stamper, 'Woods and Parks' in G.Astill and A.Grant (eds.), *The Countryside of Medieval England* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 128-48.
- ¹⁹ G.G.Francis and C.Baker, *Surveys of Gower and Kilvey and of several Mesne Manors within that Seignory* (London, 1870), p.69.
- ²⁰ M.Davies, 'Rhosili open field and related South Wales field patterns', *Agricultural History Review*, 4 (1956), 80-96.
- ²¹ M.Stinson, 'Assarting and poverty in early-fourteenth-century western Yorkshire', *Landscape History*, 5 (1983), 53-67.
- ²² R.R.Davies, *Lordship and Society in Wales and the March 1282-1400* (Oxford, 1978), p.111; a grange was created at Lunnon before 1337; Arundel, W1.
- ²³ Public Record Office Ministers' Accounts, SC 6/1202/15 (23R.II-1H.IV).
- ²⁴ W.H.Jones, *The History of Swansea and of the Lordship of Gower* vol. 2 (Swansea, 1992), ch.4 -5
- ²⁵ A custodian of the park was appointed in 1480; *ibid*, p.64.
- ²⁶ *Surveys of Gower*, pp.69-70; these holdings had been subdivided by 1800.
- ²⁷ Carmarthen Record Office, Cawdor 77/7023.
- ²⁸ J.Kissock, 'Farms, fields and hedges: aspects of the rural economy of north-east Gower, c.1300 to c.1650', *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 140 (1991), 130-47.
- ²⁹ NLW, Tithe Map and Apportionment, Ilston; M.Davies, 'Rhosili open field'.
- ³⁰ R.H.Tawney, *The Agrarian Crisis in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1912), p.58.
- ³¹ NLW, Badminton (manorial records), MSS.1533 and 5285, *et passim*.
- ³² W.R.B.Robinson, 'The litigation of Edward, earl of Worcester concerning Gower 1590 to 1596', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 23 (1968), 60-99 (pp.63-4).