

Comisiwn Brenhinol Henebion Cymru
Royal Commission
on the
Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales



TOMEN Y MUR, ROMAN MILITARY COMPLEX
Description of the site produced for a 2002 RCAHMW
Commissioners visit.

County: Gwynedd

Community: Maentwrog

NGR: SH 7057 3865

NPRN: 95476 (Roman fort); 95478 (medieval motte)

Date of description: text 2002; illustrations revised for Coflein 2008

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The Roman military complex at Tomen y Mur, Merionethshire

RCAHMW Commissioner's visit, May 2002

Introduction

Tomen y Mur represents one of the premier archaeological landscapes in the Welsh uplands, and one of the most complete Roman military complexes in Britain. Much has been recorded over the years by archaeologists and surveyors on the ground. Gresham's 1938 paper on the fort established the first accurate survey of the site, including ancillary earthworks of interest, and drew together the numerous antiquarian observations made by Pennant, Fenton, Sir Richard Colt Hoare and others. Gresham's detailed plans of the earthworks in the core area have not been surpassed or improved upon in the 64 years which have elapsed, and have formed the basis for all subsequent plans (Bowen and Gresham 1967; Jarrett and Nash-Williams 1969, pp 111-113; Lynch 1995, pp 106-108, and the published Ordnance Survey plan). The only comprehensive survey of the entire Roman landscape at Tomen y Mur remains the air photo mapping completed by T Driver for RCAHMW in 1995/6 (Driver 1996, 49). While subsequent ground work in the intervening years since Gresham's original survey, notably by Peter Crew and others, has revealed new information, aerial photography since the 1960s has played a decisive role in giving new clarity to existing sites, and revealing entirely new Roman monuments in the surrounding landscape.



Figure 1. Tomen y Mur Roman fort complex from the north-east, December 2007, showing the Roman fort and motte (centre left), parade ground (lower centre) and the amphitheatre (lower right). (Crown Copyright RCAHMW, AP_2007_5163).

The fort occupies a considerable slope but commands fine views over the surrounding landscape. Good sections of stone walling can be seen around the rampart while the south-east gateway with its double guard-chambers, central pier and stone blocking, is particularly well preserved following exposure during nineteenth-century excavations. Parchmarks photographed from the air in 1976 revealed the plan of the stone buildings inside the fort including the *principia*, which also survives as a substantial earthwork on the ground.

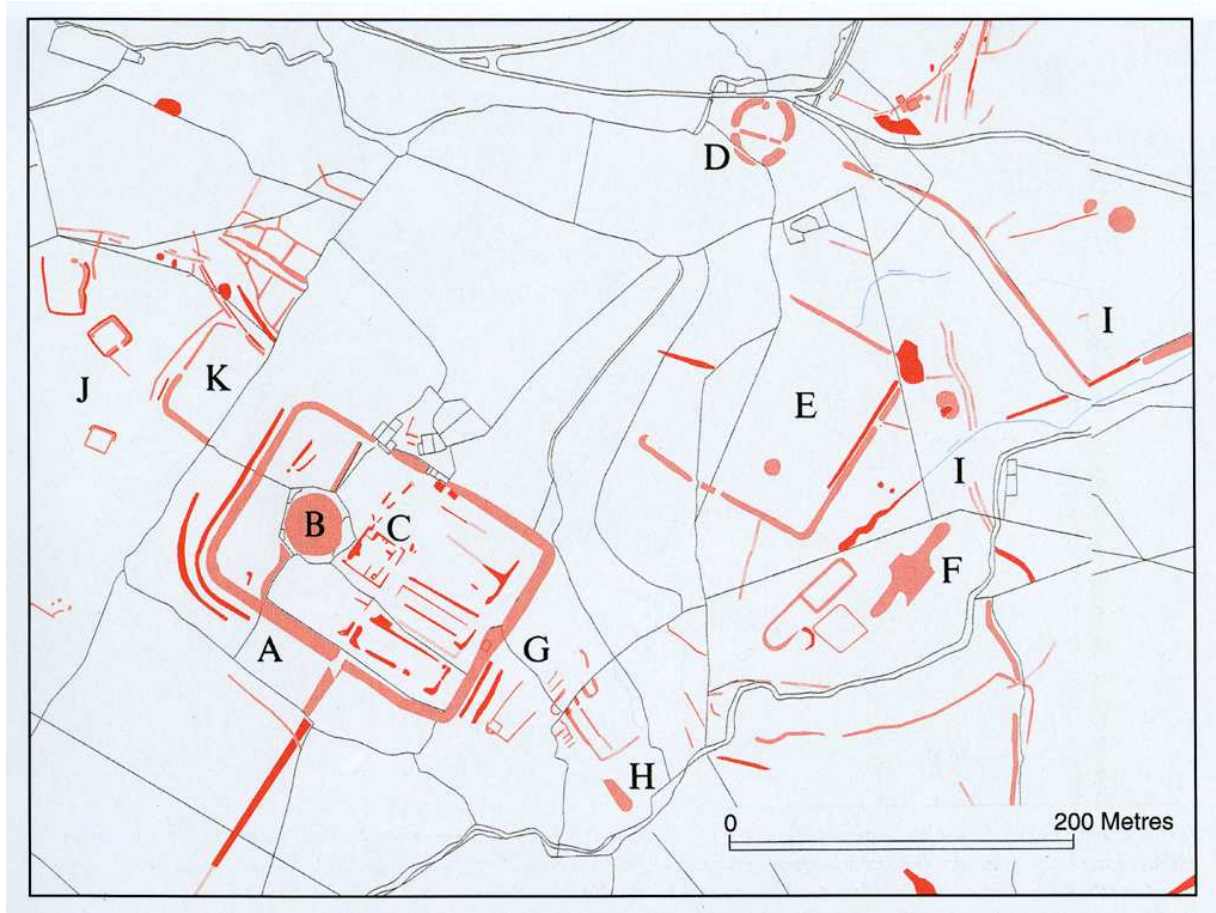


Figure 2. Tomen y Mur, Royal Commission air photo mapping (Crown Copyright, All rights reserved, RCAHMW CD2003_606_055. Licence number 100017916, 2007). Labelled features as follows:

- A. Roman fort (NPRN 95476)
- B. Site of motte, or medieval castle mound (NPRN 95478)
- C. Parchmarks of buried stone buildings within fort (NPRN 95476)
- D. Military amphitheatre (NPRN 95666)
- E. Parade ground (NPRN 89404)
- F. Winged tribunal mound (NPRN 89403)
- G. Remains of bathhouse and rest-house (NPRN 89400)
- H. Bridge abutment for Roman road (NPRN 89467)
- I. Leat for bathhouse (NPRN 89406, 89464)
- J. Roman practice camps (NPRN 89394, 89395)
- K. Annex to Roman fort (NPRN 89397)

A summary of the site

Commanding a high, windy spot, overlooking some of bleakest moorlands in Merionethshire, Tomen y Mur is a remarkable survival from the early Roman campaigns in north-west Wales. Not only does the well-preserved fort survive largely intact and (apparently) undisturbed by the plough, but the immediate environs of the site, together with the wider landscape, preserve all the surrounding ‘clutter’ of a Roman fortress, long since swept away at comparable forts sited in less remote locations. In recent years, the site has come under a management agreement with Snowdonia National Park, which has seen the installation of a small car park and footpaths.

Taking its name from the prominent motte built over the reduced rampart of the fort, possibly built by William Rufus who was campaigning in the area in 1095, Tomen y Mur was probably built in AD 77 or 78 as part of Agricola’s early campaigns. At this time, the fort may have been largely of timber construction enclosing some 1.7ha. In about AD 120, under Hadrian, the fort was reduced in size and re-built in stone. The progress of this rebuilding is well recorded in a series of nine inscribed stones found at the site, now variously relocated at Harlech Castle, Plas Tan y Bwlch, and The Grapes Hotel, Maentwrog.

The immediate environs of the fort preserve a fascinating array of monuments. The small military **amphitheatre** (below) is thought to be the only example at an auxiliary fort in the British Isles and may have been built to compensate the soldiers for what was probably a difficult and remote posting. It is confused somewhat by later stone field walls and the embankment of a quarry tramroad which bisects the arena.



Figure 3. Tomen y Mur; the small Roman military amphitheatre seen from the north, bisected by a later industrial tramway. Roman burial mounds can be seen in the left foreground (Crown Copyright RCAHMW, AP_2007_5164).

Between the amphitheatre and the fort lies the levelled **parade ground**, thought by Gresham to be unfinished, which is overlooked by a **tribunal mound** and a possible catapult mound outside the eastern corner.

Outside the south-east gate of the fort, the Roman road passes through the remains of a **bathhouse** and **mansio**, a little obscured by the trenches of the nineteenth-century excavations. The road originally crossed the small river beyond via a wooden bridge, of which the 8ft high **bridge abutment** still stands, and thence to a well-preserved group of **burial mounds** including a larger mound on a square platform. A further ground of eleven small burial mounds lies on a hill overlooking the amphitheatre to the north (see Crew *et al.* 1989).

Fragments of the water-supply system still survive in the form of two **leats** approaching from the north-east (first shown in Houlder 1974, Fig. 17; see Crew 1979). The upper leat provided water for the fort from Llyn yr Oerfel, and stops just to the north of the parade ground at a point where the ground falls away. It is thought that the remaining distance to the fort was completed by a **wooden aqueduct**. The second leat for the bathhouse takes water directly from the stream and runs south-west between the parade ground and the tribunal.

On a hill above the Roman fort to the north-west are the remains of two or three small **practice camps**, together with the levelled remains of an **annex** to the fort. In all some 18 practice camps are known from Tomen y Mur and its landscape, and the majority of these discoveries have been made by aerial reconnaissance.

Discoveries through aerial reconnaissance and mapping, 1964-2001.

One of the earliest aerial discoveries at Tomen y Mur came in 1964 when Cambridge University photographers discovered the Dolddinas practice camps, a group of 5 practice camps nearly 3kms SSE of the main fort (see Lynch 1995, 108-9; Crew and Musson 1996, 30; Davies and Jones 2006). Cambridge photography also provided an excellent record of the Roman fort and its immediate environs when the surrounding fields were still being periodically ploughed. Soilmarks after ploughing in 1964 showed interesting details of the practice camps and annex to the north-west of the fort, and of the road lines and overlapping marching camps to the south-east.

On the 27th August 1976, during the severe summer drought, St. Joseph photographed parchmarks inside the fort which clearly showed the positions of buried stone buildings and roads (St. Joseph 1977, 151). Air photo mapping has shown that the *principia* or headquarters measured some 27m square, and was comparable in size to the headquarters at Caersws and Caerhun (Jarrett and Nash-Williams 1969, Fig 85). A geophysical survey funded by the Snowdonia National Park of the fort interior was inconclusive and failed to produce results of the clarity of these few photographs from 1976. Cropmarks have not been recorded at the fort since these discoveries.

In more recent times, Tomen y Mur has been intensively surveyed from the air during Royal Commission flights between 1989-2002 (see Musson 1994, 86-87), by Chris Musson and then by Toby Driver (from 1997), together with comprehensive air photo

mapping in 1995/6. Some of the most sustained reconnaissance was carried out in 1994 and 1996 prior to publication of *Snowdonia from the Air* (Crew and Musson 1996, 26-28), resulting in a comprehensive aerial record. A number of discoveries were made, including the revelation that the unusual overlapping enclosures to the south-east of the fort, which enclose the cemetery, probably formed parts of much larger, early marching camps which have been heavily eroded by the plough on their south sides.

Flights in 1996 also revealed a previously unrecorded group of Roman practice camps on a hill above Llyn Hiraethlyn (NPRN 54524), 4km south-east of the Roman fort (Crew and Musson 1996, 30; RCAHMW 1997, 13; Driver *et. al.* 1997). Two were discovered in the air on a joint flight by Chris Musson and Toby Driver, with CM claiming credit for initial discovery, whilst two further camps were confirmed from interpretation of vertical air photographs by TD after the flight. Along with the discovery of the camps came the realisation that the Roman road did not follow a traditional route to the east of Llyn Hiraethlyn, but infact zig-zagged up the hill (the agger flanked by deep quarry pits, NPRN 89704) from Cwm Prysor to the camp group, and continuing as a fine causeway (NPRNs 309123 & 309160) over the hill down to the Dolddinas camp group, preserving a bridge abutment at the river crossing (identified by P Crew). These new camps were mapped from air photographs, ground checked by RCAHMW, and then put forward for Ordnance Survey map publication. They appeared on the new edition of the Porthmadog & Dolgellau Landranger map in 1999, three years after initial discovery.

From the Dolddinas group, aerial photography and fieldwork have confirmed the line of the well-preserved road agger, flanked by quarry pits, as it passes to the west of Dolddinas striking across uneven moorland, before turning WSW near Dolbelydr farm leaving a fine stretch of agger and quarry pits on the upslope side (NPRN 89466). On its final approach to the fort, some 1.3km to the south-east, it is heavily ploughed down and is known only from aerial photography.

On the 17th December 2001, the fort and its landscape were overflown in very clear, low winter light (RCAHMW 2002). This sortie revealed previously unrecorded Roman practice camps at Dolbelydr (NPRN 89437) in the heart of the landscape, and at just to the north of the fort at Mur-llwyd (NPRN 304236). The latter camp was so slight that it was only subsequently recognised in the background on an air photograph taken of an entirely different subject. A ground inspection showed the earthwork only survived c20cm high, and was so ploughed down it was initially missed on a walk across the site. These continuing discoveries are testament to the power of aerial photography to discover and record, even at our most famous and best-recorded archaeological monuments.

Toby Driver, RCAHMW, 2002; illustrations revised 2008.

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