

# Understanding Place

## The History and Character of Newborough



 Cadw

  
Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

  
Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd  
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

# UNDERSTANDING PLACE: THE HISTORY AND CHARACTER OF NEWBOROUGH

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Newborough is a large Anglesey village, and a former medieval borough. This report summarises the evidence collected through a project which collated the history and archaeology of Newborough, and recorded the character of the buildings and streets which define the settlement. Characterisation is a useful technique for understanding the history and character of a settlement, and this clearer understanding of the past helps manage the future of the settlement. The work was largely carried out by volunteers, supervised by archaeologists from Gwynedd Archaeological Trust. The recording took place between July 2017 and February 2018.

## 2. PHYSICAL SETTING

Newborough is situated in the south-western corner of Anglesey (figure 1). The sea lies 3km south-west of the village centre and the Malltraeth Estuary is 2km to the north-west. The coast is bounded by a broad swathe of dunes, which forms Newborough Warren. The southern part of these dunes is still an active dune system, now a National Nature Reserve and supporting a rich flora. Between 1947 and 1965 the northern part of the dunes was planted with Corsican pine for timber and to protect the village from wind-blown sand (Natural Resources Wales website). The plantation formed Newborough Forest, and the dunes here have been stabilised by the trees, though dune plants do still survive under the trees in places. The long beach is very popular with visitors, tourists and locals alike, and Newborough Forest is now extensively used for recreation; including walking, cycling and horse riding.

The village is located on the top of a low ridge, which rises from about 10 OD to a high point of 40m OD. This gives the village a southern aspect and good views of the mountains of Snowdonia across the Menai Strait. The underlying bedrock is schist, a metamorphic rock, with glacial deposits overlying it and large areas of windblown sand near the coast (Geology of Britain Viewer). The farmland surrounding the village is currently under improved pasture and used largely for sheep, but was previously extensively used for arable cultivation.

## 3. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

### *General History*

By the 13<sup>th</sup> century the main unit for administration in the Kingdom of Gwynedd was the commote (*cwmwd*). Anglesey was divided into six commotes. Each had a royal court (*llys*) that was the administrative centre and where the Prince of Gwynedd stayed as he travelled around his kingdom. Rhosyr was the royal centre for the commote of Menai, with a *llys* and a township, the *maerdref* (reeve's township), where the bondsmen who farmed the Prince's estate lived (Longley 2001, 41). The site of the *llys*, to the west of Newborough village, was excavated in the 1990s revealing a hall, chamber, and another large building, as well as other structures including a bakehouse (Johnstone 1999) (plate 1). The settlement associated with the *maerdref* has not been located with certainty.



Plate 1. Site of *Llys Rhosyr* presented for the public

Royal courts usually had a royal chapel and it is assumed that St Peter's church originated as the royal chapel, explaining its position next to the *llys*. The present church dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when the borough was established, but an 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century font indicates an earlier building once stood here associated with the court.

The church was extended in the late 15<sup>th</sup> or early 16<sup>th</sup> century (RCAHMW 1937) (plate 2).

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century Llanfaes, in the south-east of Anglesey, was the main trading centre on the island but from 1294 Edward I built his castle and the adjacent borough at Beaumaris. Llanfaes might have proved a threat to these so its population was moved across the island and a new borough was established for them on the royal lands of Rhosyr (Johnstone 2000, 179).

The borough of Newborough, which received its charter in 1303 (Soulsby 1983, 194-6), was laid out to give each burgess the same amount of property as they held in Llanfaes and it was carefully planned around a crossroads.

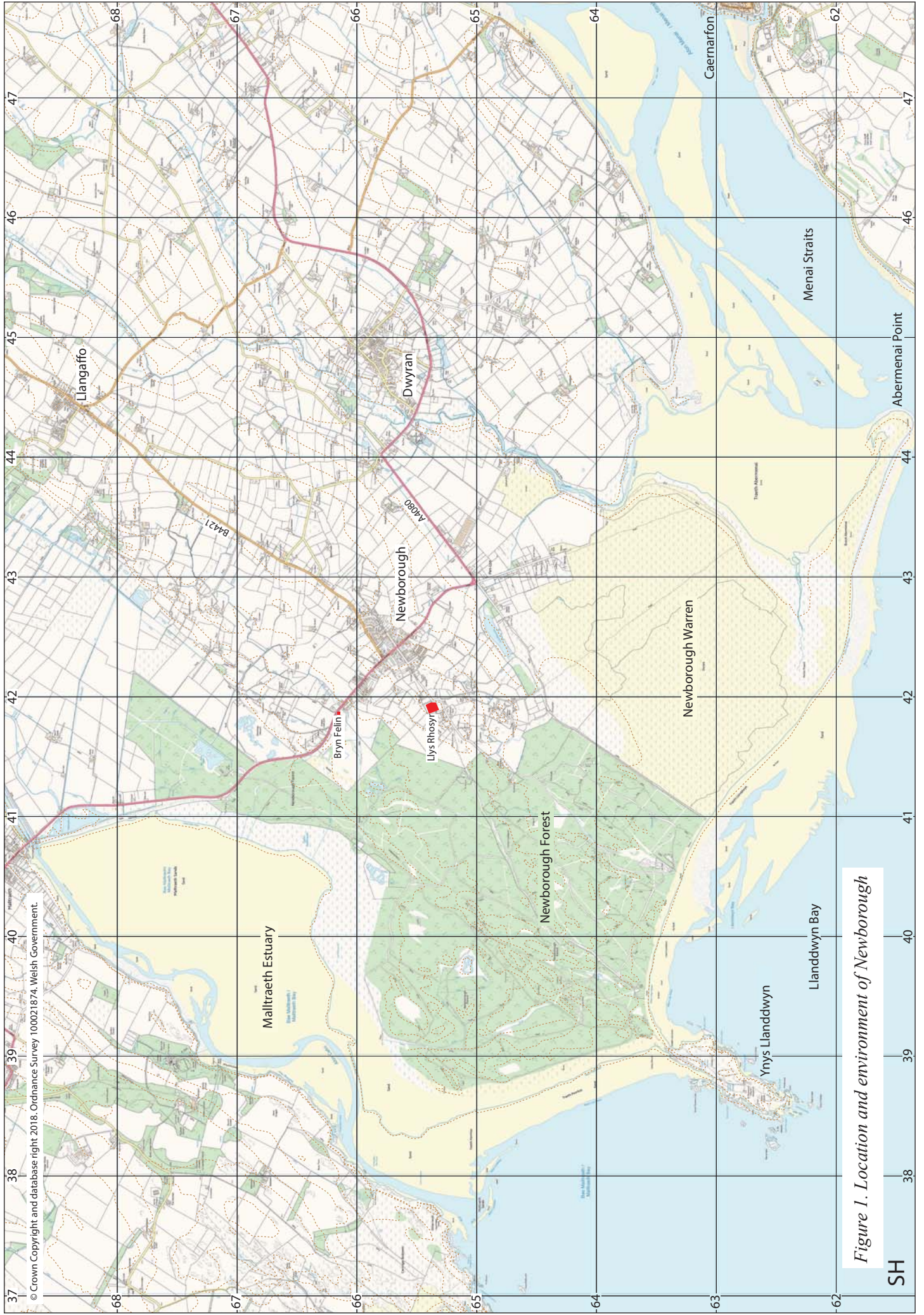


Figure 1. Location and environment of Newborough



Plate 2. *St Peter's Church*

Each property had a house on the street front and a long narrow piece of land behind. These plots, known as 'burgage' plots, still define many of the properties in Newborough (Carr 2011, 9, 209, Soulsby 1983, 194-6).

The town was almost entirely Welsh, and welcomed Welsh poets including Dafydd ap Gwilym, who praised the town, its wine and its people (Carr 2011, 9, 209). A weekly market was held on Tuesdays,

and there were also several fairs each year. These served the tenantry of Menai, though the market became famous over a much wider area for its cattle and oxen (Soulsby 1983, 194-6). In the later 14<sup>th</sup> century it was a thriving borough, and economically successful. This was despite the hardship caused by the Great Storm of 6<sup>th</sup> December 1330 which covered a large area of agricultural land with sand. Another storm in 1396-7 destroyed more land, whilst in the mid-fourteenth century the Black Death caused a severe decline in the population of Anglesey (Carr 2011, 7). During the uprising of Owain Glyndŵr in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century both the town of Newborough and the township of Rhosyr were badly damaged by attacks from both sides (Carr 2011, 256).

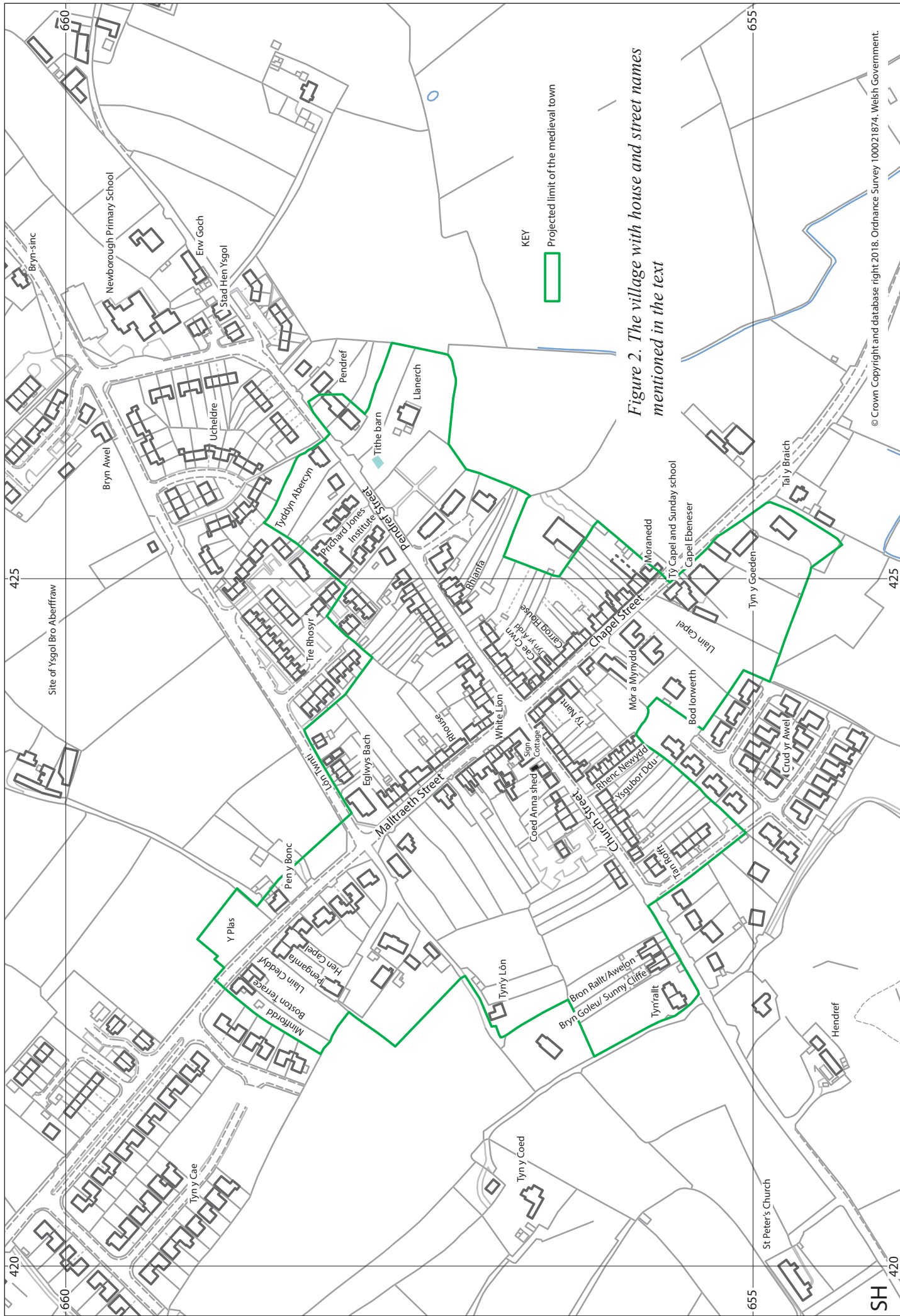
In 1507 Henry VII transferred the county courts from Beaumaris to Newborough, raising its prosperity again, but this was reversed in 1549 and the town began to decline (Soulsby 1983, 194-6). By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Newborough had lost much of its urban character, the weekly market was discontinued by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Soulsby 1983, 194-6), but annual fairs still continued (Lewis 1849). Travelers who passed through were not complementary. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Thomas Pennant describes Newborough as "a place greatly fallen away from its antient splendor [sic]" (Pennant 1783, 232-235), and in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Richard Fenton thought it was "a wretched place" (Fenton 1917, 270).

Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, at least, marram grass (*môrhesg*) was used in Newborough to make mats, ropes, baskets and fancy goods (Hughes 1956), and this was the main industry of the area other than agriculture. The enclosure of the common land in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century led to the loss of rights to collect marram grass, hindering the industry (Lewis 1849). In 1913 the industry was revived with the establishment of the Mat Makers' Association and marram grass was woven in Newborough until Newborough Warren, the source of the marram grass, was commandeered by the War Ministry in 1939 and used as a bombing range, before being taken over by the Forestry Commission in 1947 (Hughes 1956).

### ***The Borough and the Town***

The borough of Newborough included not just the town but extensive lands around it as far as Abermenai Point, as the borough ran the ferry across the Strait. Places marking the boundary were recorded by Henry Rowlands in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century (Rowlands 1846, 310-11), and most can still be identified, though in many places the exact line of the boundary is unclear. Some of the boundary was followed by the parish boundary and some is marked by boundary stones.

The limit of the medieval town is indicated by the presence of burgage plots (figure 2), the original plots of land allocated to the burgesses of the borough. These are seen as narrow strips of land and usually still have a house on the street frontage as they would have done in the medieval period. On Church Street the town probably extended as far as Tyn'rallt on the northern side but no further than Tan Rofft on the southern side. There are burgage plots along the north-eastern side of Chapel Street. The south-western side of Chapel Street is less clear but all the property boundaries resemble groups of two or three plots that have been merged, and the town probably extended down to Tyn y Goeden. Pendref Street has traces of burgage plots as far as Tyddyn Abercyn on the northern side, and Pendref must have been the limit of the town on the southern side. Malltraeth Street clearly had burgage plots on both sides of the street up to the cross roads where the B4421 (known here as Lôn Twnti) comes off the main street. Rowlands describes Y Plas or Plas Ucha as a house in the town and a marker on the boundary. The house was originally to the north-west of Pen y Bonc, though demolished in the 1930s. It would have marked the edge



of the medieval town.

#### 4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESOURCE

Despite the medieval origin of the village being well known there has been little archaeological work done, with many quite recent developments being carried out with little or no prior archaeological investigation. However where archaeological work has been done it suggests that considerable deposits and important features may survive.

The area to the north of Church Street has received some attention, mainly test pits and trial trenches, and this provides us with information about the underlying archaeological deposits. One notable feature is the widespread extent of windblown sand forming a layer up to 0.85m thick. The lack of soil development within this sand suggests this may represent a single major inundation, possibly to be identified with a historically documented sand storm in December 1330 (Carr 2011, 7). More research is needed on this sand layer but if it does represent this single storm it shows how devastating that storm was, with the loss of horticultural land right in the heart of the village. However the land was reclaimed as there is a thick layer of garden or ploughsoil above the sand.

Below the sand across much of the area is a buried soil up to 0.5m thick. This would appear to be the original medieval ground surface, and it has traces of occupation including shells and bone from rubbish deposits and one sherd of medieval pottery has been recovered.

In recent years the remains of two buildings, almost certainly of medieval date, have been excavated in plots that have been vacant since before the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Fragmentary remains of a stone building were found near the frontage of a plot off Church Street and similar remains were found prior to the development of Llain Capel off Chapel Street. In both cases quern stones had been reused in paving in or around the buildings (Rees and Jones 2015a and b). An earlier trial trench also found some traces of a medieval dwelling off Church Street (White 1979) and a watching brief during the building of Môr a Mynydd, off Chapel Street (Brookes and Price 1997; Brookes and Laws 2003) provided hints of possible medieval occupation here. These remains indicate the significance of the buried archaeology, and it is important that the few remaining gaps on the street frontages are archaeologically investigated before development. It is also likely that the back gardens and yards hide buried archaeological features and deposits relating to medieval and later activities.

The only other areas in Newborough village that have been excavated are two fields on the northern outskirts of the village, north of Lôn Twnti. This is the site for a new school and archaeological work has been taking place in advance of the development. The work is not yet complete and results are very preliminary (Evans forthcoming), but discoveries include the remains of a wall, probably related to a house shown in this area on an 18<sup>th</sup> century estate map. There is also evidence for prehistoric occupation, Bronze Age pits containing burnt stones, possibly for cooking, and the postholes of two granaries, one with 8 posts (plate 3) and one with 4 posts, have been found. The granaries are of types usually found on Iron Age settlements, but may in this case date from the later Bronze Age, but whichever date, they suggest a prehistoric settlement existed here prior to the establishment of the medieval borough.

#### 5. CHARACTER STUDY

Newborough is a large village measuring 1km north-west to south-east and 800m south-west to north-east. The



*Plate 3. Excavated postholes of a 8-post granary found in 2017 excavations in advance of a new school*

original main north-west to south-east street (Malltraeth and Chapel Streets) is now part of the main coastal road around Anglesey (A4080) (plate 4). The B4421 comes off the main road just north-west of the central crossroads,

and this leads to Llangaffo. The centre of the village is fairly heavily built-up with rows of 19<sup>th</sup> century houses flanking the main road, and the density of housing decreases towards the edges of the village. The older houses are generally towards the centre of the village with the outskirts dominated by modern developments.

Though the village formerly contained various shops and businesses these are now much less in evidence, and the large majority of the buildings are domestic houses. These are typically two-storey, stone-built with slate roofs, and a high percentage of chimneys. Recent upgrading of the houses has resulted in a high number of new windows and doors, and pebble-dash surfaces. Other building types include a non-conformist chapel, the Prichard-Jones Institute, and the parish church. The church lies a significant distance to the south-west of the village, and adjacent to the former *llys*.

The centre of the current village was the site of the medieval town, planned around the central crossroads. Here the properties have long narrow gardens or yards, originating from burgage plots. The original layout of the borough can also be seen in the roads. Malltraeth / Chapel Street was the main road to Caernarfon via the Abermenai ferry.



Plate 4. Chapel Street from the south  
(photograph by David Elis-Williams)

town houses around it. It was also the market square and the Chapel Street and Church Street would have been significantly wider than at present to accommodate markets and fairs. In the middle of the crossroads was the market cross, built in 1304-05 (Carr 2011, 206), and still shown on maps into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A town hall had stood near the crossroads, but by the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was in ruins, and its position is not certainly known. Near the market cross was also a “carreg orchest” or “feat stone”, a large stone that strong men attempted to lift to their shoulders to prove their strength (Owen 1952, 135).

What is surprising is the scarcity of houses relating to phases of the settlement’s history before the 19<sup>th</sup> century; in many other medieval towns some large town houses from the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> centuries usually survive. In Newborough maps and historical evidence, as well as building styles, suggest that almost all the houses were built or largely rebuilt in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This can probably be explained by the decline in the fortunes of the town from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Any new buildings would have been for agricultural labourers rather than merchants, and of lower quality. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century most of the housing stock was probably very old or poorly built, necessitating considerable rebuilding but only at a modest scale. Date stones, such as that on Cae Crwn, Chapel Street, of 1806 (plate 5) and that of 1859 on Rhianfa, Pendref Street, give an indication of this rebuilding, and there are records of rebuilding, usually after complete demolition of the earlier houses, in the 1840s (Owen 1952). It is possible that in some cases the masonry, especially of the ground floor of the previous houses, was reused in the remodelled buildings and, less likely, some of the original roof timbers may have been retained.



Plate 5. Date stone above the door of Cae Crwn  
(photograph by David Elis-Williams)

The only certain 18<sup>th</sup> century house surviving in the village is Pengamfa (plate 6), Malltraeth Street, with a date stone of 1769, and surviving external features, including the large chimney and off-centre doorway, which indicate 18<sup>th</sup> century or earlier origins. Some other buildings survived until relatively recently. Between Pengamfa



Plate 6. Pengamfa (photographed by Marianne Jones)

and Boston Terrace there was a cottage, known as Llain Cleddyf cottage (sword quillet), which survived until at least the 1950s, and was occupied by a joiner who made coffins (Norman Evans and David Owens, pers. comm.). Remains of another old house can still be seen in a shed adjacent to Coed Anna, Church Street. This was part of a row but the adjacent house has been demolished and the remaining building altered. This building was used by women making marram grass items. Women who did not have their own sheds clubbed together to rent this building; marram grass weaving was wet and

dirty, because the grass had to be soaked before it could be woven, so it was not a job to do in the home (Norman Evans and Einir Thomas pers. comm.).

The most impressive house that no longer exists was known as Y Plas or Plas Uchaf, and it stood to the north-west of Pen y Bonc, Malltraeth Street. This was standing into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though ruined by the 1920s. A stone with the date of 1664 was found in its ruins (RCAHMW 1937, 119), and at least parts of the house probably dated back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The site of Y Plas can be recognised as a low earthwork platform in the southern corner of the field (plate 7).



Plate 7. The site of Y Plas

Most of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century houses are modest dwellings of one or two storeys, built in rows. Short terraces of identical houses do exist, but typically each house is of slightly different height and size to its neighbour. This reflects the lack of large-scale investment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the retention of individual ownership of the houses within each plot. The simple, single-fronted properties of Tyn yr Ardd, Chapel Street, (plate 8) and Ysgubor Ddu, Nos. 1 and 2, Church Street (plate 9) give a good idea of the smaller cottages, and Carrog House, Chapel Street, is an example of a double-fronted house (plate 10). Like several of the houses this has a side passage for access to



Plate 8. Tyn yr Ardd, Chapel Street (photograph by David Elis-Williams)

Plate 9. College Bach and Ysgubor Ddu (photographed by Owenna Orme)



the rear yards. Tŷ Nant, Chapel Street (plate 11) is very similar but map evidence shows that it dates to the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. The brick arches over the windows and door are typical of later 19<sup>th</sup> century houses in the village. The brick arches can be seen at Sign Cottage, Church Street, which was rebuilt as three single-fronted dwellings in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to map evidence (plate 12). Rhouse, Malltraeth Street, also has similar features (plate 13), but in this case the lack of render or paint enables the stone work to be clearly seen and this suggests



Plate 10. Carrog House, Chapel Street (photograph by David Elis-Williams)



Plate 11. Tŷ Nant (photographed by Megan Howe)

that the house may have been rebuilt from the lower windows upwards, with the ground floor belonging to an earlier building. This may apply to some of the other 19<sup>th</sup> century houses. Rhouse was the house of the bailiff of the borough of Newborough and he kept the Corporation regalia in his house until it was donated to the Prichard Jones Institute in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Owen 1952, 37), where the mace is still on display.



Plate 12. Sign Cottage (photographed by Megan Howe)

The early 19<sup>th</sup> century houses were almost all built on sites of earlier houses that would have been used back to the medieval period. In the mid and later 19<sup>th</sup> century more gentrified houses were built, but often outside the medieval town on former fields. Examples of these are Tal y Braich (plate 14) and the Rectory, now called Llanerch. Though the latter was within the medieval town it was built on a plot vacant except for the former tithe barn. Bod Iorwerth, built around 1844 (Owen 1952, 122), was inserted behind the village houses, off Chapel Street. The number of these substantial houses was small and the village did not expand significantly until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

More modest houses acquired bay windows and other fashionable features in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. Semi-detached houses seem to have become fashionable, such as Bron Rallt/Awelon and Bryn Goleu/ Sunny Cliffe, Church Street, and Nos 1 and 2 Lôn Twnti (plate 15). Of the more substantial buildings in the heart of the village the building on the corner between Chapel Street and Pendref Street is the most notable. This was a shop in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and until recently was used as a post office, but currently houses Caffi Wiwer Goch/Red Squirrel Café (plate 16). The name of the adjacent Victoria House indicates their late Victorian date.



Plate 13. Rhouse (photographed by David Elis Williams)

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the crossroads was still the focus of the village. An inn known as Sign or Sign Fawr, dating back to at least 1746, occupied the corner of Church Street and Chapel Street, and opposite this was the

White Lion pub, built around 1830 (Owen 1952, 135). The pub is still on much the same site, but by 1889 it had been rebuilt and buildings added on the south-eastern side so it is no longer on the corner (plate 17). Other inns and taverns show that the village still provided a centre for the surrounding countryside. There was also a smithy in part of what is now the Newborough Stores, conveniently located for passing trade, as well as shops.



Plate 14. *Tal y Braich* (photographed by Chris Jones)



Plate 15. *Nos. 1 and 2 Lôn Twnti* (photographed by Anne Harris)

date but the barn may be older and have developed from a long house with a dwelling at one end and barn at the other. Bryn-sinc was also a farm on the outskirts. It was an important location as it is mentioned as a marker on the borough boundary (Rowlands 1846). It also had barns



Plate 17. *The White Lion*

Plate 18. *Erw Goch* (photographed by Jan Hale)

In its later history Newborough was a rural settlement, surrounded by farms. Some of the farms are now on the outskirts of the village, though originally separated from it by fields. Erw Goch is shown on the maps from 1846 in exactly its current plan. The building is composed of a single-storey cottage with a long barn attached (plate 18). The main cottage would appear to be early 19<sup>th</sup> century in

Plate 16. *Former post office now Caffi Wiwer Goch/Red Squirrel Café* (photographed by David Owen)



attached to the house, though now only the house survives. Pendref was a significant farm marking the end of the town on the eastern side. Its barns have also gone but the 19<sup>th</sup> century houses still survives. Pen y Bonc on Malltraeth Street has a history going back to at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century but the present buildings are late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Here at least the barns and outbuildings still survive (plate 19).



Newborough was influenced by the spread of nonconformist denominations, especially Methodism, across Anglesey in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Pryce 1922). It had four chapels by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with Ebeneser Chapel, the only one surviving, being the earliest. The Ebeneser Chapel is said to have been built in 1785, the date



Plate 19. Pen y Bonc

displayed on the current building, but the building shown on the early 19<sup>th</sup> century map is quite different to the present one (plate 20). The first chapel meetings were probably held in an existing house, and this was restored in 1835, rebuilt in 1861, and the present chapel was built in 1881. A Sunday school and chapel house were added next to the chapel in 1892, but the present form of the Sunday school rooms was not built until after 1889. A Baptist Chapel, known as the Seion Chapel, was built in 1849 on Pendref Street, but nothing of this survives except a plaque in

the wall of the house built on its site (plate 21). The modern house of Hen Capel, Malltraeth Street, is on the site of the Wesleyan Methodist chapel, built in 1804. The site of Soar Independent Chapel, built in 1864, is now just a patch of grass at the end of Rhenc Newydd, previously Soar Terrace. There was also another church in addition to the parish church. This is now known as Eglwys Bach, and it is a community centre, but it was formerly the St Thomas's Mission Church.



Plate 20. Capel Ebeneser (photographed by Chris Jones)

A unique feature of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and present village is the Prichard Jones Institute, built in a Neo-Tudor architectural style (plate 22). This was given to the people of Newborough by Sir John Prichard Jones, who was born in Newborough and became

managing director of the Dickens and Jones department store in Regent Street, London. The Institute provided a library, reading rooms and function rooms for the use of the local people and was to be supported by an endowment. There were also six cottages built to accommodate elderly Newborough residents. The cottages were provided rent free and the occupants also received a pension. The field opposite the Institute, now a children's playground, was bought to provide gardens for the residents of the cottages. In the 1920s a war memorial for the parish of



Plate 21. Plaque commemorating the building of Seion Chapel built into the wall of Cermar (photographed by David Owen)



Plate 22. The Prichard Jones Institute

Newborough was constructed in the grounds of the Prichard Jones Institute.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries the village expanded, mainly to the north and to the east. This has more than doubled the size of the village and has altered its character. The older developments on the eastern side of the village are dominated by former Council houses in Ucheldre and Tre Rhosyr (plate 23), built from the



Plate 23. Tre Rhosyr (photographed by Anne Harris)

1940s onwards. On the northern side of the village are extensive developments of bungalows, including Tyn y Cae and Bryn Rhedyn, surrounded by their own gardens. There is also a development of bungalows, Crud yr Awel, on the southern side of the village. In addition there are detached modern houses on the outskirts of the village.

Most of these developments were built over open fields beyond the medieval town but some on Malltraeth Street overlay former burgrave plots. Bryn Felin, though a modern house, is built

of the site of an earlier house that stood on the site of the first windmill to be built on Anglesey, in 1305 (Guise and Lees 2010, 7). Stad Hen Ysgol is built on the site of the British School, constructed in 1867 with charitable donations. In 1970 a new primary school (plate 24) was opened on the adjacent land but this is now due to be superseded by a primary school for the wider catchment area being built to the north of Lôn Twnti.



Plate 24. Newborough Primary School

## 6. SIGNIFICANCE AND POTENTIAL

Newborough is a particularly good example of a medieval borough where much of the original layout survives and can easily be recognised on the ground. It has expanded outwards late in its history leaving much of the centre largely unchanged in layout even through much rebuilding has occurred.

Many opportunities to obtain archaeological information in advance of development have been missed. Recently work has been done revealing remains of medieval houses, but earlier developments were carried out with little or no investigation. The opportunity to fully recover the archaeology of remaining vacant plots must not be missed if these are to be developed in future.

Archaeologically the back gardens, former burgrave plots, are of high potential, almost certainly preserving significant archaeological remains that would enlighten the history of the medieval borough, especially rubbish pits, wells, traces of small scale industry, etc. It is important that the question of the sand deposits is investigated and that there is no automatic assumption that all layers overlying the sand are recent.

The former location of Y Plas must also be considered to be of very high potential. This is currently in the corner of a pasture field that has so far avoided redevelopment. The lack of use of this site since Y Plas was demolished and the fact that the building was not rebuilt in 19<sup>th</sup> century, suggests a very high likelihood of survival of early post medieval and medieval remains.

The Prichard Jones Institute and its cottages and the Ebeneser Chapel are protected as listed buildings, but the

significance of other buildings is less clear. There are certainly good examples of early 19<sup>th</sup> century vernacular architecture, but the only probable surviving 18<sup>th</sup> century house is Pengamfa. However there remains the possibility that early fabric survives within houses rebuilt in the early or even later 19<sup>th</sup> century and this possibility should not be discounted without interior inspections.

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Gwynedd Archaeological Trust  
Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd

Craig Beuno, Ffordd y Garth, Bangor, Gwynedd. LL57 2RT  
Ffon: 01248 352535. Ffacs: 01248 370925. email: gat@heneb.co.uk

