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Routes of Change on Anglesey

By Marc Collinson, Shaun Evans, Matthew Rowland, Mari Wiliam, and Catrin Williams

A research collaboration between the Bodorgan Estate, in the south-west of Anglesey, and the Institute for the Study of Welsh Estates (ISWE) at Bangor University, is shedding light on how the estate was put to a variety of uses during and after the Second World War.

The Bodorgan Estate is constructing a new footpath through its lands as part of a landscape restoration project funded through the EU's European Agricultural Fund for Regional Development, in association with the Welsh Government. This route is intended to incorporate heritage interpretation installations, designed to draw public attention to various aspects of landscape, social and cultural history associated with the route. For historians interested in rural society, any infrastructure project that affects the landscape provides an opportunity to consider how it has been shaped, used and experienced over time. wartime and post-war periods can be understood through the prism of the landed estate, during a period when their role and influence in society was quickly diminishing on a national scale. With this in mind, researchers from ISWE and two postgraduate interns, Matthew Rowland and Catrin Williams, were excited to join the project, and undertake archival and oral history research to discover the significance of two features in the economic, social, and military history of south-west Anglesey: the legacy of RAF Bodorgan, and the impact of the 'Llanverian Experiment'

RAF Bodorgan

RAF Bodorgan was a Second World War airbase located on the grounds of the estate. A satellite airfield constructed for the Royal Air Force from late 1940, it was known as RAF Aberffraw until 1941, and closed in September 1945. The airbase was initially home to radio-controlled target planes for use in the training of anti-aircraft gunners at the nearby Ty Croes firing range. It later provided camouflaged storage for RAF reserve aircraft, being located out of range from all but the most audacious Luftwaffe operations. Such ancillary sites demonstrate how large tracts of the British countryside, including landed estates, were occupied and used by the state for the duration of the war.

The appropriation of sites for military purposes was often accompanied by major landscape change, including the construction of new buildings and adaptations to local infrastructure. This, in turn, affected the state and appearance of the land when it returned to its original owners or was put up for sale. Field boundaries were moved, and landscape was altered in places to improve the grassed runway. While the hangars at Bodorgan were dismantled after the war, other buildings remained

intact for decades, utilised as storage facilities for agriculture and, in the case of Bodorgan, also providing much-needed accommodation for the growing rural workforce associated with the 'Llanverian experiment' that followed between 1951 and 1965. In fact, archival evidence held by the Bodorgan Estate show that it was these buildings, together with the nearby lake water supply, that had led the Ministry of Agriculture to consider the estate's potential for large-scale agricultural experimentation.

The Experiment at Llanfeirian

The 'Llanverian Experiment' was introduced in the post-war period. Named after an area of the Bodorgan estate (Llanverian being the anglicised form of Llanfeirian), this was a radical initiative that imagined how land within the estate boundaries might be managed after it was vacated by the Royal Air Force. It was led by Peter Scott under the auspices of Welsh Agriculture and Industries Limited. Scott had been a force in the ambitious interwar 'Brynmawr Experiment', based in a coal mining community in South Wales. The Brynmawr initiative developed in response to Quaker concerns over the impact of the Great Depression, transitioning into a practical assistance scheme which endeavoured to create employment through small enterprises and subsistence agriculture. This ended in 1939, after loans and grants dried up and prospective employees gained employment elsewhere. What manifested at Llanfeirian was different in character but shared similar origins.

The post-war context is crucial to understanding how the 'Llanverian Experiment' came about. The project gained support from the Development Commission, a government body created by the Development and Road Improvement Funds Act (1909) to manage investment in the rural economy. The commission had provided £143,700 in loans to the project by 1953. It followed the implementation of the Labour Government's 1947 Agriculture Act, which was designed to encourage greater agricultural efficiency and profitability, to aid the UK Government's attempts to alleviate its balance of payments' deficit. Furthermore, rural employment was scarce in the post-war period, and the experiment created employment in south-west Anglesey at a time when rural depopulation and lack of work opportunities were major problems across north-west Wales.

The project was, therefore, a direct state intervention into Anglesey's rural economy by the Labour Government and changed the relationship between the central government, county-level agricultural committees and farming communities. Sir George Meyrick, owner of the Bodorgan estate, had no choice but to lease land to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. There were even attempts to acquire his residence of Bodorgan Hall to serve as the administrative centre, but this was deemed as unnecessary and prohibitively expensive by the Ministry. Initially, Bodorgan estate staff expected the proposal to fail, with senior employees confident that the project would not even reach the stage of implementation, but this view was misplaced. Over 1,000 acres of the Bodorgan estate, including

much of the former RAF site, were taken over to facilitate agricultural and horticultural experimentation. These included the farming of the whole site as a single unit, rather than as separate tenant farms, in order to grow crops that needed to be produced on a larger scale to be economic, including grass, carrots, corn, potatoes, kale. The innovation of the project was its attempt to develop a landscape designed for small scale agriculture, into one suitable for larger scale, industrialised farming. Sources consulted show that drastic changes had to be made to the landscape, including the destruction of banks, construction of roads, installation of water pipes, drainage, boundaries, and electricity. It acted to transform the local landscape, which had developed to accommodate more traditional forms of land use.

Our next steps

Fundamentally, our project aims to better understand these events and their impacts on a rural Welsh community which had long operated as part of the Bodorgan estate. With there being little existing academic research on the 'Llanverian Experiment', one key aim is to discern whether those leading it were influenced more by notions of utopian communities and subsistence farming, as at Brynmawr, or were more focused on issues of agricultural output and efficiency. Furthermore, we want to better understand whether their aim was achieved. This is of interest to the wider project, due to its apparent contrast with the landed estate system and because it heralded significant landscape change. Although the initiative only lasted about fifteen years, being closed and sold in 1965, it has clearly left a lasting impact on the landscape, as did RAF Bodorgan before it. The main thrust of the heritage interpretation, which is still under development, will be to articulate links between land, people, place and nature, including land use and management, farming practices and the historical operation of the Bodorgan estate.

With this project, we have started to construct a clearer understanding and analysis of the 'Llanverian Experiment' and its impacts, through archives which remain at the Bodorgan Estate Office and oral history interviews with members of the community who have recollections of the period. Alongside the detailed evidence of activities which took place on the land of the estate, we have gained more of a sense of how both examples of outside intervention impacted the locality, on hamlets, villages and the daily lives and experiences residents, and in particular how the two episodes are remembered in the local community. Our initial findings will feed into heritage interpretation, which should be accessible by the summer. Longer term, our findings will inform a clearer social history of this landscape to better understand the role of outside interventions such as wartime requisition and post-war agricultural experimentation on the structures of land management of south-west Anglesey and beyond. **It has been an exciting collaborative research project to develop a distinctive and locally grounded interpretation of how wartime and post-war periods can be understood through the prism of**

the landed estate, during a period when their role and influence in society was quickly diminishing on a national scale.