

## **RESEARCHING THE HISTORY OF A RURAL WATERMILL IN WALES: A CASE STUDY OF COED TREWERNAU MILL IN RADNORSHIRE**

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I have been researching the history and context of CoedTrewernau Mill in Radnorshire for around 20 years and over that time I have found out a huge amount about the mill and its over 400 year history. This work has resulted in three papers about our mill: I wrote two of them and one was by Alan Stoyel.

These references are:

Stoyel, A. Coed Trewernau Mill: The Working Parts. *Melin 34*, 2018 pp 85-104

Walters, M. Coed Trewernau mill: The History and People. *Melin 34*, 2018 pp 51-84

Walters, M and Haines, T. A Curious Letter Written from Coed Trewernau Mill in 1819. *Transactions of the Radnorshire Society*, 2022 pp 44- 5

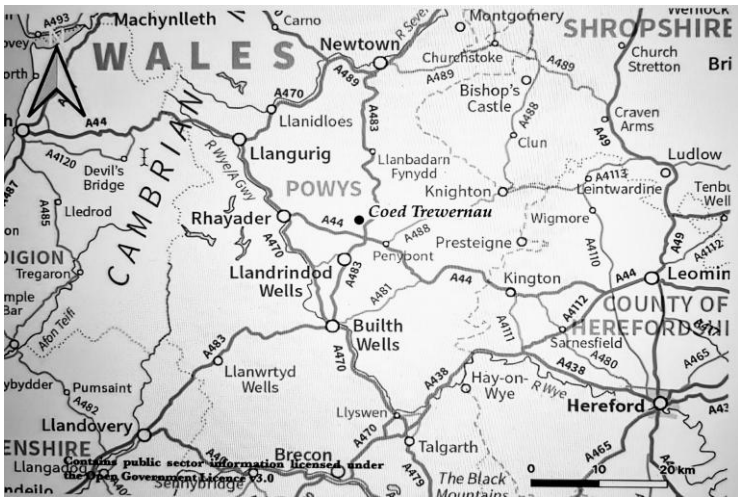


Fig 1. Location of Coed Trewernau Mill

As a member of the Welsh Mills Society committee, I am aware that there are many people who buy or take an interest in a local mill and would like to know more about it, so I am writing this paper to demonstrate the many rich sources of historical information that are available to researchers in Wales. I hope that the wealth of information I have been able to find will encourage others to do the same and be fascinated by the story that unfolds for your mill.

It is probably important to note that I am not a Welsh speaker. Radnorshire has been heavily influenced by its English neighbours so all the material that I have been working with has

been in English until very recently when I started looking at medieval documents. But they are a totally different matter, as they can be written in Old English, Latin or Old Welsh and be very difficult to read without an expert at hand.

## **First Steps: Easy (Free) Website Searches**

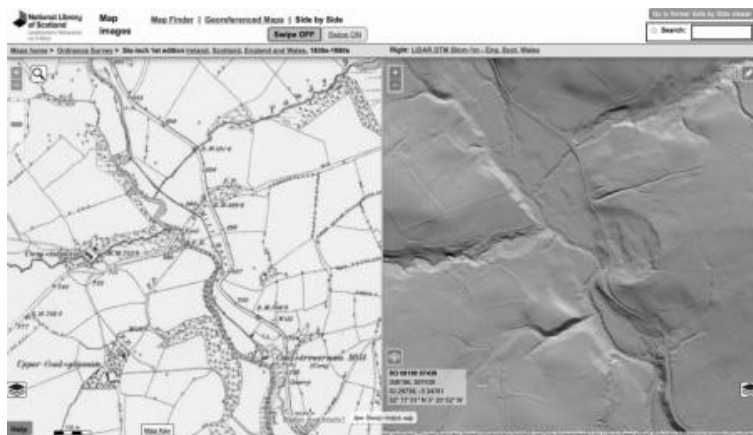
### *Maps/Satellite Imagery*

A very helpful place to start is on the National Library of Scotland side by side map viewer: <https://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/side-by-side> .

This website has a number of types of maps and aerial images covering the whole of the UK. The first reliably georeferenced maps to be produced by Ordnance Survey were the OS 1<sup>st</sup> Edition series at 6" to mile. I find that this is an excellent early map surveyed 1830s-1880s depending upon your location. The surveyors who drew up this map even plotted individual trees! The National Library of Scotland website also shows a range of satellite imagery including LiDAR. LiDAR is a remote sensing method that measures distance to the earth from an airborne aircraft and is used to create digital elevation models.



*Fig 2. Coed Trewernau Mill (photograph with kind permission of Keith Morris)*



*Fig 3. Screenshot of National Library of Scotland Side by Side mapping showing 6 inch 1st Edition mapping and LiDAR for the area around Coed Trewernau Mill*

The other early mapping that is available on-line is the tithe map, produced around 1840. The tithe mapping 'apportionments' list landowners, tenants, and land use for each field. This mapping is provided by National Library of Wales and can be found at <https://places.library.wales>.



Fig. 4 Tithe map (1839) for the area around Coed Trewernau Mill

At this point in your research, you may realise that your mill had a range of names or, at the very least, a range of spelling. I suggest that you make a list of all the name/spelling variants you come across. I was fortunate that Coed Trewernau is not a common name, but I still had many variants including:

Koed y Werney	Coideverny
Koed Tre Warney	Coedawernny
Coed Werny	Coed Trewerni
Coed y Werny	Coedtrewerney
Coedrhyurerni	Coed Trewernny



Fig 5. *Map of Parishes showing the location of Coed Trewernau*

Many mills changed their use from fulling mill to corn mill during their life. In our case, we know that there was a fulling mill at our site first, and a corn mill was added later and that it outlived the fulling mill. Also, be aware of the parish that your

mill is in, and the names of the adjacent parishes if you are close to a boundary. You can find parish boundaries on OS maps such as the modern OS Explorer maps. Sometimes recorders made errors in parish allocation. Also, be aware that the current parish boundaries only came into being in 1851. At this time, some new parishes emerged. In our case, we are in the parish of Llanddewi Ystradenni, but very close to the boundary with the parish of Nantmel.

The tithe apportionment tables that accompany the tithe maps are usually ordered by township and it is worth being aware of your township too. Townships are an old land subdivision that goes back to medieval times or even before and this land subdivision may be referred to in old documents such as indentures (legal agreements). Our mill is in the township of Mystyrrhosllowdy.

It is also useful to have at hand the grid reference for your site and the postcode.

## **On-line Historical Databases**

The two main databases to search are:

- The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales. <https://cbhc.gov.uk/>

- Coflein <https://coflein.gov.uk/en/>

If your site is in Coflein, then the database may indicate that the Royal Commission (based in Aberystwyth) holds undigitized material about your site such as photographs and drawings. The Archwilio website allows you to download some reference material.

The regional archaeological trusts in Wales have recently merged and are now under the name Heneb.



Fig 7. Screenshot from Archwilio for the area around Coed Treverau

It is highly likely that your site will be in one or both of these databases and they will give an excellent summary of the heritage

at your location, but these data sources are not set up to tell you about the people who lived there or the commercial or practical aspects of running a mill at your site.

### **More In-depth Study: Visits to Libraries**

Following your research, you will probably know the condition of your mill in the mid-1800s and whether extensive research at the site has already taken place by other researchers. My recommendation is that, at this point, you also familiarise yourself with adjacent farm names – particularly those owned by the same landowner at the time of the tithe – and also some general local history for your immediate area, including where the landowner Estates were and the family names involved, routeways, etc. You will probably get this from the online journals on the National Library of Wales website. Having this familiarity means that you are able to widen your research from your mill to other people and events in the locality which you may find have a bearing on your mill.

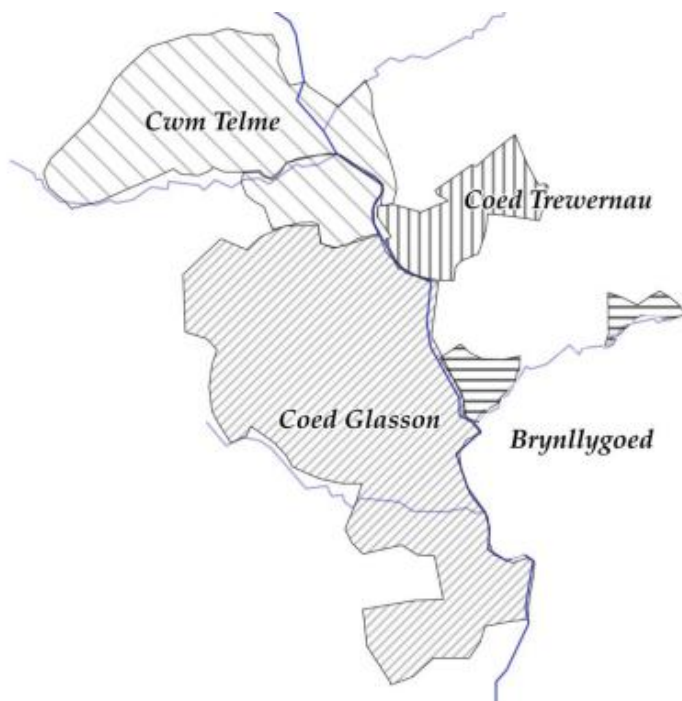


Fig 8. *Farms bought by Crawshay and Joseph Bailey*

At this point in my research, I had discovered that by the time of the tithe mapping Crawshay Bailey and Joseph Bailey, iron masters from Nantyglo near Brynmawr, had bought a group of properties near to and including Coed Trewernau Mill. This was a really interesting development. As far as I am able to find out, this purchase was one of the most northerly land purchases this family made as they used their huge wealth to acquire land in south and central Wales. Iron from their foundry would have

been used in the burgeoning railway network, and a railway was constructed within a few miles of our mill by 1864. Could that have stimulated the interest, or was it to do with prospecting for coal, before it was understood that the geology is not suitable in mid Wales? Estate documents by Layton Cooke (1822) for the adjacent Abbey Cwm Hir estate comment on the likelihood of finding coal.

### **Local County Archive and Local Reference Library**

Your local libraries will be able to give you free access to family history databases such as [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) and [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com) to enable you to see the census information for your mill and surrounding properties. The first census available is 1841 and they are available at 10-year intervals after that up to 1921. The information available becomes more extensive in later censuses but essentially you will learn the names of the occupants, their relationships, occupations, birthplaces and their age.

Both these family history databases will also link to Birth/Baptism, Marriage and Death registers, so you can research the nineteenth century and early twentieth century occupants and their ancestors and children. It was through this information that we know the millers from 1841 onwards and also the periods

of time that the head of the household did not describe themselves as a miller. We also know that a second family lived in our adjacent fulling mill in 1851. This explains the space within the fulling mill ‘factory’ that had lath and plaster on the walls.

Your Local County Archive will have an online catalogue of all the material that it holds and it was through their records (in my case using both Powys County Archive and Shropshire County Archive) that I found a series of documents that referred to our mill. These were:

- Indentures
- Land Tax Assessments
- Sales particulars

Digitisation projects are ongoing at many libraries, so you may be fortunate that some of the information that you find may be available online. If they are not digitised then you will need to visit the relevant library in person to view the material. In my research, my initial focus on just our mill revealed that from 1635 it had been part of an estate belonging to the Hanmer family who owned nearby Llanddewi Hall. Llanddewi Hall was built around 1560-70 by Owen Phillips, chief constable of the Hundred of Knighton and it is unsurprising that this estate owned other

properties near to our mill too. This ownership tells a wider story as the Hanmer family's main residence was at Pentrepant in Shropshire. Land ownership by distant landowners was quite common in Radnorshire at this time and for the next 300 years.

I was extremely fortunate that in the 1970s Ruth Bidgood conducted very detailed research into the owners of Llanddewi Hall, and her series of papers in the *Transactions of the Radnorshire Society* in 1974, 1975 and 1976 were invaluable. They alerted me to the very complicated indentures that can be found over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when many of these landed estates had financial problems and land was mortgaged or leased in quite complicated ways, meaning it is very easy to lose track of who the real landowner was. On one occasion our mill, along with some other local properties, was 'sold' for an extremely small amount of money and we have concluded that this was probably part of a marriage settlement.

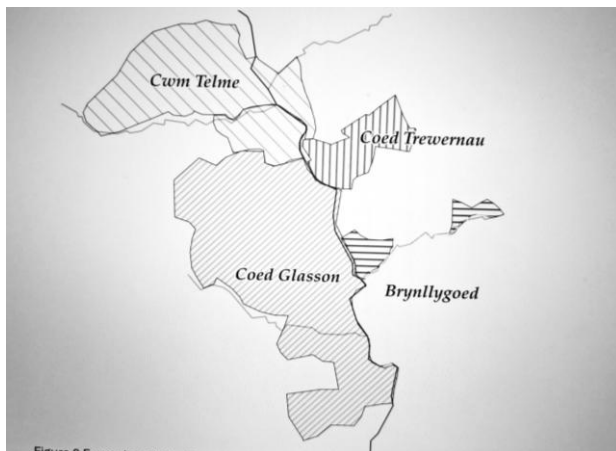


Fig 9. Map from 1906 Glanusk sale documents.  
(Reproduced by permission of Powys Archive)

It was through Sales particulars that I learnt that the descendants of Crawshay Bailey (the Glanusk Estate) put our mill up for sale in 1906.

The Land Tax Assessments (typically available from late nineteenth century to early nineteenth century) can also be useful as they provide a pre-tithe and pre-Census way to link landowners and tenants to parishes.

Other local libraries that I consulted were:

- Llandrindod Wells Reference Library
- Radnorshire Society Library

Using these libraries, I found books describing aspects of local history that have helped me to put our mill in the context of local events and people.

### **Using your Local Historian(s)**

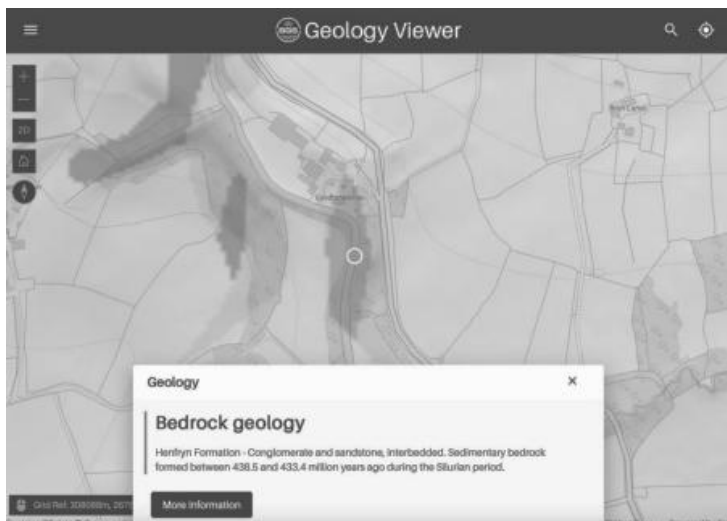
Many of the old counties of Wales have local history societies. In our case this is the Radnorshire Society. Let them know about your research and they may well be able to point you towards a local historian who can give you a lot of background to the area. In my case, Julian Lovell of Abbeycwmhir had been researching the area for many years and he was able to tell me about important events and people.

This knowledge of local historical events helped us to date the construction of our cottage. Julian Lovell pointed out the local brickworks, a few miles from us, that provided bricks for the local area until the arrival of the railway. We can see that these relatively low-quality bricks have been used to form the window arches for some of our windows and so we can conclude that these parts of our cottage were built before 1864.

As with many mills, we know that the demand for iron for the Second World War led to our waterwheel being sold for reworking into armaments, etc. We have also been curious about

the source of the very substantial sandstone blocks used in the construction of our mill. The area around our mill is notoriously short of good natural building stone, as it is predominantly very fissile Silurian shales. However, an examination of the geology map for our area shows there is sandstone nearby, and close examination of the First Edition OS maps shows that this sandstone was quarried – almost certainly the source of our building stone.

The geology of your area can be viewed on the British Geological Survey website at: <https://geologyviewer.bgs.ac.uk>.



*Fig 10. Screenshot from BGS Geology Viewer with source of the building stone for our mill highlighted.*

You may also want to contact your county family history society. In our case, Jennifer Lewis of Powys Family History Society helped us to piece together some families and family events.

### **National Library of Wales/ National Archives/ Royal Commission/ Mills Archive**

A search of Coflein will have given you an understanding of the information that the Royal Commission holds for your site. Whilst a summary and some photos might be available online, they may well have a number of un-digitised records. If this is the case, you will need to visit the Royal Commission in Aberystwyth. I found a survey of our mill conducted in 1987 by Miss M Brown of Ironbridge, and a number of photos.

The Royal Commission also holds a set of 'blueprint' early 25 inch to the mile OS maps for most of Wales which show the interim mark-ups of the surveyor, some of which didn't make it into the next edition of the map. They may show details of gardens, mill leats, wheel pits, etc. that are not available elsewhere.

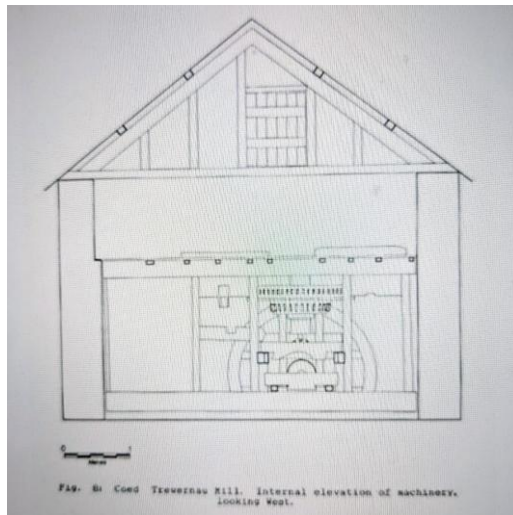


Fig 11. *Example of drawing from Miss M Brown's survey*

## **National Library of Wales (Aberystwyth)**

The National Library of Wales holds an important set of maps that are precursors to the OS First Edition. They are referred to as the 1817 Surveyors Maps and although not absolutely to scale they show place names and roads/tracks at that time. The National Library may also hold indentures and other relevant documents. They have hard copies of all the Local History Society journals so that you can look at more recent years that haven't been digitised and put online. They also have a vast collection of reference books.

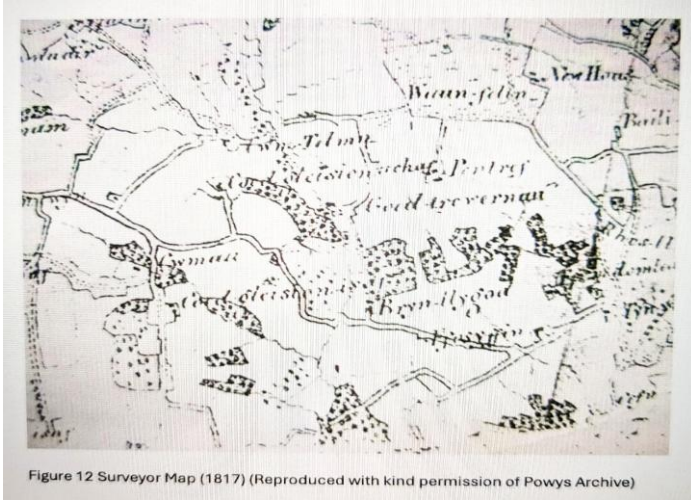


Fig 12. *Surveyor Map (1817)*  
(Reproduced with kind permission of Powys Archive)

Although it is an online resource, I mention here the National Library's digital newspaper records. <https://newspapers.library.wales>. This is a fabulous resource to have free online, but my own experience is that it came into its own when my research was well advanced and I knew particular people and events that I wanted to find more about.

### **National Archive (Kew, London)**

It may be rather difficult to predict in advance whether the National Archive at Kew will have any relevant records for your mill. It is probably more likely if your mill has medieval origins.

In our case, although we haven't found direct reference to a mill on our site in the middle ages, there is a view that the existence of a mill in the seventeenth century is suggestive of an earlier presence. The problem with trying to find your mill in medieval documents is that the documents will be written in Old English, Latin or Old Welsh, all of which can be pretty impenetrable unless you can find a transcription.

However, if your mill is near a parish boundary you might find that it features in one of the OS Remarks Books which are also held at the National Archive. These were surveys of parish boundaries conducted prior to the OS First<sup>t</sup> Edition map. In our case, we are very close to a parish boundary, and the relevant remark book, surveyed in 1886, shows that our leat was discontinuous at that time. Interestingly, in the 1891 census the head of the household at Trewernau still described himself as a 'farmer and miller'.

### **Mills Archive (Reading)**

Your use of the Mills Archive catalogue may indicate that they hold material that might be useful for your research. In the case of libraries, it is worth making contact with the organisation and explaining your research as the archivist may be able to think of

material that could be relevant. If you are lucky, it may have been digitised so you can see it, if you are not able to visit the library.

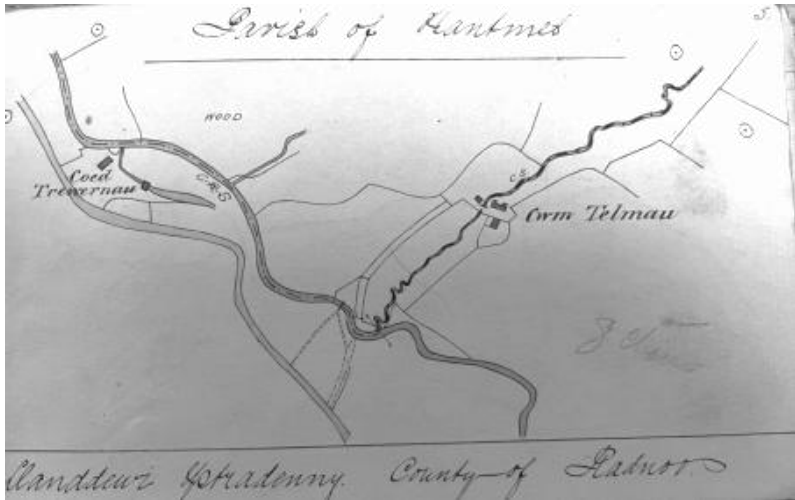


Fig 13. *Page from OS Remark Book (1886) for the Parish of Nantmel, Llanddewi Ystradenny*

## **Serendipity**

If you have made your research known to local historians there is always the possibility that something unexpected will turn up. In our case, we have two examples of this. In 2021, we were contacted by a philatelist, through the Radnorshire Society. He

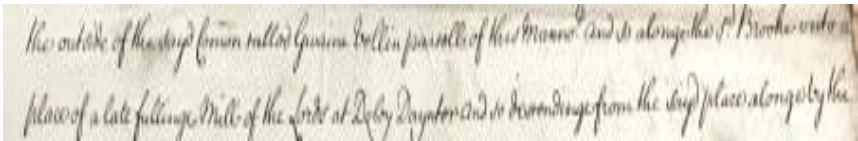
had purchased a letter, as part of a bundle of letters, written by the tenant at our mill in 1819 to the landowner – Harriett Fencott of Presteigne – asking for help, as they were being threatened by men with firearms. This letter led us to do a huge amount of research into the characters associated with this correspondence, and we wrote a paper in the *Transactions of Radnorshire Society* about our findings.

The story included links to a failed bank in Rhayader, Percy Bysshe Shelley (the writer) who lived for a while at Nantgwyllt House near Rhayader, and the interpretation of a will of a wealthy tanner in Presteigne called John Fencott whose will had a number of contradictory codicils. Soo Linacre of Presteigne, local researcher for the Judges Lodgings there, did a wonderful job helping us with our research.

There has been a question hanging over us about a stream near us called Pandy Brook. Did Pandy Brook have a fulling mill? Geoff Ridyard thought that, on balance, the name of the brook was linked to our fulling mill, and for many years I have also argued that the reason for the brook's name is that for a while it was engineered to feed directly into our leat. However, this argument was recently found wanting, when, conducting separate research about the Cistercian Abbey at Abbeycwmhir, I

found two perambulations of the Lordship of Abbeycwmhir and Manor of Gollon dated 1672 and 1796. We are not in the area inside the perambulation but Pandy Brook forms part of the boundary and to my amazement the perambulations describe the site of an ancient fulling mill now derelict called Doley Bayuter in the earlier perambulation. So, there was a fulling mill there after all. The topography of the valley is not conducive to driving a water wheel so maybe this was a walkmill? It was described as ‘the late fullinge mill of the Lords’ in 1672 and therefore almost certainly a fulling mill to meet the needs of the Cistercian abbey nearby which was dissolved by Henry VIII in 1534.

The first reference to our mill was in 1635. Perhaps our water driven fulling mill was a post-Dissolution answer to the need for a fulling mill in our area?



*Fig 15. Part of the 1672 perambulation*

## **In Conclusion**

I can only encourage you to see what you can find, and I'm sure that when you have conducted your research (which of course never actually stops), the editor of *Melin* will be delighted to receive any paper that you decide to write. In addition to *Melin*, do consider whether there may be other organisations that would like to receive your research. Maybe a County Records Office, the Mills Archive, the National Monuments Record held by the Royal Commission, or maybe a specialist museum. Do talk to possible organisations to find out how they would like your material to be ordered and indexed. Whatever research you decide to do, I'm sure that you will find it a fascinating and absorbing journey. Enjoy!

This paper has attempted to show the fascinating journey that can unfold when you explore the heritage of your mill. In Wales, we are extremely fortunate to have a number of information sources free online including:

- Tithe maps
- Newspapers
- Many Welsh Journals
- Archwilio and Coflein databases
- The Scottish Libraries side-by-side mapping is also extremely valuable

