WHAT DOES A MERCENARY LEAVE BEHIND?
THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE ESTATES OF OWAIN LAWGOCH

Spencer Gavin Smith
University of East Anglia

The medieval mercenary and his impact on the society in which he lived and died is usually discussed in terms of his exploits on the battlefield, his collection of the spoils of war (either hostages or something of more immediate financial worth) and then the subsequent relation of stories about his life in chronicles of the period or fictional tales created later using facets from several different characters and events. Equally important, however, for the study of the personality of the medieval mercenary is the question of what does a mercenary leave behind when he is employed to fight abroad; what archaeological evidence can be recovered relating to his estates and property, and what can they tell us about why he would choose the life of a mercenary.

In July 2003 a memorial was unveiled in the French town of Mortagne-sur-Gironde to commemorate one of the most important mercenary captains fighting for France during the Hundred Years War. His name was Owain ap Thomas, better known as Owain Lawgoch (Owain of the Red Hand) or Yvain de Galles (Owain of Wales). What makes this particular mercenary all the more fascinating is that he was the last direct descendant of the House of Gwynedd, a Prince of Wales by birthright, and a man well aware of his status in society. A miniature of his assassination at the siege of the castle of Mortagne-sur-Gironde is to be found in Jean de Wavrin’s Chronique d’Angleterre which is now preserved in the British Library.¹ How Owain ap Thomas came to be known as Owain Lawgoch, his career, and how he was assassinated under the orders of the English Crown at the siege of Mortagne-sur-Gironde in 1378 have already been discussed by A.D. Carr in a book based in part on research carried out by Edward Owen for an article published in 1900.²

As well the historical dimension to the study of the mercenaries such as Owain Lawgoch and the world in which he and his contemporaries...
lived and died in there is also the archaeological dimension to be considered. This archaeological dimension can take many forms; from studies of the location of battlefields and their preservation as sites of historic and archaeological interest through studies of skeletal remains from battlefields and the study of arms and armour of the medieval period and their efficiency.³

An archaeological dimension can also mean the property and related landscapes of a medieval mercenary. An example of this is Bodiam Castle in Sussex where it appears that Sir Edward Dallyngrigge spent some of his profits from the Hundred Years War on building a castle and setting it in a designed landscape although whether or not Dallyngrigge could be considered or perceived as a mercenary is a moot point.⁴ Studies of the archaeology of the high-status medieval landscape are beginning to reveal a previously unknown degree of sophistication as regards the planning and layout of designed landscapes around medieval castles and high-status houses during the medieval period.⁵

Given the status of Owain Lawgoch, his father Thomas ap Rhodri and grandfather Rhodri ap Gruffudd, what kind of property and estates did Owain leave behind when he travelled to serve in France and what information is already known about these estates? The estates were originally identified by Edward Owen and the chronology of their acquisition was refined by A.D. Carr. This study was developed in an attempt to identify the remains of the estates surviving today. The four estates are Bidfield, Gloucestershire; Althurst, Cheshire; Tatsfield, Surrey and Plas yn Dinas, Montgomeryshire. The four estates were acquired by Owain’s grandfather and father between 1270 and 1322. Each of the estates seems to have been acquired through a different method and this has some significance when the interpretation of the historical and archaeological evidence is considered. Bidfield seems to have been provided by King Edward I for Rhodri ap Gruffudd in order that he was close to the Queen Mother, Eleanor of Provence in her residence at Gloucester Castle. Rhodri had spent much of his early life as a political hostage of the English Crown and later seems to have been part of the household of the Queen Mother, a time which included a visit to France in January 1275.⁶ Althurst was purchased between 1301 and 1305 by Rhodri and his second wife Katherine; Tatsfield is recorded as being in Rhodri’s possession in 1309 when he presents to the Rectory and Plas yn Dinas was inherited by Thomas ap Rhodri on the death of his brother in law in 1332.⁷ These then are the estates...