

Parc Cybi, Holyhead

A Summary of the Discoveries of the Archaeological Excavations



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

PARC CYBI, HOLYHEAD
A Summary of the Discoveries of the Archaeological Excavations

By Jane Kenney

Contents

Introduction	2
Mesolithic Period	6
Neolithic Period	7
Beaker Period	17
The Bronze Age	18
The Iron Age	23
The Roman Period	39
Early Medieval Settlement	44
Medieval Period	45
18 th and 19 th Century Farmsteads	47
Conclusions	48
Acknowledgments	49
Glossary	49

PARC CYBI, HOLYHEAD

A Summary of the Discoveries of the Archaeological Excavations

By Jane Kenney



Plate 1. Ploughsoil stripping starting at Parc Cybi. View looking south with the A55 on the left and Kingsland Road on the right (photograph by David Longley)

Introduction

In 2006 to 2008 and 2009 to 2010, Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (GAT) carried out archaeological excavations in advance of a major Welsh Government development site, called Parc Cybi, on the southern edge of Holyhead (figure 1).

Over 20 hectares were investigated to reveal a busy and complex archaeological landscape (plate 1), featuring sites and finds dating from the Mesolithic period through to the present day. Highlights included the remains of a 6000 year old Neolithic timber hall, an Iron Age village occupied over 2000 years ago, and burial sites of the Bronze Age and Early Medieval period. Evidence for farming and craft industries illustrates the everyday life of the inhabitants. This wealth of new information has helped archaeologists to review many long-standing ideas, and to better understand how humans have lived in, and transformed the landscape of Holy Island.

Parc Cybi is located on Holy Island, a small island just off the west coast of Anglesey, rich in archaeology of all periods. The landscape is low-lying with boggy hollows and rocky ridges, but Holy Island is dominated by Holyhead Mountain to the north-west of Holyhead. Holyhead Mountain is 220m high and can be clearly seen from most parts of Parc Cybi.

Welsh Government identified land to the south of Holyhead for development as a Mixed Use

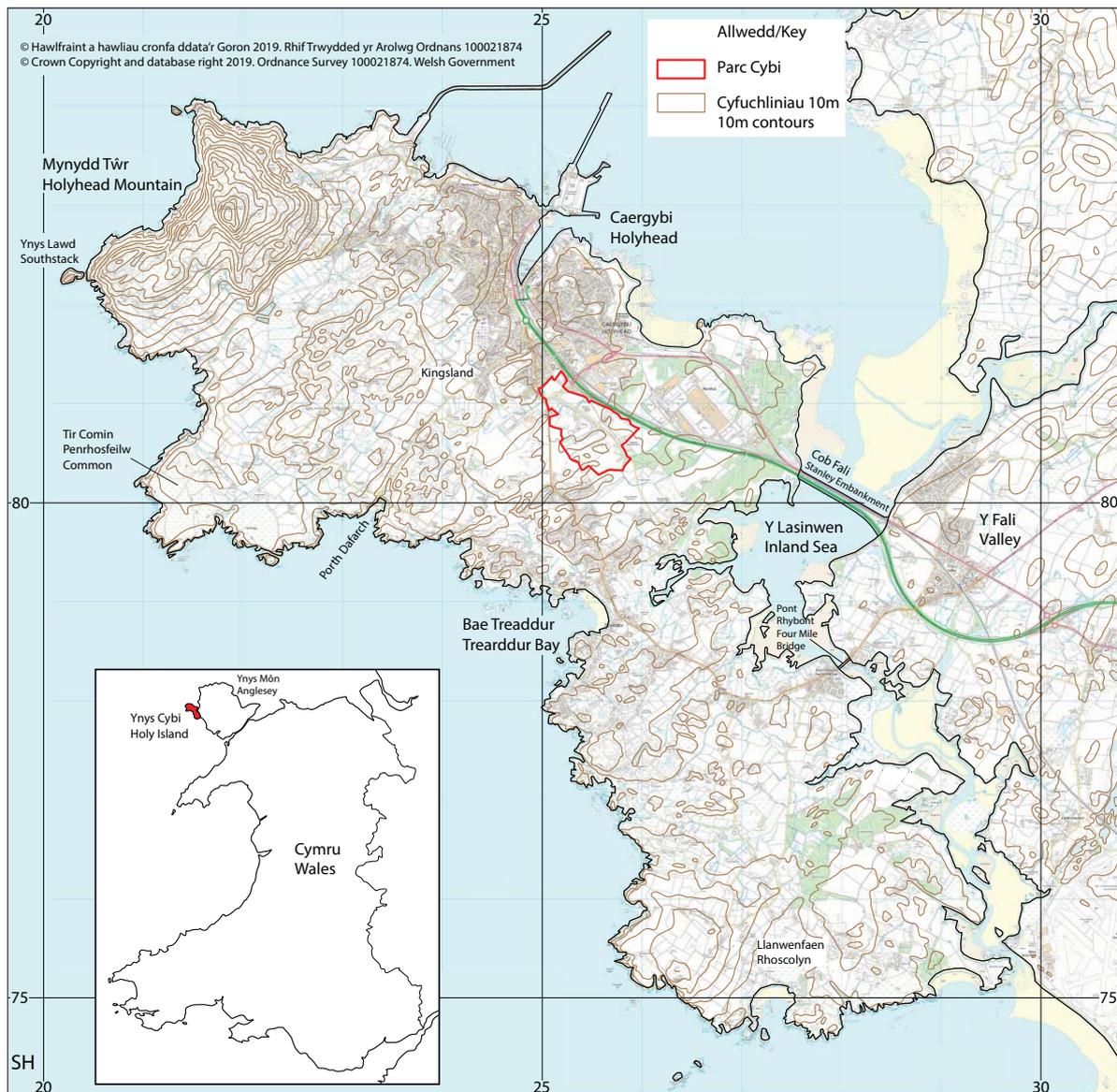


Figure 1. Location of Parc Cybi and topography of Holy Island

Figure 2. Plan showing Parc Cybi and the areas investigated



Plate 2. A view of Parc Cybi in 2019



Development Site to aid the regeneration of the area. The site was developed with European Union Objective 1 funding.

Sites already familiar to archaeologists, such as the Tŷ Mawr standing stone, Trefignath Chambered Tomb, and other archaeological sites in the area suggested that there was a high potential for the presence of significant buried archaeology at Parc Cybi.

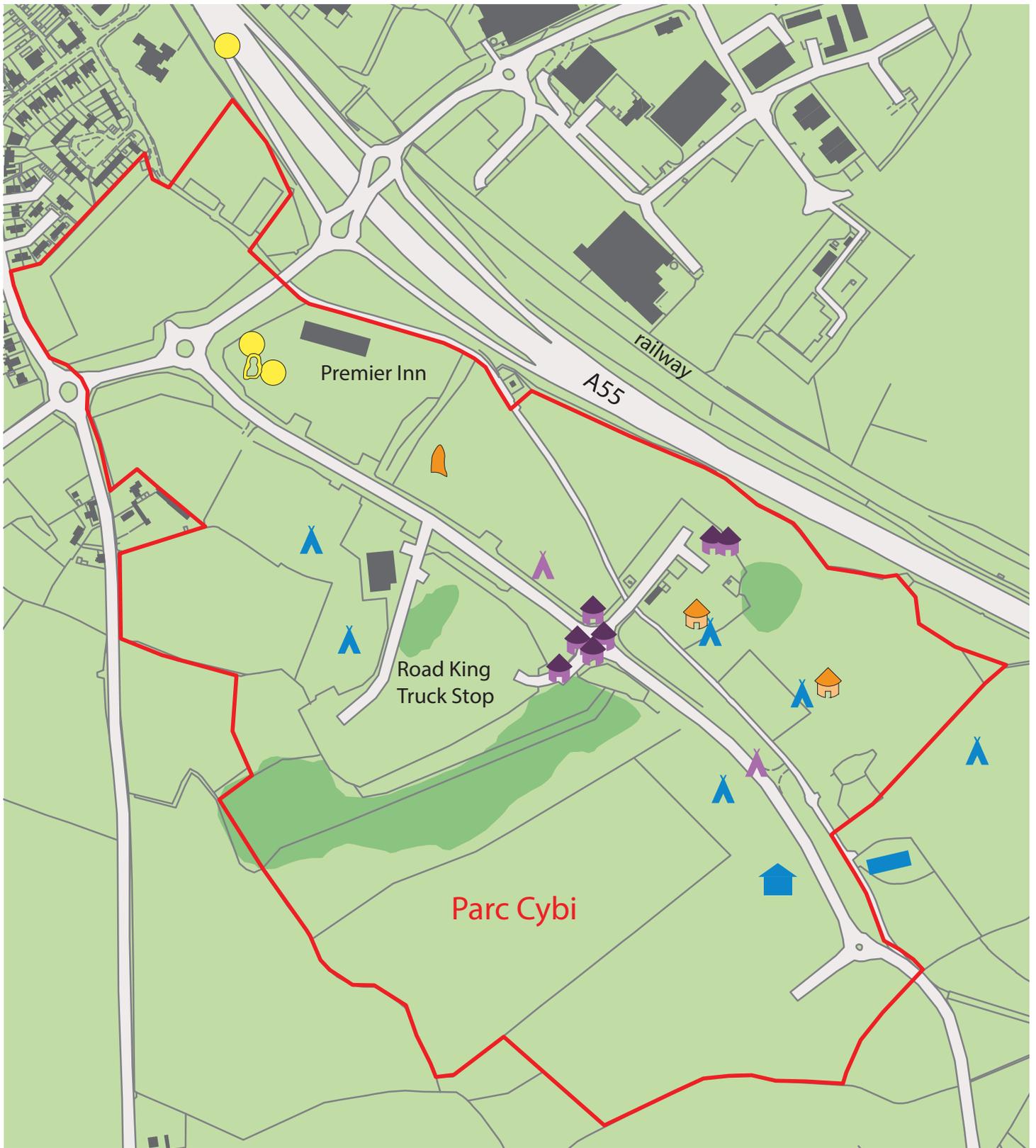
To investigate this an initial programme of archaeological assessment was undertaken. This revealed that there was indeed archaeology present in many parts of the site, and that a full archaeological investigation would be required to ensure that, where archaeological remains could not be preserved, they were fully excavated and recorded. The archaeological excavations were carried out alongside the construction of roads and other infrastructure on the site, and when the excavations were completed, the soil was replaced and reseeded with grass to await future construction on specific plots. Development has taken place on the site since the end of the archaeological excavations and, in 2019, there is a Road King Truckstop and a Premier Inn Hotel now operating on Parc Cybi (plate 2).

In order to reveal all the archaeology on the site the mixed and disturbed ploughsoil was removed using mechanical excavators (plate 3). This was done in a carefully controlled manner under archaeological supervision to ensure that archaeological deposits and features were not damaged. As archaeological features were revealed, their location was plotted and sample excavations were carried out to determine the character and importance of the features. The information gained from this process was then used to determine the extent of further detailed excavation.

Once significant archaeological deposits or features were identified these were cleaned by hand, using either a trowel or hoe, to ensure they could be clearly seen. They were then excavated in detail, and recorded by planning, photography and written descriptions. The locations of finds were recorded and then the finds were lifted and boxed or bagged for analysis. Soil samples were taken for flotation and wet sieving to separate out charred plant remains for analysis.



Plate 3. Machines stripping topsoil and ploughsoil with archaeological monitoring



- | | | | | | |
|---|-----------------------------|---|---------------------------|---|---------------------|
|  | Neolithic Chambered Tomb |  | Bronze Age round barrow |  | Iron Age roundhouse |
|  | Early Neolithic timber hall |  | Bronze Age monument |  | Iron Age hut |
|  | Neolithic huts |  | Standing stone |  | Marsh |
| | |  | Probable Bronze Age house | | |

Figure 3. Location of prehistoric sites across Parc Cybi

Figure 2 shows exactly which areas were investigated. Over such a large site, the excavation was a massive job and involved numerous mechanical excavators and large dumper trucks to move the soil, and a team of up to 40 professional archaeologists.

An excavation on this scale produces huge quantities of plans, photographs, notes, finds and samples that all need to be processed, analysed, understood and included in a report that describes what was found. This information has all been brought together with interpretation and discussion into a detailed archive report, which is available on-line (<http://www.heneb.co.uk/parccybi/technicalreports.html>), and a book will also be published.

This report provides a summary of the results of the excavation. Figure 3 shows where the sites of prehistoric date were found.

Mesolithic Period

After the end of the last Ice Age, as the temperature warmed, woodland developed across what had been frozen wastes and people returned to the land that was to become Britain. At this time, Britain was not yet an island, but part of the European continent.

The people who occupied Britain during this period, which lasted from approximately 9,500 BC to 4,000 BC, lived by hunting animals, gathering plants, and fishing in the sea and rivers. This period is known by archaeologists as the Mesolithic period.

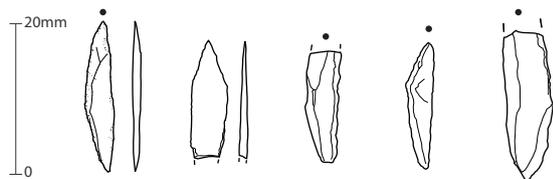


Plate 4. Microliths (small Mesolithic flint tools) found on Parc Cybi (drawn by George Smith)

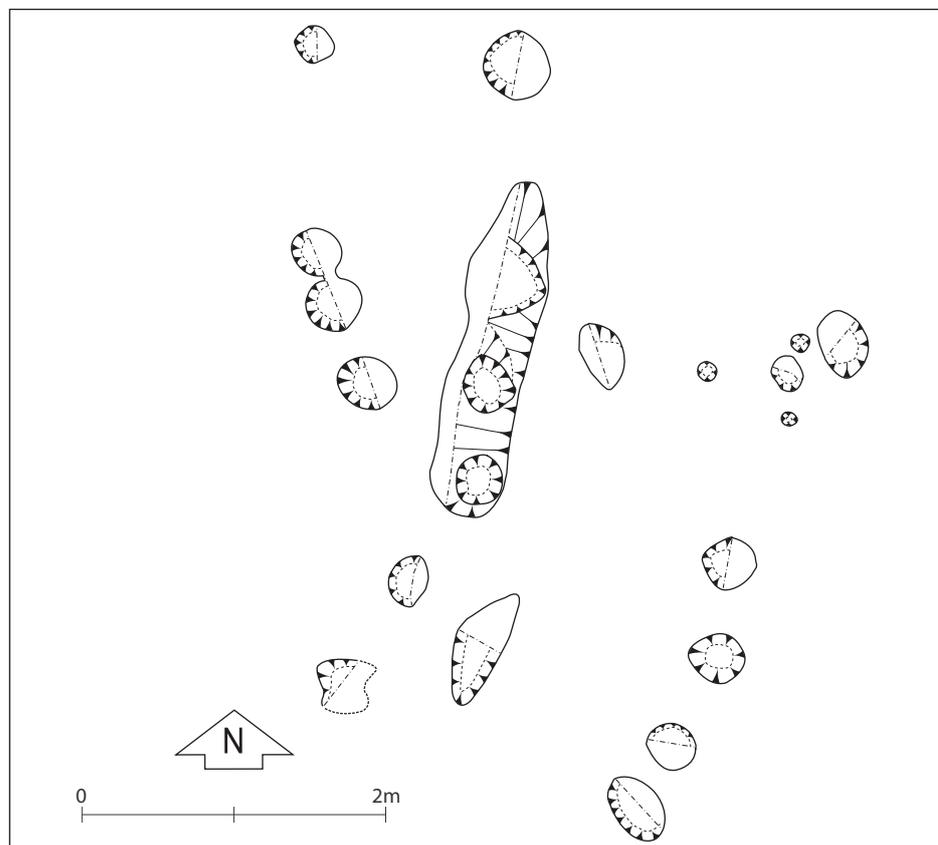


Figure 4. Postholes defining a small structure that might be Mesolithic in date

There were certainly people living on Holy Island in the Mesolithic period, though neither this nor Anglesey were yet islands. Not far from Parc Cybi Mesolithic flint flakes have been found on Penrhosfeilw Common, but on Parc Cybi there were only slight traces of Mesolithic activity. These included a few distinctive flint tools, known as microliths, scattered over the site (plate 4). However, radiocarbon dates hint that there may have been a small structure used in the Mesolithic period (figure 4).

Neolithic Period

The transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic period occurred about 4000 BC and it was marked by a number of significant changes, including the introduction of new farming crops and livestock, the production of pottery, and the use of polished stone axes. New funerary practices, accompanied by the construction of monumental stone burial chambers, have left a lasting mark on the landscape. The Neolithic period is considered to have continued until about 2500 BC. The excavations at Parc Cybi identified a range of different sites dating to the Neolithic period and a significant quantity of Neolithic pottery.



Plate 5. Trefignath chambered tomb

Trefignath Chambered Tomb

The Trefignath Chambered Tomb stands just outside the Parc Cybi development (plate 5). It was fully excavated in the late 1970s by Christopher Smith for the Welsh Office in advance of consolidation of the monument. The excavation revealed a complex monument that developed in three phases. It was first built, perhaps about 3800 BC, as a chamber in a small round cairn (mound of stones). It was rebuilt with a long cairn and a larger chamber opening towards the sunrise, and was then extended and a third chamber added.

The cairn was originally much higher than at present but the stone was re-used for field walls. The tomb might not have survived at all, but in the early 19th century, Lady Stanley of Penrhos prevented further destruction and ensured the preservation of the monument. The tomb is now in Cadw Guardianship and open to visit.

Early Neolithic Hall

One of the more significant sites on Parc Cybi consisted of the remains of an Early Neolithic rectangular building. This was defined by the postholes and foundations slots that survived in the ground, and showed where the timber superstructure had been built (plate 6).

This building was about 15m long and 6m wide and would have been an impressive structure, which might be described as a hall (figure 5, plate 7). Buildings of this kind are quite rare but have been found across Britain and Ireland, with very large examples being found in Scotland. They were used for a short period near the start of the Neolithic, and were followed by the construction of much smaller houses and large ceremonial monuments.

KEY

- Building outline
- Aisle posthole
- Wall trench
- Hearth
- Posthole
- Pit
- Possible pit or posthole
- Postpipe
- Cannel coal bead

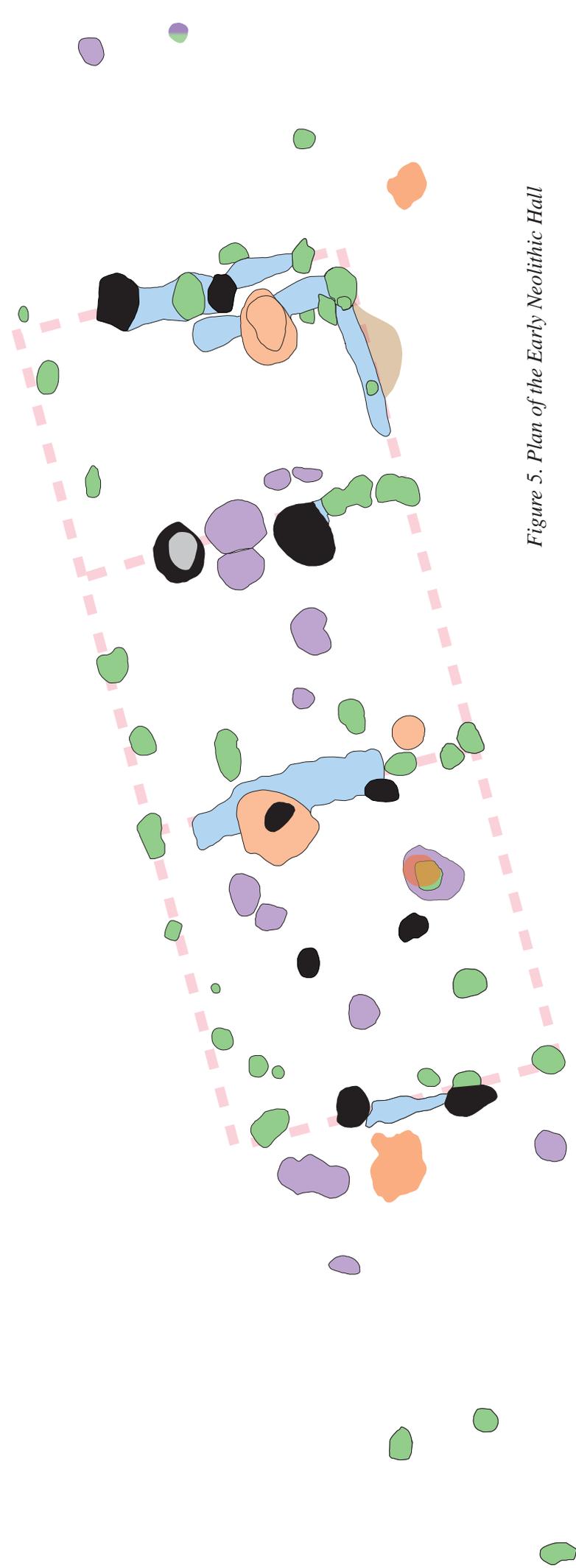
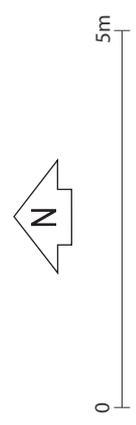


Figure 5. Plan of the Early Neolithic Hall



Plate 6. Early Neolithic timber hall from the eastern end during excavation, showing the packing stones in the eastern gable end to support posts and planking for the end wall

Radiocarbon dates show that the Parc Cybi building was used between approximately 3700 and 3600 BC. This is much the same as a similar building excavated by GAT at Llandygai near Bangor, which was used probably from just before 3700 BC to just after 3600 BC.

The hall at Parc Cybi contained scatters of domestic waste in the form of sherds of pottery, flakes of flint and fragments of burnt bone; there were also saddle querns for grinding grain. It would seem, therefore, that people were living in the building. However, other factors suggest it may have been more than a home. The hall was aligned on the Trefignath chambered tomb, which seems to have been rebuilt to follow this alignment (figure 6). This link between the hall and the tomb suggests the hall may also have had a ceremonial function.



Plate 7. The Early Neolithic hall as it might have looked in use (drawn by Helen Flook)

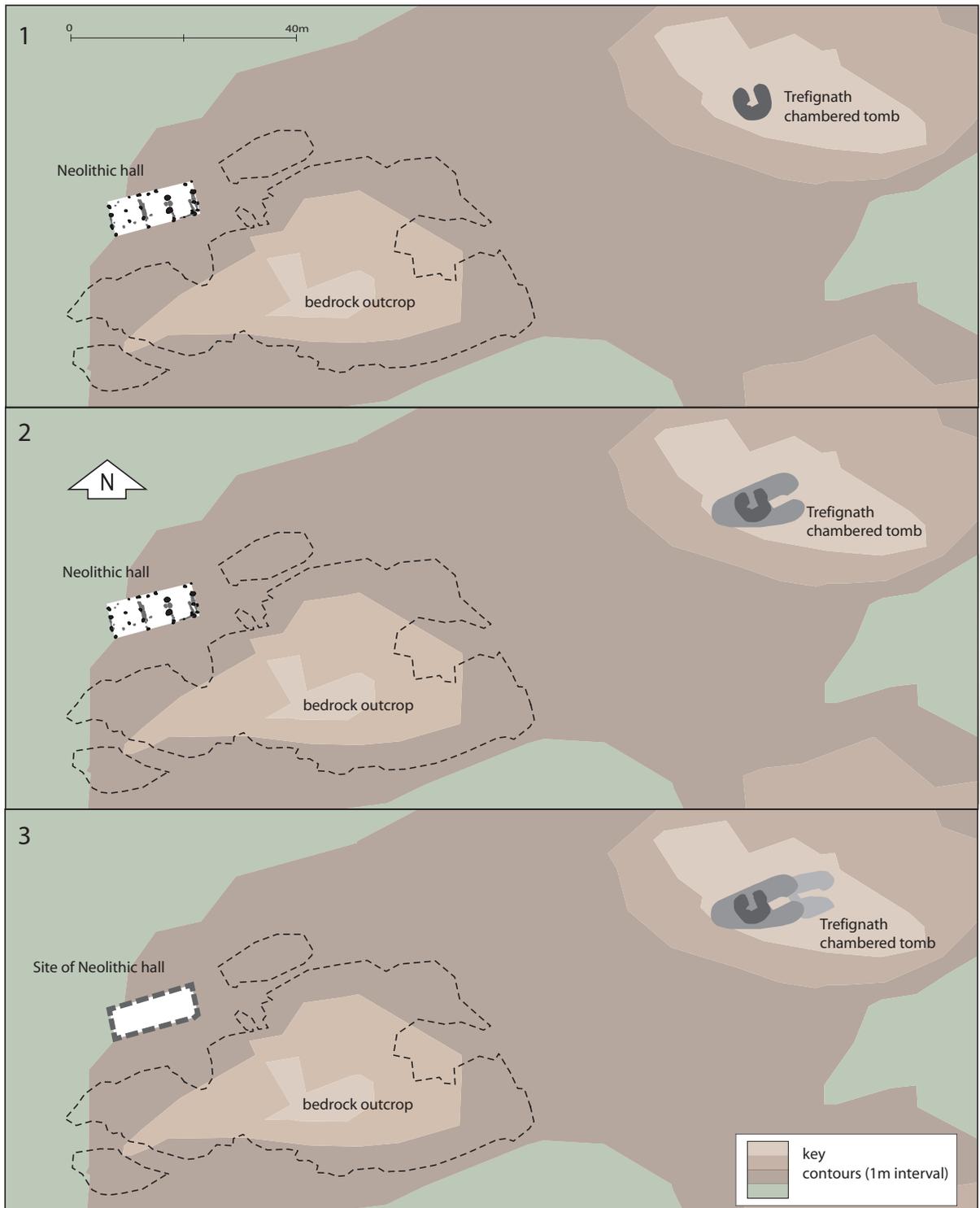


Figure 6. Relationship of the Early Neolithic hall and the tomb at the three stages of the tomb's development



Plate 8. Pit hearths dug and used after the hall had been demolished

Two pits containing a sequence of hearths were dug through several structural features, indicating that the pits were dug after the building had been demolished (plate 8). However, the radiocarbon dates from these pits and the pottery they contained were the same as those from the building, so the pits must have been dug very soon after the hall was demolished. These hearths may have been used to prepare food for a feast commemorating the end of the life of the building.

The most significant find came not directly from the building but from an isolated posthole that lay to the north. This find was a large bead made of cannel-coal (a type of oil shale that looks much like jet), but the bead had been lost or discarded before it was finished (plate 9). Radiocarbon dates from the posthole showed that the bead was made when the hall was in use, and this means that it is the only known jet-like Neolithic bead from Wales.

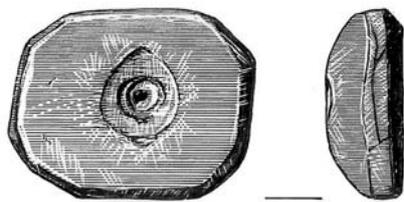


Plate 9. Drawing and photographs of cannel coal bead (drawing by Marion O'Neil and photograph by Alison Sheridan)



0 20mm



1



2



Early Neolithic Temporary Occupation Site

In contrast to the timber hall, there was also evidence for a more temporary or lightly-built structure. In a natural hollow a patch of buried soil and a few small features survived destruction by ploughing (figure 7). The buried soil was full of pot sherds and flint flakes. These, along with a scatter of holes that had held stakes and posts, and some basic hearths, showed that people had been living here, although possibly only on a seasonal or temporary basis.



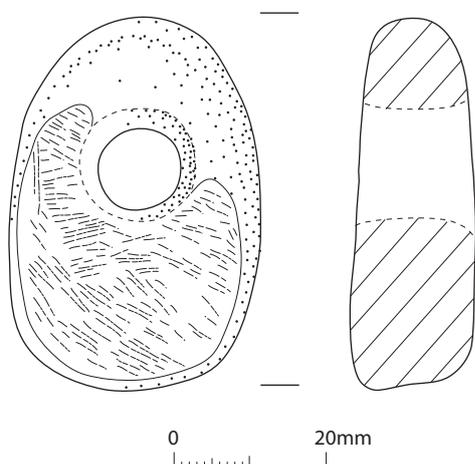
Plate 10. Leaf-shaped arrowhead found under burnt mound

The pottery and radiocarbon dates showed that the hollow was used mainly in the Early Neolithic period; about 3700-3600 BC, when the hall was in use. It was also used several centuries later and it is likely that people came back to this location repeatedly. In the Late Neolithic the shelter of the hollow was used for cooking in a pit with hot stones, and remains of flint objects, including an arrowhead, lay in the vicinity (plate 10). Shortly after 2000 BC, the hollow was used again by people with a different style of pottery, known as Beaker pottery.

Evidence for similar, probably temporary, occupation was also found at the northern end of the site, where there were scatters of Early Neolithic pottery associated with postholes and pits.

Later Neolithic Settlement

Across Britain, later in the Neolithic period (from about 3400 BC to 2500 BC), domestic buildings were generally small and short-lived. In some places large buildings were built, but they were ceremonial and round, unlike the earlier tradition of rectangular buildings (except in Orkney where large rectangular stone buildings were constructed). Occupation of this period is often marked by groups of small pits, usually indicating the site of a hut. At Parc Cybi there were several such groups of pits and one had the remains of a hearth, probably originally bordered by stone slabs. This was very similar to hearths found in the 1980s at Trelystan, Powys, but these were preserved under a burial cairn and so still had traces of stake walls of small huts surrounding the hearths. The hearth at Parc Cybi was also probably originally in the middle



of a small hut, and the other groups of pits are also likely to have been within small circular huts (figure 8). A late Neolithic structure found under the later roundhouse settlement appeared to have been nearly square, though only about 5m across.

In all cases, there was quite a lot of broken pottery in the pits, as well as flint flakes, tiny fragments of burnt bone and charcoal. This mixture of waste

Plate 11. Drawing of stone macehead from a Middle Neolithic pit group (drawn by Tanya Williams)

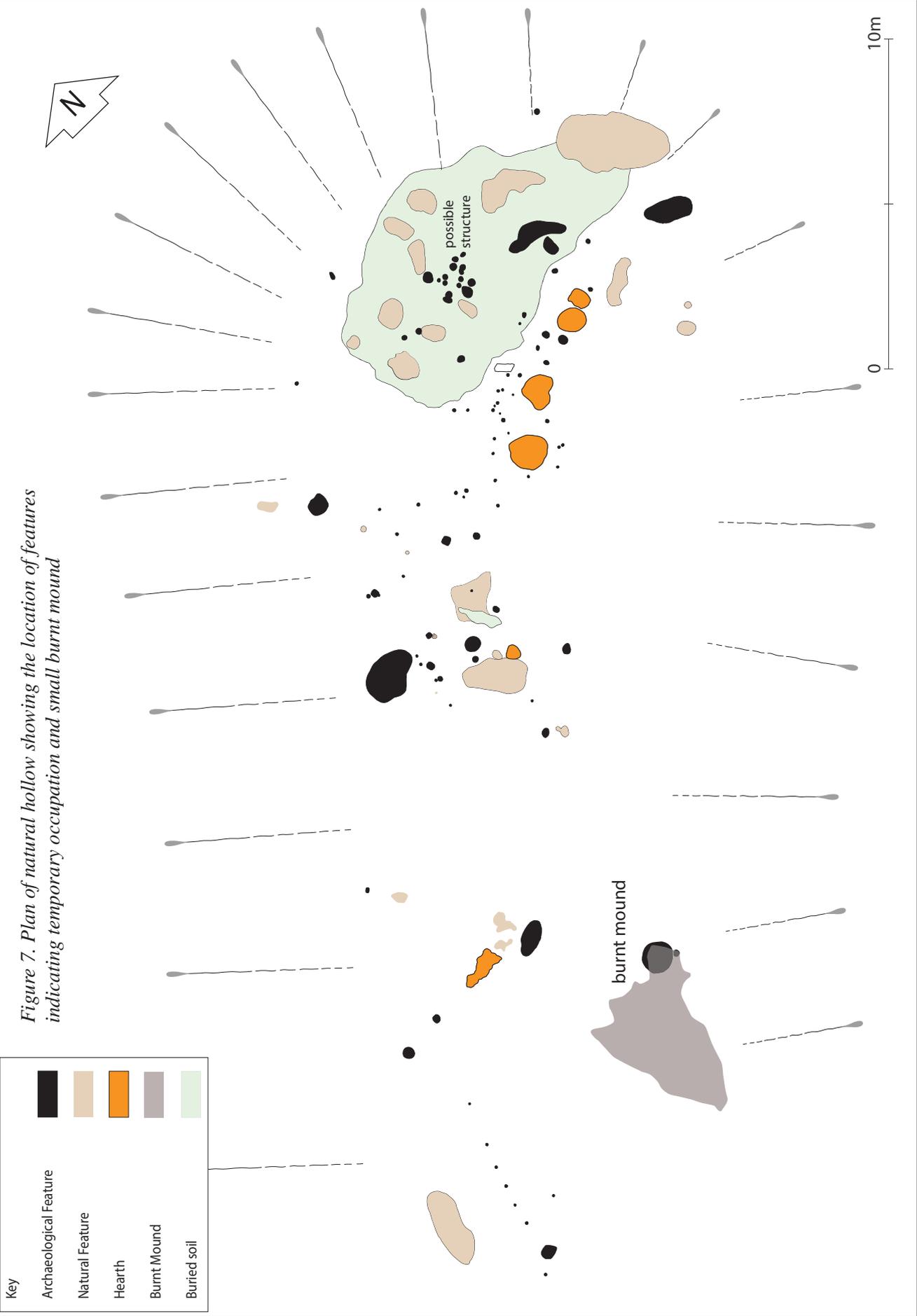


Figure 7. Plan of natural hollow showing the location of features indicating temporary occupation and small burnt mound

Key	
	Archaeological Feature
	Natural Feature
	Hearth
	Burnt Mound
	Buried soil

materials suggests that the pits were backfilled with soil from a rubbish dump. Why this valuable compost was buried in pits is something that archaeologists have discussed extensively, but it is possible that it was an offering to ensure the fertility of livestock and crops.

The pottery found in the pits was rather crudely made, but highly decorated. One pit also contained a stone macehead (plate 11) that may have been a status symbol or even a weapon; though one end was rather battered, suggesting it had been used for practical purposes.

Neolithic Pottery

The pottery made at the start of the Neolithic period was the earliest pottery produced in Wales. It is fine and well-made, but undecorated (plate 12). The surface often has traces of burnishing, where a pebble has been used to smooth it. Few of the bases of the pots survived at Parc Cybi but usually they have rounded bases, which allow them to be placed on uneven ground without falling over, and some pots have a distinct neck and shoulder.

From about 3400 BC a pottery type, known as Peterborough Ware, can be found across Britain (plate 13). This pottery is coarser than the earlier type but exuberantly decorated. Although the pottery was made locally, the styles of decoration and vessel shape were similar over a wide area, showing contact between communities.

From about 3000 BC a style known as Grooved Ware appears, which probably developed in Orkney and then spread across Britain. This is usually decorated with grooved lines, but some pots at Parc Cybi also have moulded and stamped decoration (plate 14). The pots were often bucket-shaped with flat bases. This pottery shows how ideas developed as far away as the Northern Isles could spread into North Wales.

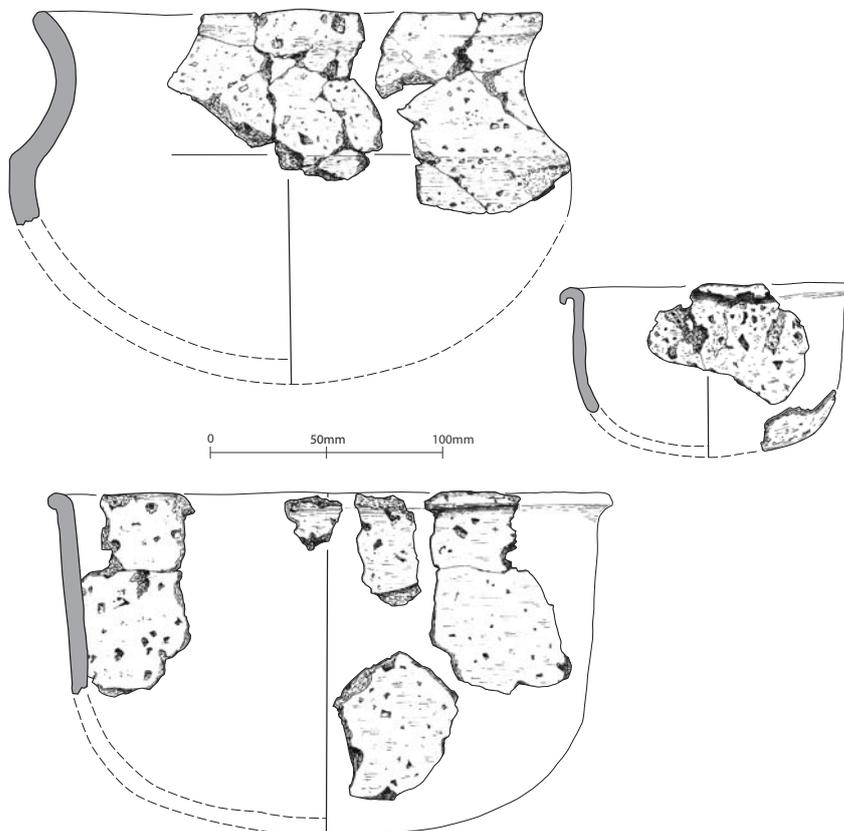
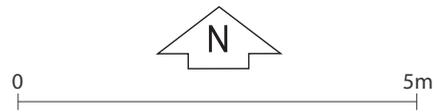
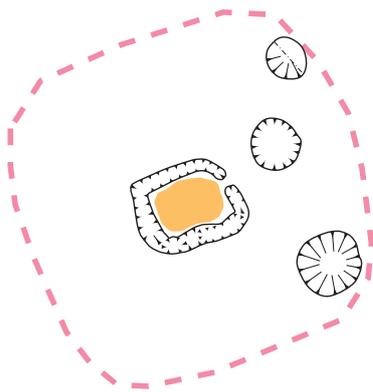
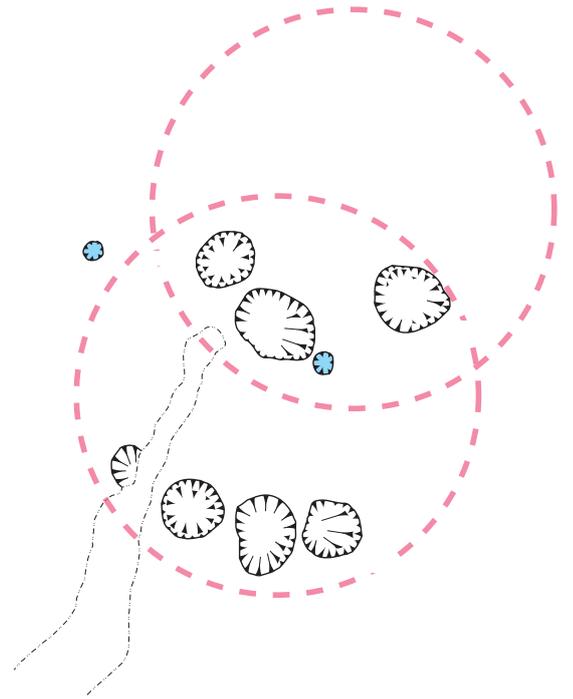
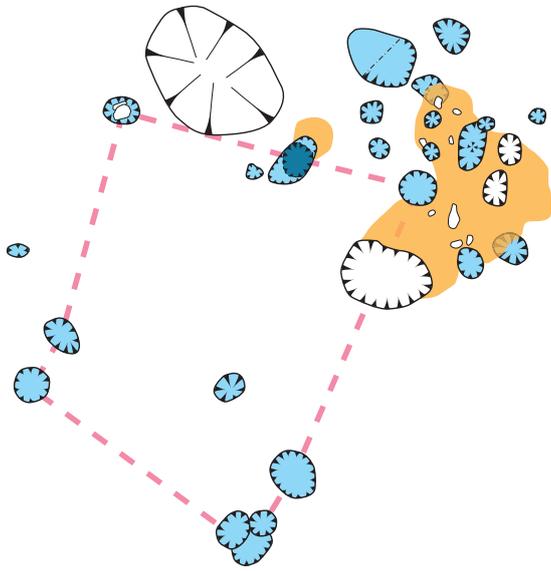


Plate 12. Examples of some of the Early Neolithic pottery found at Parc Cybi (drawn by Frances Lynch)



- Key
- Hearth
 - Posthole
 - Later disturbance
 - ★ Macehead
 - Possible outline of structure

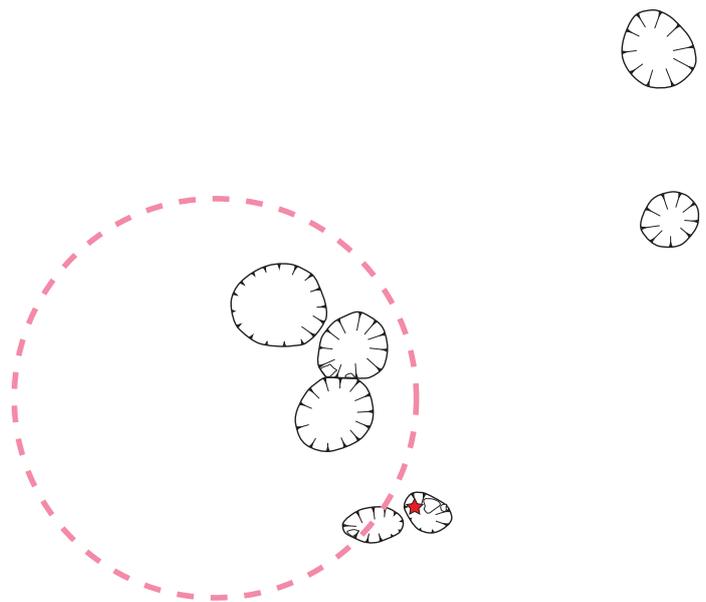


Figure 8. Plans of Middle and Late Neolithic pit groups showing their interpretation as evidence for huts

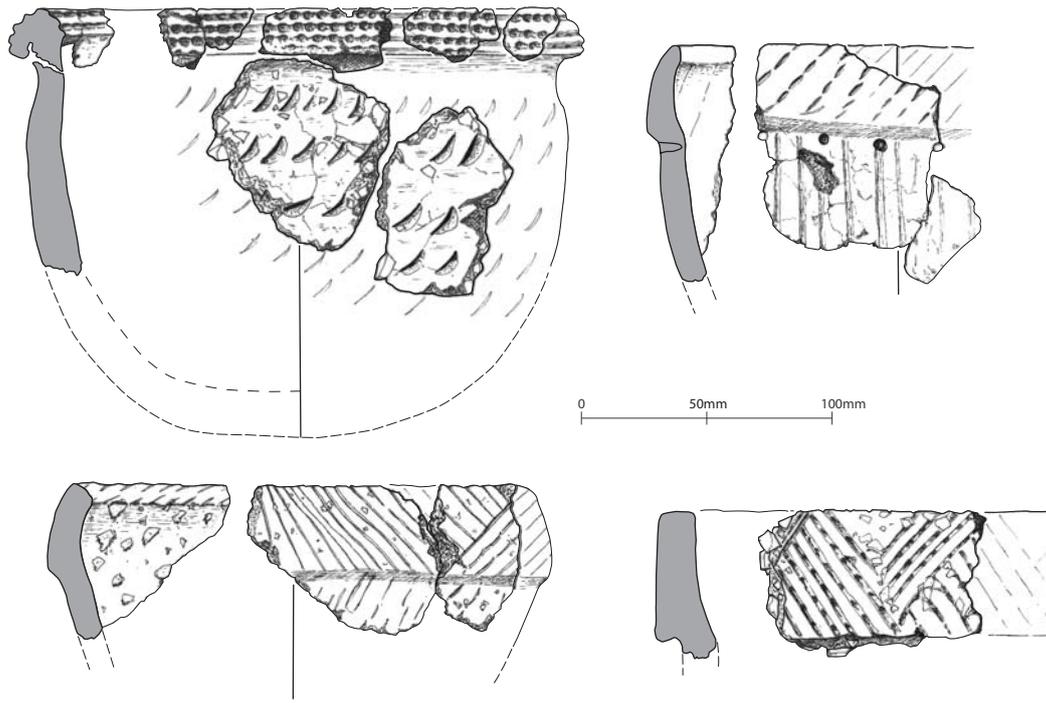


Plate 13. Examples of Middle Neolithic Peterborough Ware pottery from Parc Cybi (drawn by Frances Lynch)

Fats from cooking and food processing can be absorbed by pottery vessels and can survive millennia. By analysing these fat residues it is possible to see what the pots were used for. The fat residues were analysed from pot sherds from the Early Neolithic hall and the temporary Early Neolithic occupation site. At both sites it was demonstrated that the pottery had been used only for holding and cooking dairy products.

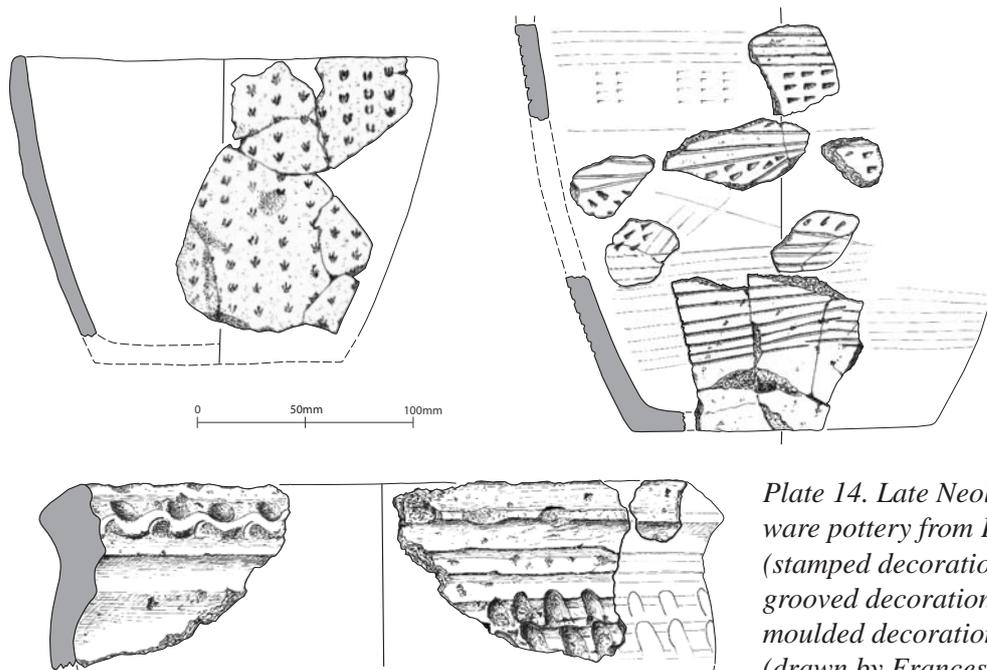


Plate 14. Late Neolithic Grooved ware pottery from Parc Cybi (stamped decoration (top left), grooved decoration (top right), moulded decoration (bottom) (drawn by Frances Lynch)

Other such studies have shown that whilst dairy products were important in the Neolithic period, the same pots were also used for cooking other food, such as meat and vegetables. At Parc Cybi, their sole use for dairy products suggests that meat and vegetables must have been cooked in other types of containers or on the open fire.

Neolithic Farming

The Neolithic period was when farming was introduced to Britain. This would have been mixed farming with livestock, sheep, cattle and pig, as well as cereal cultivation. It is difficult to study Neolithic livestock in most of Wales because the acid soils generally do not preserve bone. However, elsewhere in Britain cattle were important from the start of the Neolithic, with pigs increasing in importance in some places later on. The evidence of milk residues in the Early Neolithic pottery at Parc Cybi shows that cattle, and possibly also sheep, were being kept for milk right from the start of farming in the area. Cereal cultivation is easier to detect in Wales as charred grains survive well in the soil and cereal pollen can also be found in peat bogs. The cereals grown were primitive forms of wheat and barley that had first developed in the Middle East. Some charred cereal grains were found in the Early Neolithic hall at Parc Cybi, showing that cereals were grown in the vicinity and processed or stored in the building. Fewer grains were found in the later Neolithic pits, but some were present, so there was arable agriculture in the later Neolithic.

As the land was mostly covered with woodland, clearings would have been made for both pasture and arable cultivation. Pollen analysis suggests that these would not have been permanent fields, but would have reverted to woodland again after a few decades. People may have moved extensively around the landscape tending crops and particularly finding grazing for their livestock. The Early Neolithic temporary occupation site could have been used by people herding cattle or sheep. The slight huts of the later Neolithic suggest that they may have moved around more than the Early Neolithic people, perhaps relying more on their livestock, though they must have had some cereals growing in small plots within their territory. The Trefnath burial chamber may have been a focal point within that territory.

Beaker Period

Between the Neolithic Period and Bronze Age (roughly 2500 to 2000 BC) lies a short period termed the Beaker Period. This was when later Neolithic monuments such as henges (large ceremonial monuments with ditches and banks) and stone circles were still being used, and even built, but new burial traditions were being introduced and copper working started.

Individual burial in square stone chambers known as “cists” was typical of this period. The burial was often accompanied with one or more pottery vessels known as “Beakers”, because they appeared to be drinking vessels (plate 15). The period is named after these distinctive pots, which have been found across much of Europe.

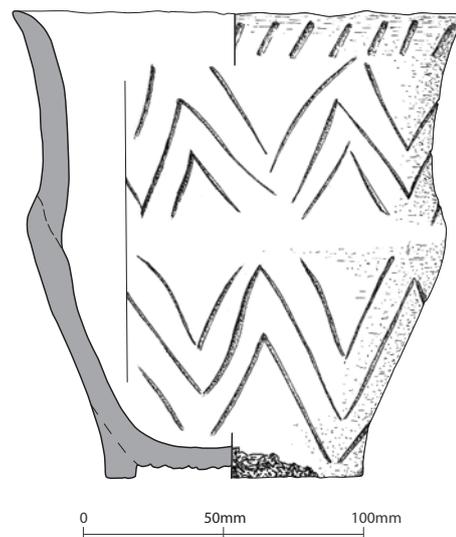


Plate 15. Beaker pot found in cist at Parc Cybi (drawn by Frances Lynch)

This pottery type and the burials continued after 2000 BC into the Bronze Age. The Beaker Period can be seen as a link between the Neolithic and Bronze Age, though recent genetic evidence suggests that there may have been a distinct change at this time, with people moving into Britain from the continent.

At Parc Cybi during this period, the hollow, used in the Early Neolithic Period, was re-occupied by people using Beaker pottery. A substantial burnt mound was also dated to this period. Burnt mounds are sites where water was heated in a pit or trough using hot stones from a nearby fire. After use, the stones were discarded in a mound around the trough, and the water, which could be kept simmering for a long time, was probably used for cooking and other functions. In north-west Wales these sites were used from about 2500 BC until 1000 BC, with a few earlier examples. There was a small burnt mound at Parc Cybi that was dated to the Late Neolithic but the larger mound was first used at the start of the Beaker period and continued in use through the Bronze Age, with three main phases of use. This mound had two troughs for boiling water and another pit that was probably an oven. It also had a very large pit, the sides of which had collapsed as if under-mined by water (plate 16). This pit seems to have been a well. It was backfilled, redug, backfilled again, and finally the infilled pit was reused as a trough. This shows how these sites were repeatedly used and altered.



Plate 16. Troughs and well under the Beaker period burnt mound

The Bronze Age

The Bronze Age lasted from about 2000 BC to 800 BC. This period is characterised by the technology to alloy copper with other metals, producing bronze. However, bronze tools were rare at first and it is by a change in burial practice that the period is most easily recognised.

In many parts of Britain, it was during the Bronze Age that fields were first defined by ditches, banks or walls, and this was accompanied by more extensive clearance of trees and an increase in settlements. However, Bronze Age houses have proved difficult to find in north-west Wales, unlike the burials, which are common. It is probable that, because of the way they were constructed, some Bronze Age houses do not survive well in the archaeological record. It is also likely that some of the round-house settlements were first built in the Bronze Age, however it is only with good dating evidence that these can be differentiated from Iron Age houses and settlements.



Plate 17. The larger cists excavated at Parc Cybi, the smaller ones have already been recorded and removed

Multiple Cist Barrow

A group of eight burial cists were found at the northern end of Parc Cybi (plate 17). A cist is a stone chamber set into the ground, usually to hold a single burial. Five of these were large square cists, big enough for an adult, though the body would have been placed in a crouched position, not laid out straight. Three of the cists were very small, probably for children. Two of the small cists were positioned close to large cists, perhaps suggesting a connection between the buried individuals. The close spacing of all the cists suggests that they were laid out with the intention of covering the cemetery with a mound of earth (a barrow) once all the burials had been interred. This would make it a multiple cist barrow, a site type that is very rare in North Wales. No trace of the barrow was found, however it is likely that it had been built and subsequently levelled by ploughing.



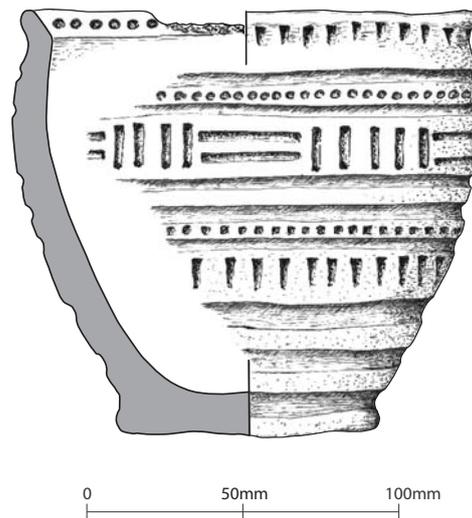
Plate 18. Beaker as found in cist at Parc Cybi



Plate 19. Food Vessel as found in cist at Parc Cybi

Fats preserved in the Beaker and the Food Vessel were analysed and this showed that both had contained dairy products. The Beaker had absorbed only a small amount of fat, possibly because it had been specially made for the grave and used only once. The Food Vessel contained a high concentration of fat, probably because it was a domestic cooking pot chosen to hold an offering in the grave.

The cists were set in deep holes in the ground and sealed by large capstones, which were so well fitted that no soil seeped in to fill the cist and when the capstones were removed the cists were still entirely empty of soil. They also did not contain skeletons as water draining through the acid, well-drained soils would have leached these away, but one cist contained a Beaker and one a Bronze Age pot, known to archaeologists as a Food Vessel (plates 18 and 19). The presence of both a Beaker and the Early Bronze Age Food Vessel (plate 20) suggests that the burials dated from soon after 2000 BC, at the start of the Bronze Age.



*Plate 20. Food Vessel
(drawn by Frances Lynch)*



*Plate 21.
Ring-ditch*

Ring Ditch

Near the multiple cist barrow there was another barrow, probably added later in the Bronze Age. Although the barrow (earth mound) no longer existed it was marked by a circular ditch, from which the earth for the mound was dug (plate 21). In the later Bronze Age, cremation burials became more common and it is likely that this barrow held cremation burials either in urns, small cists or just buried in a bag. These were probably within the mound that was subsequently levelled, and no traces of burials or pottery were found. This mound may have existed until quite recently, as it seems to have been reused as a hayrick. A stone filled drain was cut into the infilled ditch to improve drainage and the eroded barrow mound would have made a dry location to build a haystack.



Plate 22. D-shaped enclosure as first exposed with infilled ditches

D-shaped Enclosure

Between these two monuments, there was also an odd ditched feature. This seems to have started as a ring ditch, then part of the ditch was infilled and the rest of the ditch redug to form a larger D-shaped enclosure (plates 22 and 23). The ditch of the enclosure was deep, about 1m in depth, despite having a small internal area. Large stones pushed into the ditch as it was filling up suggest that there may have been a stone



Plate 23. D-shaped enclosure fully excavated

structure inside. A deposit, containing rubbish, including pottery and charcoal, was also pushed into the ditch suggesting that activities were taking place inside the enclosure. The pottery was Bronze Age and the charcoal produced Bronze Age radiocarbon dates, so this monument does seem to have been Bronze Age in date, but its function is unknown. Its location between two burial mounds does suggest that this was a ceremonial monument.



Plate 24. The Ty Mawr ring ditch, with later graves dug across it

Tŷ Mawr Ring Ditch

Another barrow surrounded by a ring ditch was located 300m north-east of these monuments. This was excavated in 1999 in advance of the construction of the A55. This barrow too had been levelled, with only the ditch surviving. Stone in the ditch suggested a stone revetment around the barrow (plate 24).

Tŷ Mawr Standing Stone

Another monument forming part of this group, possibly erected later in the Bronze Age, was the Tŷ Mawr Standing Stone (plate 25). This stands in the middle of Parc Cybi, 180m south-east of the Parc Cybi ring ditch. The stone is a scheduled monument and as it is protected, the development was designed not only to avoid the stone but also to leave an area around it so that its setting can be appreciated. This means that there was no excavation immediately around the stone.

The barrows, enclosure and standing stone create a significant ceremonial landscape, which dominated this part of the site for over a millennium. In turn they may have been influenced by the siting of the Neolithic chambered tomb, which is visible on the skyline from the standing stone.

There is a footpath giving access to the stone so the public can still visit this monument and consider its location.

Plate 25. The Tŷ Mawr standing stone with the Truck Stop in the background

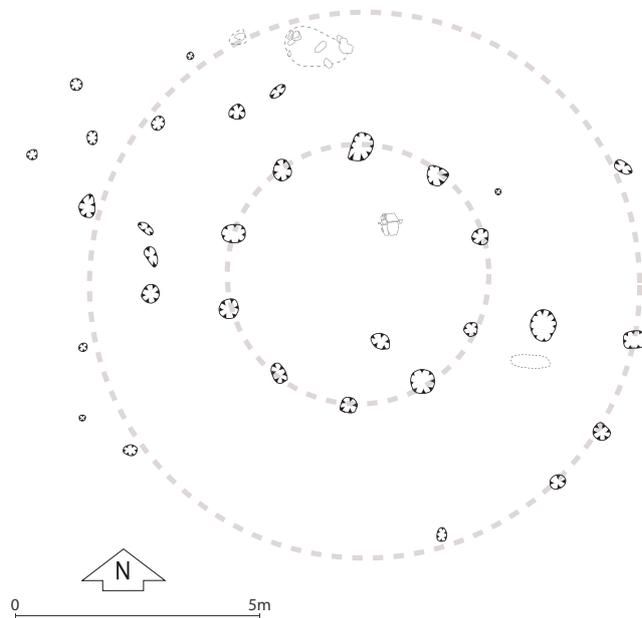


Bronze Age Settlement

It is hard to pin down where people were living in the Bronze Age at Parc Cybi. In the south-eastern part of the site, however, there were a number of structures and features which, though poorly dated, may belong to this period. These included small structures with four or six posts supporting a superstructure (plate 26), which are assumed to be granaries, and if this interpretation is correct, it suggests there was a house nearby, although no trace of one was found. A sherd of Bronze Age pottery and a small number of radiocarbon dates show that some of this activity was Bronze Age, but there was not enough evidence to prove for certain that it was all part of an extensive Bronze Age settlement.



Plate 26. Postholes for a four and a six-post structure, probably granaries, possibly Bronze Age



Not far away there were also the postholes of a substantial timber roundhouse (figure 9). It was not possible to date this building, however Early and Middle Bronze Age pottery was found close by, and there are Bronze Age parallels for this type of structure from elsewhere in Britain.

Figure 9. Plan of postholes defining a timber roundhouse

The Iron Age

Across north-west Wales there is a marked increase in settlements of Iron Age date, both as visible surviving remains, largely found in unimproved marginal areas of farmland, and as buried remains from improved agricultural land. Most settlements were small farmsteads and they seem to be distributed around territories over-looked by hill forts. Some of these hill forts were small, possibly used by local chieftains, and others were much larger, probably meeting places for tribes. On Holy Island there is a large hillfort, known as Caer y Tŵr, on top of Holyhead Mountain.

This increase in settlement is also clearly visible at Parc Cybi. New settlements were established, and new fields and trackways were created. Whilst the majority of the remains belong to the Middle Iron, evidence for activity within both the Early and Later Iron Age was also recovered.



Figure 10. Plan of Early Iron Age stone platform and associated features

The Early Iron Age and the Invisible House

An extensive radiocarbon dating programme was carried out on the Middle Iron Age village (described below). This revealed that there was an earlier phase of activity underlying the roundhouses. A stone platform was built on which there had been a large fire, and then soil had developed over the platform (figure 10). The dates from the fire, and charcoal in the soil over the platform, showed that it dated to the very Early Iron Age (1000-700 BC). The platform would be an ideal base for a building but no firm evidence for one was found. However, if the building was of timber and resting on foundation beams it would have left little trace, particularly if it had been destroyed by fire.



Plate 27. Drawing and photograph of the gold hair ring (drawing by Tony Daly and photograph by National Museum of Wales)

A ditch ran past the stone platform and this may have been of the same date or earlier. Another ditch nearby formed a funnel leading to a gap between them, suggestive of field boundaries designed to direct livestock into a gate. The gateway would have led through to an area of marsh, which would have provided good grazing in summer. In the ditch next to the gateway was found a small gold ring. This was made of thin sheet gold bent round to form a ring and it may have been a hair decoration (plate 27). Analysis of the gold suggested a Late Bronze Age date. This may have been an heirloom deposited when the stone platform was in use, possibly as a ritual offering in this important location in the landscape.

A small piece of an amber bead was found on the other side of the stone platform (plate 28). This could not be closely dated but it might have dated from the Late Bronze Age or later. Amber would have come originally from the Baltic and it was often seen as a magical material. This bead had broken while someone was trying to cut it, suggesting that this was not part of a necklace but was an individual bead, and perhaps of such importance that someone wanted to divide it up to share its magical properties.



Plate 28. Fragment of an amber bead (photograph Alison Sheridan)

Figure 11. Plan showing the development of the Middle Iron Age village

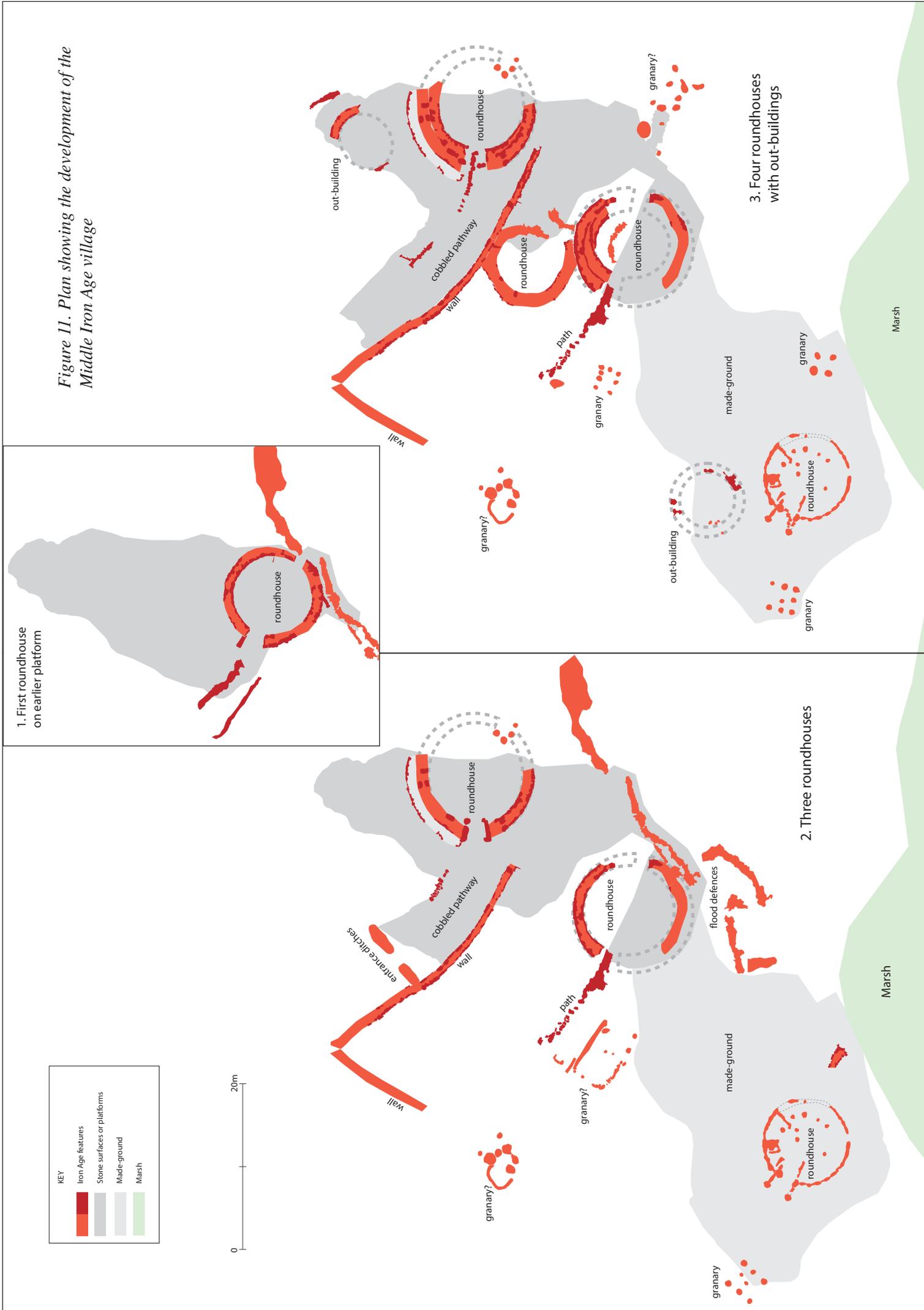




Plate 29. Iron Age village under excavation showing the stone walls of the houses and a wall running through the middle of the village to guide visitors to the headman's house



Plate 30. The earliest house in the village during excavation. The main doorway is in the middle of the bottom of the photograph



Plate 31. Surviving foundations of house wall showing how the wall has been added to, making it over 2m wide

Middle Iron Age Village

In the middle of Parc Cybi, where there is now a round-about, were the remains of a small settlement occupied during the Middle Iron Age between about 400 to 200 BC (plate 29). This had up to three houses close together, with a fourth a little distance away, as well as other buildings including granaries. The village was built close to a marsh that had formed within a rocky hollow. Some of the houses were built on the earlier stone platform, with additional made-ground created by dumping soil, so that one house could be built close to the edge of the marsh without flooding.

Originally there was only a single house (plate 30, figure 11). This was demolished and two more were built, probably along with the one near the marsh. Another smaller house was added and two of the others had their walls thickened to make their doorways more impressive (plate 31).



Plate 32. Roundhouse closest to the marsh with its wall defined by an irregular slot that probably held stones set on edge

The houses were round, built of stone and would have had conical thatched roofs. Most had thick stone walls but the one nearest the marsh appeared to have had a thin wall of stones set on edge. This had been entirely removed leaving just the slots to hold the stones (plate 32). The largest house had a hearth in the middle, but few other traces of the domestic activity found in the other houses. It also had an impressive porch with a cobble and paved pathway leading to it. A substantial wall, built with stones on edge, separated the pathway from the rest of the village (plate 33). This house may have been for the principal family and it could have been used to welcome visitors, who would have approached it along the cobbled pathway (figure 12).

The principal entrances of the houses all looked towards Holyhead Mountain, in spite of the prevailing winter winds from that direction (figure 13). There was a hillfort on the mountain and perhaps the village looked towards that, or perhaps the mountain itself was of significance as it is the highest point in Anglesey and would have been a prominent seamark for coastal travellers.



Plate 33. Wall running through the village separating the pathway to the main house from the rest of the village

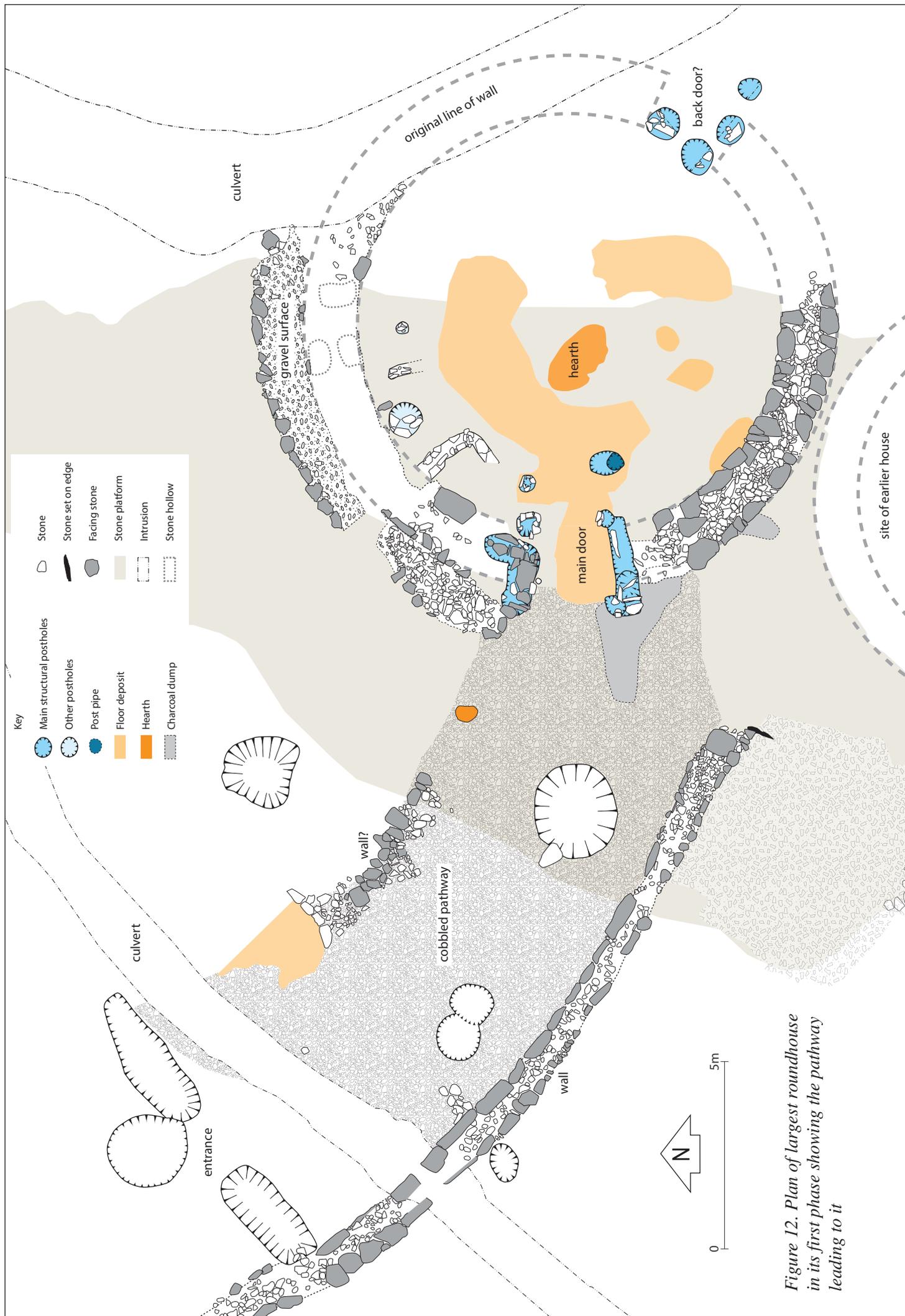


Figure 12. Plan of largest roundhouse in its first phase showing the pathway leading to it

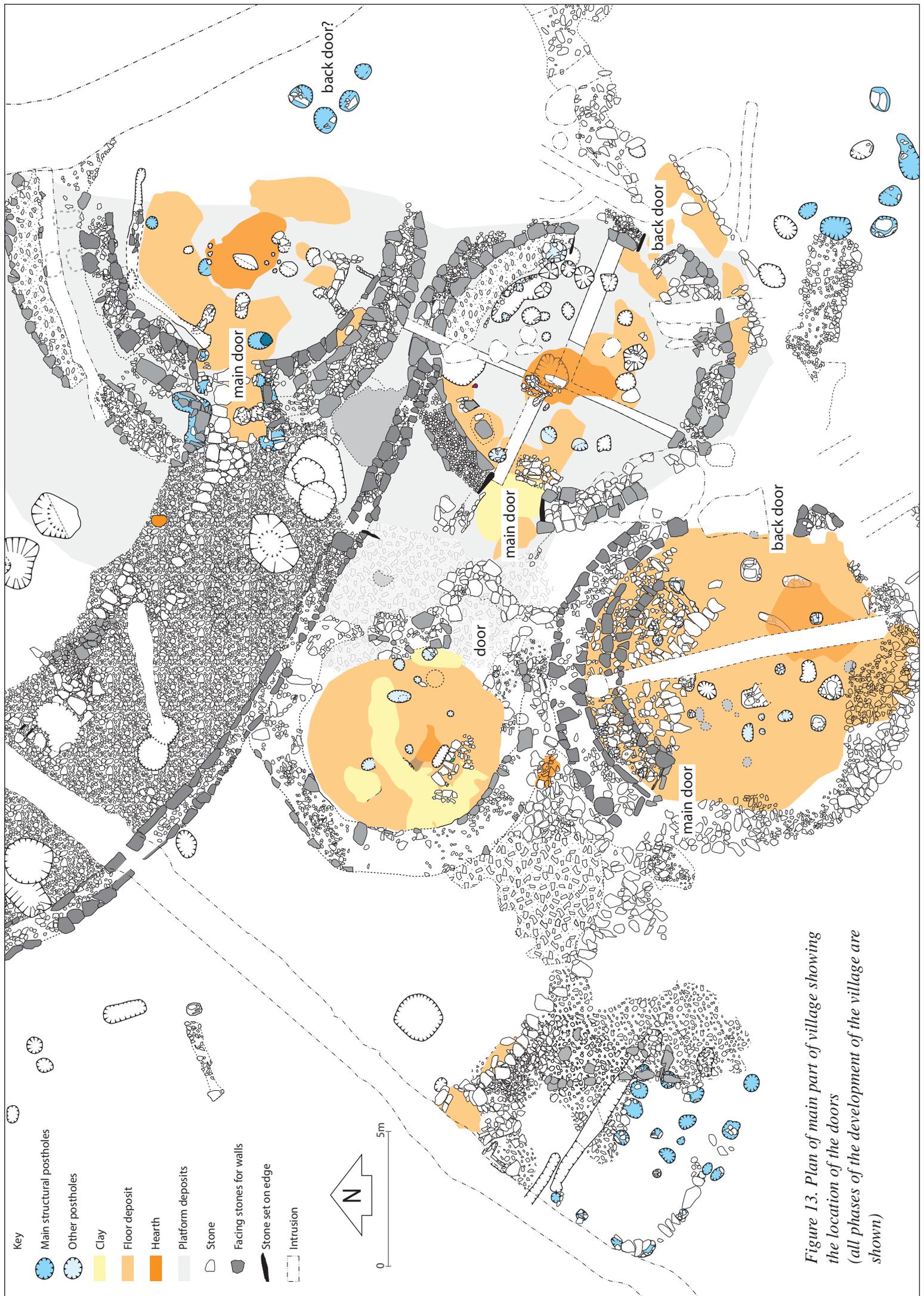


Figure 13. Plan of main part of village showing the location of the doors (all phases of the development of the village are shown)

Domestic tasks, such as spinning and food preparation, took place in the village, and grain was stored in raised granaries. These granaries had closely placed postholes for posts to support small structures raised off the ground, keeping grain away from the damp and rodents. Grain is heavy so the posts had to be close together to support the floor of the structure. The granaries were positioned next to routes to the houses, as if showing off the wealth of the village to visitors.



Plate 34. Granary with four posts. The posts rested on stone pads to prevent them sinking into the softer made-ground on the edge of the marsh

One granary had four posts, resting on stone pads (plate 34); others had 8 posts, in some cases wedged in place by large stones (plate 35). It is likely that some or all of these had stone pillars, rather than wooden posts, like a granary found at the Tŷ Mawr settlement near South Stack with some pillars still in place. The stone would help prevent damp and rodents getting into the grain. There is evidence at Parc Cybi for the use of these pillars as one was found built into the wall of a roundhouse (plate 36). The pillar had a tenon shaped on one end and must have been taken from a demolished granary.

Plate 35. Granary with eight postholes, showing the packing stones that would have held stone pillars in place



Plate 36. Stone pillar from a granary reused in a wall

This reconstruction drawing (plate 37) shows how the village may have looked when the two main houses were in use and work is starting on the construction of the third. In the foreground, it shows one of the granaries.

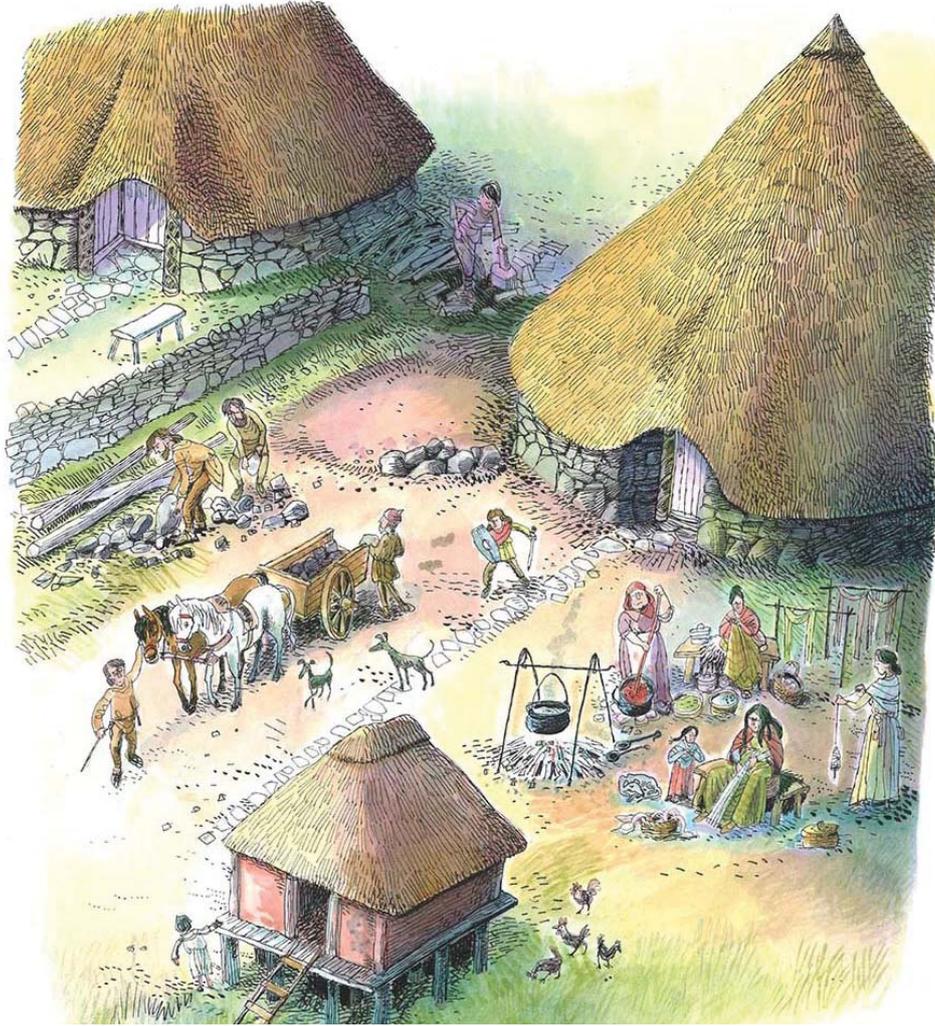


Plate 37. Drawing of how the village may have looked in use (drawn by Helen Flook)

0 200mm



Plate 38. The smallest and largest stones with holes found in the Iron Age village, shown at the same scale

People in west Wales in the Iron Age used very little pottery, presumably making vessels from wood, basketry and other organic materials, which rarely survive. The only Iron Age pottery that sometimes occurs in west Wales are fragments of rough containers used to hold salt from the salt mines of the Cheshire Plain. A single sherd and a few fragments of this material were found in the Iron Age village, showing that salt was imported from Cheshire.

Other finds were mainly of stone, including stones with holes in ranging from 3cm to 60cm across (plate 38). The largest might have been boat anchors or possibly weights to hold down the thatch on the roof. Smaller ones could have been weights for fishing nets or other purposes. One cylindrical stone found next to a hearth in one of the roundhouses may be a broken cylinder quern for grinding grain (plate 39).

Some of the smallest perforated stones were spindle whorls, neatly shaped circular objects that provided the weight to help a spindle turn for spinning wool (plate 40). There were 33 of these found in the village with 10 found in the earliest roundhouse (plate 41).



Plate 39. The possible cylinder quern as found



Plate 40. An Iron Age woman spinning with a spindle, weighted with a spindle whorl (drawing by Helen Flook)



Plate 41. Various stone spindle whorls from the Iron Age village (ASlab: Arabelle Barratt)

Clay-walled Roundhouses

The small settlement did not stand alone; other buildings were in use at about the same time. About 130m to the north-east were two houses with walls made of clay. Very little of the walls survived but the houses could be identified by the stone-lined drains set in their floors. One house had a question-mark shaped drain with a pit at one end (plate 42), and the other end exiting out of the building. This house had a hearth but relatively few other features. The other house had a complex of drains, some running into each other (plates 43 and 44). The main drain had a pit at the end, which had been filled in with stone slabs, some perforated. The drain fill was rich in iron oxide, presumably originating from the use of the drains (plate 45).

The floor of the house was covered with a layer of charcoal containing charred wheat straw. This seems to be the result of the roof burning down and collapsing into the house and shows that straw was used to thatch the houses.

The two houses were too close to each other to be used together, so must have been used sequentially, but a modern trench for a sewerage pipe had destroyed any evidence to show which was the earliest. Radiocarbon dates showed that the houses dated to the Middle Iron Age, at roughly the same time as the stone-built round house settlement.



Plate 42. Clay-walled roundhouse with question-mark-shaped drain

*Plate 43.
Clay-walled
roundhouse with
complex drains,
here shown with
the capstones
over the drains*



*Plate 44. Complex of drains
with their capstones removed
to show the stone-linings*



*Plate 45. Iron oxide deposit in a drain
within the clay-walled roundhouse*

Fields and Huts

South-east of the village were ditches defining a curving enclosure. The ditches could not be directly dated but a pit within the enclosure contained a Late Iron Age shale bracelet (figure 14). A trackway and field boundaries in use during the Roman period may also have originated in the Iron Age, at which time it is likely that the area was covered with fields. Analysis of deposits under the Middle Iron Age settlement suggested that the land had been ploughed and then converted to pasture before the settlement was built.

Within these fields there were other small huts or activity sites. A group of pits, postholes and hearths was probably the remains of a small structure, though its plan was hard to define. Near this was a large hearth with a pit oven next to it (figure 15). In the pit oven was found a fine decorated spindle whorl. These features dated to the Middle Iron Age, similar to the village.

North of the village was another small hut with many pits nearby, some probably also used as ovens (figure 16). These features dated to the Late Iron Age, after the village had been abandoned. At this time, the land must still have been farmed and it is likely the village merely moved to another location. Perhaps it did not move far, as evaluation trenching suggested there were roundhouses to the north-east, in a plot not yet fully investigated. Archaeological investigation of this plot in future may add to the story of the Iron Age settlement of Parc Cybi.

Figure 14. Plan of Iron Age enclosure with a drawing of the shale bracelet from one of the pits

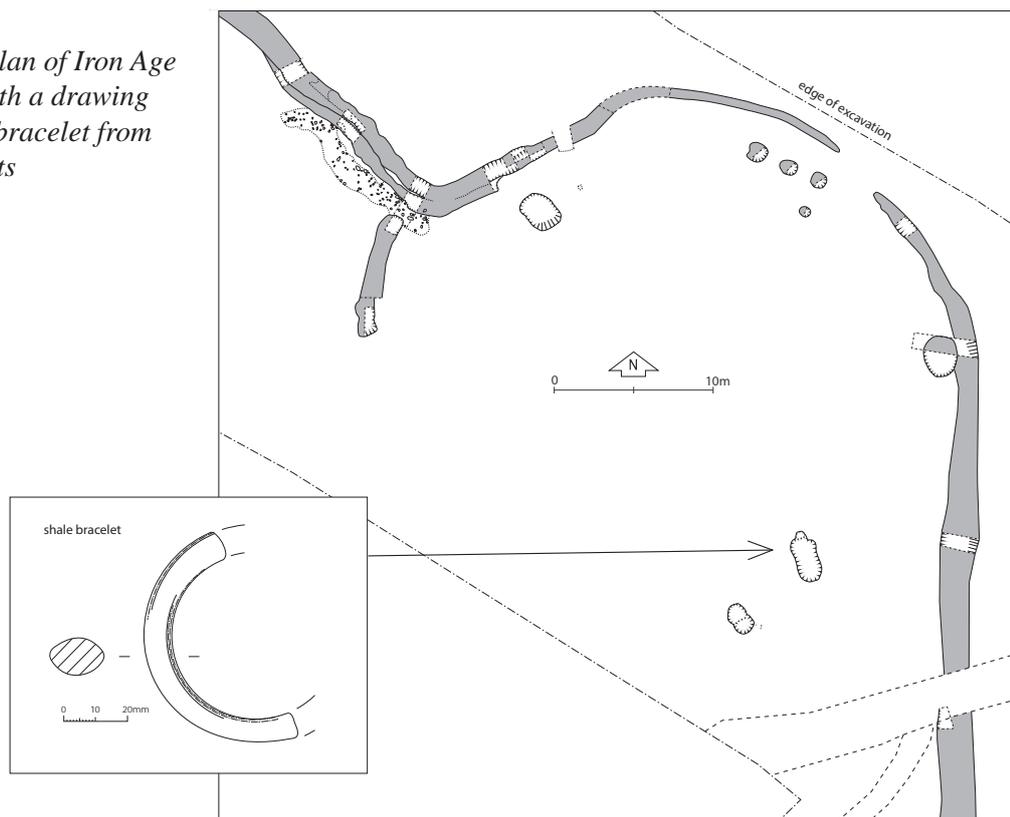


Figure 15. Plan of Middle Iron Age activity with the decorated spindle whorl found in an earth oven (ASlab: Arabelle Barratt)

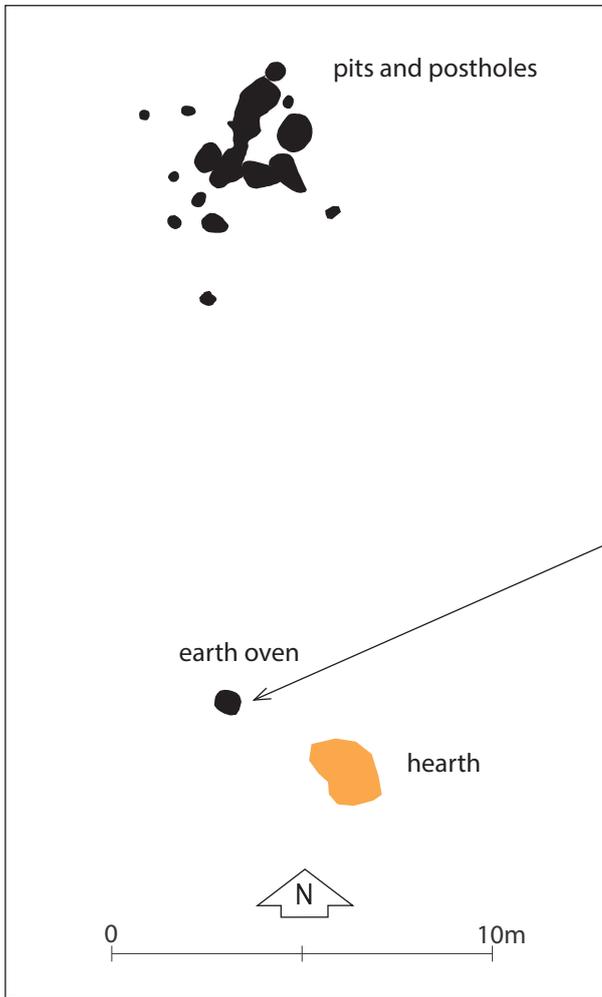
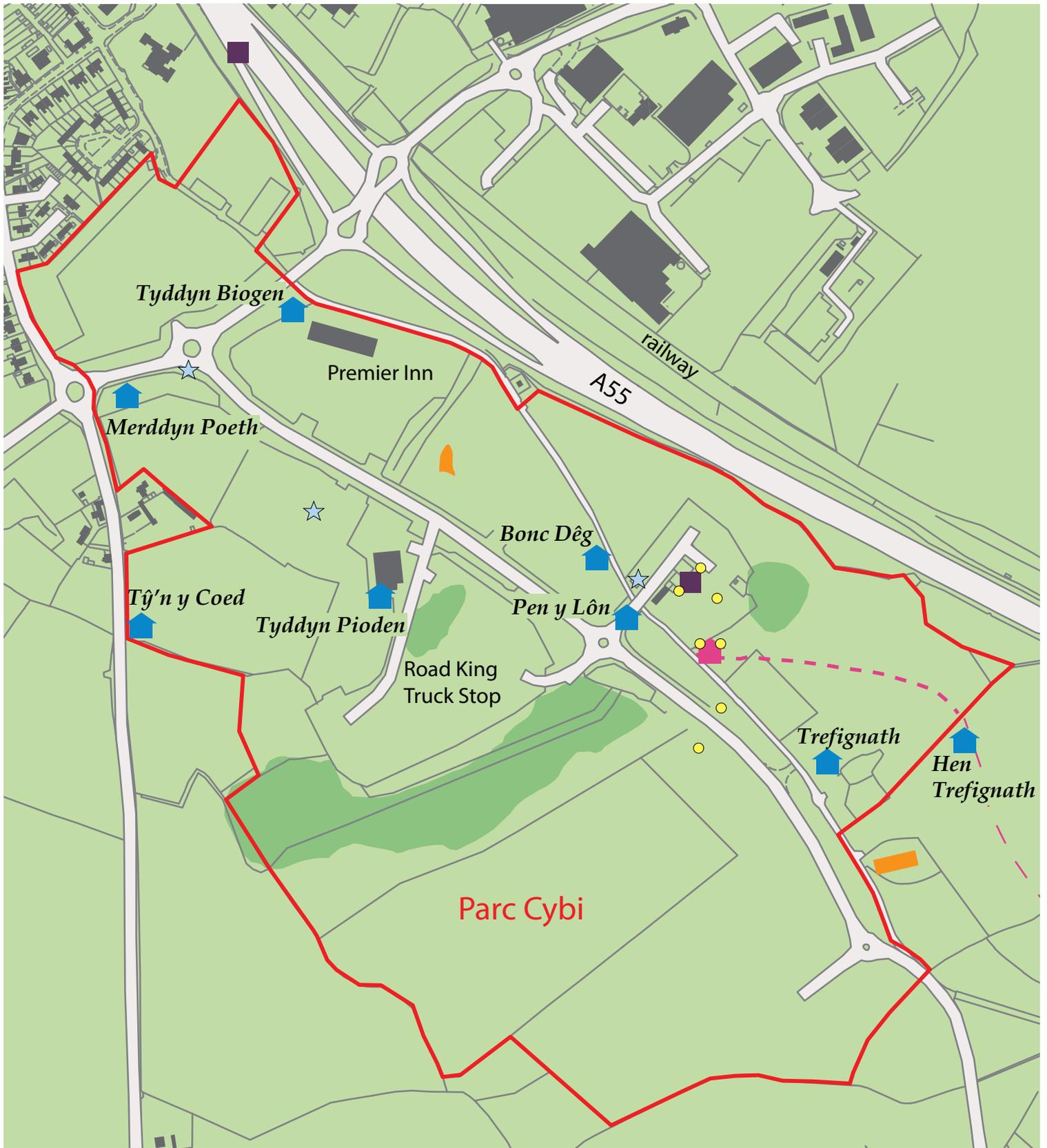


Figure 16. Plan of late Iron Age hut and pits



- | | | | | | |
|--|-------------------------|---|---|---|-------|
|  | Prehistoric monuments |  | Long cist cemetery |  | Well |
|  | Roman period settlement |  | Corn dryer |  | Marsh |
|  | Roman period track |  | 18th/ early 19th century house or cottage (with name) | | |

Figure 17. Location of Roman, medieval and post-medieval sites on Parc Cybi

The Roman Period

The Roman historian Tacitus records the conquest of Anglesey. The island was attacked by the Romans in AD 61, but the Boudican revolt meant they had to abandon it, and it was only finally conquered in AD 77. After that only archaeology can be used to reveal the influence of Rome on Anglesey and that information is still incomplete. A military fortlet was recently found near the north coast of Anglesey at Cemlyn, which may relate to the initial conquest of the island. A trading settlement on the shore of the Menai Strait near Brynsiencyn, established in the mid second century, was not defended, so the island may have been peaceful by then.

The only certain Roman road known on the island is the short length found running inland from the trading settlement. The discovery of copper ingots suggests that Romans were mining copper at Parys Mountain near Amlwch and there are finds of Roman coins and pottery from many parts of the island, suggesting trade with the Romans, and perhaps also amongst the native settlements.

In the late Roman period, perhaps in the 4th century AD, a fort was built alongside a sheltered tidal inlet where the town of Holyhead would later develop. This was linked to a signal station on top of Holyhead Mountain and probably another in the north-west corner of Anglesey on Pen Bryn yr Eglwys.

Roman Period Industry

Remains of a trackway were found running across part of the site. This probably led towards the late Roman fort, in Holyhead. Next to the trackway was a native farmstead, with evidence for craft working and storage facilities (figure 18).

In a clay-walled building was a hearth made of large boulders (plate 46). This appeared larger than necessary for normal domestic cooking, so may have been used for other purposes, perhaps dying cloth. Next to this was a stone bowl, set in the floor, for grinding or mixing. There were also other hearths, troughs and pits crammed into the small building.



Plate 46. Boulder hearth and stone bowl

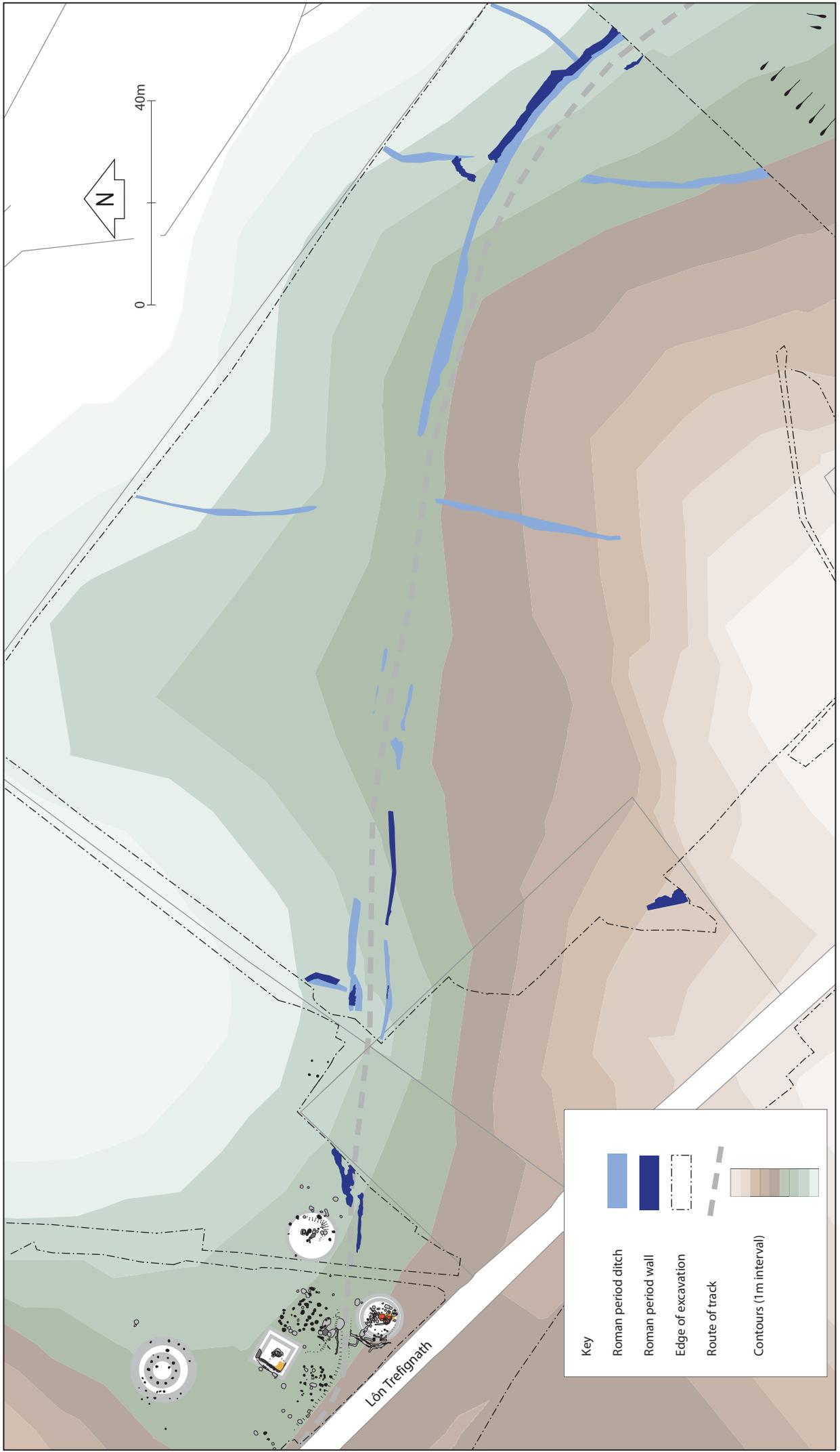


Figure 18. Plan of trackway and location of Roman period industrial activity

On the other side of the track was a series of postholes showing where storage buildings had stood (plate 47), and a small, square stone building (plate 48) with a large pit under its floor (plate 49). The floor of the building was suspended over the pit on stone slabs, with access to the pit while the building was in use.



Plate 47. Postholes showing where a sequence of small timber storage buildings had stood

Plate 48. Remains of one wall and a wall corner of a square stone building with much of its floor surviving inside



Plate 49. Pit found under the floor of the stone building, with stone slabs to help support the floor extending over the pit

Although it was not clear what was being made and stored, an iron cleaver (plate 50) and an iron chisel were found; the cleaver came from close to the boulder hearth. A lack of smithing debris showed that these had not been made here, so they were presumably used within the clay-walled building. There was also a blue glass counter possibly from a board game (plate 51).

Roman pottery from this site showed that the activity dated to the late 3rd century or early 4th century AD.



Plate 51. Glass counter from clay-walled industrial building

Plate 50. Iron cleaver found in clay-walled building next to the boulder hearth. This has been cleaned and consolidated. Also a reconstruction of how it would originally have appeared and how it was hafted. (Replica made by Ancient Arts)

Late Roman Cemetery

Romans introduced Christianity into Wales and burial in full length, stone-lined graves, known as long cists. The new religion and burial traditions continued after the Roman army had left. Most long cist cemeteries in west Wales date from after the end of the Roman occupation of

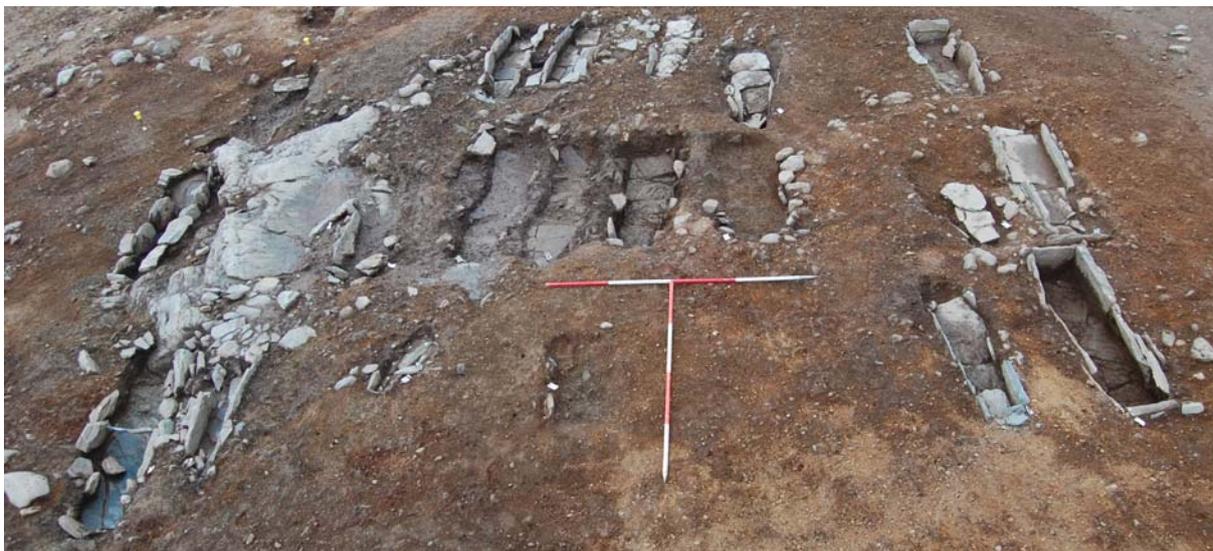


Plate 52. The late Roman long cist cemetery

Key	
	Human Bone
	Exposed bedrock
	Cist side slabs
	Cist basal slabs
	Packing stones

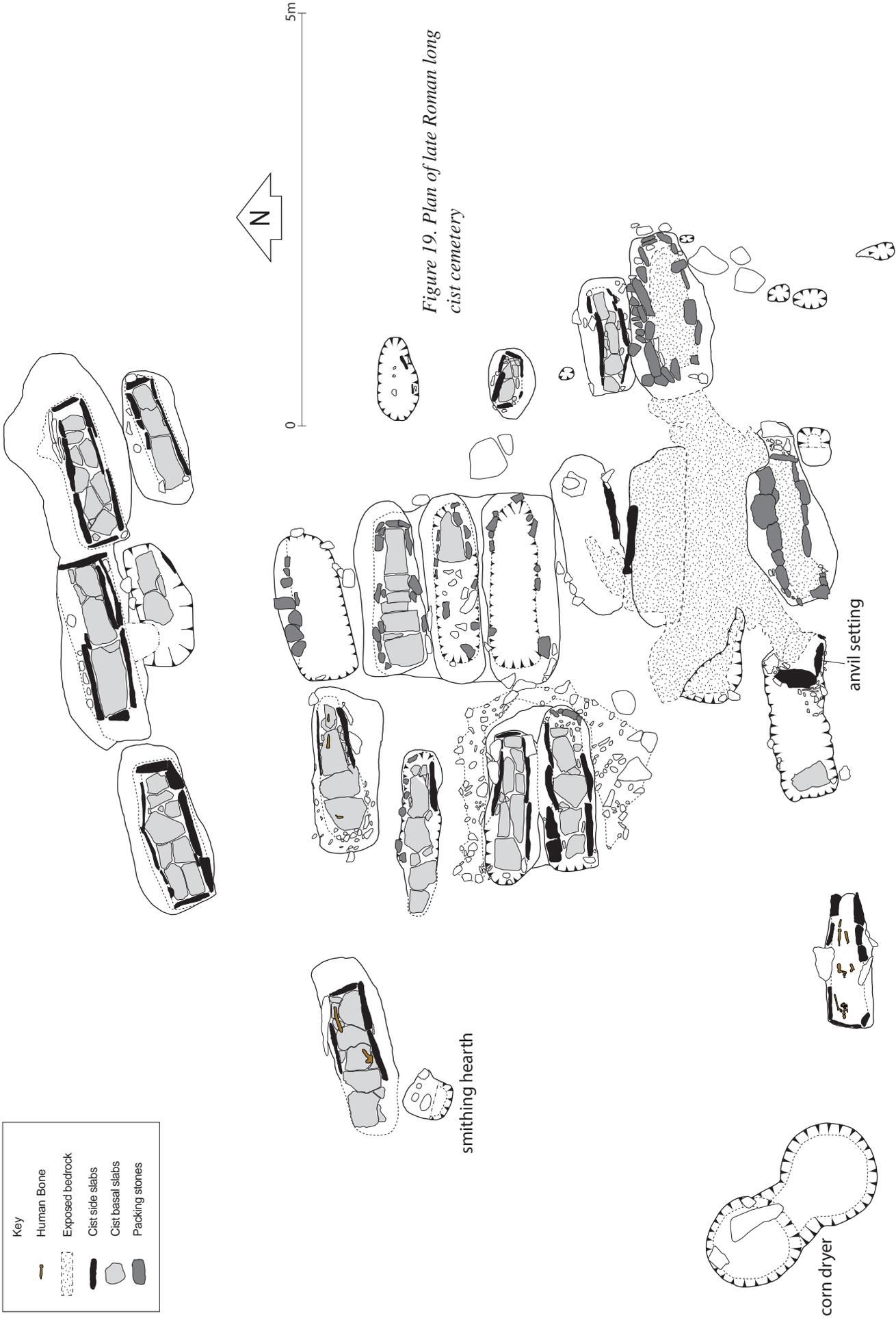


Figure 19. Plan of late Roman long cist cemetery

Britain, but a small cemetery of long cist graves found on Parc Cybi probably dated to the late Roman period (plate 52). Local people would have used the cemetery, suggesting that they had adopted Roman traditions.

There were 23 graves in the cemetery, neatly laid-out in rows (figure 19). The sizes of the graves suggested both adults and children were buried there and the few human remains that survived showed that there were both men and women. The crowns of teeth, the only remains in two adult sized graves, showed that these had been used for children aged about 5 to 7 years. It is, therefore, difficult to judge the age of the individual buried from the size of their grave, but the very small graves must have been for babies. The cemetery appears to have been used by a small community living somewhere nearby.

A smith set up his anvil on a block wedged into a hole dug into a grave (plate 53). This disturbance suggests that the cemetery was no longer in use when the smith was working. The smithing was radiocarbon dated to the 4th or 5th centuries AD, so the cemetery must be earlier. Poor bone survival meant that the cemetery could not be dated directly.



Plate 53. Setting to hold wooden base for anvil, cut into a grave and reusing grave slabs as packing stones

Early Medieval Settlement

After AD 410, Britain was no longer part of the Roman Empire and archaeologists term this period the ‘Early Medieval’ period. On Holy Island a monastic settlement dedicated to St Cybi was founded within the Roman fort. The date of this foundation is uncertain, and the earliest structural remains are of the 12th century. However the dedication has given us the Welsh name of the town, the island the new business in the form of Caergybi, Ynys Cybi and Parc Cybi.

While many cemeteries from this period have been found, it is hard to identify where the people were living. Probably most houses from this period left little archaeological trace. A rare example of an enclosed settlement has been found at Glyn, Llanbedrgoch near the east coast of Anglesey, which was used from the 7th to 10th centuries AD. The promontory fort or defended settlement at Castell, Trefadog on the west coast probably dates to the 11th and 12th centuries. Recently a field system, with small stone houses, was found near Rhuddgaer in south-west Anglesey. One house was excavated and was probably in use from the mid-6th to the 9th century. Few other early medieval settlement sites have been found on Anglesey.

However, we know that people lived at Parc Cybi after the end of Roman rule, because we found evidence for the drying of corn in specially constructed dryers.

Grain, especially oats, needed to be dried before use or storage. Corn dryers were pits with a fire in one end and, at the other, the grain suspended to dry on branches covered with straw. Sometimes the grain accidentally caught fire and was charred, which preserved the grain and when excavated it can be identified and dated.

Six corn dryers were found at Parc Cybi that were in use during the 5th or 6th centuries AD (plate 54). These were probably located on the edge of the fields but it is unlikely they were far from where people lived.



Medieval Period

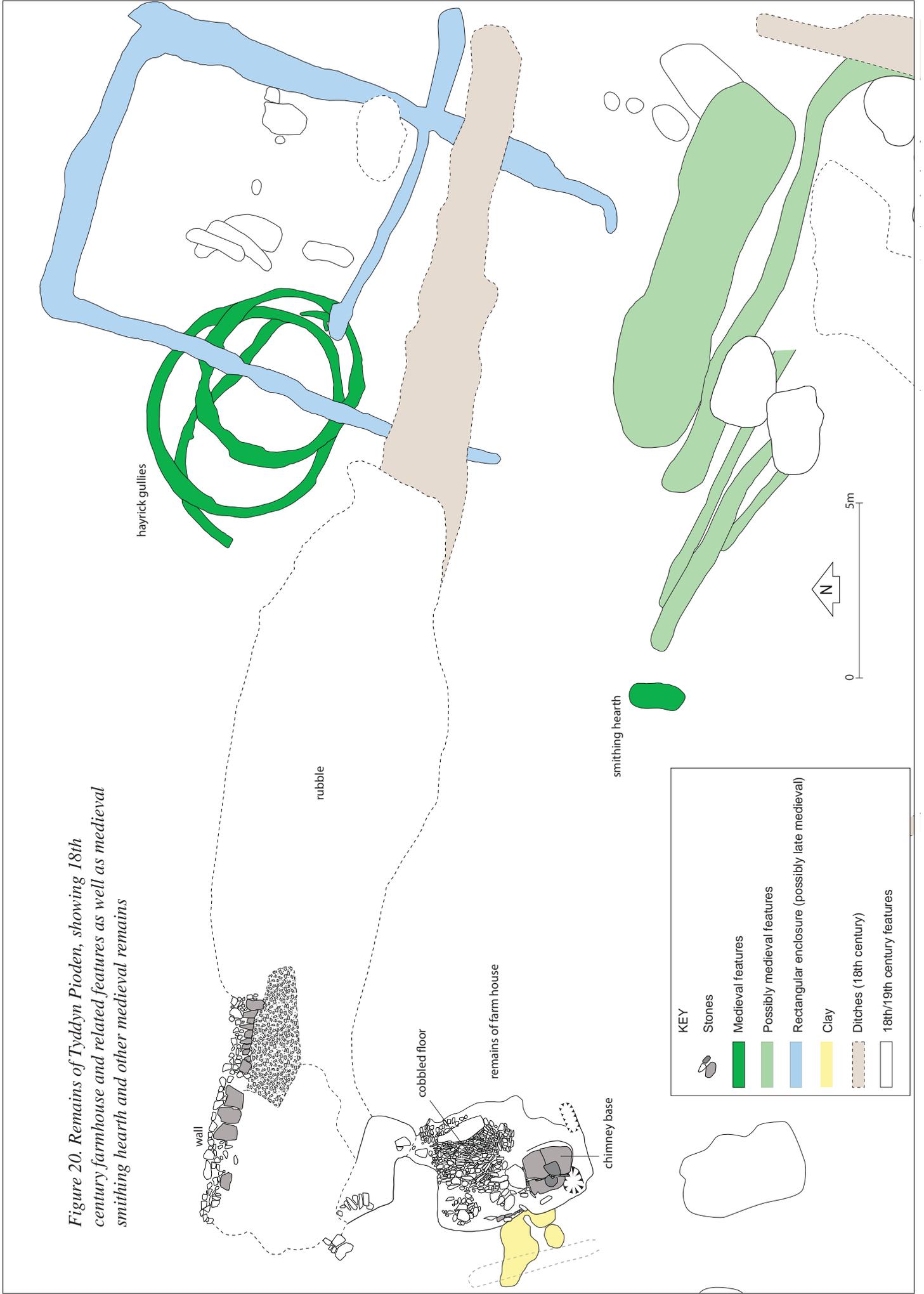
The present church in Holyhead was first built in the 12th century, on the site of the monastic settlement inside the old walls of the Roman fort. There were several small chapels associated with the church scattered over the island, some of which had holy wells. One of these, the chapel of St Ffraid at Tywyn y Capel, Trearddur Bay was built in about the 12th century on a mound over an earlier cemetery. The chapel eroded into the sea and is only known from antiquarian reports.

Holyhead developed as a port and settlement in the medieval period and there were also smaller settlements at Llanfawr, Penrhos and Tre'r Gof. Penrhos later became the home of the Stanley family, the largest landowners on the island.

No medieval settlements were found on Parc Cybi; however, the land was being farmed. There are hints in field boundaries shown on old estate maps, and in ditches found by excavation, that an open field system covered at least part of Parc Cybi in the medieval period. The land was farmed in large fields that were sub-divided into narrow strips with no fences.

Sometime in the 11th-12th centuries AD, a smith was at work in Parc Cybi. Pits and hayrick gullies nearby suggest that the smith was working in a farmyard. This yard was used much later in the 18th century for the farm of Tyddyn Pioden (figure 20).

Figure 20. Remains of Tyddyn Pioden, showing 18th century farmhouse and related features as well as medieval smithing hearth and other medieval remains



KEY	
	Stones
	Medieval features
	Possibly medieval features
	Rectangular enclosure (possibly late medieval)
	Clay
	Ditches (18th century)
	18th/19th century features

18th and 19th Century Farmsteads

Most of Parc Cybi was part of the Penrhos Estate, owned by the Owen family of Penrhos, but in 1763 the estate passed by marriage to the Stanleys of Alderley. In the 19th century the estate was largely run by Lady Maria Josepha Stanley, and by her son, W. O. Stanley, who was a noted antiquarian, recording many of the archaeological sites on Holy Island for the first time.

The estate was busy in the first half of the 19th century building new farmhouses and improving the land, including draining land and building wells. The people living in the farmhouses were tenants of the estate and would have benefited from these improvements, though presumably their rents also increased.

By the 18th century the large medieval open fields had been enclosed and farmhouses were dotted across the landscape (see figure 17). Many of the farmhouses were abandoned in the 19th century but some were still inhabited in the mid-20th century, and one was only demolished in 2006.

The remains of the cobbled floor and chimney of the farmhouse of Tyddyn Pioden were found (plate 55). This farmstead was occupied in the 18th and early 19th centuries, although it almost certainly had earlier origins, but the period between the 12th and 18th centuries has left little archaeological evidence.

Some of the farms had wells fed by underground culverts and reached by stone steps (plate 56). These were still being used in the 1950s.



Plate 55. The chimney base and floor of the house at Tyddyn Pioden



Plate 57. Ring gully, probably to surround a hayrick, near the original location of Trefignath Farm

Plate 56. A stepped well used by the farm of Bonc Deg



Many small enclosures defined by shallow ditches were found. Some were nearly square or rectangular, and some almost perfectly circular. Few of these enclosures could be dated but they appeared to be fairly recent. Circular enclosures at the site of Tyddyn Pioden were probably medieval in date and other ring gullies were found near the earliest site of the farm called Trefignath, which may also have had medieval origins. These ring gullies were probably used to create a dry area for a haystack (plate 57). The other small enclosures were used for similar functions through to modern times.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the local people were still surrounded by the distant past. The standing stone and Trefignath Burial Chamber stood within their fields and the Bronze Age barrows were probably still visible as low mounds. Even into the mid-20th century, people knew about the Iron Age village, despite the fact that no trace could be seen on the ground surface. Their ploughs hit the stones underground and the farmers dug down to get rid of the stones and to use them for building walls. They realised that there were the remains of stone houses hidden there and called the site Pant yr Hen Bobl (Hollow of the Old People).

Conclusions

This project has provided us with an understanding of the development of the landscape over the last 6000 years. Careful archaeological excavation has increased our knowledge of how the occupants lived, farmed their land, buried their dead, and participated in ceremonial activities. They were part of a wider culture, which saw the introduction of farming, changing burial practices, the introduction of Christianity, and many other aspects of life. This shared culture connected the inhabitants of Parc Cybi with wider European cultures spreading from the Orkney Isles in the far north, and south into continental Europe.

The people that lived at Parc Cybi were neither particularly rich nor powerful, but we can see how they adopted new cultures and learnt new skills. It is evidence of everyday life that gives the clearest impression of the past, such as the mastery of ceramics and dairying in the Early Neolithic, or the use of a beautifully decorated pot to contain sustenance for a loved-one in the Bronze Age afterlife.

As this land moves on into a new phase of its history, this project has provided an opportunity to explore its past and to present and interpret that past to those who still inhabit the area.

Acknowledgements

The main phase of excavation was carried out by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust between November 2006 and the end of June 2008. Another phase of excavation was carried out between September 2009 and February 2010.

The excavations and post-excavation analysis were funded by Welsh Government and thanks are due to Clwyd Roberts for working with us on the post-excavation phase, assisted by consultant Rob Early of WSP Parsons Brinckerhoff. On-site our work was greatly assisted by Jones Bros. Ruthin Co. Ltd., with particular thanks to Hefin Lloyd-Davies. Thanks also to Atkins Engineering Consultancy, especially Rob Sutton. Many archaeologists worked on the site during the two phases of fieldwork and their hard work through weather of all kinds is much appreciated. The excavation was run in the first months by Roland Flook. Thanks to the staff of Gwynedd Archaeological Planning Service, Emily La Trobe-Bateman, Ashley Batten and Jenny Emmett, for their support and advice through both the fieldwork and post-excavation work.

Translation by Bla Translation.

Glossary

Boudican revolt – Boudica, the Queen of the Iceni tribe, led her people in a revolt against the Romans, but the revolt was defeated.

Chambered tomb – a tomb with one or more chambers built of large stones, usually under a mound of stones or earth. Neolithic period in date.

Estate - the houses, outbuildings, supporting farmland, and woods that surround the gardens and grounds of a large property.

Macehead – a stone object perforated to take a haft that may have been a weapon or a status symbol but possibly had a practical function

Microlith – a very small flint object made by modifying a long narrow flake (a blade). Several microliths would have been used to create a tool, such as an arrowhead or a knife, by mounting them in a bone or wood haft.

Radiocarbon dating – a technique using the proportion of radioactive carbon in an object to determine its age.

Saddle quern – a stone used for grinding grain by rubbing an upper stone backwards and forwards. This wears the bottom stone into a saddle-like form.

Scheduled monument – a nationally important archaeological site or building given legal protection.



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



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