## EVALUATION EXCAVATION OF A SUB-RECTANGULAR ENCLOSURE NEAR ST MARY'S CHURCH, LLANFAIRPWLLGWYNGYLL, ANGLESEY Preliminary Report

# THE ANCIENT LANDSCAPE OF MÔN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY PROJECT

Project No. G2076

Report No. 939



Prepared for Cadw March 2011

> By George Smith

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

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Cover picture: Aerial photograph of crop mark near St. Mary's Church, Llanfairpwllgwyngyll, Anglesey, Photo copyright RCAHMW

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#### THE ANGLESEY AONB ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY PROJECT

#### GAT PROJECT NO. G2076

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#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The work was carried out as part of a project investigating a number of new archaeological sites on Anglesey, discovered as crop marks by aerial photography.

After the first year of assessment by geophysical survey of eight crop mark sites, two were chosen for further archaeological evaluation by trial excavation. One was a possible Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age defended hill-top enclosure at Carrog, Llanbadrig. The other, described here, was a small sub-rectangular defended enclosure on the edge of the Menai Straits, close to St. Mary's Church, Llanfairpwllgwyngyll at SH 53577116.

#### Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the Marquis of Anglesey for agreeing to the work on his land and to David Holmes of Jones Peckover, the Land Agents for arranging the agreement. Thanks are also due to the farmer Mr H. Roberts of Penmachno for agreeing to the excavation and access. Assistance was also provided by the Rev Philip Hughes, rector of Llanfairpwllgwyngyll who allowed access through the church yard. The outreach work in connection with the excavation and the project generally were made possible by means of a generous grant from the Anglesey Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Sustainability Fund administered by Efan Milner for Anglesey County Council. Thanks also go to Emma Hayward of Anglesey County Council Planning Department, who provided a temporary permit order to allow placing of the site cabin and toilet in the road next to the church. The machine work was carried out to a high standard by Ellis Pritchard of W.H. Campbell and Son of Gaerwen and the site equipment was by provided by Glasfryn Hire. The work was carried out mainly by local volunteers and many thanks go to Chris 'Beaver' Hughes, Jeff Marples, Emily May, Brian Milner, Archie Gillespie and Rhys Mwyn.

#### 2. TOPOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.

The enclosure lies at a height of 10m OD on a natural, approximately level promontory within more sloping land at the edge of the Menai Straits (Fig. 1). The bedrock is metamorphic serpentine in the area of the enclosure and schist in the adjoining field higher up slope (HMSO 1972). The area has a cover of glacial gravel drift (HMSO 1974) and the soil is a brown earth (Soil Survey1958), the land classified as of Grade 3 (MAFF 1977), land of fairly good quality suitable for general arable production. The free-draining nature of the land must have contributed to its identification as a crop mark during exceptionally dry conditions in 2006 by Dr Toby Driver during aerial survey for the RCAHMW (Fig. 2)

The fields around are improved pasture with a number of lynchet terraces and possible slight 'ridge and furrow' that suggest that the fields were arable plough land in the past and were divided into a number of smaller fields than at present The present large fields derive from amalgamation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when they probably became permanent pasture.

The present St. Mary's church building was built between 1850 and 1853, a development inspired by the building of the Britannia Bridge and the likelihood of future development of the village. The church was built on the site of an earlier church, demolished to make way for the new church. The earlier church was associated with a nearby small settlement, probably Medieval in origin, but the 19<sup>th</sup>

century development of the village took place further away alongside the A5 road and the new railway station, leaving the church isolated from its congregation.

The earlier church was fortunately described and illustrated in an article in Archaeologia Cambrensis in 1847 (Looms 1979). The old church was a small simple building but with the unusual feature of an apsidal east end and a plain semi-circular apsidal arch (Fig. 3). The building was clearly Medieval and probably pre-1282 (Looms 1979). The sketch of 1847 shows a large mound just outside the north-east corner of the church, now removed, which could have been an earlier feature. The Tithe map of 1840 (Fig. 4) shows a small field at the west side of the church which matches with some of the old boundaries identified in the geophysical survey (Fig. 6). A decorated bronze pin of the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD was found while excavating a new grave in the church yard in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and this adds to the interest and possible antiquity of the site. The pin (Fig. 5) is dated to about the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD (Fox 1940, 240) and one of a number of finds from Wales of the Early Christian period of Hiberno-Norse type, thought to indicate trading activity (Redknap 1991, 33 and 1994, 69).

The church lies next to a small stream, which derives from a spring, and there is a walled pool with steps for access close to the west end of the church. This suggests that the pool may have been used for adult baptisms and possibly, that the spring was regarded as holy and such springs sometimes have pre-Christian origins. Whatever, the presence of a spring would have been an important factor in attracting settlement to this place.

The enclosure is situated on a slight promontory with quite steep slopes on two sides, making it more easily defensible, suggesting that this was a deliberate choice.

The results of the geophysical survey were given in an earlier report (Smith and Hopewell 2010). The survey confirmed the presence of a sub-rectangular enclosure, approximately 40m by 40m with an entrance at the east end (Fig. 6). There were only faint and uncertain anomalies inside the enclosure but two possible round-house sites were identified at the west end of the interior. The geophysical survey also showed a pattern of strong parallel, linear anomalies indicative of ridge and furrow cultivation. This is also visible as earthworks oriented up and down the slope, in low light conditions. The ridge and furrow clearly once continued beyond the present fence alongside the Menai Strait, showing that there has been some erosion of the coast edge. It may be that this was artificial, resulting from creation of a landing point area, including clearing of the rocky foreshore, in connection with construction of the Britannia Bridge (completed 1849) meaning that the ridge and furrow pre-dates this event. The good preservation of the ridge and furrow and the deep turf layer developed over it suggested that the field had never been cultivated subsequent to that phase.

#### 3. METHODS

The grid used for the geophysical survey was re-established to allow the position of the anomalies to be identified and trenches and the trenches were laid out based on this grid, but not aligned on it. The trenches were recorded according to a new local grid.

Two trenches were excavated, designed to provide two cross-sections of the ditch, one with part of the bank and interior where a slight geophysical anomaly suggested

a round-house (trench 1), the other to investigate the entrance area, with ditch terminals shown on the geophysical survey (trench 2) (Fig. 6). The turf and ploughsoil were first stripped by machine and the trenches then excavated by hand.

## 4. EXCAVATION RESULTS

## Trench 1 (Figs 7-11)

Trench 1 was 20m long and 4m wide, crossing the enclosure ditch and the position of the enclosure bank on the west side, as identified by the geophysical survey. The ridge and furrow ploughing had levelled the area and no earthwork of the bank was visible and only a very faint indication of the ditch. In the eastern half of the trench, within the enclosure the ploughing had truncated the subsoil and only a very thin layer of probable remnant old topsoil had survived, layer (11). This layer contained a scatter of large cobbles and small boulders. A number of fragments of charcoal and a few pieces of waste flint came from this layer and but because it had been disturbed by ploughing was not securely stratified. Cleaning off this layer showed that many of the stones visible within it were part of and protruding from the underlying natural glacial deposit, which here was a mainly a fine buff-brown silt with scattered subangular cobbles and occasional small boulders. It appeared likely that the silt was a loessic deposit and that it overlay a stonier substrate, which was exposed at the west end of the trench. It was expected that within this eastern half of the trench would be features relating to settlement structures or activity, such as gullies, post-holes, hearths or floor deposits. These were not present and the complete lack of any kind of buried floor surfaces suggested that ploughing had completely destroyed any surfaces belonging to occupation of the enclosure. Two small features were identified, cut into the subsoil. These were small, quite shallow, probable post-holes, [20] and [22]. These were quite distinct from various shallow hollows that had been created as stones were pulled out of place during ploughing. They varied from 0.50 to 0.40m in diameter and 0.40 to 0.30m in depth. Pit [22] had possible post-packing stones (Fig. 9). They were widely scattered and did not form part of any recognisable structure, at least within the narrow area of trench exposed (Fig. 7).

Towards the west end of the trench was a stony band coinciding with expected position of the enclosure bank, inside the ditch. Partially covered by this stony spread was a small pit or post-hole [35].

The west edge of the trench crossed the enclosure ditch and a 1.5m wide cutting [5] was made across it. The ditch was *c*. 4m wide and 1.5m deep at this point. At the east edge the line of the ditch had been cut past a large glacial erratic boulder of schist, which had originally protruded above ground and which the ditch had deliberately avoided. It still protruded into the edge of the ditch and it had been pecked away slightly to create the east edge of the ditch. The part of the boulder that protruded above the surface had later been broken up, perhaps by fire-setting, to clear the ground for the ridge and furrow cultivation phase. Some of the debris from this stone breaking had been thrown in the ditch, showing that layer (26) had been a backfill layer of levelling of the ditch and bank prior to the ridge and furrow cultivation (Figs 8 and 10). At the west side the ditch cut through a deposit of small glacial boulders.

Four phases could be seen in the filling of the ditch (Figs 8 and 10). First, primary silting of clayey silt with scattered sub-angular cobbles and small boulders (28). Second, finer gradually accumulated silt dominated by gravel (27). Third, fine silt with

a random mix of pieces of broken schist, sub-angular cobbles and gravel (26). Finally an accumulation of humic silts from 18<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> century ploughing (6).

There were no artefacts in the ditch fill but some charcoal was collected from the primary fill (28), and from below it, on a slight ledge at the east side of the ditch (33).

## Trench 2 (Figs 12-16)

This trench was designed to investigate the entrance to the enclosure identified on the aerial photograph and the geophysical survey. The trench was 8m by 10m and spanned the area of the ditch terminals, the former bank terminals and the entrance gap between them (Fig. 12).

The subsoil here was quite different to that in Trench 1, being fine loose gravel. Cleaning revealed the two ditch terminals but there was no trace of the former bank. In the entrance gap between the former positions of the bank terminals, where any gateway or other entrance structure would be expected, were three features [9], [29] and [31], which showed as darker, more humic areas within the gravel subsoil. Feature [9] was slightly curving and linear with steep sloping sides and slightly rounded base (Figs 12 and 14). It lay approximately along the contour, across the entrance gap and slightly wider than it. It contained no artefacts but produced 2 pieces of charcoal. The shape of the feature in plan and cross-section is unlike a drainage gully and its position, terminating before it reached the enclosure ditch means it couldn't have functioned as a drain. Its only other possible function is as a beam-slot, but the timber would have to have been slightly curved.

The other two features [29] and [31] were both post-holes (Figs 12 and 14). [29] was sub-circular and c. 1.20m in diameter. Excavation showed that within it was a smaller sub-circular feature, c. 0.37m diameter and 0.56m deep, with more humic fill than the rest of the compact gravelly pit-fill and presumed to be a post-pipe (Figs 14 and 16). Post-hole [31] was also sub-circular, c. 0.37m diameter but cut directly into the gravel with no inner post-pipe or additional post-pit or post-packing stones. Fitting quite tightly within the lower part of the hole was a sandstone block, c. 0.30m deep (Fig. 14). It had a fairly level top- surface at -0.25m down in the pit. It may have been a post-pad, or, because it reduced the depth of the hole considerably, may have been inserted when the post was withdrawn. The stone was presumed so sit o the base of the pit at -0.52m but this was difficult to confirm because it was not possible to excavated cross section at that depth and because of being cut through gravel quite similar to the fill.

The two post-holes are different in style, one with a pit and packing, the other not, but the post-pipe of [29] is very similar in size to the pit of [31]. This suggests that they formed an associated pair as part of one structure. They lie on either side of the entrance gap between the ditch terminals and about 1m inside them, where the forward edge of the enclosure bank would have been (Fig. 12). It seems likely that they were part of framing for an entrance structure or gate between the terminals of the bank. The size and depth of the pits, including the topsoil that would have overlain them indicates substantial posts up to a maximum of about 2.5m height. If the pits did hold timbers for an entrance structure, the linear feature [9] could have held a horizontal timber forming a threshold consolidating the approach to this entrance.

Both post-holes produced some animal bone, which must have been introduced after the removal of the posts, suggesting that they had been withdrawn, rather than decayed *in situ*. The post pits must also have been backfilled immediately because otherwise the near vertical, gravel sides would quickly have eroded.

A cutting 1.5m wide [7] was made across the north side of the trench through the northern ditch terminal. The ditch was 5.2m wide at this point and 1.8m deep. Its profile had quite gently sloping sides. Its greater width and sloping profile, compared to ditch [5] was because it had been cut through quite loose gravel. At the inner and outer top edges of the ditch cobble-sized stones had been apparently deliberately packed into the surface, probably to help prevent erosion (Fig. 13). In addition, the outer face of the ditch had been consolidated by placing a thin layer of more compact, cohesive, clayey silt (39).

All the ditch fills were largely gravel. The topmost layer (8) was accumulated ploughsoil, belonging with the ridge and furrow cultivation. This overlay a layer of more gradual silted in humic accumulation (17). This lay over two layers of silting (18) and (19) with a greater proportion of gravel. The lowermost layer (24) in a deeper cut at the base of the ditch was a primary silt with a high proportion of cobble-sized stones.

The profiles of the ditch fills suggested a natural silting sequence with no obvious major phase of backfilling like that in the ditch cutting in Trench 1. A similar phase of backfilling would be expected prior to the ridge and furrow cultivation but because the bank here would be of gravel it had probably already eroded to quite a low profile and so needed less levelling.

The ditch fill (17) was quite humic and probably represented a period of stability, when the ditch had largely silted up. It had also accumulated some rubbish material, suggesting some domestic occupation close by at the time the layer was developing. This included pieces of animal bone, charcoal, slag and one small iron object. Layer (19) also produced some similar material, including animal bone, charcoal and an iron object.

The lowermost, steeper cut at the base of the ditch represents the original profile of the ditch, as cut, preserved by the rapid primary silting. The gently sloping uppermost profile derives from erosion of the gravel sides to a natural slope angle. There was a wide ledge on the outer side of the ditch which may indicate a later re-cut, perhaps just to renovate the eroding ditch around the entrance.

#### 5. GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results have shown that the enclosure had a semi-defensive function. I terms of the size of the enclosure ditch there must have been a substantial bank. However, the width of the ditch around the entrance may be misleading because of the greater erosion of the gravel sides there. In Trench 1 ditch cutting [5] the ditch sides were still quite steep and the width at *c*. 4m is probably more representative. It compares to a ditch of the same width at the settlement enclosure of Bryn Eryr, Llansadwrn, Anglesey, which was occupied in the later first millennium into the Roman period (Longley 1998). The Bryn Eryr enclosure provides a close parallel in shape, although larger at *c*. 70m by 56m internally compared to 40m by 30m at the St Mary's enclosure. The entrance at Bryn Eryr was also on the narrower 'end' but the gap between the ditch terminals was much wider at *c*. 6m compared to 2.8m at the St Mary's enclosure. However, this narrower gap may be a result of erosion of the gravel sides of the ditch.

No certain gate posts or entrance structure was found at Bryn Eryr although there were traces of possible post-holes. A similar type of sub-rectangular enclosure of the same period ads Bryn Eryr has been excavated at Whitton, Glamorgan (Jarrett and Wrathmell 1981). It was of a very similar size to Bryn Eryr. Both sites appeared to start as a single unenclosed roundhouse, then a central roundhouse in an enclosure. then gradually developing with the addition of more houses, the latest houses at Whitton being rectangular, those at Bryn Eryr, round but with stone walls, compared to the clay walls of the earlier houses. There had been a complex timber entrance structure at Whitton. In the gap between the bank terminals was a probable 6-post structure that had been renewed more than once, forming a gate or possibly even a tower over gate, and c. 4m wide (ibid, 10-16). The post-holes at St Mary's enclosure may have been the outermost of a similar structure. The geophysical survey suggests that there were two similar posts on the inside of the bank, making up a four-post structure for an entrance about 2.8m wide (Fig. 6). Exactly the same arrangement was also found at the Iron Age enclosure of Woodside, Pembrokeshire (Williams and Mytum 1996).

The Bryn Eryr and Whitton settlements both had central houses in their earlier phase although the geophysical evidence at the St Mary's enclosure was very vague and initially suggested houses at the rear of the enclosure, but a central position is also possible, which would explain the lack of settlement structures in Trench 1. The amount of erosion by the phase of ridge and furrow cultivation is greater than expected so any remains are going to be slight, with no preserved internal or external floor surfaces. The presence of fragments of charcoal suggests that there had been occupation within the enclosure and this was presumably the same as that represented by charcoal, animal bone, slag and iron the objects in ditch cutting [7]. There were also a few pieces of pressure-flaked waste flint in Trench 1, helping to show that this was a preserved horizon and that there had been some casual Neolithic activity on the promontory long before the enclosure was built.

One interpretation of the enclosure, before excavation, considering the proximity to the church, possibly with an early foundation date and the find of a 10<sup>th</sup> century decorated pin, was that the enclosure might be of Early Medieval date. The lack of artefacts tends to suggest that the enclosure is of Iron Age date. However, the failure to find any round-houses and the lack of any finds demonstrably of Iron Age date, such as spindle whorls or querns means that the options are still open for the date of the enclosure. The question should eventually be resolved when radiocarbon dates are obtained.

There is more post-excavation work to be completed, including processing of soil samples, identification of charcoal and bone, X-ray of iron objects. Selected pieces of charcoal from the base of ditch cutting [5], from the lower layers of ditch cutting [7] and from one of the post-holes will be submitted for AMS radiocarbon dating.

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### **APPENDIX 1**

## **EXCAVATION ARCHIVE**

Context sheets	40
Drawing sheets	6
Drawings	11
Digital photographs	48
Spot levels	124
Artefacts	58
Bone Charcoal Flint Iron objects Pot/Glass Slag/cinder Stone	16 24 8 4 2 3 1
Soil samples	3



G2076 St. Mary's Church Enclosure Fig. 1 Topographic location map. Contours metres OD



G2076 St. Mary's Church Enclosure Fig. 2 Aerial photograph, from the north-east, showing crop mark in pasture during drought, 2006 Photo by Dr Toby Driver. Copyright RCAHMW



Fig. 3 Old St. Mary's Church, Llanfairpwllgwyngyll, 1847



Fig. 4 St. Mary's Church, Llanfairpwllgwyngyll, Tithe map, 1840



Fig. 5 St. Mary's Church, Llanfairpwllgwyngyll. 10th century AD Irish-type decorated, ring-headed pin (ring-missing), found in the church yard



G2076 St Mary's Church Enclosure Fig. 6. Fluxgate gradiometer survey. Grey-scale plot and location of evaluation trenches



G2076 St Mary's Church Enclosure: Fig. 7 Trench 1 Plan



G2076 St Mary's Church Enclosure: Fig. 8 Trench 1 Ditch cutting [5], south-facing section



G2076 St Mary's Church Enclosure: Fig. 9 Trench 1. Other feature cross-sections



G2076 St. Mary's Church enclosure Fig. 10 Ditch cutting [5], south-facing section, 1m scales



G2076 St. Mary's Church enclosure Fig. 11 Post-hole [22] 30cm scale



G2076 St Mary's Church Enclosure: Fig. 12 Trench 2 plan



G2076 St. Mary's Church Enclosure: Fig. 13 Trench 2 Ditch cutting [7], south-facing section



G2076 St. Mary's Church Enclosure: Fig. 14 Trench 2 Other feature sections



G2076 St. Mary's Church enclosure Fig. 15 Ditch cutting [7], south-facing section, 1m scales



G2076 St. Mary's Church enclosure Fig. 16 post-hole [29], showing post-pipe. 30cm scale





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