THE PEMBROKESHIRE CEMETERIES PROJECT
EXCAVATIONS AT WEST ANGLE BAY 2006

SECOND INTERIM REPORT

Paratowyd gan: Archaeoleg Cambria
Ar gyfer: Cadw
Prepared by: Cambria Archaeology
For: Cadw

REGISTERED IFA ORGANISATION

ARCHAEOLEG CAMBRIA ARCHAEOLOGY

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RHIF YR ADRODDIAD / REPORT NO. 2006/119

Hydref 2006
October 2006

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PRN 56955

Gan / By

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SUMMARY

A number of machine and hand excavated trenches were opened during a short second season of excavation at West Angle Bay. The excavation objectives included 'ground truthing' of the results of a geophysical survey of the site and further clarification and confirmation of the results of the 2005 excavations. The work was undertaken by staff from Cambria Archaeology and students from Cardiff University. In addition, several local volunteers took part in the project and a successful programme of outreach undertaken by Cambria Archaeology, was funded by 'PLANED' (Pembrokeshire Local Action Network for Enterprise and Development).

Although some aspects of the site were clarified during the excavation, interpretation of the findings will largely be dependent upon the results of carbon 14 dating, and specialist analysis of flotation samples, finds and human remains, that have not yet been undertaken.

INTRODUCTION

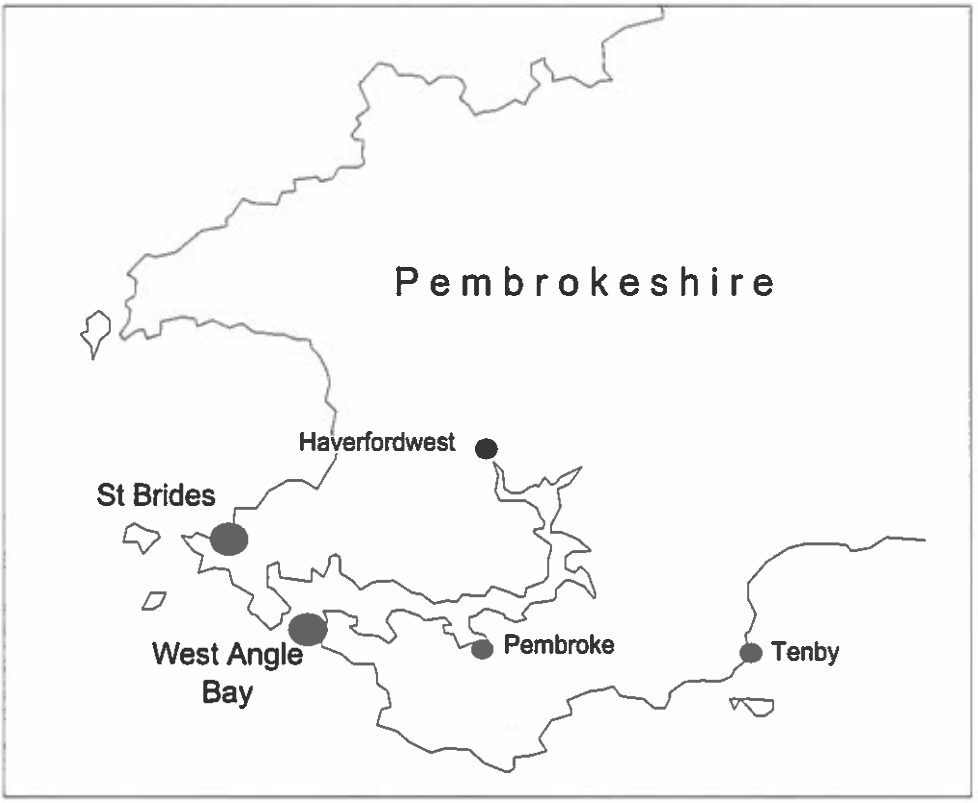
Project background

The Pembrokeshire Cemeteries project emerged from the Cadw-funded Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites assessment (DAT 71), in which a number of 'at risk' coastal cemetery sites were identified (Ludlow 2002). They included cist cemeteries at West Angle Bay and at St Brides both of which are suffering from coastal erosion. Up to three groups of burials have been noticed eroding out of the cliff-face on the south side of West Angle Bay, which was known to be the site of a medieval chapel.

In 2005, evaluation trenching was undertaken at West Angle Bay (PRN ~~35095~~; 55789 NGR SM 85 03) funded by Cadw and PCNP (Ludlow 2005). The aim of the trenching was to identify the presence and extent of any additional burials or other significant features that might be present, in order to inform future strategies for the management of the archaeological resource. A substantial stony cemetery enclosure bank was identified, surrounding numerous intercutting burials. Evidence of an earlier ditch feature following the alignment of the later bank was also identified. Beyond those visible in the cliff face, no further burials were encountered beyond the limits of the cemetery enclosure.

In 2006, a geophysical survey of the entire field was funded by PCNPA and undertaken by Stratascan (Heard 2006). This greatly clarified the character of the cemetery enclosure and in addition indicated the presence of several additional buried features. In addition, newly identified aerial photographic evidence provided valuable information on the nature of the site.

A further two-week programme of excavation funded by Cadw was undertaken by Cambria Archaeology in 2006, with support from Cardiff University students and local volunteers.



Site location map

Project objectives

Because of the limited time and resources available, and because of the monument management goals of the project, the objectives of the 2006 season were to test the nature of a variety of possible archaeological features suggested by the geophysical survey and to confirm or further clarify the results of the previous season of excavation.

The trenching strategy was designed to minimize disturbance to known archaeological deposits identified in the previous season, while maximizing the recovery of information on the deposition sequence and character of the site. To this end, two trenches from the 2005 season were partially re-opened. Five other trenches were opened to test and characterize the geophysical survey results. The excavation aimed to minimize the need to recover human skeletal material.

In addition to the archaeological objectives, funding for an 'outreach officer' was provided by 'PLANED'. This allowed the an extensive programme of outreach work to be undertaken including a visit and participation by the local school, on-site presentations for the many visitors to the site, and archaeology 'taster sessions', allowing the opportunity of hands on archaeological experience.

Methodology

Most trenches were machine-excavated down to the top of natural geology, or to a level at which archaeological features were identified or anticipated. Additional hand-excavated trenches were also dug.

All archaeological features were hand-excavated, and recorded using the standard system employed by Cambria Archaeology. Plans and section drawings were drawn at 1:20 scale and excavated features photographed in digital and BW format. The majority of the fieldwork was undertaken by local volunteers and by six students from the University of Cardiff as part of an accredited archaeology degree course, all under the supervision of staff from Cambria Archaeology. All trenches were backfilled at the end of the excavation.

EXCAVATION RESULTS

Trench 1 (Fig 1)

Trench 1 was first opened in the 2005 season. It was located on the eastern edge of the apparent platform, at NGR SM 8510 0300, where it appeared to be defined by a slight north-south bank. At the end of the 2005 season, a number of small soil marks were observed in the natural at the western end of the trench. One of them apparently containing burnt material. In addition, a possible north-south soil mark was observed towards the west. However, due to time constraints these features were not excavated.

The geophysical survey suggested that anomalies in this location might be attributable to archaeological features. In order to characterize these features the western half of the 2005 trench was re-opened in 2006.

When cleaning up the base of the trench prior to excavating the previously identified features, a small flint thumb scraper was recovered. A number of possible archaeological features were identified in plan. On excavation, however, these 'features' proved unconvincing. Most were discounted as variations in colouration within the natural deposits. Two features that appeared to contain charcoal flecks were also excavated. These, however, turned out to be irregular in form and were interpreted as animal burrows or root holes.

Conditions during excavation were very hot and dry and the soils were baked hard. Soils were soaked and covered, to sweat overnight, in an attempt to clarify the presence of archaeological features. No archaeological features, no buried soil horizon sand no features corresponding to the geophysical anomalies were identified. The presence of the flint scraper, however, does suggest that there may be evidence of prehistoric activity in the vicinity.

Trench 13 (Figs 1 and 2, photos 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)

This trench was originally opened in 2005. In 2006 part of the original trench was reopened and extended northwards in order to confirm and clarify the findings of the previous season and to characterise the results of the geophysical survey.

In the southern part, the trench was cleaned down to the level reached at the end of the previous season. The spread of stones 045, interpreted as a bank surrounding the cemetery was re-cleaned and displaced stones were systematically removed in order to clarify its character.

In the interior of the cemetery compound, the excavation of human remains was limited to two disturbed apparent infant burials 218 and 231, and a potentially well preserved adult within a well constructed stone-lined cist grave 211. The latter was excavated in order to allow further clarification of the relationship between the burials and the bank surrounding the cemetery. Various fragments of redeposited human and animal bone were also recovered during the cleaning and excavation of the bank material.

On the north side of the bank, soil was removed in spits to reveal the face of the stonework and to identify a possible ditch on the exterior of the cemetery boundary. The partial excavation of the bank material was then undertaken to confirm the presence of an earlier ditch, sealed beneath and on the same alignment as the bank, which had been first identified in the 2005 season.

The systematic removal of stones and soil did not reveal either a well-constructed wall, or a bank and ditch, as had been anticipated. The presence of the earlier ditch (cut 238) was, however, confirmed.

In 2005 it was considered that ditch 238 represented an early phase of the cemetery when it was surrounded by a ditch. The material overlying 238 was interpreted as a stone and earth bank constructed around the cemetery in a later phase.

The 2006 excavations have clarified the situation. The material overlying ditch 238 (243) has now been identified as collapse from a stone wall constructed within the area enclosed by 238, rather than a bank constructed on top of it. A possible bank has however, been identified to the south of ditch 238, represented by deposits 239 and 240. Beneath these deposits, a prehistoric flint core was recovered from layer 241. The stone wall is thought to have been constructed on top of this bank, but prolonged ploughing, and possible intentional removal has meant that evidence of the wall structure has been lost. All that remains is stone from where the wall has collapsed over the bank. An aerial photograph from the 1950s suggests that the cemetery enclosure survived as an upstanding feature at that time, but agricultural activity and presumably stone removal, has obliterated virtually all surface evidence within the last fifty years.

There was insufficient time to confirm and clarify this hypothesis by further excavation on the interior of the cemetery boundary.

Trench 14 (Fig 1)
This trench was cut in order to ascertain the presence or absence of a possible second enclosure suggested by interpretation of the geophysical survey. If such an enclosure were located, the burials that are eroding out of the cliff face on the northern edge of the site would be contained within its interior. The trench was located to cross the possible ditch and sample the interior.

No evidence for a ditch cut or banked enclosure was identified within the trench. Two features that might have been burials were investigated but were found to be natural features.

Trench 15 (Figs 1 and 4, Photos 1 and 2)
This trench was located to reveal the apparent intersection of two ditches identified from the geophysical survey, in order to ascertain the sequence of their construction. Natural shale bedrock was encountered immediately below the plough soil. A linear cut was apparent running north-south through the trench. The anticipated east-west ditch cut (a continuation of the enclosure ditch sought in Trench 14) was not present. A change in the form of the natural shales in the anticipated location may account for the geophysical anomaly.

A possible silt-filled linear cut feature observed close to the northern trench edge, prompted the trench to be extended by 1m to the north. On excavation, however, the feature turned out to be a fissure within the natural geology.

Two sections were cut through the north-south ditch. It was found to be roughly v-shaped in profile, becoming more vertical where cut through solid shale bedrock. The ditch was 2.60m wide and was 1.50m deep from the ground surface, with a level base. A slag fragment and some small fragments of oyster shell were the only finds recovered. Bulk flotation samples were recovered, from which it is hoped sufficient charcoal to obtain a C14 date might be recovered.

While as yet unproven, it is considered possible that this ditch may be of Roman or Iron Age date. A medieval or later date cannot, however, be discounted at this stage.

Trench 16 (Fig 1)
This was a hand dug test pit located to test a geophysical anomaly that might indicate a cist burial close to the cliff edge. In the event, no such feature was found to be present.

Trench 17 (Fig 1)
This trench was cut to sample a geophysical anomaly interpreted as being of possible archaeological origin. No features or deposits of archaeological origin were identified. It later transpired that the trench had been erroneously located. On the evidence of similar anomalies in the area of Trench 1, however, it is possible that the anomaly was also not of archaeological origin.

Trench 18 (Figs 1 and 5)
This was an additional hand-dug trench cut once the amount of archaeology elsewhere on the excavation had become apparent. The trench was located to sample a strong geophysical signal suggesting two parallel ditches running across the site on an east-west alignment.

Immediately below the ploughsoil, two parallel ditches were indeed located, cut into the natural geology. The ditch fills contained several large stones. The feature has been interpreted as a ditched trackway, although no evidence of a metalled surface survived. No dating evidence was recovered, and the stratigraphic relationship between the trackway and the rectilinear ditch to the east could not be ascertained.

CONCLUSIONS

The 2006 excavation season has provided important additional information on the nature and character of the early medieval cemetery and has confirmed the existence of significant archaeological features beyond the confines of the cemetery. It has also been very successful from the point of view of student training, hands-on public involvement and public outreach generally.

Following the 2005 excavations, the following phasing for the site was suggested:

Phase 1 – unenclosed burials in an open field (including the cliff-face burials?)
Phase 2 - formalised burial plot established, enclosed by a ditch?
Phase 3 - boundary bank constructed, redefining the cemetery site and disturbing earlier burials
Phase 4? – a fourth phase might be represented by the establishment of St Anthony's Chapel, which was not identified, but may lie within the enclosure just to the north of the evaluation trench.

The 2006 season found no further burials or other evidence to suggest an extensive unenclosed burial phase (Phase 1). The unenclosed burials identified in the cliff face have not yet been dated and may post-date the burial enclosure.

More significantly, the excavation has demonstrated the possibility that the boundary ditch, boundary bank and boundary wall all belong to the same phase, (combining Phases 2 and 3). Geophysical evidence suggests that Phase 4 may also be also be contemporary with this phase, since a rectangular structure is indicated within the cemetery enclosure. This structure may be St Anthony's Chapel, but confirmation of this would require additional excavation.

The presence of a prehistoric flint core beneath the possible bank material may, however, suggest that the boundary ditch and bank are the remains of a prehistoric feature that was re-employed in the early medieval period as a focus for burial.

The geophysical survey has indicated that there are several other archaeological features in the vicinity of the burial enclosure. While it has not been possible to date or phase these features in relation to the early medieval cemetery, it does suggest that human activity in this location covers a larger area, and probably a longer time span, than was previously suspected. This may support the possibility that the early medieval cemetery re-employs a prehistoric site. The probable presence of the remains of St Anthony's Chapel within the enclosure increases the significance and importance of the site.

From a monument management perspective, the 2006 season has demonstrated that significant archaeological features exist beyond the focus of the cemetery, which may be of importance to the context and understanding of the early medieval phase of the site. Better understanding of the character of the cemetery enclosure itself has clarified the impact of the destructive processes that have occurred to date, and the likely implications of any future threats.

The upstanding remains of the enclosure bank having been entirely removed, there is now little protection offered to the human and structural remains in the upper levels of the cemetery. The apparent presence of numerous infant burials in the later phases of cemetery usage is possibly a very significant observation in relation to early medieval burial practices. The poor bone preservation conditions and the closeness of skeletal material to the present ground surface, mean that potentially important osteological evidence is at risk of loss.

It might be argued that sufficient data has now been recovered from the last two excavation seasons to inform decisions as to how the site could be managed in the future, both as an historic monument and as an archaeological resource. From a research perspective, however, much of the history and nature of the site still remains to be clarified.

Management goals may aim to minimize further disturbance to site in favour of preservation of the archaeological remains *in-situ*, as a resource for the future. The main cemetery enclosure is some distance from the cliff edge and is not under immediate threat from coastal erosion. The current land management of the site does not actively threaten the survival of the archaeological resource, and is secured for the next five years or so under an agri-environment grant scheme.

The importance of the site does not, however, just lie in its physical structures. The skeletal material at the site is also of considerable importance to understanding the site, and early medieval religious communities more generally. The skeletal material is at threat, if not from erosion off the cliff edge, then from the poor conditions for bone preservation that pertain in the soils at the site. The importance of the skeletal remains at West Angle Bay is further enhanced by the potential to compare it with the human bone assemblage recovered from the early medieval cemetery recently excavated at Brownslade Barrow (Hughes and Crane 2006).

Other management options might therefore consider the value of the information that could be recovered through excavation now, over the information that could be recovered once a potentially significant proportion of the skeletal material at the site had been lost through further deterioration.

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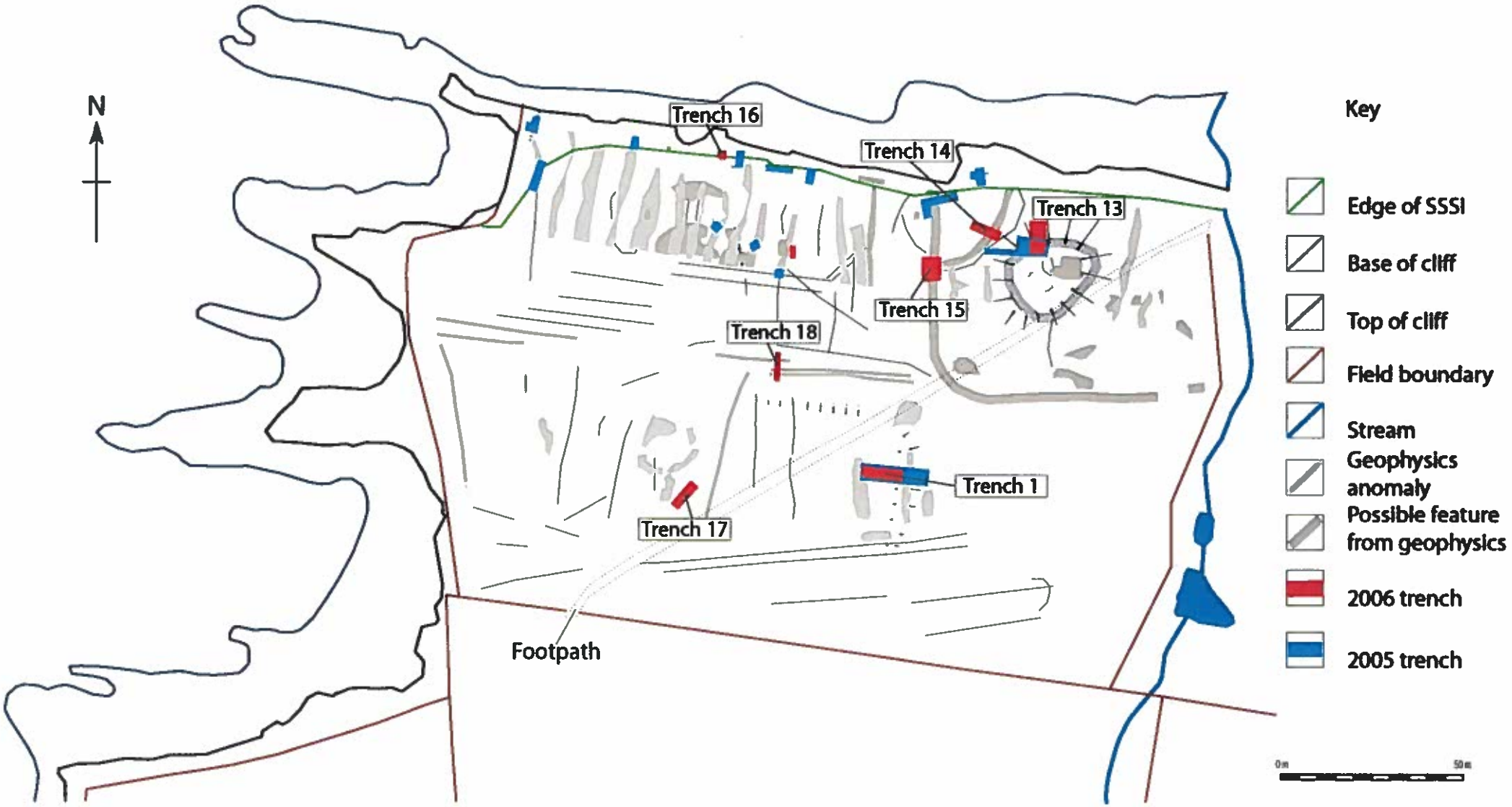


Figure 1: Trench location plan in relation to geophysics survey

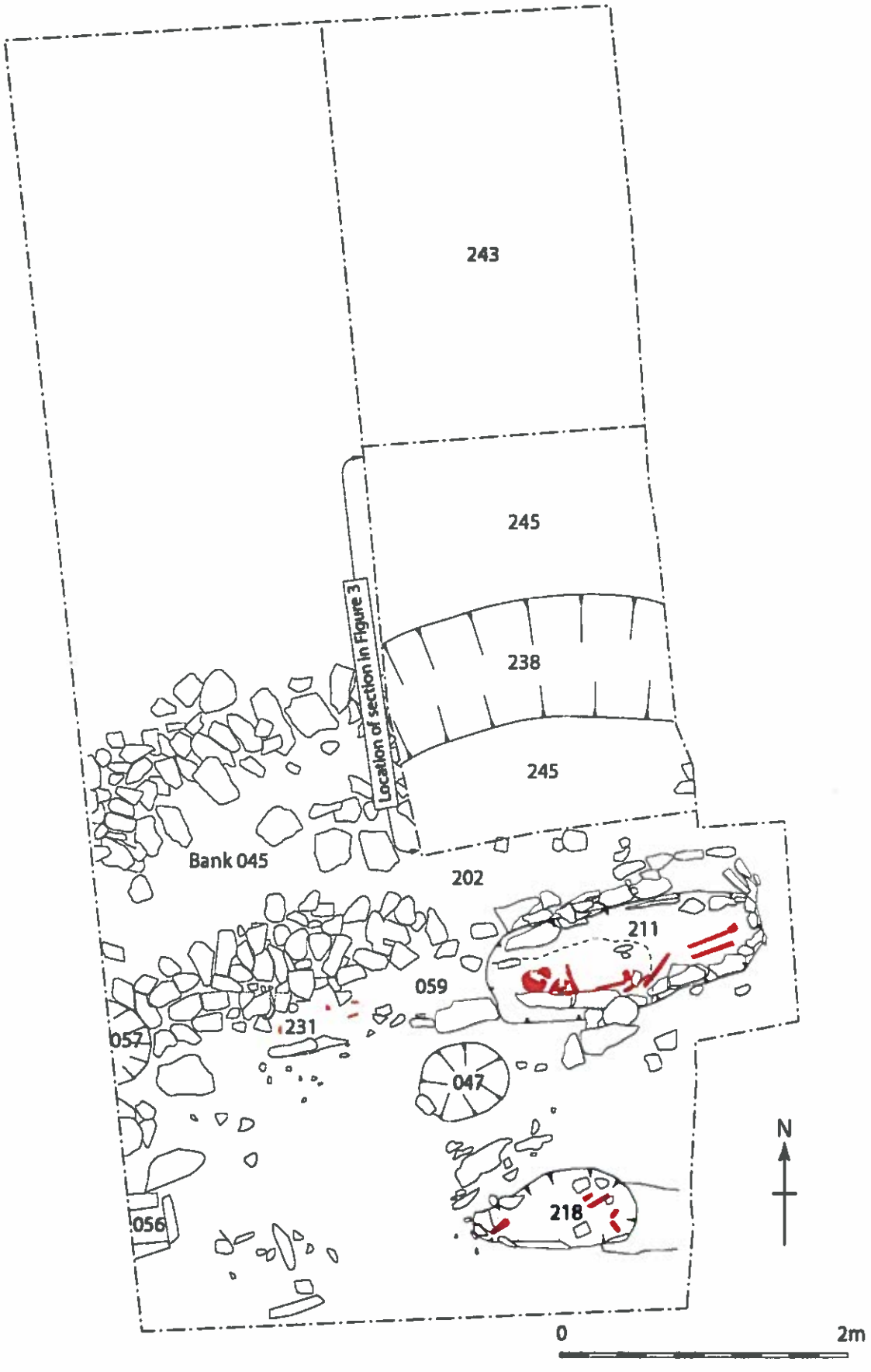


Figure 2: Plan of Trench 13 after excavation

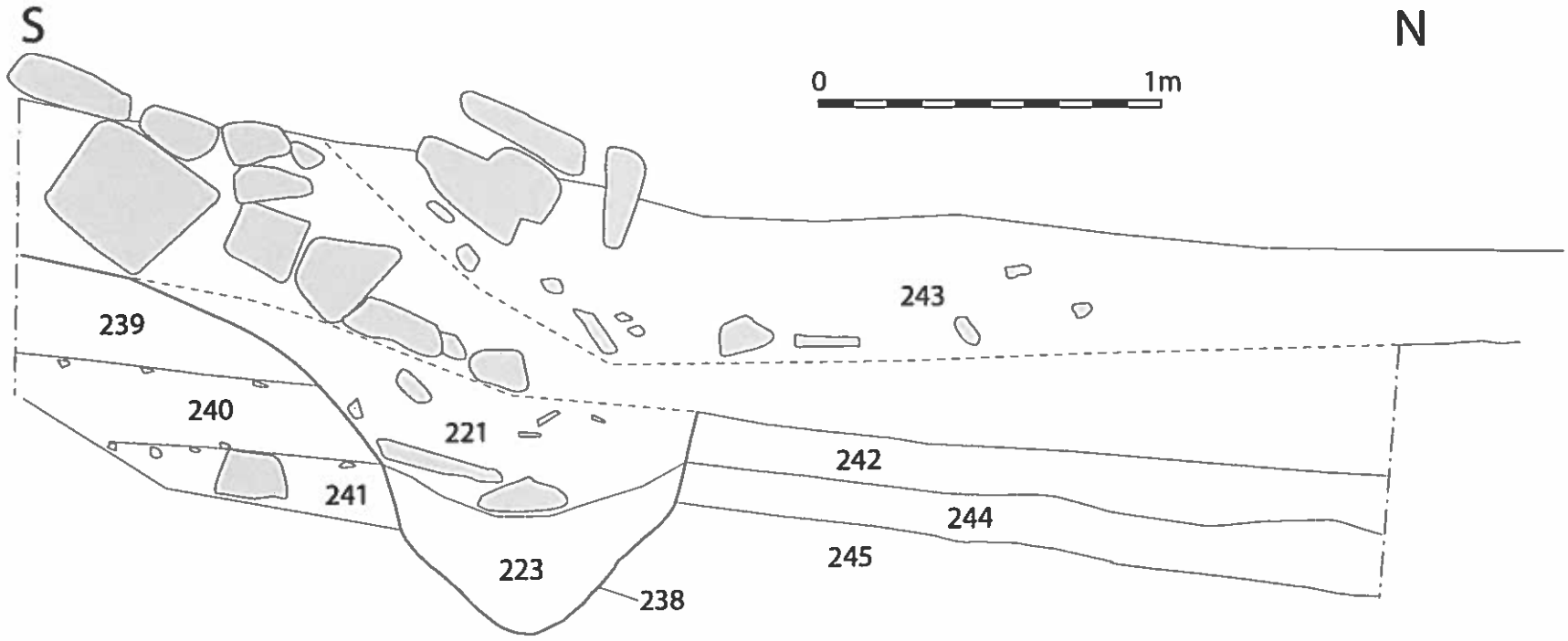
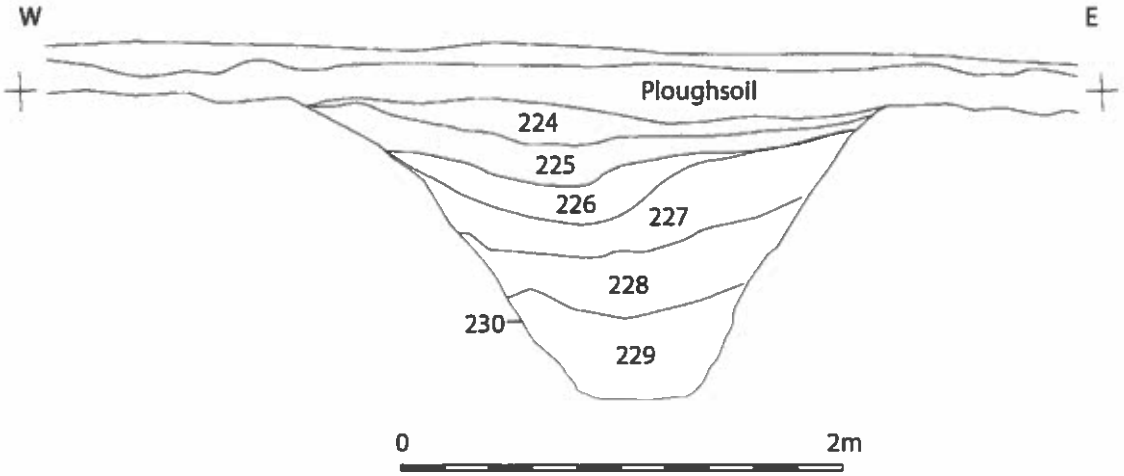


Figure 3: Section through ditch and bank in Trench 13



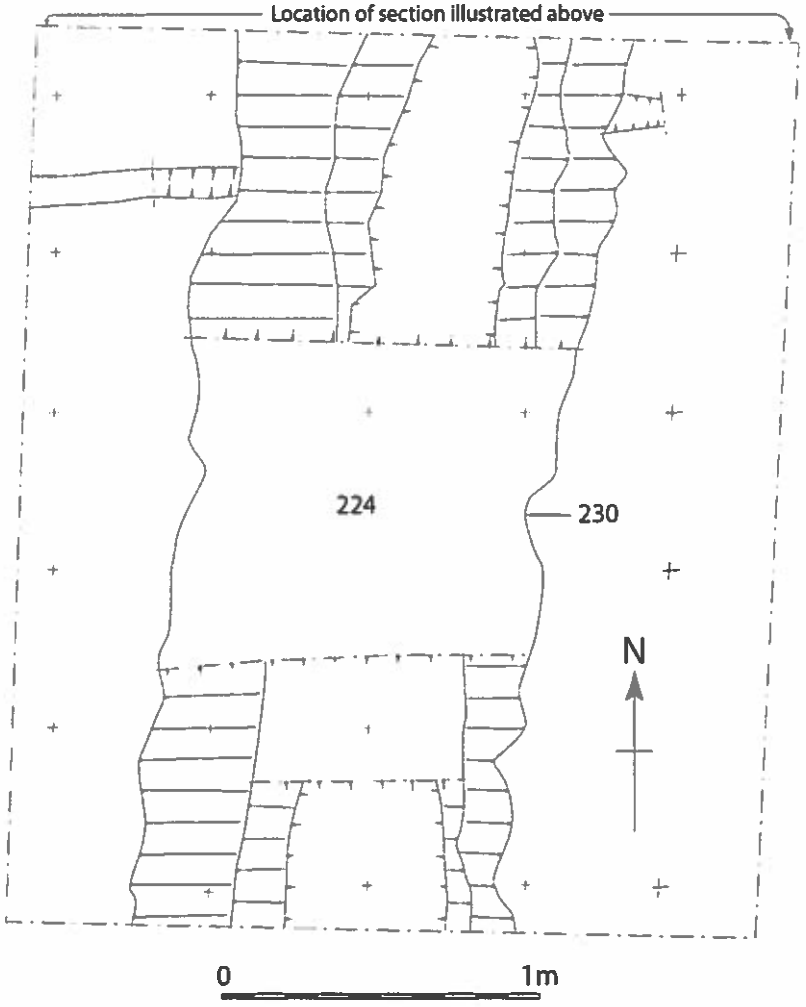


Figure 4: Trench 15. Ditch 230 in plan and section

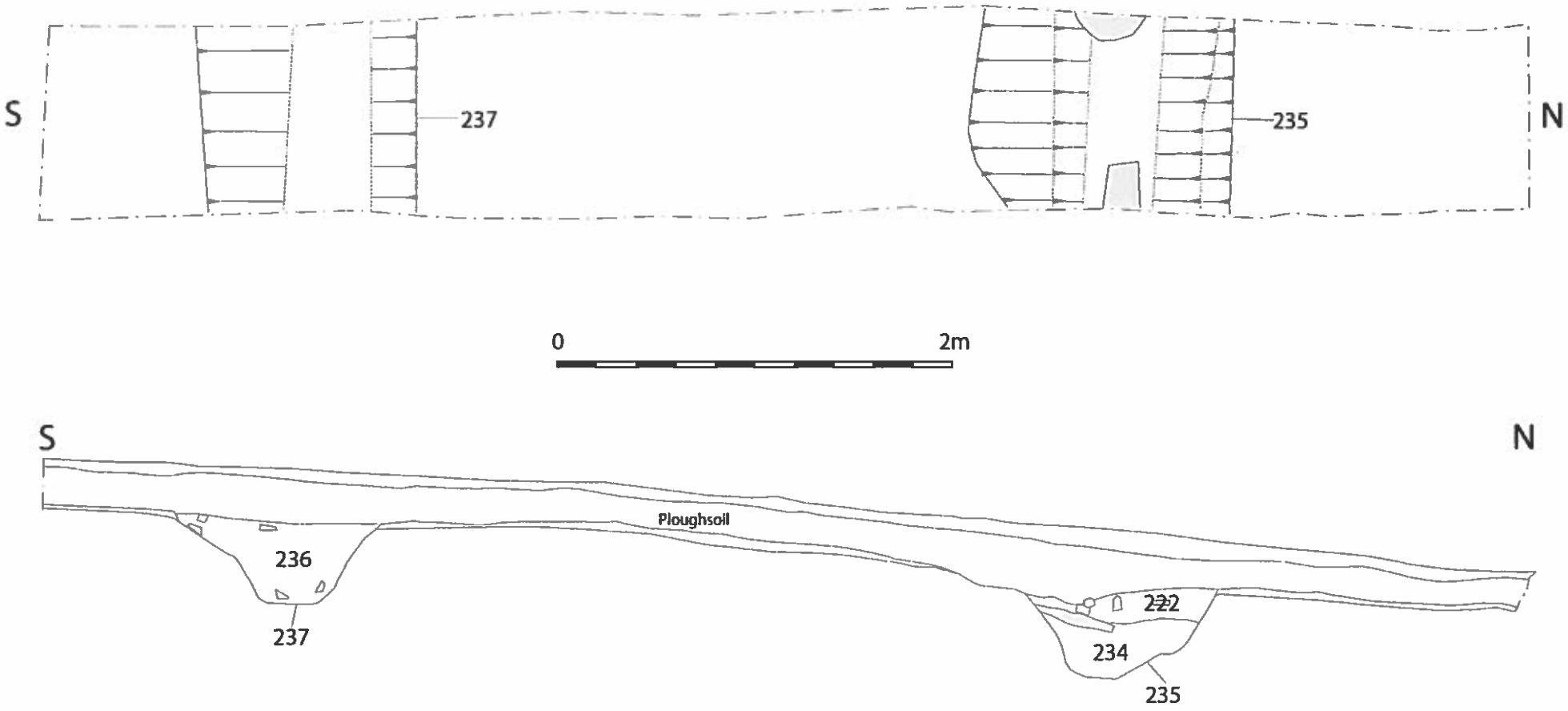


Figure 5: Trench 18 in plan and section

Photo 1: Trench 15. Ditch cut 230 before excavation, looking east

Photo 2: Trench 15. Section through ditch cut 230, looking north

Photo 3: Trench 13 looking north, before excavation of cists and bank

Photo 4: The southern half of Trench 13 looking east showing bank 045

Photo 5: Trench 13 looking west. Section through stones of bank 045

Photo 6: Trench 13 looking east. Section through ditch cut 238

Photo 7: Trench 13. Inhumation in cist grave 211, looking west

Photo 8: One of many site tours provided during the excavation

Photo 9: University students recording in Trench 13

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Paratowyd yr adroddiad hwn gan / This report has been prepared by Duncan Schlee

Swydd / Position: Archaeologist

Llofnod / Signature ..... Dyddiad / Date 10/10/2006

Mae'r adroddiad hwn wedi ei gael yn gywir a derbyn sêl bendith
This report has been checked and approved by

Gwilym Hughes

ar ran Archaeoleg Cambria, Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Dyfed Cyf.
on behalf of Cambria Archaeology, Dyfed Archaeological Trust Ltd.

Swydd / Position: Director

Llofnod / Signature ..... Dyddiad / Date 10/10/2006

Yn unol â'n nôd i roddi gwasanaeth o ansawdd uchel, croesawn unrhyw sylwadausydd gennych ar gynnwys neu strwythur yr adroddiad hwn

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