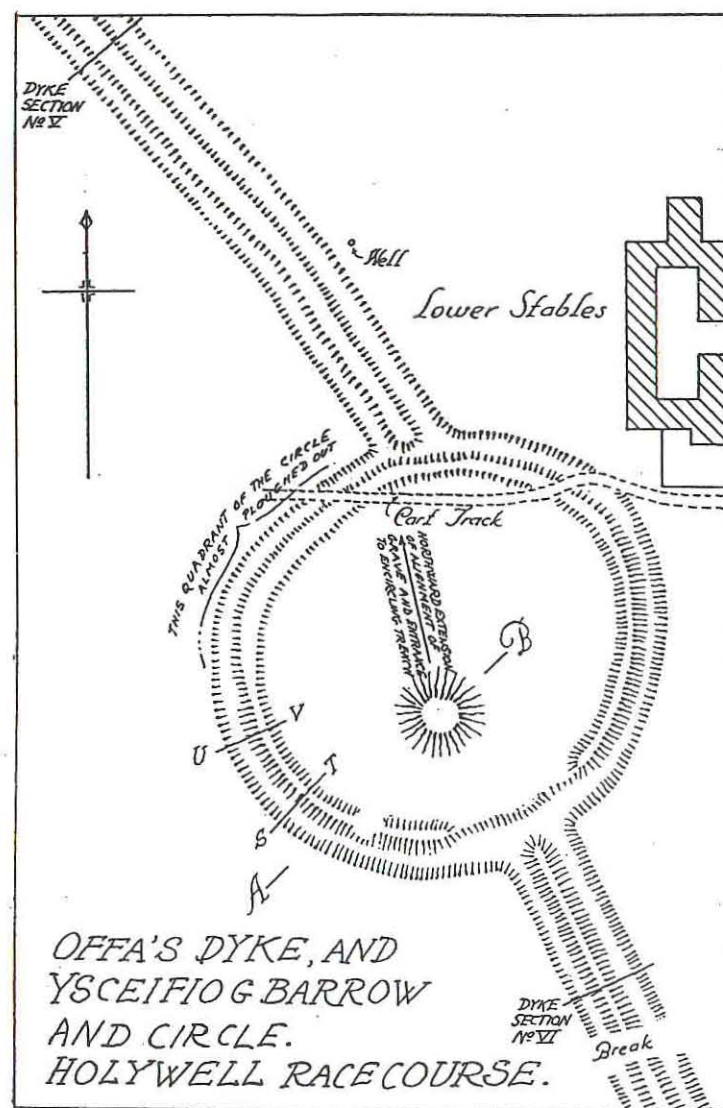


Holywell Earth Circle, Babel, Flintshire
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION



CPAT Report No 209

Holywell Earth Circle, Babel, Flintshire
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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November 1996

Report for Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Contracting Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (hereafter CPAT) was requested, in June 1995, by Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments, to submit an estimate of costs for undertaking an archaeological excavation and following on this, a watching brief at the site of the Holywell Earth Circle, Babel, Flintshire, in advance of a drainage scheme in the fields within which the site lies.
- 1.2 The excavation and watching brief were considered necessary as a condition of Scheduled Monument Consent since a part of the proposed drainage scheme was within the scheduled area of the Holywell Earth Circle (F.6).
- 1.3 The quoted estimate for the work was accepted and the excavation and recording work was subsequently carried out between July 12th and 21st, 1995 in accordance with the specification prepared by Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments.
- 1.4 The proposed drainage scheme was not implemented by the owner, and the watching brief was therefore not required. The following report therefore covers the excavation work carried out.

2 LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND SOILS

- 2.1 The site is located at the rear of Lower Stables Farm (SJ 1522 7530; 195mOD; Figs 1 & 2) which is approximately half-way between the villages of Gorsedd to the north and Babel to the south. At this point, Offa's Dyke is visible as a low bank running in a straight line up the south-east facing slope to the ridge where its profile at that point is defined below the hedge-line. Immediately to the south and east of the farm, the topography is either fairly level or slightly sloping.
- 2.2 Soils to the east of Lower Stables Farm are stagno-gleys of the Talog-Clifton Series in loamy reddish-brown Irish Sea drift over Palaeozoic limestone (Rudeforth *et al* 1984).
- 2.3 Currently, the two fields containing the monuments are pasture. OS Field No. 0435 (Fig. 2) was reclaimed from gorse-infested heath in the early 1940s and subsequently ploughed several times. OS Field No. 0718, which contains the Ysceifiog earth circle and barrow, was last ploughed in 1963 (R. Davies, pers. comm.)

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 3.1 In the vicinity of Lower Stables Farm, Offa's Dyke was described by Sir Cyril Fox as a bank ditched on both sides and that the Dyke stopped short at the ditch of the Ysceifiog Circle both to north-west and to the south-east of it (Fox 1926). Two sections were cut across the Dyke at points 130yds north-west and 43 yards south-east of the earth circle respectively (Fig. 3). At both locations the Dyke was described as slight and such was the nature of the ditch silts that they were practically indistinguishable from the undisturbed 'natural' clay. The depth of the ditches in the north-west section excavated were recorded as being 6 and 7 inches respectively and the height of the bank as 11 inches (Fox 1926b, 158).
- 3.2 The ditch surrounding the Ysceifiog barrow was described by Fox as being continuous (Fig. 3). No causeway was detected but at one point a sloping passageway was identified cutting into the ditch from the north.
- 3.3 Two trenches were excavated across the ditch and bank at separate points in the south-west quadrat (Sections S-T and U-V in Fig 3). Ditches were found to be 3ft 9 inches and 4ft 4 inches deep respectively and the banks were 1ft 7 inches and 1ft high at these points (Fox 1926a, 83-84)

4 THE EXCAVATIONS

- 4.1 Two trenches, A and B, were excavated at the points indicated in the specification. In both cases, the turf and topsoil were excavated mechanically and further excavation carried out manually.

4.2 Trench A (Fig. 4)

- 4.2.1 The trench, 30.0m long and 1.0m wide, was aligned north-south located in a position where it was anticipated that it would cut obliquely across the linear earthwork and at its southern end would coincide with the circuit of the Earth Circle ditch.
- 4.2.2 Removal of the topsoil (1) in the northern and southern parts of the trench exposed a stiff, greyish-yellow, sandy clay layer with a slight stone content (2). The only variation to this layer in the northern third of the trench was a slight depression (9) containing a light brown fill which on excavation proved to be a natural depression in the otherwise undisturbed sandy-clay layer. In the southern third of the trench, the sandy-clay layer appeared to be completely undisturbed.
- 4.2.3 In the central third of the trench, the exposed soil varied in colour, texture and depth from the stiff sandy clay uncovered to the north and south, being grey-brown in colour and with a distinct mottling which increased with depth (3). At one point within this layer, a modern stone-filled field drain (6) was uncovered which extended diagonally across the trench. At a maximum depth of 1.00m below the surface, layer (3) was succeeded by an orange-brown sandy clay (4) which extended below the specified limit of excavation at 1.20m. At this depth, the base of the trench was markedly stonier, a feature which may have indicated the existence of a third successive layer (5). Layers (3) and (4) were interpreted as the successive fills of a ditch the northern edge (7) of which was defined as a tangentially-running band of sandy gravel with a layer of panning below this. The southern edge of the ditch was similarly defined by a band of sandy gravel but with marked manganese concretion towards the base of the trench. The orientation of the ditch-edge on the southern side (8) was transverse across the trench rather than tangential as on the northern side. Finds from the trench was limited to a single secondary waste flint fragment recovered from (4).

4.3 Trench B

- 4.3.1 This trench, which was 1.0m north-south x 4.0m east-west, was located in a position along the proposed drainage line which, it was anticipated, would coincide with the circuit of the Earth Circle ditch at this point.
- 4.3.2 Following the removal of the turf/topsoil layer, at a depth of 0.35m, a layer consisting of modern brick fragments and angular limestone fragments contained in a stiff, yellow clay matrix was exposed. This overlay a yellow sandy clay, at a depth of 0.60m, which was similar to Layer 2 in Trench A. At the western end of the trench, removal of the topsoil exposed a stone-filled field drain 0.35m wide x 0.25m deep which extended laterally across the width of the trench. No stratigraphic features indicating the existence of a ditch at this location were recorded.

5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The tangential orientation of the ditch-edge (7) in the northern half of Trench A may reasonably be interpreted as defining the inner edge of the ditch, whose base extended below the limits of excavation, on the western side of Offa's Dyke. The opposing east facing side of the ditch presumably lies at some point to the west of the trench. The dyke itself, to the east of the ditch, as anticipated in the brief, appears to have been completely denuded.
- 5.2 The edge (8) which crossed Trench A transversely in its southern half may represent the eroded north-facing edge of a feature the base of which again extended below the limits of excavation. No trace of an opposing south facing edge were found. Although the stratigraphic evidence is inconclusive, the position and orientation of this feature corresponds approximately with the line of the ditch associated with the earth circle in this sector (Fig. 2).
- 5.3 Fox noted that Offa's Dyke stopped short at the ditch of the Ysceifiog circle (Par 3.1). Fig. 3 however shows quite clearly that the Dyke did in fact cut the outer but not the inner edge of this ditch and the excavation of Trench A seem to confirm this event.
- 5.4 The excavation of Trench B was inconclusive in that it revealed no firm evidence for the existence of the earth circle ditch at this location. The stratigraphy and finds were entirely of a modern origin and the location of the trench corresponds approximately with the line of the cart track denoted in Fig. 3.

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 6.1 CPAT wishes to acknowledge the help given by Mr and Mrs R. Davies during the course of the excavation.

7 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Fox, C., 1955, *Offa's Dyke*, London, Oxford University Press.

Rudeforth, C.C., Hartnup, R., Lea, J.W., Thompson, T.R.E., and Wright, P.C., 1984, *Soils and their Use in Wales*, Bulletin No 11. Harpenden: Soil Survey of England and Wales.

APPENDIX 1
SITE ARCHIVE

Site data

14 context record forms

1 A3 plan of Trench A 1:100

1 A3 section of Trench A 1:50

1 A4 plan of Trench B 1:20

1 black and white negative film and contacts

1 colour slide film

Photographic catalogue

Finds

1 waste flint fragment from context 4



Fig. 1: Site Location, scale 1:25,000

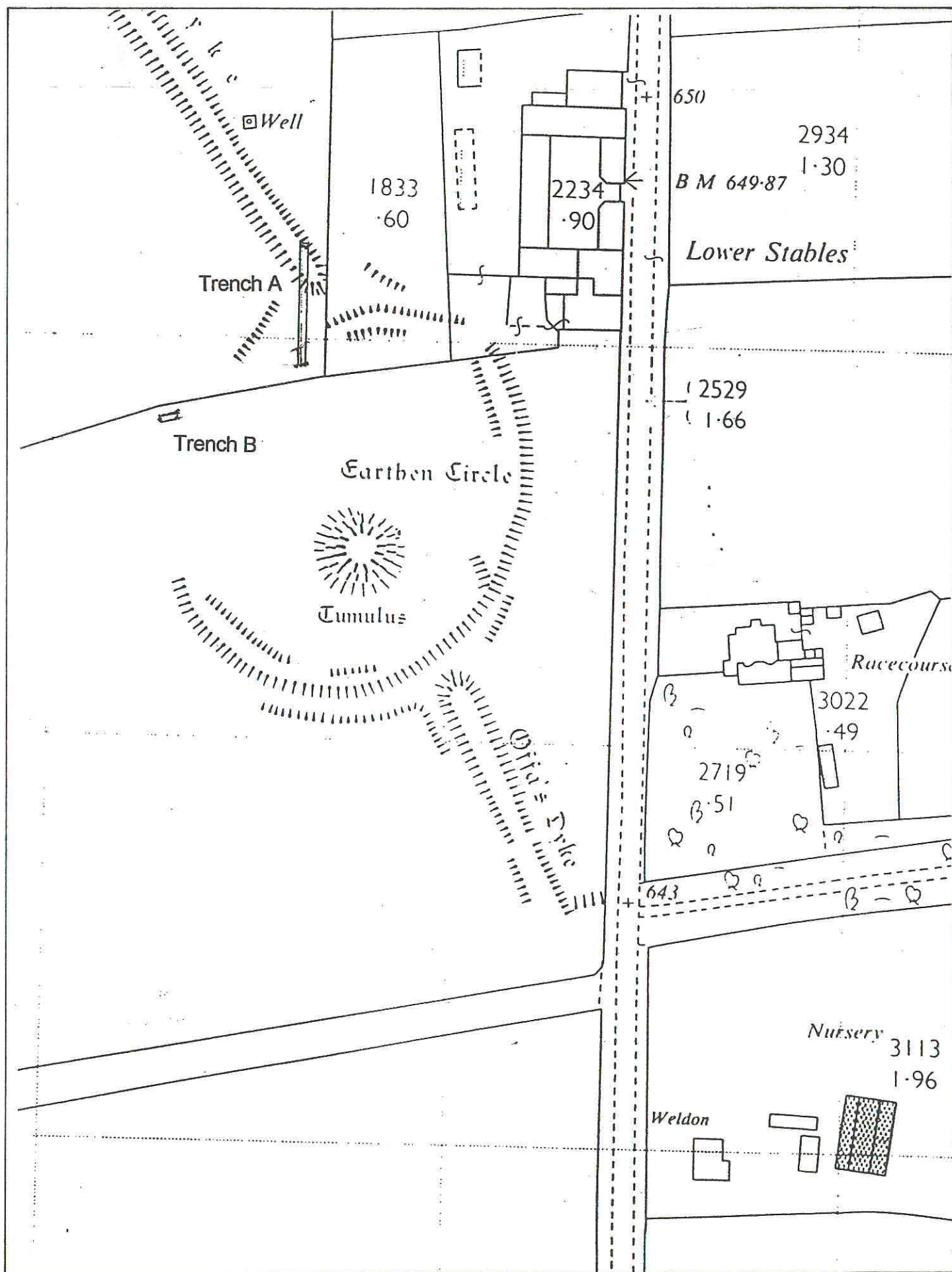


Fig. 2
Trench Location
Scale: 1:1250

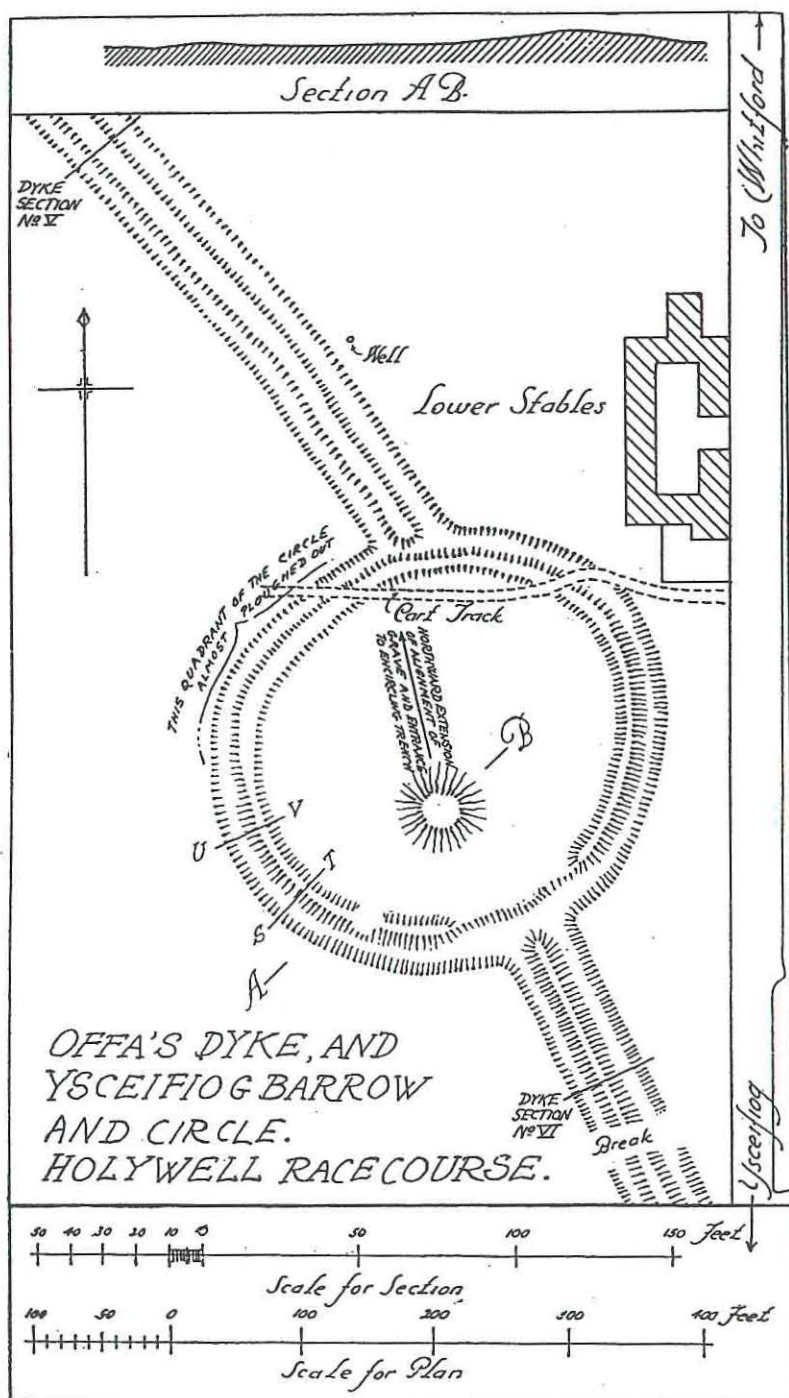


FIG. 8. Plan of Ysceifiog Circle, Flintshire, showing junction with Offa's Dyke, and sites of excavated sections, V and VI, of the Dyke.
(From *Arch. Camb.* 1926, p. 50.)