

CPAT Report No 1096

Ty Griana, Babell, Flintshire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF



THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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May 2011

Report for Mr B Cattroll

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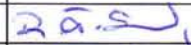

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CONTENTS

- 1 INTRODUCTION
- 2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
- 3 WATCHING BRIEF
- 4 CONCLUSIONS
- 5 REFERENCES

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In April 2011 the Field Services Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) was invited to undertake a watching brief during the construction of a new garage adjacent to Ty Griana, near Babell in Flintshire (Fig. 1; SJ 1527 7488). The watching brief was conducted as a condition of planning consent owing to the fact that the development lay on the projected line of the Whitford Dyke (Fig. 2).
- 1.2 The linear earthwork had formerly been regarded as part of Offa's Dyke (Fig. 1), although it has more recently become accepted as a separate monument and has been termed the Whitford Dyke to differentiate it from its much longer Saxon counterpart. The earthwork can be traced intermittently for around 9km from a point south of the former Holywell Racecourse (SJ 1531 7466) to Trelawnyd (SJ 0834 7988), although the most northerly section remains to be confirmed archaeologically (Fig. 3).



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Fig. 1 The location of Ty Griana



Fig. 2 Low lying embankment, the remains of Whitford Dyke, north of Ty Griana
Photo CPAT 3268-0010

2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The discontinuous earthwork appears to have been first recorded by the Ordnance Survey on the Surveyors' Drawing No. 343, surveyed in 1834-5, on which it was identified as a northern continuation of Offa's Dyke. This identification was later accepted by Sir Cyril Fox, who commenced his fieldwork study of the Dyke as a whole with investigations in this area in 1924-5 (Fox 1955). Fox described the surviving earthwork sections in some detail, although a comparison with the Surveyors' Drawing clearly indicates that significant sections had already been lost by the 1920s.
- 2.2 In particular, Fox's attention was drawn to two sections of the earthwork where a change in direction coincided with what appeared to be prehistoric monuments, and it was in these areas that he decided to excavate a number of sections. Near the south-eastern end of the earthwork, on the site of the former Holywell Racecourse, is the hengiform monument known as the Holywell Earth Circle (or Ysceifiog Circle), which is defined by a ditch with a slight internal bank forming an oval 108m across from north-east to south-west by 95m from north-west to south-east (Fig. 3). Within the circle, but off-centre to the south, is a prominent round barrow 20m across. Fox noted that the 'dyke' respected the circle, rather than continuing across it, and excavated two sections across the 'dyke', one 39m to the south-east and the other 119m to the north-west. The excavations were unable to identify either the original ground surface or the profile of the ditches with any certainty, despite having been over-cut in both sections, although the conclusion was that the ditches were probably around 1m deep and 3.3m wide, and between 8.25 and 9.75m apart internally.
- 2.3 The general acceptance of this earthwork as the northern section of Offa's Dyke has been challenged by Hill and Worthington (2003, 154-161) who drew attention to the fact that the Whitford Dyke differs in that it consists of a bank edged by ditches to either side both of which are of slight nature, and the fact that the form of the monument is completely anomalous when compared with the size and profile of the earthworks which form Offa's Dyke further to the south. Indeed, the most northerly section still regarded as Offa's Dyke is at Treuddyn, 22.75km away to the south-east. Instead, they have suggested that the earthworks are part of a mutually agreed boundary of medieval or earlier origin, which is now known as the Whitford Dyke.



Fig. 3 The earth circle, barrow and Whitford Dyke at Holywell Racecourse viewed from the north-east. Photo CPAT 08-c-227.

- 2.4 The status of the linear earthwork adjacent to the circle was also questioned by Alex Gibson (1999), who similarly argued that the two flanking ditches suggested that this was not part of Offa's Dyke. In addition, the fact that the 'dyke' appears to run up to, but not cross the circle and its central barrow, were seen as an indication that the features might be contemporary. Gibson suggested that only the section to the south-east of the circle, not the entire earthwork, might be a cursus. Cursus monuments are characterised by roughly parallel banks and ditches, with the more complete examples having terminals at either end, forming elongated enclosures, some with central linear mounds. Excavations in England have dated them to the Neolithic, between 4,000 and 2,500 BC. They take their name from the Latin for 'racecourse', and are so named because early archaeologists believed them to have been used by the Ancient Britons for racing their chariots, a theory which has now been dismissed. Their true purpose, however, remains a mystery, although it is generally believed that they served as routeways for ceremonial processions. Although many cursuses extend over considerable distances, in some cases up to 10km, most are rather shorter, typically around 2km or less in length.

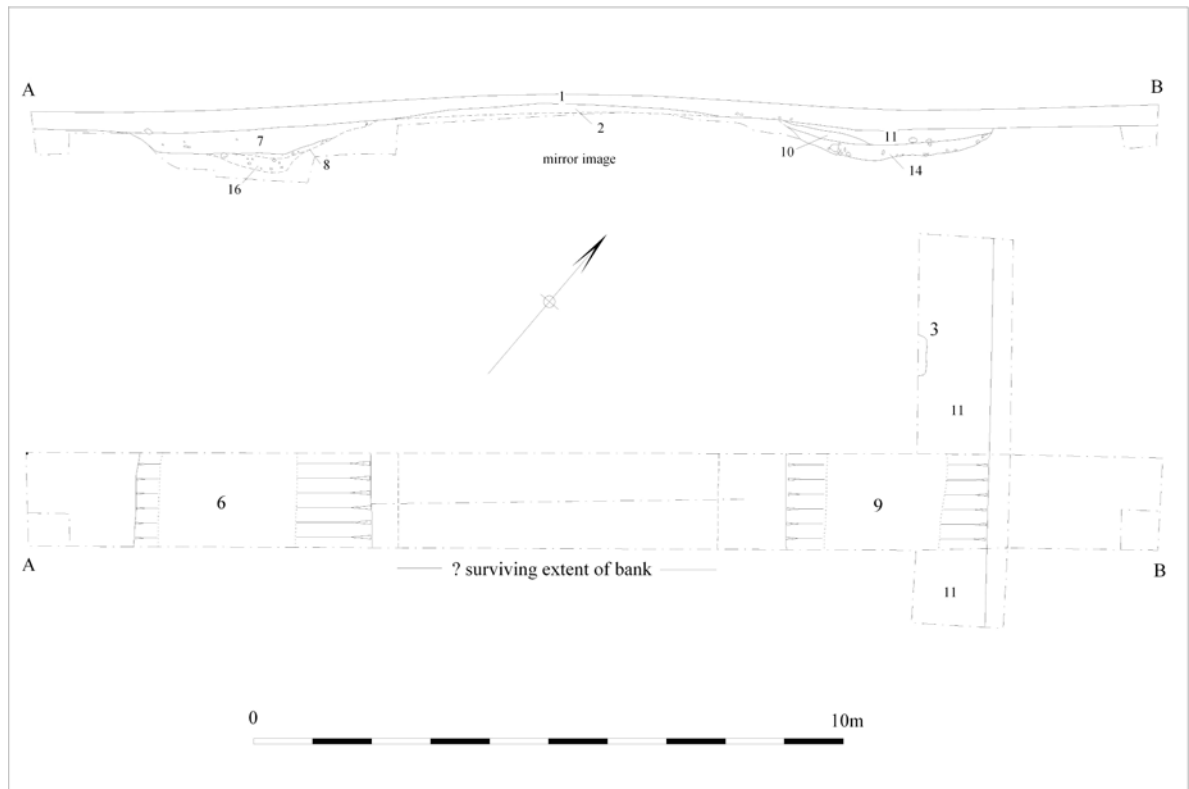


Fig. 4 Plan of the 2009 excavation of the Whitford Dyke

- 2.5 A re-examination of the earthwork as a whole has shown that as far as can be determined its form remains consistent along its entire length, with a central mound flanked by two ditches. Although the dimensions do vary, it is not unreasonable to assume that the visible earthworks were originally part of a single monument. The north-western end is rather uncertain as a length of bank to the south-east of Gop Farm has been identified in the past as part of the dyke, although Fox suggested that it might be part of an old roadway (Fox 1955, 19). Neither this, nor the adjacent section alongside the present road, are convincingly part of the linear earthwork and the last identifiable section is just west of Trelawnyd.
- 2.6 Small-scale trial excavations were undertaken by CPAT in 2009, investigating a section across the dyke to the north of the earth circle, revealing a slight surviving bank around 5.4m wide and perhaps 0.15m high, with a western ditch 4.2m wide and 0.75m deep and an eastern ditch 3.7m wide and 0.55m deep (Fig. 4).

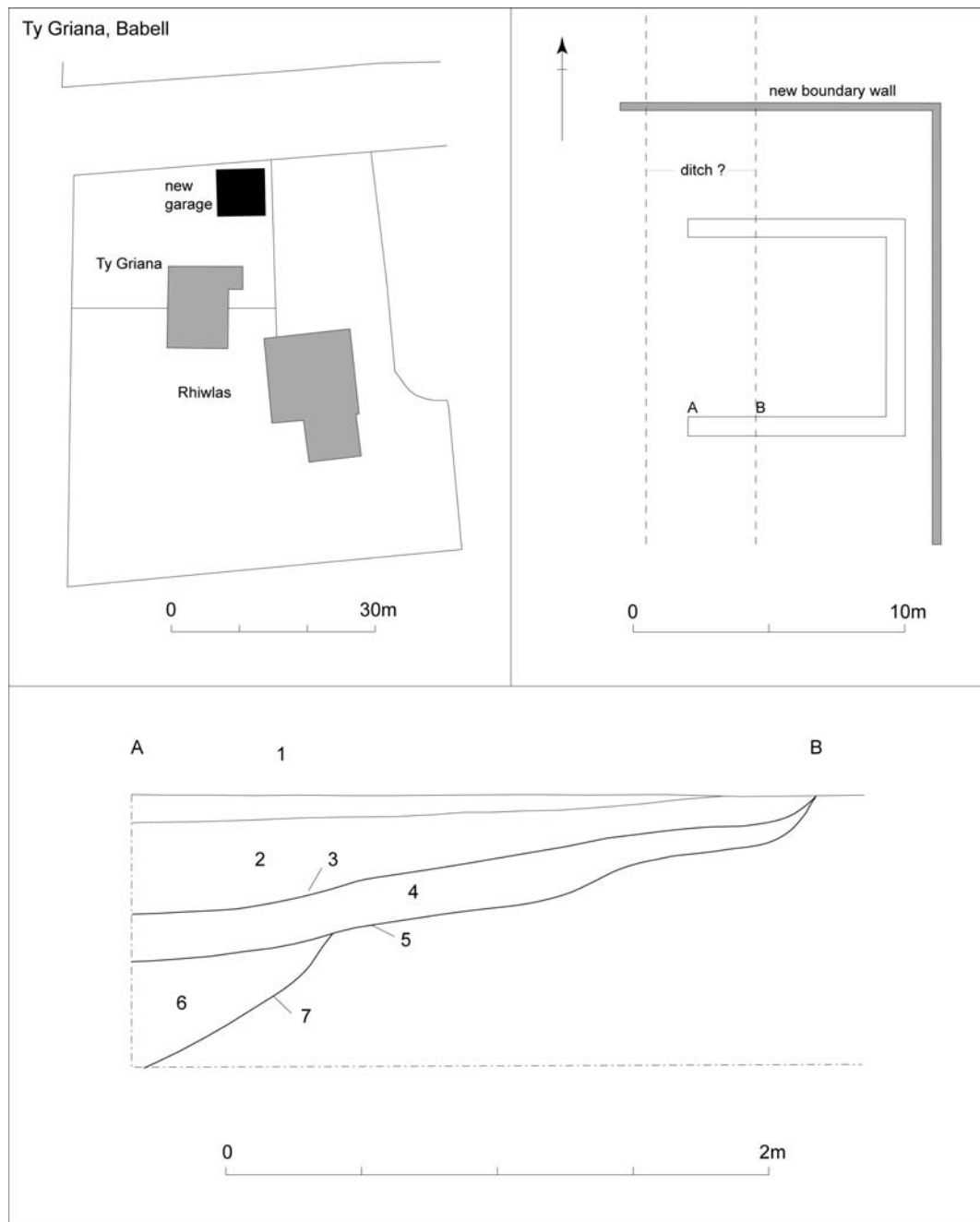


Fig. 6 Section of the ditch revealed during the watching brief

3 WATCHING BRIEF

- 3.1 The excavation of the garage footings, which were 0.7m wide and 1m deep, were within a building footprint of approximately 8m², located 3.6m south of a recently erected boundary wall (Fig. 6). The new wall had been constructed along the line of an existing field boundary, and a restricted view of the footings for the wall revealed possible traces of ditch fills suggested by bands of orange mineral deposit which were visible in section. Unfortunately all further traces of the ditch immediately south of the wall had been removed by groundworks undertaken during the construction of Ty Griana in the 1950s.
- 3.2 The machine-excavated garage footings immediately south of the wall revealed undisturbed natural subsoils up to a depth of 0.9m. The natural deposits were characterised by successive bands of pale orange sand with variable inclusions of gravel and patches of pink boulder clay.

- 3.3 In contrast, the footings for the south side of the garage contained evidence for the outer edge of a ditch towards its western end (Fig. 6 and 7). Part of a ditch, 0.9m deep and 2.5m wide, revealed fills tipping from east to west. The base of the ditch was defined by a 10mm band of firm, iron-panned mineral deposit (7), together with overlying grey sand and gravel (6), 0.37m thick. This basal fill was sealed by a further lens of orange mineral deposit, above which was a mottled bluish-grey sand (4), 0.16m thick, a band of iron panning (3) and an upper fill of fudge-brown firm silty sand (2), 0.34m thick, which also contained patches of re-deposited pink boulder clay. All of the deposits contained flecking of naturally occurring coal throughout, although it is possible that some of the flecking in the basal fills could have been traces of wood charcoal. No dateable artefacts were recovered from the ditch apart from fragments of brick and a few sherds of 19th-century ceramic retrieved from a modern deposit which sealed the ditch. No other significant features were recorded within the bounds of the development plot.



Fig. 7 South-facing section through the remains of dyke ditch deposits.
Photo CPAT 3268-0007

4 CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 The watching brief has indicated that extensive landscaping was undertaken when Ty Griana was built in the 1950s which has removed any upstanding remains of the Whitford Dyke in this area. It was evident that along the northern perimeter of the property the eastern flanking ditch had been severely truncated such that only the basal fills survived. The landscaping had evidently been less extensive further to the south where the outer edge of the ditch was identified in the footings for the south side of the new garage, at which point the ditch survived to a depth of up to 0.9m deep.
- 4.2 The full width of the ditch was not apparent within the observed footings, although the 2009 excavations at Holywell Racecourse (Jones 2009; Fig. 4) recorded the eastern flanking ditch as 3.7m wide and 0.5m deep.
- 4.3 No artefactual evidence was recovered from the observed ditch deposits which might have elucidated the date of the Whitford Dyke. The question therefore remains as to whether the linear earthwork is more likely to belong to the earlier medieval or prehistoric periods. Current thinking favours the former, with the incorporation of two prehistoric monuments along its route, and Gop Cairn possibly marking the north-western end. As a boundary feature the earthwork runs more or less along the spine of the Flintshire plateau, dividing the hinterland of the Dee Estuary from the Vale of Clwyd. This is not to say, however, that the monument is uniformly of the same period and, as Gibson suggested, the section immediately to the south-east of the hengiform site could be a cursus.

5 REFERENCES

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