

THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

Mathrafal Barns, Meifod, Powys

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF



CPAT Report No 822

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Report for Jamie Richardson (Builders) Ltd

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In September 2006 the Field Services Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) was invited by Mr J Richardson of Jamie Richardson (Builders) Ltd, of Meifod, Powys to prepare a specification and quotation for undertaking an archaeological watching brief on a site at Mathrafal, Meifod, in connection with the conversion of two redundant farm buildings to dwellings. The watching brief was the subject of a brief drawn up by Mr M J Walters of the Curatorial Section of CPAT, acting in his capacity as archaeological advisor to the local planning authority, who had determined that an archaeological watching brief should be undertaken during certain of the building works.
- 1.2 The site is situated immediately to the north of the scheduled ancient monument known as Mathrafal Castle (SAM Mg44), and was almost certainly excluded from the original scheduling order, only because of the existence of the buildings and the curtilage surrounding them. As such it might be anticipated that any ground works associated with the development could well encounter features or artefacts associated with the castle and its earthworks, hence the need for the watching brief.

2 LOCATION AND GEOLOGY

- 2.1 The development plot is located at the junction of the B4389 and the A495 to the south-east of Pontrobert and south-west of Meifod. The site occupies low-lying land between the road and the River Banwy. An outcropping of rock immediately to the south-west of the development site forms the foundation for the castle site and continues across the river bed at this point, creating shallow rapids and a resultant downstream pool.
- 2.2 The site lies on the geological boundary between Ordovician sedimentary rocks of the Ashgill series, and undivided Llandovery Silurian rocks (1994 British Geological Survey map). In the river valley, silty, permeable brown soils predominate on the alluvium, often with a gravelly subsoil. Away from the river valley Cegin association cambic stagnogleys of fine silty and clayey soils on drift material become more important (1983 Soil Survey of England and Wales map).

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The earthworks at Mathrafal consist of a motte and bailey castle surrounded by a later rectangular enclosure. The earliest surviving documentary evidence for the site occurs in an elegy on Madog ap Maredudd, ruler of Powys (d. 1160), by Cynddelw, in which the poet refers to a battle "on the field of Mathrafal", and the burning of a castle here is mentioned in a slightly later 12th-century poem by Llywarch ap Llywelyn (Jones and Parry Owen 1991). Although earlier research suggested the rectangular enclosure predated the motte and bailey castle (Musson and Spurgeon 1988, 104), archaeological investigation carried out in 1989 indicated that the earliest date for the construction of the rectangular enclosure defences is c. A.D. 1200, possibly after the levelling of the bailey defences (Arnold and Huggett 1995). The defensive nature of the site appears to have become unimportant by the fourteenth century, although the site continued to function as an important manorial complex. Occupation on the site continued right up until the nineteenth century, with a farmhouse standing in the north-west corner of the site, and ancillary farm-buildings (the subject of this development) in the yard to the north.
- 3.2 The development plot consists of two 19th-century redundant farm buildings, Building A in the south-west and Building B to the north-east, situated within yards and grassed areas, with a

further pasture field adjacent to the north-east. Building A consists of a stone-built, two-storey rectangular unit, with slated roof and a former hayloft or grain store on the first floor. The ground floor of the building appears to have been utilised as a dairy, and has a lath and plaster ceiling, slate and concrete slabbed floor, and has utilised the bare rock face which has been incorporated into the rear of the building as a possible shelf. Building B was unroofed at the time of visit, but consisted of a byre area, floored with river cobbles and end-set slate slabs, and open to the south-west. A gully or hollowed area to the north-east of Building B currently has a piped land-drain discharging into the river, but may represent the channel of an earlier watercourse, or possible driveway to a fording place of the river at this point, or a washing pool.

4 WATCHING BRIEF

- 4.1 The watching brief took place on the 17, 18, 19 & 25th October, during the mechanical excavation of service trenches, rainwater drains, and foundation trenches, and the hand excavation of test pits. A further visit was made on 24th January 2007 during the excavation of a pit for the installation of a septic tank and associated soakaway channels. A full drawn, written and photographic record was maintained throughout. Numbers in brackets in the following text refer to individual records in the site archive.



Plate 1. Trench 1: hearth (11) and posthole (13)

- 4.2 Trench 1 consisted of a c.0.60m-deep, and c.64m-long cutting excavated to allow the laying of services along the side of the drive and along the rear and sides of Building B, with a spur leading southwards to Building A. The natural subsoil deposit (03) varied along the length of the trench, from dark greyish gravels in the north-west, to bright orange-yellow silty clays and gravels in the central and eastern area of the site. Several features were identified in the base of the trench, overlying or cutting into the natural subsoil. Towards the north-western end of the trench, adjacent to the entrance of the drive onto the road, a level spread or possible metalled

surface, of compacted pebbles (05) extended for at *c.* 4m, and continued beyond the limits of the trench to the north-east and south-west. Approximately 2m to the south-east, a 1.35m-wide pit (11) containing quantities of reddened clay and charcoal (06) produced a single sherd of medieval pottery. A later posthole (13) containing a greyish-brown silty clay with several packing stones (12), had partially truncated the edge of the pit. One metre further to the south-east a linear ditch (08), aligned north-east to south-west crossed the trench and continued beyond the limits of the excavation. The ditch contained a single fill of dark grey-brown very firm silty clay (07) with frequent charcoal flecks and occasional burnt daub and stone. A regular, straight-sided pit (10), at least 0.65m wide and over 0.60m deep, containing a very loose, stony fill (09) associated with fragmented brick and 19th-century ceramic, was revealed *c.* 4m to the south-east.

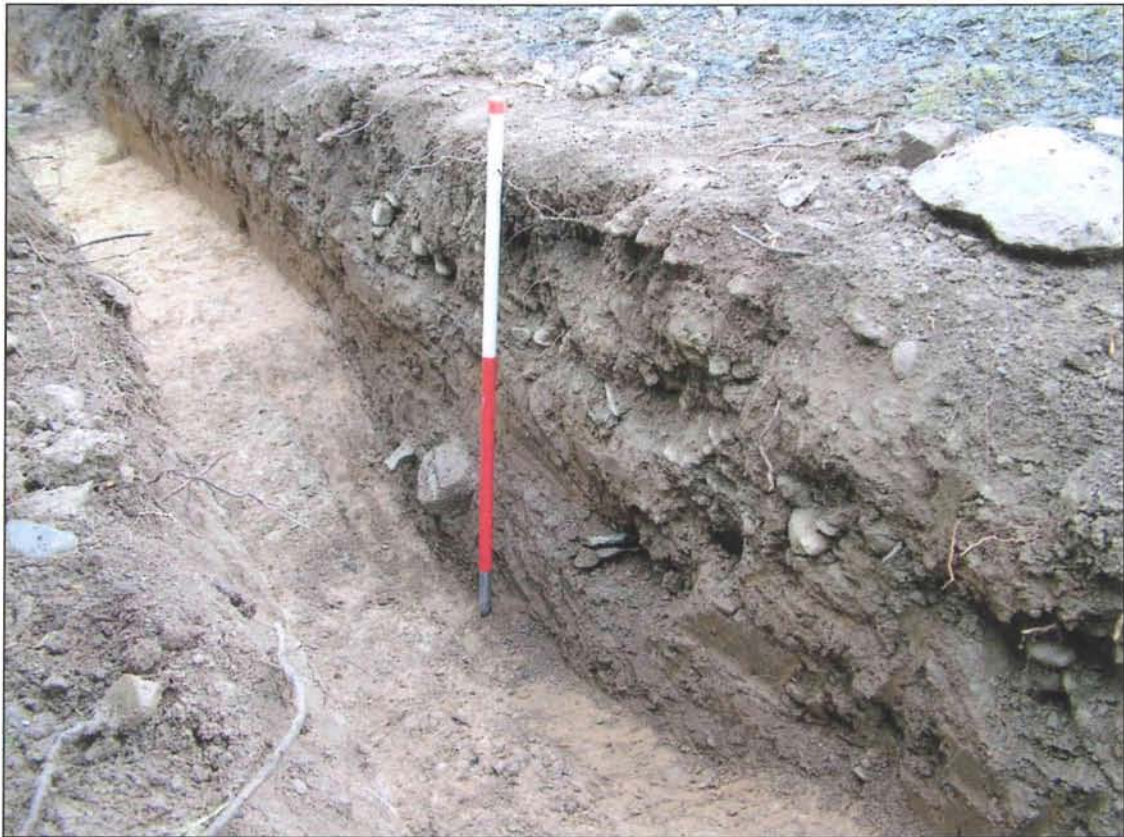


Plate 2. Trench 1: ditch (08) from the north

- 4.3 In the area of Trench 1 to the rear of Building B a *c.* 5m-wide linear feature (18) was identified, aligned east to west, continuing beneath the building to the west, and heading down towards the river in the east. Limited exploration of the sides of the feature confirmed it as a probable large ditch with *c.* 45° sloping sides and a depth greater than 0.60m. From the limited area of the feature that could be observed it appeared that the ditch was widening slightly towards the east and the river. Two fills were identified. The earliest of these (17), was a greyish-brown, soft silty clay with approximately 20% gravel and small stones. The upper fill (16) was a blue-grey, sticky clay with frequent charcoal flecks and iron staining. Fragments of intact plant material (grass) suggest deeper deposits of this feature could contain valuable waterlogged organic material. The ditch was sealed by a 0.50m-thick deposit (21) of relatively homogenous yellowish-grey clay-silt, with occasional iron mottling. The topsoil (01) in this area was extremely dark and organic-rich, presumably due to animal manure inputs.
- 4.4 A possible pit (20) was identified in the short cutting running off from Trench 1 which was inserted for rainwater drainage along the north-western gable wall of Building B. The full extent of the feature was not revealed, but it appeared to form a possibly circular or oval pit, with a diameter greater than 0.80m. The fill (19) was very similar to the upper fill in the large

ditch (18), being a blue-grey, sticky clay. This feature was sealed by a 0.70m-thick deposit (22) of gravels and rounded stones, beneath the topsoil (01). Although this feature appeared to represent a pit, the location and nature of its fill suggests it might in fact relate to drainage and the large ditch (18). The extension to Trench 1 inserted for rainwater drainage along the north-western gable wall of Building A failed to reveal any archaeologically significant deposits or features. The area to the north-east of this building consisted of disturbed and made-up ground up to a depth of at least 0.60m, associated with the former agricultural building situated in this area.



Plate 3. Trench 1: northern edge of large ditch (18) from the north

- 4.5 Trench 2 was inserted in to the floor of Building B, to provide internal services to the proposed bathroom etc. At the deepest end of the trench, the upper surface of the blue-grey clay (16) in the large ditch (18) was revealed. It was sealed in this area by a sequence of deposits comprising a yellowish-grey, firm clay (21), overlain by a very firm, compacted stony layer (26), which probably represented an old ground surface or working surface for the construction of the building. Above this were two deposits of floor levelling material; the lower (27), a grey-brown stony clay, the upper (28), a bright orange-brown soft silt.
- 4.6 Trench 3 was a foundation trench inserted along the south-western side of Building B. Heavy rain at the time of excavation hindered observation, but a blue-grey clay, identical to that forming the upper fill of the large ditch (18), was noted in the central to north-western area of this trench. It seems probable that this material represents a continuation of the ditch as observed in Trenches 1 and 2.
- 4.7 Trench 4 was an L-shaped foundation trench around the south-eastern corner of Building A. A bedrock of brittle shale (23) was encountered along the length of the trench, once a layer of concrete had been removed. This material could be seen breaking the surface immediately adjacent to the trench in the field to the south, and within the rear wall of Building A. The rock appeared to have been shaped or cut away (25) along the very edge of the south-eastern side of this trench, revealing a sticky blue-grey clay fill (24). It was not possible to determine the

nature of this feature within the confines of the watching brief, particularly as conditions were poor with heavy rain and failing light, but it is possible that the bedrock in this area has been shaped to assist drainage of the castle site in the south. This is indicated both by the hollowed nature of the surface rock, and in the cut edge of rock visible in the rear wall of the building and in the foundation trench. The grey clay may therefore represent a continuation of the material viewed to the north-east in the ditch (18).



Plate 4. Trench 2: fill of ditch (18) revealed in the base of the trench below the floor of Building B

- 4.8 The excavation of the pit for the installation of the septic tank revealed no features or deposits of archaeological significance. There was no evidence of any deposit which may have represented surfacing for a possible track or driveway to the river at this point. The trenches for the associated soakaway were excavated in the field adjacent to the development site to the north-east, but were not excavated beyond the depth of the alluvial silts (c.0.50m) and no archaeological features were encountered.

5 FINDS

- 5.1 A quantity of post-medieval ceramics and iron agricultural objects including gate fittings, nails, and fragments of tools were identified during the topsoil strip. These were noted but not retained.
- 5.2 The pottery retrieved from context (06) consisted of a single body sherd of unabraded sandy micaceous ware of local origin. The surfaces are reddish brown with a very dark-grey reduced core, with abundant fine quartz and mica inclusions. The sherd probably originates from a large jar, and may be dated to the 13th century.

- 5.3 Several fragments of burnt daub were retained from the ditch fill (07). These consist of five, moderately abraded, amorphous lumps of reddish clay with occasional gravel inclusions. None was larger than 30mm in diameter.

6 CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 The watching brief revealed the presence of features dated on ceramic evidence to the medieval period, and presumably associated with the occupation of the castle site. These include evidence for possible structural features towards the north of the development site consisting of a posthole and hearth, with associated surfacing. Based on stratigraphic evidence as well as the fill content, the adjacent ditch would also appear broadly contemporary. These may represent ancillary buildings located outside the rectangular enclosure, but without further investigation the function of such structures cannot be securely identified.
- 6.2 It appears probable that the large ditch revealed to the north-east of the site and continuing beneath Building B, extends westwards towards the castle. Here, run-off from the surface bedrock upon which the castle was built is considerable, as evidenced during the ground works for the development. Presumably this factor was just as problematic in the past and the ditch was cut to aid drainage away from the castle and the surrounding ground to the west. In addition such a feature would provide further defences in this area.

Cartographic sources

- 1983 Soil Survey of England and Wales map (Sheet 2 - Wales) and Legend (1:250,000 scale).
- 1994 British Geological Survey map of Wales (Solid edition at 1:250,000 scale).

Printed Sources

- Arnold C.J. & Huggett J.W., 1995. Excavations at Mathrafal, Powys, 1989. *Mongomeryshire Collections* 83, 59-74
- Jones N.A. & Parry Owen A. (eds.) 1991. *Gwaith Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr I*. Cardiff
- Musson C.R & Spurgeon C.J. 1988. Cwrt Llechryd, Llanelwedd: An unusual moated site in central Powys. *Medieval Archaeology* XXXII, 97-109

APPENDIX 1

PROJECT ARCHIVE

28 context record forms
6 A4 site plans
39 Digital images
Photographic catalogue
Context Register

Finds

1 sherd medieval pottery
5 fragments burnt daub



Fig. 1 Mathrafal topographical survey 2003, showing location of barns, scale 1:1,000

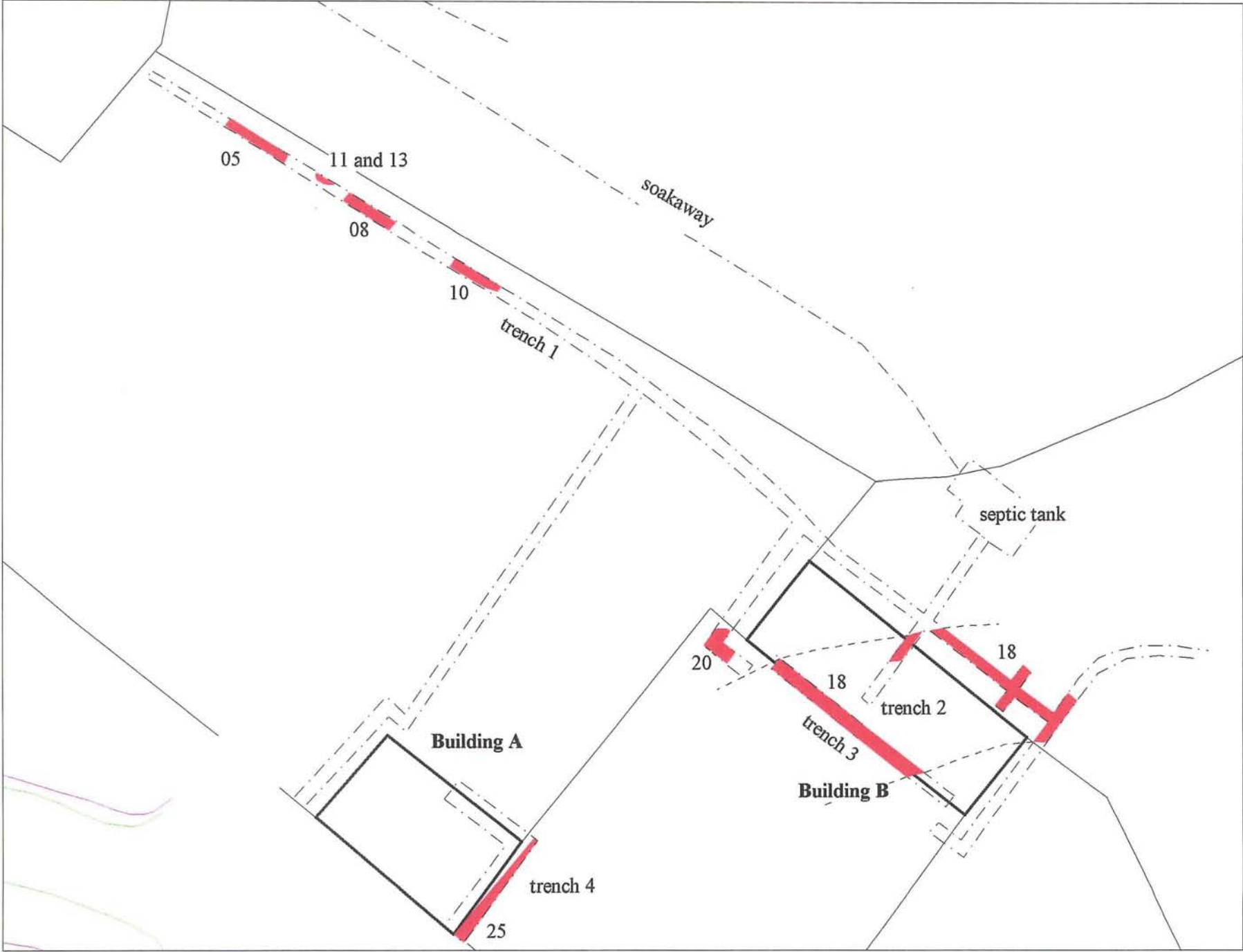


Fig. 2 Trench locations and archaeology, scale 1:300

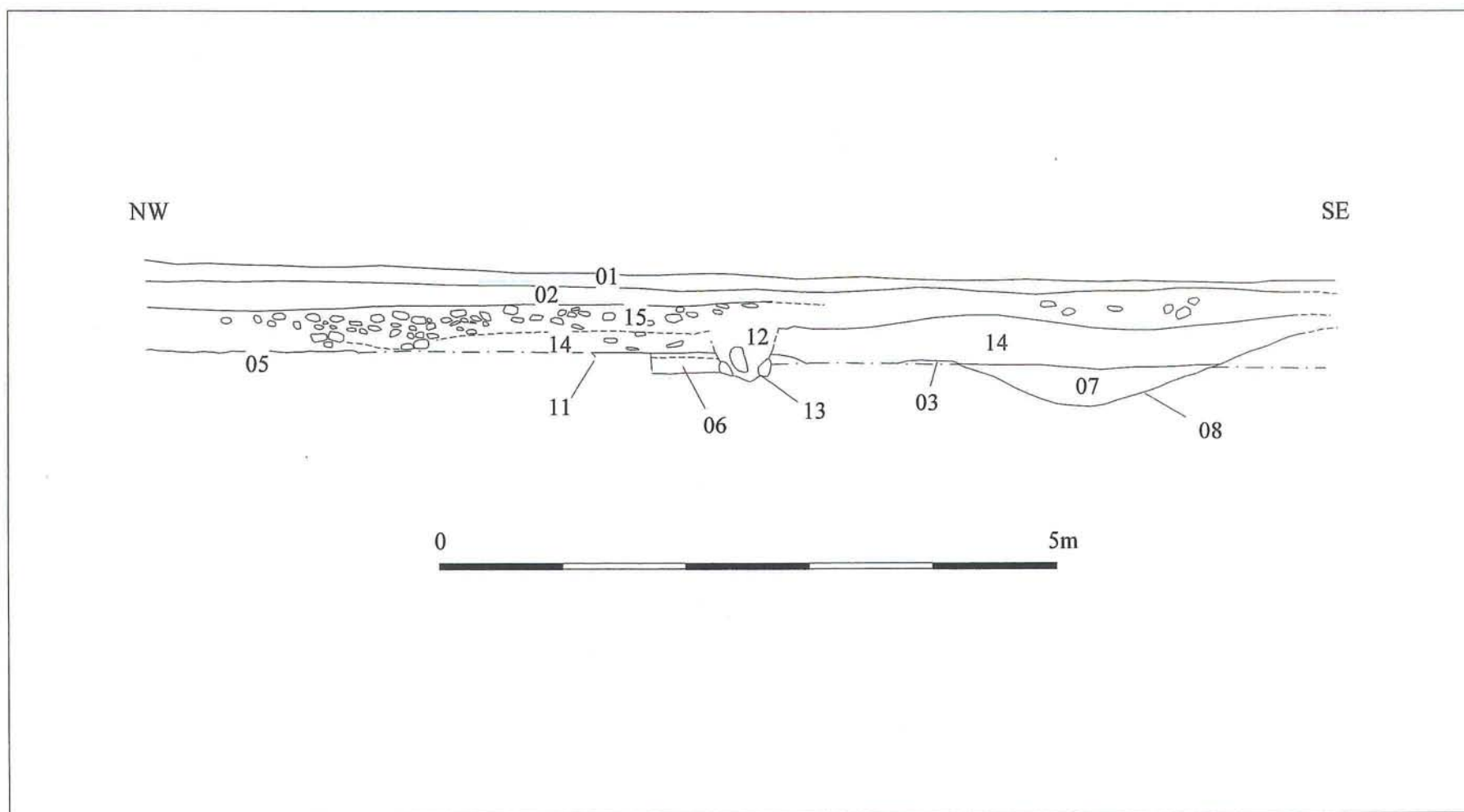


Fig. 3 section of features 05, 08, 11 and 13, scale 1:50

APPENDIX 2 SPECIFICATION

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Field Services Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) have been invited to prepare a specification for undertaking an archaeological watching brief in connection with a planning application for the conversion of barns at Mathrafal, near Meifod, Powys. A brief for the required archaeological works has been produced by Mr M Walters (CWAT 641).
- 1.2 Information held on the regional HER indicates that the site lies immediately to the north of the scheduled ancient monument known as Mathrafal Caste (SAM Mg44), a medieval motte and bailey. It is considered possible that buried archaeological remains survive within the area relating to medieval and/or post medieval occupation. The following specification provides details for the proposed scheme of works.

2 Objectives

- 2.1 The objectives are:
 - 2.1.1 to record any archaeological features identified during the archaeological monitoring of groundworks to ensure their preservation by record;
 - 2.1.2 to prepare a report outlining the results of the watching brief.

3 Methods

- 3.1 The watching brief will be undertaken to include: the archaeological supervision of all relevant groundworks, including topsoiling, foundation and service trenches; and appropriate archaeological excavation and recording of any significant features or deposits which may be revealed.
- 3.2 All archaeological deposits and/or features noted during the watching brief will be recorded and, where appropriate, excavated by hand and recorded by drawn section/plan and/or photography. All photography will be in 35mm format black and white negative and colour slide. All features identified will be tied in locationally to points which are identifiable on modern Ordnance Survey mapping.
- 3.3 The on-site contractors are required to allow sufficient opportunity for appropriate archaeological excavation and recording to be undertaken. Every effort will be made to minimise any disruption to the overall scheme of works.
- 3.4 Following the on-site work an illustrated and bound report will be prepared. This will be in A4 format and contain, as necessary, conventional sections on: Site location, Topography and Geology; Historic Background; Watching Brief; Conclusions and References, together with any appropriate appendices on archives and finds.
- 3.5 The site archive will be prepared to specifications laid out in Appendix 3 in the Management of Archaeological Projects (English Heritage, 1991).

4 Resources and Programming

- 4.1 The watching brief will be undertaken by an experienced field archaeologist and overall supervision will be by Mr RJ Silvester, a senior member of CPAT's staff who is also a member

of the Institute of Field Archaeologists. The duration of the watching brief will be entirely determined by the contractor's programme of work.

- 4.2 All report preparation will be completed by or with the assistance of the same field archaeologist who conducted the fieldwork.
- 4.3 Copies of the report will be deposited with the client within two weeks of the completion of on-site works. If appropriate, a short report will be published in *Archaeology in Wales*.
- 4.4 Requirements relating to Health and Safety regulations will be adhered to by CPAT and its staff.
- 4.5 CPAT is covered by appropriate Public and Employer's Liability insurance.

N.W. Jones

14 September 2006