

THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

Pen-y-gaer, Bwlch, near Crickhowell,
Powys
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

Interim report



CPAT Report No 904

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**Pen-y-gaer, Bwlch, near Crickhowell,
Powys
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION**

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Report for Cadw




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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In September 2007 the Field Services Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) carried out an exploratory excavation in the environs of the Roman fort at Pen-y-gaer, near Crickhowell in Powys, with financial assistance from Cadw.
- 1.2 The excavation was placed as a result of evidence from a geophysical survey undertaken by CPAT in 2006 (Hankinson & Silvester 2006), which covered some of the area immediately surrounding the fort. A number of anomalies were revealed by the survey in a field to the south of the fort which seemed to imply that there were below-ground structures, and it was initially suggested that these might relate to an associated bath-house.

2 LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

- 2.1 The excavated area was centred at NGR SO 1684521793, some 100m to the south of the fort. It lay on a level area of the valley floor, at approximately 105m OD, which is crossed by the small stream known as the Ewyn Brook, a tributary of the Afon Rhiangoll.
- 2.2 The soils of the locality are mainly well-drained reddish loamy soils belonging to the Eardiston 2 Soil Association (1983 Soil Survey map and legend), and these are derived from the underlying Lower Old Red Sandstone rocks, belonging to the Devonian period (1994 Geological Survey map). The field is presently used for stock pasture and has apparently only rarely been ploughed in the past.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Pen-y-gaer lies between the forts at Brecon and Abergavenny, only some 2km to the east of the pass now occupied by the village of Bwlch, which is thought to have been established on the route of the Roman road to Brecon. The fort stands on a small knoll overlooking the site of the excavation.
- 3.2 The presence of a fort here was probably first recognised by Sir Richard Colt Hoare in 1803 (Thompson 1983, 238) and was also noted by Jones (1805-9, 499) at the beginning of the 19th century. Colt Hoare related that large quantities of brick and tile were present, together with the foundations of buildings in the surrounding fields.
- 3.3 The authenticity of the fort was confirmed by excavations in 1966 (Nash-Williams & Jarrett 1969, 108-110), which apparently revealed three phases of occupation, dating from 80-130 AD. The abandonment of the fort was tentatively considered to have occurred in the reign of Hadrian, but the writers suggested that confirmation of this hypothesis had to await further larger-scale excavation.

4 EXCAVATION

- 4.1 The primary aim of the excavation was to determine whether the geophysics results represented anomalies related to Roman settlement on the field below the fort; and also to ascertain whether the nature of any settlement could be clarified.
- 4.2 In the following description, numbers in brackets refer to context descriptions given to individual layers or features within the site archive. Significant amounts of pottery and roof tile, together with lesser amounts of other Roman material, were revealed by the excavation, but these remained to be examined at the time that this report was prepared.

- 4.3 The excavation comprised a single trench, measuring approximately 16.3m east-west by 2.9m, placed to intersect two of the more marked linear anomalies revealed by the geophysics. The initial stage of the excavation comprised the removal by machine of between 0.1m and 0.3m of the mid-brown sandy loam (1), which constitutes the local topsoil. The shallower topsoil was later found to be that which overlay substantial stone-built structures. The large quantities of Roman material which were produced by the excavation, and the limited time available for the work, resulted in the restriction of the excavations to the cleaning and recording of the upper surface of the Roman deposits, with only minor investigations being carried out to determine the relationship of selected features and deposits, once cleaning of the base and sides of the trench had been completed. No evidence of the natural subsoil was revealed at any point, and all the deposits at the base of the trench could be attributed to the Roman period by their incorporated finds. Further excavations will undoubtedly be necessary to confirm the suggested sequence, however.
- 4.4 In addition to the excavations, two local metal detectorists known to the landowner kindly agreed to carry out a detector survey of the spoil from initial machining. This proved reasonably successful and a small group of lead objects were recovered. Of more significance was a single coin, identified as a Bronze *As* of Hadrian (119-138 AD), which was recovered from the excavated topsoil and is likely to be broadly contemporary with the period in which the fort was thought to have been abandoned.
- 4.5 Commencing at the eastern end of the trench, the first significant feature was the foundations of a stone wall (05), some 0.6m wide and extending across the width of the trench in a north to south direction. A short wall (10), 2.0m long (east-west) and up to 0.9m wide, abutted the north-south wall on its west side. Both walls may have cut through an earlier pit which appeared to extend beyond the east and south edges of the trench at its south-east corner, but this could not be confirmed, so the features to the east and west of the main wall have been given separate context numbers (04 and 08). An area of debris (06) on the north side of wall (10) contained some large fragments of roof tile and amphora, but its precise nature was not investigated.



Plate 1 Wall foundations (05) and (10) at the eastern end of the trench Photo CPAT 2481-033

- 4.6 To the west of the walls the deposits underwent a marked change in character, and incorporated large quantities of iron smithing waste (11), including slag and nails. This material had a layered appearance, with traces of a compacted surface (09) running beneath the area of debris (06).
- 4.7 The iron smithing waste gradually faded out to the west, apparently on top of a probable floor layer (15) which was composed of pink silty sand with pebbles impressed into its upper surface, although the junction between the layers was largely hidden by other features. On the south side of the trench, both layers 11 and 15 appeared to have been cut by a possible pit (14), perhaps 3.5m north-west/south-east by 2.2m in size. The pit appeared to contain a silty lower fill (12), and a very stony upper fill (13) in which the well-preserved lower half of a rotary quern was found (see Plate 2). On the north side of the trench, layer (11) met a layer of sandy silt (20) which overlay the probable floor (15). The relationship between layers 11 and 20 was not investigated.



Plate 2 The lower half of a rotary quern in fill (13) of probable pit (14) Photo CPAT 2481-016

- 4.8 On the west side of pit 14 was a curving, or perhaps angular, gully (19), between 0.7m and 1.0m in width, which had also been cut into through floor layer (15). Unfortunately, it was not possible to relate the pit and gully, as the junction between the features was hidden beneath the edge of the trench. A post-hole or pit (17), approximately 0.5m in diameter was also found to have been cut into the narrow strip of floor (15) between layer (20) and gully (19).
- 4.9 The next major layer comprised an area of broken roof tiles (21), covering an area about 2.2m wide, running parallel to and abutting the foundations of a further wall (25), itself 1.05m wide, which ran in a north-south direction across the width of the trench (see Plate 3). The wall was in a relatively poor condition, mainly owing to its close proximity to the ground surface which had led to stones becoming dislodged during ploughing; some of the wall stones had pronounced scratches where they had been caught by the plough. The roof tiles seemed to be intimately associated with an underlying

spread of firm orange-yellow silt (24), and may represent a collapsed lean-to roof set against the wall. A single post-hole (23), measuring 0.8m by 0.6m and with apparent packing stones in its fill (22), appeared to be cut through the tiles and silt, although it is not impossible that the presence of the post precluded this material from its immediate vicinity at the time of the collapse, and that the features are contemporary.



Plate 3 Remains of collapsed (lean-to?) roof (21) against wall (25) Photo CPAT 2481-042

- 4.10 The wall (25) appeared to be set on a bank of stony silt (26) that had acted as the retainer for a layer of dark grey sandy silt (27), up to 0.25m thick, which contained a large quantity of Roman finds and extended beyond the bounds of the trench to the west. The layer sealed a pink sandy silt (28), through which a post-hole (32), measuring 1.0m by 0.8m, had been cut. Its fill (31) was very similar to the overlying layer (27).
- 4.11 Layer (28) was defined on its west side by a line of roughly placed stones (29), up to 0.55m in overall width, which also mirrored the main (north-south) wall alignments. The remainder of the trench, to the west of the stones, was occupied by a pink sandy silt with less stone than layer (28), although it was also sealed by layer (27).

5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The excavation, though limited in scope, has provided some very useful information regarding the nature of the anomalies revealed by the 2006 geophysical survey. Our preliminary assessment of the results suggests that part of a *vicus*, or civilian settlement associated with the fort, has been revealed.

Activity evidently included iron smithing and the small-scale milling of flour, as would be expected in this type of settlement. No confirmatory evidence of the putative bath-house was uncovered.

- 5.2 A pair of parallel walls running north-south across the trench cannot be directly linked, due to their extension beyond the limits of the excavation and discrepancies in size, but it is reasonable to assume they are broadly contemporary, if not directly linked to form a single building. Evidence for what appeared to be a narrow, roofed lean-to, or perhaps corridor, against wall 25 was revealed in the western part of the excavation trench, which suggests that the area to its east, in the direction of wall 05, was open, forming more of a courtyard. The presence of smithing debris is likely to be significant in understanding the utilisation of this area, but further information regarding the detailed relationships of these and other features must await further work.
- 5.3 It is significant that building foundations, as well as large quantities of Roman brick and tile, were noted in the fields surrounding the fort by Colt Hoare in the early 19th century. This record seems to have been given greater authority by the results of the excavation, and it may well be that a wider range of structures could survive below the existing ground surface around the fort, either of a type not conducive to recognition by geophysical survey (*i.e.* post-built), or lying outside the area examined in 2006.
- 5.4 The excavations were well supported by the landowners and proved popular with local residents. Two of the local history societies visited the site and the significance of the preliminary results was discussed. A group of children from the nearby school at Cwmdu was also taken around the excavations and the relevance of the site for the locality was explained. This fitted in well with their current school work and provided a local example to illuminate the more general teaching they had received regarding the Roman occupation of Britain.



Plate 4 Members of local historical societies visiting the site Photo CPAT 2481-019

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 6.1 The writer would like to thank the following people for their assistance during the project: Ian Grant, CPAT, for his assistance with the excavation; Mr W J Elliott and Dr B Elliott, for carrying out a metal detector survey of the excavation spoil, and Mark Walters, CPAT, for his identification of the Roman coin found during that survey.
- 6.2 The writer would particularly like to thank Mr & Mrs James, the landowners, for their interest and permission to carry out the excavation.

7 REFERENCES

7.1 Published sources

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Jones, T A, 1805-9. *A History of the County of Brecknock*

Nash-Williams, V E, & Jarrett, M G, 1969. *The Roman Frontier in Wales*, Cardiff: UWP

Thompson, M W, 1983. *The Journeys of Sir Richard Colt Hoare through Wales and England 1793-1810*, Gloucester: Alan Sutton

7.2 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)



Fig 1 Location of excavation trench and geophysical survey areas in relation to the Pen-y-gaer fort Scale 1:1,000

Pen-y-Gaer

Vicus

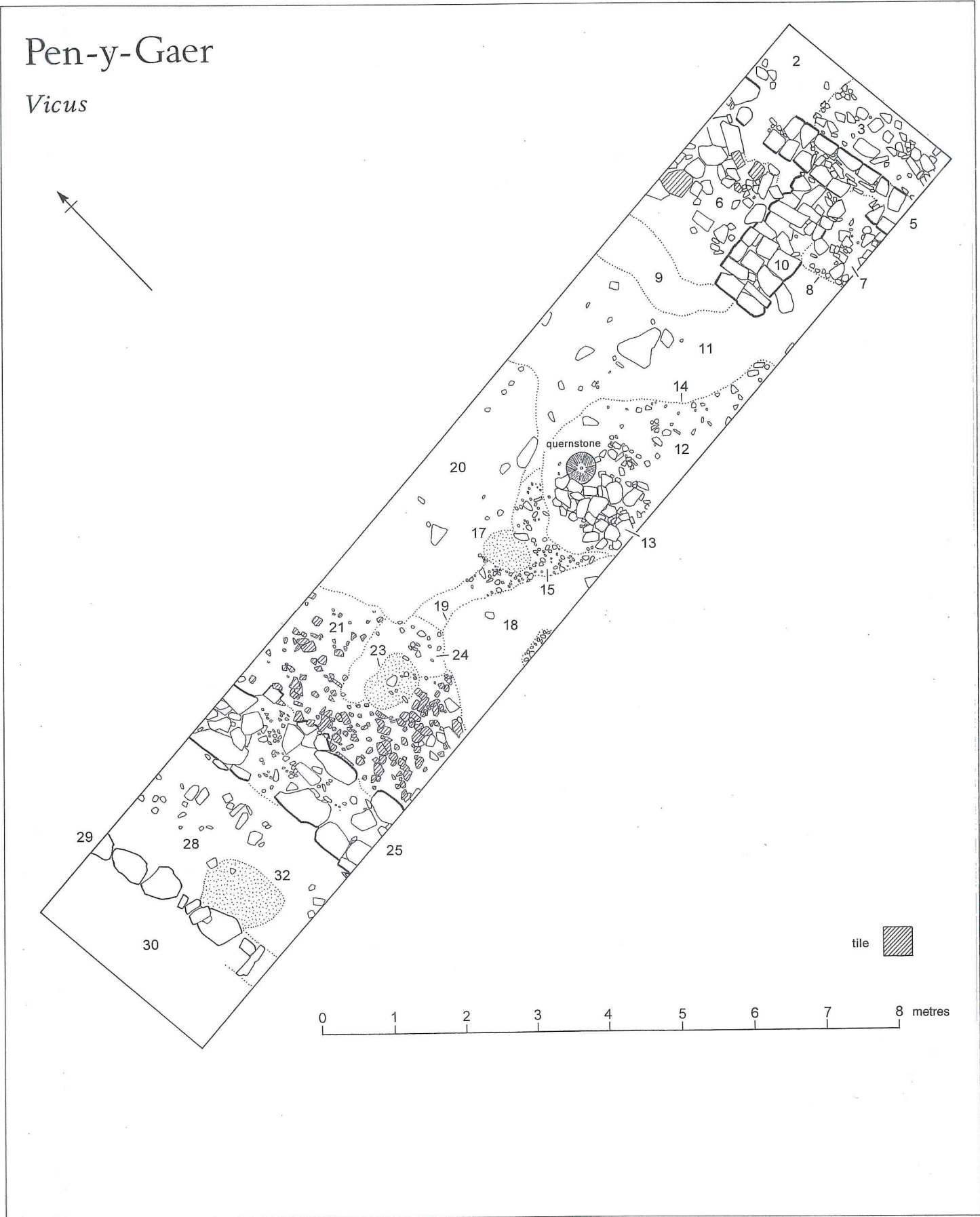


Fig 2 Plan of excavation trench