

CPAT Report No 1135

Sarn-y-bryn-caled Ring-ditch, Welshpool, Powys

TRIAL EXCAVATION



THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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TRIAL EXCAVATION

I Grant

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Report for Cadw

The Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust

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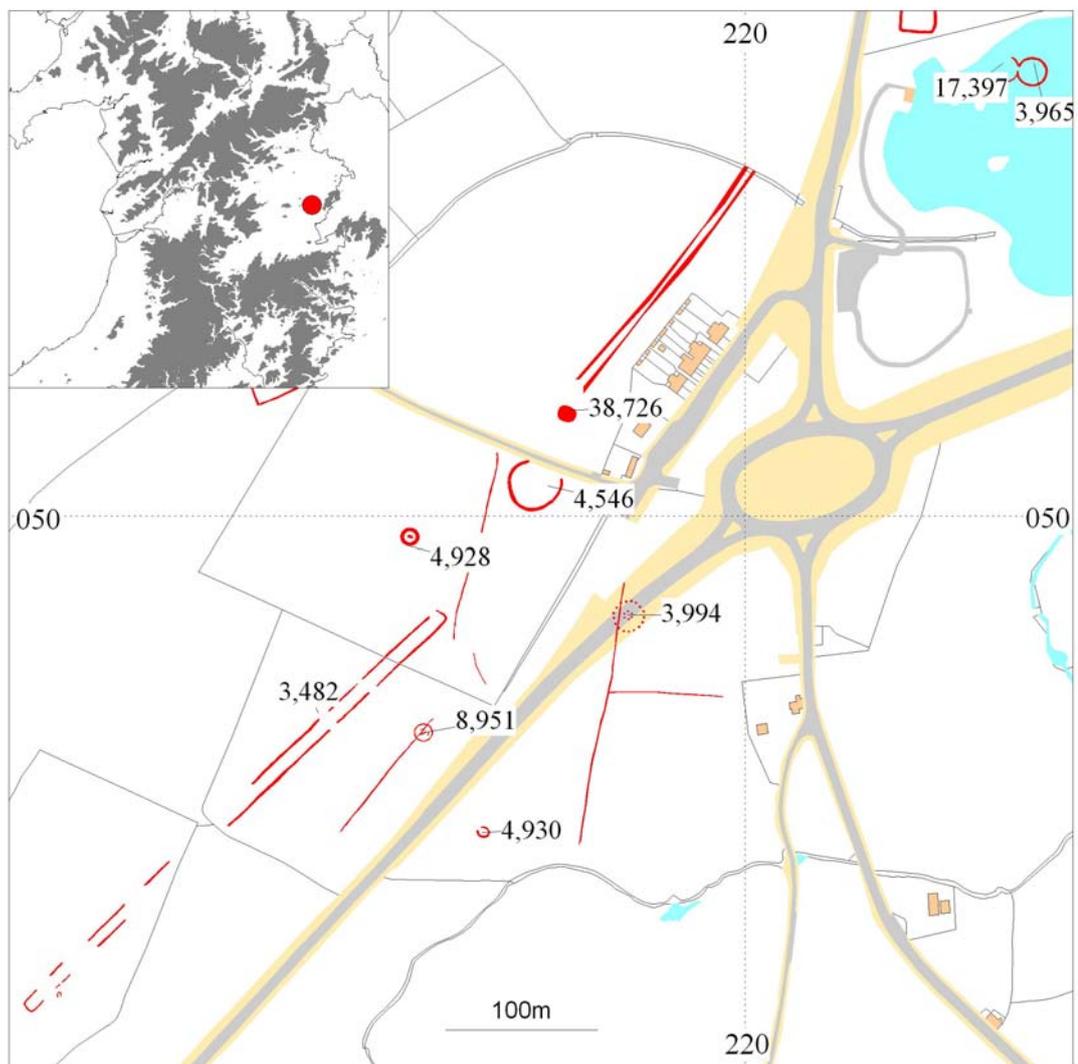
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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 A programme of small-scale excavation was undertaken on the site of a large ring-ditch at Sarn-y-bryn-caled, Welshpool, in Powys (PRN 4546, SJ 21870502), in February 2012. The work was funded by Cadw as part of an on-going study of unusually large ring-ditches in the region following the completion of the pan-Wales survey of prehistoric funerary and ritual monuments. Previous work included a trial excavation on the site of a 100m-diameter ring ditch at Walton Court in the Walton Basin which indicated that the monument had been constructed before 2570-2300 BC (Jones 2010). Across Britain a class of supersized ring-ditches has been recognised which appear to fall within the category of so-called ‘formative henges’, dating to the Middle Neolithic. The Clwyd-Powys region has 14 sites which are around 40m or more in diameter, including the exceptionally large example at Walton Court, all of which are known only from cropmark evidence and are considered to be under continuing threat from ploughing.



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Fig. 1 Location of the Sarn-y-bryn-caled ring-ditch showing other cropmark sites in the immediate area

- 1.2 The site, which is somewhat irregular in shape and around 35m in diameter, was known only as a result of cropmark evidence (Fig. 2) which had also identified two other ring ditches (PRNs

4928 and 8951) within the immediate area, as well as a Neolithic cursus (PRNs 3482) and a timber circle (PRN 3994).

2 EXCAVATION

- 2.1 The trial excavation comprised two trenches, each 1.5m wide, positioned to investigate two sections of the encircling ditch on the south-western and south-eastern sides of the ring-ditch. The modern ploughsoil (1 and 14) was removed by machine onto the surface of the natural subsoil, which consisted here of river gravels with patches of silty clay. Numbers in brackets in the following text refer to individual context records in the site archive.

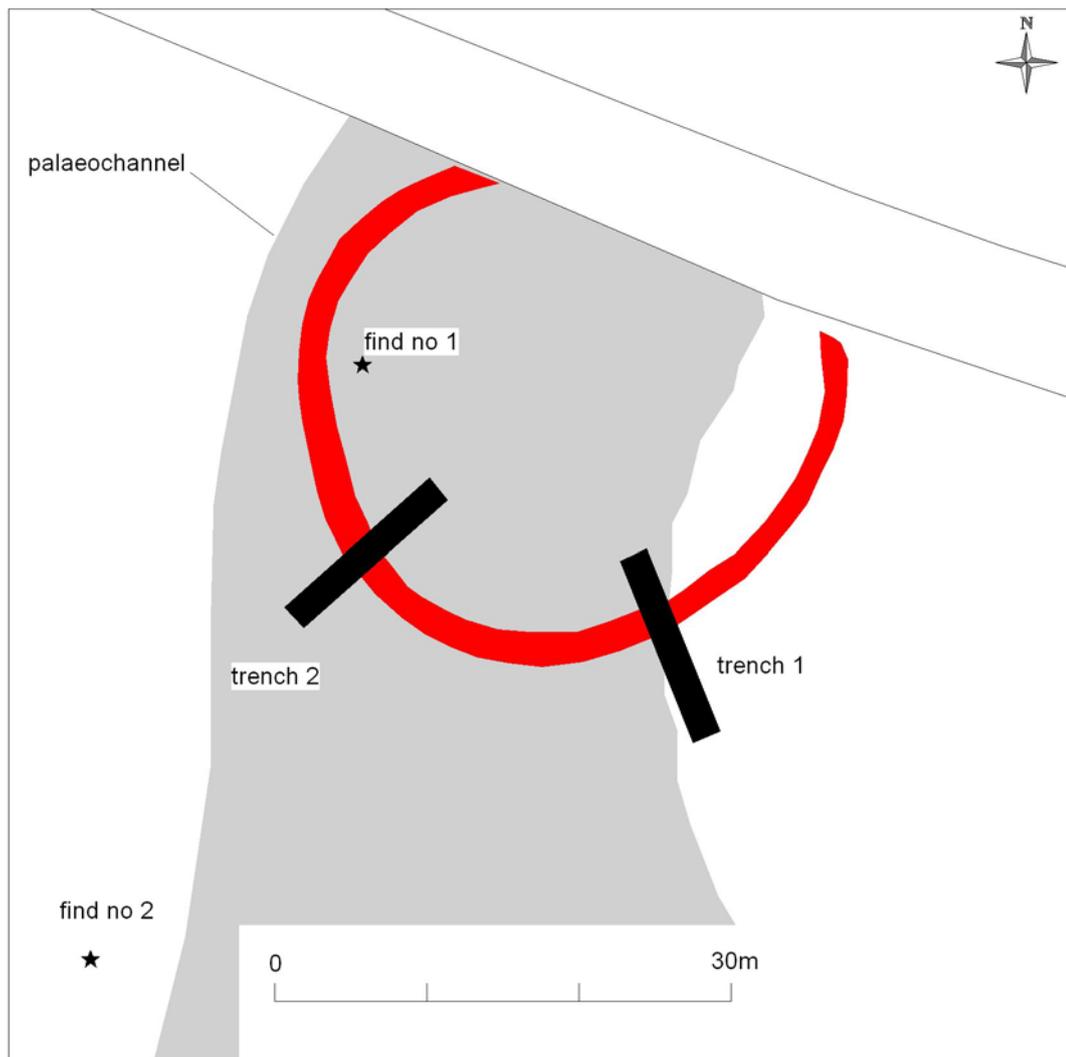


Fig. 2 Trench location showing the position of the palaeochannel



Fig 3. General view of trench location looking north towards the Breidden.
Photo CPAT 3424-0047

Trench 1 (Figs 4, 5 and 9)

- 2.2 Trench 1, which was 13m in length, was positioned on the south-east side of the ring-ditch. The undisturbed natural subsoil at the southern end of the trench consisted of small, rounded river gravels through which two features, a modern land drain (3) and a small (undated) circular pit (4) were cut. To the north of the trench the subsoil changed to a stony, silty clay, indicating the eastern edge of a palaeochannel that traversed the field from north to south (Fig. 2).
- 2.3 The ring-ditch (9), which measured up to 1.4m wide and 0.6m deep, had well-defined, steeply sloping sides, with a narrow, flat-bottomed base, 0.45m in width. The primary fill (8) consisted of a 0.1m-thick deposit of loose, greyish brown, gravelly silt with occasional flecks of charcoal. The deposit, the result of initial weathering from the sides of the ditch, was sealed by a firm, pale greyish brown, clay silt (7), which was 0.3m thick. The gleyed fill contained numerous iron-panned mineral deposits, possibly suggesting a period of waterlogging followed the stabilisation of the ditch. The upper ditch deposits (6 and 5) appear to illustrate a period of decline and disuse of the monument. Layer 6, a stone-rich, yellow-brown, silty clay, 0.14m thick, appeared to have been derived predominantly from inside the ring-ditch, suggesting that this material could be the ploughed-down remains of an inner bank or mound. The uppermost fill (5) consisted of fine, orange-brown, silt clay.
- 2.4 No further deposits or features of archaeological significance were recorded within the trench.



Fig. 4 Section through ring-ditch (9), Trench 1. Viewed from the north-west.
Photo CPAT 3424-0059



Fig. 5 South-west-facing section through the ring-ditch (9), Trench 1.
Photo CPAT 3424-0066

Trench 2 (Figs. 6, 7, 8 and 9)

- 2.5 The second trench was located on the south-west side of the ring-ditch and measured 12.6m in length. The removal of the ploughsoil exposed the ditch (23) which was of similar size and profile as in Trench 1, measuring 1.2m wide and up to 0.55m deep. The primary fill (22) consisted of clay silt and greyish brown gravel, 0.22m thick, (similar to the basal fill (8) in the other excavated section). The middle and upper fills of the ditch (21 and 20; 0.14m and 0.18m thick respectively), were also comparable with the composition and nature of the ditch deposits in Trench 1, with what appeared to be a ploughed down spread of stone and clay (20) overlying a firm, gleyed and iron panned, silty clay (21).



Fig. 6 Excavating the ring-ditch (23) in Trench 2. The oak tree in the background marks the northern end of the Cursus (PRN 3482). View looking south. Photo CPAT 3424-0021

- 2.6 Apart from the ditch a number of other features were also noted cutting the natural undisturbed subsoil (13). At the southernmost end of the trench a possible linear ditch or gully (19) was identified, filled by a pale yellowish-grey silt clay and extending beyond the limits of excavation. A further 1.5m to the north-east was another possible gully, or elongated pit (17), 0.7m wide, and orientated east to west. The fill, a dark brown silty clay, contained fragments of cattle bone assumed to be of post-medieval or more recent date. This had been truncated by another linear feature (18), approximately 0.6m wide and orientated north to south. Three other rather poorly defined features (24, 25 and 26) were revealed within the interior of the ring ditch, all of which contained a similar mottled brown silty clay. None of the features was investigated and they remain undated, with the exception of 17 and 18 which are post-medieval or later in date.
- 2.7 All of the features in Trench 2 were sealed by an old ploughsoil (15) up to 0.2m thick. The deposit, which does not appear in Trench 1, consisted of a mid grey brown clay silt with occasional small pebbles and contained numerous fragments of 17th and 18th-century pottery. Overlying the deposit was a modern ploughsoil (14 - similar to 1 in Trench 1) up to 0.25m thick.



Fig. 7 Section through ring-ditch (23), Trench 2. Photo CPAT 3424-0083



Fig. 8 South-east facing section through the ring-ditch (23), Trench 2.
Photo CPAT 3424-0084

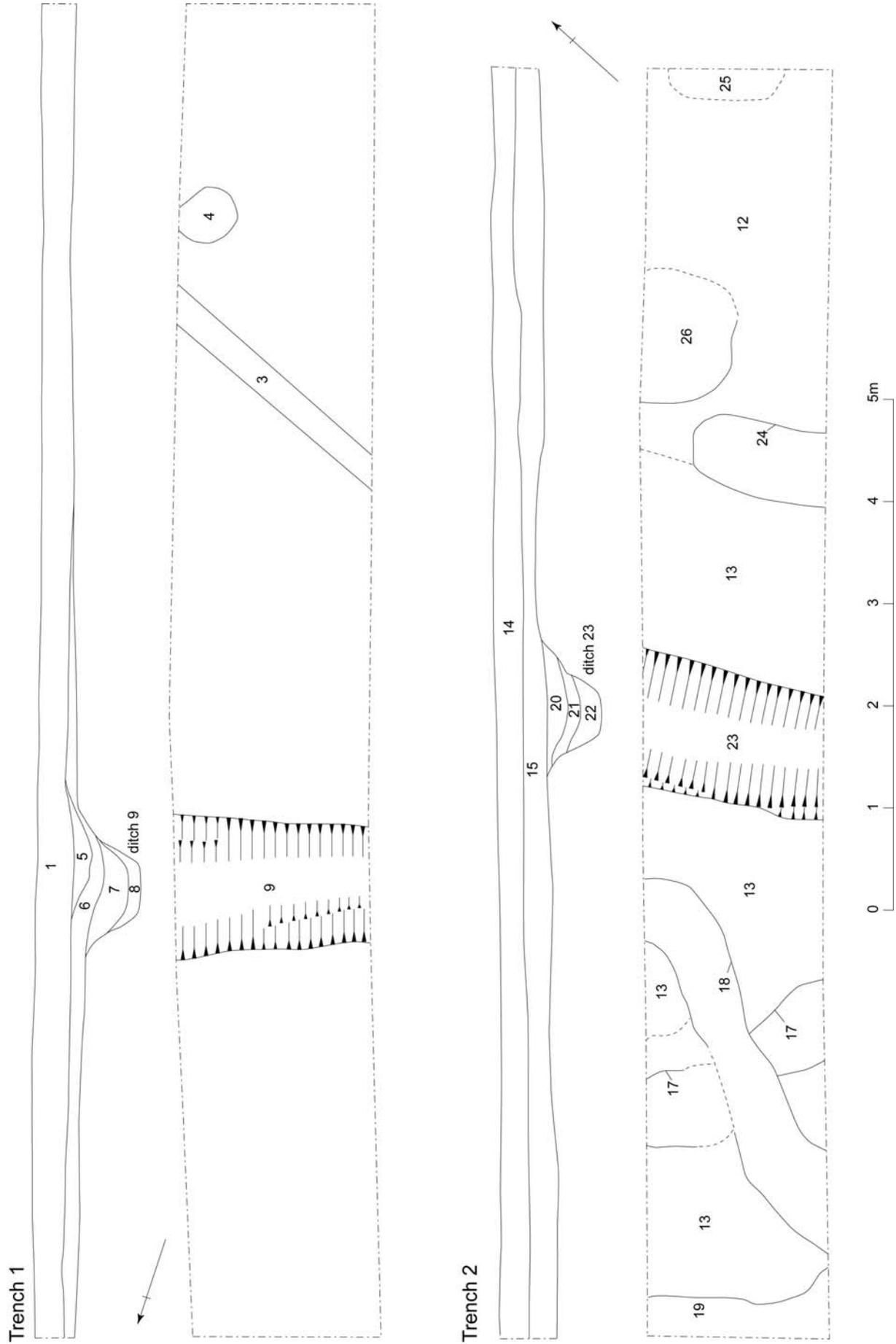


Fig. 9 Excavation plans and sections

3 FINDS

- 3.1 No cultural material was forthcoming from either of the excavated ditch sections, although bulk soils samples were taken from all the ditch fills. These have the potential for providing palaeoenvironmental evidence as well as material suitable for radiocarbon dating.
- 3.2 A rapid fieldwalk across the general area of the ring-ditch produced two worked flints (Find nos 1 and 2, Fig. 2), one of which (Find no. 1) displayed some evidence of secondary retouch work along the edges.

4 CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 The trial excavations have confirmed the presence of an unusually large ring-ditch around 35m in diameter defined by a single ditch up to 1.4m wide and around 0.6m deep. Although there was no surviving evidence for the position of the accompanying bank, the sequence of infilling observed in the upper fill of the ditch section in Trench 1 strongly suggests that this lay on the interior.
- 4.2 The interior of the ring-ditch remains relatively untested as neither trench extended more than 6m from the inner edge of the ditch.
- 4.3 The site forms part of a wider complex of prehistoric monuments, several elements of which have been subject to excavation. The ring-ditch lies 90m from the north-eastern end of a cursus (PRN 3482) which is *c.* 380m in length, aligned north-east to south-west. It is defined by roughly parallel ditches around 8-10m apart, both of which appear to have multiple causeways and in two instances these can be seen to be opposed. Trial excavations in 1991-2 provided a radiocarbon date of 3891-3662 cal. BC (OxA-3997) for charcoal recovered from the base of one of the ditches. At a similar distance to the south-east is the site of a Neolithic timber circle (PRN 3994) which was totally excavated in advance of the Welshpool Bypass in 1991. The circle, which was 17.5m in diameter, consisted of 20 large post-pits, most of which contained the charred remains of posts averaging 0.32m in diameter. Two larger post-holes on the south-west side formed an entrance, whilst the interior contained an inner circle of six posts surrounding a central pit, together with a two-posted structure. Charcoal from posts in the outer circle produced radiocarbon dates of 2100-2000 cal. BC (Gibson 1994). Other elements of the complex include two penannular ring-ditches (PRNs 4930 and 3965), a large, possibly ritual pit (PRN 38726), and three other ring-ditches (PRNs 4928, 8951 and 17397).
- 4.4 The large diameter of the ring-ditch, together with its relatively narrow ditch, appear to place the site into a category of burial and/or ritual monuments of which other examples have been recognised in the area of the Severn/Vyrnwy confluence, as well as in the Walton Basin in Radnorshire. Excavations in 2009 investigated the largest currently known ring-ditch at Walton Court Farm in the Walton Basin, confirming the presence of a ring-ditch around 100m in diameter with a single ditch 2m wide and 1.4m deep. Radiocarbon dating from hazel charcoal near the base of the ditch has provided a date of 2570-2300 cal. BC (Jones 2010). It is to be hoped that radiocarbon dates will also be forthcoming from the Sarn-y-bryn-caled ring-ditch to provide comparative evidence.

5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 5.1 The writer would like to thank the following: Sophie Watson and Bill Britnell for assisting with the excavation; Mr T Till, Powis Estates for allowing access to the site; and Cadw for funding the excavation.

6 REFERENCES

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