

**CPAT Report No 1164**

# Hen Caerwys Community Excavation, Caerwys, Flintshire



CADW and  
THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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by  
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Report for Cadw



CPAT

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## *The Background*

The background to the present work at Hen Caerwys, a rural site of medieval date on the limestone plateau of Flintshire (SJ 1386 7421) was briefly covered in the first interim report in August 2011 (Silvester and Davies 2011) and in considerably more detail in successive entries in the web-based project diary which we maintained for most of the period between August 2011 and June 2012. At the time of writing this report the project diary was still accessible on the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust website.

Here it is sufficient to note that the site which we know as Hen Caerwys was discovered at some point prior to 1960, and was partially excavated by the Flintshire Historical Society between 1962 and 1968 when two house platforms were examined. Those excavations were not published and for some years the interested observer was reliant on brief notes in various journals, until Tom Rogers, who does not seem to have been personally involved in the excavations, published one of the house excavations in 1979. In the same year the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments in the Welsh Office (the precursor of Cadw) scheduled much of the complex, this coinciding with abortive plans by Rogers to survey and excavate the site on a large scale.

Hen Caerwys remained overgrown and poorly understood for another fifteen years, though early attempts at a measured survey by a Mr and Mrs Hill of Caerwys and the Cadw Field Monument Warden Lorna Ackroyd Bell (in the early 1980s and 1990s respectively) correctly identified the key elements of the site, including a large rectangular enclosure and two sets of house platforms. But accurate survey was ultimately hindered by the dense woodland covering much of the site, and it was not until 1993 when Cadw grant-aided the Clwyd Archaeology Service to survey the site as one element of an on-going management plan, that the first full plan of the area emerged. This was undertaken as an EDM survey on the latter's behalf by the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, and was only possible because of extensive clearance works carried out by the landowner, Mr Mike Owens, as part of the management agreement. Some of the results were published in an undated (but *c.*1994) *Historic Landscape Supplement* to the *Clwyd Archaeology Service Newsletter*, and were also used for an information panel and self-guided walk leaflet prepared by Cadw for the site.

The management agreement has continued with considerable success, selective tree thinning and bi-annual strimming of the lower-lying scrub maintaining Hen Caerwys as a visible and accessible monument, and the permissive walks are much used by the local community. Most recently, in 2011, Mr Owens, commissioned a geophysical survey of two of the enclosures on the site.

It was against the background of a site that when first excavated in the 1960s was lauded as the first known, abandoned nucleated medieval settlement in north-east Wales (and is still virtually the only one known) that Cadw and specifically their regional inspector, Will Davies, decided to run a small community excavation during the 2011 Festival of British Archaeology, to re-focus attention on this important site and to attempt to resolve some of the issues raised by the incomplete excavation records that survive and the piecemeal interim reports. The success of that trial project led to a further season of work in 2012 and this forms the subject of the interim report presented here.

### *The Site*

It is not proposed to describe in any detail here the complex of earthworks that make up Hen Caerwys. Briefly, the site lies within three contiguous tracts of mature broadleaved woodland and two pasture fields, a total area of nearly 12 hectares. The several house platforms form two discrete groups, both lying below south-facing natural scarps and on the plateau above are a number of stone banked enclosures and fields, and some trackways which present an irregular appearance and even if not of two or more phases suggest a rather haphazard aggregation of new elements to an existing core. Almost certainly later is a substantial embanked rectangular enclosure which overlies a bank of the field/enclosure system. And because of their proximity, this could be contemporary with another near square enclosure which contains the low foundations of a house (perhaps a long house, from its length) and a platform set at right angle to it. Together these suggest a discrete farm complex set across the earlier fields and enclosures of the more nucleated settlement represented by the house platforms. It is possible but as yet unproven that a second similar farm complex lies just to the south.

The complex is completed by other features which have yet to be fully understood further north in the pasture, both small and large quarry pits, probably of various dates, and occasional lengths of isolated bank which don't immediately fit into the general pattern. A very ruined lime kiln is located in the western corner of the wood in which the large enclosure stands.

### *The excavation*

This season's excavation ran from Monday 16 July to Saturday 28 July, to coincide with the Festival of British Archaeology. The average daily number of community volunteers was about seven, with up to ten appearing on one day. Visitor numbers were up on last year with nearly fifty appearing on the last day of the excavation.

Three trenches were examined. Trench 1 cut across an enclosure bank had been opened in 2011, but not completed in the time available it had been covered over and then backfilled. It was re-opened this year and finished. The same story was true of Trench 2 which was opened in 2011 with the anticipation that it would enable to pinpoint with certainty the position of the Flintshire Historical Society's second platform excavation in the 1960s. Again it was covered over at the end of the first excavation and reopened this year. The third trench was a new venture, set across the foundations of the house set in its enclosure as referred to above. Most of this trench was excavated as far as was practicable, but the interior of the building was not fully investigated and so it has been covered and left until next year.

### *Trench 1*

Trench 1 was originally about 15m long, the western part of it lying across the interior of the enclosure and exposing only a thin layer of soil above the bedrock. Only that part of the trench that cut through the enclosure bank was re-opened to enable the completion of the section through it. At this point the bank was 3.9m wide and had a height of around 0.6m above the bedrock. It was impossible to determine clear faces, either internally or externally, but the presence of large limestone blocks gave some form to the structure, implying that it was a broad but low feature, with larger lumps of limestone edging smaller rubble in the core.

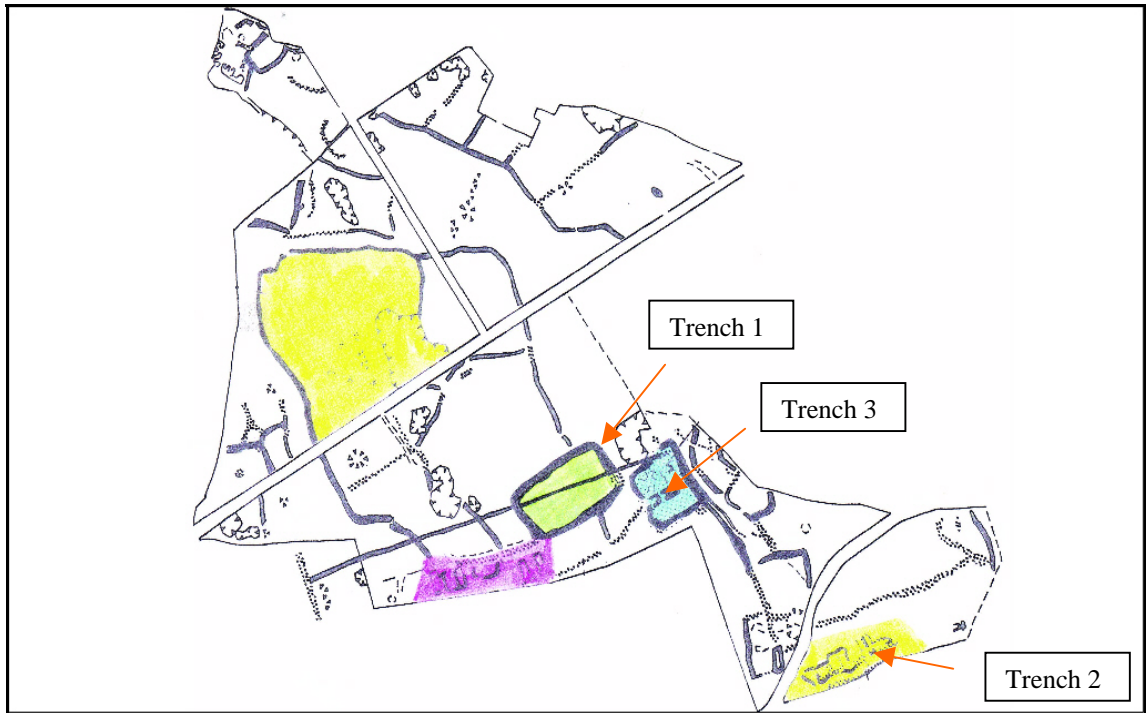


Fig 1 Hen Caerwys earthworks showing the location of the three trenches. Unscaled.

Above this structure was a band of smaller limestone rubble, little more than 200mm thick which spread more widely than the basal bank. This could reveal a later phase designed to heighten the bank or simply have been a means of heightening the bank during its original construction. Either way degradation of the bank led to this material being spread.



Fig 2 Trench 1 after excavation (CPAT 3492-0154)

One curious result of excavating the section was that the natural limestone was slightly domed beneath the bank, to a height of between 0.2-0.3m. A visiting geologist disabused the writers of the notion that this could be a result of natural processes, and so it appears that at this point on the circuit of the enclosure the bank was deliberately built on a natural rise.

## *Trench 2*

The purpose of this trench was to confirm the location and extent of the second house described by Pennant Williams and Leach in their final, 1967 interim report. This was assumed, from the excavators' brief note and a later published summary by Lawrence Butler (since confirmed verbally) to be a platform close to the south-west of their House 1. This exhibited similar signs of disturbance in its exaggerated profile, lengths of exposed internal walling and disfigurement by apparent spoil heaps, although the lack of a surviving plan or record dictated that an element of doubt was retained and the 2012 excavation proceeded with some caution.

The 2011 trench was located towards the southern, downhill end of the platform, straddling the projected line of its eastern long wall and centred upon what was presumed to be a surviving pier of walling. This season the initial 4x4m trench was expanded 1m to the south to a substantial bank of limestone rubble presumed to represent the collapsed remains of the apron wall of the house. The short 2011 season exposed the upper surface of a layer of angular limestone rubble slabs set beneath a very thin topsoil layer and within a dark-orange clay, which was notably devoid of charcoal or any other signs of occupation debris. This surface was present throughout, tipping downwards and to the west towards the centre of the platform, a sondage cut within the north-western corner of the trench demonstrating it to be at least 0.4m deep.

Initial cleaning of the expanded trench in 2012 revealed the rubble layer to extend beyond the confines of the excavation to the west, north and east, also confirming the upstanding pier of stonework to be an articulated section of rubble walling. This survived to a maximum height of two uneven courses, measuring 0.65m wide by up to 1.2m long and was probably bonded by a darker brown clay surviving in lenses within it. The wall rested upon the uniform limestone layer covering the floor of the trench, its possible continuation to the north defined by a series of larger, flatter slabs within the rubble, which seem to have been laid to form a rough foundation course. It is possible that the one of the ends of this upstanding fragment formed one side of an entrance in a comparable position to that identified in House 1, its north-eastern corner being defined by a single large limestone block rising its full height.

With wall footings resting on the ubiquitous rubble and a notable lack of occupation soil on or within it, especially when compared with that recorded across the interior of the published House 1, it was considered that this layer represented either a previously exposed and thoroughly cleaned limestone floor surface, structural collapse sealing potentially undisturbed medieval deposits or underlying platform material from which any traces of flooring or occupation had been completely removed in the 1960s. Laborious excavation of the whole trench to the level of the 2011 sondage indicated the latter, revealing only more rubble increasing in size, angularity and compaction with depth, all set within the same uniform clay forming a platform approximately 0.5m in depth. Below this, further exploration of the north-

eastern quadrant revealed the rubble to overlie a very compact orange, sandy clay, clearly of natural origin. The only finds were retrieved from the upper surface of the rubble and included modern nails, 20<sup>th</sup> century glass and ceramics, three sherds of 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century pottery, some animal bone fragments and unidentifiable iron objects, the earlier pieces presumably redeposited or overlooked by the otherwise remarkably thorough Flintshire Historical Society.

To complete the season a narrow 0.5m wide extension was opened from the south-west corner of the trench in order to define what was assumed to be the southern, apron wall. This revealed the feature to be an irregular dump of larger stones giving way to a deposit of dark, charcoal flecked earth at the south-western extremity of the trench, almost certainly representing the sorting of spoil by the original excavators, a working method also adopted in 2012 with the abundant larger stones being thrown onto a separate pile, creating something of a cairn with an adjacent tip of earth. The trench was then extended over the southern edge of the platform to the level of the track below. No signs of a wall were identified but the platform terrace was clearly visible in the orange clay as a scarp falling away to the south.



Fig 3 Trench 2 during the open day at the end of the excavations (CPAT 3492-0080)

The location of some of the missing occupation debris neatly completes the sequence of events in this trench. The interior of the ruined medieval building was very thoroughly excavated and almost all of its internal deposits removed down to the rubble platform on which it was founded, leaving only the partial remains of the walls. It would appear from the shallow overburden covering the rubble layer that the 1960's trench was subsequently left open to the elements, accounting for the absence of darker occupation soil, which with most of the rest of the excavated material is likely to be found in the other irregular mounds surrounding the platform, indicating limited further potential for surviving deposits. The only

advantage of continuing the excavation of this trench would therefore be to retrieve a plan of the walls.

### *Trench 3*

The house site where trench 3 was opened is the most obvious feature within the embanked rectangular enclosure, but is far from being the only one. A rather smaller structure lies some twelve metres to the north-west of the main house and can just be recognised on GAT's 1993 plan, reproduced as the base plan for Fig 1. Immediately to the north of the other end of the main house, but not shown on the plan is a slightly raised platform, set against the inside of the enclosure bank.

The house itself is externally some 24.0m long (east-north-east to west-south-west) and 8.4m wide. Internally it is some 20.4m long by around 4.5-5m in width but this makes no allowance for the very spread nature of the collapsed. In practice we know from the excavation that the internal width of the building is 4.4m and that the walls were a little over 1m in thickness, assuming that the section was reasonably typical of the whole.

The house appears to have at least three compartments or rooms, possibly four – there is some ambiguity in the central part of the house caused largely by the spread of collapsed rubble. What seems clear is that the room at the eastern end was set at a higher level than those at the west, though this is in part a function of the almost imperceptible slope on which the building is set.



Fig 4 Trench 3 showing the remaining external facing stones of the buildings' north wall (CPAT 3492-0064)



The excavation trench was set out across the most westerly room, up close to the end wall which curiously produces the most pronounced surface remains, suggestive of a chimneybreast in a post-medieval cottage though here it could be simply a result of the proximity of the enclosure bank. The trench was 13.5m long and its width varied from 3.2m at the north-west end to 2.3m at the south-east, the difference being a reflection of the need to avoid tree stumps which dot the site.

The excavation was taken down to the limestone bedrock beneath parts of the slightly raised platform adjacent to the house, in the quarry hollow (see below) which separated the house from the platform, and immediately outside the north wall of the house. It has yet to be encountered within the walls of the house and to the south of it.

The walls of the building were well-defined, at least on the inner faces which were exposed to view across the whole width of the trench. Of rough limestone blocks they were in general only one course high. The outer wall faces presented a very different appearance. Only on the north side where there were three upright revetment slabs in a line and well-embedded could the line of the outer wall face be confidently established. Elsewhere on the north and along the entire wall face on the south, it was impossible to pinpoint a wall face, and it was the undifferentiated rubble infill of the walls that was encountered. It seems likely that the pressure of the roof bearing down on the walls had a much more drastic effect on the outside than on the inside faces.

Another probable wall was encountered on the north-east side of the trench. This is likely to be a partition wall between two rooms although only the top of what remains has yet been exposed. But it does seem to indicate that this the most westerly room in the building was quite small - around 4.4m wide, but probably less than 3m long.

Inside the house the basal layer appears to be a clayey silt containing occasional stones and mortar flecks (though this has only been partially excavated). It is a well-sorted layer disturbed by tree roots. It is apparent that it runs under both the north and south walls of the house, but its composite character is indicated by the fact that it also butted up against the walls internally. Nothing similar has been detected as yet outside the south wall, and only a thin spread of the material which faded out quickly beyond the north wall. Significantly perhaps there was no sign of anything similar covering the bedrock underpinning the platform.

Nothing within this layer or above it revealed that there had ever been a laid floor within this room. Varying amounts of rubble mixed with clayey silt filled the room, collapse from both side walls and also no doubt the end wall. The collapse of the building may have been episodic but it was impossible to differentiate different phases, not helped by the irregularity of the rubble and the tree roots. And the very few artefacts within the building suggested that any domestic debris had been cleared out, perhaps regularly.

Immediately to the north of the house, the surface of the ground was hollowed from which it was inferred there might be either a gully around the platform or perhaps a worn trackway leading into the interior of the main enclosure through an otherwise unidentified entrance. Excavation revealed that limestone blocks had been prised out to leave a sharp-sided hollow that broadened from 0.5m wide in the main west

section to 1.1m in the opposite face and up to 0.5m deep below the bedrock level. This was filled up with silt and lumps of limestone and contained a considerable amount of animal bone. While it is possible that this did act as a drainage gully, it is more likely that it was a shallow quarry that provided building stone and then was allowed to fill up with silt and debris.

For the platform to the north of the house excavation was generally uninformative. That part of it that was examined produced no artefacts nor any stratigraphy that might have provided a clue to its function. However, above the natural limestone pavement, flat thin slabs of limestone had been laid over at least that part of the platform that was fully examined to create a level floor or standing. Above this there was simply a mix of earth and some random stone.

## Finds

Finds from the 2102 excavations were more prevalent than in the first season though still sparse, particularly when compared with what is known to have found at Hen Caerwys in the 1960s.

### Pottery

A provisional identification list is provided in Table 1, and this initial assessment reveals two significant features, namely that three sherds of pottery from Trench 3 reveal Roman activity in the vicinity, and secondly that the medieval and post-medieval pottery, though sparse in quantity, implies a long period of time from the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century through to the 18<sup>th</sup> or even the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the house under excavation or a predecessor was in use.

*Table 1: Hen Caerwys pottery: provisional identifications*

Find	Cont	Trench	No	Weight (g)	Type	Comment
1008	7	3	1	5	Cooking pot	BB1 body sherd with exterior burnish. Romano-British
1009	7	3	1	6	Dish?	Slipware bodyware in coal measures-type fabric. 17/18 <sup>th</sup>
1010	7	3	1	36	Jar	Body sherd with dark internal glaze and the stub of a strap handle. Coal measures-type redware, presumably from Buckley. ?18/19 <sup>th</sup>
1011	10	3	1	33	Jug/Jar	Base of a medieval jug or jar with internal green glaze and patchy external glaze
1012	10	3	1	166	Jar	Base of a storage jar in local red earthenware. 18/19 <sup>th</sup>
1013	10	3	1	12	Jug/jar	Body sherd in a Midland Purple-type fabric with external and patchy internal glaze. 15 <sup>th</sup> ?
1014	10	3	1	5	Jug/jar	Body sherd; medieval vessel in a sandy, cream fabric
1019	13	3	1	6	Jar?	Body sherd; highly fired Midland Purple fabric. 15/16 <sup>th</sup>
1020	13	3	1	17	?	Unknown vessel type in a sandy, cream fabric with clear glaze. Medieval
1021	7	3	1	5	Jar?	Body sherd in Coal measures fabric with dark external glaze and internal surface missing. Post-medieval
1027	13	3	2	5	Jug/jar?	Undiagnostic medieval body sherds
1028	18	3	2	43	Mortarium	Hammer head mortarium in a white fabric Mancetter-Hartshill, not earlier than the end of 2 <sup>nd</sup> century. Romano-British
1031						Missing
1032	200	2	1	22	Jar	Body sherd in Midland Purple-type fabric. 15/16 <sup>th</sup>
1033	4	3	1	9	Cooking pot	BB1 body sherd. Romano-British
1035	20/7	2	1	4	Jug	Small strap handle from a medieval green-glazed jug in a white sandy fabric

### ***Stone***

The only notable find was the tip of a whetstone, not attributable to any particular date.

### ***Metal***

Recognisable objects include a fragment of a horseshoe and a nail, together with a small amount of iron 'waste'.

### ***Bone***

This material has yet to be examined by a specialist.

### ***Conclusions***

An interim report is not the place for conclusions, particularly when work on site is still in progress. What can be said briefly is that the excavation of Trench 1 regrettably has not assisted us in tying down either the date or the function of the enclosure through which it was cut; Trench 2 has confirmed to our satisfaction that the platform which the excavation focused on was indeed that which was the second to be examined by the Flintshire Historical Society in the 1960s providing some insight into their working methods if little new information; and Trench 3 has revealed that rather than being a late medieval longhouse, the building under excavation appears to have a longer history running in to more recent times. That there was Romano-British activity on the plateau top here also has significant implications and brings into question whether all the earthworks that survive at Hen Caerwys are necessarily of medieval and later date.

### ***Acknowledgements***

Our thanks are due to all the volunteers who turned out to help, to Mike the owner for his unfailing enthusiasm, and to the staff. And not forgetting all the visitors who came to see us.