ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT UPPER NEWTON 'ROMAN VILLA' WOLFSCASTLE, PEMBROKESHIRE

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Gan / By

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SUMMARY

A small archaeological investigation was undertaken by Dyfed Archaeological Trust in May 2010 to ascertain whether the possible site of a Roman villa was of sufficient significance to warrant statutory protection and to define an area for proposed scheduling. The excavation work was undertaken with the assistance of local volunteers.

No evidence of a Roman villa was revealed within the excavated area, although it remains possible that the building has been totally destroyed by agricultural activity, or is located beyond the excavation area. Charcoal from a shallow circular feature may provide a carbon date which could indicate a Roman (or other) date.

A geophysical survey and contour survey were undertaken as part of the project. These suggest a re-interpretation of the documentary evidence and a possible alternative location for the villa site. In addition, a previously unknown prehistoric enclosure was revealed by the geophysical survey.

The results of the investigation do not suggest the area immediately surrounding the excavation site needs to be scheduled. Further excavation would be needed to ascertain if other features identified from the geophysical survey are of sufficient importance to warrant scheduling.

INTRODUCTION

There has recently been renewed interest in the evidence for Roman villas in southwest Wales. In Carmarthenshire only one definite villa is known, at Llys Brychan, near Bethlehem. Geophysical survey and evaluation trenching has recently been undertaken at this site as part of the Towy Afon yr Oesoedd project. Recent work by Jeff Davies and Toby Driver has now identified a villa at Plas Aber Magwr near Trawscoed Roman fort in Ceredigion. Several other possible villa sites are also recorded on the Dyfed HER (Cwmbrwyn, Carmarthenshire; Trelissey, Pembrokeshire; and Castell Flemish, Pembrokeshire), but these mostly lie within Iron Age defended enclosures and their status as villas has not been confirmed. The above are designated Scheduled Ancient Monuments. In 2008 and 2009 DAT undertook geophysical survey and trial trenching to try and locate a possible villa site in the Dinefwr Park, Llandeilo, but no conclusive structural evidence was identified. One other possible villa site (PRN 2384) is located on land at Bank Farm near Wolfscastle in Pembrokeshire (NGR SM9497 2648; Maps 1 and 2).

The character and condition of the Bank Farm site is unclear. An excavation undertaken by Dr. Mark Merrony, a local archaeologist in 2003, is believed to have located a possible building of Roman date, but the evidence obtained has not been published and its has therefore not been possible to appraise these findings.

Project background and objectives

DAT's Cadw-grant-aided report Scheduling Enhancement Project 2009: Roman Non-Military Sites: Dyfed highlighted the paucity of evidence for Romanised settlement in southwest Wales. Leading on from this report, DAT have undertaken further investigation of the Bank Farm site, including a programme of geophysical survey and small-scale excavation to try and find more evidence to corroborate the claims of the 2003 excavations. The site is not scheduled, so a further aim of the archaeological investigations was to ascertain whether the site was of sufficient significance to warrant statutory protection and to define an area for proposed scheduling. Due to its location, the site is potentially at risk from the continuing and cumulative effects of agricultural activity.

Historical background

The site at Bank Farm has been referred to by many different names (Wolfscastle, Ford, Upper Newton). Prior to his excavations in 2003, Dr. Mark Merrony published an article that provides a useful summary of the existing documentary evidence relating to the Wolfscastle site and other possible Roman sites in West Wales (Merrony 2003). Much of the following information is derived from this source.

Richard Fenton provides a detailed description of the site in his Tour Through' Pembrokeshire (Fenton 1811). This is presented here in full:

From the village of Ford I take the road to the left to examine a field, where, from the account given me, I had reason to believe there had been a Roman villa, for in the month of December, 1806, a labourer employed in casting an old hedge found a great number of bricks, proved afterwards, from their peculiar form and ornament, to be Roman: and stones which, on examination, seemed to have been in contact with fire. This induced him to dig deeper, when he came to a pit of an oblong square lined on each side with stone and mortar about eight feet long, and near six feet high; from each of the side walls there were two flues springing up to the surface of the ground, elevated to about 45 degrees. The mouths of the

flues were one foot four inches wide, and three feet from the bottom of the pit, but four inches wider at the surface of the ground, and worked round with fluted Roman brick of about one inch and one-eighth of an inch thick. There was a great quantity of ashes turned up, appearing to be of culm and wood. The pit is at the distance of a hundred yards from an old British encampment, and several pieces of walls have been discovered between the pit and the encampment, by digging for stones to erect a presbytarian meeting-house in the village, of similar masonry to that round the pit. For this account I am indebted to the accuracy of the Reverend Mr. Jenkins, vicar of St. Dogwell's, and who saw the place in the state here described.

'With the farmer for my quide, on whose ground this curious discovery was made, and accompanied by my son, whose services I know not how to estimate, I visited the spot, when the bath itself, and the line of foundation wall connected with it, had been cut though in several places, yet not so perfectly destroyed but what I could perceive enough to prove that the above description was very correct, and that I need not hesitate a moment to pronounce it a bath, part of a Roman villa. There were scattered about in various directions great quantities of bricks of various size and shape, some thick, others thin, ornamented with lines, and others grooved, so as to admit of their being a duct for water, together with some slate tiles curiously shaped, many having iron pegs in them. I likewise saw a piece of very rude vitrification of great thickness, and bits of red painted stucco. My son, not confining his researches to the fields we are in, undertook to examine the surrounding ground, and found to the westward of it on an unenclosed spot sloping towards the river, and facing the north, the remains of a small earthwork, nearly square, with the angles rounded, marked by a single vallum, having an entrance into it from two opposite sides, as if it had been intersected by a road. There were on the inner surface great inequalities, which led him to suppose that there had been buildings there of some kind formerly. It certainly could not have been thought to have been a post of any strength, from its inconsiderable size and situation, lying rather low, which inclined him to think it rather of Roman than British construction, and might have been a summer camp of that people, who required no works calculated for defence against the native inhabitants, then in a state of entire subjugation.'

Edward Laws also visited the site in 1886, reporting 'there was not much to see'. In 1924 a visit by RCAHMW was more positive, with recent ploughing revealing slate tiles of 'distinctly Roman appearance'.

In 1960 a scatter of roofing slates, two pieces of hypocaust, and a fragment of a tegula were found at SM948265, 'about 77 paces east of a fortified native enclosure' (St Joseph 1961, JRS 51).

Archaeological background

The only published account of the excavations undertaken by Mark Merrony in 2003 appear in local newspapers (Western Telegraph 2/4/2003 p.13; Western Mail 2/4/2003 p.10). Details from this article about what was found are unclear. A surface constructed of 'paving slabs' is reported, along with pottery 'believed to be' Severn Valley ware of 1st to 4th century, Roman roofing slates and a stone object that 'could be a flue arch or part of a bath'. The presence or absence of walls is not mentioned.

Cartographic evidence

The 1st edition Ordnance Survey map 1889 and the second edition map of 1907 mark both the site of both a Roman Camp (Ford Camp PRN 2385) and a Roman villa (PRN 2384) (see figure 2). The location indicated for the villa has subsequently been the focus for both excavations undertaken at the site.

It is also notable that the east to west road lying to the south of the site is marked as a Roman Road 'Via Julia Maritima'. Confidence in the veracity of this route has recently been questioned, especially since the recognition of a Roman road heading west from Carmarthen, which has so far been traced as far as Wiston. As yet, however, there is no direct evidence either way.

A watercourse is marked on the historic mapping, to the north of the survey area. This can be traced from a spring to the west of Ford Camp through fields, all the way to Wolfscastle, following a contour all the way. The antiquity or significance of this feature is unknown, but it would appear to have supplied fresh water to the settlement at Wolfscastle.

Aerial photographs and Lidar

Oblique aerial photographs of the location of the purported villa tend to focus on the nearby prehistoric enclosure. Views of the possible villa site are incidental and are consequently not very informative. Photo 'Pemb 256-003504-29' (DAT HER), does, however, provide a useful view of the general topography of the area. The location of the possible villa appears from the photograph to be on a slight 'spur'. This landform is not, however, evident on the ground, and may be an illusion.

Meridian aerial photographs 12517-18 (190/220) show little or nothing of interpretive potential at the site or in its vicinity. It does, however, show that neither of the two current field entrances was in existence at the time.

Next perspectives digital aerial mapping (dating to c.2006) shows a certain amount of agricultural activity in and around the excavation area. It is not clear from the photos what impact this activity may have had on any buried archaeological remains, although it probably accounts for the nature of the topsoil layer encountered during the excavation.

A Lidar image of the area (D0031753) provides little clear detail, but appears to show a slight, roughly rectangular feature, straddling the field boundary, immediately southwest of the excavation area. Although tempting to suggest this could represent a building, it is at least equally possible that it is a geological feature.

Site location and description

The site is situated on the western edge of relatively level natural terrace on a north-facing slope, approximately 120m east of the Ford Camp enclosure (PRN 2385). The site is located at the offset junction of three field boundaries (see Figures 1 to 4) including two field entrances. The field boundaries are stone-faced earthen banks. Field boundary terminals (at gate openings) also appear to be stone-faced. One of these entrances has been blocked with an iron feeding trough and grille, and a water trough stands in the corner. This location is now used for feeding and watering livestock (a dairy herd). A large dung heap had accumulated on both sides of the feeding trough. The target excavation area lay beneath this heap! Since 2006 the farm has changed hands. The new tenant, unaware of the previous excavation and possible presence of an archaeological site has since constructed a farm access track on the eastern side of the field boundaries, overlying the previous area of excavation.

Methodology

An area 6m by 7m was stripped of overburden down to the top of visible archaeological features. The trench was then hand cleaned and sample excavated. The majority of excavation work was undertaken by local volunteers. Standard site recording, including photography, scale planning and context descriptions etc. were primarily undertaken by DAT staff. Two additional small test pits were dug to answer specific archaeological questions. A contour survey of the surrounding area, and a geophysical survey were also undertaken.

Geophysical survey

In 2003, Dr Mark Merrony and Tony Johnson undertook a gradiometer survey of a hectare of land surrounding the villa site location. The anomalies were interpreted as, and indeed appear to show, evidence of a building at the expected location (Merrony 2004). Dr. Merrony estimates the dimensions of this apparent structure as approximately 18.5 by 7.5m (but possibly wider), on a southwest-northeast alignment. Parallel lines running east from this location were interpreted as a possible trackway.

In 2010 another gradiometer survey was undertaken by DAT, covering a larger area. Prior to the excavation, it was only possible to survey three of the fields surrounding the site. During the excavation, however, the fourth quarter was completed (Figure 1). The main features of interest and field numbers are indicated on Figure 2.

The northern half of the survey area (fields 1 and 2) largely replicates what was found in 2003, however, since the first survey, constraints caused by the recently constructed farm access track, a stockpile of dung and electric fencing, made it difficult to extend the 2010 survey area right up to the field boundaries in the vicinity of the site.

The southwestern portion of the survey area (field 4) provided surprising results indicating a previously unrecorded sub-rectangular enclosure (E) with indications of two possible round-houses and other anomalies. The parallel linear features (K) correspond with a field boundary only represented on the tithe map (see Figure 3).

Unfortunately, the southwest portion of the survey (field 3) was not available until after the excavation. This area shows several potentially significant anomalies. Feature H may indicate the corner of a building close to the field boundary to the north. Feature J appears to suggest two parallel anomalies that may represent part of a building. These appear to be crossed by a former north-south field boundary.

Further to the south is a dark, roughly square anomaly (I) that is also suggestive of an archaeological feature.

The survey also shows a group of rectilinear features to the east (G). These appear to represent field enclosures, but are of as yet unknown date.

EXCAVATION RESULTS

Trench 1

An area measuring 7m by 6m was opened in the southeast corner of field 1 (Figures 2, 4 and 5). This location was to the northwest of the 2003 excavation. Due to a large dung heap covering the entire area, it had been unable to undertake geophysical survey in this area in 2010. However, based on the results of the 2003 geophysical survey and Dr Merrony's interpretation of it, the excavation area was expected to encompass evidence of portions of the interior and exterior of the building, its northwest corner, and part of the southwest continuation of its west wall.

Following removal of the dung heap, topsoil was removed gradually until a level was reached at which it was possible to identify potential archaeological features. Ploughsoil overburden was minimal, due to poaching by cattle, compaction in the area of the field entrance, and the periodic removal of the dung heap for muck spreading. A hint of this activity is apparent on the Next Perspectives aerial photographic coverage of the site dated to c. 2006. At the south end of the site this resulted in the removal of approximately 0.10m of natural geology, while at the north end, only topsoil was removed. Examination of trench edges did not suggest horizontal deposits of archaeological origin or significance had been inadvertently removed, or were preserved below field boundaries.

An initial clean of the area revealed a possible post-hole (009) with a charcoal rich fill (photo 11) in what was anticipated to be the interior of the possible building. A linear feature (004) (photos 1 to 8) was defined in the approximate location that the west wall of the building had been anticipated. In what was anticipated to be the exterior of the building, vestiges of plough soil were removed to define a few patches of darker soil suggestive of possible cut features cut into the natural shale subsoil.

Along the length of the linear feature 004, occasional clusters of stones were investigated as possible post-holes with packing stones (photo 4), but on excavation this possibility was found not to be the case.

Several sections were excavated through linear feature 004 (photos2 to 8). These demonstrated that the effects of agriculture have resulted in a 'smoothing out' of what would in earlier times have been a slightly more pronounced slope to the northeast. As a result the linear feature survived to a greater depth at its east end (0.25m) than to the west (0.05m).

Excavation at the eastern end of the trench demonstrated that the linear feature continued eastwards (see photo 8), rather than turning southeast (to form the anticipated northwest corner of a building as interpreted from the geophysical survey). Excavation at the west end appeared to indicate that the linear feature curved slightly to the southwest (see photo 5). The fill of the feature contained occasional small to medium sized stones (photo 4) and occasional fragments of roofing slate, some with evidence of nail holes. No other inclusions were apparent.

No evidence of *in-situ* stone footings was revealed, and the profile of the cut (a shallow 'V' shape) did not have the appearance of a foundation trench or beam slot. Concentrations of large stones in the corner at the foot of the water trough were examined and excavated systematically (photos 6, 7 and 8) to look for evidence that they were part of a surface, or wall footings. No such evidence was found, and this group of stones has been interpreted as tumble from the stone faced field banks that have been dislodged and compacted by cattle at the water trough.

Circular feature (009), a possible post-hole, containing a charcoal rich fill was also excavated (photo 11). As a single isolated feature, however, it is unclear what

this feature may represent. A sample was taken for possible Carbon 14 dating and a bulk sample was taken for wood species identification and the possible recovery of charred plant remains. This evidence may indicate whether the feature is of Roman origin or not.

Of the more ephemeral features 005, 007 and 014 (photos 7, 11 and 12) were the most convincing, although in all cases it was difficult to distinguish between the fill material and the surrounding natural. Feature 005 did, however, contain a few fragments of charcoal, and a small burnt animal bone. It is possible that these features are the result of plant root action or animal burrowing, or are pockets of ploughsoil that remain in hollows below the machined level.

Test pit 1

A small test excavation was made where the field boundary has been breached (see figure 4 and F in figure 2) to form a gateway. The fact that the basal stones of the stone-faced bank were still *in-situ* (see photo 13) indicated that this area had not been significantly truncated since the field boundary was constructed and that any underlying remains would be undisturbed.

The excavation revealed what appeared to be a continuation of the field boundary ditch revealed in the main excavation area. This was cut through a silty deposit containing charcoal flecks, as well as fragments and occasional flecks of burnt earth. Within and beneath this deposit, were several fragments of roof slate (photos 14 and 15).

It is unclear whether the ditch is contemporary with the stone-faced bank or not. It may relate to an earlier field boundary on the same alignment. It may also have been re-cut.

Test pit 2

A small test pit was dug to try and locate and characterise archaeological deposits in the vicinity of the 2003 excavations (figure 4). No archaeological deposits were encountered.

DISCUSSION

Evidence from aerial photographs and historic mapping, coupled with the results of the geophysical survey and excavation suggest that the existing field system in the wider vicinity of Wolfscastle is based on a series of roughly north-south aligned boundaries (figure 3). These were probably laid out in relation to the settlement of Wolfscastle in the medieval period. Field boundaries in the area around the possible villa site appear to some extent, to stray from this alignment, and may mark the edge of the medieval field system. Some of the field boundaries may therefore have origins before the medieval period. Those around the villa site have also undergone a series of alterations that have not occurred elsewhere. Why this should be is unclear.

On the evidence revealed in the excavated area, there is little to suggest that this is the location of a Roman villa. It remains possible, however, that there is such a building nearby, or that all evidence of a building in this location has been destroyed by subsequent activity. It is unclear how the results of the 2003 investigations relate to these findings. Several observations can, however, be made:

Stones in gateway F (figure 2) identified as possible wall footings in 2003, are in fact the basal stones of a stone faced bank, through which a gate has been constructed. The stone-faced banks appear to replace earlier field boundaries. Linear feature 004 appears to be a continuation of one of these field boundary ditches. It may be these boundaries that were being 'casted' when the original discoveries were made on 1806. The geophysical survey appears to indicate the lines of other such boundaries that were not replaced. One such boundary identified from the geophysical survey in 2003 was at that time identified as a possible track way leading east from the villa.

Even if to a large extent robbed for stone and plough damaged, earlier descriptions of the site would suggest substantial evidence of a villa might be expected to have survived in this location. A deposit containing charcoal flecks was revealed in Test Pit 1. This deposit was cut by, and was therefore earlier than, the field boundary ditch, and, although little can be said about the significance of this deposit, its presence may be taken to support the possibility of surviving archaeology nearby.

With the exception of numerous, but small fragments of roof slates, no other evidence of building materials was recovered during this excavation. On the other hand, the slates do suggest a building of some kind was present somewhere nearby, and it is possible that material from a villa site could have spread some distance from its original location through agricultural activity and stone robbing.

It is at present impossible to relate the results of this excavation with those of the excavation in 2003. Until the 2003 excavation results are made available, the apparent absence of significant archaeology in this location must cast some doubt on the current interpretation of what was found previously.

Although the excavation results are disappointing, the geophysical survey has identified several additional features that it was not possible to investigate on this occasion. Several of these features can be related to Fenton's account of his visit, and may offer an explanation for the absence of features encountered in the excavation area.

The Reverend Mr. Jenkins' account to which Fenton refers, mentions that the 'pit is at the distance of a hundred yards from an old British encampment'. This has been taken to be the currently extant enclosure PRN 2385. Fenton also mentions that:

'My son, not confining his researches to the fields we are in, undertook to examine the surrounding ground, and found to the westward of it on an

unenclosed spot sloping towards the river, and facing the north, the remains of a small earthwork, nearly square, with the angles rounded, marked by a single vallum, having an entrance into it from two opposite sides, as if it had been intersected by a road. There were on the inner surface great inequalities, which led him to suppose that there had been buildings there of some kind formerly. It certainly could not have been thought to have been a post of any strength, from its inconsiderable size and situation, lying rather low, which inclined him to think it rather of Roman than British construction, and might have been a summer camp of that people, who required no works calculated for defence.

The 'nearly square earthwork with rounded angles' described above, fits reasonably well with the enclosure identified from the geophysical survey in field 4. At the time of Fenton's visit, an earthwork associated with the geophysical survey results may still have been extant. The fact that the discoveries were made when field boundaries were being removed (evidence of which is apparent from the geophysical survey), may have resulted in sufficient landscape change for a certain amount of confusion about the location of the site to have ensued when Fenton visited it several years later. Bearing all this in mind, it is possible that the location of the features described by the Reverend Mr. Jenkins have become confused over the years. With this possibility, it is worth re-considering the results of the geophysical survey in field 3.

At the north end of the field is a concentration of linear anomalies (H and J), which together may represent the site of a building. Their proximity to the field boundaries suggests they could well have been encountered when the boundaries were rebuilt (rebuilding of field boundaries is suggested by the results of Test Pit 1).

This location is on level ground which slopes uphill to the south from this point (see contour distribution in figure 2). Features H and J are on a different alignment to the possible field system (G), which may suggest they are either not related, or originated at different times. Further south, the dark, square anomaly discernable on the geophysical survey (I in figure 2) is a possible candidate for the 'bath' described by the Reverend Mr. Jenkins. At the southwest corner of this feature a feint irregular linear might even be interpreted as a spring, for supplying water to the feature.

The proximity of H and J to enclosure E, also suggests they represent different phases of activity, and it is tempting to suppose that a formerly Iron Age enclosure became Romanised, culminating in the construction of a villa in the Roman style. All this is, of course conjecture and can only be confirmed or refuted by further excavation.

CONCLUSIONS

The excavations have not confirmed the presence of, extent, or state of preservation of a Roman villa at the Upper Newton site. If anything, they suggest that there is no evidence for such a building in this location. These results are at odds with the (un)reported findings of Dr. Merrony. Despite recent correspondence since the 2010 excavation was undertaken, details of his excavation results remain unavailable. There therefore seems little justification for scheduling the present supposed location of the villa.

Since it would seem, however, that on several occasions, building materials and ceramics of Roman date have been recovered from the area, it may be that the building has been totally destroyed (as may be suggested by the evidence of a certain amount of truncation). The Roman building material could have spread over a considerable distance from its source through agricultural activity, and the historical report of the site having been robbed for building stone. It is also therefore still possible that there is a Roman building nearby, but not within the 2010 excavation area.

Based on a reconsideration of the documentary, excavated, and geophysical survey evidence, it is here suggested that a more likely location for the remains of a possible Roman villa site is in the northwest corner of field 3 (figure 2). Further excavation would be needed to confirm this.

Proof of the presence of a villa site in west Wales remains a sought after and important goal for increasing understanding of the extent and character of Roman influence in the region. The close proximity of two Iron Age / Romano-British enclosures to a possible villa site offers a potentially significant opportunity to obtain new information on the Romanisation (or otherwise) of indigenous settlements in the region. Any future proposed excavation to locate the illusive Roman villa, should also therefore consider assessing the condition of survival of the enclosure in field 4, and its potential to answer research questions of relevance to the region and Wales generally.

SOURCES

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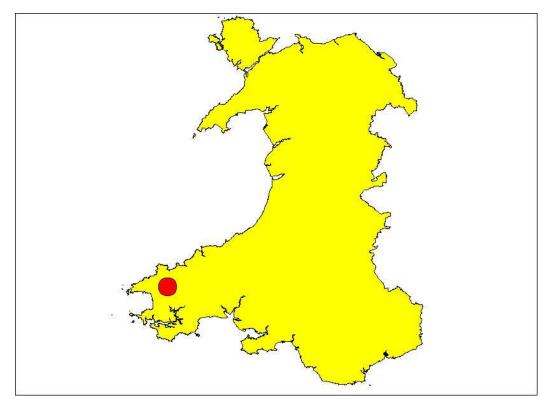
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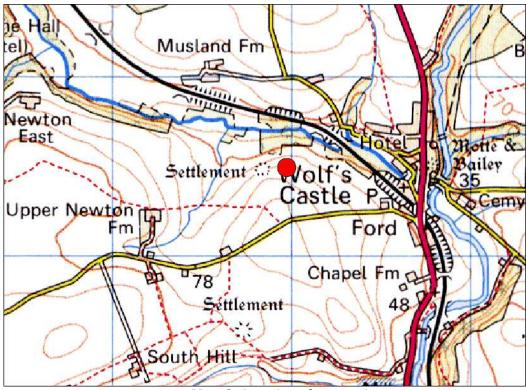
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Map 1: Location of Wolfscastle



Map 2: Location of excavation

Reproduced from the 1997 Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 scale Landranger Map with the permission of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, © Crown Copyright Cambria Archaeology, The Shire Hall, Carmarthen Street, Llandeilo, Carmarthenshire SA19 6AF. Licence No AL51842A.

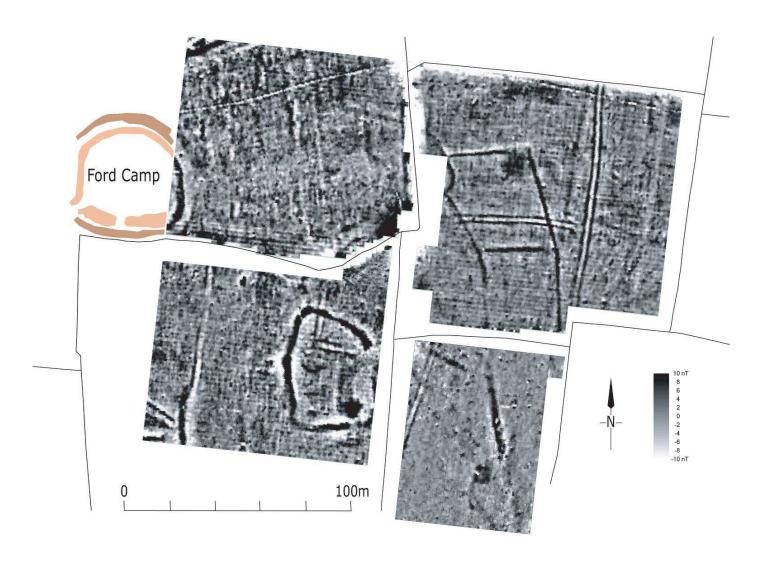


Figure 1: Geophysical survey of the environs of the site

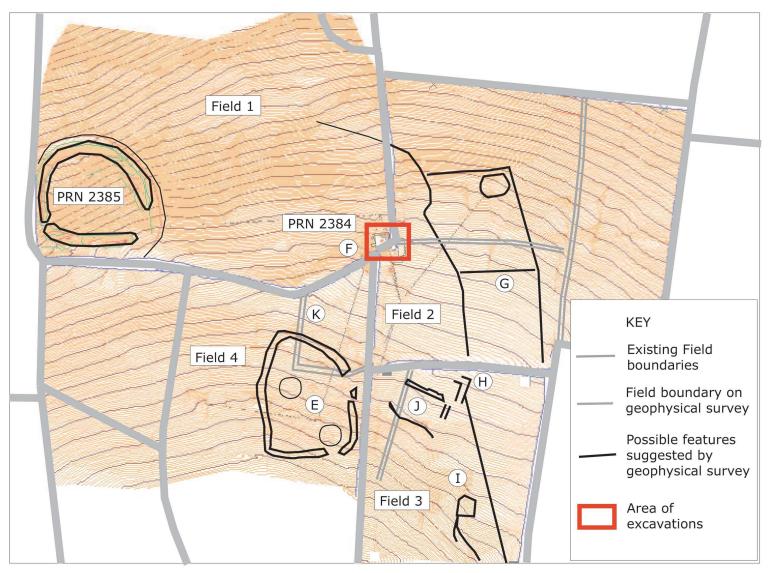


Figure 2: Contour survey of the site environs with main geophysical features

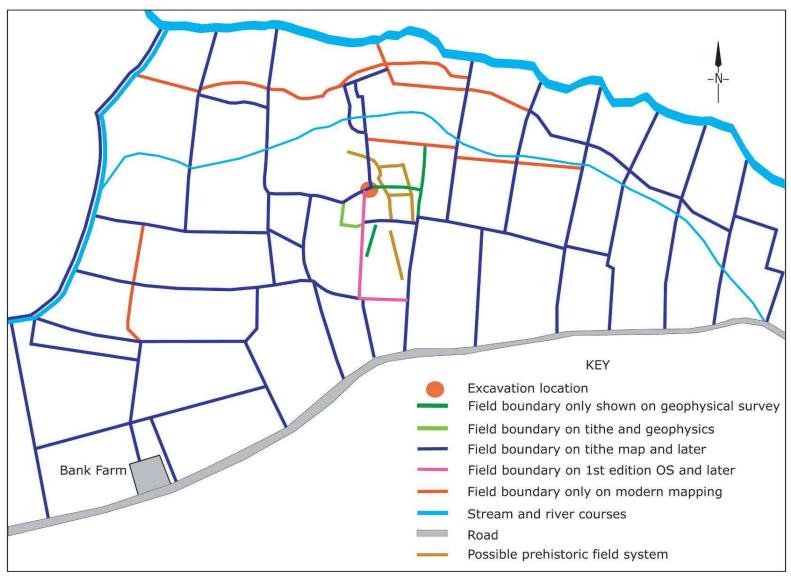


Figure 3: Plan of field boundary development in the site environs

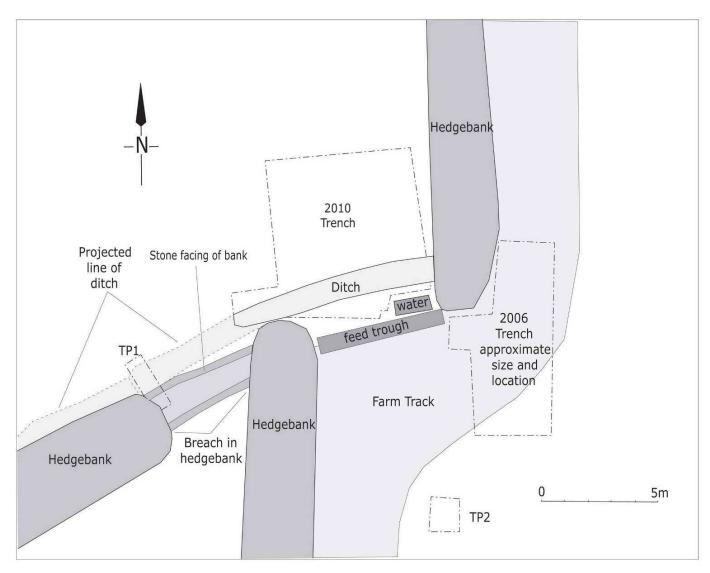


Figure 4: Plan of locations of archaeological investigations

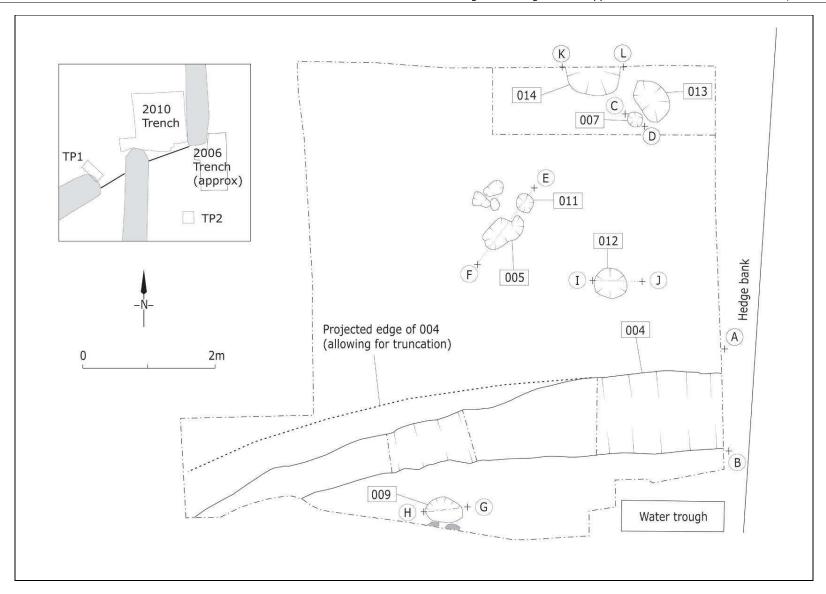


Figure 5: Excavated features in 2010 trench

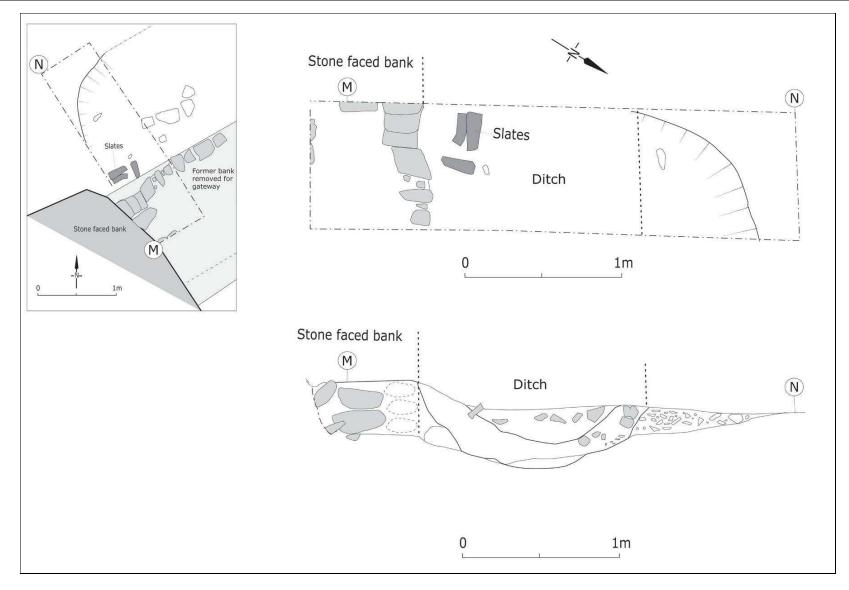


Figure 6: Plan and section of Test Pit 1

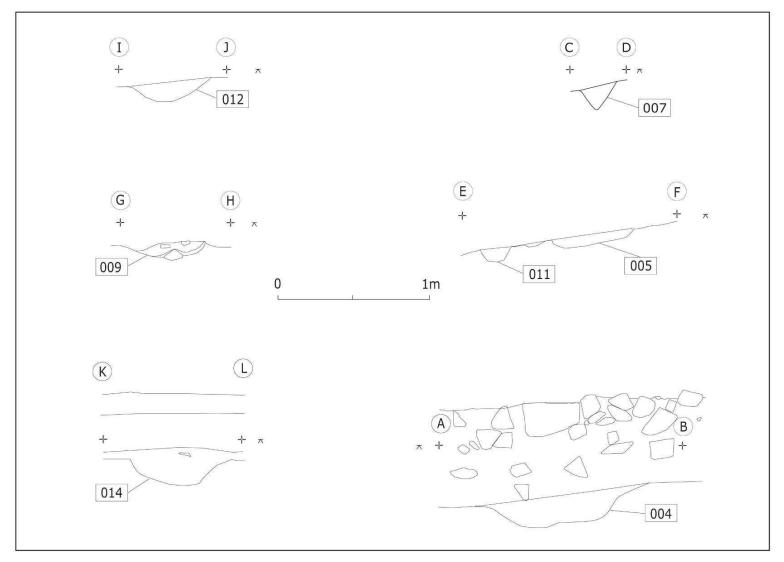


Figure 7: Sections and feature profiles



Photo 1: Ditch 004 looking east before excavation



Photo 2: Part of ditch 004 excavated



Photo 3: Ditch 004, part excavated, showing stone tumble in backfill



Photo 4: Possible post hole within fill of ditch 004 (disproved by excavation)



Photo 5: Ditch 004 looking east, showing curve in alignment



Photo 6: Stone bank tumble overlying ditch 004, looking east



Photo 7: Partially removed bank tumble



Photo 8: Section through ditch 004, showing overlying stone bank tumble



Photo 9: Post hole 007 looking north



Photo 10: Possible pit or post hole 009



Photo 11: Possible pit or post hole 014



Photo 12: Possible post holes or pits 005 and 011 looking northwest



Photo 13: Cut through field boundary (note footings of stone facings to bank)



Photo 14: Test pit 1 showing slate fragments and stone bank footings to left



Photo 15: Test pit 1 looking west, following partial removal of stone bank facing (to left) to reveal ditch cut in section)

INVESTIGATIONS AT UPPER NEWTON 'ROMAN VILLA' WOLFSCASTLE PEMBROKESHIRE 2010

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Mae'r adroddiad hwn wedi ei gael yn gywir a derbyn sêl bendith This report has been checked and approved by: James Meek
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Yn unol â'n nôd i roddi gwasanaeth o ansawdd uchel, croesawn unrhyw sylwadau sydd gennych ar gynnwys neu strwythur yr adroddiad hwn As part of our desire to provide a quality service we would welcome any
comments you may have on the content or presentation of this report