

# **STRATA FLORIDA ABBEY, CEREDIGION SN 77026 35221**

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF**

**March 2011**



Prepared by Dyfed Archaeological Trust  
For: Cadw



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CEREDIGION, SN 77026 35221  
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Gan / By

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## **STRATA FLORIDA ABBEY, CEREDIGION: ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING**

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## **STRATA FLORIDA ABBEY, CEREDIGION: ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF**

### **SUMMARY**

*This report has been produced by Dyfed Archaeological Trust Field Services in response to a request from Cadw, to undertake an archaeological watching brief during drainage groundworks associated with the refurbishment of the visitor centre at the entrance to Strata Florida Abbey (SAM CD001) near Pontrhydfendigaid, Ceredigion (NGR SN 4740 6575). The visitor centre building was formerly the Ystrad Fflur School (PRN 19695), but this has also been suggested as the possible location of a gatehouse associated with an inner precinct wall around the abbey. An archaeological evaluation undertaken in 2010 (Scott Jones 2010) to inform the details of the proposed alterations to the building exposed small portions of several wall foundations. A watching brief during the associated drainage groundworks offered the potential to expose further evidence to aid interpretation of the character of the buried structural features in this location.*

*The watching brief has demonstrated that substantial remains of significant structural features survive below the current ground surface in this location. The west face of footings of a well built north-south aligned wall were identified, as well as evidence for other walls at the north end. While it is uncertain exactly how these features relate to those identified in 2010, or what they are the remains of, the evidence in this location is not obviously suggestive of a gatehouse. Other conjectural interpretations are explored.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Project Commission**

This report has been produced by Dyfed Archaeological Trust Field Services in response to a request from Cadw, to undertake an archaeological watching brief during drainage groundworks associated with the refurbishment of the visitor centre at the entrance to Strata Florida Abbey (SAM CD001) near Pontrhydfendigaid, Ceredigion (NGR SN 4740 6575). The visitor centre building was formerly the Ystrad Fflur School (PRN 19695). This part of the site is not within the scheduled area.

A watching brief during groundworks for the construction of a bio-disk unit and associated drainage for a toilet, offered the potential to expose further stonework and to provide additional evidence to aid interpretation of the other buried structural features in this location. The intended location for the bio-disk unit and drainage was a few meters south of the visitor centre between the western boundary wall of the 'old garden' and the road. This location was different to an earlier proposal to locate the unit within the 'old garden'.

The original proposal had been to have the two bio-discs located next to each other, one feeding into the other. As a result of the exposure of significant buried remains during the machine excavation of the holes for the discs, it was decided instead to locate the discs one on top of the other in a location closer to the visitor centre. This would allow a smaller (but deeper) hole to be dug, enabling damage to the archaeological features to be avoided.

### **Scope of the Project**

The watching brief was undertaken at short notice, with no agreed brief or likely duration. Archaeological attendance and recording occurred over two days during the groundworks. The project also included preparation of this report.

### **Abbreviations**

Regional Historic Environment Record – HER; Primary Record Number – PRN; National Grid Reference – NGR; Scheduled Ancient Monument – SAM.

### **Illustrations**

Record photographs are included at back of the report. Printed map extracts are not necessarily reproduced to their original scale.

## **THE SITE**

### **Location and Topography**

The site area lay immediately south of the visitor centre, between the old garden wall and the road (see Figure 5), at the west end of the public access footpath to the abbey remains. Ground levels within the graveyard to the north of the path, and the walled garden to the south are significantly higher than the level of the public access footpath, suggesting the ground levels have been raised in those locations.

### **Archaeological Background**

The background history of Strata Florida abbey has been summarized and discussed elsewhere (Scott Jones 2010 etc.) and is not presented as part of this watching brief report.

Extensive excavations were carried out at the abbey in 1847 by J. Davies of Pantyfedwen and later in 1887-90 S.W. Williams of Rhayader oversaw the removal of large quantities of material to expose the majority of the abbey ruins that can be seen today.

More recent excavation and survey work by the University of Wales (Trinity St David, Lampeter) has concentrated on the landscape surrounding the abbey. This work has identified the extent of the outer precinct of the abbey, and has located a substantial gatehouse in the inner precinct wall, and several other significant features that give a clear idea of the impressive scale and extent of the original abbey foundation.

An archaeological evaluation undertaken (Scott Jones 2010) to inform the details of the proposed alterations to the visitor centre exposed small portions of several wall foundations (see figure 5). On the basis of these findings, it has been suggested that this might be the location of a gatehouse provided access to enclosed grounds surrounding the abbey.

An archaeological evaluation undertaken within the walled garden (Blockley 1997) did not identify any structural remains, but a deposit of stone lying above the natural geology was considered to be a make-up layer contemporary with the Abbey.

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF**

### **Methodology**

The archaeological watching brief consisted of two visits to the site on February 28<sup>th</sup> and March 1<sup>st</sup> 2011, to observe the excavation of drain runs and larger holes for the insertion of the bio-discs.

The site area was measured in using tapes and offsets. A photographic and hand written record was kept of the works. An archive will be prepared of all records taken for the archaeological watching brief.

### **Results**

The initial excavations were for a drain-run leading south from the south wall of the visitor centre to the intended location for two bio-discs. The upper deposits were a mixture of topsoil, stone rubble and other disturbed or redeposited material derived from previous ground disturbance and path surfaces etc. Large rounded boulders (111) were encountered at the base of the excavated cut, some of which were removed to ensure there would be sufficient drop in the pipe-run (Figures 2, 3 & 4; Photos 1, 2 & 3). The large rocks appeared not to be bonded, laid or faced in any way.

Immediately to the south, where the trench was widened to accommodate the bio-discs, a wall face (110) was revealed in the east edge of the excavated cut (Figures 2, 3 & 4; Photos 1, 2 & 3). On cleaning, it became apparent that this was the last few courses of a substantial and well-built wall (based on the size of the individual stones) on a north-south alignment. Since only the west face was revealed it was not possible to ascertain the width of the wall. A fragment of moulded stonework was found within the wall which had been reused from elsewhere (Figure 4; Photo 5). Moulded stonework was also recovered from the topsoil above the wall and within the make-up layers below the existing path (Photo 4). The cross shaped stone (Photo 4) is probably of architectural origin, but within the burial ground there are some graves on which similar stones have been used as grave ornaments.

The large rounded boulders (111) were shown to run beneath this wall face and have therefore been interpreted as wall footings. It was originally intended to dig a hole large enough for the two bio-discs to lie side by side (one feeding into the other) in this area. Due to the damage this would cause to the archaeological remains, an alternative solution was agreed. By placing the bio-discs one above the other, it would only be necessary to dig a smaller (but deeper) hole. By locating the bio-discs closer to the visitors centre the hole could be located away from the projected face of the north-south wall (110).

During excavation of the second hole, what appeared to be two roughly constructed stone wall footings were revealed (Figure 2). Footings 108 ran in an east-west direction along the north edge of the excavation (Figure 5, Photos 6 & 8). Footings 103 ran in a north-south direction along the east edge of the excavation (Figure 6; Photo 7 & 8). The character of the stonework of both wall footings, and their alignment suggested they were not part of the same build as wall 110 (see Figures 2, 3, and 4). It is notable however, that during the 2010 evaluations a large dressed stone similar to those forming wall 110 (but on a different north-south alignment) were identified in Trench 3. These stones appear to lie on top of the same stone footings identified as 108 in 2011 (see Figure 7). The hole for the bio-discs was slightly moved to the west to avoid disturbance to footings 103.

## DISCUSSION

The small exposures of stonework made during the drainage works provided interesting evidence for a well-built and presumably substantial north-south aligned wall. The alignment of wall 110 suggests that while it may have influenced the line of the existing road, it has not dictated the alignment of the west wall of the walled garden. How far south wall 110 extended is unknown; the near right angle bend in the road at the southwest corner of the walled garden is thought to have been dictated by the location of a former entrance-way through a gatehouse associated with a Plas built on the site during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. If, however, a presumed southern wall to the abbey cloister is extended westward (see Figure 6) it could also form a corner with north-south wall 110. No evidence of either wall was revealed during an excavation undertaken by Lampeter University to reveal the gatehouse building (Jemma Bezant pers. comm.), although this may be because deposits pre-dating the gatehouse phase were not exposed.

At the north end of wall 110 (in the vicinity of the visitor centre), the watching brief and the earlier evaluation excavation have revealed evidence of several walls suggesting the presence of previously unknown structures, or phases of construction.

Scott-Jones (2010, 7) suggests that east-west wall 404 (revealed in 2010) appears likely to continue eastwards, but probably turns right at some point, to create an enclosed walkway around the abbey. It is also possible, however, that wall 404 continued eastward to join the west end of the north wall of the north aisle of the abbey, although no evidence of this is visible in the standing remains. The wall may also have continued westward to form a corner with the north-south wall (110) revealed during the watching brief, thus (along with the southern wall postulated above) forming a regular rectangular enclosed area to the west of the abbey (see Figure 8).

Unfortunately, the evidence of other walls that have been revealed in the vicinity of the visitor centre at least complicate, if not confound this theory! Wall 206 (revealed in 2010) appears to form the corner of a building, suggested to be the southeast corner of the north side of a gatehouse providing access to the enclosed area west of the abbey. Wall 303 revealed in 2010, may indicate the western face of the same building.

Wall footings 108 (revealed in the watching brief) may be a westerly extension of the southern wall of the northern part of the gatehouse, but as such it would appear to extend beyond the western face of wall 110 (here suggested to form the west side of the enclosure). It is curious that the facing stones of wall 302 and wall 110 are very similar in quality, but do not line up. In addition, it was not possible to ascertain a physical link between wall 110 and wall footings 108, due to the presence of wall footings 103, which are also of significantly different character, and with a western face out of line with wall 110.

Although it could not be demonstrated within the excavated trench, it appears likely that wall 103 butts up to the northern end of wall 110. It could also not be demonstrated (but seems likely) that wall footings 103 and 108 are bonded. Whatever the relationship between these walls may be, they do not appear to be obviously consistent with the interpretation that they are part of the north half of a gatehouse.

In short, it is at present difficult to demonstrate that all these walls belong to the same structural phase. Indeed the evidence probably suggests they belong to at least two different phases. This is perhaps supported by the presence of a fragment of re-used moulded stone within the fabric of wall 110, suggesting that at least some of the material was re-used from an earlier structure. If this is the



case, it remains possible that there was a gatehouse (or other building type) in this location that was later demolished or adapted in a later phase of the abbey's development. Further excavations would be necessary to prove or clarify this.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The trenches excavated for the construction of the bio-discs and drains have exposed interesting evidence of stone built structures that are apparently associated with the fabric of the abbey complex. It was possible to ensure that the groundworks did not unnecessarily damage these surviving in-situ walls.

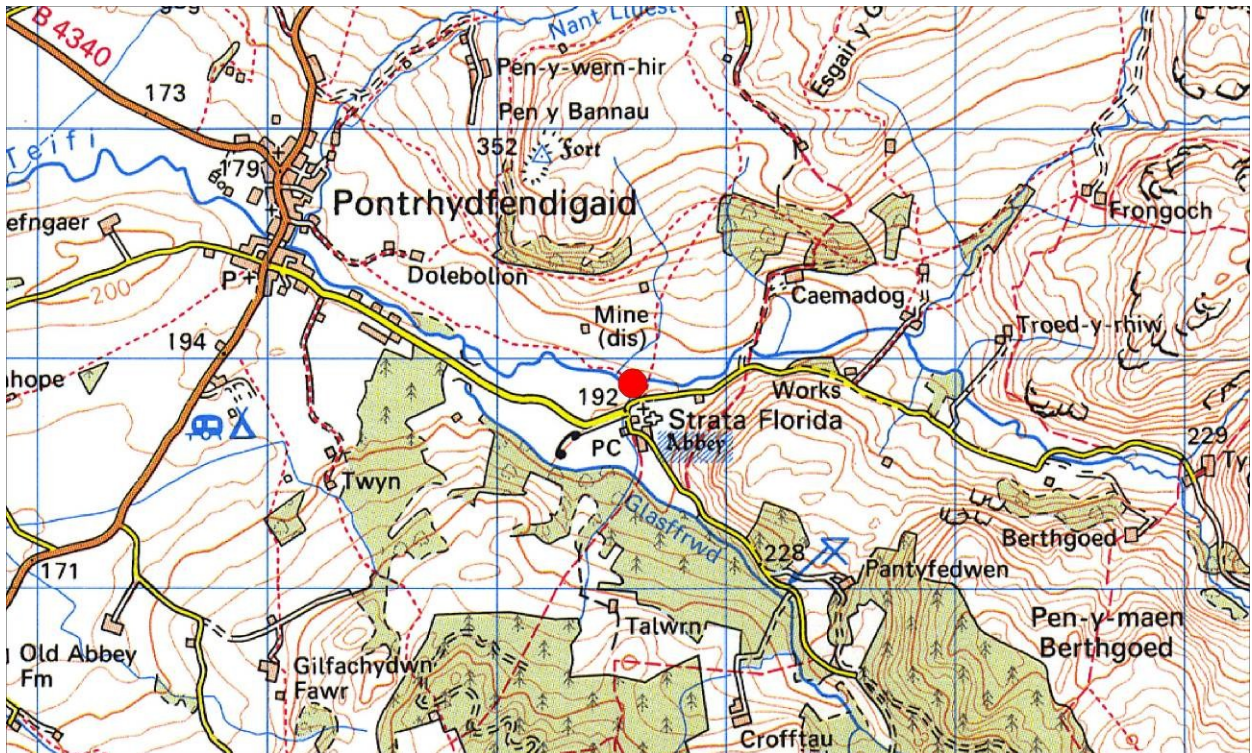
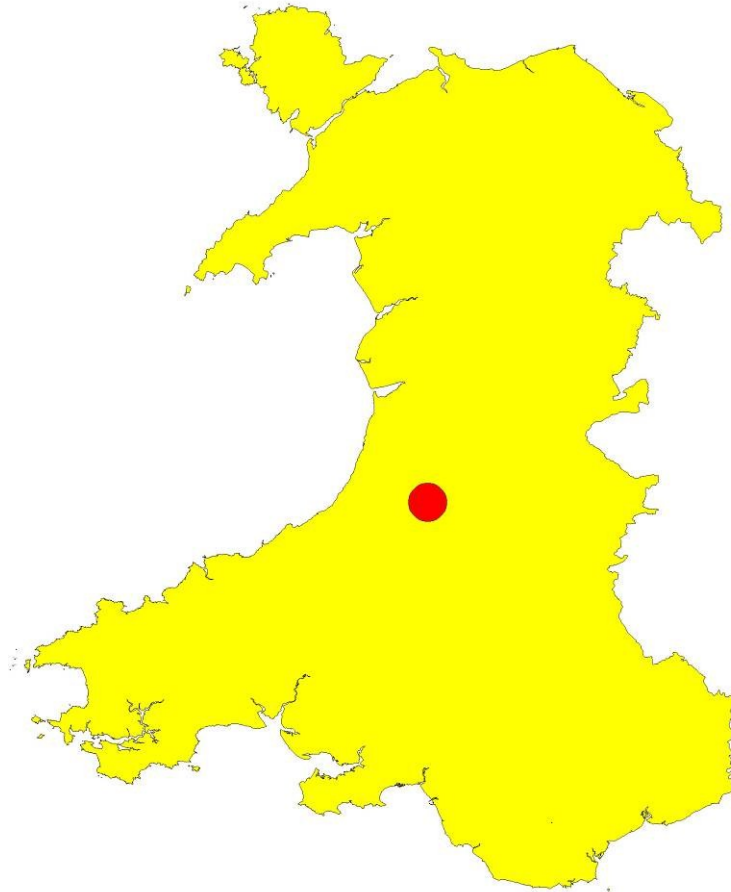
Some of the walls exposed in the watching brief do not appear to be consistent with the suggestion that may have been the site of the northern half of a gatehouse. However, since difficulties in interpreting the significance of the exposed stonework suggests that more than one phase of construction may be present, it remains possible that evidence for a south side to the gatehouse building (if it ever existed) may have been demolished or partially re-modelled in a later phase of construction. Exactly how the walls that have been revealed relate to the development of the plan of the abbey requires further excavation and is beyond the scope of this watching brief report.

Further targeted archaeological excavation in the vicinity of the visitor centre and walled garden would undoubtedly offer great potential to clarify what the archaeology that is present actually represents. This might be possible as part of the on-going Lampeter University excavations. Opinion should perhaps be sought as to how important the results of further investigations in this location would be to our overall understanding and interpretation of the site. In the light of the current refurbishment of the visitor centre and the restoration of the walled garden it would seem sensible to undertake any such work now rather than at a later date. The results could then be included in any forthcoming public interpretation and displays at the site.

## **SOURCES**

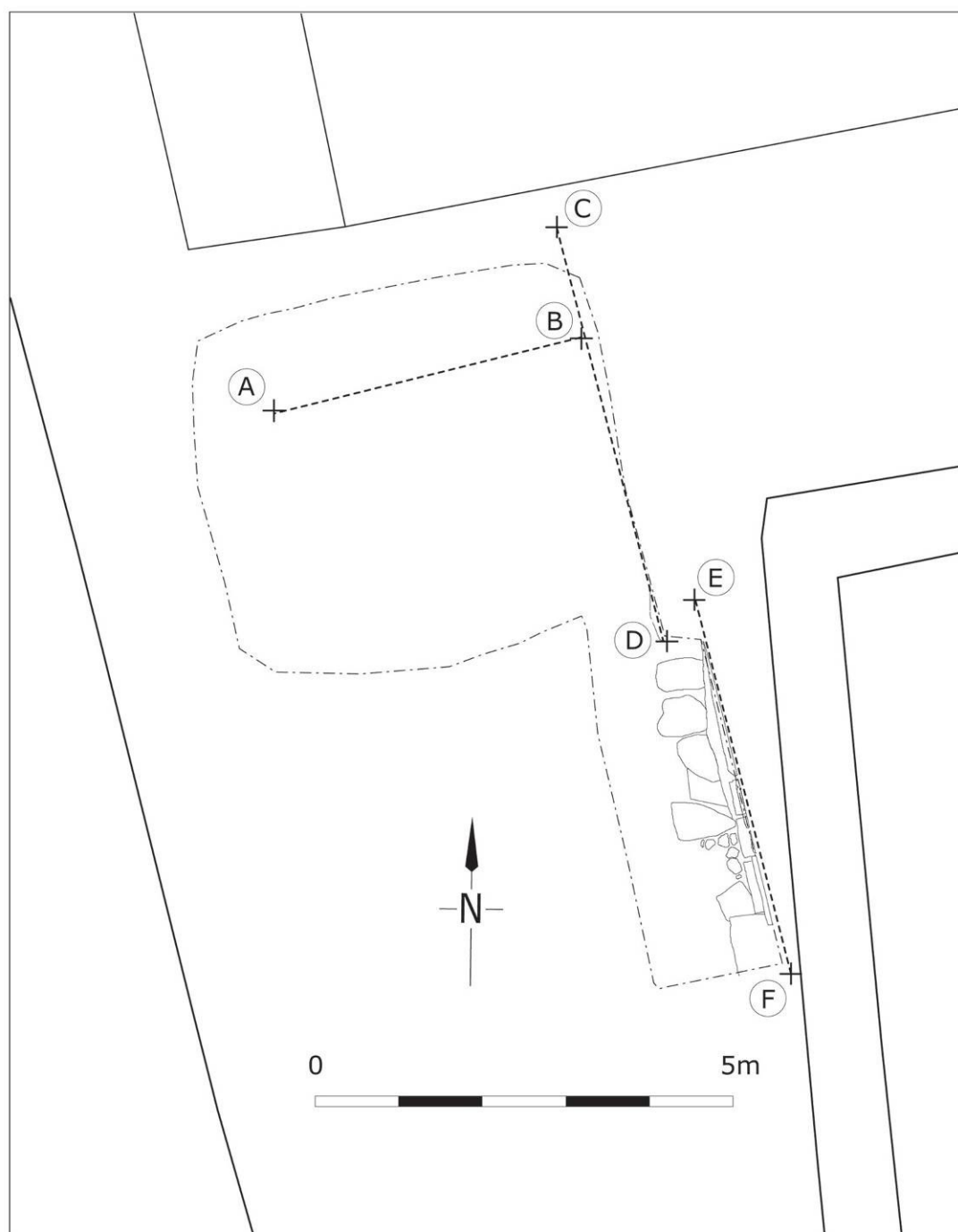
Blockley, K. 1997 *Strata Florida Abbey, Pontrhydfendigaid, Ceredigion . Archaeological Evaluation*. Unpublished Cambrian Archaeological Projects report no. 31

Scott-Jones, R. 2010 *Strata Florida Abbey, Pontrhydfendigaid, Ceredigion . Archaeological Evaluation*. Unpublished Cambrian Archaeological Projects report no. 611

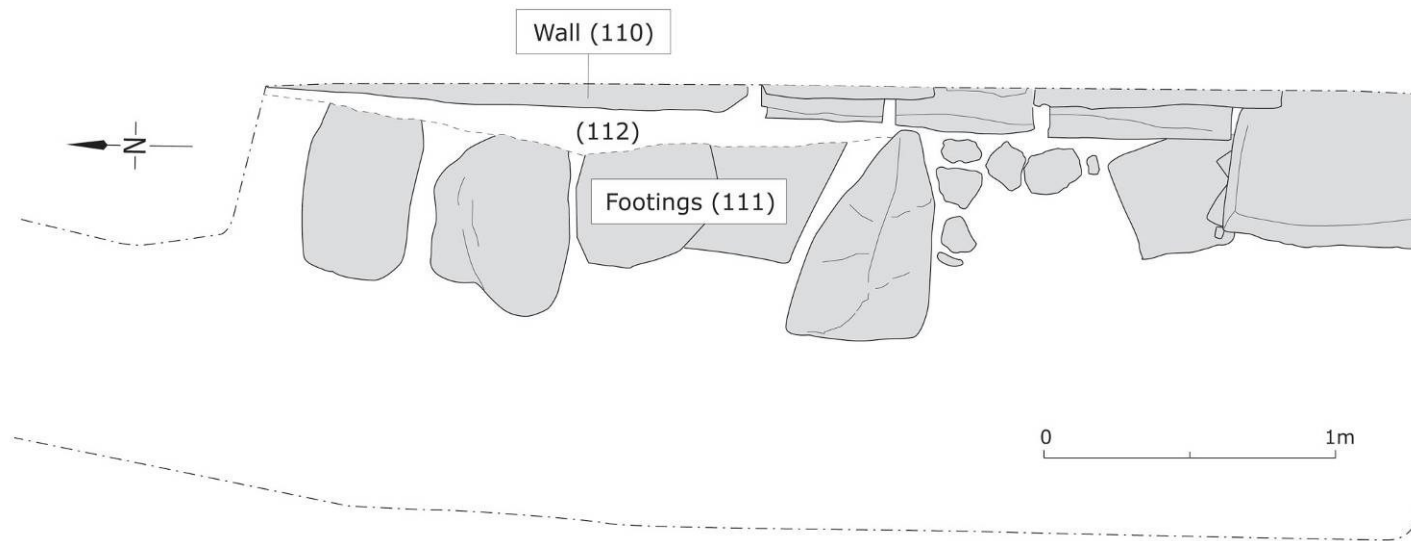


**Figure 1:** Location map based on Ordnance Survey.

Reproduced from the 1995 Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 scale Landranger Map with the permission of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, © Crown Copyright Dyfed Archaeological Trust Ltd., The Shire Hall, Carmarthen Street, Llandeilo, Carmarthenshire SA19 6AF. Licence No AL51842A

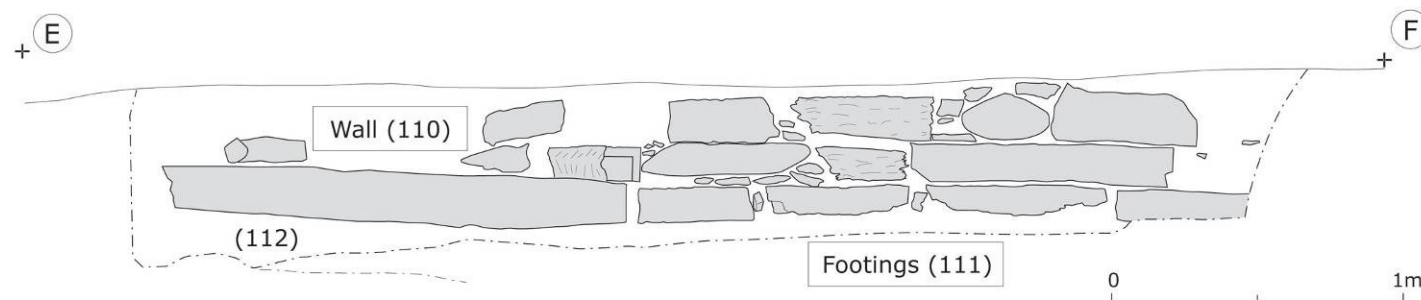


**Figure 2:** Plan of excavated area showing profile locations.



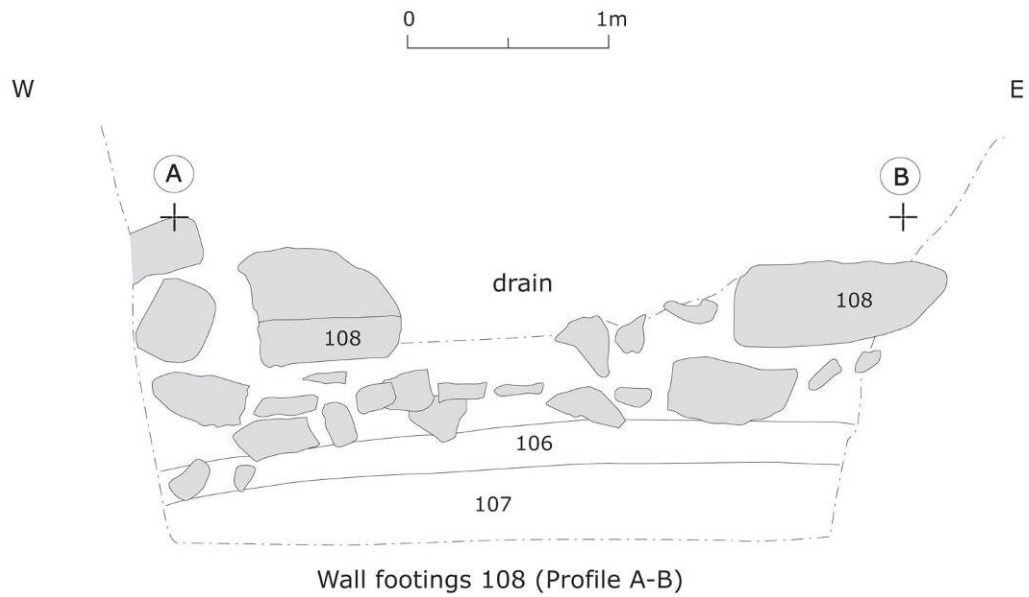
Plan of wall 110 and footings 111

**Figure 3:** Wall 110 and footings 111 in plan

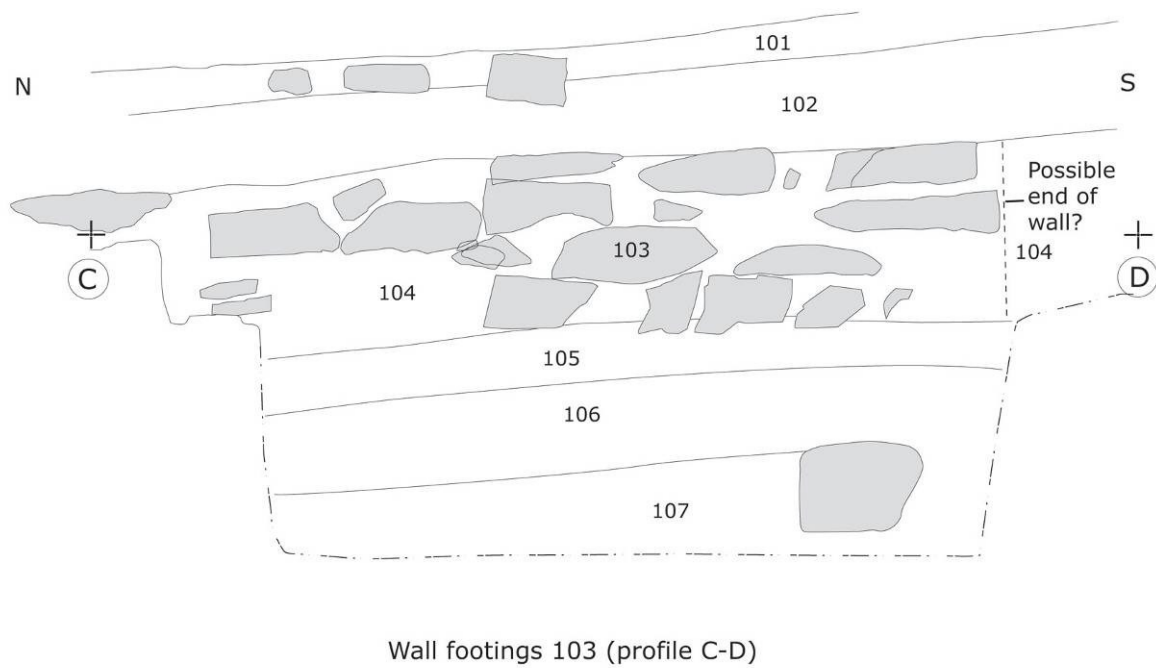


West facing elevation of wall 110

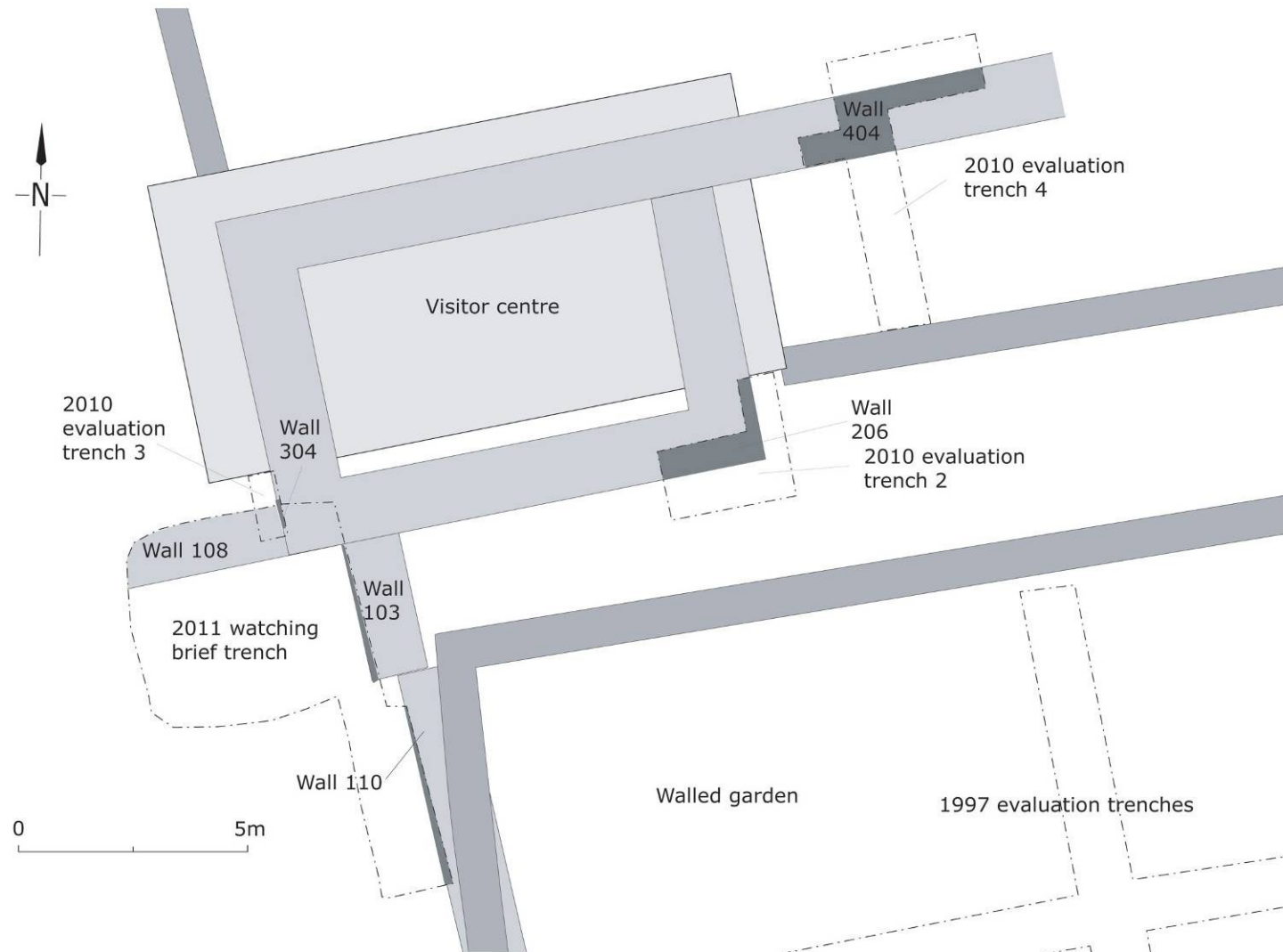
**Figure 4:** Wall 110 and footings 111 in profile



**Figure 5:** Trench profile showing wall 108

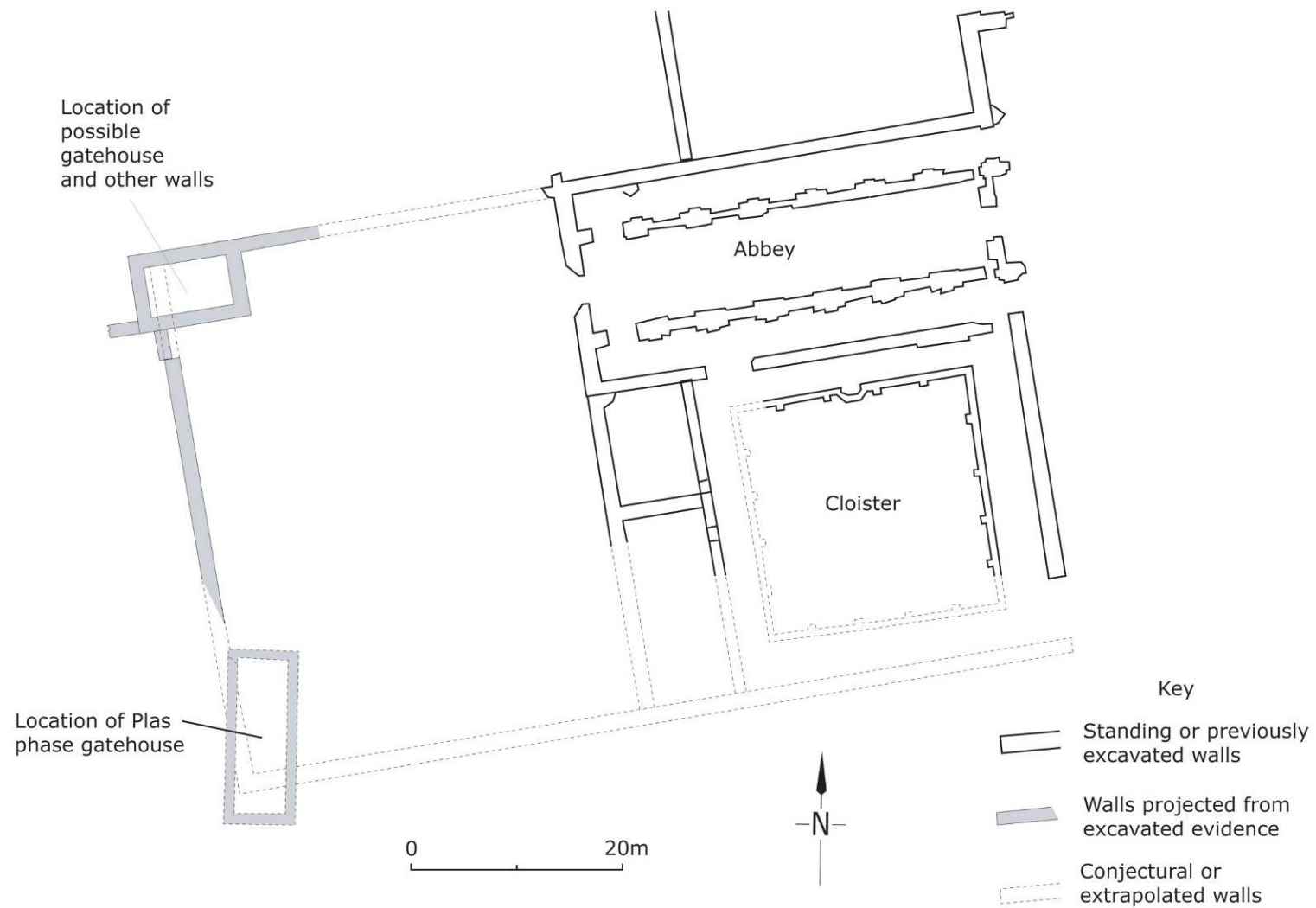


**Figure 6:** Trench profile showing wall 103



**Figure 7:** Plan showing trench locations, extant walls, excavated walls and projected wall lines extrapolated from archaeological investigations in 1997, 2010 and 2011.





**Figure 8:** Possible wall lines extrapolated from excavation results and extant wall lines.

## PHOTOGRAPHS



**Photo 1:** North-south wall 110 and footings 111 looking east  
(wall of garden in background)



**Photo 2:** Detail of wall 110





**Photo 3:** Wall 110 and footings 111 looking north



**Photo 4:** Moulded stonework recovered from topsoil.





**Photo 5:** Dressed stone fragment re-used in wall 110.



**Photo 6:** East-west wall footings 108 looking north





**Photo 7:** North-south wall footings 103 looking east (possible end to right?)



**Photo 8:** Exposed faces of walls 108 and 103, looking east.

**CONTEXT DESCRIPTIONS**

<b>Number</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Description</b>
101	Topsoil	Topsoil and rubble dump. Very dark greyish brown clayey silty sand with common small to medium stones and large sandstone fragments including some moulded stone.
102	Subsoil	Dark grey brown clayey silty sand with common small to medium sized angular blocks. Lower rubbly soil, similar to 101, but with more angular stone. Overlies walls 103 and 108
103	Stone wall foundations	North-south aligned wall. Very rough coursing, with a rubble core. No bonding or pointing material.
104	Layer	Dark greyish brown, mottled with grey green, friable but compact. Few small pebbles, occasional larger. An earlier ground level into which wall 103 is built. No foundation cut for 103 visible.
105	Layer	Dark greyish brown, mottled with grey green. Friable but compact. Few small pebbles, occasional larger. Same as 104.
106	Natural gravels	Mottled reds, greys and brown abundant small to medium pebbles, rare larger pebbles. Naturally sorted waterlain gravels.
107	Natural gravels	Dark grey brown silty sandy clay with very common small to medium pebbles. Natural gravels far less sorted than 106.
108	Wall foundations	Rough coursed rubble core wall with no bonding or pointing material. E-W aligned along north edge of excavated hole. Small angular stones in base with much larger ones above and no sign of superstructure.
109	Topsoil	Very dark grey brown sandy silty clay with common small to medium pebbles and angular stones. Topsoil above stone wall 110 south of main excavation area.
110	Stone wall	Well faced (to west) clear and good coursing with no bonding or pointing material apparent. Made of long and well faced stones. Core not seen. Well constructed wall on huge stone foundations 111.
111	Stone foundations	Large stone foundations using unshaped rounded boulders seemingly laid rather haphazardly below well faced wall 110.
112	Backfill	Very dark greyish brown, silty sandy clay with very common small to medium angular stones and pebbles and pea grits. Layer over foundations 111- backfill of foundation trench? Same as soil between stones and in base of trench.

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## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF**

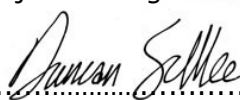
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Mehefin 2011  
June 2011

Paratowyd yr adroddiad hwn gan / This report has been prepared by

Duncan Schlee

Swydd / Position: Project Manager

Llofnod / Signature .....  ..... Date 14/06/2011

Mae'r adroddiad hwn wedi ei gael yn gywir a derbyn sêl bendith  
This report has been checked and approved by

James Meek

ar ran Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Dyfed Cyf.  
on behalf of Dyfed Archaeological Trust Ltd.

Swydd / Position: Head of Field Services

Llofnod / Signature .....  ..... Date 14/06/2011

*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

