PORTH Y RHAW PROMONTORY FORT, SOLVA, PEMBROKESHIRE

INTERIM REPORT ON THE 2019 EXCAVATION

Prepared by Dyfed Archaeological Trust

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INTERIM REPORT ON THE 2019 EXCAVATION

By

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INTERIM REPORT ON THE 2019 EXCAVATION

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CRYNODEB GWEITHREDOL

Mae Porth y Rhaw, bryngaer amglawdd arfordirol yn agos at Solfach, Sir Benfro, yn dioddefaint o erydiad arfordirol difrifol. Cloddiwyd y tu mewn i'r safle yn y 1990au. Ym mis Gorffennaf 2019, cloddiodd Ymddiriedolaeth Archeolegol Dyfed rhan o'r fynedfa i'r gaer. Roedd y dramwyfa fynedfa wedi'i gorchuddio â waliau cerrig wedi'u hadeiladu o glogfeini enfawr. Nodwyd dau gam o adeiladu waliau. Roedd wal gerrig y tu mewn i'r fynedfa yn rhan o dŷ crwn neu siambr warchod. Roedd y darganfyddiadau o rwbel yn y fynedfa a thros y tŷ crwn / siambr warchod yn cynnwys crochenwaith Rhufeinig, llawfelin wedi torri a slag haearn. Cafwyd hyd i gasgliad bach o fflintiau Mesolithig mewn pridd claddedig o dan clawdd amddiffynnol.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Porth y Rhaw, a multivallate coastal promontory fort close to Solva, Pembrokeshire, is suffering from severe coastal erosion. Excavation in the interior of the site took place in the 1990s. In July 2019, Dyfed Archaeological Trust excavated part of the entrance to the fort. The entrance passageway had been revetted with stone walls constructed from massive boulders. Two phases of wall construction were identified. A stone wall just inside the entrance was part of a roundhouse or guard chamber. Finds from rubble in the entrance and over the roundhouse/guard chamber included Roman pottery, broken quern stones and iron slag. A small assemblage of Mesolithic flints was found in a buried soil beneath a defensive bank.

The location of Porth y Rhaw fort (red dot).

PORTH Y RHAW PROMONTORY FORT, SOLVA, PEMBROKESHIRE

INTERIM REPORT ON THE 2019 EXCAVATION

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Porth y Rhaw is a multivallate coastal promontory fort close to the village of Solva, Pembrokeshire (SM 786 242). It is a Scheduled Monument (reference no. PE273) and is recorded on the Dyfed Historic Environment Record under PRN 2721.

1.2 The *c*. 30m high sea cliffs to the west, south, and east of the promontory fort have suffered severe erosion, so much so that the interior of the fort is now reduced to two small promontories, the eastern one 70m N/S and 25m E/W and the western one 70m SW/NE and 30m NW/SE (Fig. 1; Photos 1-4). These two reduced promontories were undoubtedly once much larger, and probably formed a single block of unknown dimensions, but estimated to be at least 100m by 75m. The remains of the interior are relatively level, but immediately to the north of the interior land falls away quite steeply into a shallow valley. The defences make use of this slope, with the inner bank occupying the crest of the valley side, lending a monumental aspect to the whole site. There are four lines of bank and ditch in total. The three inner curving ones are close-set and parallel, *c*. 120m long. The inner bank rises 4m above the ditch, the second bank is less substantial and rises just 1m above the ditch and the third 1m-2m above the ditch. The outer, fourth, bank is straighter than the others and its course diverges from them at its west end, perhaps indicating a separate phase of construction. Because of the natural slope the outer bank is almost 20m lower that the inner bank. The entrance has suffered from erosion, but a gap through the inner bank towards its eastern end close to the cliff edge marks its position. Terminals of the second and third banks stop short of the cliff edge - any continuation of these banks, if there were any, has been lost to the sea.

1.3 Excavations in 1995-98 in the interior of the fort on the eastern promontory revealed the remains of at least eight timber roundhouses, some of which had been rebuilt several times, including one in stone. Radiocarbon dates indicate occupation started in the early-to-mid Iron Age, and pottery indicates it continued into the 4th century AD. A report on these excavations was published in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* in 2010.

1.4 Almost all coastal promontory forts are suffering from erosion; this impact of this will increase as sea level rises and the climate changes. It is recognised that it is not feasible to investigate all promontory forts with active erosion and thus the strategy is to examine one in as much detail as possible. Porth y Rhaw has been chosen as a representative example. Dyfed Archaeological Trust, therefore, applied to Cadw for grant-aid to fund an excavation in and close to the entrance of the fort. This application was successful.

1.5 This short report summarises the results of a three-week community excavation undertaken between 1 July and 19 July 2019.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Excavations in the mid-1990s in the interior of the fort demonstrated that important stratified archaeological deposits survive on the site. Coast erosion continues to threaten the site, and this project is thus in response to that erosion with the intention of recovering as much information as possible from the entrance to the fort and immediately inside the entrance before it is lost to the sea. Information from the site will add greatly to what was obtained from the 1990s excavations. It is anticipated that the 2019 excavation was the first year of a multi-year project.

2.2 Health and Safety was a primary concern. A worn path along the cliff edge and through the fort entrance provided visitor access. This was not used during the excavation and was fenced off and an alternative route used over the defensive banks of the fort. Fencing was erected along cliff tops close to working areas.

2.3 All excavation was done using hand tools. Turf was set to one side, separate from other excavated material. All the end of the excavation the trench was back-filled by hand and the turf carefully replaced.

2.4 All archaeological deposits and features were recorded in accordance with DAT's recording manual. Drawing was a combination of conventional pencil and paper and electronic surveying. Features containing deposits of environmental significance or other significance were sampled.

2.5 All archaeologically significant artefacts, ecofacts and samples were retained and related to the contexts from which they were derived. Sensitive materials are stored in appropriate stable conditions. Finds are being temporarily stored by DAT in stable conditions. All finds, except those deemed treasure remain the property of the site owners, the National Trust.

2.6 Following the completion of the fieldwork data recovered will be archived in accordance with the National Standards for Wales for Collecting and Depositing Archaeological Archives.

2.7 The following guidelines and legislation were adhered to:

CIfA 2014, Code of Conduct, Chartered Institute for Archaeologists

CIfA 2014, Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Excavation, Chartered Institute for Archaeologists

CIfA 2014, Standard and Guidance for the Collection, Documentation, Conservation and Research of Archaeological Materials, Chartered Institute for Archaeologists

Scheduled Monument Consent for the excavation was granted by Cadw.

2.8 The overall aims of the project were:

to define and record the extent, character and date of the archaeological remains at the entrance to the promontory fort,

to archaeologically sterilise a zone most under threat from coastal erosion, and

to report on the fieldwork and produce an archive.

2.9 The objectives of the project were:

To engage members of the local community and others on the excavation,

to obtain scientific dates and other scientific data,

to analyse and report on the environmental remains and on artefacts,

to produce a project archive, and

to produce a report for publication.

2.10 The Research Objectives were:

This project addresses several of the research objectives in 'Introducing a Research Framework for the Archaeology of Wales':

The chronology and function of larger hillforts needs to be addressed

Coastal promontory forts have received some archaeological attention in recent years, but this class of monument is still little understood. Further investigation is required

The theme of change and continuity of Iron Age hillforts/defended enclosures.

3 RESULTS

3.1 The excavation concentrated on the entrance passageway through the inner bank, an area approximately 17m by 5m with a 7m long extension to the west to examine a possible roundhouse or guard chamber (Fig. 2). Deep, springy turf (101) with a thick, dense root mat covered the whole site. Below this was a compact, mottled silty-clay soil (102) up to 0.30m thick in the entrance passageway and level areas but thinner on gentle slopes and non-existent on the steep slopes of the banks flanking the entrance.

3.2 Pre-excavation the entrance passageway was a simple turf-covered gap through two bank terminals (Photos 5 and 6). The terminal to the southeast rose to c.2.5m above the passageway. The terminal to the northwest was not so high but had a low in-turn to the south. The possible roundhouse/guard chamber lay on the north side of this in-turn.

3.3 The entrance passageway was choked with layers of soil, stone, and boulders which had eroded off the flanking banks (104-109, 112-115, 117). Some of these layers were discrete pockets of stones, other lenses of almost stone-free soil. The largest boulder, presumably fallen off one of the walls flanking the passageway, weighed over a tonne (Photos 7-9). Roman pottery, pieces of slag, crucible fragments and pieces of quern were found in these layers.

3.4 Removal of the layers in the passageway revealed two clear phases of construction (further excavation may reveal more). The earlier was represented by a revetment wall (163) to the northwest bank and a revetment wall (162) to the southeast bank (Figs. 2-5; Photos 11-13.). Both were dry-stone constructions and included massive boulders as well as smaller stones in their make-up. At least some of boulders and stones were obtained from the coves below the fort. Wall 163 curved round to the north at its northeastern, outer, end. They formed an entrance passageway c.2.5m wide. The second phase was a narrowing of the passageway to c.1.7m-1.8m wide by the insertion of a wall (161) in front of wall 163. A gatepost (posthole

151; Photo. 10) had been built into the wall. A similar gatepost (posthole 159) had been built into wall 162. Together they formed a gateway c.1.4m wide. The walls (161, 162, 163) rested on bedrock (140), the postholes were cut into bedrock and most of the passageway floor was bedrock. A metalled surface (118) of small- and medium-sized pebbles lay directly onto bedrock at the southwestern end of the entrance passageway, becoming increasingly patchy to the northeast and southwest.

3.5 A group of postholes cut into bedrock lay to the south of the entrance passageway in the interior of the fort (Photo. 14). Due to the small number of postholes in the relatively small excavated area, no pattern was discernible.

3.6 The main area was extended to the northwest to investigate the possible roundhouse/guard chamber and to excavate a section through the in-turn to the northwestern bank terminal. The northwestern side of the in-turned bank had been cut into and revetted with a curving dry-stone wall (138; Fig. 6, Photo. 15). The material (135) on which the wall sat formed part of the lower part of in-turned bank. Layers (134) and (116) butted up against the wall (138) and contained Roman pottery and part of a quern stone. Due to the small area excavated it was not possible to determine whether the wall was part of a roundhouse or guard chamber.

3.7 A section was cut partially through the in-turned bank (Fig. 7). The bank was constructed of several distinct layers surviving beneath turf and topsoil (101, 102). The uppermost layer (133) of sand and silty-clay with abundant stones was probably wash/erosion from the bank higher up to the northeast. Below this was a stony layer (141), which overlay a hard sandy layer with frequent stones (146). Below this was a smooth, compact, stone-free silty-clay (148), possibly a buried soil. However, it overlay a cobbled surface (149). This rested on a buried turf comprised of a light brown sandy-silt with flecks of charcoal (153). Below this was an iron-stained, mottled sandy-silt (155). A small assemblage of worked flints of Mesolithic date lay at the interface of (153/155).

3.8 A small section was cut into the rear of the bank to the east side of the entrance (Fig. 8). A stony layer (105) containing two pieces of slag underlay turf and topsoil (101, 102). This overlay an area of flat stones (126). These rested on bedrock (140).

4 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

4.1 The Trust is most grateful to Cadw for grant-aiding the excavations, and to the National Trust for permitting the excavation on their property. Thanks are due to Menna Bell, the National Trust archaeologists for South Wales, for conducting tours of the excavation. Apart from two Trust staff members, Frances Murphy and Hubert Wilson, all the excavation was undertaken by a dedicated and hard-working group of volunteers. Without them, the excavation would not have been possible. In total, 28 volunteers participated on the excavation donating 1250 hours of their time.

5. FIGURES

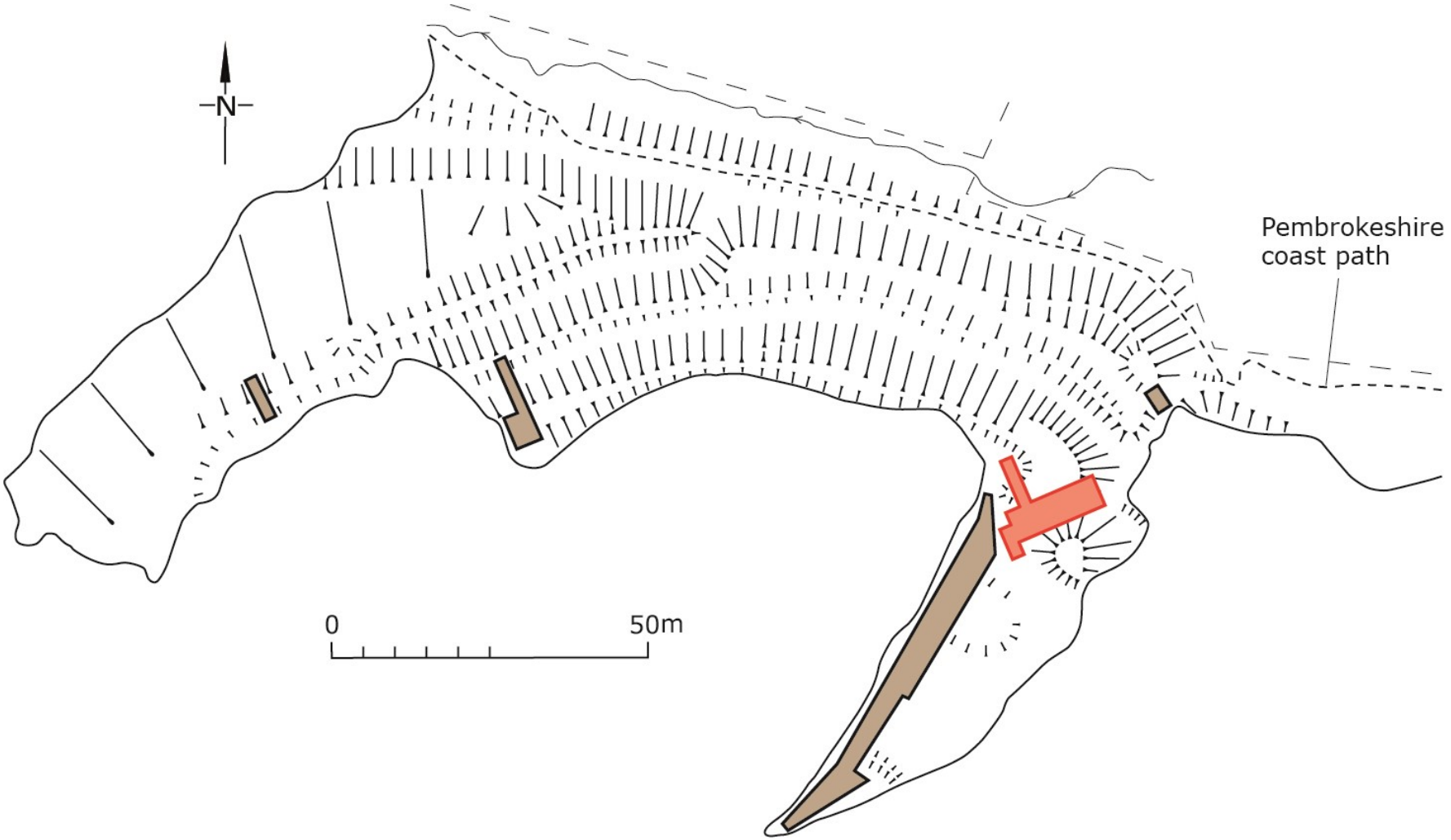

Figure 1: Earthwork plan showing the 1990s excavation trenches (shaded brown) and 2019 excavation trench (shaded orange).

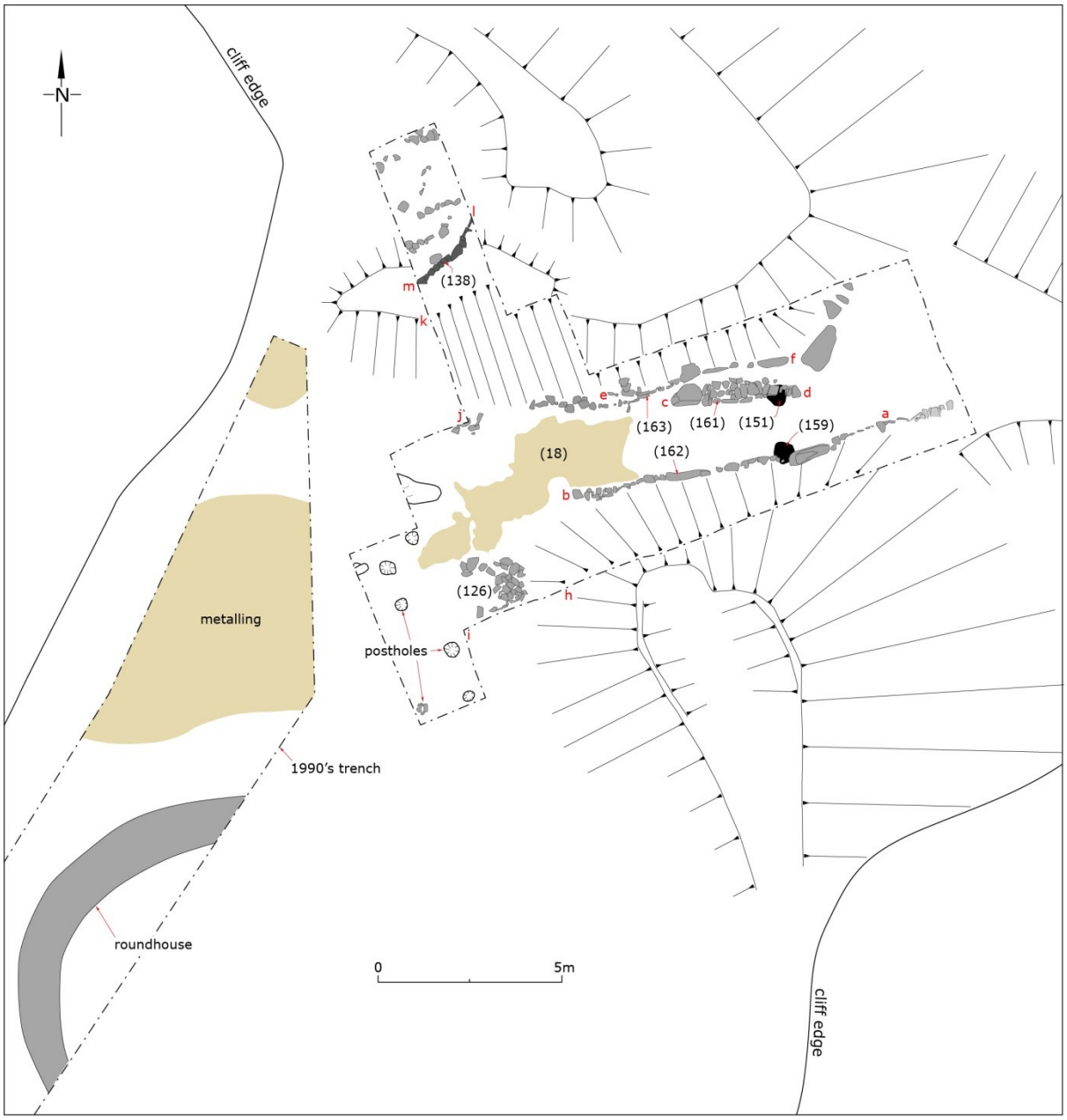

Figure 2: Plan of the 2019 excavation.

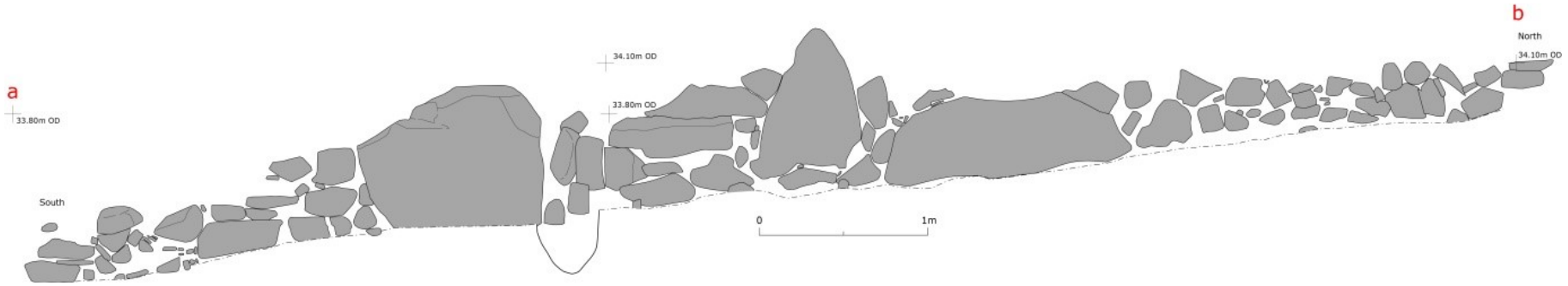

Figure 3: Elevation of revetment wall (162).

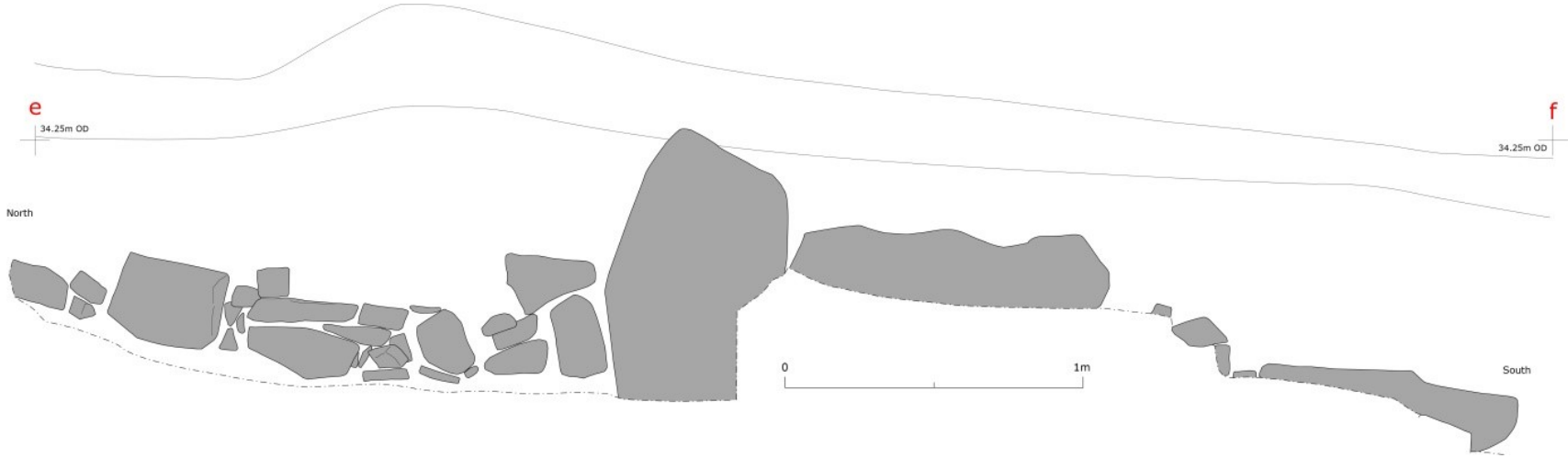

Figure 4: Elevation of revetment wall (163).

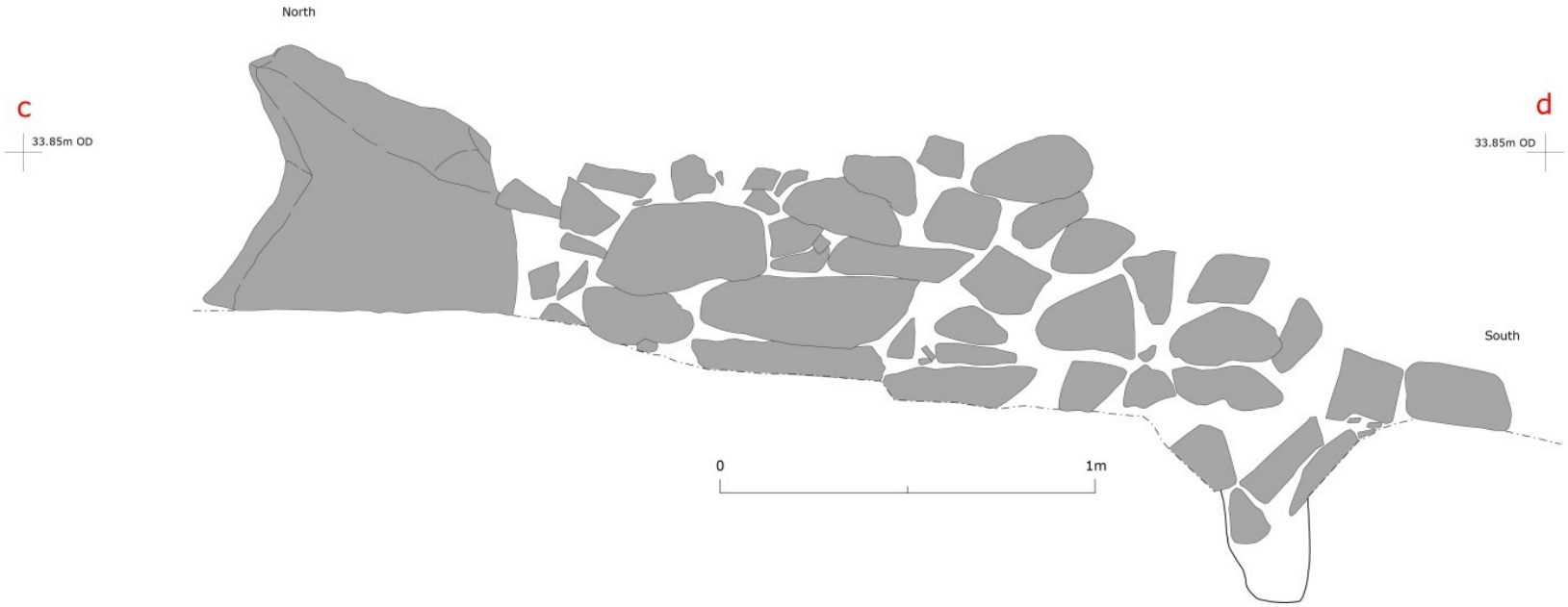

Figure 5: Elevation of revetment wall (161).

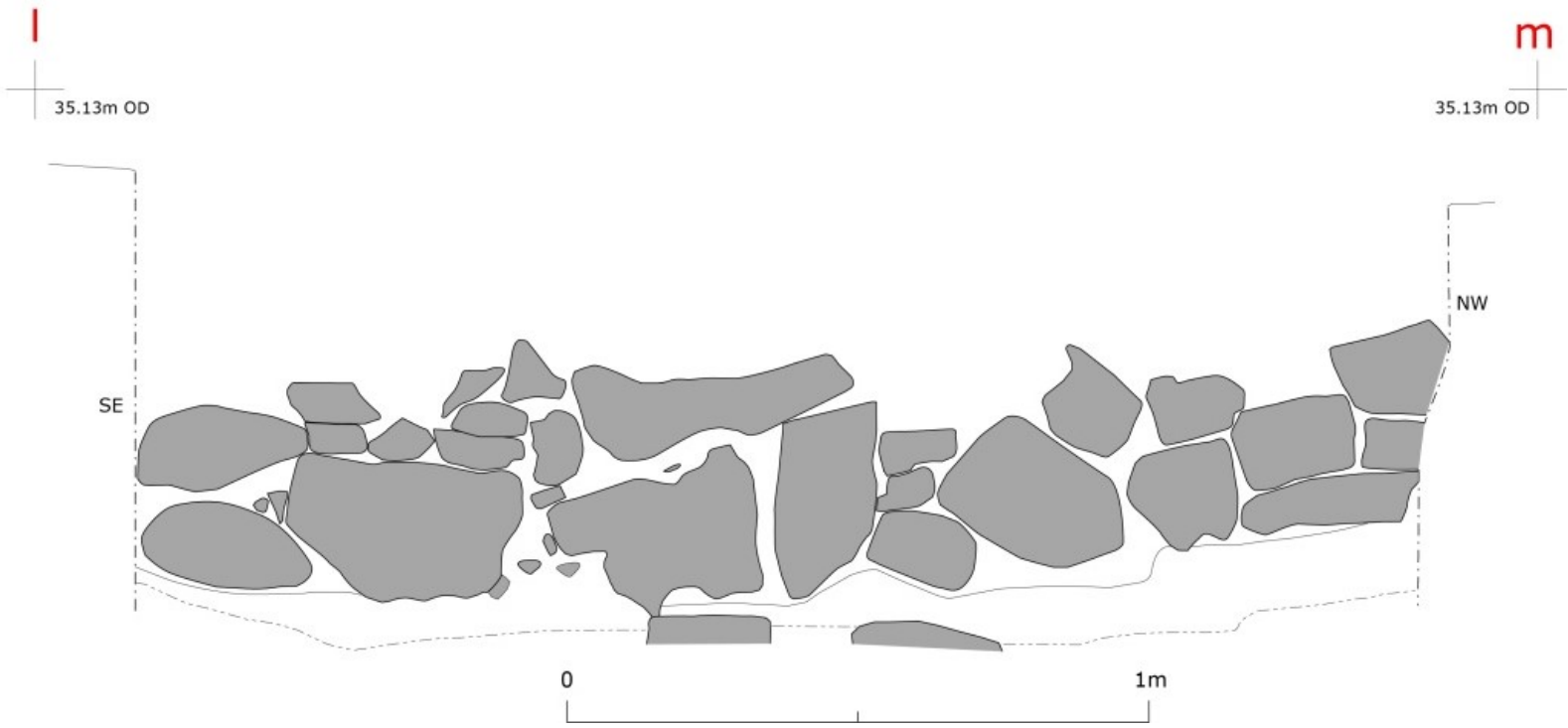

Figure 6: West-facing elevation of wall (138).

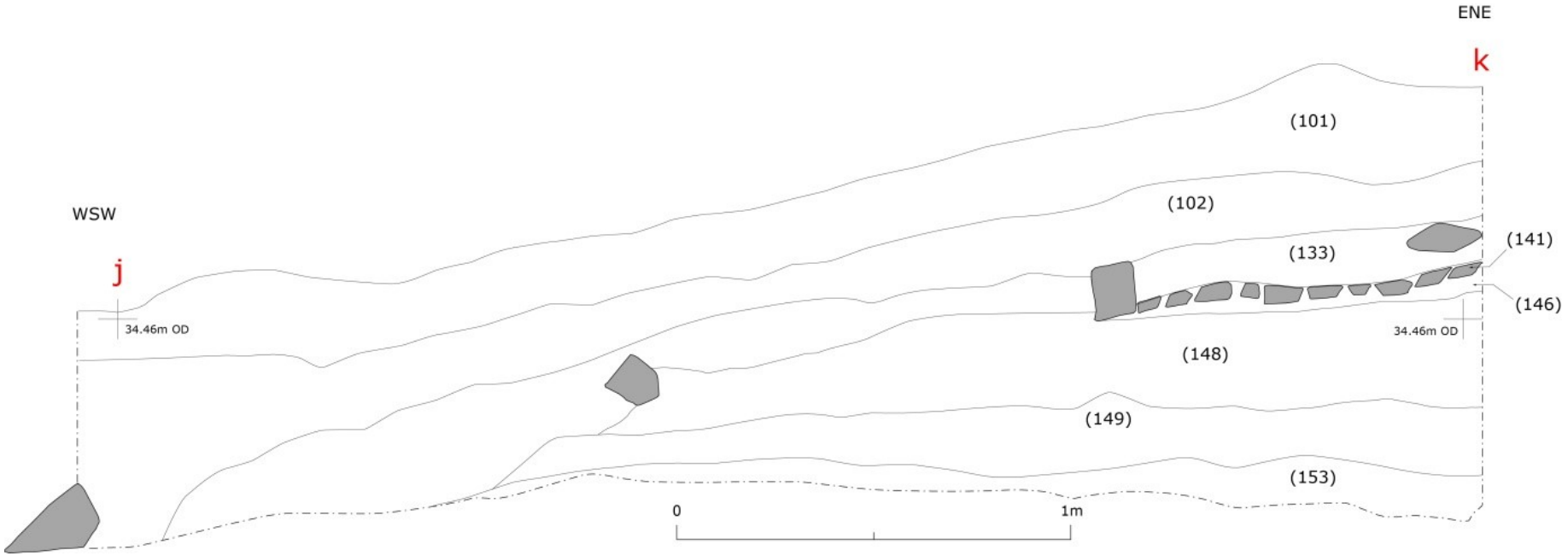

Figure 7: Section through in-turned bank, west side of entrance.

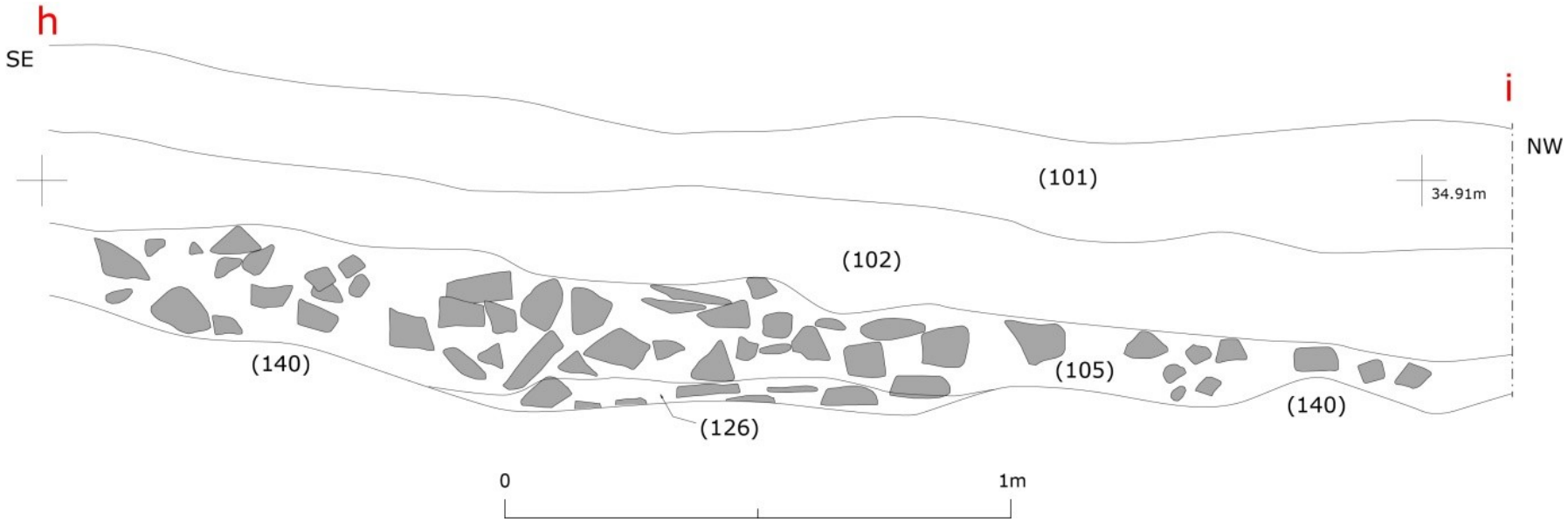

Figure 8: West facing section through south end of the bank; east side of the entrance.

6 PHOTOGRAPHS

Photograph 1: *Aerial photograph taken by Toby Driver of the RCAHMW on 15 July 2019 as part of the Cherish project.*
https://www.facebook.com/CherishProject/
http://www.cherishproject.eu/en/

***Photograph 2**: Aerial photograph taken by Toby Driver of the RCAHMW on 15 July 2019 as part of the Cherish project.*
https://www.facebook.com/CherishProject/
http://www.cherishproject.eu/en/

Photograph 3: Porth y Rhaw fort from the west.

Photograph 4: Porth y Rhaw fort from the north.

Photograph 5: Removing the turf in the entrance passageway on the first day of the excavation.

Photograph 6: View of the excavation from the northeast.

Photograph 7: The entrance passageway after removal of turf and topsoil. Looking north.

Photograph 8: Rubble in the entrance passageway. Looking south.

Photograph 9: Moving the largest boulder within the rubble in the entrance passageway.

Photograph 10: Posthole (151) and revetment wall (161).

Photograph 11: The entrance passageway after the removal of rubble layers. Looking north. Wall (162) to the right and wall (161) to the right.

Photograph 12: The entrance passageway after the removal of rubble layers. Looking south. Wall (161) to the right and wall (162) to the right and postholes (151, 159).

Photograph 13: The entrance passageway after the removal of rubble layers. Looking south. Wall (162) to the right and wall (161) to the right and postholes (151, 159).

Photograph 14: Posthole (120) in southeast corner of excavation.

Photograph 15: The wall of the roundhouse/guard chamber. Looking east.

Photograph 16: The back-filled and re-turfed entrance passageway.

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