

PORTH Y RHAW PROMONTORY FORT, SOLVA, PEMBROKESHIRE INTERIM REPORT ON THE 2022 EXCAVATION



Prepared by Dyfed
Archaeological Trust
For Cadw



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DAT Event Record No. 118020

Report No. 2023-14

Cadw Project No. DAT 158

March 2023

PORTH Y RHAW PROMONTORY FORT, SOLVA, PEMBROKESHIRE INTERIM REPORT ON THE 2022 EXCAVATION

By

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PORTH Y RHAW PROMONTORY FORT, SOLVA, PEMBROKESHIRE
INTERIM REPORT ON THE 2022 EXCAVATION

Client	Cadw
Event Record No	118020
Report No	2023-14
Project Code	DAT 158
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PORTH Y RHAW PROMONTORY FORT, SOLVA, PEMBROKESHIRE
INTERIM REPORT ON THE 2022 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. Ym Gorffennaf/Awst 2021 gloddiodd yr Ymddiriedolaeth ardal sy'n cysylltu'r ardal a gloddiwyd yn y 1990au â man cloddio mynedfa 2019 ac yn 2022 canolbwyntio'r cloddiad ar ty crwn gyda waliau cerrig.

Roedd yr ty crwn yn c.9m diameter fewnol gyda c.1m waliau trwchys. Mae'r torthwy i'r ty wedi cael ei creu gan carreg andros o mawr. Mae draen yn rhedeg o gwmpas yr cylchedd mewnol o'r ty sy'n cymryd dwr sy'n dod i mewn yn nol allan trwy ceuffosydd sydd wedi cael ei adeiladu i fewn i waliau'r ty. Yn gorwedd tu fewn i'r ty mae yna sawl aelwydydd gof haearn a ffwrnesi, gyda meini einion cysylltiedig. Mae crochenwaith yn dyddio adeiladu'r tŷ i'r Cyfnod Brythonig-Rufeinig. Cloddiwyd hefyd wal o dŷ crwn cynharach o gerrig a gyliau a thyllau pyst o dai pren cynharach.

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. In July/August 2021 the Trust excavated an area linking the area excavated in the 1990s with that of the 2019 entrance excavation area, and in 2022 excavation concentrated on a stone-walled roundhouse.

The roundhouse was c. 9m diameter internally with c.1m thick walls. A massive, stone slab formed the threshold to the house. A drain ran around the inner circumference of the house taking any incoming water out via culverts built into the house wall. Several iron-smithing hearths and furnaces, with associated anvil stones, lay within the house. Pottery dates the construction of the house to the Romano-British Period. A wall of an earlier stone-built roundhouse and gullies and post-holes of earlier timber-built houses were also excavated.

PORTH Y RHAW PROMONTORY FORT, SOLVA, PEMBROKESHIRE
INTERIM REPORT ON THE 2022 EXCAVATION

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Porth y Rhaw is a multivallate coastal promontory fort close to the village of Solva, Pembrokeshire (Fig. 1. 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 (Photos 1, 2 and 7). 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 than 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 within 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 In July 2019, the Trust excavated part of the entrance to the fort (Fig. 2). 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 structure/building 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.

- 1.6 The 2021 excavation inked the area excavated in the 1990s with the 2019 entrance excavation area, with the 2021 trench reopening small portions of the 2019 trench. To the north of the entrance considerable erosion and degradation of the inner defensive bank had taken place prior to the construction of a curved revetment wall. This wall was later modified into an element of a sub-circular house. A threshold stone was revealed approached by a pathway made from broken quern stones. A metal trackway, recorded in the 1990s excavations, occupied the central part of the trench. Stratified, complex deposits and features lay in the south end of the trench, including a pit with charcoal-rich fill. Romano-British pottery was associated with some of the deposits.
- 1.7 This short report summarises the results of a seven-week community excavation undertaken between 6 June and 22 July 2022. Initially a five-week excavation was planned, but this was extended by two weeks to fully investigate the complex archaeological deposits.

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.
- 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. The location of the walls of the excavated roundhouse was emphasised during back-filling.
- 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. 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.
- 2.5 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.
- 2.6 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.

2.7 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.

2.8 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.

The Research Objectives were:

2.9 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 2022 excavation focused on exposing in full a stone-built roundhouse, the west and north-west sides of which were investigated in the 1990s (see Figs 2-4 and Photos 2-8). It had an internal diameter of c. 9m, with walls c. 1m thick.
- 3.2 The 1990s excavation revealed a narrow south-west facing entrance to the roundhouse and what was then interpreted as a stone-slab floor. However, the 2022 work showed the slabs of this supposed floor to be the capping of an internal drain.

- 3.3 The 2022 excavation demonstrated that the roundhouse had been terraced into the gentle north-west-facing slope. Material dug out from the eastern side of the house had been deposited on the western side to create a level terrace. On the west side, the roundhouse wall had then been constructed over this redeposited material. On the east side, the wall consisted of a single line of upright stones set against the cut of the terrace.
- 3.4 The building appeared to have suffered from water ingress which necessitated the construction of an internal drain running around the majority of the inner circumference of the house. This drain started on the north-east side of the house adjacent to the main entrance and ran around almost the full circuit of the roundhouse before emptying into a culvert (Figs 3 and 4) that was an integral part of the wall.
- 3.5 This primary culvert became choked with silt and soil, necessitating the construction of a second culvert (Photo. 14) through the wall on the north-west side of the house. On the north-east, east and south side of the house the drain had an overall fall of just a few centimetres, was shallow, cut into bedrock and capped with flat stones (Photos 6, 10, 12 and 13). In the north-west side of the house, where the second culvert lies, the drain became more amorphous, wider and had probably been recut several times. It was capped with massive flat stones.
- 3.6 The main entrance to the roundhouse faced north-east, towards the entrance of the fort. In its last form, it was a wide, splayed entrance defined by two door-postholes connected by a slot for a sill beam. Its most remarkable feature was a massive, smooth threshold stone (Figs 3 and 4; Photos 7-9). Two earlier postholes indicate an earlier, slightly wider door.
- 3.7 The house did not have a conventional central hearth. There were, however, several hearths and furnace bases and areas of heat affected soil/rock (Figs 3 and 4; Photos 6, 10, 11 and 12). These were iron-smithing hearths, evidenced by slags, iron artefacts and anvil stones sunk into the ground next to several of the hearths. Copper alloy smelting may also have taken place within the roundhouse.
- 3.8 Artefacts from the house, including the rim of a mortarium stamped with the maker's mark found built into the wall, were of Romano-British date.
- 3.9 The terracing of the roundhouse into the slope had destroyed evidence of earlier buildings and activities. However, outside the confines of the house, to the south, east and north-east, numerous earlier features survived, and included the wall of an earlier stone-built roundhouse (Fig. 3; Photo. 17) that can be traced to the north running under the existing inner defensive bank of the promontory fort. Other features include curving gullies of former timber-built roundhouses, pits and postholes. The intercutting nature of these features indicates a long period of occupation (Figs 3 and 4; Photos 16-17).

4. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- 4.1 The Trust is most grateful to Cadw, the National Trust, the Nineveh Trust and Pembrokeshire Coast National Park for grant-aiding the excavations. Additional thanks are due to the National Trust for permitting the excavation on their property. The excavations were directed by DAT staff Fran Murphy

and Hubert Wilson, with additional help from Jenna Smith and Ken Murphy. However, the excavation would not have been possible without the dedicated and hard work of the large group of volunteers, many of which have returned to work at the site each year since 2019. In total, 65 volunteers participated on the excavation donating 372 days of their time. DAT staff and Tomos Jones, the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park archaeologist, provided tours to members of the public and posted regular updates on social media. In total, approximately 3000 visitors were shown around site during the excavations.

5. FIGURES



Figure 1: Map extract showing location of Porth y Rhaw promontory fort marked by red dot.



Figure 2: Locations of all three excavation trenches opened over the 3 year period.

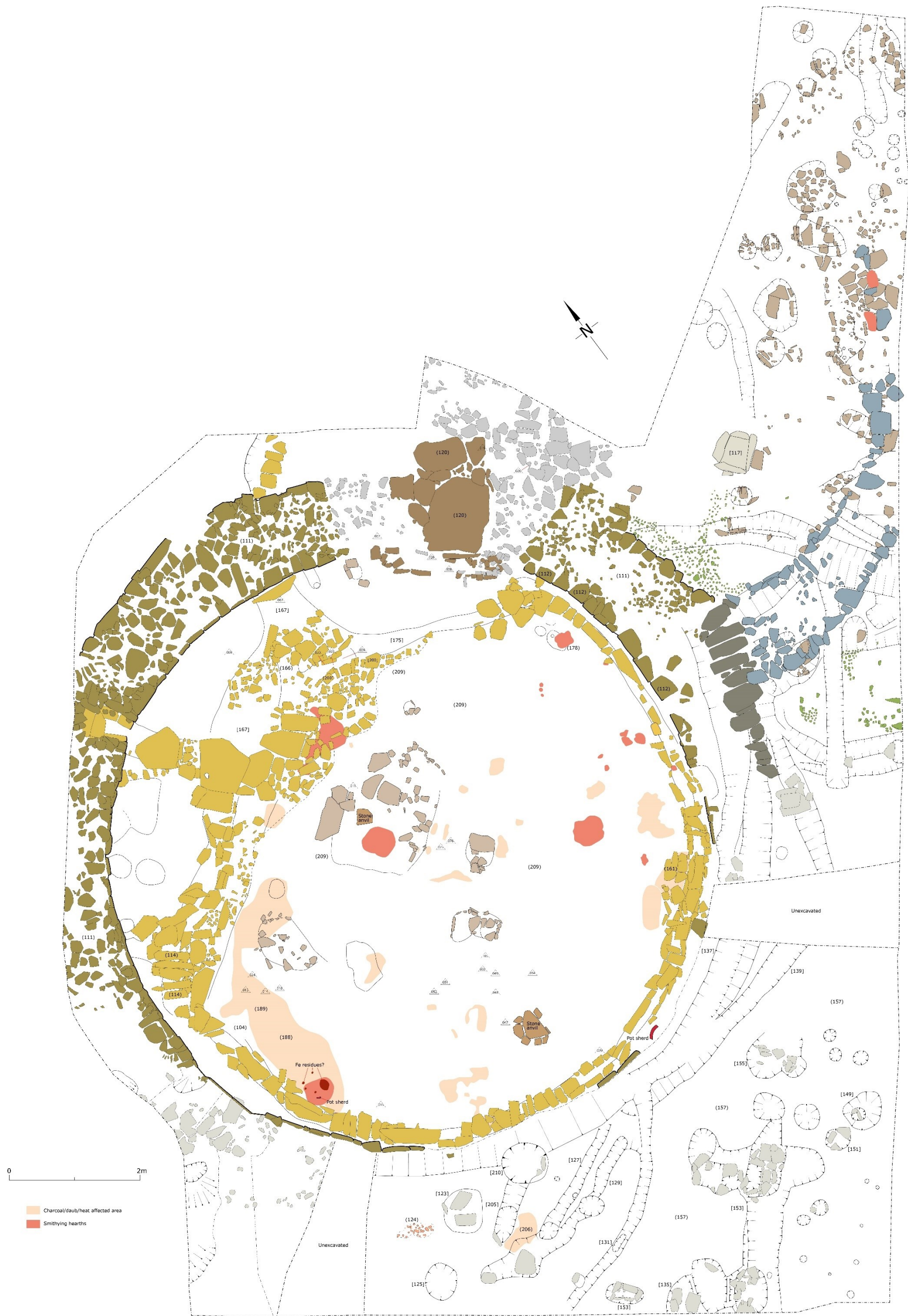


Figure 3: The stone-built roundhouse and associated features recorded in 2022. Hearths are in red and heat-affected soil in pale orange.

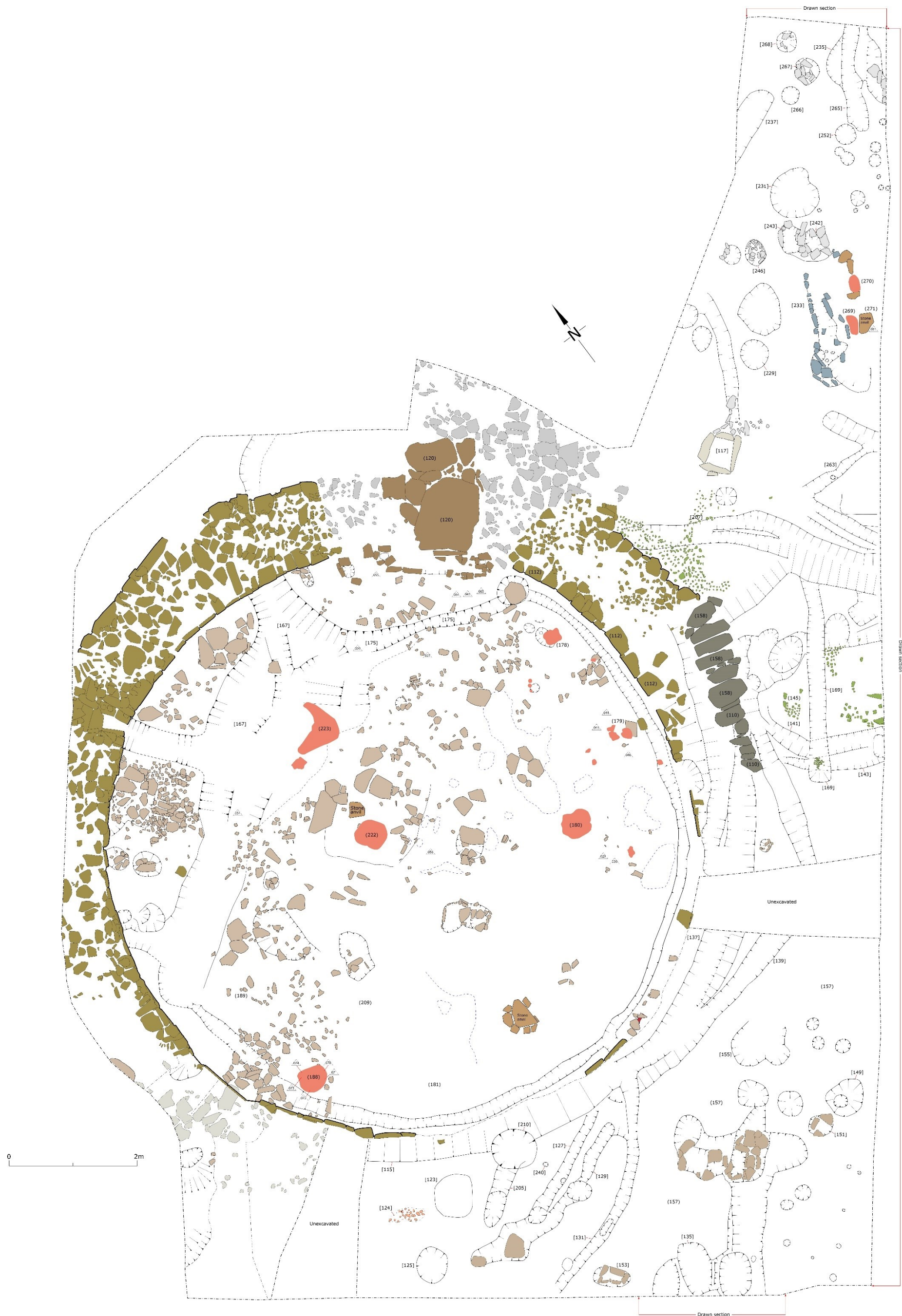


Figure 4: The stone-built roundhouse showing excavated drains and gullies and associated features recorded in 2022.

6 PHOTOGRAPHS



Photograph 1: Aerial photograph showing the excavation taken by Toby Driver of the RCAHMS on 30 June 2022 as part of the Cherish project.

<https://www.facebook.com/CherishProject/>
<http://www.cherishproject.eu/en/>



Photograph 2: Aerial photograph showing the excavation taken by Toby Driver of the RCAHMS on 30 June 2022 as part of the Cherish project.

<https://www.facebook.com/CherishProject/>
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Photograph 3: Initial stages of the excavation after removal of turf and topsoil.



Photograph 4: The upper levels of the roundhouse. 1m scale



Photograph 5: The roundhouse beginning to emerge (Photo: D Maynard).



Photograph 6: The roundhouse with pockets of heat affected ground clearly visible, as is the drain running around the inner wall face.



Photograph 7: The roundhouse fully exposed (Photo: D Maynard).



Photograph 8: The roundhouse full exposed (Photo: D Maynard).



Photograph 9: The main entrance to the roundhouse, showing the massive threshold stone and threshold beam slot. 1m scale



Photograph 10: A small iron-working hearth inside the roundhouse. Note the heat-affected capping stones of the drain. 0.5m scale



Photograph 11: Iron slag associated with one of the hearths. 0.2m scale



Photograph 12: A small iron-working hearth. 0.5m scale



Photograph 13: The drain running around the side of the roundhouse wall.
1m scale



Photograph 14: The outlet/culvert of the roundhouse drain.0.2m scale



Photograph 15: The roundhouse drains in the western side of the roundhouse.
1m scale



Photograph 16: Gullies, postholes and walls pre-dating stone-built roundhouse.
1m scale



Photograph 17: The wall of an earlier stone-built roundhouse (left), pre-dating
the later, complete, roundhouse (right).



Photograph 18: Features associated with timber roundhouses pre-dating the stone-built houses. 1m scale



Photograph 19: The back-filled and re-turfed excavation trench emphasizing the location of the stone-built roundhouse.



Photograph 20: Site visit by Dawn Bowden (red coat), Welsh Government Deputy Minister for Arts and Sport with Trust staff, volunteers and Cadw staff.

