

HEN GAER HILLFORT, TIR-Y-MYNACH, CEREDIGION

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF, 2003-4



Report No. 2004/50

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SCOTTISH POWER SYSTEMS LTD.

CAMBRIA ARCHAEOLOGY

REPORT NO. 2004/50
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APRIL 2004

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By

Tom Jamieson

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on the content or presentation of this report

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1.0 SUMMARY

An archaeological watching brief was carried out by Cambria Archaeology Field Operations, in October 2003 and again in February 2004, at Hen Gaer, Tirymynach, Ceredigion (NGR SN 633 844). It was undertaken on the excavation of a trench for a subterranean high voltage power cable, by Scottish Power Systems Ltd, close to - and ultimately partly within - the scheduled area around Hen Gaer, an iron age hillfort which is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (PRN 2015; SAM CD 026 (CER)).

The cable trench revealed a substantial ditch lying between the hillfort and an isolated mound that had been previously thought to represent a burial mound, but which may in fact represent part of the hillfort defences. In addition, four smaller cut features were revealed close to the defensive bank around the hillfort which cannot be dated, but whose character is are consistent with domestic activity, perhaps associated with the fort.

From the results of the watching brief, it is recommended that the scheduled area be extended westwards.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Development proposals and brief

Scottish Power Systems Ltd proposed to excavate a trench for a subterranean high voltage power cable around the iron age hillfort of Hen Gaer. The proposed route of the cable trench ran in close proximity to the scheduled area around the hillfort, which is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, SAM No. CD 026 (Cer). Cadw, as the archaeological curator for the site, accordingly imposed a condition on the consent for the scheme, requiring an archaeologist to be present during any excavation associated with the works.

Scottish Power Systems Ltd contacted Cambria Archaeology in June 2003, requesting a costed specification for the watching brief. This was submitted and accepted on 4 June 2003. The watching brief was carried out on 20 – 28 October 2003, with a second visit on 11 February 2004.

2.2 Abbreviations used in this report

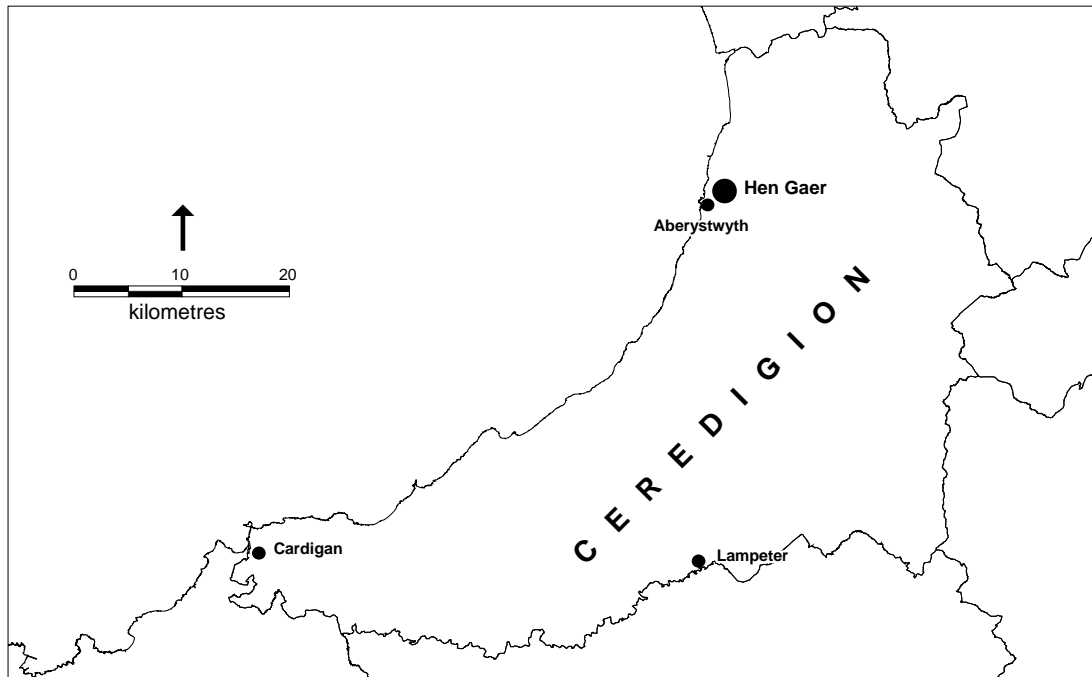
Sites recorded on the Sites and Monuments Record for Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and Pembrokeshire (SMR) are identified by their Primary Record Number (PRN) and located by their National Grid Reference (NGR) and height above sea level (OD). Hen Gaer is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM).

3.0 SITE DESCRIPTION

3.1 Site location

The site lies at NGR SN 633 844, approximately 1km west of Bow Street, which is 5km north west of Aberystwyth, in the Parish of Tirymynach, Ceredigion (Fig. 1). It is situated at 160m OD, on the summit of hill which forms a westerly outlier of the Ceredigion upland *massif*. To the southwest, it overlooks the fertile vale of the Afon Clarach which emerges into the Irish Sea 5km west of the site. The underlying solid geology is represented by palaeozoic shale.

Fig. 1 - Location map of site

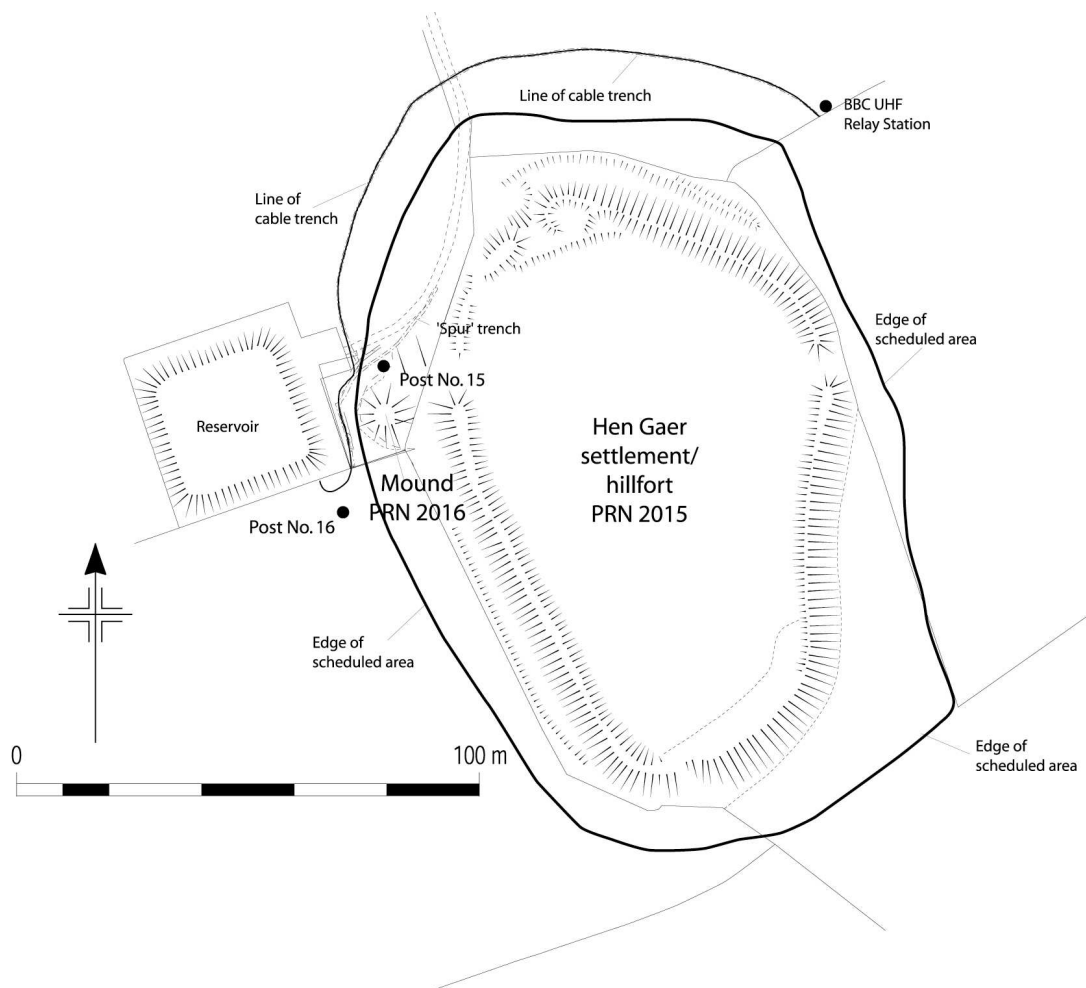


3.2 Site description

Hen Gaer hillfort PRN 2015 (properly termed 'hilltop enclosure') is a large defended enclosure of probable iron age date (Hogg 1994, 233, 240, 264; SAM file CD 026 (Cer)). It is sub-oval in plan and consists of a single large bank enclosing an area of approximately 0.85 hectares. There is a visible outer ditch running along its western and northern sides, the northern ditch having a small counterscarp bank on its outer edge. This counterscarp was probably formed by periodical cleaning of the ditch and is now topped for much of its length by a post-medieval field boundary. There are three visible entrances to the fort (Fig. 2) but those to the east and north may not be original. The western entrance is fronted by a large circular mound (PRN 2016) which was originally thought to be a burial mound, but was probably part of the outer defences, representing an extra protection for the entrance.

Immediately to the west of the hillfort is a modern covered reservoir, while immediately to the northeast is a BBC UHF Relay Station mast, erected in February 1996. The archaeological watching brief that accompanied this development revealed no archaeological features (Crane 1996).

Fig. 2 - Plan of site showing scheduled area and cable trench



4.0 METHODOLOGIES AND RESULTS

4.1 Methodologies

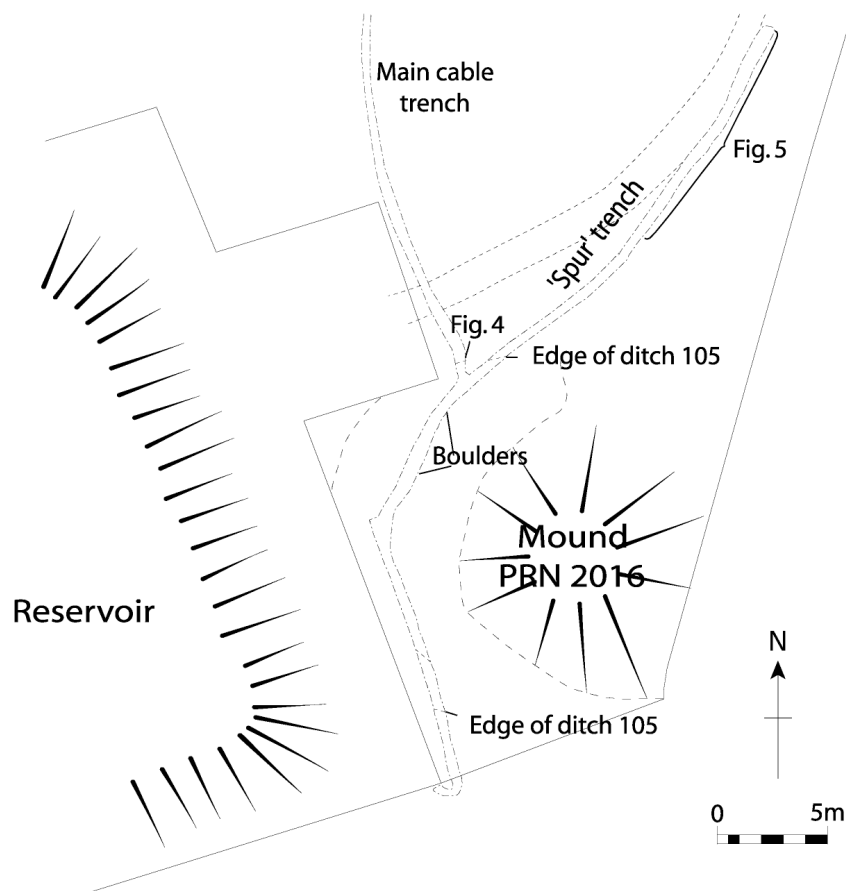
The cable trench was excavated, throughout its length, by the contractor, using a mechanical excavator. A plan of the trench in relation to the site was drawn by the watching archaeologist and, where relevant, the cut sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20. A full archive of photographs was taken of the entire length of the trench through the affected area.

The cable trench was designed to connect two points either side of the northern part of the Hen Gaer Enclosure (see Fig. 2). However, in order to avoid the water pipes leading east from the modern reservoir, it became necessary to route the cable between the reservoir and the entrance mound (PRN 2016). Although this line was just outside the scheduled area, the trench did impact upon the hillfort and archaeological deposits were disturbed.

Moreover, due to confusion between two sets of plans which had been drawn up by the client, the initial, western section of the trench was mistakenly continued eastwards by the contractor, as a 'spur' that ran through the scheduled area for a distance of 50m (see Fig. 3). The watching archaeologist contacted Cambria Archaeology Heritage Management (CA-HM), who in turn contacted Cadw, and a site visit was made on 22 October 2003 by Helen Burnham (Cadw Regional Inspector) and Lucy Bourne (CA-HM). An amended route was agreed, which ran at least 10m outside the scheduled area thereby limiting the risk of damage to potential archaeological deposits.

A further site visit was made on 11 February 2004, to observe two trenches being excavated to house two electric posts (Fig. 2).

Fig. 3 - Plan of western section of trench, and 'spur' trench



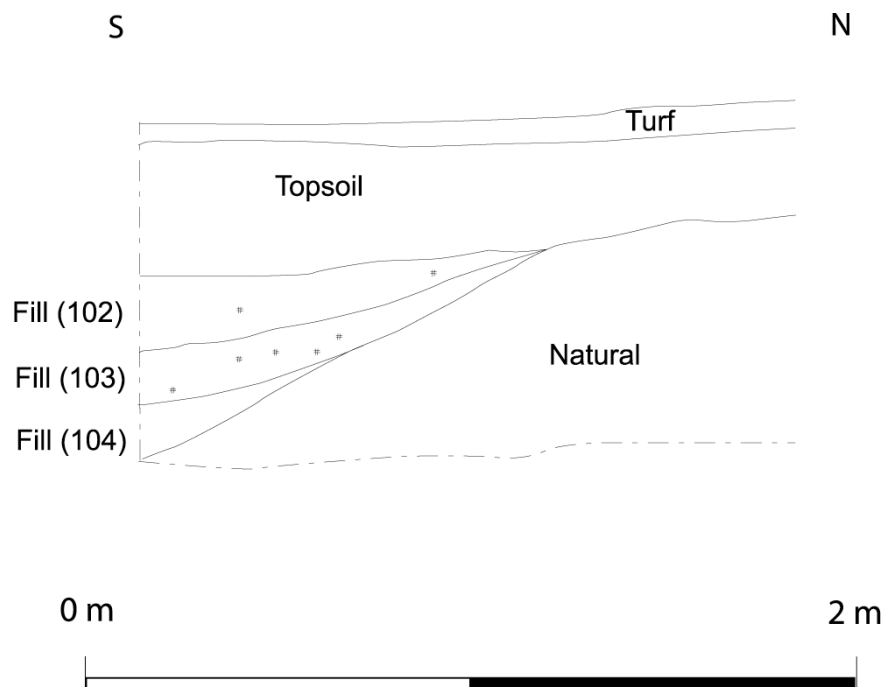
4.2 Observations and results

In terms of the archaeology revealed, the cable trench breaks down into 3 main sections.

4.2.1 The west end - ditch [105]

The westernmost section of the trench ran approximately north-south, to pass between the reservoir and the entrance mound PRN 2016 (Fig. 3). This section was approximately 25m long and, for almost its entire length cut through the fill of a large ditch [105] which followed the curving base of the mound and almost certainly represented the construction ditch for the mound (Fig. 4). Although the ditch had not been sectioned it was faintly visible in plan and appeared to be between 5m and 7m in width, and was clearly over 1m in depth. Given such dimensions it seems likely that this ditch was defensive and that the mound was therefore likely to be part of the defences rather than a burial mound.

Fig. 4 - East facing section of ditch [105]



The cable trench initially cut the ditch at a very oblique angle, but it exited from the ditch at an almost right angle and therefore provided a clear section. It appeared to have a well defined edge with a fairly gentle angle of slope on its north side. The lowest, ie. earliest ditch fill that was observed, (104), was a light brownish-grey silty clay, approximately 0.20m in depth, with occasional angular shale inclusions (Fig. 4). Given its similarity to the surrounding natural it is likely that this was a primary fill resulting simply from the erosion of the sides of the freshly dug mound and ditch.

Overlying this fill was a dark brown silt layer (103) which was approximately 0.16m in depth, with angular stone inclusions and occasional charcoal flecks throughout (Fig. 4). This seemed to represent a soil that had built up within the ditch, possibly during the occupation of the Hen Gaer enclosure.

The uppermost fill (102) was a fairly friable mid brown clay silt with approximately 40% small angular stones which averaged about 0.08m in size. There were very occasional charcoal flecks throughout this layer but not enough to indicate any definite occupation activity. Where exposed by the cable trench, this fill seemed to extend across the entire width of the ditch, and appeared to be fairly homogenous (Fig. 4). However, the degree of charcoal flecking seemed to increase with depth while several large rounded boulders were removed from the centre of the ditch. They all appeared to lie within context (102), at a depth of at least 0.80m, and were up to 0.75m x 0.40m x 0.35m in size. They clearly formed part of the fill, in contrast to other boulders of this type which could be seen in the surrounding natural soil. It is therefore possible that they were originally part of a revetment wall around the mound.

The cable trench also exposed a buried soil layer 10m north of the ditch. This was almost certainly related to the construction of the modern reservoir.

4.2.2 The 'spur' trench - features [106], [120] and [125]

This section of trench was mistakenly excavated within the scheduled area around Hen Gaer, extending northeastwards from the western section for almost 50m into the scheduled area (Fig. 3). A number of archaeological features were revealed in section, all less than 10m from the northwest corner of the defensive bank (Fig. 5). As these features were only exposed in section it was not possible to determine their relationship with each other.

The three cut features closest to the defensive bank were however very similar in nature. The easternmost, and closest to the bank (Fig. 5), was fairly shallow, being 0.10m in depth (no context number), and contained charcoal and heat-affected clay (112). This burning appeared to be *in situ*, but as only the edge of the feature was exposed it is not possible to determine its true character.

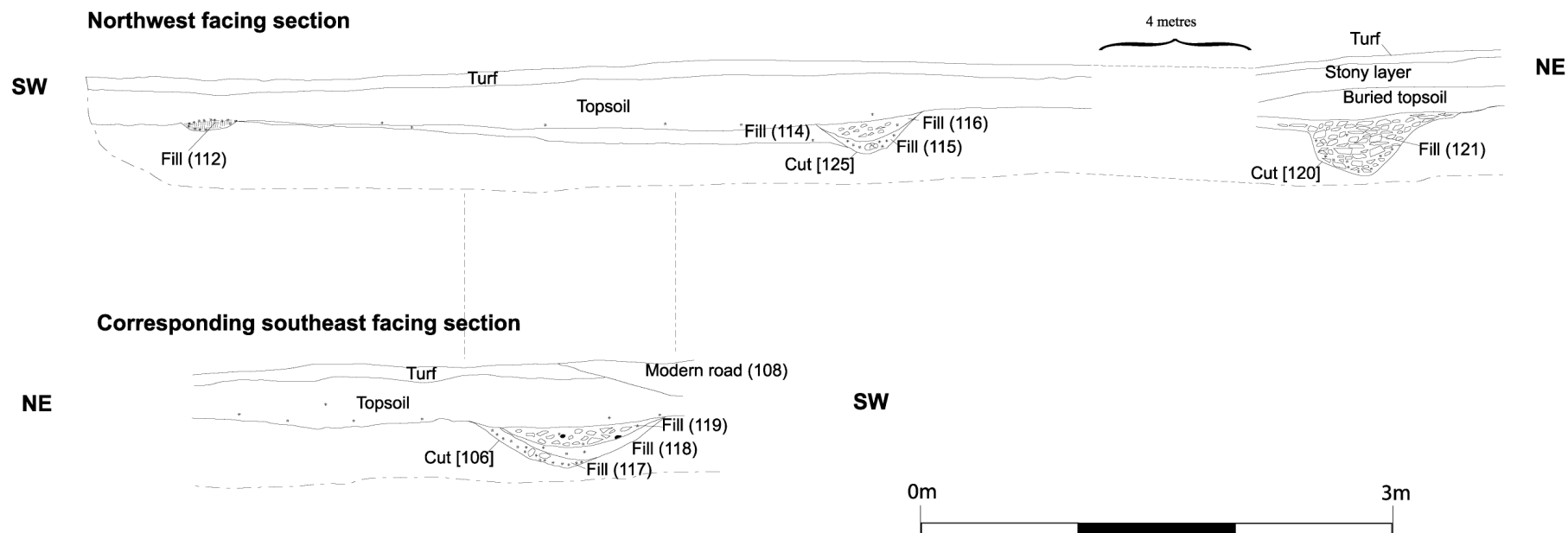
Two small features, possibly small pits, were revealed to the west of this feature. They appeared in opposing sections of the trench, and were about 3m apart. The easternmost, [106], was a shallow concave feature 1.80m wide and 0.35m in depth. It exhibited a dark brown, silty primary fill (117), which contained occasional flecks of burnt bone, flecks of heat-affected clay, and large amounts of charcoal present both as flecks and small fragments (Fig. 5). This primary fill also contained possible 'pot-boilers' in the form of small rounded stones which showed evidence of heat damage. The secondary fill (118) was a light yellowish-brown silt with 50% small angular stones and occasional charcoal flecks throughout. The upper fill (119) was a mid reddish brown clay silt with a high percentage of small angular stones, occasional flecks of charcoal throughout and some charcoal pieces up to 0.04m in diameter.

The second pit, [125], was much smaller, being only 0.90m wide and 0.26m in depth (Fig. 5). However it was very similar to [106] in being a concave cut feature, while its primary fill (115) was in all aspects almost identical to that of (106), including the inclusions. Moreover, although there were only two fills, the secondary fill (116) was very similar to the final, upper fill of [106], but lacked charcoal pieces. Neither pit clearly registered in the opposing section, meaning either that they were both truncated by the cable trench, or that they represent a single feature that had been cut very obliquely by the cable trench.

Feature [125] appeared to be cutting a band of light yellowish brown stony silt that ran along the southern section edge of the cable trench for a length of about 3.6m (Fig. 5). This layer was up to 0.12m in depth and contained occasional charcoal flecks. It is possible that it was simply a natural layer, as no cut was visible and it did not appear in the opposing section. However it is possible that it was in fact the edge of the main defensive ditch belonging to the hillfort.

The westernmost feature in this area appeared to be an irregular pit, [120]. It was slightly larger than the other features being 0.80m wide and 0.50m in depth (Fig. 5). It had a single, homogenous fill (121), which was a mid-brown clay silt, with very frequent large angular shale inclusions and very occasional charcoal flecks.

Fig. 5 - Section drawings of the 'spur' trench, showing features



The nature of all these features, and the content of their fills, were consistent with domestic activity. However, given the fact that they were only observed in section it was not possible to determine how they related to the hillfort. It was noticeable that the topsoil exposed in this section of the cable trench was considerably deeper than that seen in the rest of its length. There were also frequent flecks of charcoal present along the interface between this topsoil and the underlying subsoil for the whole of this section of trench. One piece of 18th century pottery was recovered from this layer, at a depth of about 0.10m.

4.2.3 The remainder of the trench

The remainder of the cable trench, running northwards and then eastwards from the western section, cut through undisturbed bedrock. No further archaeological features were seen, other than a post-medieval field boundary and modern farm track, 35m north of the enclosure, both of which were visible as landscape features prior to trench excavation (Fig. 2). The field boundary was aligned north-south and consisted of a shallow ditch (123) and a simple earth bank (124) topped with a modern barbed wire fence. The bank (124) was approximately 3.20m wide and 0.80m in height, and was composed of a light brown clay silt with occasional small angular inclusions. This material was presumably sourced from ditch (123) which ran along the length of its western side. The ditch was shallow and linear, being approximately 2m wide and 0.30m deep, and contained a stony, light clay silt fill (122) which probably represented the slumping of the hedge-bank over time. The modern track (108) comprised a fairly well sorted layer of angular shale fragments that was approximately 0.30m in depth, and up to 3m in width. The track did not appear to be of any antiquity and was probably constructed as an access road to the reservoir.

4.2.4 The electric post trenches

A further site visit was made on 11 February 2004, to observe two trenches being excavated to house two electric posts (Fig. 2). The trench for the first post (post no.15) was located just north of the entrance to the covered reservoir approximately 5m north of entrance mound PRN 2016. The second trench (post no.16) was located in the adjacent field, immediately south of the reservoir and 15m west of Hen Gaer hillfort itself.

Each trench was approximately 2m long, 1m wide and 1.80m deep, aligned approximately north-south. Neither trench exposed any archaeological features or deposits.

4.3 Conclusion and recommendations

The project has highlighted the difficulties sometimes encountered with development in and around Scheduled Ancient Monuments, which in this case clearly arose from a misunderstanding. However, it is this piecemeal loss of deposits and features that can pose the greatest threat to field monuments.

Nevertheless there have been very positive results. The watching brief has provided some important new information relating to the Hen Gaer site, indicative of its complex nature. The size and character of the large ditch [105], around entrance mound PRN 2016, is such that the mound will certainly have to be re-evaluated. The width of the ditch is very similar to that of the defensive ditch still visible on the western and northern sides of the hillfort implying that the mound represents part of the hillfort defences, rather than being a separate monument that was previously thought to perhaps represent a burial mound. If this is the case then it is likely to represent part of an outer 'hornwork', defending the entrance to the fort, and its presence affects future interpretation of the status and function of the enclosure itself. Its isolation suggests that a section of bank joining the mound to the rest of the hillfort defences has been levelled off at some point in the past. This would also explain the lack of any visible ditch between the mound and the northwest corner of the fort, when it is clearly evident for the rest of the western side, and also the greater depth of topsoil in this area. The one pottery sherd recovered may also give a possible date for this event - after the 18th century - although the levelling work that occurred when the reservoir access road was constructed should also be borne in mind.

The group of small features exposed by the mistakenly excavated 'spur' section of cable trench all appear to be of a type common on domestic sites. However, they cannot be closely dated. They were clearly cut before the deeper topsoil built up, but it is not possible to state how they relate to the hillfort itself. Nevertheless their presence does indicate the potential and complexity of the site, and the importance of protecting not only the monument but also the immediate surrounding area.

It is therefore recommended that the scheduled area be extended westwards, as far as the modern reservoir, to include the new ditch line.

5.0 THE FINDS

No stratified artefactual material was recovered from sealed contexts during the watching brief. However one piece of 18th century pottery was recovered from between the topsoil and the underlying subsoil, at a depth of about 0.10m.

6.0 ARCHIVE DEPOSITION

The archive, which will be indexed according to the National Monuments Record (NMR) material categories, is held by Cambria Archaeology, Llandeilo, and contains the following:-

- A.** Copy of the final report and disk
- B.** Field notes
- C.** Copies of planning specifications
- G.** List of references
- J.** Final drawings
- L.** General administrative notes
- M.** Project correspondence

There is no material for classes **D, E, F, H, I, K** and **N**.

7.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The fieldwork was undertaken by Tom Jamieson and Hubert Wilson of Cambria Archaeology, and the reporting was undertaken by Tom Jamieson. Thanks to Scottish Power Systems Ltd. Thanks also to Neil Ludlow of Cambria Archaeology for project management and for assistance with the report, and to Helen Burnham (Cadw Regional Inspector) and Lucy Bourne (CA-HM).

8.0 REFERENCES

Crane, P., 1996 'BBC Relay Station at Penrhyncoch, Cardiganshire: archaeological watching brief' (unpublished client report by Cambria Archaeology; copy held with Sites and Monuments Record for Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and Pembrokeshire).

Hen Gaer CD 026 (Cer), in SAM file held by Sites and Monuments Record for Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and Pembrokeshire.

Hogg, A. H. A., 1994 'The Hillforts and Later Prehistoric Settlements', in Davies, J. L., and Kirby, D. P., Cardiganshire County History Vol. 1, 234-271.

Photo 1 – view of Hen Gaer from the northwest, showing entrance mound PRN 2016 (centre), and ramparts beyond



Photo 2 – view of Hen Gaer entrance mound PRN 2016, and reservoir beyond



Photo 3 – view of cable trench from the southwest, showing western section (foreground) and ‘spur’ trench beyond



Photo 4 – view of central section of cable trench from the northeast, looking towards reservoir

