Archaeological Excavation Report

Stone Alignment
Mynydd Y Betws, Carmarthenshire.

10th – 21st July 2017.

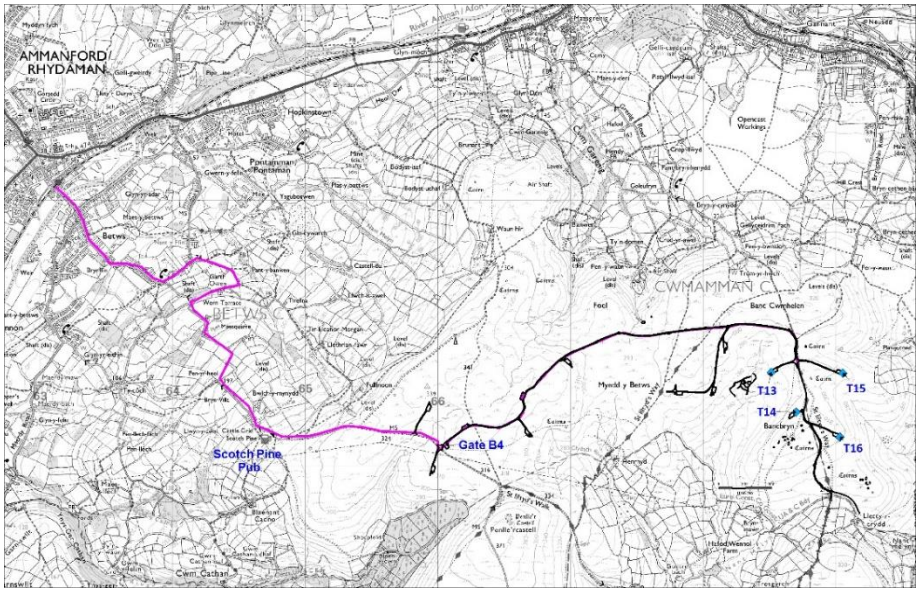
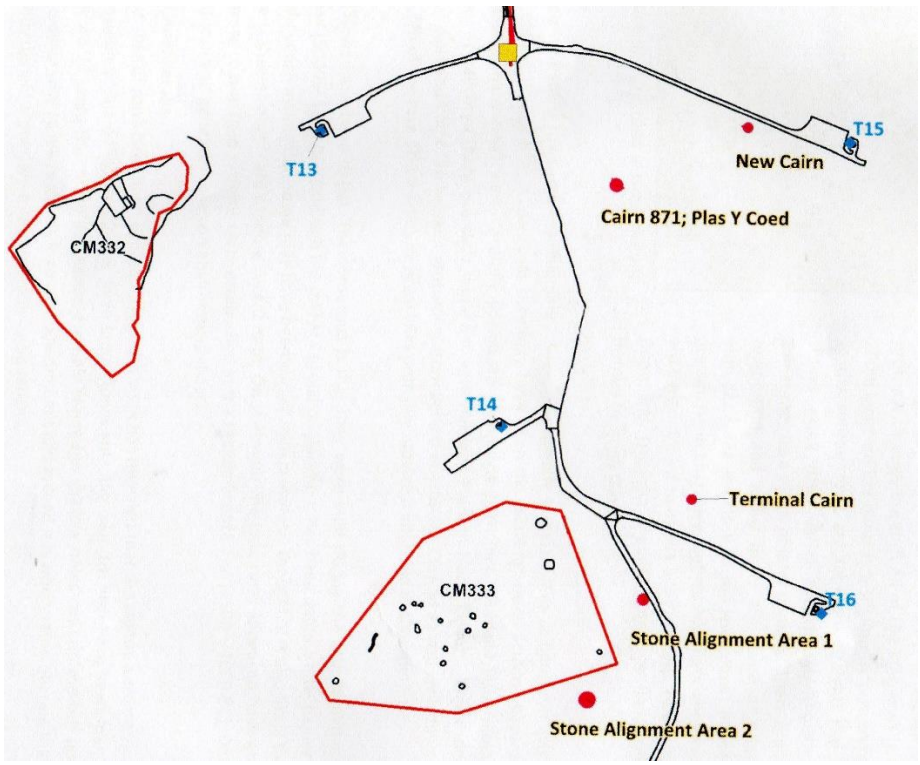


Fig 1: Location of Stone Alignment - South of T14.



Site detail of the Mynydd Y Betws dig.

Fig 2: The Stone Alignment exposed by the moorland fire in 2012 (Photo Dr Sandy Gerrard (SG))

The alignment of stones to be investigated were observed in 2012 after a fire across the moorland destroyed the dense vegetation.

The alignment comprises of approximately 170 stones averaging 20 – 40cm in size, projecting up to 30cm above ground level. and is approximately 600m long, between NGR SN6855 0978 (South-West end) a large stone (Fig 4), to SN6890 1032 (North-East end) at a small cairn. For almost half the length, North East end down, there appears to be a definite alignment with Hartland Point in North Devon. There are two Cairn Cemeteries adjacent to the alignment (see Fig 3).

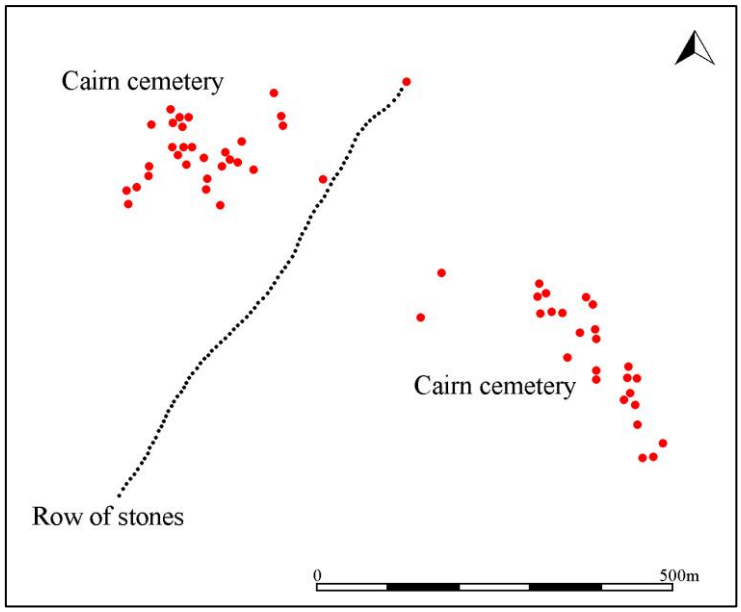


Fig 3: Schematic of Stone Alignment and Cairn Cemetaries. (SG)

Fig 4: The Terminal Stone. (SG)

This report outlines the excavation by Dyfed Archaeological Trust 10th – 21st July 2017, Director Dr Sandy Gerrard.

Excavation:

After familiarisation with the site and explanations of the apparent link to Hartland Point, the team decided which stones were to be investigated. The stones at the North-East end were given alphabetic identification A to M, and the decision was the investigate three stones G [309], I [303] and J [304].

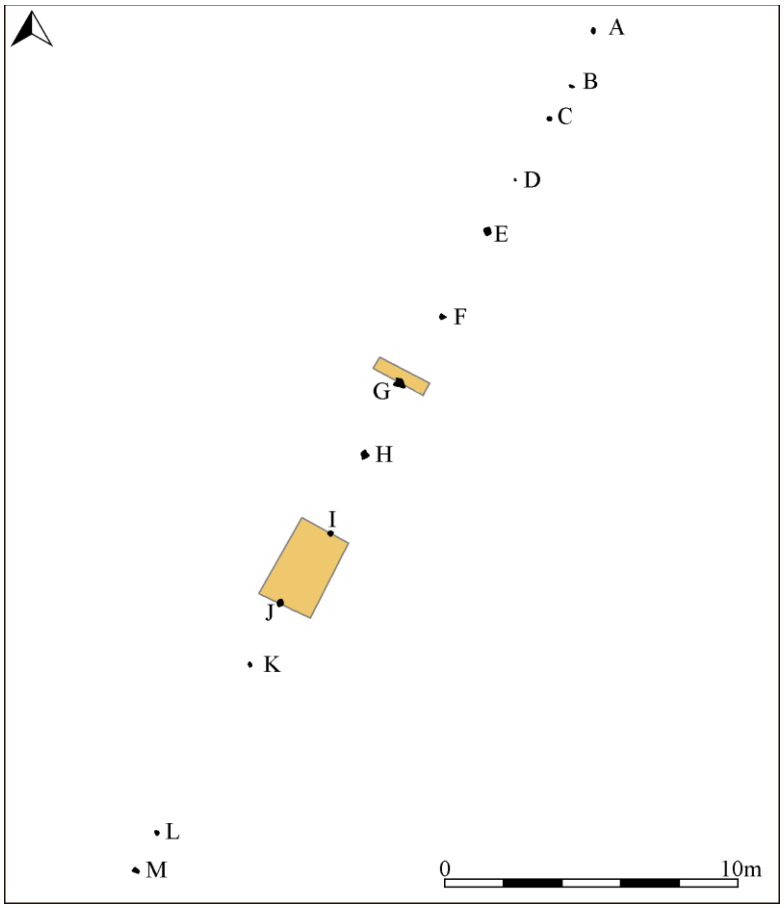


Fig 5: Positions of Trenches.

At the start it was decided to dig two slit trenches, 2m by 0.5m adjacent to stones I (Trench 1) and J (Trench 2). See Fig 6.

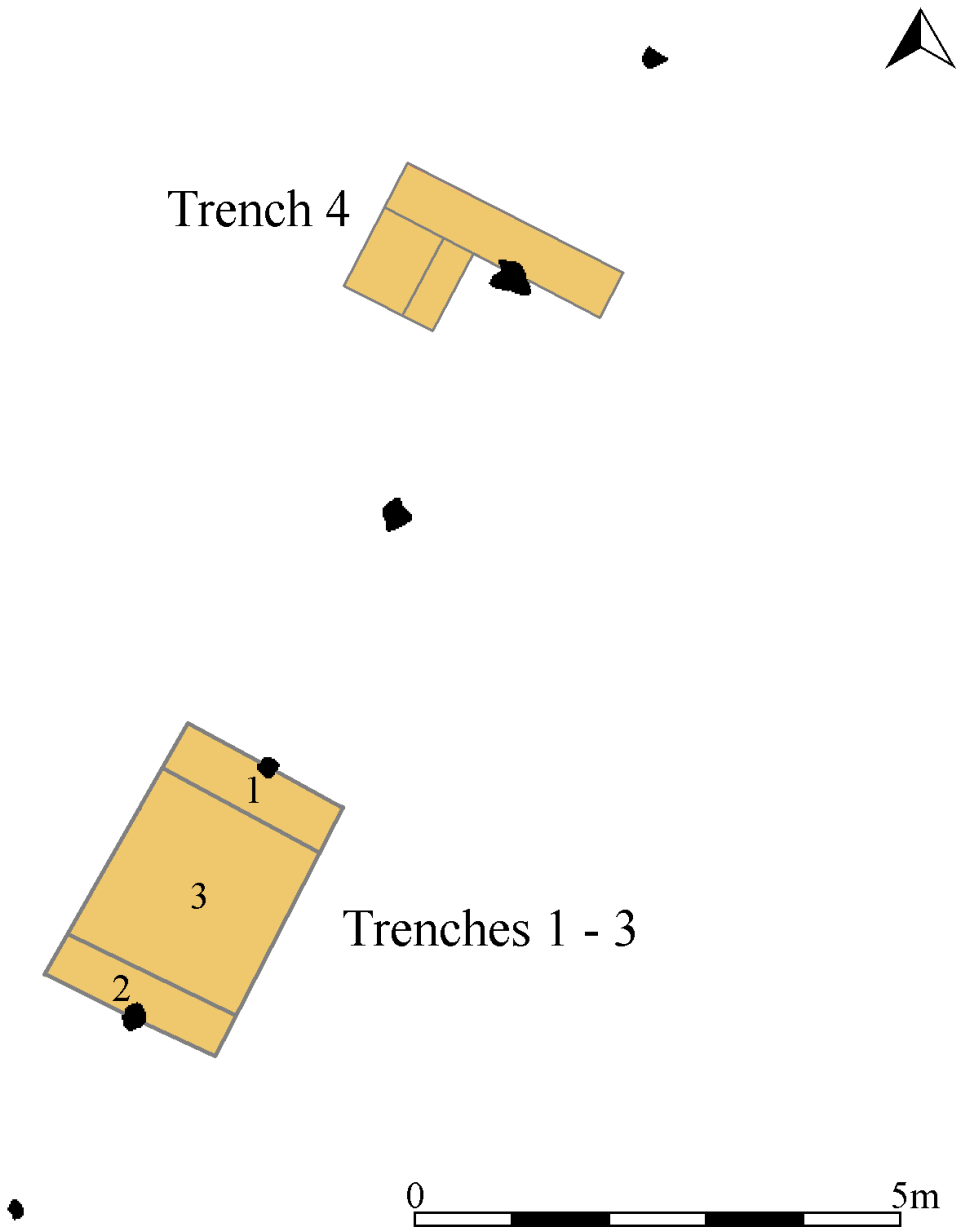
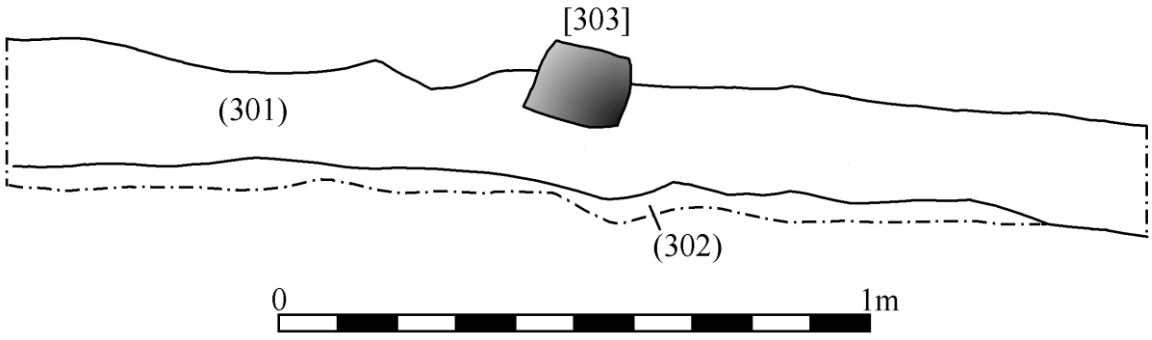


Fig 6: Layout of Trenches.

Once the turf was removed, careful excavation was carried out, keeping eyes open for any signs of artefacts or edges. The material removed was basically a peaty material with extensive rooting that proved quite difficult for trowelling. Eventually the peaty material gave way to natural sandstone level. There appeared to be a largish stone standing on, or possibly embedded in, the natural surface. It was now quite clear that the alignment stones are actually imbedded in and standing on the peat. There was approximately a 15cm thickness of peat below each stone.

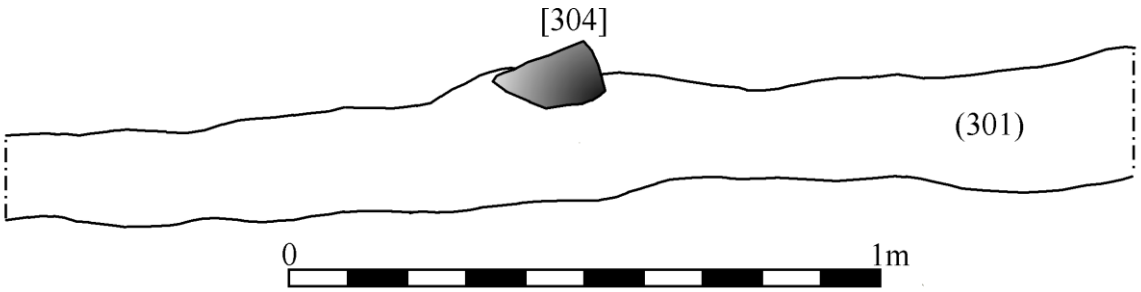
Once the natural level was reached the sections containing the alignment stones were drawn. Please see Fig 9 (Page 9), for positions of all sections drawn.

Trench 1 – South-West facing section.



Section 1: South West facing section Trench 1. (See Fig XXX for schematic of positions). (Drawn by PR and MS)

Trench 2 – North-East facing section with stone 304.



Section 2: North-East facing section Trench 2. (See Fig XXX for schematic of positions). (Drawn by PR and MS)

Upon completion of this work, a start was made on removing the material between Trenches 1 and 2, i.e. creating Trench 3.

Although quite a large area, removal of this material was again carried out carefully, looking out for artefacts or any sign of human activity. Due to poor weather, this proved to be quite a long process, as

the trench was filling with water, i.e. seepage from the peat trench sides as well as rain, requiring regular emptying using a hand pump and sponges.

Trench's1,2 and 3 – Almost there.

Eventually the natural sandstone level was reached; again, there were no artefacts nor signs of human activity. The stone partly exposed in Trench 1 was now fully exposed with another smaller one beside it. A plan of this was drawn, see Fig 7. There were also two similar stones partly exposed in the North-West facing, Section 3.

Trench 1, 2 and 3 – Down to the natural level.

Trenches 1, 2 and 3 – Two exposed stones on natural layer.

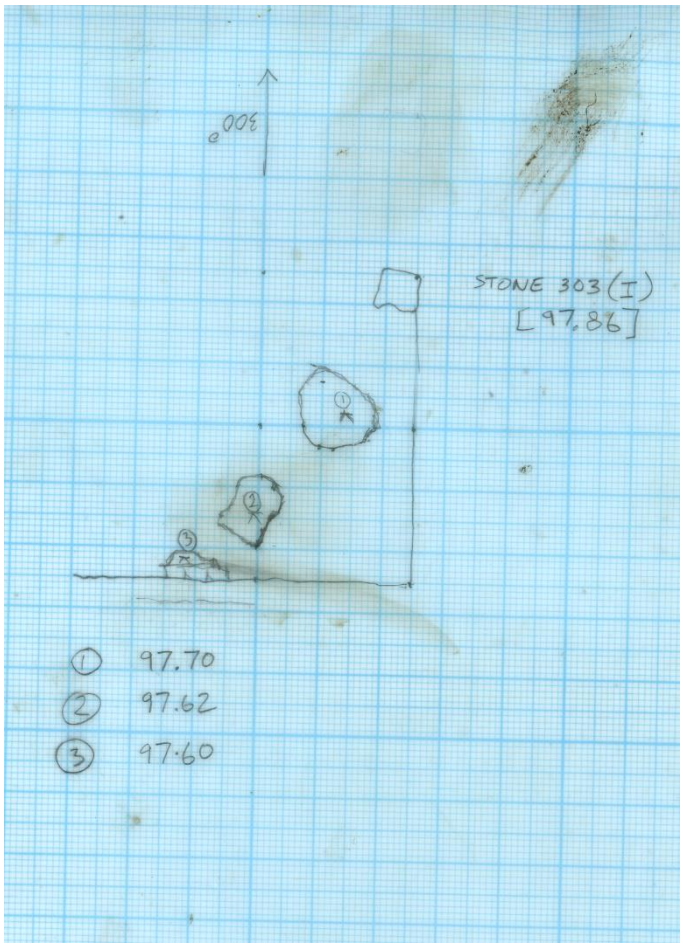
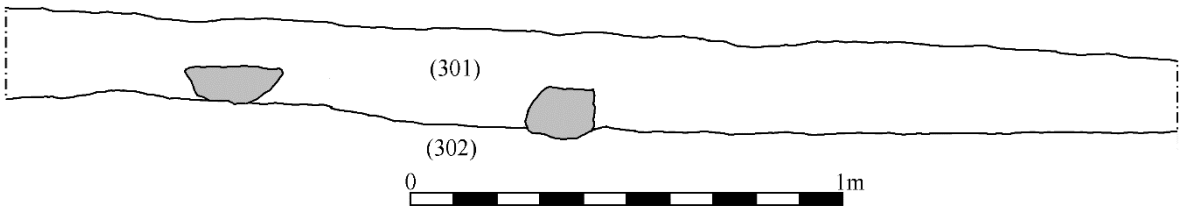


Fig 7: Plan of stones exposed in Trenches 1, 2 and 3 (Drawn by PR)

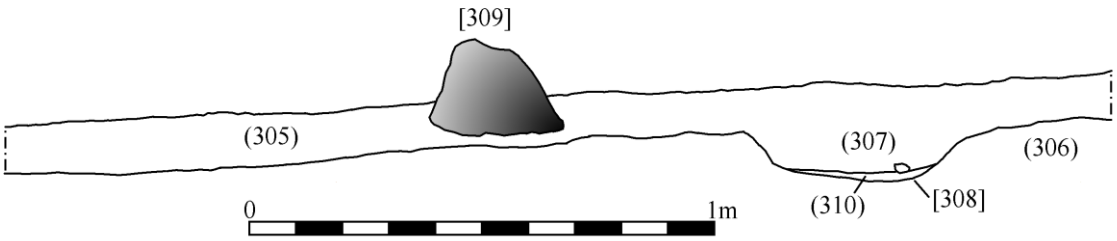
Trenches 1, 2 and 3 – After removal of exposed stones.



Section 3: North-West facing section in trenches 1, 2 and 3. (Drawn by PR and MS)

With the sections and plan of the extra stones drawn the stones were removed, making the surface they were standing on visible. It was quite clear they were standing on the natural surface and not embedded.

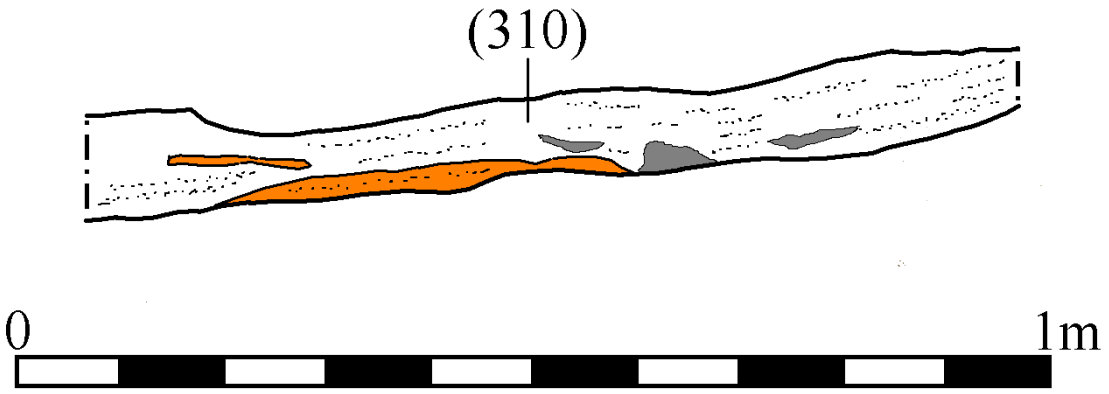
Trench 4, 2m x 0.5m, was started at stone G. As with trenches 1 and 2 the turf was removed and careful removal of peat carried out, eventually down to the sandstone natural layer. As in Trenches 1 and 2 the alignment stone was imbedded in the peat but had peat below it. There was a definite cut in the natural layer. This turned out to be part of an assumed bowl-shaped depression, the first thought being that this may have been where the alignment stone (G [309]) had come from. Once photographed the peat infill was removed.



Trench 4: North-East facing section, clearly showing the depression (307) mentioned in the text. (Drawn by PR and FS)

At this point it was decided to extend the North-East end of the trench by 0.75m x 0.5m to find, hopefully, the full extent of the depression. This was done quite quickly and proved inconclusive. The trench was extended by a further 0.5m, this time in a South-West direction when it became obvious it was not a simple domed depression. Extended again by 1m. During these excavations, a strip of baulk was left in place and a section drawn of east-South East section. The section showed orange patches that subsequently were found to be quite large area in plan, as well as very black material. Upon removal of the baulk it was fairly clear that the depression actually continued further and that it was a natural feature. It is probable that it was a small river or stream, caused when the frost melted and the melt water ran down the hill.

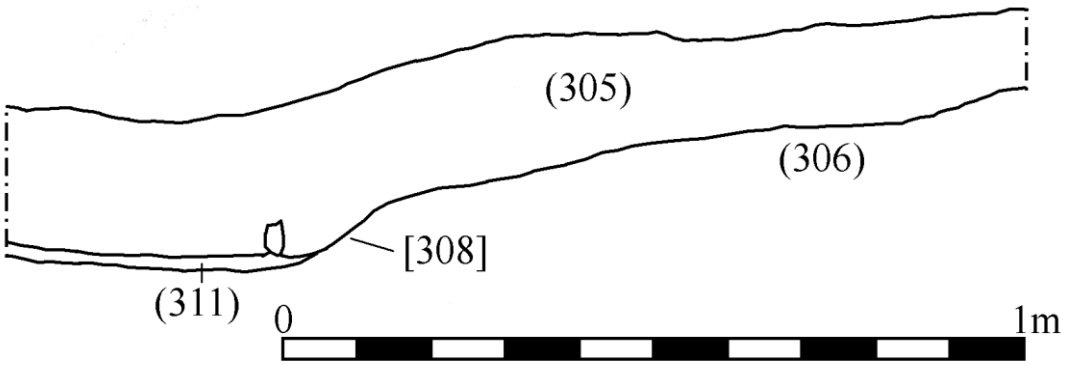
Trench 4 – Showing Section 6.



Section 6: Section of East-South-East facing baulk in Trench 4.

(Drawing by PR and MS)

Finally, in Trench 4 a section drawing was produced of Section 5.



Section 5: East-South-East facing section of completed Trench 4.

(Drawing by PR and MS)

Trench 4 – Showing the baulk before removal.

Trench 4 – Baulk fully removed showing the exposed feature.

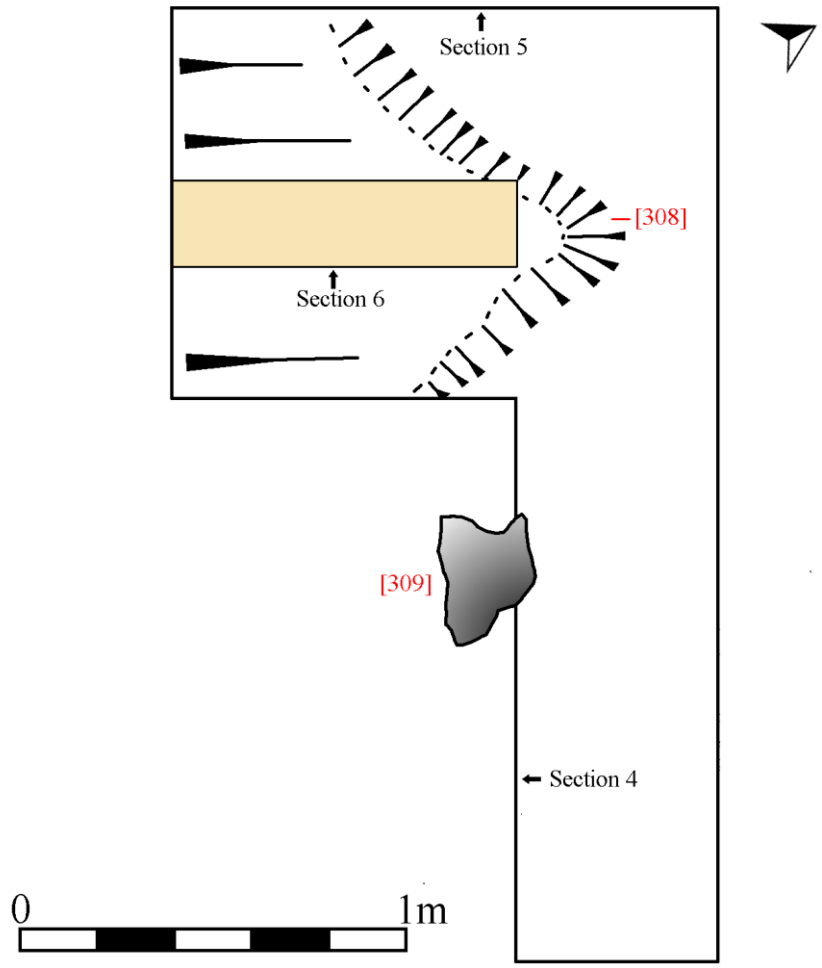


Fig 8: Plan of Trench 4 showing detail of sections and extensions.

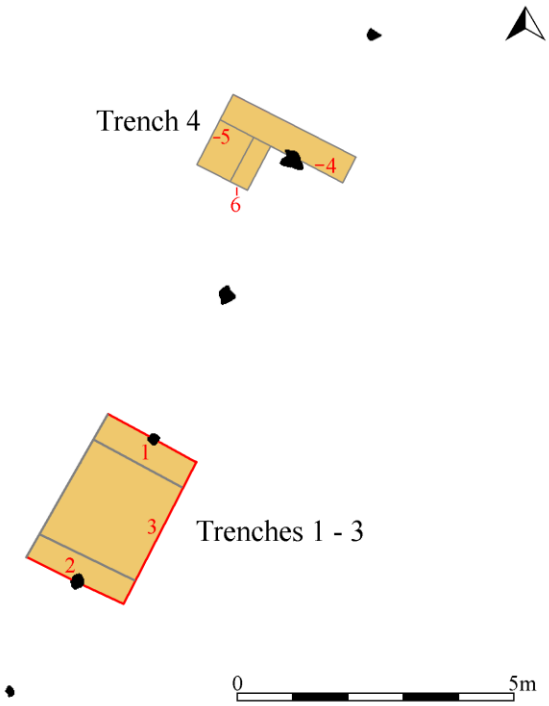


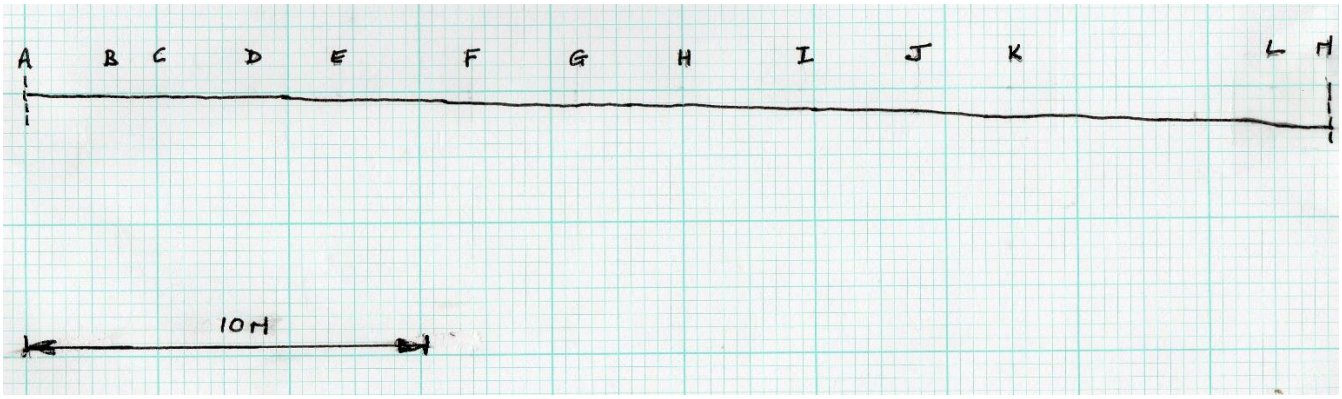
Fig 9: Plan showing positions of the various section drawing within the trenches.

During the excavation, some measurements were made of stone levels and heights above ground level concentrating on stones A to M. The results are as follows:

Stone:	Height	Level relative to previous stone:
A	0.06m	0m
B	0.04m	-0.14m
C	0.04m	0.02m
D	0.04m	-0.14m
E	0.16m	0.02m
F	0.01m	-0.29m
G	0.16m	-0.18m
H	0.18m	-0.10m
I	0.05m	-0.22m
J	0.07m	-0.09m
K	0.03m	-0.21m
L	0.06m	-0.40m
M	0.06m	-0.04m

Altitude difference between A at 0m to M = -1.69m

Longitudinal distance between stone A and stone M = 31.5m



Schematic of fall of stones A to M.

This concluded the excavations of the Stone Alignment. The trenches were back filled and the turf re-placed.

The original question was, “Is this a Prehistoric Stone Alignment”?

Unfortunately, it is difficult to make an absolutely certain confirmation on this due to no artefacts being found to aid dating, nor was there evidence of human activity. The fact that the stones are in a line does appear to be intentional bearing in mind the alignment with Hartland Point, North Devon and the other ancient monuments in the vicinity. It is difficult not to think of it as prehistoric bearing in mind the adjacent cairns, which are assumed burials.

Does the fact that the stones are not sitting on the ancient sandstone layer hold any significance? This fact does not rule out the possibility of prehistoric involvement. The Sandstone Sedimentary Bedrock formed during the Carboniferous Period, 307 – 309 million years ago, formed by rivers that dominated the area. The peat started to form 3 million years ago in the Quaternary Period, therefore in prehistoric times there was already a layer of peat onto which the stones could have been placed.

A secondary question would be “if it is a stone alignment what was its purpose?”. Again, no firm conclusions could be reached. Was it as a guide across this section of moorland, perhaps leading to the cairns at the high point. My feeling is that it was not. I base this on the fact I feel there would be a linear depression, parallel to the alignment, in the peaty surface. During this project those working on Cairn 871 crossed the moorland from the roadway to the cairn on a regular route. At the end of the project the route was quite obvious to the eye even though it was only used for 12 days. I think if the stone alignment was for guiding it would have been for a long period, maybe many years, therefore a walkway would be quite distinct. There is no evidence of this.

My lack of expertise in this field means I have to leave it to others to decide on this issue. However, I feel the work carried out during the eleven days is barely scratching the surface, bearing in mind we only worked around 3 stones, c11.5%, of the approximate 170 that make up the alignment.

My thanks to Dr Sandy Gerrard for his valuable guidance and advice throughout the eleven days. I learned a tremendous amount about stone alignments and, importantly, about practical archaeology.
I also thank The Dyfed Archaeology Trust for the opportunity to work on such a site.

Peter Rowland
14th August 2017.