Bancbryn Stone Alignment Scheduling Assessment Report

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Site Visit: 16th April 2013

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Background

This report comprises an evaluation for scheduling of the stone alignment discovered in 2012 by Dr Sandy Gerrard on the slopes of Bancbryn, Mynydd y Bettws, Carmarthenshire. Within the report I have adopted the standard Cadw practice of naming an archaeological monument feature according to its geographic location or position relative to a geographic landmark. I have referred to the feature in this report as the Bancbryn *stone alignment* – applying the preferred terminology recommended by the Welsh Thesaurus of archaeological terms for describing rows of stones. (*Stone row* is a non-preferred term and other descriptive terms tend to relate to function eg stone boundary).

I visited Bancbryn on 16th April 2013 and walked the length of the stone alignment. A *Topcon* handheld GPS was used to survey the line of the stone alignment; position readings were taken above each stone considered to form part of the alignment. Photographs were taken for illustrative purposes and are included with this report.

Description

The Bancbryn stone alignment comprises a sinuous linear arrangement of approximately 170 stones averaging 20-40cm in size and projecting up to a maximum of c. 30cm above ground level; many of the stones are located at ground surface level with a light cover of vegetation. The line extends across Mynydd y Betws moorland for a distance of approx. 600m between NGR SN 6855 0978 at its SW limit to SN6890 1032 at its NE end. The stones are mostly rounded in shape and appear to be of local origin. The distance of separation of stones varies from sections where they are very close (less than 1m apart) to gaps of 8-10m. The linear nature of the feature is most visible in the sections where the stones are closely positioned such as between SN6882 1017 and SN6881 1015 and SN6874 1002 to SN6866 0994. There is no visible evidence to suggest the presence of a bank, ditch or other associated earthwork.

Archaeological investigation

The stone row was first reported by Dr Sandy Gerrard at the end of 2011. In January 2012 Cotswold Archaeology carried out a small scale archaeological investigation of two sections of the feature which lay in the way of routes proposed for new access tracks for the windfarm. A report provides a written description of the investigations carried out but does not include photographs or drawn

illustrations. The report indicates that no stones or features were identified at crossing point A. Three stones were investigated in crossing point B, all of which had been sealed by a covering of soil and vegetation. The author reports that the stones were not associated with identifiable sockets.

Context and setting

There is surviving archaeological evidence for activity from several different periods on Mynydd y Betws including prehistoric funerary/ritual monuments and post-medieval upland settlement and land exploitation. Some of the better preserved monuments have been scheduled, including Bancbryn Cairn Cemetery (CM333), Bancbryn Platform Cairn (CM334) and Bancbryn Cairn Cemetery (East) (CM335), the easternmost cairn of the CM333 is located in close proximity (less than 15m) from a well preserved section of the stone alignment. Further to the west in a sheltered hollow is Bancbryn Deserted Rural Settlement (CM332), there is no obvious direct relationship between this feature and the stone alignment. Unscheduled features include an area of shallow excavations located close to the NE limit of the stone alignment which are recorded by the Royal Commission Inventory as the remains of small scale 18th/19th extraction of shallow deposits of coal. These workings appear to have been incorrectly described as 'adits' in the Cotswold report (2012).

Consideration against Scheduling Criteria

The non-statutory criteria which the Welsh Government applies as a guide to support the selection of monuments for scheduling are published on the Cadw website. These are: Period, Rarity, Documentation, Group Value, Survival/Condition, Fragility/Vulnerability, Diversity and Potential. Explanations of these criteria are given in Annex 1.

Period
The date of the stone alignment is currently unconfirmed by artefacts or scientific dating techniques. Archaeologists who have examined this feature have not been united in their preferred interpretation. Two alternatives have been proposed: a prehistoric stone alignment, or a post-medieval boundary or waymarker.

Prehistoric Stone Alignments in Wales
Stone rows or alignments are a feature of prehistoric ritual landscapes and are particularly associated with upland moor areas. The Welsh Royal Commission Thesaurus definition of a stone alignment (preferred term) is: *"A single line, or two or more roughly parallel lines, of standing stones set at intervals along a common axis or series of axes".*

The English Thesaurus provides a more detailed description: "*A single line, or two or more roughly parallel lines, of upright stones set at intervals along a common axis or series of axes. The number and size of stones in known alignments varies greatly, but the minimum number of stones required to form an alignment is three. The word alignment here refers to the juxtapositioning of the stones forming the monument itself rather than to any supposed or observed orientation on other monuments and/or topographical features.*

"A stone alignment can be distinguished from certain types of avenue by virtue of its relative straightness, and from a pair of standing stones by the greater number of uprights required to form

an alignment. Field boundaries and other features formed of upright slabs may, however, sometimes be confused with stone alignments, but in most cases such monuments can be distinguished because of their relatively recent date of construction."

Prehistoric stone alignments are often found in association with other prehistoric ritual structures such as cairns, ring cairns and stone circles, and it is this relationship which has provided the primary basis for dating (Newman, 2011:p41). Distribution in the British Isles is similar to that of other megalithic structures, predominantly in the west and north. The single largest assemblage is in Dartmoor, with 75 – 80 known examples (Newman, 2011:p37). In Wales prehistoric stone alignments are relatively rare, and typically take the form of rows of as many as a dozen upright stones up to half a metre high, occasionally with stones over twice that height (Browne & Hughes, 2003:p25). Burl (1993) notes that stone pairs are much more common (not strictly alignments which require 3 stones), particularly in the counties of Dyfed and Gwynedd, with four- to six-stone and three-stone rows almost as plentiful. "Single lines of many stones are scarce in Wales, tending to lie in a north-south band down the centre of the country. Not surprisingly if theirs was an origin emanating from the south-west of England where similar lines are abundant, the most striking Welsh examples are in the south-west, the best known being the now damaged line at Parc y Meirw near Fishguard" (Burl, 1993).

Excluding stone pairs, there are currently 20 scheduled examples of monuments recorded under the category of stone alignments or stone rows in Wales. The sites show a strong geographic bias towards Mid/East Wales (15 sites), plus two in Pembrokeshire and three in North West Wales. To date no examples have been identified for scheduling in Carmarthenshire or Glamorganshire. In general the scheduled Welsh examples comprise between 3 and 12 stones. Only a small number of the scheduled examples comprise greater numbers of stones. These are Hywlfa'r Ceirw Stone Alignment near Llandudno (CN132), Hafod-y-Dre Stone Alignment, Pentrefoelas (DE095) and Lluest Uchaf Cairns and Stone Row, Caersws (MG276).

Hywlfa'r Ceirw Stone Alignment near Llandudno (CN132) comprises a double row of stones 3m apart extending a distance of 90m. Although originally scheduled as a prehistoric feature (date of scheduling unknown (pre-1979)), more recently the date and purpose of this monument has been questioned by Cadw and the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, since it is closely associated with an adjacent field system and it has been suggested that it may be a mis-identified component of a later agricultural landscape. Hafod-y-Dre Stone Alignment, Pentrefoelas (DE095) is comprised of c. 130 small stones set into turf however, unlike Bancbryn these are aligned in a series of rows covering an area c.20m square. In an account of 1884 the site comprises 16 parallel rows forming a "perfect square". Today the pattern is less complete. Lluest Uchaf Cairns and Stone Row, Caersws (MG276) comprises 15 stones, the largest being 1m in height set in a row 60m in length and associated with two cairns.

Discussion

As summarised by Dr Gerrard in his note to Cadw of 29th May 2012, the Bancbryn stone alignment demonstrates many characteristics of the prehistoric stone rows found in SW England, namely: its NE-SW alignment, proximity to a number of prehistoric cairns and sinuous character comprising a combination of close and more distantly separated stones. In addition, Dr Gerrard has drawn attention to the presence of a larger than average stone at the SW terminus which he suggests may represent a fallen pillar and a possible cairn at the NE terminal. During our site inspection my colleagues and I did not manage to locate the possible cairn at the NE end; the SW terminal area today coincides with the location of a trackway which may have caused some disturbance.

In my view the failure of the Cotswold Archaeology excavation to discover artefacts or identify socket holes is inconclusive since the investigative strategy was led by development rather than research and did not target sections of the feature likely to be most responsive to archaeological examination.

Taken in the context of the known Welsh prehistoric stone alignments, the Bancbryn alignment appears atypical due to its much greater length (c. 600m) and the number of component stones. On average Welsh examples are c. 15m long and contain less than 15 stones. The longest scheduled Welsh example is c. 90m in length, but as noted above, its attribution has since been questioned. The size of the stones used to form the feature does not detract from a prehistoric interpretation; however, the rounded form of the stones means that the majority appear to have been placed on the ground rather than set in upright positions which reduces the visual similarities with Welsh examples and also removes a potentially useful source of archaeological information to be retrieved from stone sockets.

An important factor in determining date is association with other features. The Bancbryn stone row is located within a recognised prehistoric ritual landscape, represented by Bancbryn Cairn Cemeteries (CM333 and CM335) and other individual cairns such as CM334. None of the cairns comprising these features lie directly on the same line as the stone alignment. Dr Gerrard has referred to a possible cairn near the NE terminal but I was unable to locate this feature. Such a relationship, particularly if directly aligned, would assist in a prehistoric attribution but is not a prerequisite.

Post-medieval interpretation

An alternative interpretation which has been suggested by Cotswold Archaeology in their report (2012) and currently supported by Dyfed Archaeological Trust is that the stone alignment is a more recent feature, either a boundary or waymarker potentially associated with post-medieval exploitation of Mynydd y Bettws (Bancbryn deserted rural settlement lies to the north west), the $18^{th}/19^{th}$ century coal workings, Bryn Mawr Farm or a combination of the above. Based on field inspection it would appear unlikely that the stone alignment formed part of any form of physical boundary intended to prevent movement of people or stock, either as part of a fenced line or embankment since it is too sinuous in form to support a fenceline (and excavation did not identify post holes) and there is no indication of an associated ditch or bank.

A route or way marker may be a viable interpretation since examples of stone marked routes exist across open uplands elsewhere in the UK and Wales eg in the Black Mountains. However, if this was the case, then it would appear to have been a unique example on Mynydd y Bettws and any explanation of its purpose is speculation. As context it is noted that aerial photographs of the area taken in 1943 show that the vehicular track which today leads northwards from Bryn Mawr Farm on to Mynydd y Bettws had yet to be created, presenting the possibility that prior to this alternative routes could have been used to direct movement on to the moorland. However, the 1943 photographs do not show any evidence for a trackway following the route of the stone alignment.

Rarity

This criterion is closely allied to period. If prehistoric in date, the stone alignment is rare. If constructed in a later period, rarity would be dependent upon its function and the number of other surviving examples. Cadw has not undertaken or commissioned any studies of upland routes/boundaries, and currently there are no individually scheduled examples.

Documentation

Archaeological evaluation report by Cotswold Archaeology (2012); additional comments received from Dr Sandy Gerrard (2012). The feature does not appear on historic mapping for the area.

Group Value

If prehistoric, the alignment would have important group value as an element of a wider ritual landscape. If of a later period, the group value is more limited, and unlikely to be seen as grounds for scheduling.

Survival/Condition

Apparently good although the original length and number of stones is unknown. The alignment has been broken in two places by access tracks constructed for the windfarm. The two breaks are close together near the NE end and do not affect the sections where the stone alignment is at its most visibly prominent. There are no current signs of active deterioration through erosion.

Fragility/Vulnerability

The main threats are physical damage through removal of stones, ground disturbance and damage either from erosion or vehicles leaving the roads and driving over the stones. The purpose of scheduling would be to preserve the feature intact and prevent removal of stones and other manmade disturbance. Natural erosion does not appear to be a current threat.

Diversity

Low – the stone alignment is a single feature.

Potential

This criterion is rarely used on its own as a basis for scheduling but where appropriate has been applied as a supporting factor. In general prehistoric stone alignments have received relatively little modern archaeological investigation, and in those cases where excavation has been undertaken, structural evidence and finds have not been forthcoming (eg Cholwichtown, Lee Moor, Dartmoor and the Cotswold Archaeology evaluation of this feature). Potential is therefore not high, although it is noted that there appears to have been minimal disturbance to the feature so any surviving buried evidence associated with construction/use/contemporary environment should have remained intact.

Conclusion

There is currently no commonly agreed interpretation for the stone alignment within the archaeological community. Evidence has been put forward in support of two different interpretations: a prehistoric ritual stone alignment, and a later post-medieval boundary or route-way. Without further information it is not possible conclusively to confirm either conclusion. If the former, it would meet the criteria for scheduling; if the latter, it would normally be categorised as a feature of local/regional interest but not of national significance, and would therefore not be scheduled.

The main arguments against supporting a prehistoric interpretation are the inconsistencies in physical appearance of the stone alignment when compared with currently accepted Welsh prehistoric examples and the lack of evidence for stones having been set upright in sockets. Alternative theories suggest a post-medieval date, either as a boundary or a way-marked track across the moorland, although there is no specific evidence to support these explanations, and no directly similar previously recorded examples have been presented.

Sources used to compile this report:

Cotswold Archaeology (2012)	Preliminary Statement on a Stone Alignment
Gerrard, S (2012)	Notes on Preliminary Statement on a Stone Alignment
Browne, D & S Hughes (2003)	*The Archaeology of the Welsh Uplands,* RCAHMW
Leighton, D (1997)	*Mynydd Du and Fforest Fawr,* RCAHMW
Newman, P (2011)	*The Field Archaeology of Dartmoor*, English Heritage
Cadw	Scheduled Monument Descriptions

Field visit 16th April 2013

1943 Vertical Aerial Photography

Photographs

Looking SW towards Bryn Mawr Farm (adjacent to trees in middle distance)

Section of Stone Alignment adjacent to Bancbryn Cairn Cemetery (CM333)

Close up of a stone within the stone alignment showing scale

Looking NE along line of stone alignment

Annex 1

Period
All types of monuments that characterize a category or period should be considered for preservation.

Rarity
There are some monument categories which in certain periods are so scarce that all surviving examples which still retain some archaeological potential should be preserved. In general, however, a selection must be made which portrays the typical and commonplace as well as the rare.
This process should take account of all aspects of the distribution of a particular class of monument, both in a national and a regional context.

Documentation
The significance of a monument may be enhanced by the existence of records of previous investigation or, in the case of more recent monuments, by the supporting evidence of contemporary written records.

Group value
The value of a single monument (such as a field system) may be greatly enhanced by its association with related contemporary monuments (such as a settlement and cemetery) or with monuments of different periods. In some cases, it is preferable to protect the complete group of monuments, including associated and adjacent land, rather than to protect isolated monuments within the group.

Survival/condition
The survival of a monument's archaeological potential both above and below ground is a particularly important consideration and should be assessed in relation to its present condition and surviving features.

Fragility/vulnerability
Highly important archaeological evidence from some field monuments can be destroyed by a single ploughing or unsympathetic treatment. Vulnerable monuments of this nature would particularly benefit from the statutory protection which scheduling confers. There are also existing standing structures of particular form or complexity whose value can again be severely reduced by neglect or careless treatment and which are similarly well suited by scheduled monument protection, even if these structures are already listed historic buildings.

Diversity
Some monuments may be selected for scheduling because they possess a combination of high quality features, others because of a single important attribute.

Potential
On occasion, the nature of the evidence cannot be specified precisely, but it may still be possible to document reasons anticipating its existence and importance and so to demonstrate the justification for scheduling. This is usually confined to sites rather than upstanding monuments.