

Abermagwr Project 2010

Report of first season of excavation, 2010



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Cambrian Archaeological Association

Abermagwr Roman Villa (Ceredigion) SN 6688 7416. NPRN 405315





Figure 3. Aerial photograph of Abermagwr Roman villa on 24th July 2006, during a severe drought, revealing the full extents of the villa enclosure together with parchmark evidence for the rectangular main building of the villa, upper right. With hindsight, the parchmarks of the appended Room 6 can be made out at the rear. The clarity of the parchmarks of the main villa building is surprising, considering that the grass roots are responding to the stone and clay packed wall foundations which lie between 40-49cm below the topsoil along the rear (north) wall of the building (Crown Copyright RCAHMW, AP_2006_3798).

3b. Historical and place-name evidence for the villa ruin

Two items of historical and place-name interest were noted by Gerald Morgan in 2009 and subsequently researched. The eighteenth century Trawsgoed Estate map shows part of the northern boundaries of the 'villa enclosure' fossilized in later field banks, prior to improvement and clearance to make one large field. The part of the field containing the villa is named 'Dol capel' suggestive of the site of a lost ecclesiastical building. Morgan also noted that the place-name *Abermagwr* contains the element 'fagwr' which can mean 'old ruin' and may relate to the same building described by the 'Dol capel' name. David Hopewell (in AW 47 (2007), 92) notes that the field containing the fort annex outside Caer Gai Roman fort, Bala, is similarly called 'Cae Capel', and this seems show a preponderance for communities of the Middle Ages or thereabouts to assign visible ruins a religious/church/chapel origin. Both names at Abermagwr suggest that

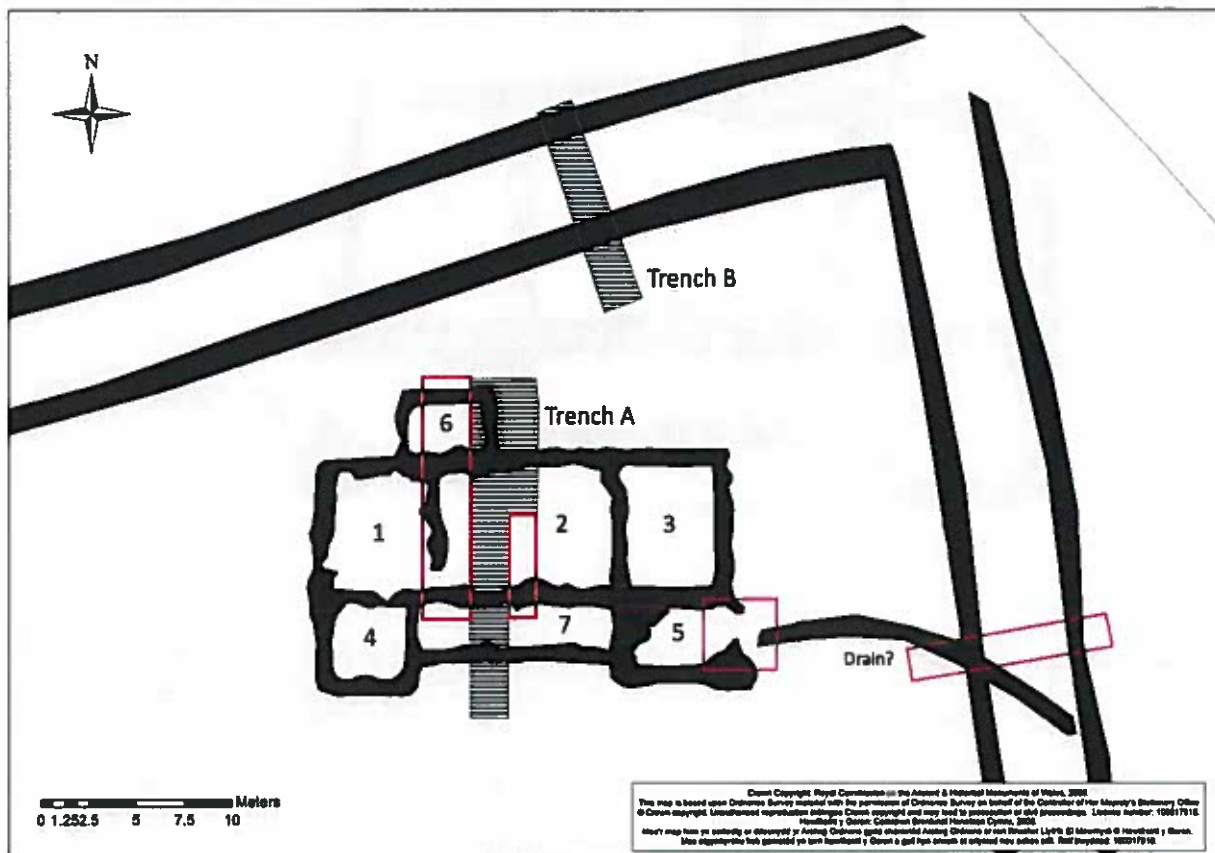


Figure 4. Abermagwr Roman villa. Plan prepared from simplified magnetometry plot showing 2010 excavation trenches 'A' and 'B' and proposed trenches (in red) for 2011 excavations (Crown Copyright RCAHMW. Figure based upon Ordnance Survey mapping "Reproduced by permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of HMSO. © Crown copyright and database right 2009. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence number 100022206).

5. The building sequence revealed in Trench A.

Trench A, measuring 18m north-south by 3.6m in the northern part, narrowing to 2m on the south, was designed to sample the building from north to south, from an area outside the verandah of the building on the south side to the rear of the main block on the north, together with examination of the outside angle between the main block and the additional Room 6. Nowhere in Trench A was the depth of ploughsoil seen to be greater than some 22cm, tallying with the recollection of the landowner about the deepest ploughing episodes on site during the 1970s. The lack of deep-ploughing meant that the state of preservation of the buried deposits, and hence the stratigraphy, was extremely good considering that it was a plough-levelled site in agricultural land. Had this relatively fragile and complex buried building lain in an area of more aggressive cultivation it would certainly have been badly damaged or even entirely erased, yet may have yielded little recognisable building debris such as stone sections, roof or flue tiles normally recognised during field walking.



Figure 6: Upper rubble layer (002) interpreted as discarded material up-cast from the robber trench (marked left) of the north villa wall.

As the excavation proceeded, the lack of masonry or substantial wall foundations was considered puzzling given the extremely clear magnetic response shown on both the original and the high-resolution geophysical surveys (Figure 1). Comparison of the open trench with the geophysical plot showed that the main wall lines were marked by soil-filled voids in the lower rubble layers. Only at a far lower level (40-49cm below the topsoil for the north villa wall footings) were the stone and clay packed foundations of the walls discovered, at the base of increasingly clearly-defined robber trenches. The theft of in-situ masonry walling had been frustratingly thorough over the whole of Trench A, save for one potential block remaining in the east section above the foundations of the south wall of the building. However, considerable quantities of quarried stone had been discarded across the site yielding a good sample for study, although no dressed stone was discovered. At the upper level it was difficult to separate Roman collapse/demolition rubble from piles of upcast from the trenches, other than in a few areas, with the two episodes generally intermixed and disturbed.



Figure 8: *Excavation in progress showing robber trenches of the rear wall of Room 2 (foreground) and the footings of the wall of Room 6 (centre top) where it abuts the former. View from south-east.*

5c. Lower collapse levels, floor levels & floor hearths

At the lower level, excavation of Room 2 yielded similar deposits to those uncovered in Room 6 (see page 8). As the original Roman floor level was reached, dense deposits of horizontally-laid, broken roofing stone tiles were discovered packed together (e.g. 010, 012), together with a high proportion of charcoal and indications of burning (Figures 9 & 10).



Figure 9: *View from the east of Context 004 in section, a closely-packed and well-defined layer of broken roofing stone tiles, charcoal and debris infilling Room 6. Only the eastern part of Room 6 was investigated in 2010, this layer yielding both the first and best preserved Constantinian coin (small find 002) and the shard of window glass (small find 001)*

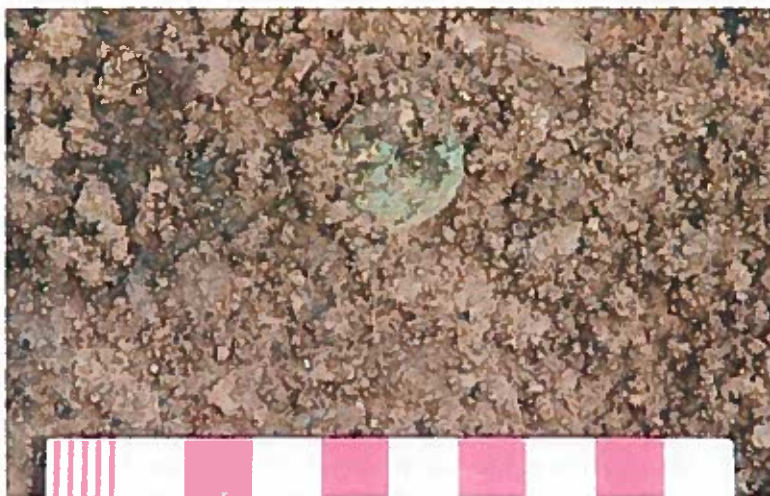


Figure 12: Coin (small find 005) on discovery, trowelled up from its original resting place on a stone tile at the northern end of Room 2.



Figure 12a: Roman coins found at the villa, from left to right SF009, SF005 and SF002. See Appendix 2 below for details.



Figure 14: View of southern hearth (036) in Room 2, with the footings of the southern villa wall crossing top to bottom, far right. The hearth is not structurally defined, but is represented by rich charcoal deposits and scorched clay. The hearth was characterised by the remains of a Black Burnished 1 cooking pot (Figure 27) crushed into the burnt deposits.

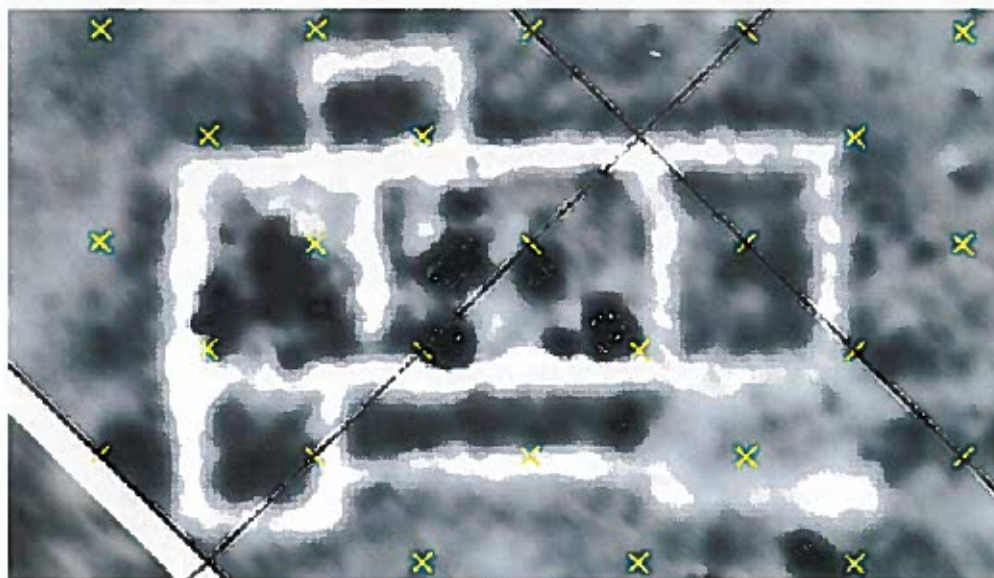


Figure 15: Detail of the 2010 magnetometry survey with yellow grid crosses at 5m intervals. Black 'voids' or anomalies are visible in the principal (central) Room 2, and in Room 1 to the left, as well as in the east corner of the verandah/corridor (room 7). These were initially interpreted as possible areas of floor collapse above a hypocaust. Post-excavation reappraisal of the magnetometry shows that the anomalies in Room 2

discussion with Tim Palmer during a site visit confirmed that these thin stone tiles could be quarried throughout the local region as part of the exposures of Silurian shales.

Early finds of near-complete examples of stone roof tiles showed a prominent point at their base, typical of pentagonally-cut stone tiles and slates found elsewhere in Roman Britain. A particularly well-preserved 'dump' or loose stack of roofing stone tiles (037), at least one complete, was uncovered on the penultimate day of the excavation (Figures 17, 18 & 20). This lay in the outside angle of the north wall and Room 6, sitting above a clay/colluvium layer which may be an original Roman ground surface. It was initially thought that this was slippage from the villa roof. Roger Goodburn who visited the excavations considered this unlikely and proposed it as a 'sorting stack' left by a robber. Whatever its date it remains only partially excavated and will be a good source of roofing tiles in the 2011 season.



Figure 17: Fragmentary (left) and near-complete (right) pentagonal stone roof tiles. The right-hand tile was found in the pile of roofing tiles (context 037) and this view shows its outer face which may have been weathered in-situ.

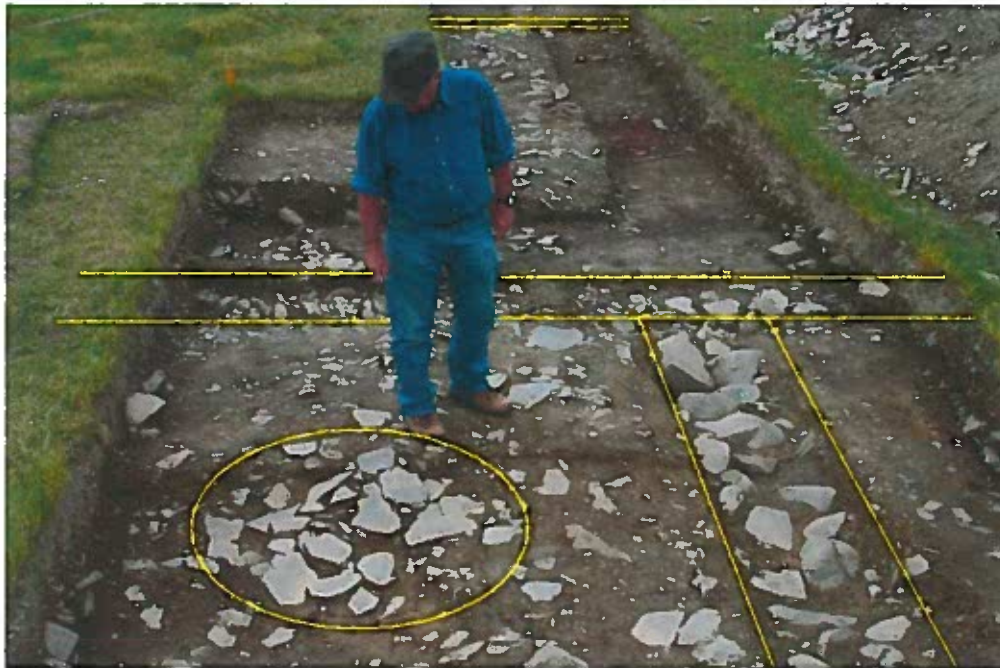


Figure 20: General view of Trench A from its northern end, on completion of the 2010 excavations, with pertinent features highlighted. The view looks south to the footings of the rear (north) wall with the footings of the appended rear Room 6 partly visible on the right of frame. The south wall footings are marked in the far background by yellow lines passing left to right; the intervening space is the principal Room 2. In the foreground, Jeffrey Davies stands within the outside angle of the rear walls of Room 2 and Room 6, examining the pile of stone roof tiles (context 037, circled).

6. The outer enclosure ditches

Trench B was excavated through the double-ditched enclosure ditches to the north of the villa in the hope that a quantity of datable finds, arising from the close proximity of the villa, would be discovered. In the event a considerable depth of colluvium or hillwash, between 70-80cm deep, was found to have been deposited across the enclosure ditches and the flanking cobbled surface of the villa yard. Only a partial section of the inner (south) ditch was discovered. Even this was not well-distinguished from the surrounding natural subsoil. The ditch base lay some 42cm below the level of the cobbled villa yard, but 1.18m below the modern ground surface, the fill of the ditch being virtually clean. As noted above in 5d the cobbled yard surface which was enclosed by the ditches on their south (inner side) lay only 2cm higher than that uncovered to the south of the villa, demonstrating a horizontal cobbled yard surface surrounding the villa. Only towards the lip of the ditch did the cobbled surface rise some 30cm in a gradual slope.

Current Archaeology, October 2010, page 10. Finds will be deposited in the Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth.



Figure 23: Abermagwr Roman villa. Three local primary schools visited the dig to learn about the Romans. This view shows the visit of Ysgol Llanafan/Llanafan Primary School.

8. Summary conclusions

The Abermagwr project overturns our understanding of late Roman mid Wales. Prior to 2009 it was not recognised that late Roman villas in Wales could be delineated by sharp-angled enclosures. After the Abermagwr enclosure was revealed, similar work by the Dyfed Archaeological Trust (DAT) demonstrated a close parallel at Llys Brychan villa, Carmarthen (Figure 24). It was previously assumed that mid Wales was not as fertile, prosperous nor indeed as Romanised as south and east Wales and southern England to invite long-term investment in Romano-British villa farming estates, with Roman forts abandoned around AD130. With the confirmation of the Abermagwr Roman villa, we are at the start of a new investigation of Roman/'native' interaction in late Roman mid-Wales. The villa offers the potential to study room function and regional building techniques, for wider research on the farming estate and villa environs, and the potential for 'settlement shift' from nearby defended enclosures (one lying in a field adjacent to the villa). Future regional survey linked to research at Abermagwr will focus on other potential villa sites, including a bivallate sharp-angled enclosure recorded as parchmarks to the west of the Roman fort of Caerau, Beulah (Figure 25).

Proposals for a 2011 season of excavation

With the limitations of an exploratory excavation in 2010, and a small workforce, only the latest Roman levels were attained. The objectives of the 2011 season are thus:

- a. An extension of the excavated area of the exposed Roman levels in Trench A, examining earlier floor surfaces and hearths and the wall foundations to understand the longevity of occupation or re-occupation on site and the function/s of the principal Room 2.
- b. The excavation of a new exploratory trench across the outer enclosure ditches to the east of the villa to establish their date, character and relationship to the villa.
- c. The excavation of a small trench over the eastern *ala* or wing, where the geophysical survey suggests a drain. This may indicate the existence of a small bath house or plumbed room and should be an excellent repository of dateable material.
- d. Recruitment of a dedicated team of experienced excavators for the 2011 season, with funding obtained for local accommodation and subsistence, to ensure completion of all objectives within the two-week excavation.

Acknowledgements

Permission for the excavation was granted by the landowner, Huw Tudor, who also assisted with practical arrangements including machining of the trench and reinstatement by Robert Hamer. Funding was provided by the Cambrian Archaeological Association. The voluntary digging team consisted of Debbie Richards, with Linda Jones and David Thompson for the majority of the dig, with additional help willingly provided by David Browne, Louise Barker, Olwyn Pritchard, Harry Charnock, Sion Griffiths, Howard Thomas, Scott Lloyd, Susan Fielding, Geoff Ward, Dr Simon Rodway and Dr Barry Lewis without whom the excavation would not have proceeded so well within the two weeks. Ken Murphy and Richard Jones at the Dyfed Archaeological Trust provided a range of tools and a dumpy level to assist with the project. Richard Hopkins kindly loaned his metal detectors for the duration of the project. Thanks are due to the Secretary, Dr Peter Wakelin, and Commissioners of the Royal Commission for allowing Toby Driver to co-direct the project. Angharad Williams, with David Browne, at the Royal Commission coordinated the educational visits to the excavation and provided advice on educational materials for the project. Louise Barker at the Royal Commission surveyed the site grid and trenches using survey-grade GPS and fixed the TBM, while Susan Fielding and Scott Lloyd carried out a wider total-station survey of the excavation site and field boundaries. Sal Garfi at the Royal Commission assisted with the geo-referencing of the various survey datasets into ArcMap GIS. Richard Brewer, NMW, Professor William Manning and Ken Murphy, DAT, kindly provided academic support for the project. Roger Goodburn provided information on other Roman villas with parallels to Abermagwr. Derek Baskerville liaised on behalf of the Trawsgoed Community Council.

Appendix 2.

Abermagwr 2010 – coins (JLD; John Casey)

SF002. CONSTANTINE I Date AD 314-315. RIC VII, 1-9, 15-24, 27, variant. Lyons mint: F { T
PLG

Obv. IMP CONSTANTINVS PF AVG

Rev. SOLI INVIC-TO COMITI

Wear: UW/SW

SF005. CONSTANTINE I Date, probably AD 310-313. RIC VI. London mint: * { requires checking
PLN

Obv. IMP CONSTANTINVS [PF AVG]

Rev. SOLI INVIC-TO COMITI

Wear: UW/SW

SF009. CONSTANTINE I Date AD 325-326. RIC VII 461. Trier mint. {
PTR .)

Obv. CONSTAN-TINVS AVG

Rev. PROVIDEN-TIA AVGG, Wear: UW/UW

1. Bowl with flat grooved rim. AD 250-350.
2. Shallow bowl or platter with incised decoration within base. AD 150-400.
3. Shallow bowl or platter AD 150-400.
4. Cooking pot AD 270-350.
5. Cooking pot AD 270-350.
6. Cooking pot AD 270-350.
7. Cooking pot AD 270-350.
8. Cooking pot AD 270-350.
9. Bowl or platter AD 150-400.
10. Base of cooking pot or platter.
11. Base of cooking pot or platter.
12. Cooking pot AD 270-350.

Vessels in grey ware analogous to BB1

1. Cooking pot.
2. Cooking pot.
3. Cooking pot.
4. Cooking pot AD 270-350.

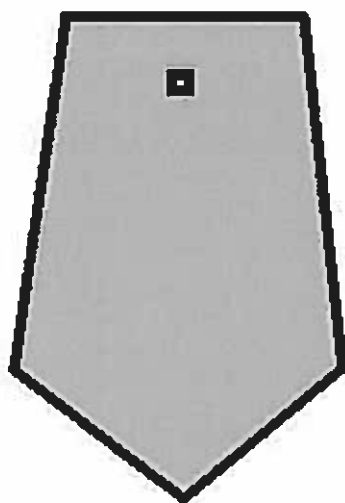
Amphorae

1. Three sherds of Dressel 20 (Context 017)
2. Handle of Dressel 20 or possibly, though unlikely, Dressel 23 (Context 023). Possibly early-mid 3rd century AD, but could well be earlier. Associated pottery is of c.AD 270-350.

Other vessels

1. Fragment of a vessel in a self-coloured fabric with numerous large (?quartz) inclusions (Context 004). Possibly prehistoric.
2. Ring-neck flagon in buff fabric (Context 001). Later 1st century AD.
3. Jar with shallow cordon.
4. Vessel with lid-seating.
5. Flagon or jar with cordon towards base.
6. Large jar.
7. Flagon or jar.
8. Thin walled jar.
9. Vessel in orange fabric with grey core. Possibly Severn Valley ware.
10. Vessel in orange/buff fabric.
11. Vessel in buff fabric.
12. Vessel in hard orange/red fabric.
13. Part of ?flagon or handled jar in buff fabric.
14. Jar in light orange fabric with large inclusions.

b. Standard sizes of pentagonally-cut stone roofing tiles



Pentagonal stone roofing tiles were cut to a standard shape and size, conforming roughly to:

LENGTH: 39 centimetres from flat top to pointed base

WIDTH: (max at widest point) 26 centimetres. (width of top) 20 centimetres

ANGLE OF TAPERED LOWER SECTION: Between 40-50 degrees.