
BRYNCIR QUARRY, GARNDOLBENMAEN, ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEFS, 2004-5

GAT Project No. G1653

Report No. 582



Prepared for R.M.C. Ltd

By G.H. Smith
May 2005

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd
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REPORT ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEFS DURING QUARRY EXTENSIONS, 2004

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1. SUMMARY

This report covers a series of archaeological watching briefs carried out in advance of gravel extraction during extensions to gravel quarrying as part of Bryncir Quarry, on Blaen-y-cae Farm, Garndolbenmaen, SH 4880 4525 (Fig. 1). The work was recommended by Gwynedd Archaeological Planning Service (GAPS) because of the considerable number of archaeological features or finds from the area recorded in the Gwynedd Historic Environment Record (HER, formerly the Gwynedd Sites and Monuments Record) at Bangor. This had been further emphasised by the discovery of a small Early Bronze Age cremation cemetery, in use within the period 2100-1750 BC, during a previous phase of quarry expansion in 2003. This cemetery was subsequently fully excavated thanks to the funding provided by RMC Ltd (Smith 2004). Gwynedd Archaeological Trust was asked by RMC Ltd to carry out the archaeological work, described here. The watching briefs covered by the present report identified features only of minor importance and therefore no further archaeological work has been recommended.

2. PROJECT BACKGROUND AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gravel extraction has been taking place at Bryncir for many years and a number of archaeological finds have been made, the most significant being the remains of the Roman fort of Pen Llystyn. Recent extensions of the quarry have been preceded by archaeological assessment and watching briefs provided by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust at the request of RMC Ltd (GAT 1994, Jones and Davidson 2000). The present report covers several separate watching briefs carried out in 2004 during extensions to the quarry area or during excavation of new access roads. Thanks must go to RMC Ltd for provision of funding for these visits. Thanks must also go to Gareth Davies, Manager of the Bryncir Quarry, and to all the quarry workers for their friendly co-operation and help.

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AIMS

The aims of the watching brief were to investigate and record all archaeological features revealed during the soil stripping operation, and to ascertain whether any further work was necessary.

4. METHODOLOGY

A 21-tonne 360° tracked excavator with a 2m wide ditching bucket was used throughout the watching brief. This machine had an added straight edge covering the bucket teeth. This allowed the topsoil to be removed cleanly, providing good conditions for archaeological observation. Occasionally a large wheeled loader was also used to push off the topsoil. This did not taken off the topsoil evenly or cleanly and the wheels cut up the exposed subsoil surface. When this machine was used the conditions for archaeological observation were poor and it would be preferable for a tracked excavator to be used in any future work to ensure an adequate standard of recording.

Watching briefs in 2003 had covered part of the area to the north of Blaen-y-cae farm (Fig. 2 Area A). There were four phases of watching brief in 2004:

1. 21st May 2004 (Fig. 2 Area B), P. Jones.
2. 19th and 20th July 2004 (Fig. 2 Areas C and D), G.H. Smith.
3. 11th August 2004 (Fig. 2 Areas E and F), J.A. Roberts.
4. 30th September, 1st and 2nd October 2004 (Fig. 2 Area G), M. Jones and J.A. Roberts.
5. 8th February 2005 (Area H), J.A. Roberts.

5. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND TOPOGRAPHIC SETTING

5.1 Topographic setting

The site is situated on the farm of Blaen-y-cae (SH48264523), 2km to the north-west of Garndolbenmaen. The area comprises gentle slopes at the west side of Mynydd Graig Goch, the westernmost outlier of the Nantlle Ridge. It overlooks the broad valley of the Afon Dwyfach and this and the area around it provided a relatively productive agricultural area that would have been attractive to prehistoric settlement, particularly along the better-drained lower slopes of the mountains, which the pre-19th century road followed before construction of the present A487 road (Fig. 1).

5.2 Prehistoric period

The area between Bryncir and Garndolbenmaen is particularly rich in archaeological remains of all periods. The earliest period is that represented by a Neolithic polished axe found on the land of Dafarn Faig about 1km to the north. On the same farm have also been found a perforated stone, a hammer-stone and several spindle whorls, all probably of Bronze Age date. Another, more spectacular find of the Early Bronze Age was a well-preserved decorated gold lunula, a crescentic-shaped neck ornament, the only example of such object known from Wales. It was found in the peat on Llecheiddior-Uchaf arm about 1km to the south-west, in the valley immediately west of Bryncir. This object, probably import from Ireland, was probably a ritual deposit and points to the existence of a wealthy community in the area. There are also a standing stone and a possible burial cairn on Llystyn Gwyn farm adjoining Blaen-y-cae to the north. The hill at Bryncir to the west is a prominent landscape feature and was used for burials in the second millennium BC. In 1821 a stone edged cairn was found there, within which was a line of ten stone cists covering urns containing cremation burials, one with a piece of copper or bronze, all unfortunately now lost (Evans 1923). Other Bronze Age pottery has also been found during gravel quarrying at Bryncir (Griffiths 1959) and during excavation of the Roman fort there in 1960 (Hogg 1969). The settlement to which these burial features belonged was likely to be nearby and possible evidence of such settlement is to be found in the shape of several mounds of burnt stone mounds to the north at Llystyn Gwyn and there are others to the south-east and south suggesting an extensive area of activity. This type of feature is thought to derive from long-term communal cooking activities and of a variety of ages although most of those excavated have been found to be of the Middle or Later Bronze Age (Davidson 1998). There are also remains of a number of stone-built roundhouses nearby at Cefn Trefor Uchaf just to the east and on the slopes of Mynydd Graig Goch (Fig. 1). There are others to the south at Llystyn Uchaf and towards Garndolbenmaen. Some of these may represent the Bronze Age settlement to which the burials and finds belong although past excavations suggest that most of these stone-built round houses belong to the late first millennium BC or to the Roman period while those of the Bronze Age were of timber and have not left any recognisable remains in the present landscape.

5.3 Roman and medieval periods

The Bryncir area was valuable for agriculture, because of the good drainage of the soils on gravel and for its commanding position in relation to routes from north to south around the mountains, demonstrated by its choice for the Roman fort in the first century AD. The original fort, the remains of which have been destroyed by quarrying, was an auxiliary fort founded about 80 AD, but burnt down soon after. It was subsequently rebuilt as a fortlet for a small garrison between about 100 and 130 AD, but abandoned again within a short period (Hogg 1969). Pen Llystyn is also believed to have been some kind of centre of authority during the early medieval period, the *Llys* in the name referring to a court or hall, possibly based in an enclosure on the site of the Roman fort, of which there were tentative remains recorded during the salvage work on the fort (Edwards and Lane 1988). The name Llystyn derives from *Llys Din* – Court of the fort. The importance of the site is supported by the presence of a number of sites of rectangular platform houses of medieval type in the vicinity and of an important inscribed stone of AD 6-7th century date, now at the farm of Llystyn Gwyn, suggesting that there was some kind of ecclesiastical foundation here.

Dolbenmaen 2km to the south-east, was itself an important medieval centre at the bridging point of the Afon Dwyfor where it flows through a fairly narrow pass. There are small fortifications, thought to be of Early Medieval date, on both of the rocky crags overlooking the bridging point and there is also the motte or earth mound of a small earthwork and timber castle, next to the bridging point of the river.

6. RESULTS OF THE WATCHING BRIEFS

6.1 Area B, 21st May 2004 (Figs 2-6). Visit by P. Jones

This area was to the north-east of Blaen-y-cae Farm and was an extension of the area that had previously revealed an Early Bronze Age cremation cemetery, excavated in 2003 (Figs 2 and 3). Following initial discovery of this cemetery a geophysical survey had been carried out of the remainder of the field in case this might show if the cemetery was more extensive or if there were other similar or associated features, since the cemetery may have been more extensive or have been covered by a burial mound. The geophysical survey, however, did not demonstrate the presence of other possible features although this could have been due to a sub-soil that was unsuitable for such survey, in which case other features could still be present. However, watching briefs of other areas around the cemetery revealed no further features, although such features could still occur. Certainly the burial pits and other features revealed during the excavation of the cemetery were so small and shallow that they probably would not have been located by geophysical survey alone. The geophysical survey covered the area stripped in May 2004, showing a number of minor anomalies but none that appeared likely to be of an archaeological nature. However, one small feature was subsequently found that coincided with one of these geophysical anomalies (Fig. 3).

The area studied was an irregular rectangle about 91m by 50m (Fig. 2, B). The topsoil was stripped to reveal a mixed yellow, orange and brown very stony subsoil. There were also patches of very dark brown peaty soil which was examined but revealed no charcoal or any other debris indicating habitation or other human activity. Many large rounded and sub-angular boulders (0.5-2.5m max dimension), a few of which were visible in the topsoil surface before stripping were dragged out by the machine causing considerable disturbance of the subsoil surface.

The stripped area proved to be almost completely sterile of archaeological features or deposits. The only exception was a small group of features at the north-west of the stripped area (Fig. 3) about 15m south-west of the area excavated in 2003, containing the cremation cemetery. The features showed as small patches of charcoal-rich soil observed in association with patches of light grey silt. The features formed a line oriented approximately north-west to south-east and 2m long. The smaller patches to the south-east were found to be shallow hollows about 20mm deep. Only one of the patches, Feature 40, at the north-west end of the group, proved to be more substantial, and this is described below.

Feature 40

This was a sub-rectangular pit, 0.40m by 0.35m in plan and 0.15m deep. After cleaning the immediate area the ground surface was seen to slope gently from north-east to south-west. It was unclear if the feature had originally been cut from a higher level than the subsoil surface. The general area was photographed and the feature half-sectioned and drawn in plan and section (Figs 5 and 6). The pit had gently sloping sides and a rounded base with steeper sides at the north and north-east. The fill consisted of dark grey-brown silt containing a significant amount of charcoal and some small pebbles (<5mm dia.). The fill was retained as a sample. There were no bones or pottery that might indicate human activity.

6.2 Areas C and D, 19th and 20th July 2004 (Figs 2 and 6-7). Visit by G.H. Smith

This phase saw the beginning of topsoil stripping of the new haulage road to provide access to the new quarry area south of Blaen-y-cae farmhouse. During the initial phase of the watching brief the westernmost part of the haulage road was stripped through an area of rough grazing in uneven marshland (Area C). The stripped level comprised peat ranging from c. 0.60m depth at the west end and 1.5m at the central part (Fig. 7). The peat was fine sedge peat but there were some woody remains including some pieces of larger fallen timber and two areas of roots or fallen branches. The peat lay over a subsoil of stony till with some patches of silt or clay. A small stream gully crossed the eastern end of this area.

The location of this area, close to a small stream would be typical for an area of prehistoric 'burnt mound' activity but no burnt stones were seen anywhere in the stripped area and there were no finds of any type to indicate early human activity in the vicinity.

The area of haulage road of area C proved to be problematic because of the wetness of the marshy land through which it ran. It was necessary to quarry some material from another small area close to areas A and B to provide a foundation for the new road. An additional visit was therefore made on 20th July. A long narrow area (Area D) about 50m long and 20m wide was stripped between the temporary wire fence and the original stone field wall (Fig. 2). The topsoil was a humic loam changing to more peaty soil at the south-west which was marshy. The subsoil was a rather variable textured stony till interspersed with softer silts. One feature was identified. This was an approximately straight linear feature at the south end of the area (Fig. 8). It was oriented approximately west-south-west to east-north-east, about 15 long and 1m wide. A sample segment was excavated and it proved to be a very shallow rounded-section scoop, 1.07m wide and 0.13m deep. The fill was naturally accumulated peat and the feature faded out at both ends. There were no finds and the feature seems likely to be a short-lived Post-medieval drain dug to help drain a wet marshy hollow at the north-east end of the feature.

The feature was measured in to the nearby stone field boundary wall and the trial section was drawn and photographed.

6.3 Areas E and F, 11th August 2004 (Fig. 2 and 9-10). Visit by J.A. Roberts

In the next phase of the watching brief the remainder of the new haulage road south of Blaen-y-cae farmhouse was stripped using a 360° tracked excavator with a straight-edged bucket. This part of the road lay within the south edge of two fields of improved pasture on a slightly higher level than the marshy area followed by the western part of the haulage road (Fig. 9). This was therefore better quality land, which might have seen more past human use, but which in addition would probably have been ploughed, reducing the quality of survival of any archaeological remains. The topsoil was removed to an average depth of 0.35m exposing an orange-brown subsoil, which was identified as a glacial deposit. A stone-filled field drain was identified c. 50m east of the junction with Area E and bisecting the road on a NW-SE axis and cutting the natural subsoil (Fig. 10). The deposit backfilling the drain comprised medium-sized sub-rounded stones, fragmented slate and fragmented brick. No artefacts were recovered but the drain could confidently be dated from its inclusions to the Post-medieval period.

Several dark patches of burnt or humic matter were also identified in this area. They were cleaned and investigated but appeared to be evidence for decayed bioturbation. The best example was half sectioned, and from its profile was recorded as a tree or root-hole.

The final 50m stretch of the haulage road was then completed and an additional area (Area F) stripped to provide a vehicle turning circle for the quarry extraction.

No other archaeological features of any description were identified.

Conclusion

The only archaeology present on site was a post-medieval field drain of probable 19th century construction (Fig. 9). It was associated with the Blaen-y-cae farmstead, running from that farmstead, down the natural gradient and into the marshland below. The evidence suggested that the area had been undisturbed or rough pasture throughout the post-glacial period.

6.4 Area G, 30th September, 1st and 2nd October 2004 (Fig. 2). Visits by J.A. Roberts and M. Jones

This area (Area G) was the main new quarrying area (Blaen-y-cae South). The topsoil was stripped using a 360° tracked excavator with a straight-edged bucket, which provided good visibility for identification of archaeological features but for the last part of the visit this was hampered by very wet weather conditions.

Removal of the topsoil revealed subsoil of yellow gravelly glacial till with variable amounts of stone and areas of manganese and iron panning (Fig. 10). At the top of the slope closer to the farmhouse was an area of larger stones than elsewhere in the subsoil, between 50mm to 200mm long, probably a natural glacial dump although a field clearance cairn had been recorded in this area during the original assessment (Jones and Davidson 2002, Feature 1).

No archaeological features were visible in the subsoil other than the course of the disused Post-medieval leat crossing the south side of the area identified during the original assessment (Jones and Davidson 2002, Feature 3). This water-course once provided power to a small water-wheel at the south side of Blaen-y-cae farmhouse. The head of water to the leat and wheel was produced by means of a small reservoir with a sluice uphill on the east side of the adjoining road, recorded on the 1918 Ordnance Survey 1:2500 scale map. The leat was a small ditch cut into the slope and following the contours, revetted in part by a bordering bank.

The only finds from Area G were of Post-medieval pottery.

6.5 Area H, 8th February 2005 (Fig. 2). Visit by J. A. Roberts.

A visual inspection of the ground prior to stripping did not reveal any features other than the disused leat to Blaen-y-cae farm noted in the original assessment. An area of approximately 200sq. m was stripped using a 21 ton 360⁰ excavator. The topography was quite undulating with a central high point sloping down to both north and south. The southern slope dropped to the silted-up leat that ran westwards towards Blaen-y-cae farm.

The topsoil varied in depth between 0.25 and 0.50m becoming thinner at the central high point. Removal of the topsoil revealed natural fluvio-glacial deposits including patches of sand and gravel. There were no man-made features present and no significant artefacts were recovered.

7. CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Blaen-y-cae North (Area B)

This was an extension to areas covered by watching briefs and excavation in 2003 (Smith 2004). The features located in 2004 provided no clue as to date or function. However, their proximity to the features of the cremation cemetery excavated in 2003 and the presence of much charcoal in the fill suggests that they are likely to be associated with that funerary activity. The features excavated in 2003 included a number of small pits with charcoal-rich fill in addition to four pits that contained cremation burials. It is further notable that the features located in 2004 lay in a line oriented north-west to south-east, as was the main group of features excavated in 2003. The two groups seemed too far apart to suggest that they might be part of the same alignment. However, the two lines were in on a similar alignment to each other (Figs 3 and 4). It is best to regard the two areas of features as related but not necessarily contemporaneous. The north-west to south-east orientation might have some significance in relation to the position of sunrise at mid-winter or sunset at mid-summer. It seems a significant coincidence that ten cremation burials found on the hill at Bryncir in 1821 were also reported to be in a line, although unfortunately there is no record of their orientation (Evans 1923). The watching brief in 2004 provided a useful addition to the record of the cremation cemetery excavated in 2003, at the same time demonstrating that the cemetery was quite a succinct isolated group of features and not just a part of a much wider area of activity.

7.2 Blaen-y-cae North (Area D)

This small area was in marshy land with a peaty cover and produced only one feature - a probable Post-medieval drain.

7.3 The new haulage road (Areas C and E)

This long narrow strip cut through some early peat deposits with preserved natural wood and timbers at the western end and through better-drained land at the east but the only features were Post-medieval field drains.

7.4 Blaen-y-cae South (Areas F, G and H)

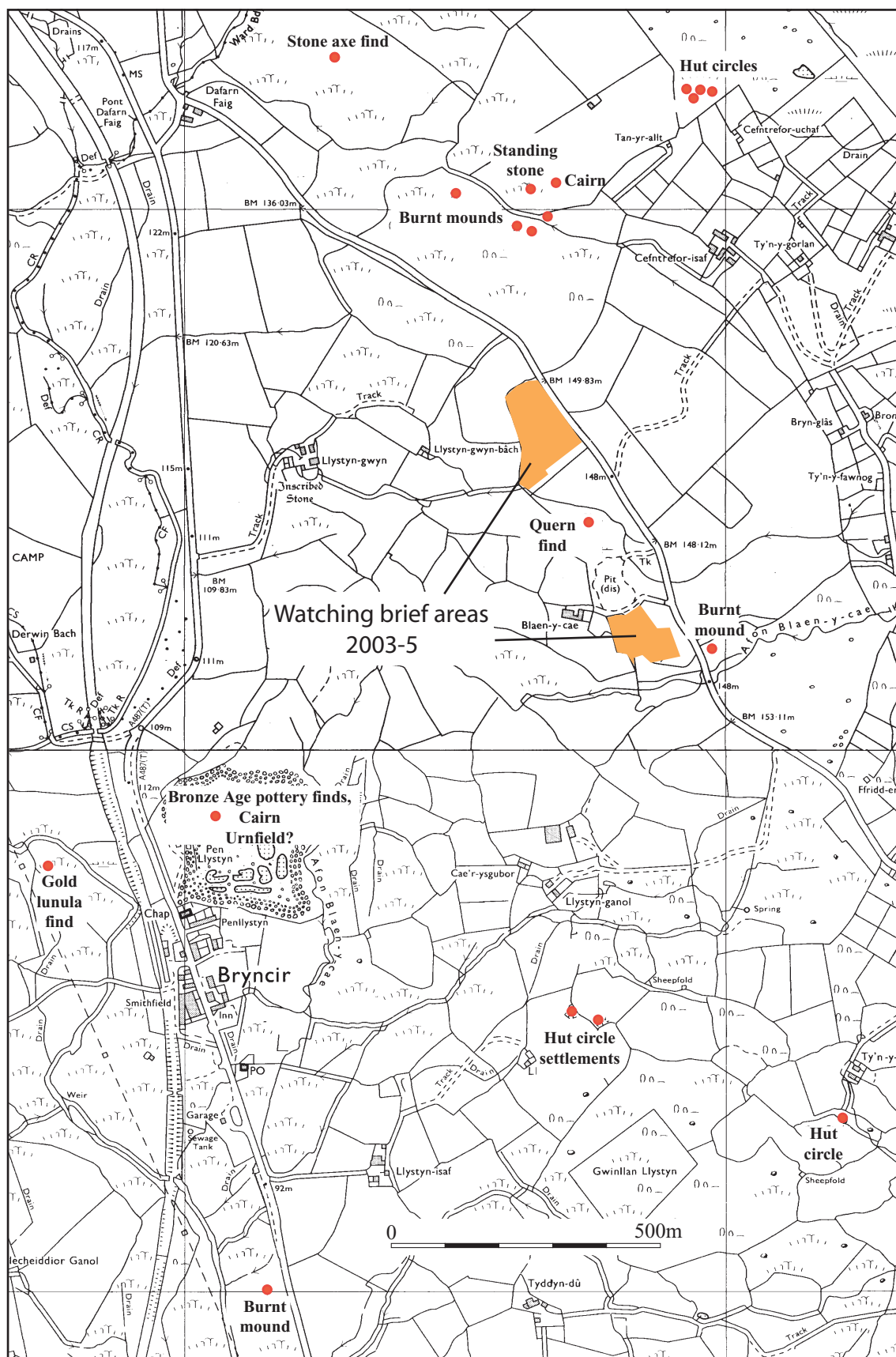
This large area revealed no archaeological features apart from the line of the disused leat recorded on the RMC digital plans and noted in the original archaeological assessment (Jones and Davidson 2002, Feature 3). The leat once provided water to power a water-wheel at the south side of Blaen-y-cae farmhouse.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Only one feature was identified that would require further study or excavation prior to quarrying beyond the recording that took place during the watching briefs. This was Pit 40 in Area B, which possibly formed a part of the Early Bronze Age cremation cemetery, 20m to the north-west, located and excavated in 2003. The pit was fully excavated and recorded during the work and its fill retained for analysis.

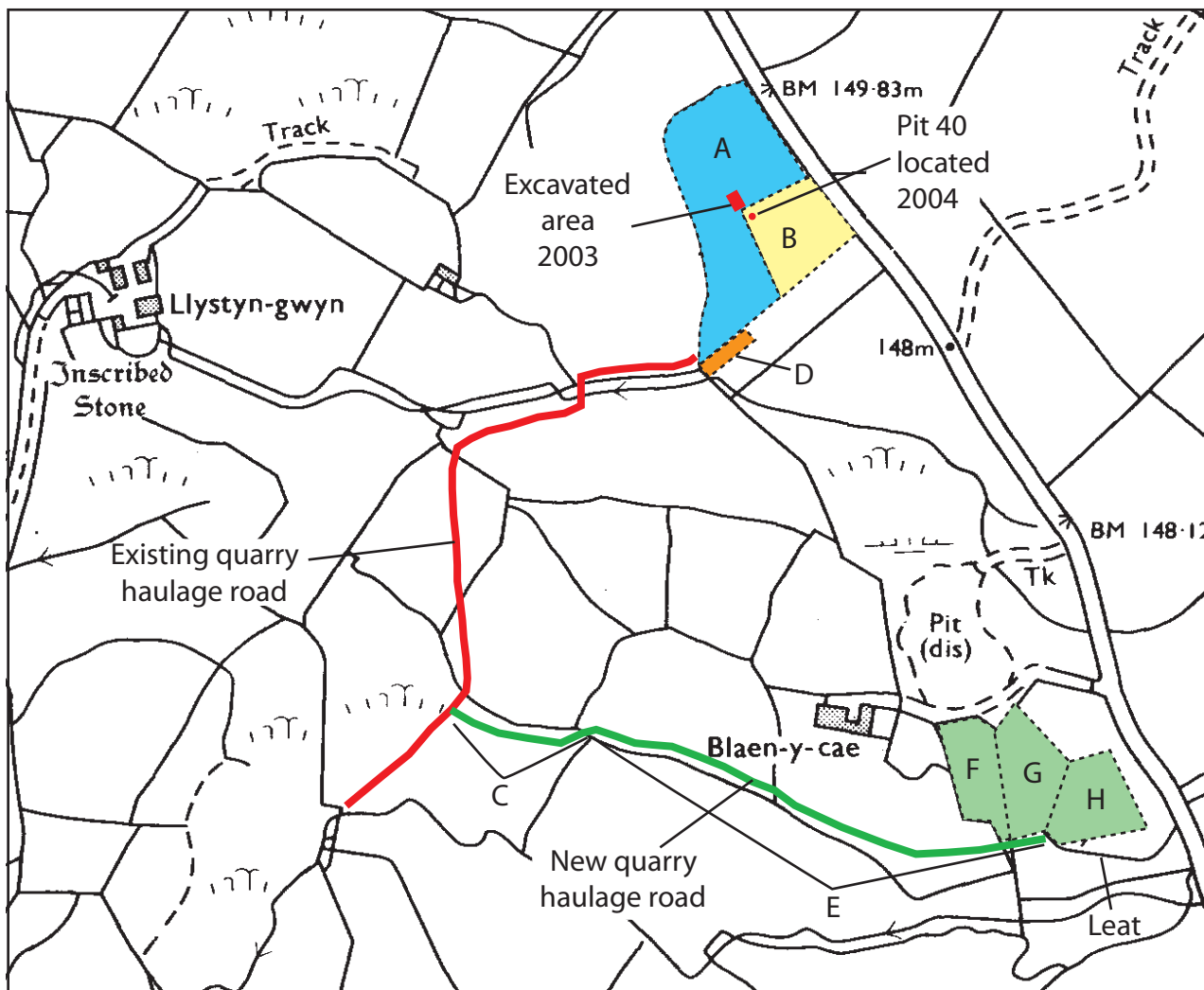
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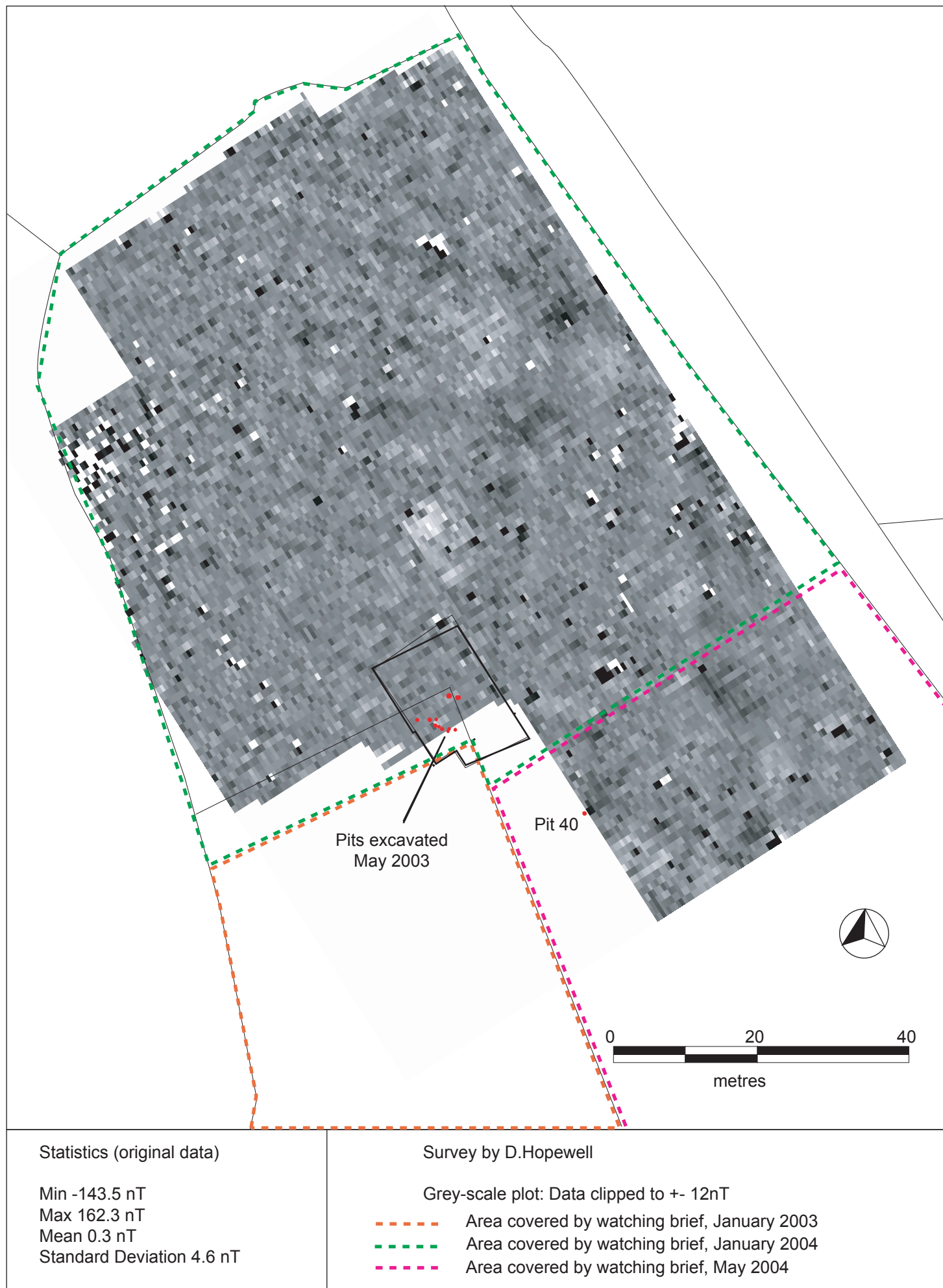


Bryncir Quarry Fig. 1 Location of archaeological watching brief areas 2003-5 in relation to known archaeological finds and features in the immediate vicinity.

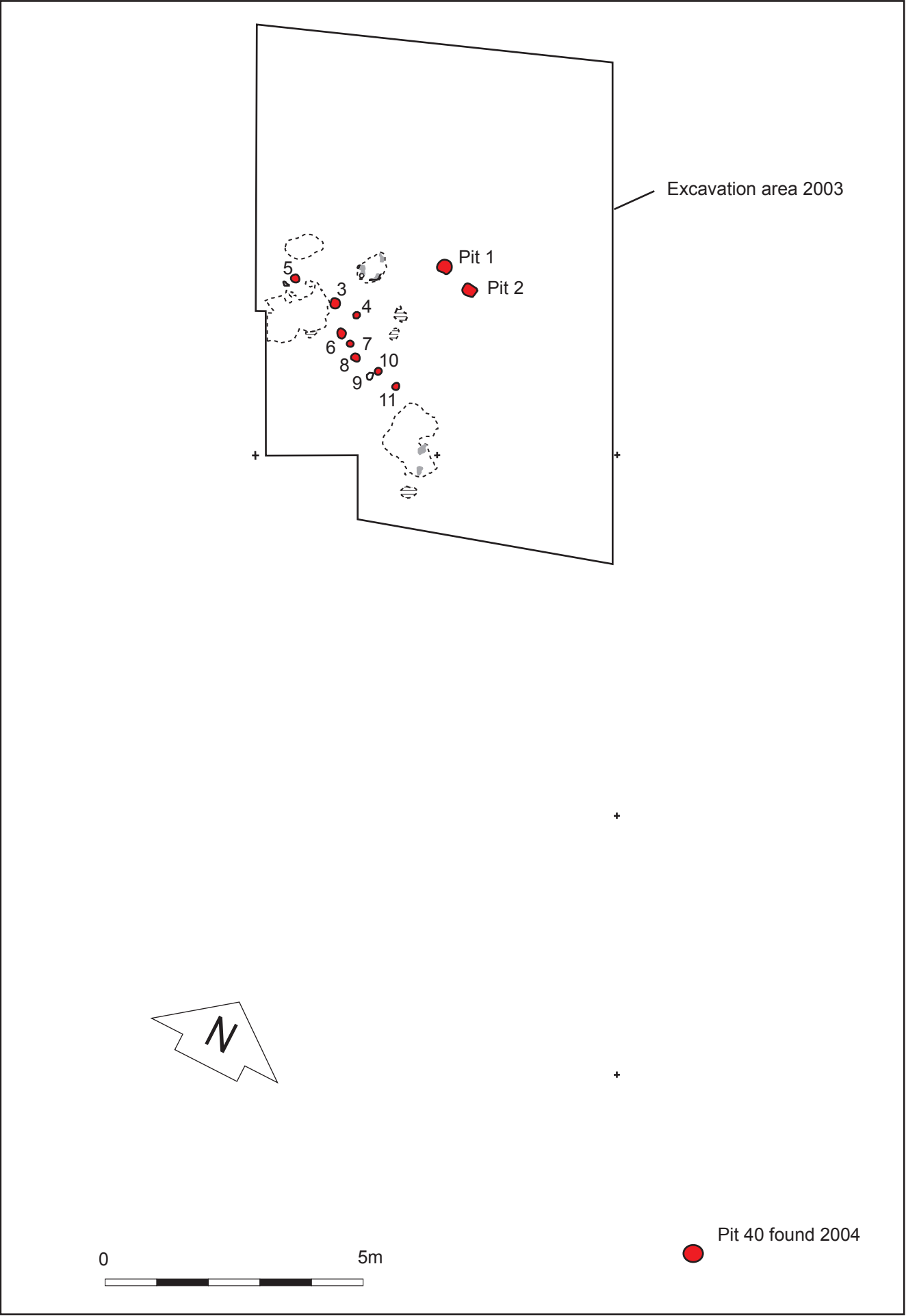
Based on the OS 1:10,000 scale map. © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number AL 100020895



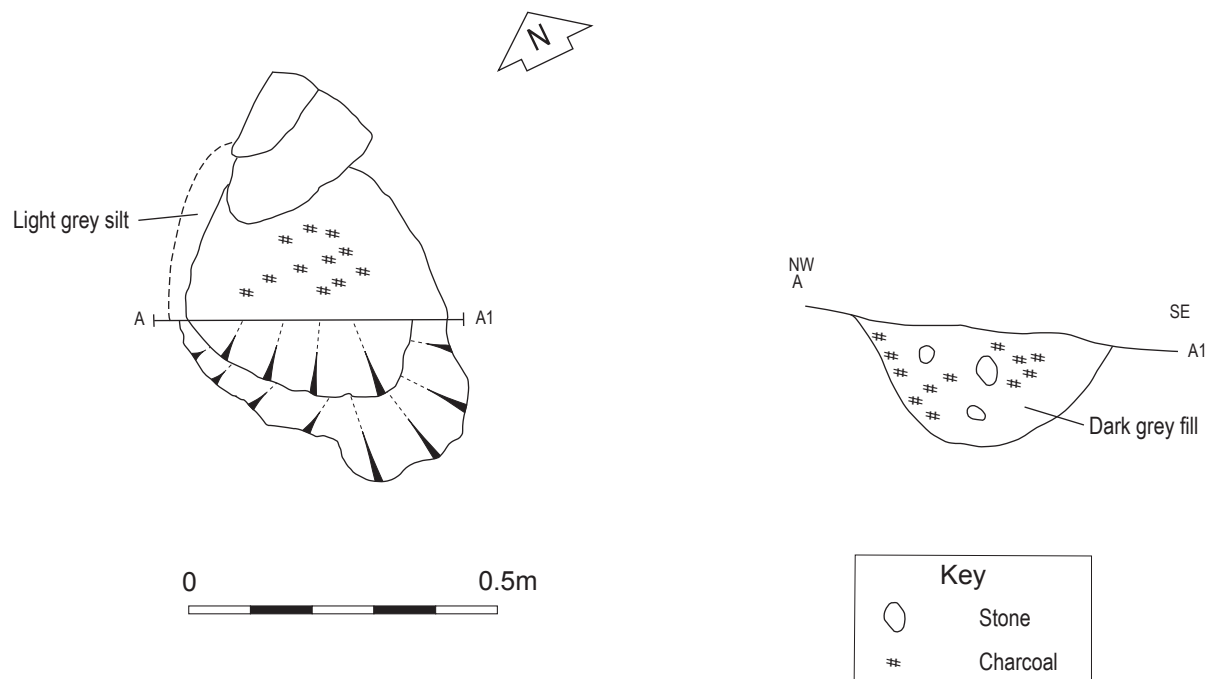
Brynecir Quarry Fig. 2: Location of archaeological watching brief areas 2003-2005
Based on the OS 1:10,000 scale map. © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number AL 100020895



Bryncir Quarry Fig. 3 Archaeological watching briefs 2004-2005: General location of Pit 40 in relation to the features excavated in 2003 and the Fluxgate gradiometer survey: Grey-scale plot and statistics



Bryncir Quarry Fig. 4 Archaeological watching briefs 2004-2005: The location of Pit 40 found in 2004 in relation to the features found in 2003



Bryncir Quarry Fig. 5 Archaeological watching briefs 2004-5. Plan and section of Pit 40



Bryncir Quarry Fig. 6 Archaeological watching briefs 2004-5. Pit 40, Section. 30cm scale



Bryncir Quarry Fig. 7 Archaeological watching briefs 2004-5.
Area C, line of new haulage road, showing peat deposits over 1m deep



Bryncir Quarry Fig. 8 Archaeological watching briefs 2004-5.
Area D, showing linear feature, cross-sectioned. 1m scale



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