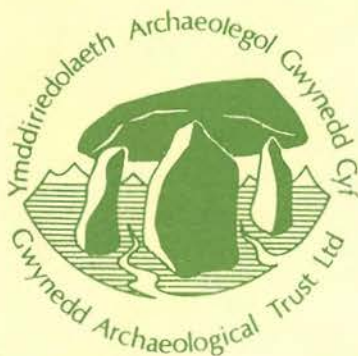
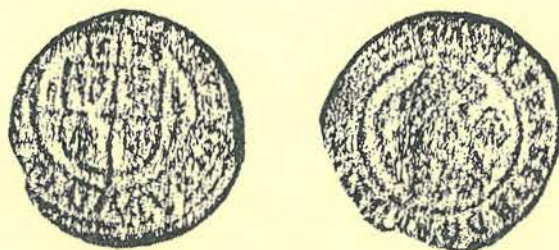


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Report 26

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT
OF THE
A55 NORTH WALES EXPRESSWAY
ABER IMPROVEMENT



Gwynedd Archaeological Trust Ltd

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd Cyf

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE A55 NORTH WALES EXPRESSWAY ABER IMPROVEMENT

BACKGROUND

The Gwynedd Archaeological Trust Ltd was requested to undertake an archaeological assessment by Cadw:Welsh Historic Monuments, for the Welsh Office Highways Directorate, of the A55 North Wales Expressway Aber Improvement linking the existing dual carriageway at College Farm, Aber with the Llanfairfechan by-pass at Madryn Farm (Welsh Office Highways Directorate, *The Chester-Bangor Trunk Road (A55) (Aber Improvement and Slip Roads, Aber Improvement Side Roads) Orders 199, 1st Nov. 1990*).

BRIEF

The brief for the work was agreed between the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust Ltd and Dr. M. Yates and Mr. R Turner, Inspectors of Ancient Monuments, Cadw:Welsh Historic Monuments.

The scope of the work was as follows:

- (i) An appraisal of existing data relating to the proposed route, including SMR records (Gwynedd Archaeological Trust Sites and Monuments Record), aerial photographs, published sources, archive records etc.
- (ii) Field survey of the route by surface inspection and fieldwalking to locate and record any existing earthworks.
- (iii) Where practicable, geophysical (remote sensing) survey by means of scanning the entire route and detailed survey in sample areas.
- (iv) On the basis of the results of steps (i), (ii) and (iii), trial trenching and test pit digging, either by hand or a combination of hand and machine to evaluate the depth, survival and extent of archaeological deposits.

ACCESS

NB. As access was not permitted to land between the Pentre-du Road and Madryn Farm, it was not possible to assess this section of the proposed route beyond an appraisal of existing data as

described in A below. Access to, and the archaeological investigation of this section forms part of a proposal for further work before construction work begins (RECOMMENDATIONS, below).

PROCEDURES AND METHODS

A. Existing Data and Records

The line of the proposed route was checked against the Trust's SMR, aerial photographs held by the Trust, and relevant archive documents in the Caernarfon Record Office of the Gwynedd Archives Service (Aber Parish Records: XPE/56-106, *Survey of Glebe Land of Aber parish*, 1776 and XPE/56-193, *Map of Aber Church and Rectory*, undated).

B. Ground Survey

Where access was permitted, the line of the proposed route was fieldwalked for existing earthworks and a geophysical (magnetometer) survey of four sample areas (fig. 1, A, B, C, and G) undertaken by Geophysical Surveys of 12 Reservoir View, Thornton, Bradford, using a Geoscan FM36 Magnetometer with ST1 automatic trigger and a Compaq SLT/286 PC linked to a portable Hewlett Packard Thinkjet to produce field plots.

An earlier geophysical survey undertaken for the Trust by Geophysical Surveys, in connection with a Woodland Grant Scheme at Pen-y-bryn, Aber (Geophysical Surveys Report 89/65: *Aber Medieval Settlement*, Gwynedd), covered the edge of the proposed route in the field east of Sunnyside (fig. 1, Area A2).

C. Trial Trenching

On the basis of the results of the geophysical surveys, magnetic anomalies recorded in five of the areas (fig. 1, A, A2, B, C, and G) were investigated by a series of machine and hand-dug trenches. The results obtained in Area G near Madryn Farm form part of a proposal for further archaeological work before construction of the proposed route begins (RECOMMENDATIONS, below).

RESULTS

A. Existing Data and Records (fig. 2)

Although no archaeological sites have been recorded along the line of the proposed route, it is an area of very high archaeological potential. In medieval times, Aber was the commotal centre of Arllechwedd Uchaf and one of the seats of the princes of Gwynedd. Recent documentary research and a buildings

survey indicate that the llys or court belonging to this settlement almost certainly stood at Pen-y-bryn, on the south east side of the proposed route. A Norman motte was constructed on the west bank of the river and now stands central to the present village, (fig. 2, Site 370) whilst the church, which may be an ancient foundation, lies 300m further west (fig. 2, Site 1628).

Aber owes its origins to having been at the focus of the traditional routes from Anglesey across the Lafan Sands, the mainland to the west and the Conwy valley across the hills to the east. Chance finds of a Bronze age stone axe hammer (fig. 2, Site 4071) and an urn burial (fig. 2, Site 4079) found close to the line of the proposed route hint at the importance of the area in prehistoric times, whilst the Roman road between *Canovium* in the Conwy valley and *Segontium* in Caernarfon was marked by a Roman milestone discovered near Madryn Farm (fig.2, Site 368).

The importance of the area in the past is further demonstrated by the density and variety of archaeological sites which have survived in the upland hinterland south of the present village (fig. 2). The contrasting and apparent paucity of sites along the coast, however, is almost certainly the result of prolonged and intensive agriculture, where remains have been become buried from view, rather than an indication of an absence there of past activity.

This was clearly exemplified by the discovery during the construction of the Shell UK Rhosgoch to Stanlow Oil Pipeline in 1973 of a possible Bronze age burnt mound site, close to the present junction of the Pentre-du road and the A55 (fig. 2, Site 4092) in a section of the proposed route to which access was not permitted. From the published account (White, R.B., 1977. Rhosgoch to Stanlow Shell Oil Pipeline. In *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, Vol. XXVII, Pt. III, pp. 473-475, Site 17), although interpreted as a possible metalworking site, the remains found bear a striking resemblance to those discovered during this assessment near Madryn Farm, in geophysical survey Area G. The results of recent archaeological excavations elsewhere suggest that both sites could be associated with contemporary settlements, the remains of which would be of considerable importance and significance.

B. Ground Survey

There were no surface evidence of any archaeological features or earthworks along the line of the proposed route. Topsoil and colluvium (hillwash) accumulations in Area G concealed any indications of the burnt mound site subsequently revealed by geophysical survey and trial trenching.

C. Trial Trenches

Trial trenches were located in geophysical survey Areas, A, A2,

B, C and G both at random and to examine the nature of the magnetic anomalies recorded therein. Wherever possible, trenches were opened by machine to the level of the subsoil or any apparent archaeological features revealed, and then cleaned by hand.

Areas A, A2, B and C

A total of fifteen, mainly 1 by 20m, trenches were excavated. The results showed that all the magnetic anomalies recorded were caused by natural, periglacial features in the subsoil, modern disturbances or pipeline and service trenches.

Area G (fig. 3)

NB. This plot was originally laid out to coincide with the extent of an earlier proposal for the line of Gwyllt Road sliproad, which extended south east of the current proposal. The details were received by the Trust after completion of the assessment work in the field; however, the change has not affected the results obtained, or the recommendations based thereon.

Several magnetic anomalies occurred in Area G reflecting potential archaeological features. Two anomalies were known to be caused by pipelines and did not require investigation. Trenches A and C revealed that the linear anomalies across the centre of the area were caused by modern rubble-filled land drains.

During hand clearance in Trench A, a 1578 silver threepenny piece of Elizabeth I (front cover) was found near the bottom of the topsoil. Given the context, the coin is unlikely to come from a hoard and must be a casual loss soon after it was minted, as it shows little evidence of wear. A report of the discovery has been passed on to H M Coroner as required under Treasure Trove legislation.

Trench D, just outside the geophysical plot, was opened to examine in more detail natural subsoil variations, initially mistaken for archaeological features in Trench C. Anomalies around Trench F also proved to be of natural origin.

Trenches B1 and B2 were dug to examine a distinct anomaly detected on the edge of a narrow shelf of ground or cultivation terrace running across the field, parallel with the longer axis of the survey plot. Trench B1 was hand-dug, but abandoned in favour of B2 opened by machine, owing to the depth of topsoil and colluvium encountered.

Hand-clearance in B2 revealed a distinct layer of fragmented burnt stones, charcoal and blackened soil (fig. 4, 010) at a depth of 0.5m from the present surface of the field (plates). The NW side of the layer was abutted by a low heap of natural, unburnt stones (fig. 4, 011), possibly the edge of an associated wall.

The thickness of the burnt stone layer was not ascertained, but its extent almost certainly coincides with the anomaly recorded in the geophysical plot; extending south and east of trench B2 for at least 10m. To test this, Trench E was hand-dug 10m in the opposite direction, south west of B1 and B2. No burnt stones were found, but of equal significance, a charcoal-flecked and possibly related, buried ground surface was revealed, at a similar depth from the present surface to the burnt stone layer in B2.

APPRAISAL

The results of the trial trenches in Area G near Madryn Farm indicate the presence of a possible, Bronze Age burnt mound site. These sites occur widely in the north and west of Britain, and from excavation and field trial results, are most likely to represent debris left around cooking areas, where hot stones were used to boil water to cook food, usually in pits or troughs set in the ground.

The cultural context or significance of this activity is unknown, but a number of recently excavated burnt mounds have been linked to contemporary settlement sites nearby. At Meyllteyrn Uchaf, Dwyfor, Gwynedd a site excavated by the Trust in 1990 revealed a burnt stone spread sealing the remains of a timber roundhouse standing within a double-ditched enclosure of c. 0.75 ha area. Charcoal from the spread has been dated by radiocarbon analysis to the 13th C BC, about the middle Bronze age. The burnt mound at Madryn Farm could have similar associations and these should be fully investigated before any construction work on the new road begins.

Burnt mounds usually occur above the surface, but this may be a characteristic of their survival in marginal areas where most have been found so far, and agriculture and soil build-up have been less intensive. Discoveries of examples buried in the fertile, lowland areas of the county are increasing, suggesting an equal, if not greater incidence of sites in these areas. The 1973 discovery near the Pentre-du road was one of seven recorded during the construction of the Shell UK oil pipeline across lowland Caernarfonshire and Anglesey. The Madryn Farm site, 650m to the NE, suggests a high density of sites occurring along the coastal plain, and a high probability of further archaeological sites being discovered in the area between, to which access for assessment was not permitted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Madryn Farm burnt mound site lies just on the edge of the revised line for the proposed Gwyllt Road slipway (fig. 3, overlay). Any groundworks incidental to the construction of the slipway outside the limits shown on the proposed route

plan, should be avoided in this area. If this is not possible, provision is required to archaeologically examine and record the site before construction work begins.

2. In view of APPRAISAL, para. 2 above, the likelihood of the burnt mound being the focus of a larger contemporary settlement site should be fully investigated. Provision is therefore required to examine and record all the archaeological features which may lie in the area NW of the mound, beneath the revised line of the proposed route (fig. 3, overlay) before construction work begins.

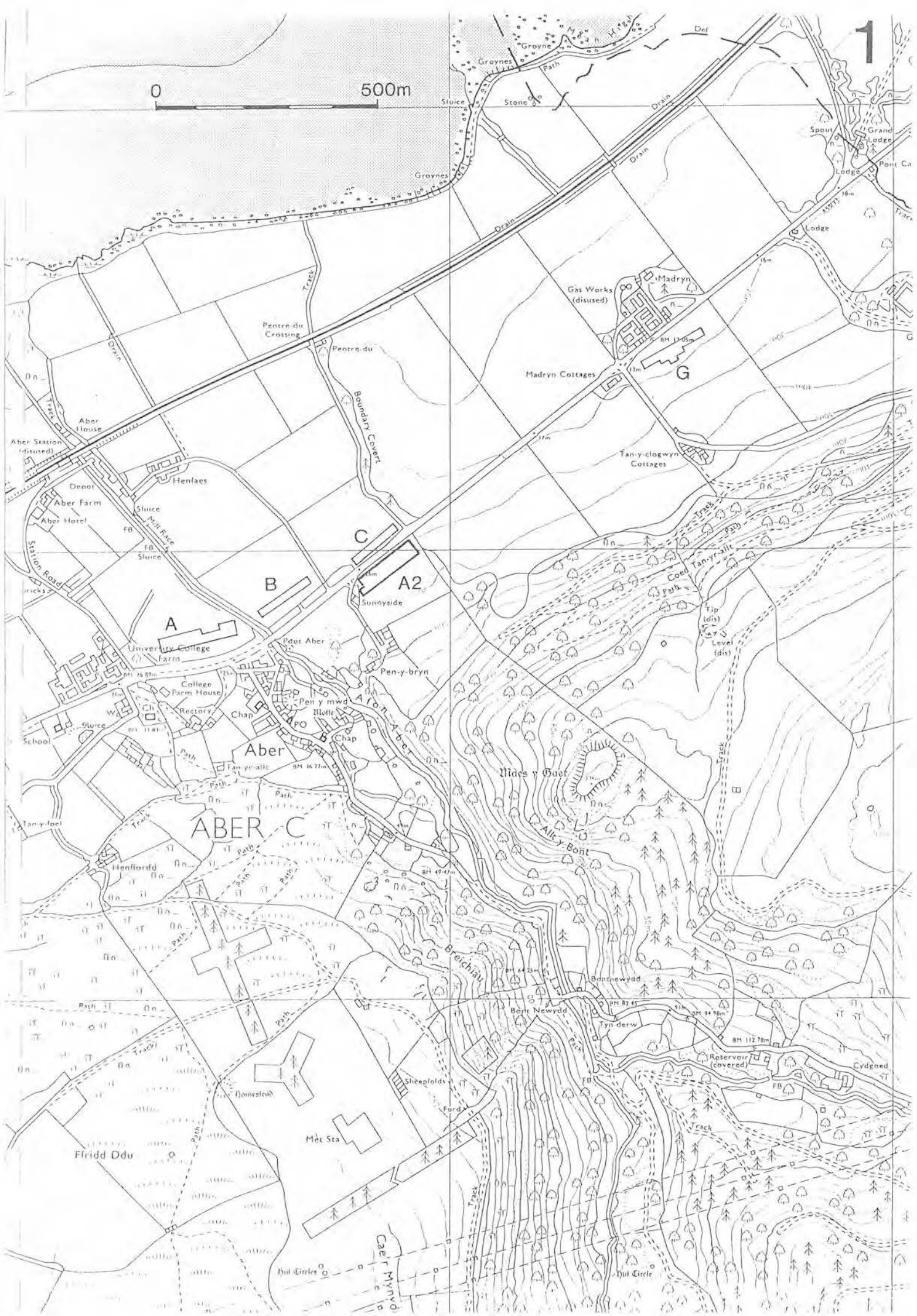
The relevant area of archaeological interest in 1. and 2. has been indicated in red on the overlay to fig. 3.

3. As access for archaeological assessment was not permitted to the section of the proposed route between Madryn Farm and the Pentre-du road, provision is required to monitor topsoil stripping in this area once construction work begins, and if required, facilities provided to examine and record any archaeological features revealed.
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FIGS AND PLATES

1. Geophysical (magnetometer) survey plot areas along the line of the proposed route.
2. Gwynedd Archaeological Trust SMR extract for the area of the proposed route.
3. Geophysical survey plot Area G, near Madryn Farm, showing principal anomalies recorded and the location of trial trenches. The overlay shows the revised line of the proposed route with the area of archaeological interest noted in Recommendations 1 and 2 outlined in red.
4. Plan of burnt stone layer and possible boundary in Trench B2.

The plates show a general view of Trench B2 from the south east (top) and detail of the burnt stone layer revealed (bottom).



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Sand & Mud

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Llys Meddyg

Aber Road

The Grove

Wern Newydd

Wern Cottage

Spring

Gwelly Road

Tachion

Upland

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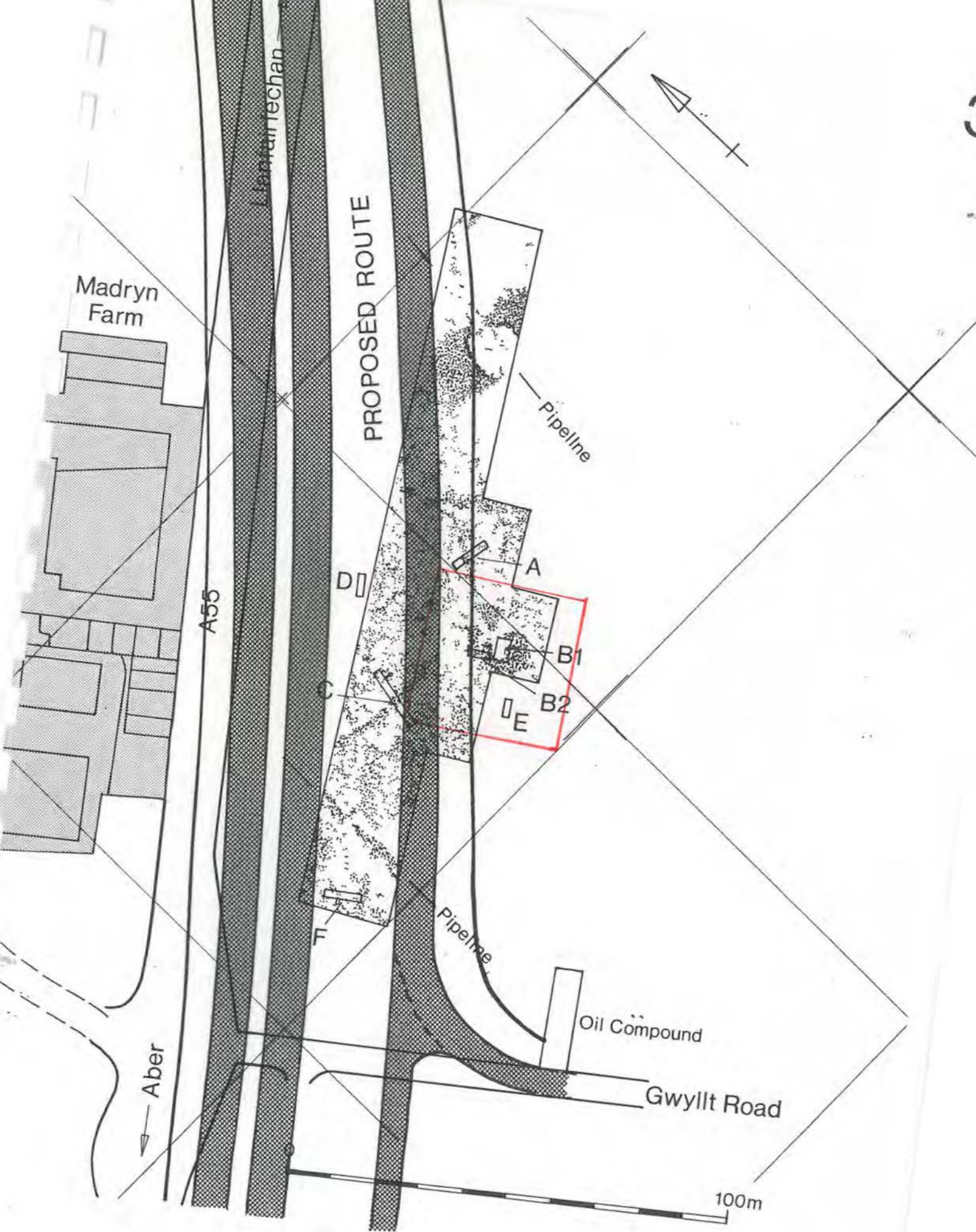
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