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Archaeological Assessment at Llanfaes



Gwynedd Archaeological Trust Ltd

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd Cyf

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Background

In June 1991 Welsh Water consulted Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (GAT) about a proposed Sewage Treatment Works at Llanfaes. GAT indicated that the proposed development was on or adjacent to the medieval Friary at Llanfaes and possibly within the area of the medieval town. GAT recommended that an archaeological assessment of the whole area be carried out to provide pertinent information for the relevant meeting of the YMBC planning committee.

The site of the proposed treatment works occupies a roughly triangular area of just over 1 hectare. The site is considerably overgrown with a dense cover of trees and shrubs except for access tracks and structures associated with the Fryars House and metalled roads and concrete foundations associated with former wartime use by the engineering works which now occupies much of the area immediately to the north.

Discussion between the owners of the site - Lairds (Anglesey) - and Welsh Water led to an agreement that the archaeological assessment be limited to the areas unencumbered by trees, dense vegetation, wartime installations and the access road in current use. Welsh Water commissioned GAT to carry out the reduced assessment, the aims and scope of which were as follows.

Aims of the assessment

The assessment aimed to establish the nature and extent of buried features by archaeological excavation and to assess the requirement for recording surviving emplacements connected with the fitting out of flying boats during WW2. In particular it sought evidence for the existence of the Franciscan friary with its associated buildings and burial ground and any evidence for the presence of structures associated with the medieval town and harbour of Llanfaes within the development area. The assessment also aimed to provide the necessary information for an adequate response to be formulated to safeguard archaeological evidence should the development proceed.

The historical significance of Llanfaes

The town

Llanfaes was the maerdref or bond township associated with the royal court of the commote of Dindaethwy. As such it predates Beaumaris as the important medieval focus of settlement along this stretch of the Straits by some centuries. Its precise location is unknown but an original nucleus in the vicinity of the parish church/Henllys with later expansion towards a harbour on the Straits might be postulated. During the 13th century Llanfaes developed an important commercial aspect; there was a ferry across the Straits, fisheries and a harbour. Maritime trade was of more than purely local importance accounting for more than 70% of the total trading revenues of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd. By the late 13th century the town had almost certainly acquired a compact, nucleated, plan incorporating 120 burgages extending over about 90 acres.

The town came to an abrupt end in 1303 when Edward I moved the inhabitants to his new plantation at Newborough, leaving Llanfaes virtually deserted. This absence of further development has meant that the exact location of the medieval town has been lost.

The Friary

A Friary was established about 1237 by Llywelyn ab Iorwerth in memory of his wife Joan,

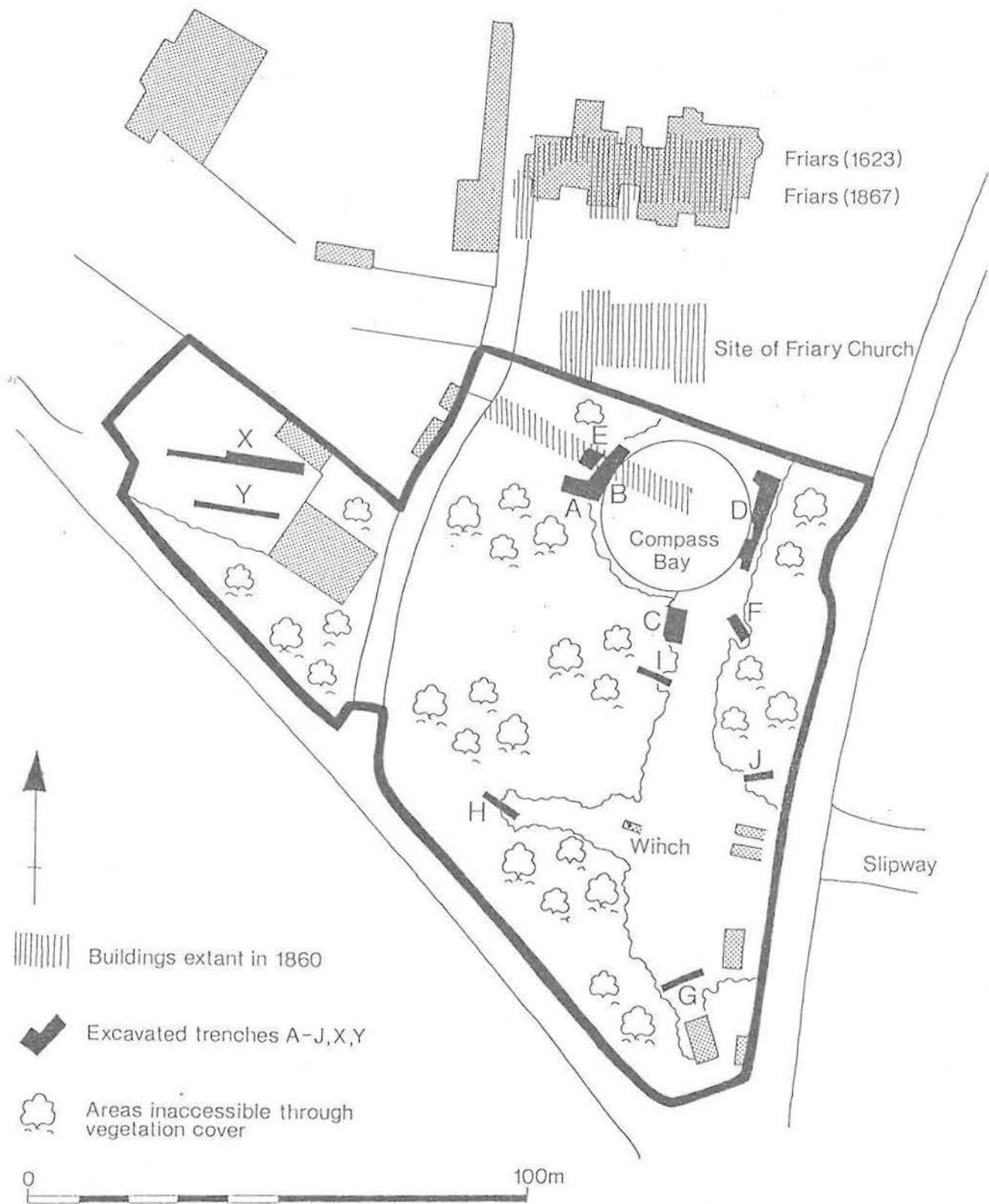


Fig. 1 Location map showing the site and assessment trenches

daughter of King John of England. It was one of the earliest in England and Wales and became the burial place of many notable people including Joan, wife of Llywelyn ab Iorwerth and Eleanor de Montfort, wife of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd. Friaries, depending on alms for their maintenance are invariably associated with urban nucleations and the existence of the large flourishing medieval town of Llanfaes must have dictated the choice of location.

The Friary suffered some destruction in the wake of the Madoc revolt in 1295, the aftermath of which saw the foundation of Beaumaris. Nevertheless, land was acquired for enlargement in 1316 with a further 5 acre extension shortly after. The Friary suffered again in 1401, having taken sides with Glyndwr, and was temporarily abandoned. By 1414, however, Henry V had made provision for the restoration and support of the Friary and so it continued until its final suppression under Henry VIII in 1538. An inventory carried out at that time mentions buildings of the friary: a church, brew house, kitchen, storehouse and hall. There must have been other structures such as cloisters, enclosing a garth, and a latrine.

Work on the demolition of the Friary began in 1539 with boat loads of good stone removed. In 1623 a private house - Friars - was built on the site. Part of the conventual church, in use as a stable and barn, still stood to the south of Friars in the 19th century. A late 18th century wash drawing by Moses Griffith shows the structure, part demolished, in relation to the house. This first 'Friars' was demolished along with any surviving remains of the Friary in 1866 and the present house built. Tiles and grave slabs from the friary are preserved at the present house and a number of graves have been dug up to the south west and to the south of the house. Graves were disturbed when the concrete plinth of the compass setting circle was being set-in during the 1940s.

Excavation methodology

Ten trenches were opened by machine in areas accessible (see fig 1 A-J, X,Y), avoiding the dense undergrowth that covered most of the site, the concrete plinth of the compass setting bay in the north of the site and the north-south tarmac road that provided vehicle access to diesel tanks still in use. The dimensions of the trenches varied according to the immediate constraints and the nature of the deposits. A total of c.330 sq.m were excavated over a period of 4 weeks from July 23 to August 21 1991. The machining was carefully monitored and hand cleaning proceeded where archaeological deposits were encountered.

Results

The most significant results were obtained in those trenches in the immediate vicinity of the compass setting bay, particularly D and E. Trenches A to F will be considered together after discussion of the remaining trenches.

Trench H: 6.5m x 1m, 0.6m - 0.9m deep.

Lenses of sand and clay deposits occurred throughout the section; no archaeological features were visible.

Trench I: 8m x 1.0m; 0.5m deep

Light brown sandy clay and pebble deposits; no archaeological features were visible

Trench G: 7.5m x 1.0m; 1.3m deep.

The tarmac surface and hard-core associated with the road down to the southernmost corner of the site was encountered. Below this, sandy clay and pebble lenses occurred. The only feature of note was a spread of burning over beach pebbles at a depth of 1.05m below the present ground surface.

Trench J: 5m x 1m; 1.15m to level of waterlogging.

A former ground surface, represented by a grey brown sandy clay was encountered at a depth of 0.6m below the present ground surface at the western limit of the trench, dipping east to 1.15 at the centre of the trench at which point it could not be traced further due to waterlogging. Above this surface, grey sand pebble layers occurred with clay loam intervening.

The deposits in trenches G,H,I and J are suggestive of wind blown and water washed sand and pebble deposits such as might be expected in the vicinity of the shoreline in the lowest lying part of the site.

Trench X: 25m x max. 2.5m; 1.0m deep

A series of linear features were observed crossing trench X from north-east to south-west at a depth of around 0.75m below the present ground surface. One, at least, could be identified as a rubble drain; the others remain problematical. The most substantial feature at 6m in width survived only a few centimetres into the undisturbed ground surface and contained brick and mortar in its fill. The presence of brick and mortar through most of the depth of the section above this feature, however, suggests an originally deeper, now truncated, cut. The remaining linear features, also surviving no more than a few centimetres, with dark brown soil and clay fill, may represent fence or boundary lines perhaps to be associated with the fields of the friary or the secular township.

Trench Y: 16m x 1.0m; 1.0m deep

A rubble drain crossed the trench obliquely at its east end.

Trenches A - F: features in the vicinity of the compass bay at the north end of the proposed development area.

Trenches A and B proved completely sterile. The natural slope of the ground is from north-west to south-east. The establishment of a level compass setting bay here in the 1940's, however, necessitated cutting back into the natural slope at the western to north-western limit of the circle to a depth of over a metre, removing all archaeological deposits. It was here, during this process, that local memory recalls burials being disturbed. Trench E 4m x 3.10m was excavated immediately to the north-west of A and B in the undergrowth beyond the compass bay. Here the old ground surface survived, though disturbed by tree and bush roots, and structural foundations were recognised. The structures could not be dated except that the earliest feature within this area, limited by vegetation cover, appears to be a grave. This possible grave is overlain by the foundations of a wall running north-south, in the rubble core of which medieval tile fragments were recognised. A stone capped drain with brick lining runs parallel to this wall and a second drain with brick and slate lining cuts the wall. These drains appear to be Victorian features, though perhaps predating the construction of the second Friars House. Despite the destruction occasioned by the setting of the compass bay there is clear potential for the recovery of graves and structural information in the area immediately to its west.

Trench D

Trench D was excavated for a length of 20m north to south immediately to the east of the compass bay and it is within this trench that the most significant archaeological deposits were recognised (see fig 2,3 & 4). Seven main phases of activity were recorded.

Phase 1

The earliest surviving structural remains are the substantial foundations of a wall (212) running west-east across the southern part of the trench. To the south of this a stone lined and capped drain (210) while inserted slightly later may be regarded as belonging to the same general period of use.

The graves 105, 115, 204 and 216 are the earliest recognised within the excavated area. At least one of these (204) cuts a ground surface abutting wall 212 and will be broadly contemporary with it. These features: the wall, drain and graves are all to be associated with the early period of the Friary (phase 1).

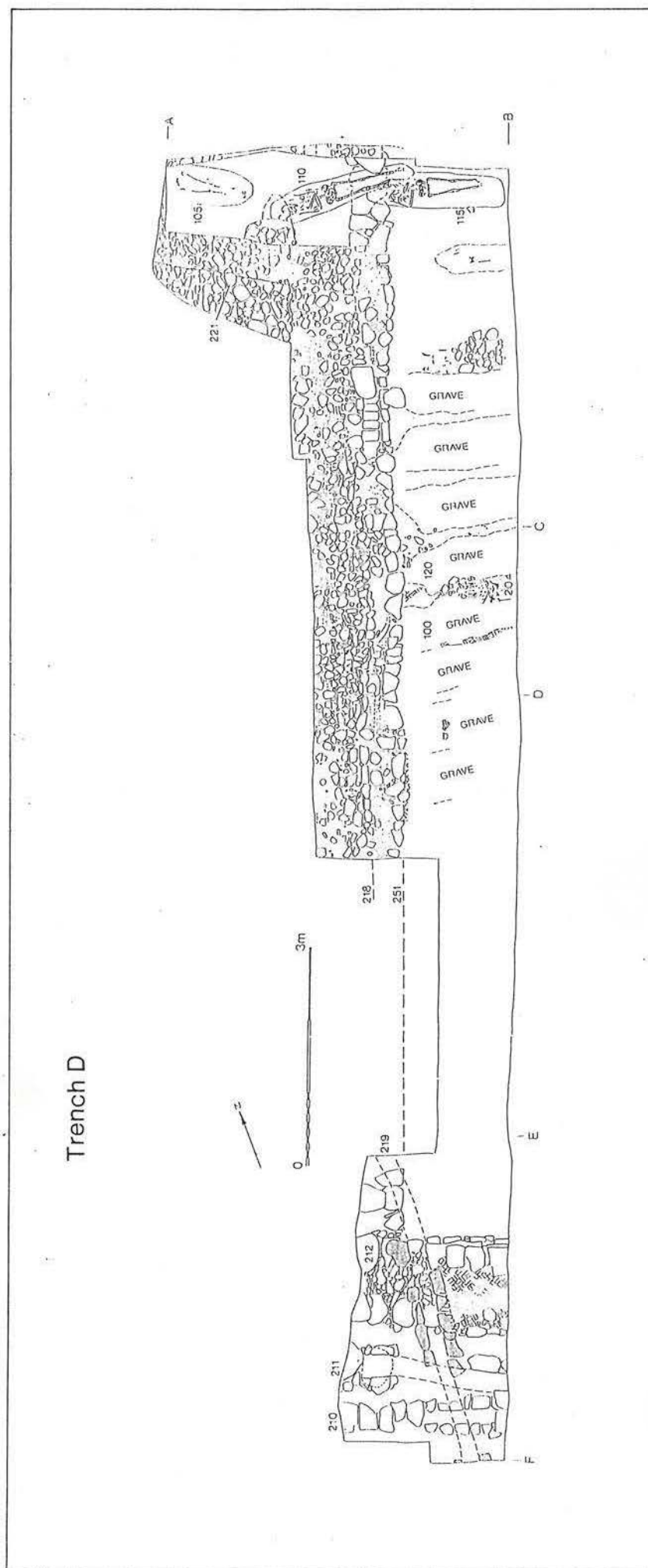


Fig. 2 Plan of features in Trench D

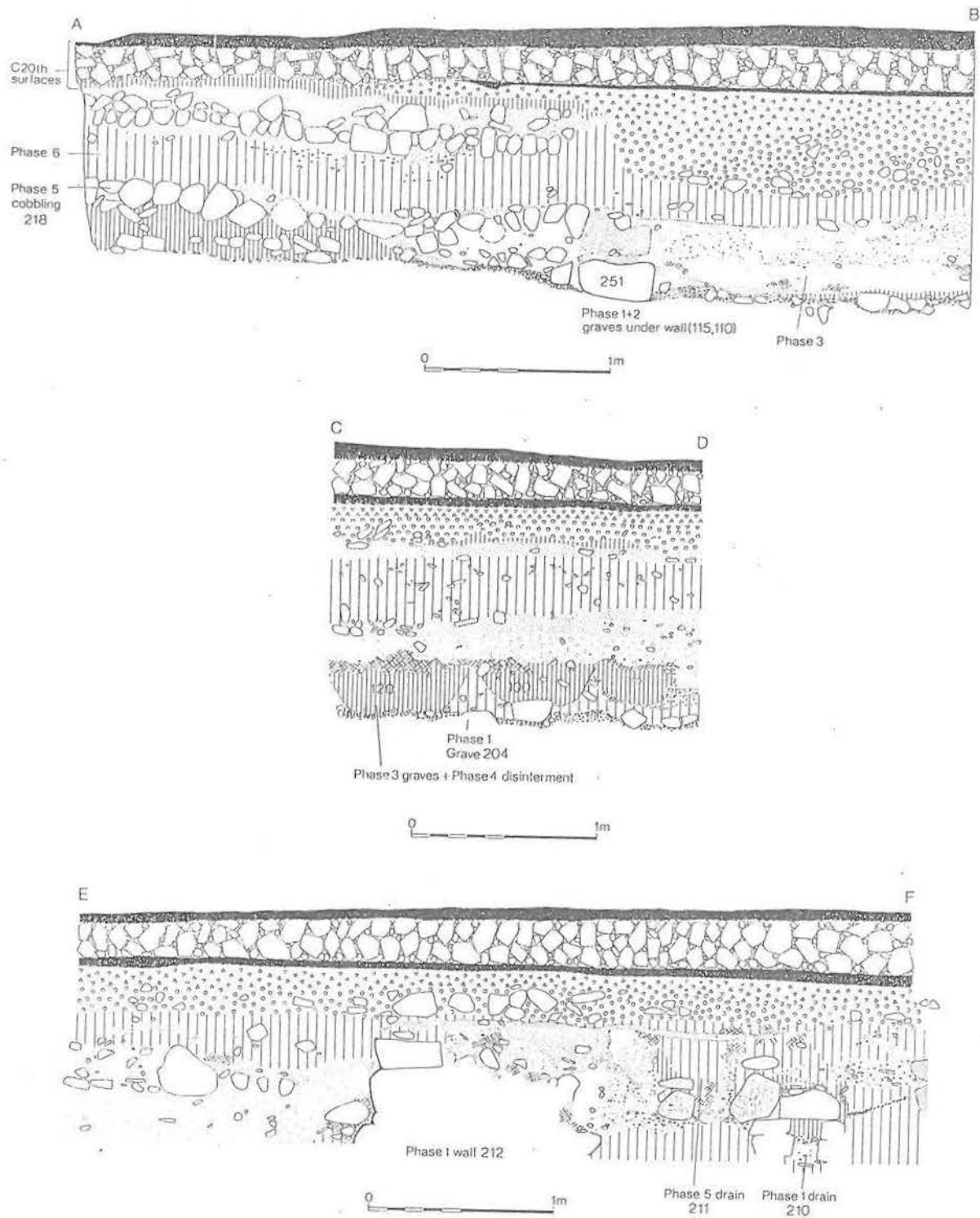


Fig. 3 Sections A-B, C-D, E-F

Phase 2

Grave 110 cuts grave 115 and is on a slightly different alignment to 105, 115, 204 and 216 implying a chronological distinction involving, perhaps, a new structural phase which is otherwise unrecognised in the area excavated.

Phase 3

The long linear wall foundation (251) abuts the early wall (212) and is therefore later than it, if not necessarily by any great period of time. The wall (251), however, also rides over both grave 115 (phase 1) and 110 (phase 2). This wall has graves ranged at right angles to it which can be shown to be stratigraphically later than the construction of the wall and on circumstantial grounds to be contemporary with its use. The graves 120 and 100 also cut a phase 1 grave; so both wall and later graves all post date phase 2. This and the builders' disregard for the earlier graves suggests that these activities should be assigned to a late phase in the history of the friary.

Phase 4

Graves 120 and 100 (and presumably the other phase 3 graves) contained no burials. The likely explanation for this is that these latest interments were removed for reburial with the dissolution of the Friary in 1538 or soon after. The memorials of the Tudor, Bulkeley and Penrhyn families are known to have been removed to their respective parish churches as was the lid of Joan's coffin, the coffin itself serving, for 250 years, as a watering trough on the coast road to Beaumaris. The earlier and, perhaps, forgotten phase 1 and 2 burials remain in the ground.

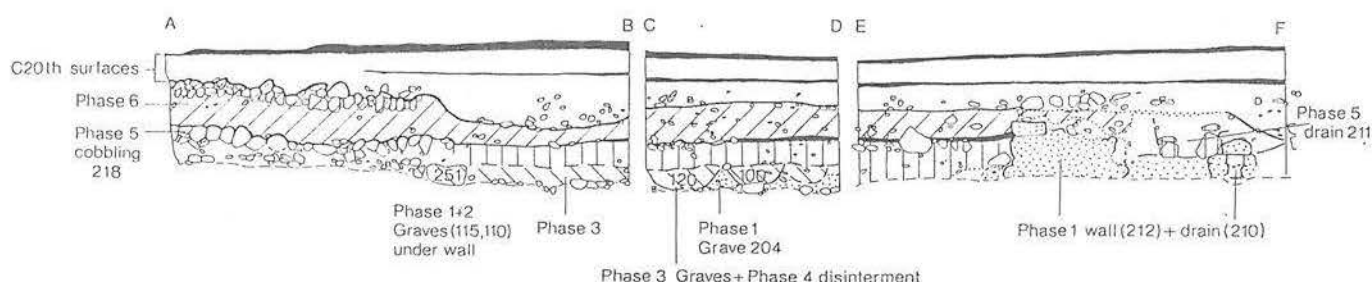


Fig. 4 Summary of main phases represented in Sections A-B, C-D, E-F

Phase 5

A cobbled surface (218) respecting the line of wall 251 was laid to the west of the wall with a brick step onto a clay and gravel path to the shore. This overlies the clay surface which seals the fill of the disinterred graves. These features may be associated with the construction of Friars House in 1623. Some 0.25m of mortar flecked soil then accumulated to the level of the cobbling. The upper horizon of this deposit displays a very heavy concentration of mortar and building debris representing demolition in this area. A possible context might be the demolition of 17th century, and re-used Friary, structures in 1860 although an earlier date is to be preferred. Drain 211 was set in at this stage and the lower courses of the phase 1 wall were still visible.

Phase 6

A 0.25m deposit of clay soil accumulated across the 17th century cobbling and demolition horizons into which was set a further expanse of cobbling. Adjacent to this, running north-south, a marked depression probably represents the line of the track to the south-east corner of

the site known to have existed in the 19th century. This overlies the phase 1 wall (212), any surviving remains of which were truncated at this time; but not before suffering the penultimate indignity of having a Victorian stone and brick lined drain (219) driven through it. These features may be contemporary with the building and use of the new Fryars house built in 1867. A mortar horizon at the level of the cobbles may represent the demolition of structures associated with the earlier house, demolished in 1860.

Phase 7

The track established during phase 6 was filled with clay and gravel hard-core and surfaced with tarmac. Immediately above this a very substantial hard-core foundation was laid for the wartime compass setting bay and associated tarmac surfaces. The phase 7 horizons can all be accommodated within the 20th century.

Trench F

The road 220 and the continuation of the Victorian drain 219 were recorded in this trench.

Trench C

A series of intercutting stone capped drains and linear soil marks which might represent timber features were recorded in this trench.

Recommendations

1. Archaeological remains were identified over part of the area. They are well preserved in trenches E and D to the west and east respectively of the concrete compass bay. The archaeological deposits involve a sequence of structural detail and associated graves relating to the 13th, 14th and 15th century Franciscan Friary and to later activity associated with the private houses of Friars (1623) and Fryars (1867). While there has been demolition and rebuilding over the area and some burials appear to have been disinterred, enough detail survives to reconstruct ground plans and a sequence of events. The terracing of the concrete circle into the natural slope of the ground may have destroyed archaeological remains over the western half of the circle (fig. 5) but foundations and graves were located in the undergrowth immediately to the west. The structural remains are sufficiently impressive to merit consolidation and display, for which substantial resources will be required.

1.1 The archaeological deposits in the area around the compass bay can be considered to be worthy of preservation and the Trust recommends that the scheme should be redesigned so that no development occurs over this part of the site.

2. To the south of the compass circle and in the area to the extreme west, flanking the Llanfaes road, old ground surfaces were identified and archaeological features (drains, boundary ditches and possible timber features) were recorded in Trenches C, F and X. The drain in F is Victorian, the features in Trench C and Trench X may be medieval. None of these features appear, on the evidence available, to be significant enough to merit preservation.

2.1 Should the development continue, however, Trenches C and X and the areas around them will require further investigation.

2.2 The winch, slipway and sliding doors of the wartime installations will require drawn and photographic record.

3. Access was impossible over much of the overgrown parts of the site. While the Trust does not consider that remains sufficiently unique or interesting to merit preservation will be encountered, the limited assessment cannot confirm that the area is sterile and further investigation once the vegetation cover is removed would be necessary.

4. The archaeological requirements in the recommendations can be satisfied by appropriate

archaeological agreements, possibly in the form of a Section 106 agreement. Welsh Water have indicated their preparedness to enter into such an agreement.

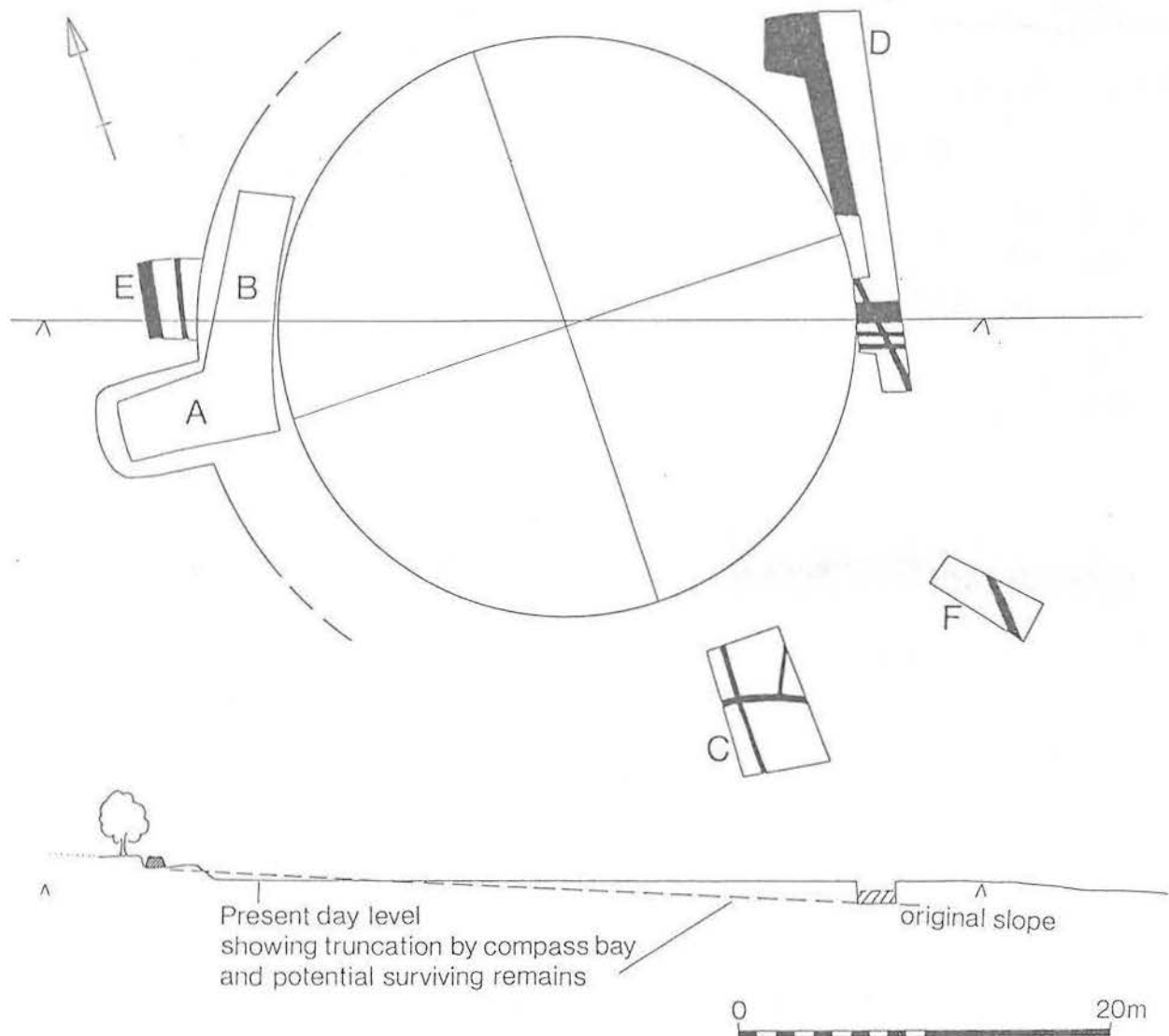


Fig. 5 The compass bay showing assessment trenches and profile indicating probable truncation and survival of archaeological deposits

Summary of recommendations

The assessment has indicated that the extent and nature of the archaeological deposits are such as to:

- (a) suggest a redesign of the scheme to preclude development in the area of the compass bay
- (b) allow development elsewhere in the application site subject to appropriate archaeological agreement.

