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**ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS
AT
FFYNNON BEUNO, ABERFFRAW**



Gwynedd Archaeological Trust Ltd

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd Cyf

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT FFYNNON BEUNO, ABERFFRAW

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for Gwynedd Archaeological Trust 1992

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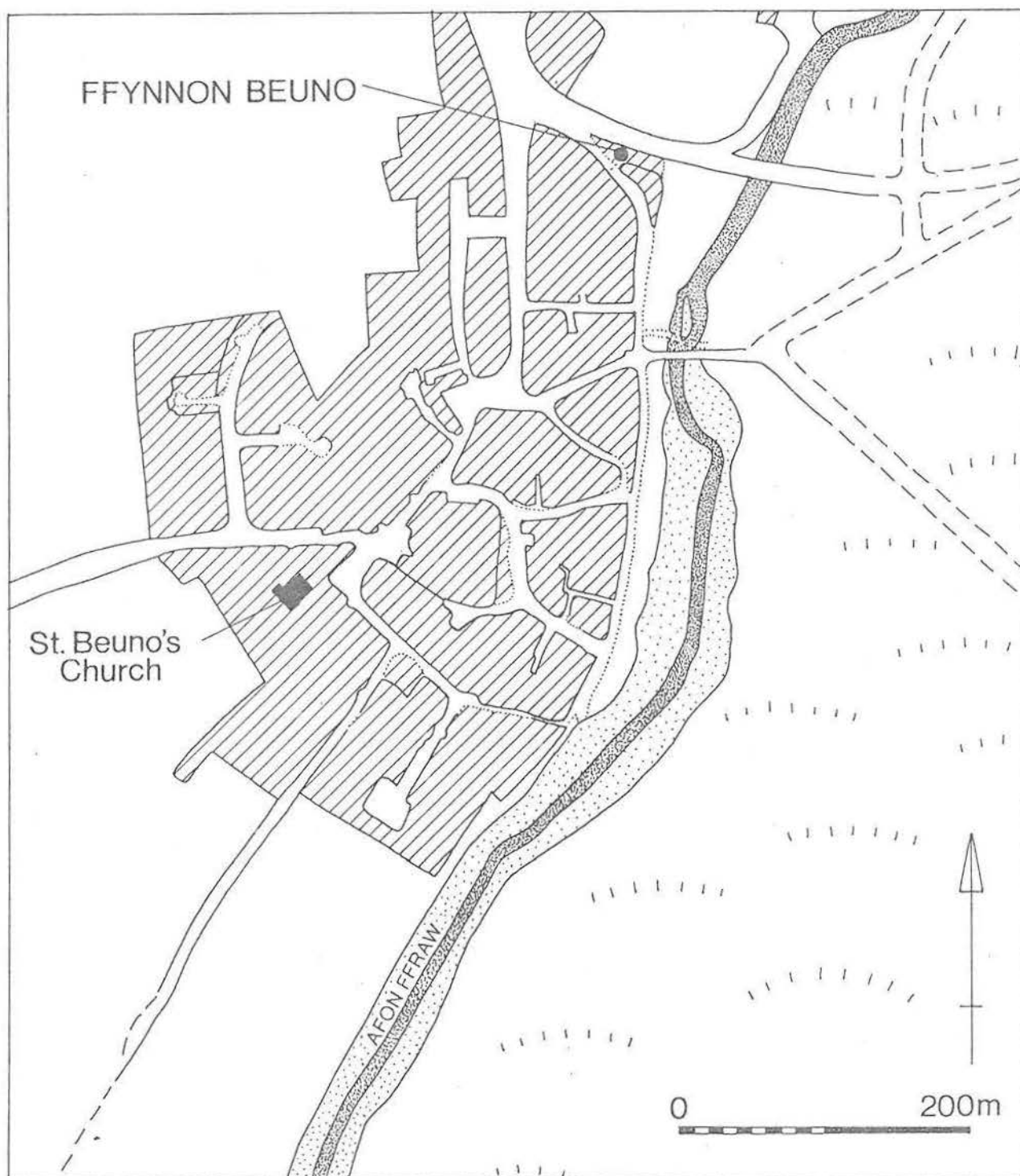


Fig.1 Location of Well (Ffynnon Beuno) within Aberffraw

Background

An archaeological assessment was carried out at Ffynnon Beuno, Aberffraw (NGR SH 355 690) by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust during September 1991. The project was undertaken on behalf of Gwynedd County Council Highways Department in advance of a bridge improvement scheme on the A4080 at Aberffraw.

The work to be carried out on the bridge involved the removal of a modern well house immediately to the south which may have overlain the site of an earlier Christian well - Ffynnon Beuno. It is known from historical sources and local tradition that the well house was built earlier this century and water continued to be supplied to the village up until the 1940s when piped water was first introduced.

The assessment, therefore, was primarily aimed to reveal any remains related to the earlier site located underneath the modern alterations.

Procedures and Methods

The excavation comprised two trenches, approximately 5m x 2m in length, hand dug down to natural deposits adjacent to the well house; one westwards and the other in a southerly direction. Both were photographed and the south facing section of the west trench was drawn. No geophysical survey was carried out owing to the large amount of modern disturbance, namely buildings and service pipes. The initial inspection of the site revealed substantial vegetational overgrowth around the modern well house, and a large amount of garden waste. Thus the original topography of the well site was impossible to discern. A one metre area around the well house was also examined to determine the extent of the concrete foundations. Owing to safety conditions, and because of no immediate threat, the well shaft was not investigated extensively, but it was noted that the shaft was full of water up to ground level.

Results and Observations

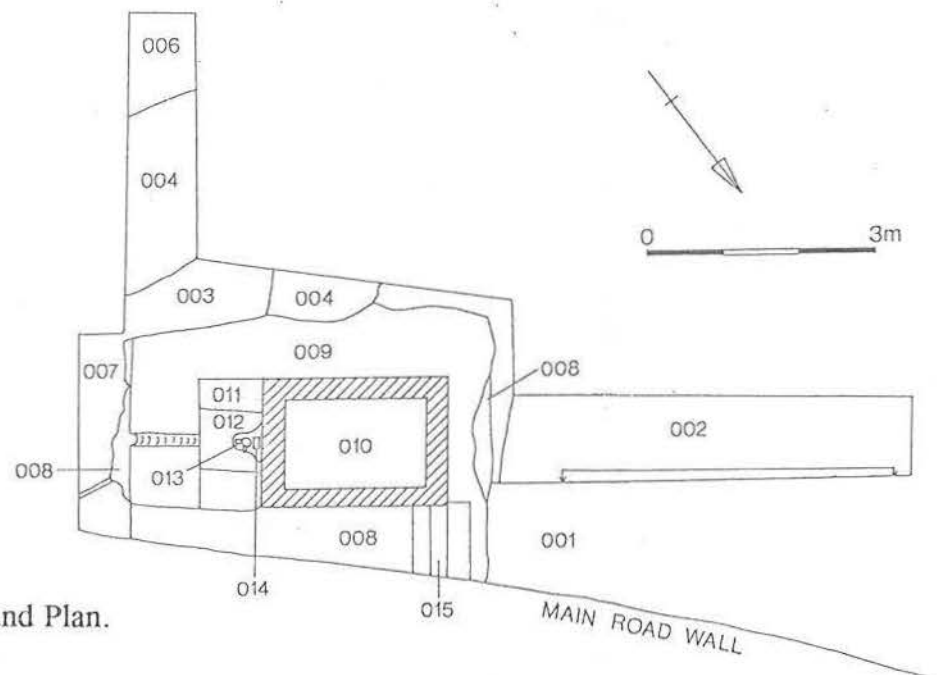


Fig.2 General Ground Plan.

(i) West trench (5m x 2m)

Up to 1m of garden soil, Context 001, was removed. This consisted of a mid brown silty loam containing up to 10% of poorly sorted stones and modern rubbish. This overlaid a dark grey silt 002, up to 0.25m deep, containing a small amount of modern brick and slate, and a 1915 half penny. Context 002 was interpreted as a dumped infill associated with the modern road. The west trench was examined no deeper than 002 at this point, (but see 'West Trench Profile' below).

(ii) South trench (5m x 2m)

Up to 0.5m of 001 and 002 was excavated to reveal a hard grey clay containing 50% of small subangular and sorted stones 004. A small amount of late 19th Century pottery was also retrieved from 004. This grey clay with a predominance of small stones was interpreted as an early 20th Century road surface. The road was probably the remains of a track that used to lead from the well, through the village to the Cellar Mill. A very small area of this road surface was also encountered some 2m to the north west, near the well house. These similar areas of 004 lay either side of a spread of soft grey silty humus, containing approximately 70% of small stones and early 20th Century bricks 003. This grey silt may have been the infill of erosion in the road surface. No earlier road surfaces were found beneath 004.

The southernmost metre of the south trench consisted of a light brown sand containing 25% of mixed and well sorted stones, 006. This was quite distinct from 004 to the immediate north, and the border between these two contexts marked the edge of the road surface.

(iii) The Well House and Associated Structures

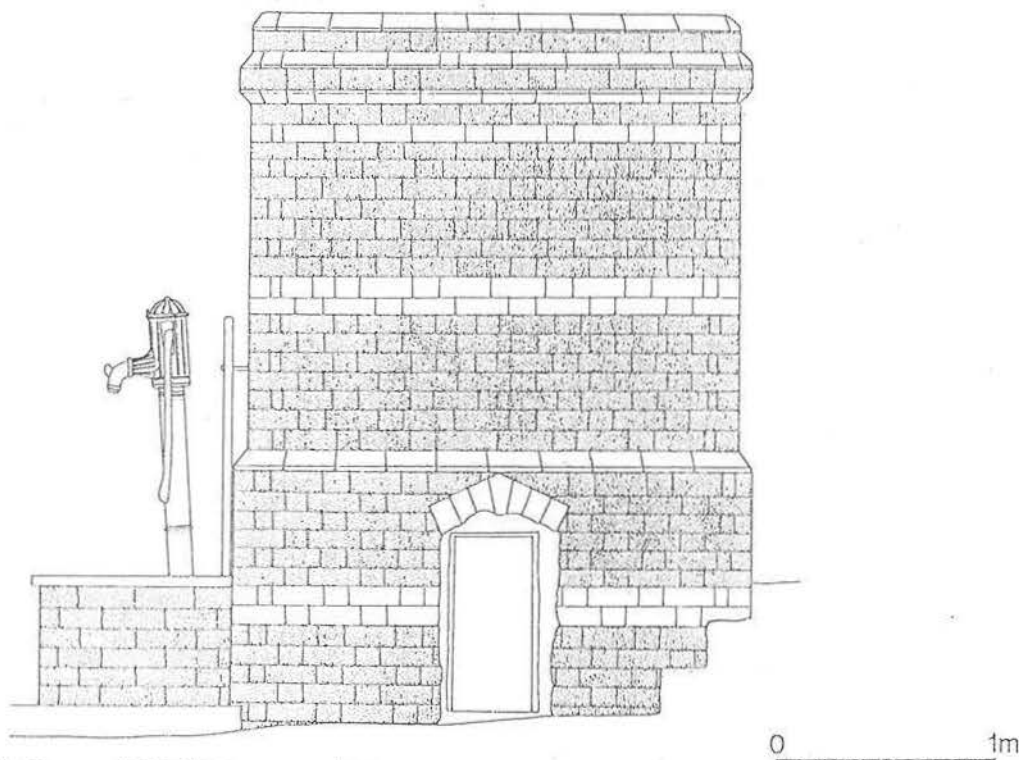


Fig.3 North Face of Well House and Pump.

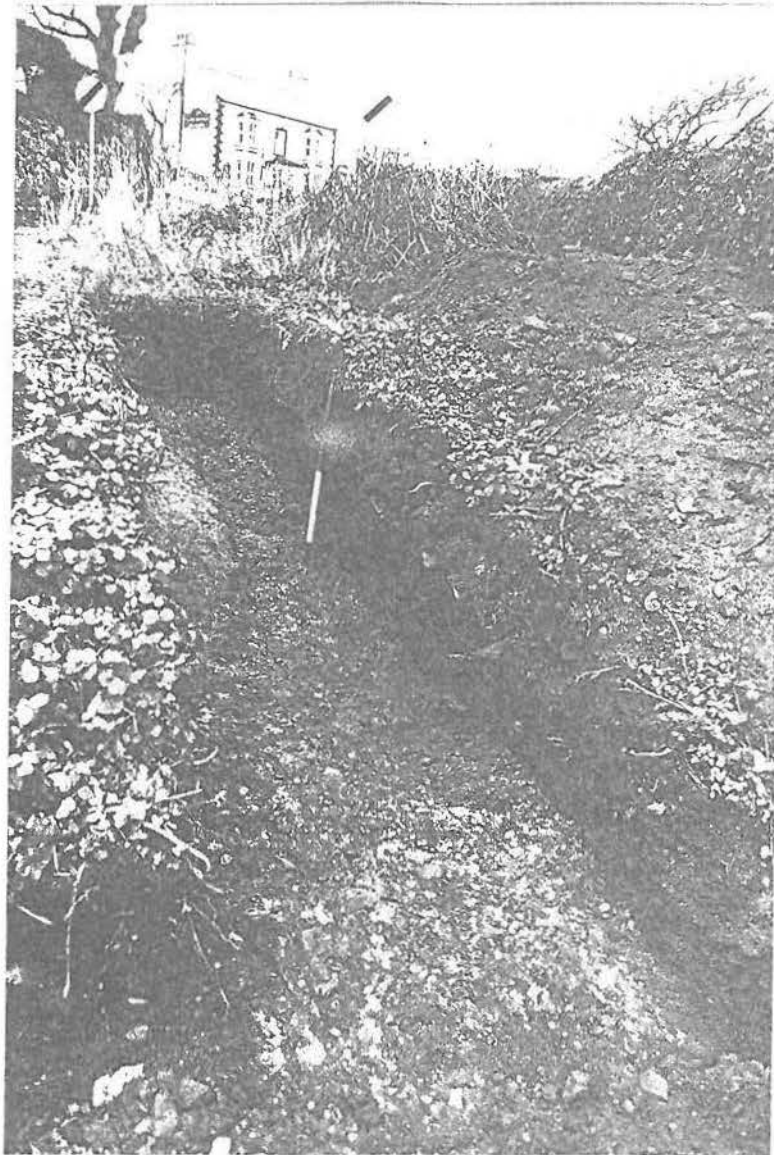


Plate 1. West trench (from east).



Plate 2. South trench (from west).

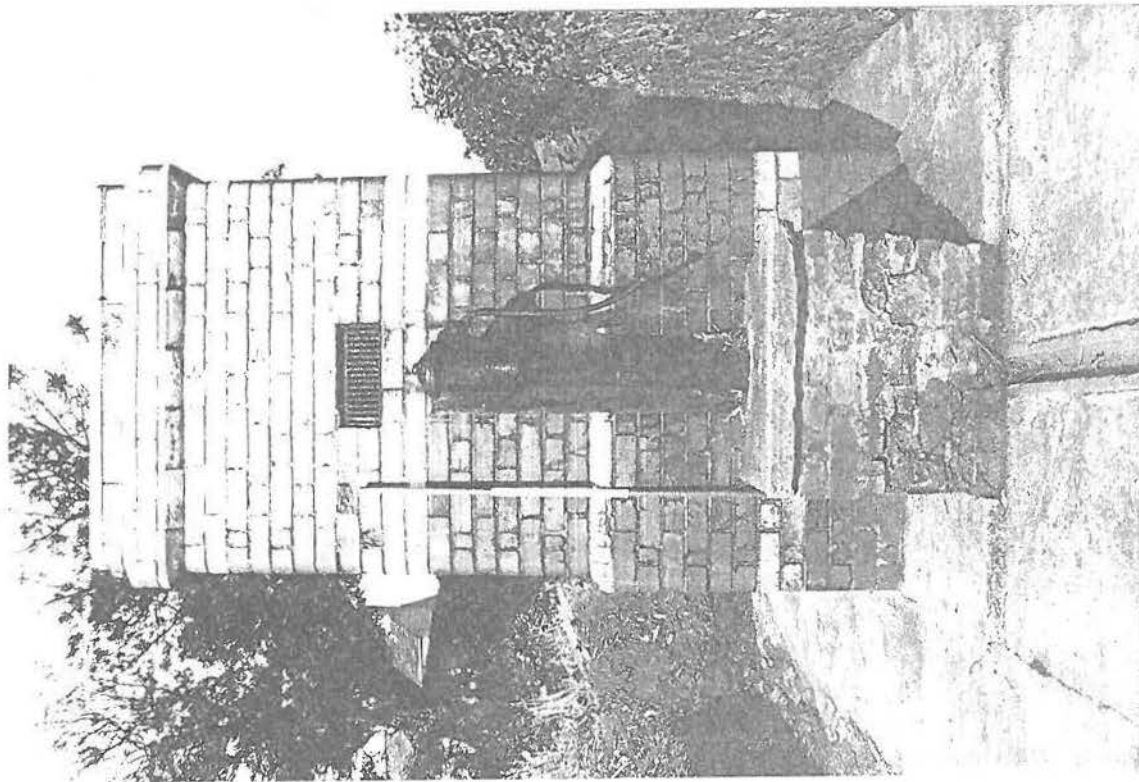


Plate 3. Well House and Pump (from east).

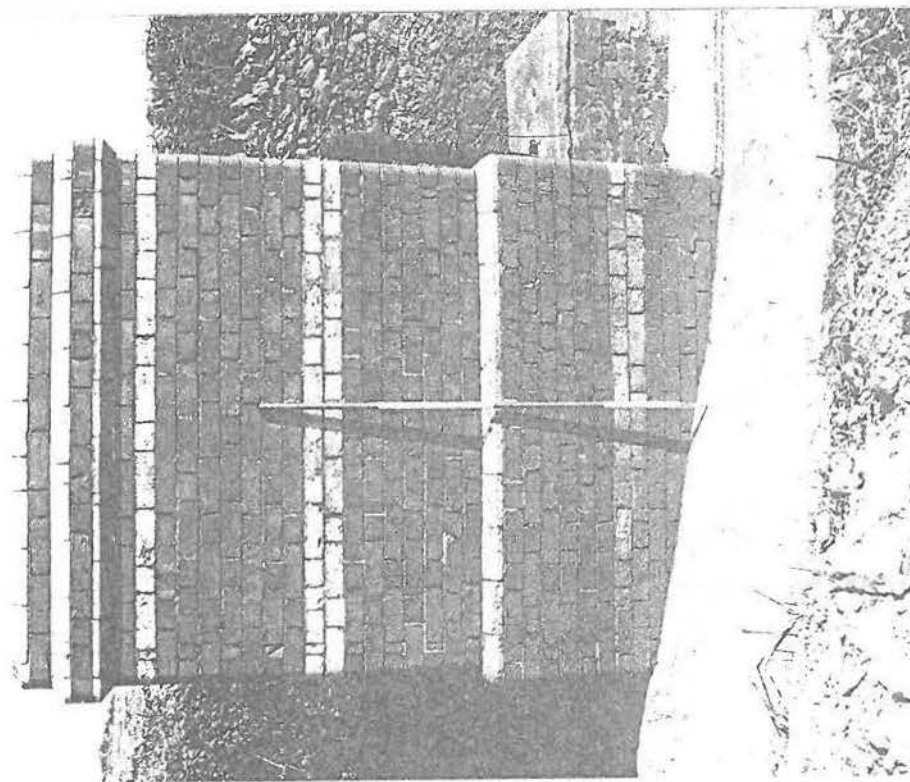


Plate 4. Well house (from south).

Local oral sources in the village indicated that the construction of the well house earlier this century was carried out due to the drowning of a young girl at the site. Following the excavation, the well house was to be demolished and the shaft filled in and subsequently covered by the new road.

Once the area immediately surrounding the well house had been cleared, it became apparent that the structure was built on a substantial concrete platform, extending over 1m away from the house itself on all sides, 008 and 009. The well house itself 010 was built from red engineering bricks with seven bands of yellow bricks included intermittently. The structure stood to a maximum height of 3.27m, was 2.35m long and 1.6m wide. The west and east faces of the house contained a metal grille (0.39m x 0.17m), whereas the north face had a much repaired door at its base, measuring 0.75m x 0.37m. This door was carefully removed and revealed the only entrance into the shaft.

Immediately east of the house a concrete step 0.85m x 0.45m had been constructed, 011, overlying 009. This step was overlaid by a brick built plinth 012, butted against 010, and functioning as a mounting for a cast iron pump 013. The black, cast iron hand operated stand pump measured 1.12m in height, consisted of a plain shaft with an ornate upper lever chamber and spout base. An upright wooden plank 014 was placed between the pump and the east face of the well house. The fabric was complete and in good condition, although the mechanism was broken.

Associated with the pump and the underlying platforms, a narrow drain ran eastwards from the edge of 012 and across 009. Between the outer edge of 009 and the limit of the excavation on this east side, a black humic silt had formed 007, which was interpreted as a sediment from the drain. Between 009 and the excavation limit on the south east side a hard grey and yellow clay was reached which may have been the remains of the above mentioned road, or at least the remnants of a much worn access path.

At the north west corner of the well house, a series of three steps had been constructed between the well house face and the road wall 015. The steps were built from brick and stone and compensated for the fairly steep slope at this part of the site.

(iv) West trench Profile

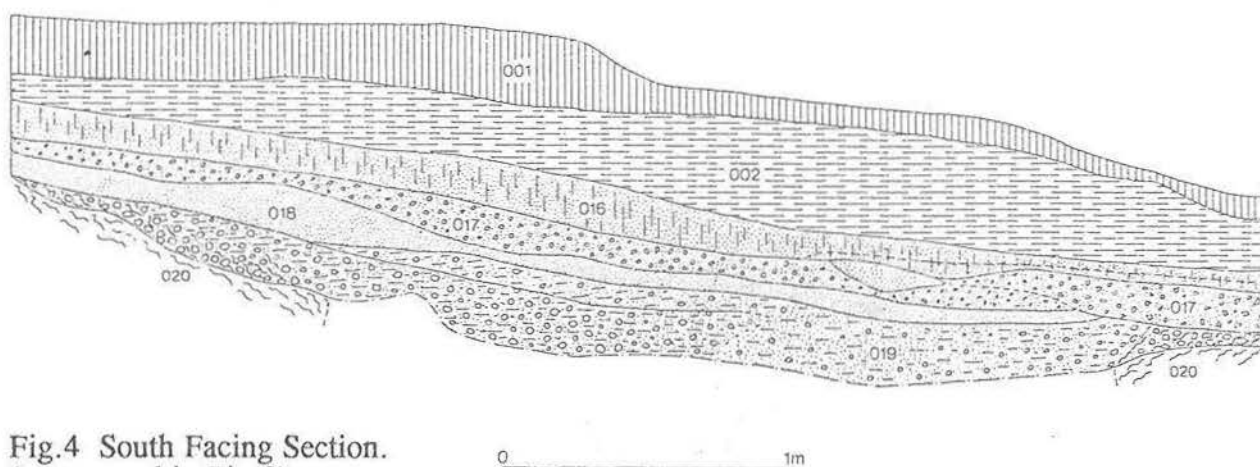


Fig.4 South Facing Section.
(as arrowed in Fig.2).

Following the demolition of the well house by machine as part of the contractor's programme, it was decided to excavate a further 0.40m in depth in the west trench. The south facing section of the trench was then drawn to a scale of 1:10.

The base of 002 overlaid 0.05 - 0.15m of dark grey medium sand and humus, 016, containing 5% of medium sized mixed stones. This was interpreted as being the old top soil layer. Context 016 overlaid a 0.09m thick layer of grey medium sand, consisting of 50% of well sorted 0.04 - 0.1m angular stones. A piece of 19th Century pottery was also retrieved from this layer 017, which may have been related to the earlier road surface: Context 017 overlaid a 0.1m thick layer of soft, stone free, mid grey medium sand which represented the old subsoil layer 018. This grey medium sand overlaid a lens of medium silty sand which contained a large percentage of poorly mixed, angular stones on the west side (approx. 40%). The east side of this silty sand 019 contained much less stones, approximately 2%. Context 019 formed the base of the trench towards the middle of the section, but both the west and the east extremes of the section revealed protruding bedrock, 020, namely soft shaly material, blue / grey and orange in colour.

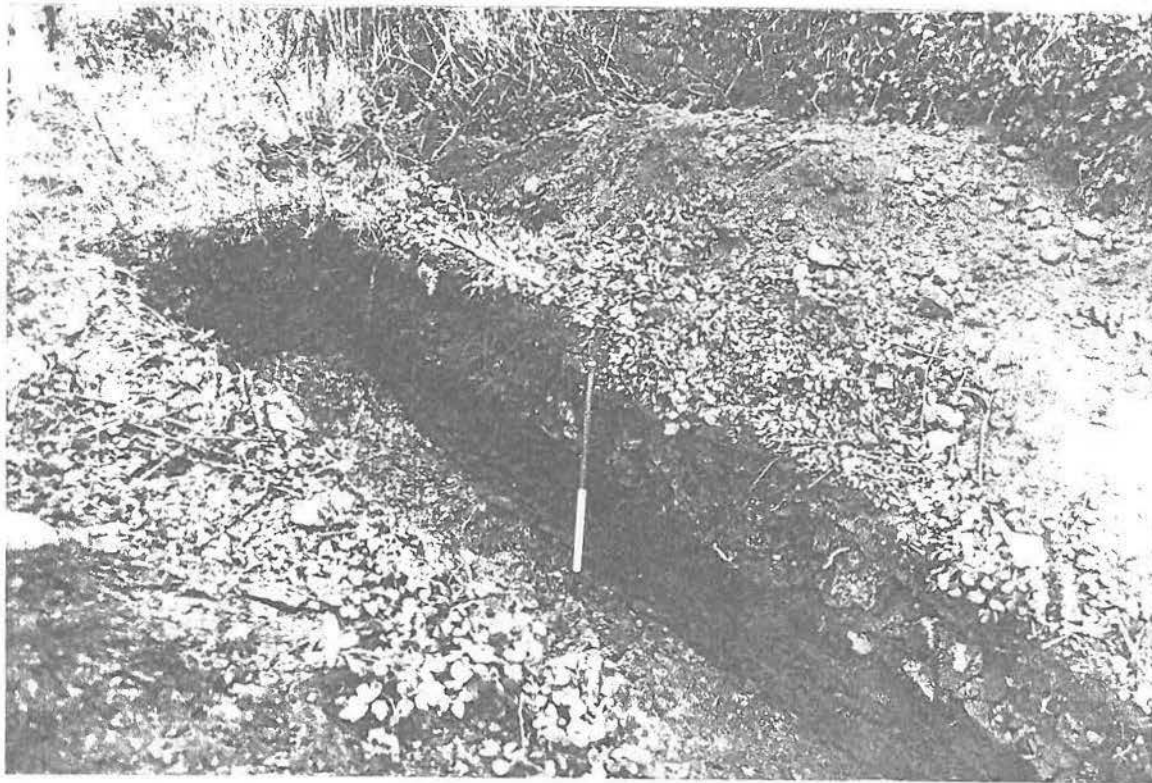


Plate 5. West trench (south facing section).

Conclusions

A wealth of material has been written about the large number of holy wells in Wales, (Jones, F. 1954 *The Holy Wells Of Wales*. University of Wales, Cardiff.) relating to their association with saints as well as their ritual and religious aspects. Some wells were visited during certain important days of the year corresponding with traditional significant days within the Celtic and subsequent Roman calendars. It is believed that the Church introduced feasts to coincide with the earlier pagan activities. Many of the rituals carried out at the wells were still performed up until the early part of this century. No such rituals are known from Ffynnon Beuno, possibly because the well was a source of water for the village and contamination from ritual items could not be risked. These rituals included 'offerings', such as pins, clothing, buckles and coins. The behaviour of these offerings indicated whether or not the wish would be granted. Other wells were known for their healing properties (some for animals), and some for their divination, prediction and cursing powers.

Most importantly however in early Christian times, a vast majority of these wells became dedicated to saints. The saints are intimately connected with the wells, and it is clear that the cults and legends associated with saints such as Dewi, Beuno and Cybi had a great influence on the people. During the lives of the saints, they were expected to perform miracles at wells and to introduce new well sites. Some wells were dedicated to saints some time after their death, mainly within the area where the saint used to live. Occasionally however, wells from further afield were dedicated to a saint in a district where he was known to have worked during his lifetime.

Compared to the legendary and historical background, our knowledge concerning the archaeology of Christian well sites in Gwynedd is extremely limited. There is therefore an urgent need to carry out excavations as at Ffynnon Beuno in the hope that more modern additions to the well structures may be covering earlier remains (such as the holy well and cell site at Penmon). Given the conditions, there is also a strong possibility that many of these sites may produce substantial waterlogged remains.

It was hoped, especially considering strong reference to the well in Mediaeval documents, that Ffynnon Beuno might have yielded earlier remains of the well and confirmed some of the hypotheses outlined above. However, this was not possible under the circumstances of the assessment, but it should not undermine the need to conduct similar excavations at other sites of potential.

The stand pump was carefully removed from the well site and the increasing rarity of this kind of village artefact warrants the necessity to preserve and possibly display the pump accordingly.

The finds and other records are kept at Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, pending final deposition at Oriel Mon, Llangefni.

Acknowledgements

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust wishes to thank Gwynedd County Council for funding the project and for their general assistance at Aberffraw.

