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**ABERFFRAW WATCHING BRIEF**  
**BRITISH GAS WALES**



Gwynedd Archaeological Trust Ltd

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd Cyf

**ABERFFRAW WATCHING BRIEF - BRITISH GAS WALES**

**GWYNEDD ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST 1992**

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## ABERFFRAW GAS BOARD PROJECT

### Background Information

In November 1991, British Gas Wales informed Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (GAT) of its intention to lay an extensive system of gas pipes within the main streets of Aberffraw (NGR SH 355 690.)

It was agreed that GAT would conduct a watching brief on the project, monitoring the progress of the work carried out by British Gas' subcontractors - Mcfaddens. The area is of considerable archaeological importance as Aberffraw is the site of substantial Mediaeval occupation. Evidence from 6th, 7th and 12th Century documentary sources strongly suggests that Aberffraw was the chief seat of the kingdom of Gwynedd during the time of the independent Welsh Kings, and that a royal court was established there. The exact location of the court or palace, however, is still not known. Previous small excavations in Aberffraw have indicated the likelihood that the area was inhabited during the Roman period. A number of Roman ditch sections found during these excavations, led to the proposal that Aberffraw may have been the site of a Roman fort. Based on the position of the possible fort ditch traced at two separate parts of the village, a hypothetical position for the fort has been suggested. This hypothetical rectilinear line encompasses much of the central area of modern Aberffraw. Given this probable intense Roman and Mediaeval activity at Aberffraw therefore, it was hoped that the monitoring of British Gas Wales' project would yield positive results.

### Aims and Methods

The trenches excavated along each street by Mcfaddens were of the same standard dimensions throughout the project - 0.80m deep and 0.40m wide. A substantial stretch of road (40 - 50m) was excavated each day before the pipe was laid and the trench backfilled, the trench stratigraphy being carefully examined by GAT. The following general working agreement for the watching brief was agreed by GAT and British Gas Wales :

During excavation, if any archaeological features were found within the trenches, GAT would be allowed to carry out detailed recording - namely photography and planning. British Gas Wales also agreed to extend the limits of the trenches slightly should the nature of any archaeological material require such action.

The work was carried out between November 1991 and January 1992.

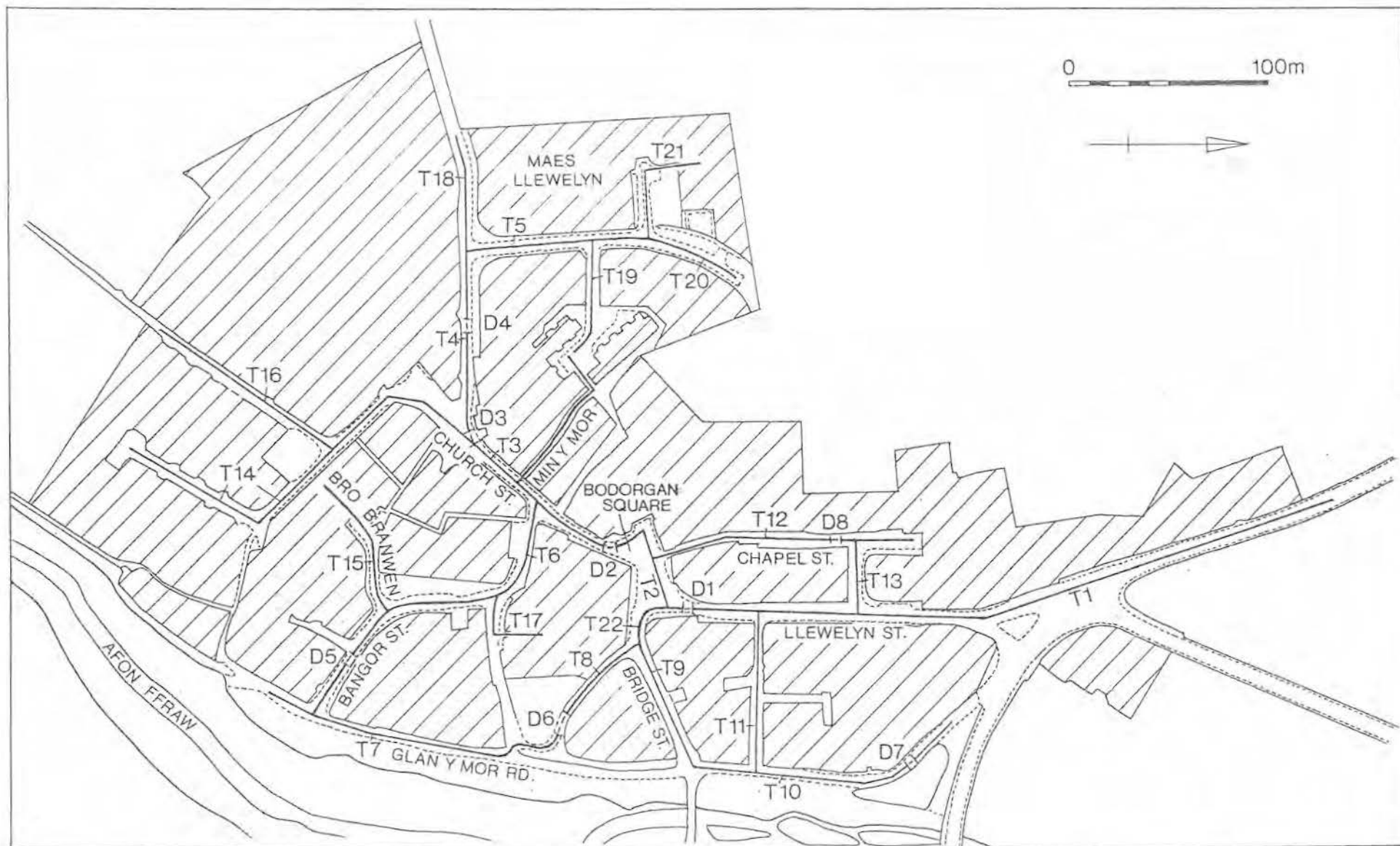


Fig.1 General Location of Trenches

## General Locations and Observations

### Trench 1

Trench 1 was excavated from the police station, southwards along Llewelyn Street to Bodorgan Square. (plate 1 and 2).

The majority of T1 was free of any archaeological remains. The only possible feature in T1 was located at the point where Llewelyn Street entered Bodorgan Square. Below the initial 0.06-0.07m of tarmac (Context 001), and 0.15m of deep grey rubble fill for the tarmac (002), a 0.10m thick layer of pink silty gravel was found, (003.) The lens of pink gravel was 2.3m wide, with patchy remnants extending northwards for an additional 1.5m. Beneath (003), a 0.15m deep layer of orange / light brown clayey silt was reached, (004.) This fill was not as wide as (003), being 2m in width. Within (004), a small amount of isolated black stones were found, (005), which were possibly burnt. Context (004) overlaid a dark grey / brown layer of silty gravel, (006), which reached the bottom of the trench, and was probably natural. The feature, (D1), (plate 3), was photographed and drawn to a scale of 1:10.

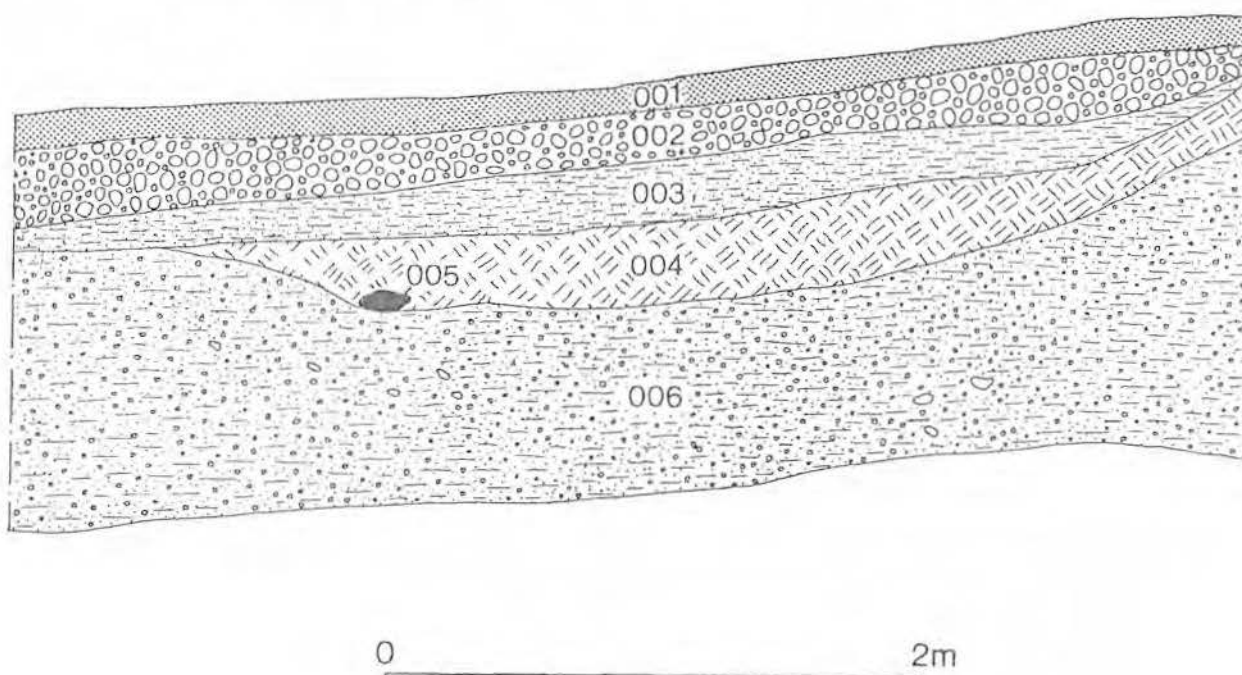


Fig.2 D1 (West facing)

### Trench 2

Trench 2 extended from the end of T1, west through Bodorgan Square, terminating immediately in front of the post office. No archaeological features were found in Trench 2.

### Trench 3

Extending south westwards from Bodorgan Square, Trench 3 was excavated along Church





Plate 1. Trench 1: View from east



Plate 2. Trench 1: View from north



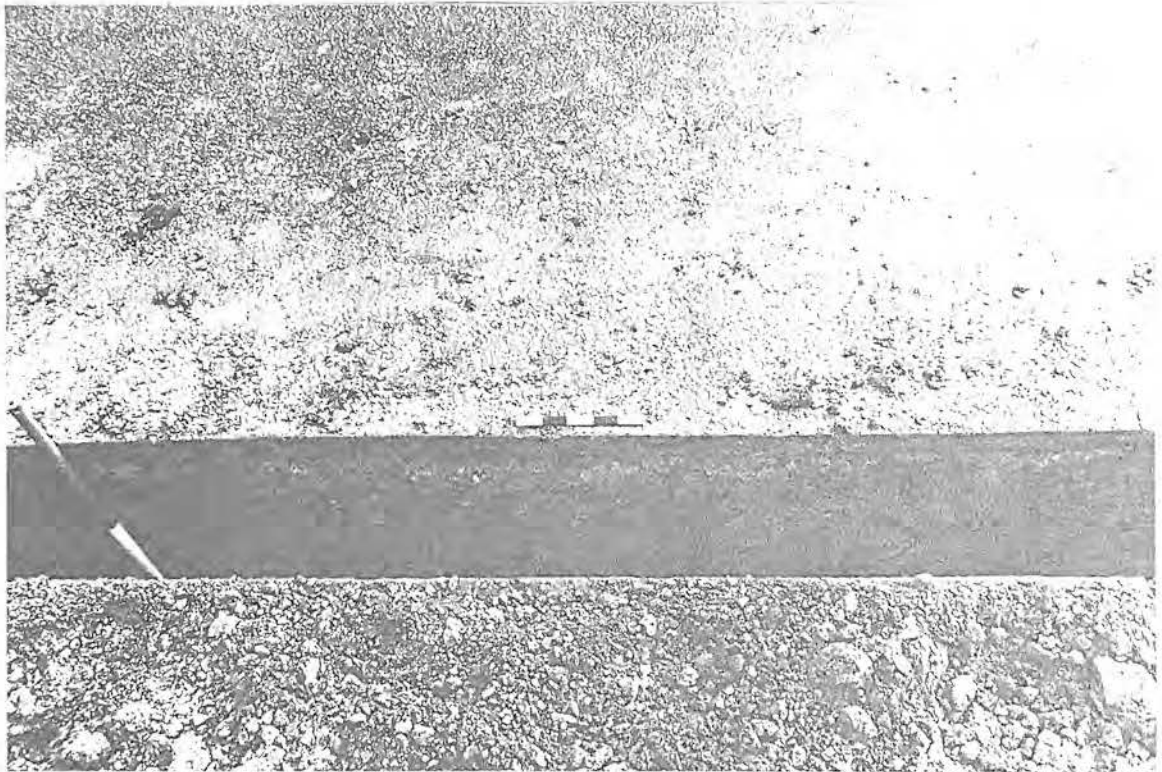


Plate 3. Trench 1: D1 View from west



Plate 4. Trench 3: View from north

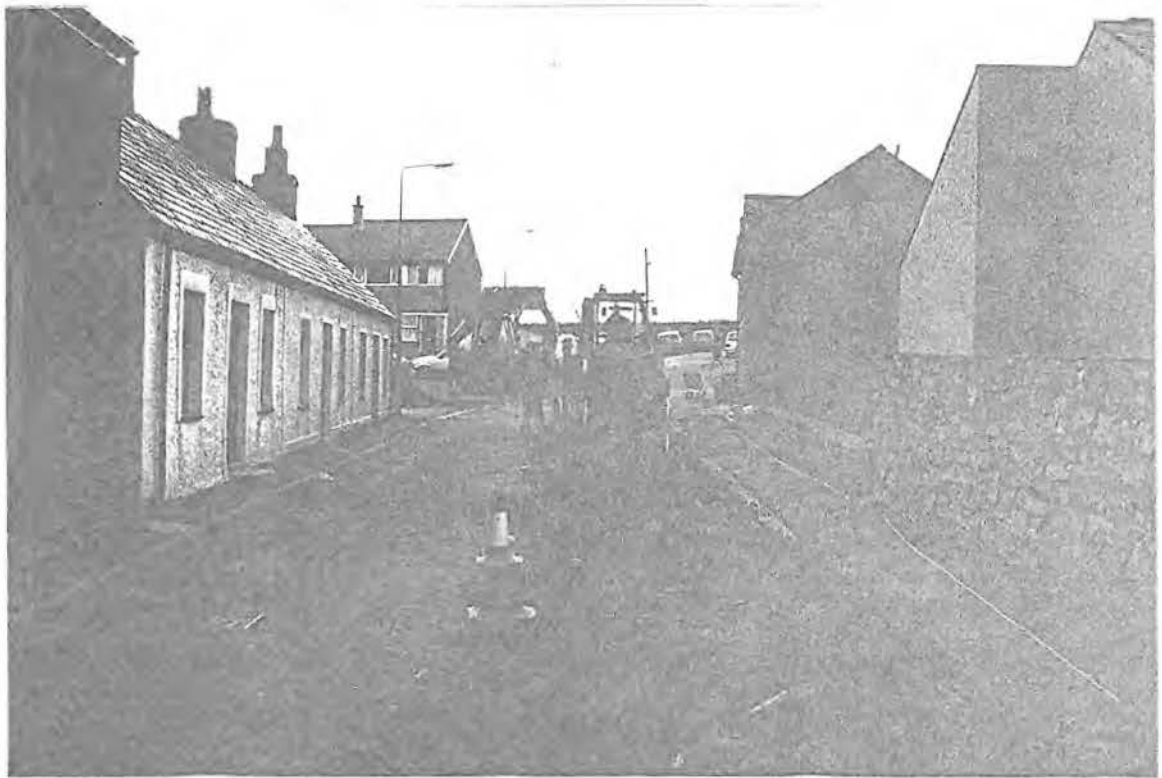


Plate 5. Trench 3: View from east

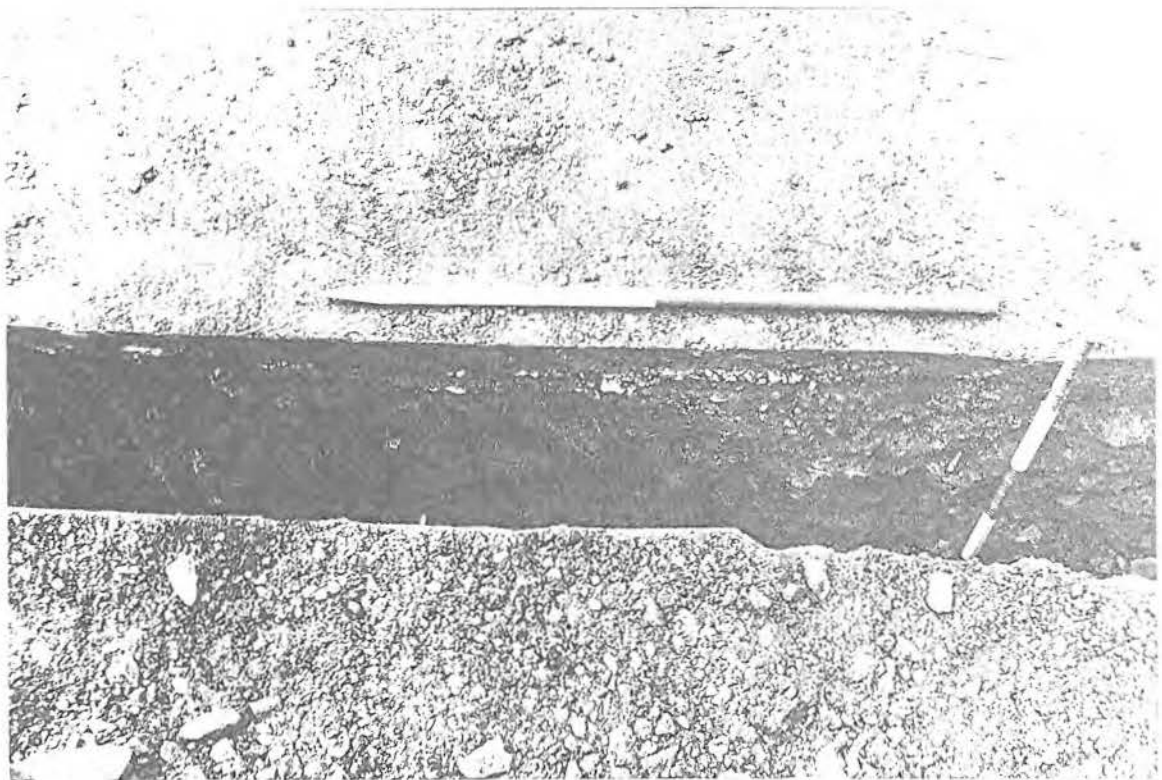


Plate 6. Trench 3: D2 View from east

Street. (plate 4 and 5). A possible feature was noticed at the south west corner of Bodorgan Square, (D2), (plate 6), approximately 3m wide. Beneath 0.07m thick of tarmac (001) and 0.12m of grey rubble fill (002) for the tarmac, a distinct 0.10m thick lens of yellow sand was found, (007.) The sand contained a large percentage of small stones / gravel, and overlaid an inconsistent layer of stone free, middle brown sand, (008.) On the south west side all layers were butted up against a 0.60m thick of shattered bedrock / rubble, (009), which probably extended deeper than the bottom of the trench. Beneath (008), the trench was filled down to the base of the trench by (006) natural. D2 was recorded and photographed.

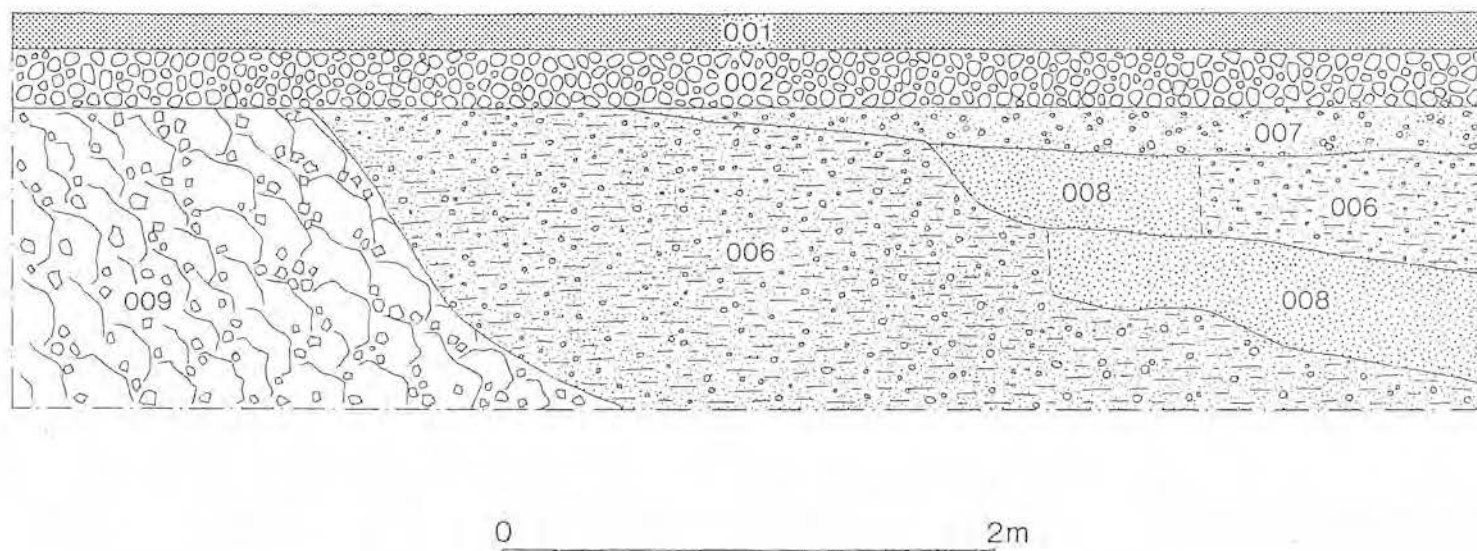


Fig.3 D2 (West facing)

Approximately 6m north of D2, near the junction of Trench 2 and Trench 3 in Bodorgan Square, the route of T3 had to be altered slightly because of substantial bedrock outcrop within the trench. It is known that a large Mediaeval cross once stood somewhere within Bodorgan Square, subsequently removed and its exact location unknown. With this in mind, Mcfaddens agreed to excavate around the extent of the bedrock outcrop, and the 3x2m area was examined by GAT for any remains which might be related to the foundations of the cross. None was found.

Trench 3 was further excavated in a south westerly direction along Church Street but no further archaeological features were revealed. The trench stratigraphy towards the south west of T3 consisted predominantly of context (006) with occasional bedrock outcrops.

#### Trench 4

At the point where Trench 3 and Trench 4 meet, a possible ditched feature was located, D3. (plate 7). Up to 0.06m thick of (001) and 0.08m of (002) overlaid the first possible ditch fill which was a 0.20m thick layer of very clean orange, stone free silty sand, (010.) This in turn overlaid a 0.5m thick layer of middle brown, large granular sand, (011), which reached the bottom of the trench. On the extreme north side of the section however, (011) overlaid a 1m wide fill of light brown / grey sandy gravel, (012), the top of which may have formed the edge of the ditch on that side. On the south side, outcropping bedrock, (013), may have formed the edge of the possible ditch. D3 was 5.4m wide. The feature was photographed and drawn to a scale of 1:20.

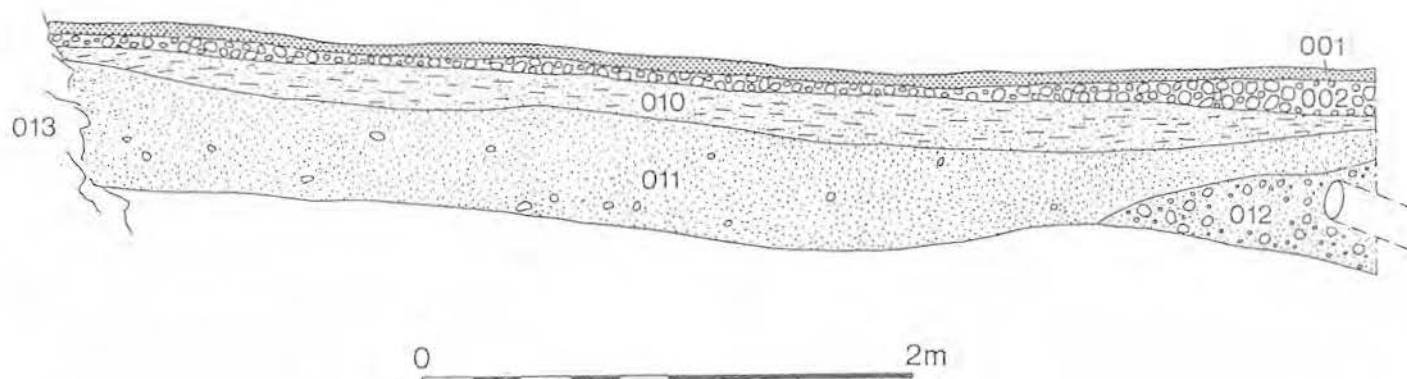


Fig.4 D3 (South facing)

Approximately 25m West of D3, another possible ditch, (D4), was located in T4. Underneath a depth of 0.07m of (001) and 0.08m of (002), up to 0.30m of orange / yellow, dry silty sand was reached, (014.) At the centre of the section, (014) overlaid a 0.60m thick layer of clean, middle brown sand, (015), which in turn butted against a fill of light brown, fairly stoney sandy silt, (016), on the east side of the section, forming the edge of the ditch on that side. On the west side, the edge of the ditch seems to have consisted of bedrock, (013), which underlaid (014) and was butted against (015) on its east side. The bottom of (013), (015) and (016) formed the base of the trench. Ditch 4 was photographed and drawn to a scale of 1:20.

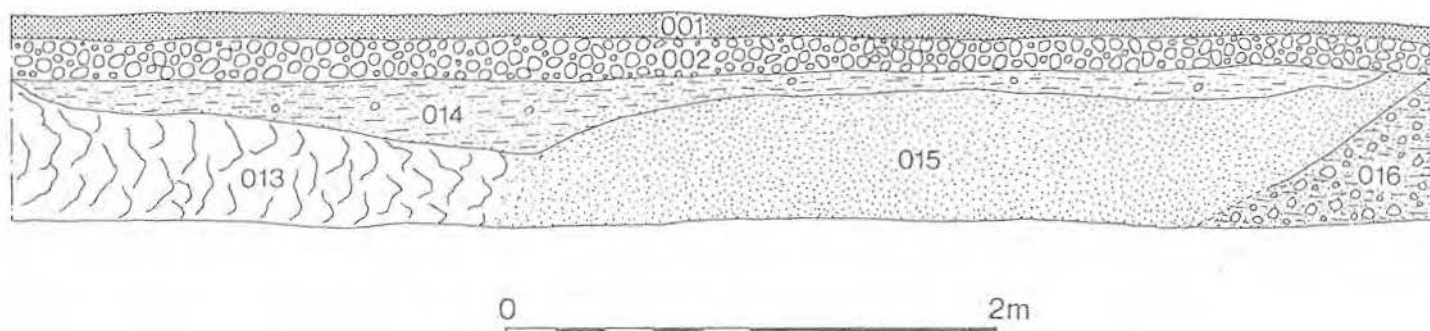


Fig.5 D4 (South facing)



## Trench 5

Trench 5 ran northwards into Maes Llewelyn housing estate. No archaeological features were found.

## Trench 6

Extending south eastwards, Trench 6 was excavated along Bangor Street, starting from the junction with Church Street. No archaeological features were revealed along the first top half of the trench. In the lower half however, near the point where Bangor Street meets Glan Y Mor road, a very prominent ditch feature was located, (D5). (plate 8,9 and 10). Initial observations showed substantial traces of charcoal and shell in the main fill of the ditch.

Mcfaddens agreed to extend the limits of the trench southwards in order to obtain a clearer impression of the ditch. The depth of the ditch was found to be a maximum of 0.5m and approximately 5m wide. The extension of the trench southwards to increase the width of the trench area did not prove to be productive since the ditch fill had been completely eroded by a modern sewerage pipe on this southern side. Modern service pipes had also truncated much of the ditch section on the west side, which meant that only the east side of the section was drawn accurately. It was noticed that the ditch section did not cross the excavated trench at right angles. This part of T6 lay at an east to west orientation, with the ditch cutting across it from SW to NE. The stratigraphy of D5 (east side) was as follows :

Up to 0.08m and 0.12m of (001) and (002) respectively overlaid an inconsistent layer of dark orange gritty sand (017), which was a maximum of 0.10m deep. Beneath (017), (and beneath (002) where (017) was particularly inconsistent and lacking), a layer of middle brown sand was reached (018). This was the main fill of the ditch and contained substantial traces of charcoal, shell, burnt clay and 19th Century pottery. Context (018) was 0.5m at its deepest and cut into a light brown / dark orange silty sand, which was probably natural (020). Towards the extreme east of the section, (018) rose sharply developing into a 0.10m thick layer lying above natural (020). This natural was considerably different from natural (006) encountered in previous trenches. Context (020) was cut by the remains of an old water pipe (021). Finally, at the extreme east side of the section, a thin lens, approximately 0.05m deep, of very hard orange clay, (019), was observed lying between (018) and (020).

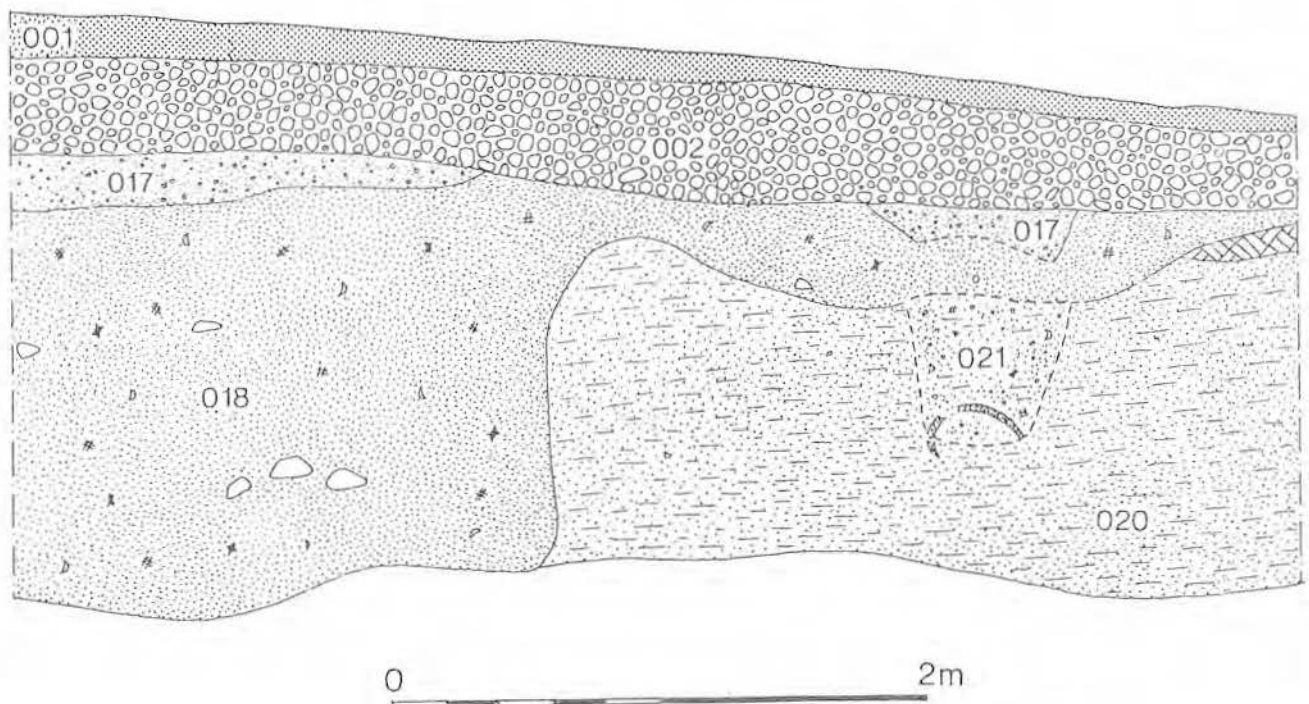


Fig.6 D5 East side (South facing)



Plate 7. Trench 4: D3 / General view from north east

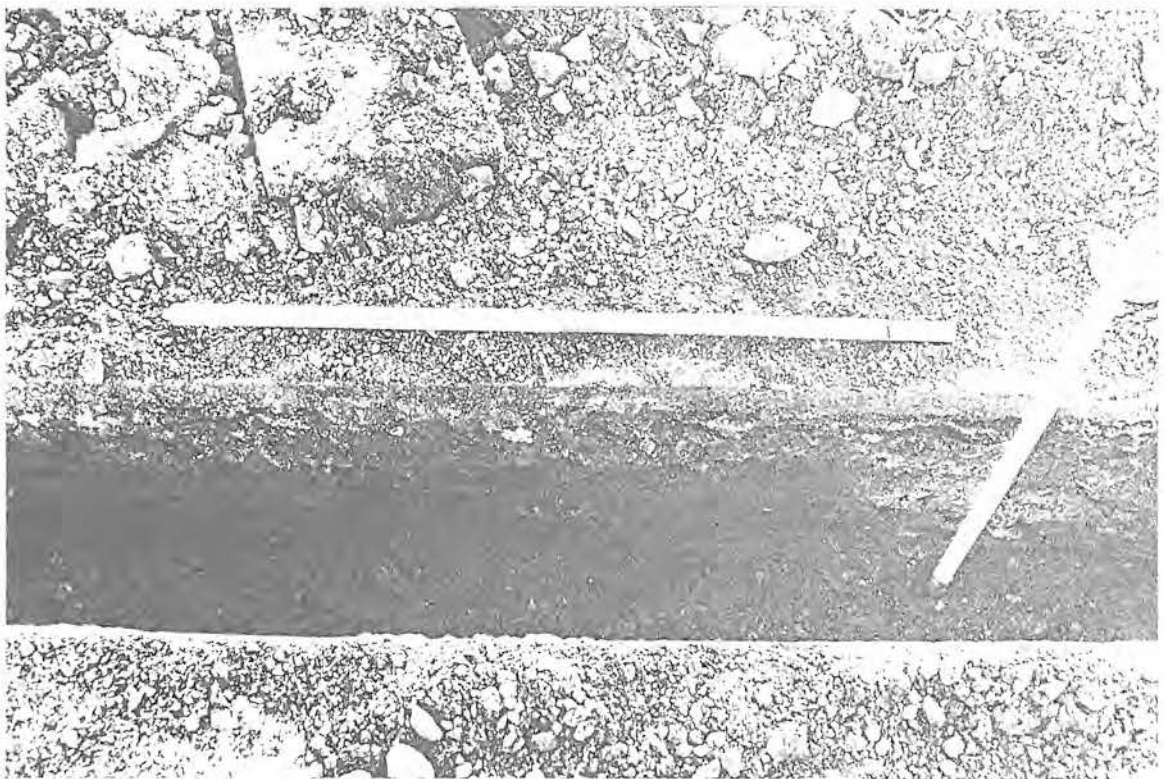


Plate 8. Trench 6: D5 View from south

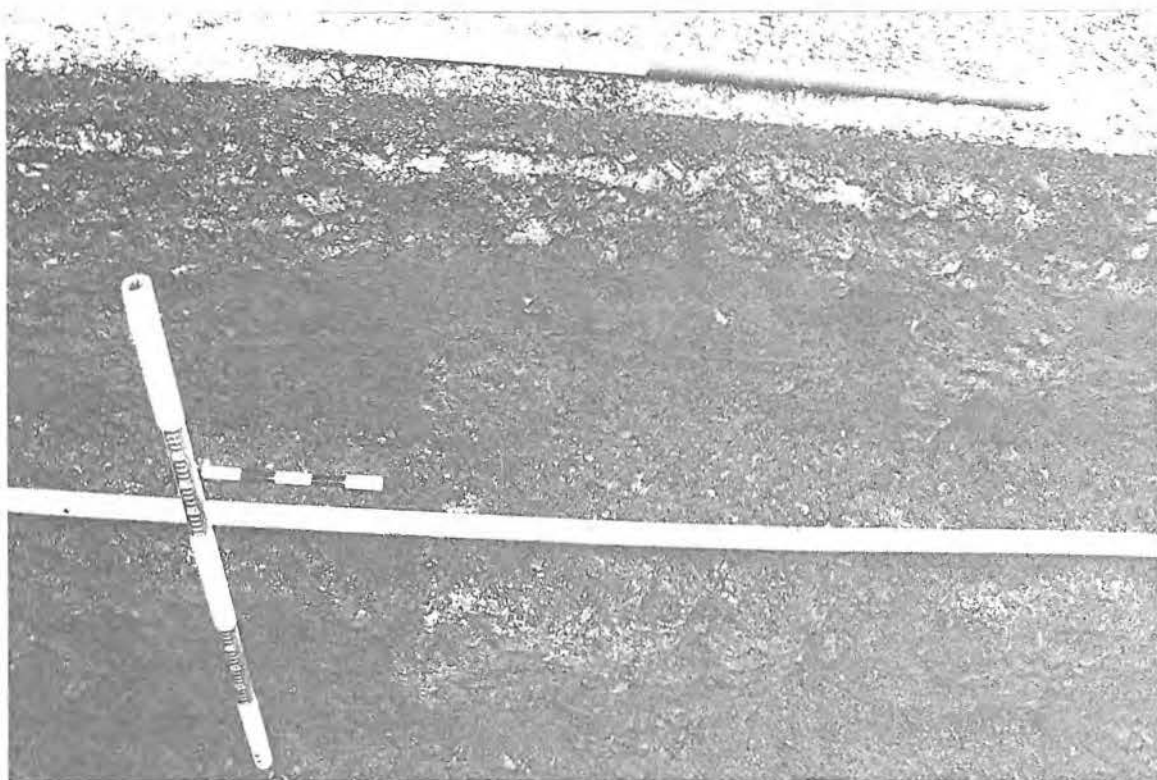


Plate 9. Trench 6: D5 View from south

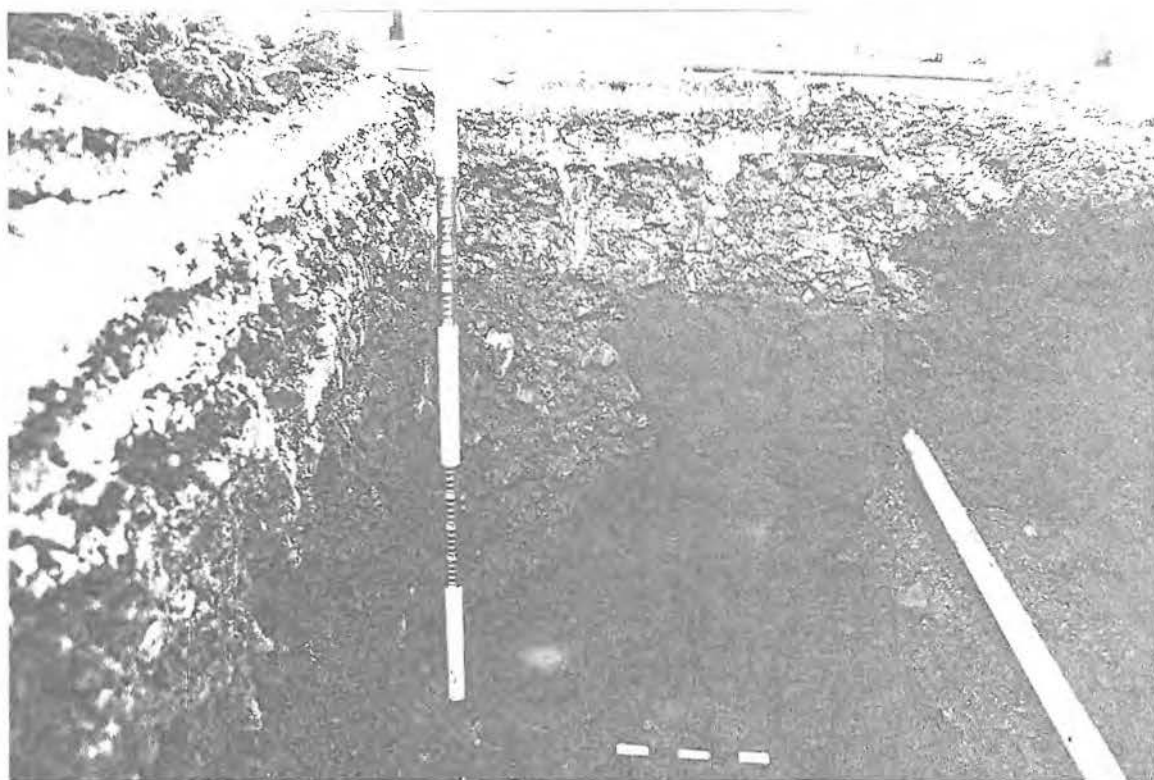


Plate 10. Trench 6: D5 View from east



### Trench 7

Parallel to the shore of Afon Ffraw, Trench 7 was excavated northwards along Glan Y Mor road. The depth of the trench had to be shallower here because of the problem of in seeping sea water. No archaeological remains were noted.

### Trench 8

Trench 8 was excavated in a north westerly direction from Glan Y Mor road towards Bridge Street and Bodorgan Square. (plate 11 and 12). Some 15m south east of Seion chapel, a ditch was found (D6). The main fill of D6, (018), was identical to that found in D5 - containing a large amount of charcoal and 19th Century pottery.

Underneath 0.07m of (001) and 0.13m of (002), a prominent layer of middle brown sand (018) was reached, containing the prementioned charcoal and pottery. The east side of (018) in the section was filled with three large rocks / boulders in the upper levels. The fill of (018) was cut into natural (020), and was 6m wide. The maximum depth of the ditch was not reached however, because it exceeded the depth of the excavated trench. Lack of time and the strong possibility of active service pipes meant that the trench could not be excavated to a deeper level. The exposed extent of the ditch section however, measured 0.60m in depth. The section was photographed, but lack of time meant that only a brief scaled representation drawing of the feature was obtained.

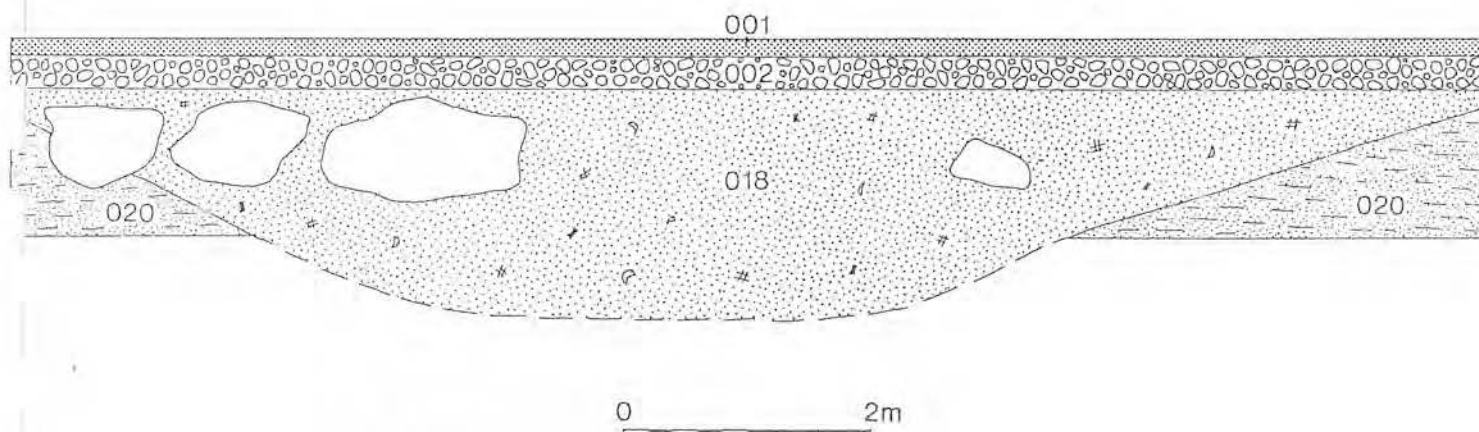


Fig.7 D6 (North facing)

### Trench 9

This trench was excavated eastwards down Bridge Street, towards Afon Ffraw. No archaeological features were found.

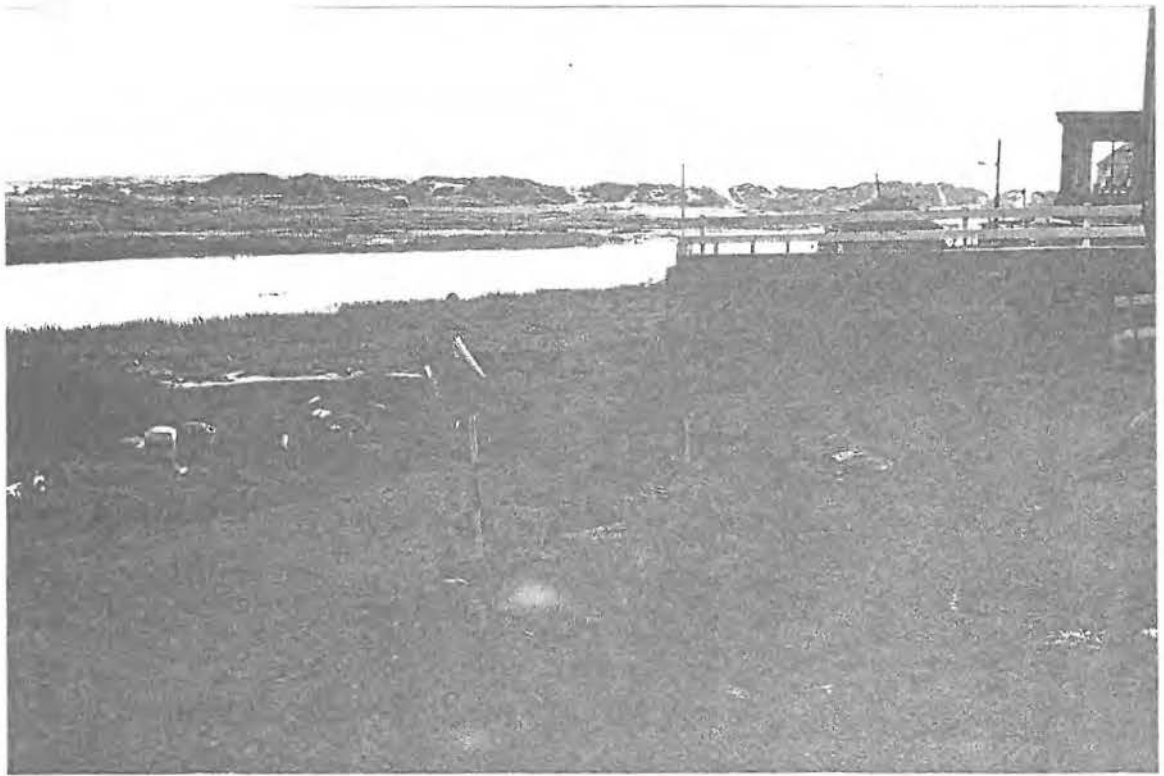


Plate 11. Trench 8: General view from north

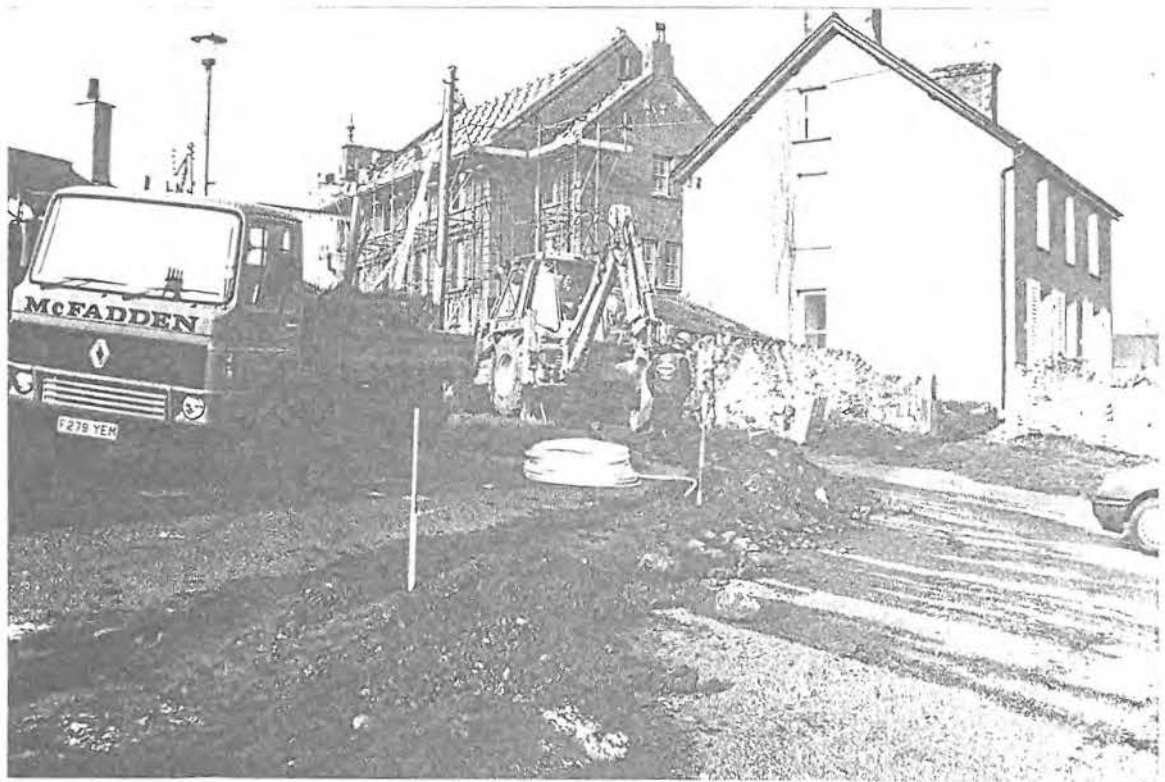


Plate 12. Trench 8: General view from south

## Trench 10

Trench 10 extended northwards from the lower end of Bridge Street, northwards along Glan Y Mor, parallel to Afon Ffraw, and towards the modern Aberffraw bridge. As in Trench 7, much of T10 had to be dug slightly shallower than intended because of in seeping sea water. The northern half of T10 was on higher ground and the sea was not a problem here. A ditch section was found within this northern part of T10, immediately east of Bragdy Terrace. The feature lay underneath 0.05m of (001), and 0.07m of (002). Context (002) overlaid an intermittent layer of yellow gritty, and fairly stoney sand, (022), which was a maximum of 0.15m deep. Beneath (002) and (022), context (023) comprised of the main fill of the ditch - namely a light grey, stone free sand with occasional charcoal flecks. Within (023), the possible remains of an earlier and deeper cut to the ditch was seen. This feature, (024), was very similar to (023) in texture, except for a much darker grey colour. This again contained a small amount of charcoal flecks. The bottom of (023) was reached at 0.80m, which was also the extent of the trench. A brief examination showed that (023) was lying above a blue / grey, heavily waterlogged gleyed clay, which seemed to be alluviated natural, (026). This differed from a light brown gritty sand, (025), which was the predominating natural of the trench, cut into by the ditch.

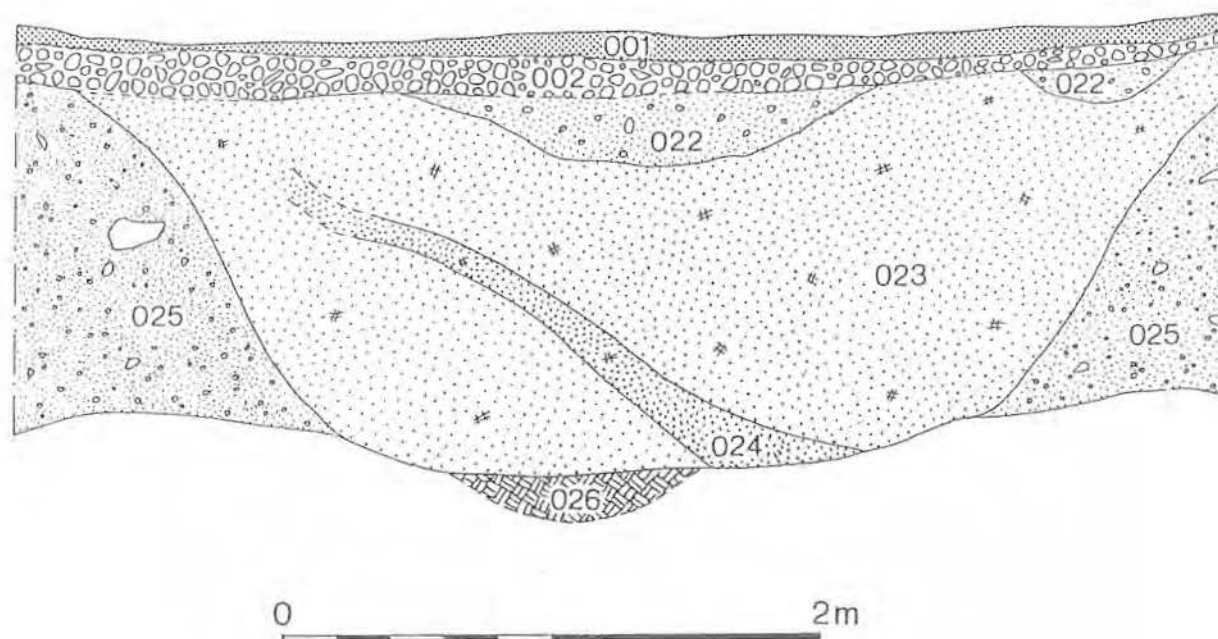


Fig.8 D7 (North East facing)

## Trench 11

Trench 11 was excavated westwards along a narrow lane linking Glan Y Mor with Llewelyn Street. No archaeological remains were found.

## Trench 12

Covering the length of Chapel Street, T12 was excavated southwards, starting near Llys Llewelyn Heritage Centre. The trench was excavated in two separate parts, the first running southwards from Llys Llewelyn, and the second running northwards starting from Bodorgan Square tying in with the southern end of the first part.

Archaeological features (D8) were noticed near the Methodist chapel in the first part of T12. Beneath (001) and (002), a large boulder (1.25m x 0.40m) was apparently set in an 0.80m deep pit containing grey / brown humic soil (026) with occasional flecks of charcoal and 19th Century pottery. The pit also contained a scatter of smaller stones and decayed mortar towards the northern end. Context (006), natural, filled in the stratigraphy either side of the pit. The southern half of T12 did not yield any archaeological remains.

## Trench 13

A short stretch of road, approximately 20m in length, linking Chapel Street and Llewelyn Street. The trench was excavated in an easterly direction but no archaeological features were encountered.

## Trench 14

Trench 14 was excavated from Neuadd Glannau Ffraw, past the County Primary School and into the Fron housing estate. No archaeological features were found.

## Trench 15

Trench 15 was excavated westwards along Bro Branwen cul de sac. No archaeological features were recorded.

## Trench 16

Running south westwards past the County Primary School and Fronheulog housing block, Trench 16 yielded no archaeological remains.

## Trench 17

Trench 17 was excavated eastwards from Bangor Street into a narrow access path adjacent to Tan Refail. No archaeological features were found.

## Trench 18

Located at the extreme south west corner of Aberffraw, Trench 18 was excavated from the limit of T4 westwards towards the Church Hall. No archaeological remains were found.

#### Trench 19

Trench 19 was excavated eastwards from Maes Llewelyn housing estate into Min Y Mor housing estate. No archaeological features were found.

#### Trench 20

This trench was excavated northwards from the junction of T5 and T19, along Maes Llewelyn housing estate. No archaeological remains were found.

#### Trench 21

Trench 21 was excavated into the extreme west end of Maes Llewelyn housing estate, directed westwards from T20. No archaeological features were recorded.

#### Trench 22

This short length of trench covered the east corner of Bodorgan Square, linking the southern end of T1 with the junction of T8 and T9. No archaeological remains were observed.

## Conclusions

Considering the potential of Aberffraw as a major Mediaeval (and possibly Roman) stronghold, it was hoped that the work carried out by British Gas would gain some considerable archaeological insight in this respect. Particular interest was taken in studying the trenches when they crossed the hypothetical rectilinear outline of the Roman 'fort', but at the same time not forgetting that the validity of this outline is open to much scepticism.

## Recorded Features

a) Features D1, D2, D3 and D4, although not convincing, may have represented the truncated remains of ditches. The lack of pottery or charcoal from these features meant that no date could be attested to them.

Only one of these possible ditches, (D3), was located on the line of the hypothetical Roman 'fort'. This ditch, however, did not yield any material of Roman character.

b) Feature D5, found in the lower half of Bangor Street, was the first that could categorically be identified as a ditch. Although the ditch was positioned on the hypothetical 'fort' line, the main fill yielded nothing earlier than 19th Century pottery.

Initially, it was considered that D5 may have been the remains of a pit. However, as an almost identical feature was found in Trench 8 (D6 - containing the same fill of context (018) and 19th Century pottery), it is equally possible that D5 and D6 are two different sections of the same ditch, possibly functioning as a boundary.

c) Feature D7 in Trench 10 also seemed suitably convincing as a ditch section. The retrieval of 19th Century pottery in D7 also confirmed it as a fairly modern feature, although not apparently related to either D5 nor D6.

d) Feature D8, in Trench 12 was identified as a pit. Again, the feature proved to be 19th Century in date, based on the retrieved pottery.

## Summary

The watching brief succeeded in revealing a number of features from within different areas of the village. Although two of these features were situated on the hypothetical outline of the 'fort', neither were found to be of Roman origin. Indeed, all eight features were probably 19th century in date.

No remains were revealed relating to Mediaeval or Roman occupation.

## **Acknowledgements**

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust greatly acknowledge the cooperation of Mr. Paul Duggan and British Gas Wales during the Aberffraw project.

GAT also appreciate the valuable time and assistance given by Mcfaddens at Aberffraw.



