

# **GWYNEDD ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST**

**Seion Chapel, Conwy**

**Watching brief and archaeological response at  
Seion Chapel, Conwy, Gwynedd**

Q106

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Report No ~~45~~ 45

## Background

In September 1992 Gwynedd Archaeological Trust was requested by Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments to conduct a watching brief and a limited programme of archaeological response to conversion work and alterations at an early 19th century chapel adjacent to Plas Mawr, Conway (Fig 1). The conversion will provide new accommodation for the Royal Cambrian Academy of Art which is to be moved from its present location in the corrugated iron hall to the west of Seion Chapel as part of Cadw's guardianship plans for Plas Mawr. The archaeological potential for Conway is acknowledged and the work provided a potential opportunity to examine the pre-Victorian townscape hitherto unexplored in this area. Following a site visit and discussions with scheme architects Bowen Dann Knox and contractors, the Trust outlined provisions for a watching brief and a limited archaeological response which could be accommodated by the contractors while work was in progress.

## Response Brief

The following response was agreed;

- (i) Two hand-dug, 1m wide trenches across either end of the passageway between Plas Mawr and Seion Chapel to investigate the nature and extent of the deposits under the present concrete surface which is to be reduced as part of the scheme.
- (ii) One hand-dug, 1m x 3m trench under the middle of the main, suspended timber, Chapel floor to investigate the nature and extent of the deposits where it is proposed to site a concrete supporting pillar for the new gallery.
- (iii) A watching brief during the demolition and machine clearance of the Old School Room adjoining the SE side of the Chapel, where the existing ground surface is to be lowered, level with that in the main Chapel area.
- (iv) A watching brief and the recording of a section through where the deepest deposits are anticipated on the south corner of the site.
- (v) A general watching brief undertaken on a *pro rata* basis, during any further major ground disturbances, and/or at the request of the contractors, in response to any items or features of potential archaeological interest they identify during the course of their work.

Some of the above provisions were adapted following observations made during the course of the work.

## Results

- (i) Any stratigraphy in the passageway between Plas Mawr and Seion Chapel had been badly disturbed by the location of service pipes for mains water etc. One, 1m wide trench was initially dug across the passageway but abandoned when the nature and scale of the modern disturbance became apparent. However, some detail of the nature of the deposits was recorded in the long section at the western end of the site (Fig. 2).

Following the excavation and clearance of the passageway by the contractors it was possible to make some further observations. A drain/culvert, (context 004) ran parallel with the south wall of Seion Chapel, and a similar feature had been noted by the contractors running along the north wall. On the south side the feature comprised a stone-lined box with stone capping, total width 0.60m and an internal drain channel of 0.20m section. The drain could be traced/followed in the

contractors trench from a point 1.0m from the west corner of the Chapel to the east corner where water presumably discharged down slope into Crown Lane.

A pit (context 001) had been dug against the northern wall of Plas Mawr, measuring approximately 1.0m across and 0.5m deep. The items recovered from the pit included one small piece of post-medieval/19th century window glass, (Finds No. 008) a 0.50 x 0.40 m piece of copper alloy with two small circular perforations, (Finds No. 006) one piece of bone, (finds no 007) and a small amount of shell and slate. The pit (Fig 5 ) appears to have been dug against the foundation course of Plas Mawr, however on stratigraphic grounds it could equally have been an earlier feature disturbed by the foundations of the house.

(ii) In the interior of the Chapel a 1m x 3m trench was hand-dug at approximately the middle of the Chapel floor (Fig 3). The following features were recorded. A stone-lined drain (context 006) of similar construction to the external drain recorded in the passageway (004) ran parallel with the eastern edge of the excavation trench. The drain was sealed with redeposited natural clay, (context 007) and had cut across the edge of an earlier feature, (context 008), a rubbish pit which continued under the eastern side of the excavation trench. The pit (Fig 4 ) as seen in the trench measured 1 x 1.5m by 0.60m deep, with four separate layers/horizons of fill including a 0.20m lens of mixed marine shells (comprising oyster, mussel, whelk, cockles, sample Finds No. 005). One rim and handle sherd of medieval pottery (Finds No. 003) was recovered from the fill of the pit below the shell horizon, (context 012). Two other sherds were also recovered in redeposited contexts (005), probably levelling for the chapel floor, (Finds No. 001 and 002 ). One other pot fragment had been recovered by the contractors in the north west of the chapel building, (Finds No. 004).

The Trust visited the site on several occasions while the contractors work was in progress, and a third pit was noted, in section, in one of the internal foundation trenches. The details of this were only roughly recorded.

(iii) A watching brief was undertaken during machine clearance of the Old School Room, no archaeological features were recognised.

(iv) A watching brief was undertaken on the south corner of the site, but the extents of the deposits above natural were not as had been anticipated, (Fig 2).

## Discussion

The work carried out at Seion Chapel, Conway, was of limited scope and restricted by the conditions prevailing on the site, although every facility was extended by the contractors. The passageway between Plas Mawr and Seion Chapel had been severely disturbed by a combination of activities, including the addition of fairly recent slate cladding to the lower courses of the fabric of Plas Mawr along the whole length of the passageway (Fig 3). The profile of the natural hill slope and the relative levels of the buildings was recovered in the main, eastern section. The slope seems almost certainly to have been terraced for the erection of Seion Chapel and also for the rear, north-west end of Plas Mawr. The two pits sited in the interior of Seion Chapel are presumably rubbish pits, roughly contemporary with the pottery recovered. Whether they were arguably associated with a structure which may have stood on the site cannot be answered owing to the limitations of the area investigated.

## **Site archive**

### **Photographic list comprising:**

2 colour transparency index sheet

2 black and white index sheets

Finds list (08 items)

List of site plans (nos 1 to 6 )

Levels book

Context sheets (nos 1 to 12 )

Correspondence etc

## **The Plas Mawr Pottery**

Compiled by J Rutter

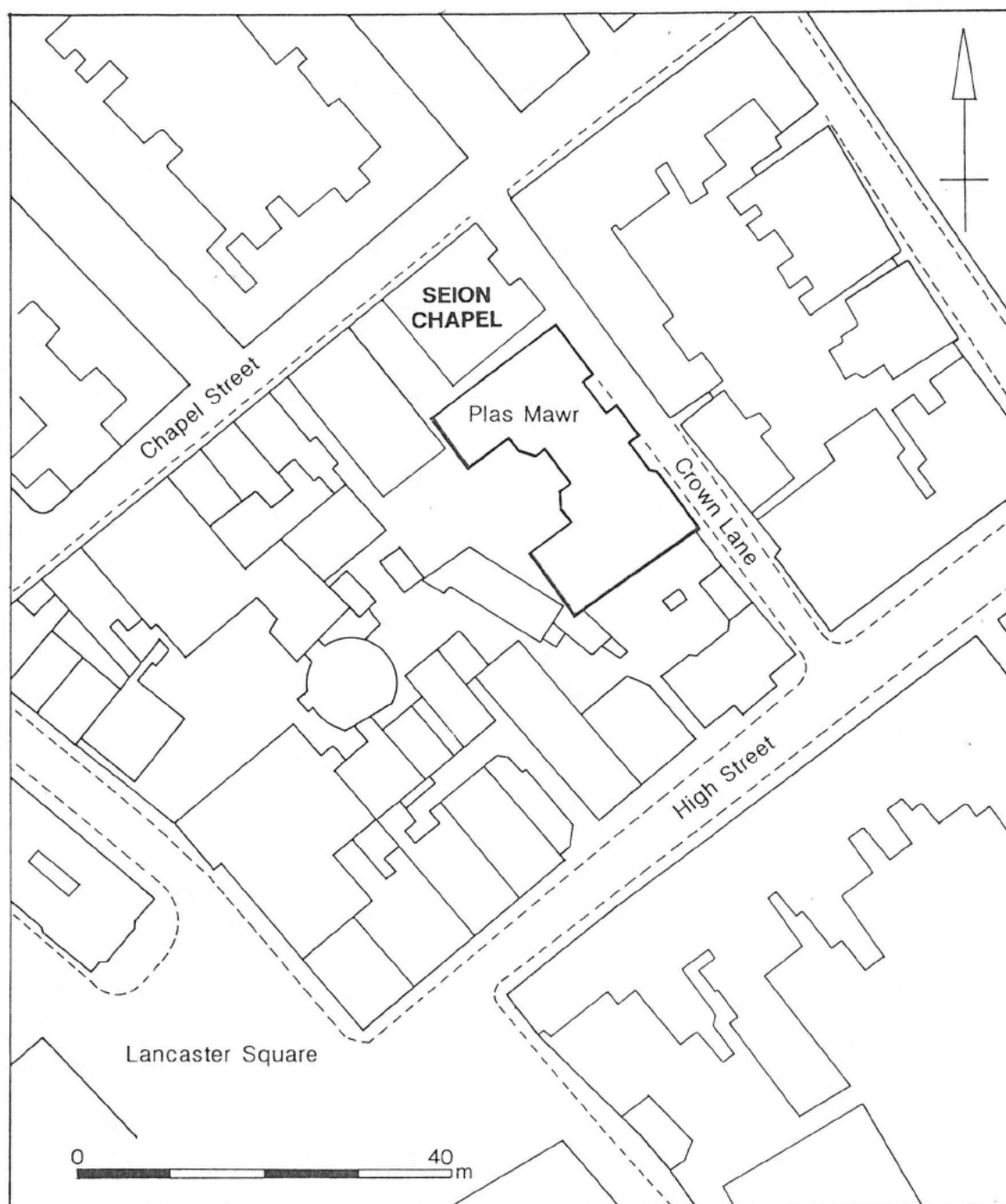
Four fragments of late medieval - early post-medieval wares.

**SF.001** Body sherd of a jug or possibly something more exotic. Fourteenth century in date. The interior appears to have been handled quite extensively, after removal from the wheel. It may be that this relatively small sherd comes from close to the handle or spout of the jug, areas which do become warped as handles and spouts are attached. Optimistically, the sherd may alternatively be of a zoomorphic aquamanile, a vessel constructed of one or more wheel thrown sections with legs and a modelled head attached. Knights on horseback or rams are "common" forms in pottery.

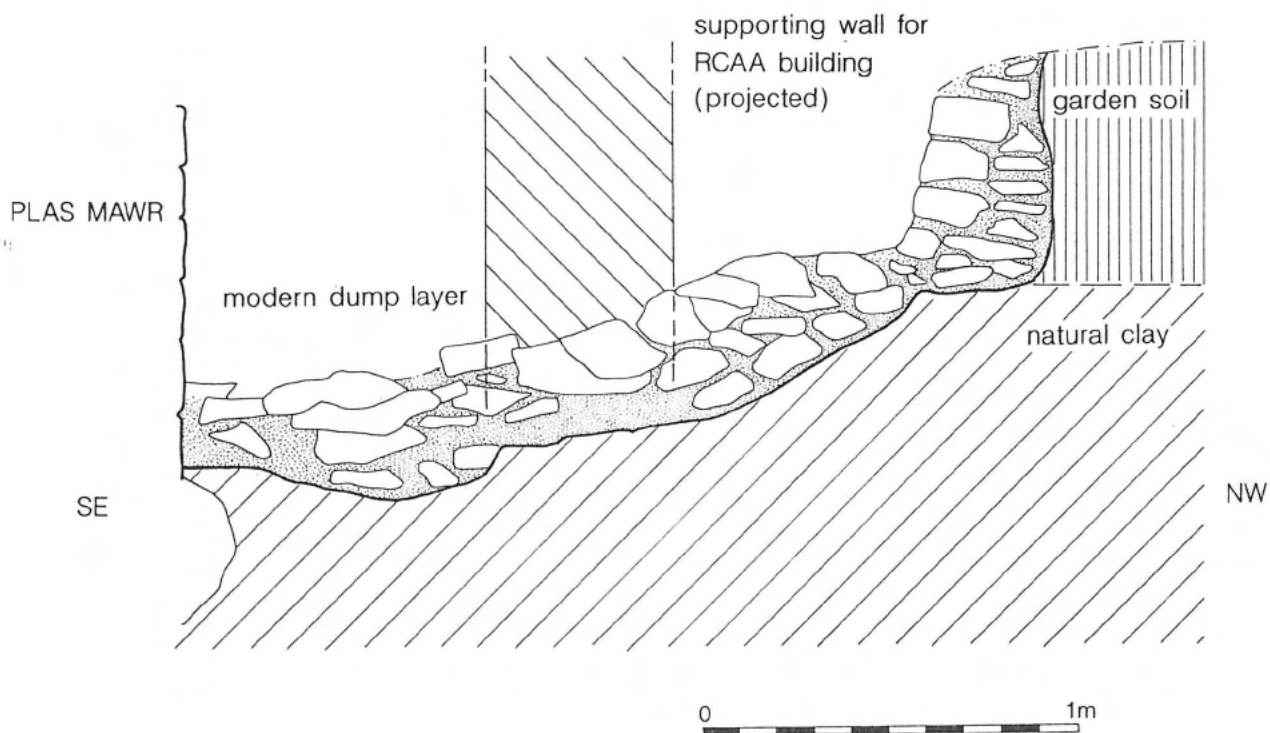
**SF.002** Body sherd of a cup, just below the rim and noticeably overfired to a hard purple colouring. The type can be dated to the second half of the sixteenth or early part of the seventeenth century, there is not unfortunately, anything about this sherd which places it any closer, unless the cordon can be said to be more in keeping with early seventeenth century barrel shaped mugs.

**SF.003** Rim and handle of a large storage vessel of Ewloe type. Fifteenth - Sixteenth century in date. The type is common in and around Chester and reaches the eastern seaboard of Ireland.

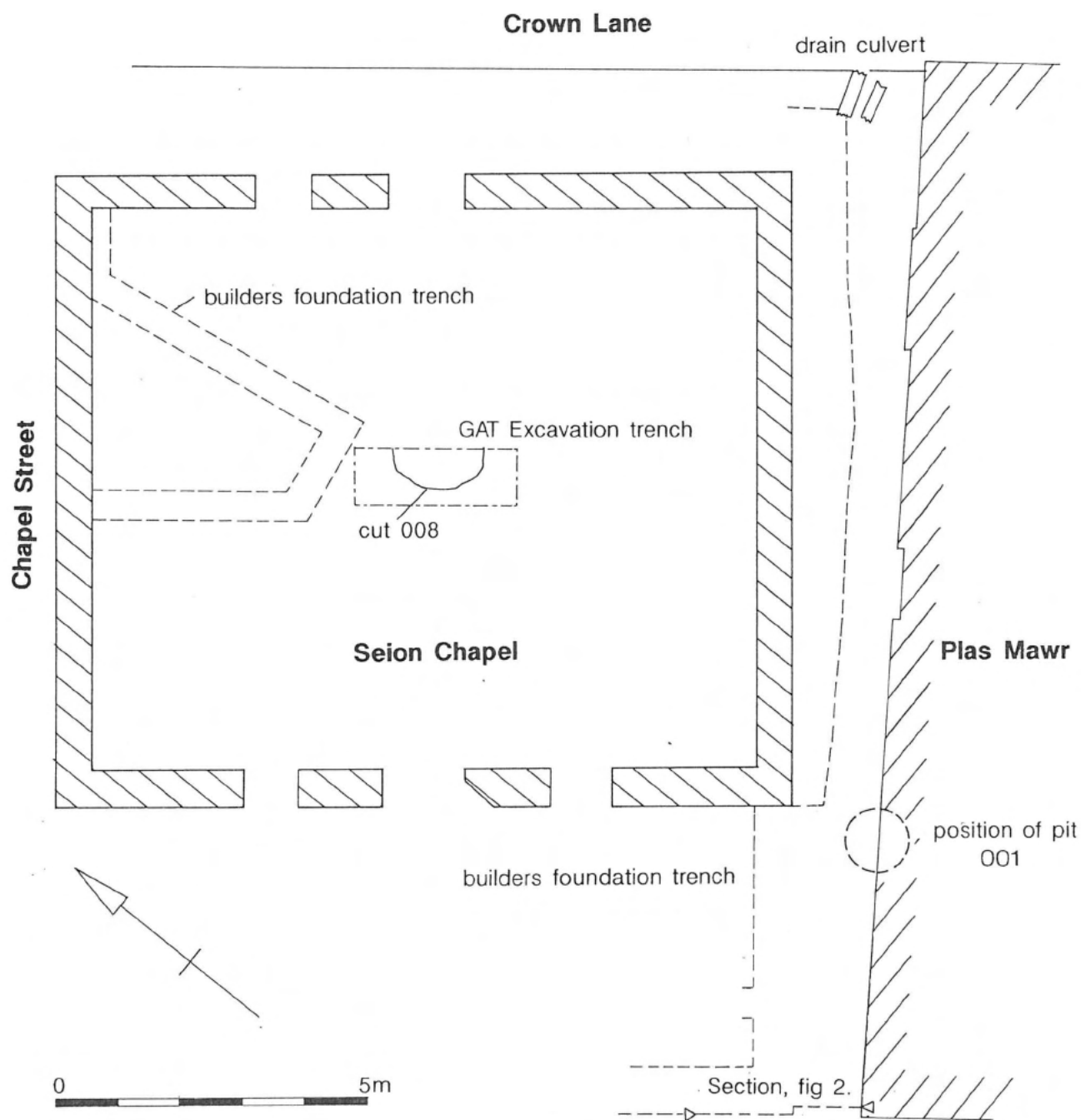
**SF.004** Rim of a storage vessel, rather plainer but of the same type as SF.003 (Fig. 6).



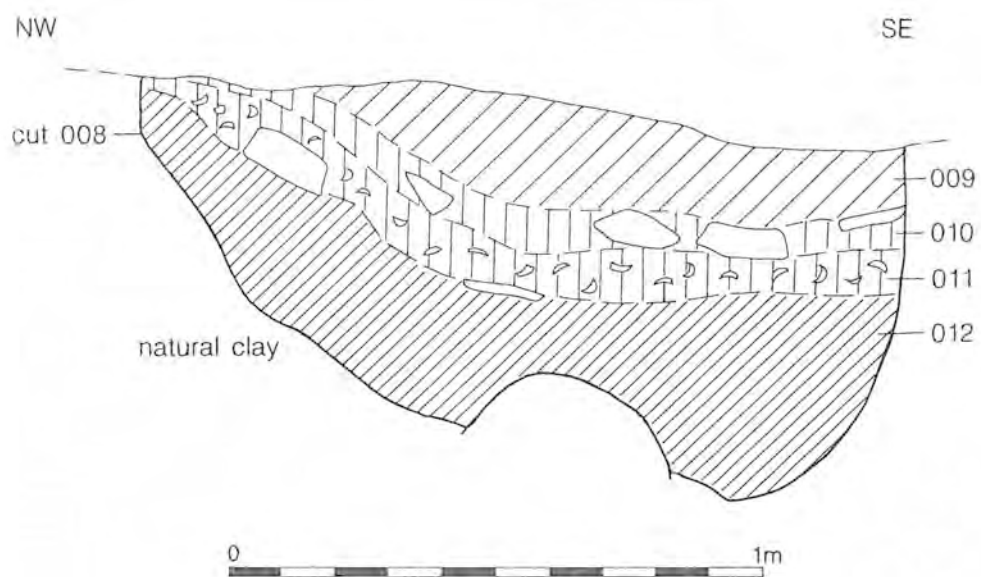
Conway, Seion Chapel. Fig 1. general location.



Conway, Seion Chapel. Fig 2. Section against rear, west corner of Plas Mawr.

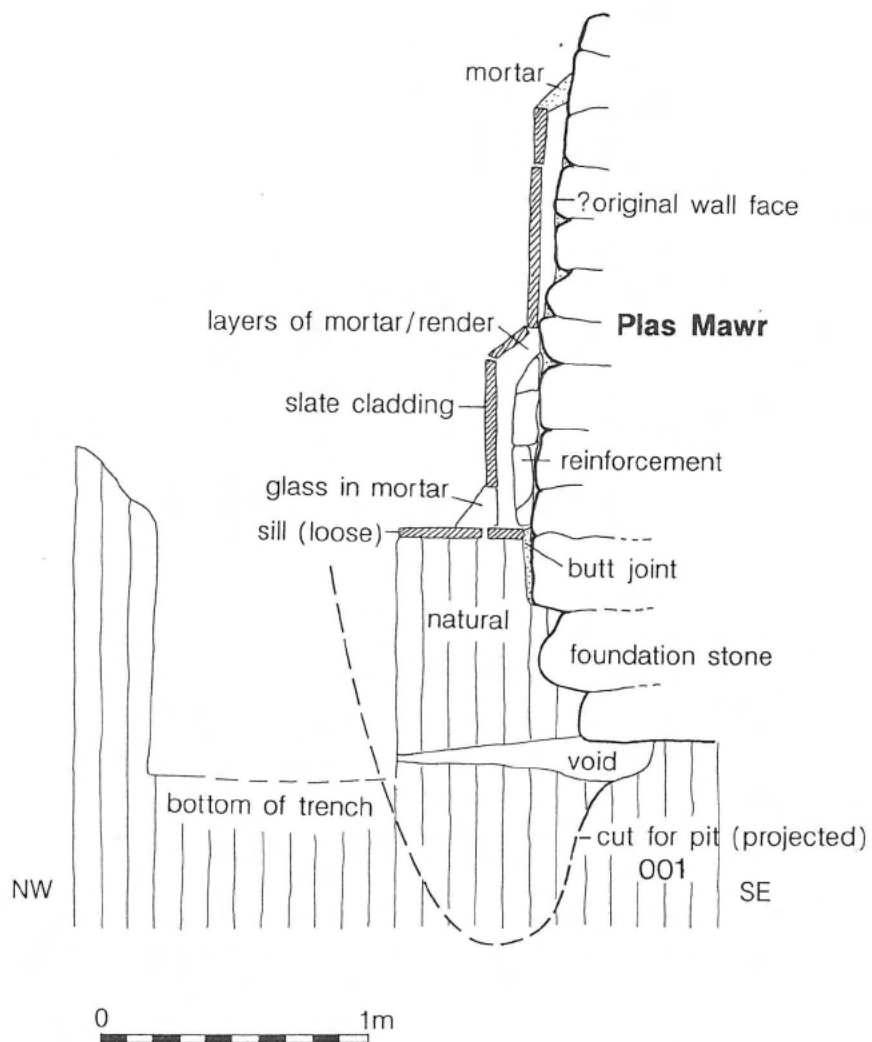


Conway, Seion Chapel. Fig 3. location of trenches and archaeological features.

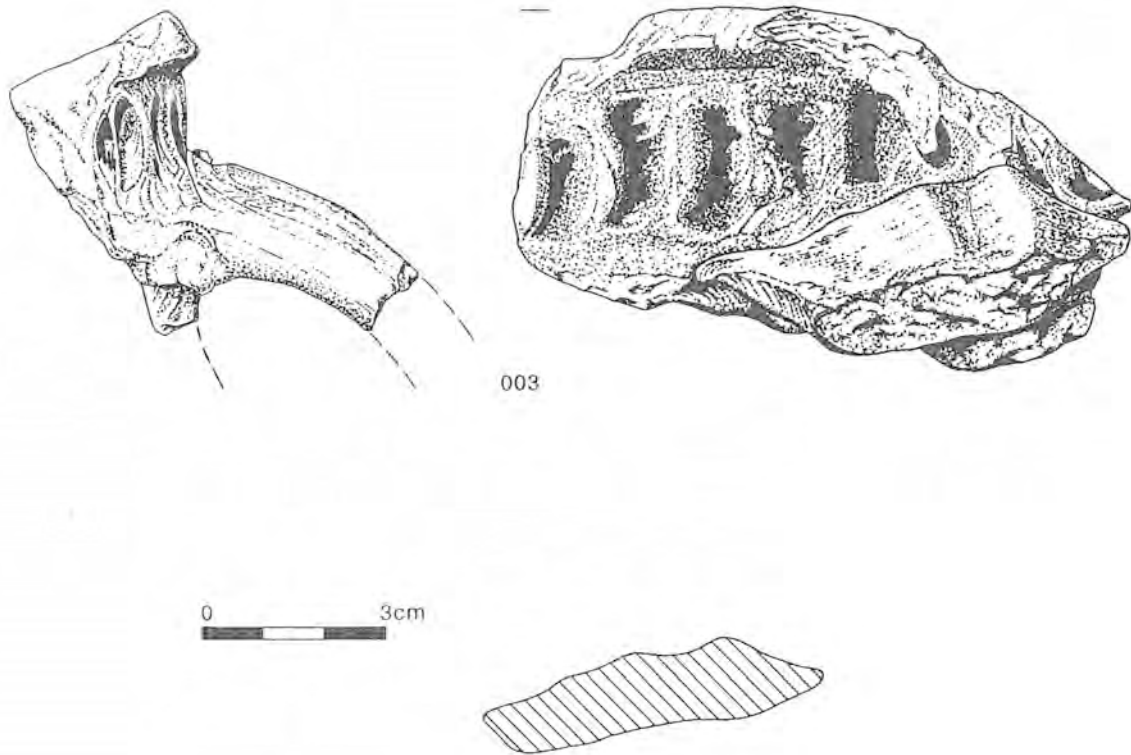


Conway, Seion Chapel. Fig 4. Section through pit 008.

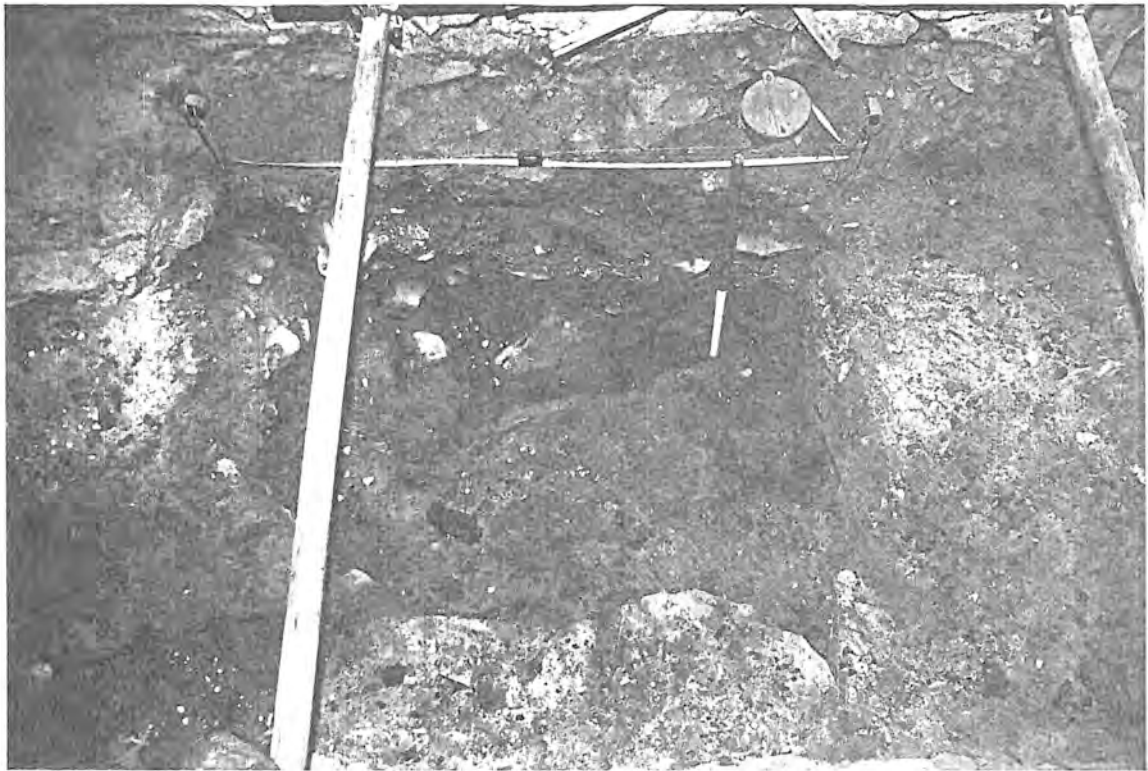




Conway, Seion Chapel. Fig 5. Schematic section showing position of pit 001.



Conway, Seion Chapel. Fig 6. Late Medieval pottery.



Conway, Seion Chapel. pit 008 viewed from west.



Conway, Seion Chapel. Contractors trench showing location of pit 001.

