

PEN Y BRYN, ABER
ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

REPORT NO. 55

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

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ASSESSMENT EXCAVATIONS AT PEN Y BRYN, ABER

Introduction

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust was commissioned by Cadw to carry out an assessment excavation at Pen y Bryn, Aber, over a three-week period during December 1992.

The excavation was designed to assess the potential for recovering evidence to confirm activity on the site during the middle ages, and, more particularly, to assess the potential for recovering evidence, either structural or chronological, which might relate to the former presence on the site of the royal court (*llys*) of the princes during the 13th and earlier centuries.

The excavation was occasioned by the claims of the present owners, Mr and Mrs Gibson, that Pen y Bryn is indeed the site of the *llys*, supported by the suggestion that the earliest phase of the tower of the present house and a barn to the north-east of the house may be earlier than the late 16th century, when the Thomas family are known to have settled at Aber.

It is well attested in documentary sources of the 13th century and later that the *llys* of the commote of Arllechwedd Uchaf was at Aber. The site of this *llys* if it were known would undoubtedly be worthy of consideration as a site of national importance. The current financial difficulties of the present owners are likely to occasion a change of ownership at Pen y Bryn and with it the possibility of inappropriate redevelopment. Were Pen y Bryn the *llys*, the obtaining of evidence to confirm this would allow some measure of protection to be afforded through the scheduling process.

The historical evidence

The *llys* of Arllechwedd Uchaf is well attested in 13th- and 14th-century extents and other documents as being at Aber. Fourteenth-century ministers' accounts record the shipping of stone to repair the hall. The demesne lands of the Prince here, as at other *maerdrefi* in other commotes, would have been extensive. With the defeat of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd in 1282 the role of the *llysoedd*, as royal residences of a peripatetic dynasty, already outmoded and in decline as a system of government, ceased to fulfil any function at all. The Welsh royal lands passed to the English crown and for a while the court buildings were maintained, but not for long. At Aberffraw timbers were moved from the *llys* to Caernarfon in 1322, and the hall at Ystumgwern was relocated at Harlech, for example. By the 16th century crown lands were being disposed of and passed into private ownership. The Thomas family acquired the "manors" of Aber and Cemais and at Aber they built a house at Pen y Bryn, probably in the late 16th century. Manorial courts henceforth were held at Pen y Bryn. It is not in doubt that the lands of Pen y Bryn occupy a part of the former demesne lands; it becomes a point of unresolved debate, however, whether the present house as the later manorial focus replaces, on the same site, the former medieval *llys*.

The evidence of the antiquarian tradition

Local and antiquarian tradition must be used with extreme caution but can sometimes provide valuable locational clues. The following are the main antiquarian references to the *llys* at Aber.

Leland's Itinerary (1530)

"The Moode, in the parochie of Aber otherwise Llan Boduan, wher Tussog Lluelin uab Gerwerde Trundon had a castel or palace on a hille by the Chirch, wherof yet parte stondith".

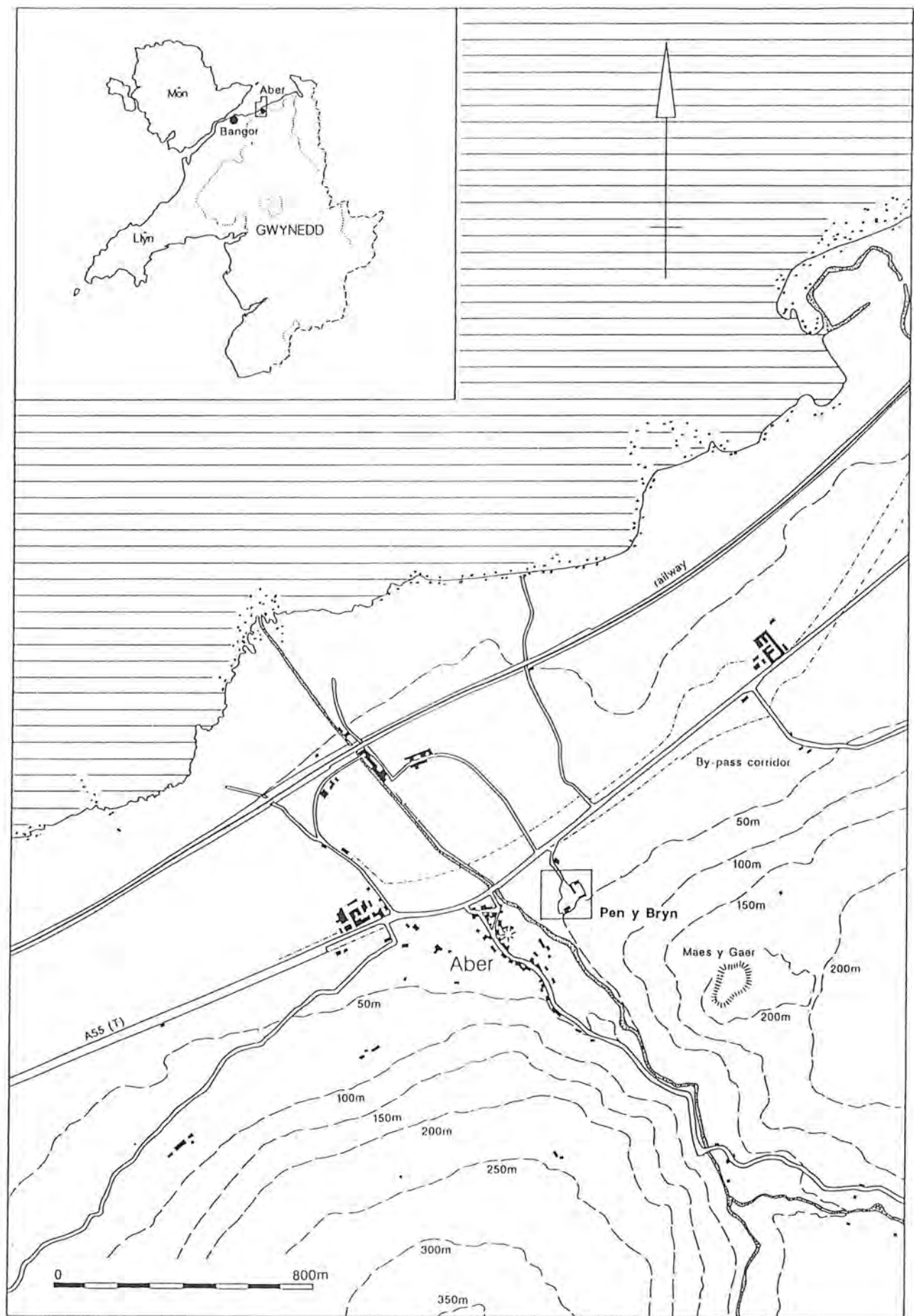


Fig. 1. General location & topographical setting

The Moode is *Y Môd*, the Norman earthen motte which still stands centrally in the village on the west bank of the river. The church is some distance to the west of the motte. Pen y Bryn rises above the east bank of the river.

Pennant: *Tours in Wales* (1778)

"At the entrance of the glen close to the village, is a very large artificial mount, flat at top, and near sixty feet in diameter, widening towards the base. It was once the site of a castle belonging to Llywelyn the Great. Some foundations are yet to be seen round the summit, and in digging traces of buildings have been discovered".

Nicolas Carlyle: *Topographical Dictionary of Wales* (1815)

"In the village is an artificial mound of earth about 15 feet high and about 15 yards in diameter nearly circular, the interior of it has not been investigated, but it is supposed to contain the remains of some of the Welsh Princes who had a palace at Aber. A small portion of old building is pointed out near this mound as the only remaining vestige of the palace of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth Drwyndyn the last prince who resided at Aber".

Cambrian Tourist (1821)

"Near the bridge is a circular mount seemingly artificial, which was the foundation of a small castle, probably constructed of timber, as many of the welsh fortresses were : vestiges of the moat and its feeder from the river still remain.

Traces of buildings have been discovered near this spot, which were probably the remains of the princes palace, as the inhabitants still pretend to show strangers the foundations of the old kitchen".

Catheral: *Wanderings in North Wales* (1828)

"In the mouth of the defile, near the village, stands a great artificial mound, the site in other days, of one of Llywelyns palaces. Many years ago some antiquarian by excavating for the purpose, discovered several of its many substructions".

T. Roscoe *Wanderings and Excursions in North Wales* (1836)

"In the mouth of the defile, near the village, stands a great artificial mound, the site in other days of one of Llewellyn's palaces. Many years ago some antiquarian, by excavating for the purpose, discovered several of its massy substructions. Old Leland, that indefatigable itinerant, has mentioned this fact; and in his record of it makes known the forest-like character which the country at that time exhibited. 'In a wood,' says that pilgrim, 'in the parish of Aber, Llywelyn an Jorwerth had a house on a hill, part of which now standeth.'.....

At this place was the ancient seat of Rhys ab Sir William Thomas, a descendant of Athelstan Gludrudd, founder of one of the five royal tribes of Wales, which is still in a great degree of entire, having a specula or watch-tower attached to it, so necessary in those troubled times."

Archaeologia Cambrensis (1860)

"The tumulus at Aber is of military character and was once surmounted by defences probably of wood. It may have been connected with the palace Llywelyn the Great is said to have had in this place

The only other object of interest is the house at Pen y Bryn, a defensive structure, partially of the 16th century, part of which consists of a small square tower of semi defensive character".

"Before leaving Aber Pen y Bryn should be visited. It is traditionally the house of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd. The present house, possibly built upon earlier foundations, dates from the 16th century, but the base of the tower is much more ancient. The barn to the left has some rows of small split windows with flat heads and broadly splayed jambs inside, composed of large pieces of Anglesey grit stone, triangular on plan. Whether they are in their original position or whether they were brought from the tower, cannot now be stated, but it is quite possible that they are genuine Welsh work of the 13th century. Most unfortunately they have been partly blocked up a few years ago. The building is like a small edition of the great barn at Vaynol dated 1604".

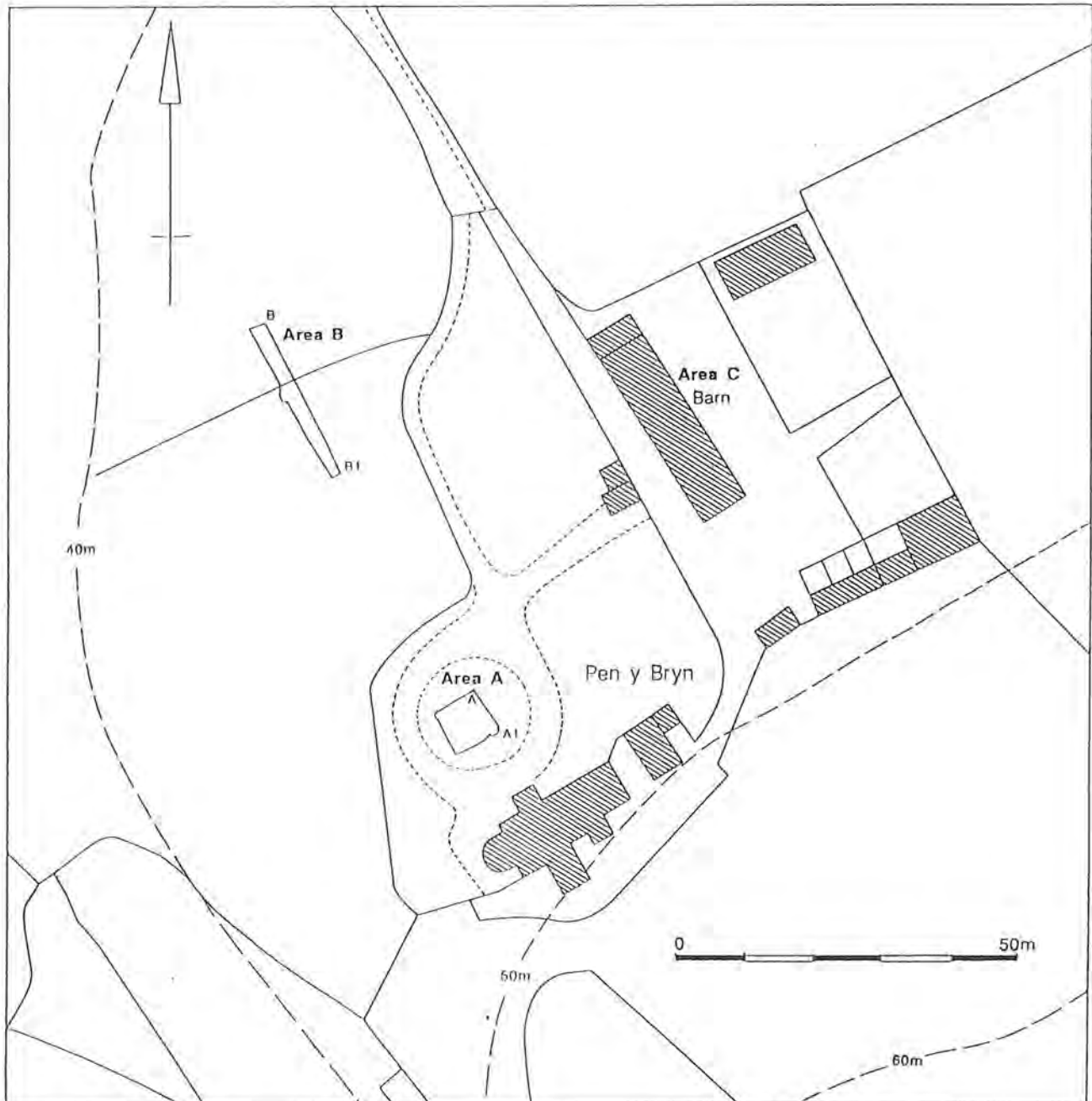


Fig. 2. Location of excavation trenches



Fig. 3. Area A. Stone-faced terrace north of house.

T Jones Pierce: Aber Gwyn Gregin *TCHS* (1962)

"Although the actual site of Y Ty Hir cannot now be precisely located, this ancient seat of the princes of Gwynedd was probably situated on or near the elevated site now occupied by the house known as Pen y Bryn".

As can be seen from the above selection of references there appears to be a switch at the end of the last century from the site of the earthen castle in the village at Aber to the site of Pen y Bryn as the supposed location of the *llys* complex.

The setting of the site.

Pen y Bryn house is located on the 50m contour on the north-west facing hillside of Maes y Gaer in the parish of Aber (SH65827273). The complex comprises the house, a range of stone outbuildings and more recent agricultural buildings. Three areas were investigated by the Trust; the location of these trenches was decided on the basis of field survey and the results of geophysical survey previously undertaken at Pen y Bryn.

The areas were: area A, a 6m x 6m trench located on the circular lawn immediately in front of the house, area B, a 25m x 1.5m trench in the field to the north of the house and area C, a 2.2m x 2m trench in the barn to the south-east of the house (Fig. 2).

Area A

Trench A was located on the circular lawn in front of the present house. It was hoped that structural deposits of a house seen in a drawing by Colt Hoare of 1810 might seal earlier remains. The results of the geophysical survey previously undertaken on the lawn concluded "that the lawn has a considerable amount of artificial make up".

The trench, 6.30m x 6.30m, was initially dug by machine and subsequently cleaned by hand.

Within trench A a large wall of unmortared stone was built on a natural soil profile of clayey sand. The wall, 1.20m wide, consisted of large facing stones on its north face, underpinned with small chocking stones. The slighter facing stones on the south side were set into the natural soil horizon. The wall is therefore likely to be a landscaping feature, with some care having been taken over the appearance of the north face of the wall (Fig. 3). On the eastern side of the trench 1.50m of facing stones was missing and would appear to have been robbed, the cut for the robbing being visible in the main section. The wall runs parallel with the long axis of the present house and curves southwards on the east of the excavation trench towards the house. To the west the wall continues the same alignment further north although it is much robbed at this point (see Fig. 4). The plan is suggestive of a series of terrace/landscaping features immediately in front of the house.

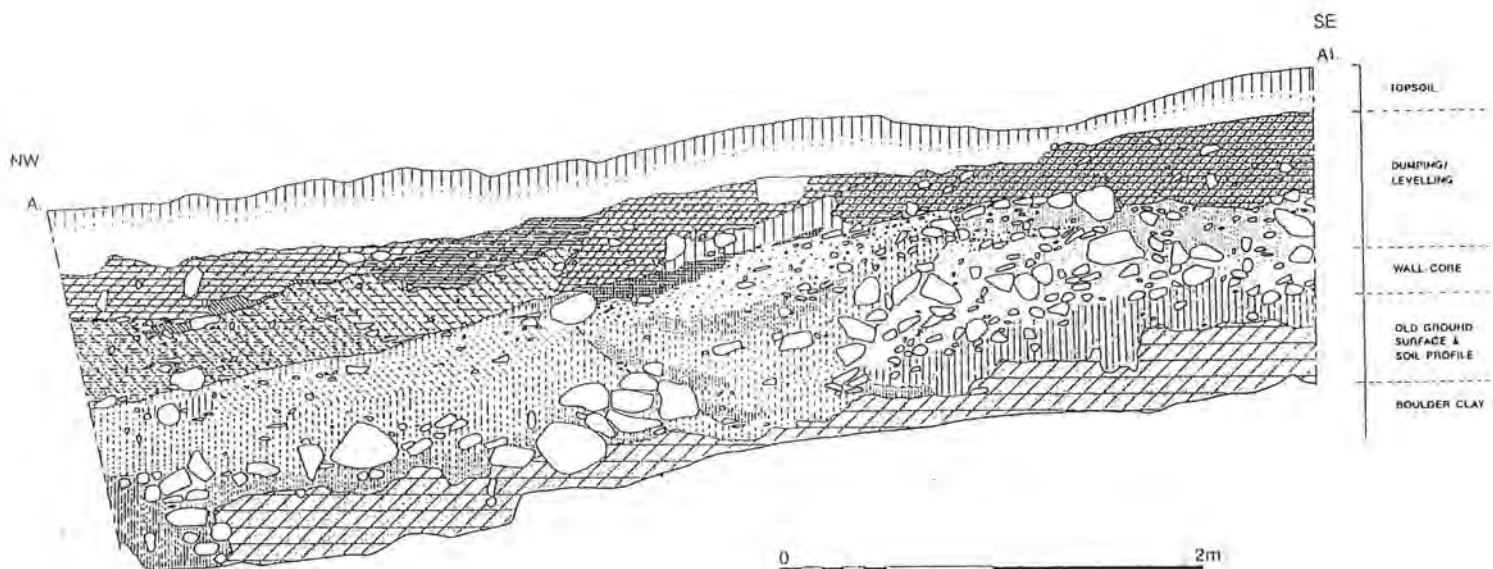


Fig. 4. Area A. Main section.

The area in front of the house was then raised by dumping a series of deposits which included possible building debris. The tip lines could be seen running downslope from south to north. The area was subsequently grassed over in the form of the circular lawn. Under the porch/stair turret of the house is a doorway into the cellar which would have become inaccessible once the ground level was raised.

A fairly large amount of pottery, glass etc was recovered within trench A. The earliest sherd is late medieval/early post-medieval (15th/16th-century) and "it is possible that this ... vessel was still in use at the beginning of the 17th century, and is therefore almost contemporary with a high proportion of the other vessels represented" (see pottery report below).

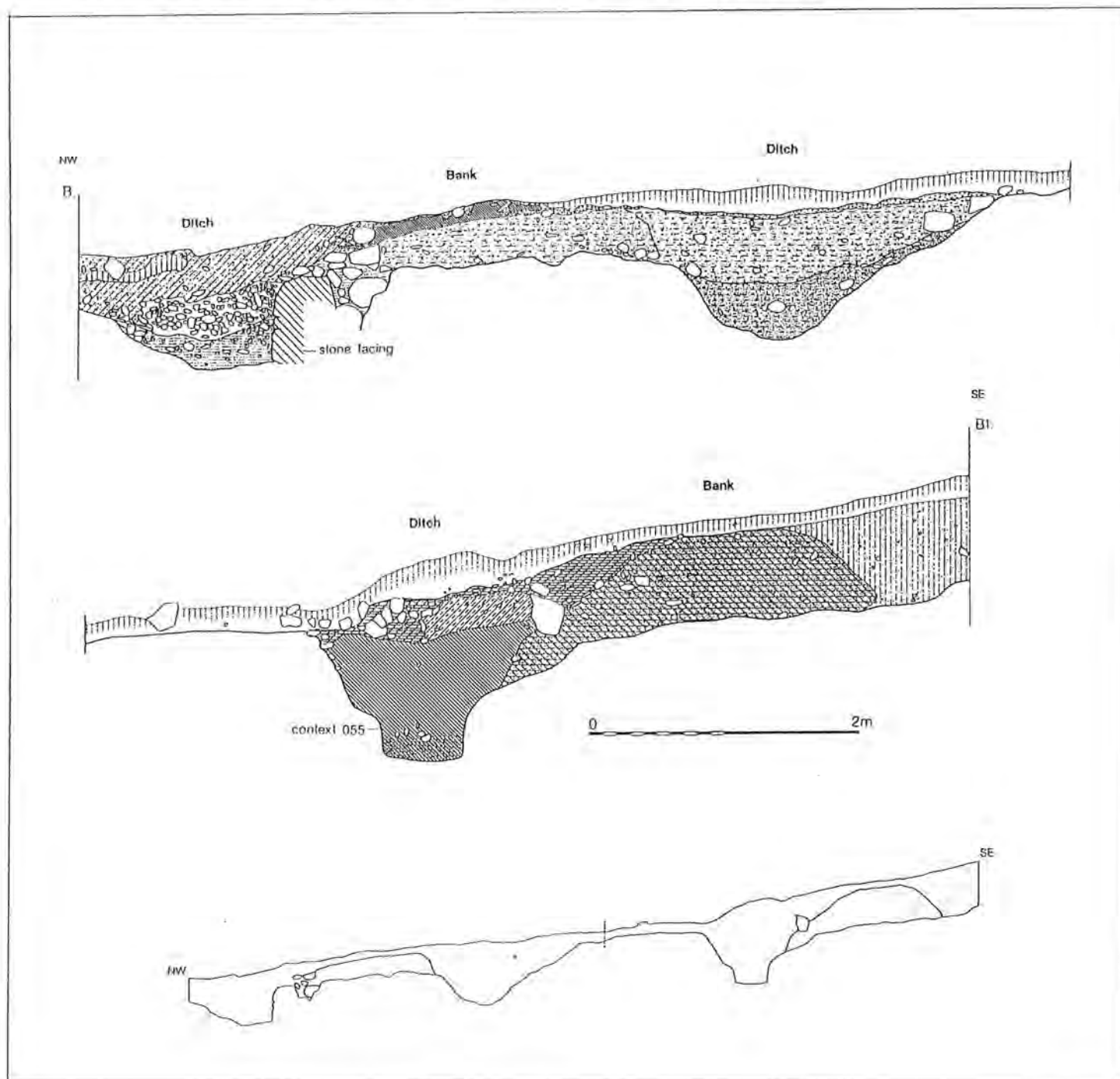


Fig. 5. Area B. Section through landscaping features north of house.

Area B

A trench 25m x 1.5m was excavated in the field immediately to the north of the house. Constant flooding within trench B led to some delay in its excavation. The trench was located in order to investigate linear features running east - west across the field, roughly parallel with the alignment of the house and clearly visible on the ground.

The main features recorded within trench B were two banks, three ditches and a stone spread. The southernmost ditch (055) fronted a 2m wide earthen bank and was abutted by a stone spread which continued north for 4.50m, overlying a 1.5m wide silted ditch. Finally another bank partly overlying the stone spread was fronted by a stone-filled ditch. Large boulders had been set in the cut of the ditch, immediately in front of the bank, which had then been revetted by depositing stones on the boulders (see Fig. 5). The latest bank and ditch in the sequence is probably the feature shown on an 1848 estate map. The banks and ditches appear to be landscaping features associated with the house.

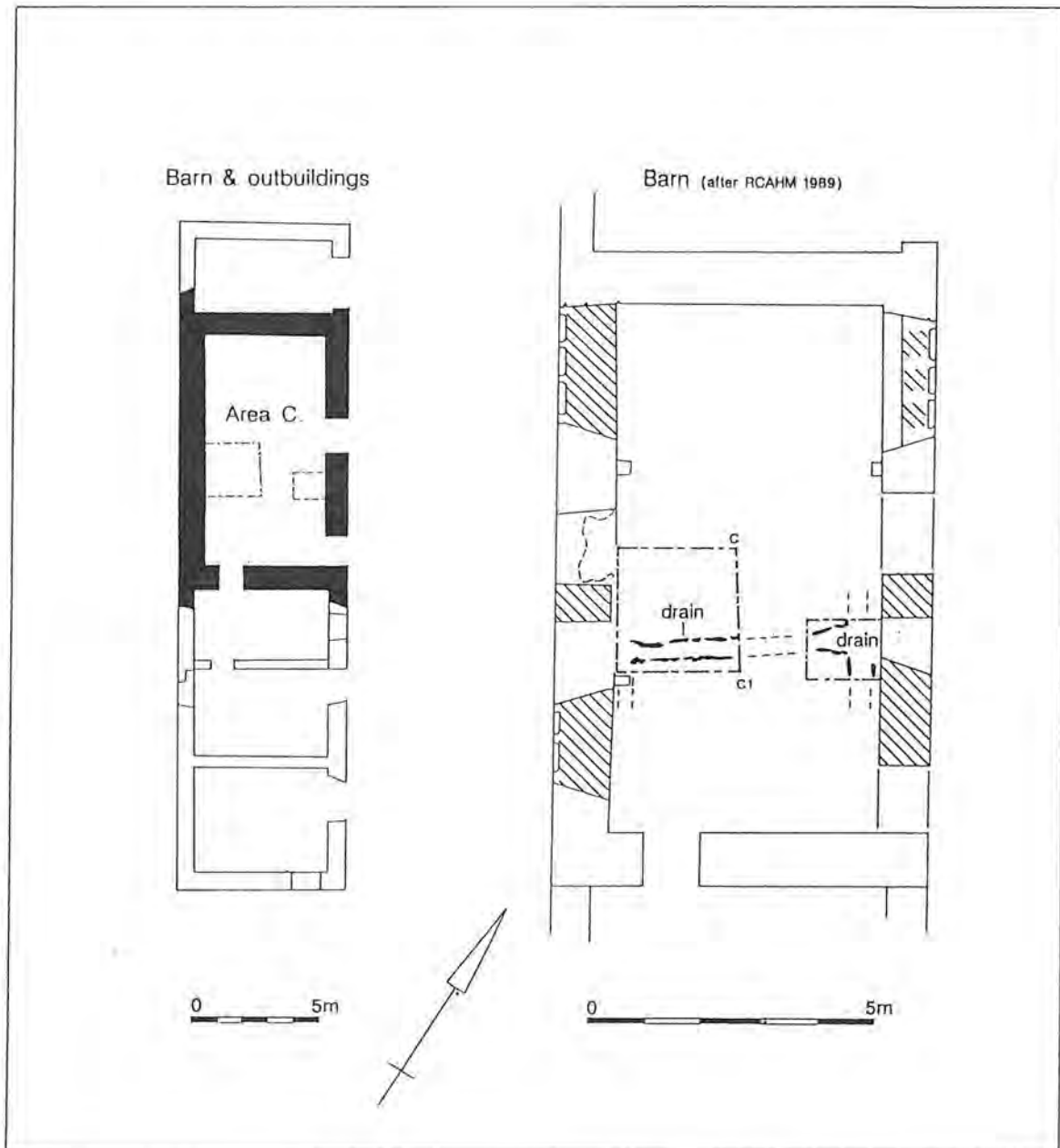


Fig. 6. Area C. Location of trenches within barn.

Area C

The excavation trench, 2.20m x 2m, was located within the barn on the south-west side (Fig. 6) in the area of the blocked entrance. The aim of the excavation was to establish the sequence of floor deposits in an area badly disturbed by recent digging. The following description includes the principal deposits recorded (including those recognised outside the excavated area). A full list of contexts is deposited in the site archive at GAT.

A series of six floor deposits was recognised within the barn. The earliest of these, a sandy clay, was cut by a slate-lined drain which ran across the width of the barn and continued southwards along both sides of the barn wall, leaving the building through the east entrance. The drain was subsequently filled with rubble when the next floor deposit was laid. A further two floor deposits were succeeded by a slate floor of rectangular slabs. Overlying this a mixed deposit containing brick, slate and wood 0.75m wide and on the same alignment as the blocking of the west entrance may be the remains of a partition wall. Finally a concrete floor overlay the earlier floor deposits. No datable finds were recovered from any of the deposits.

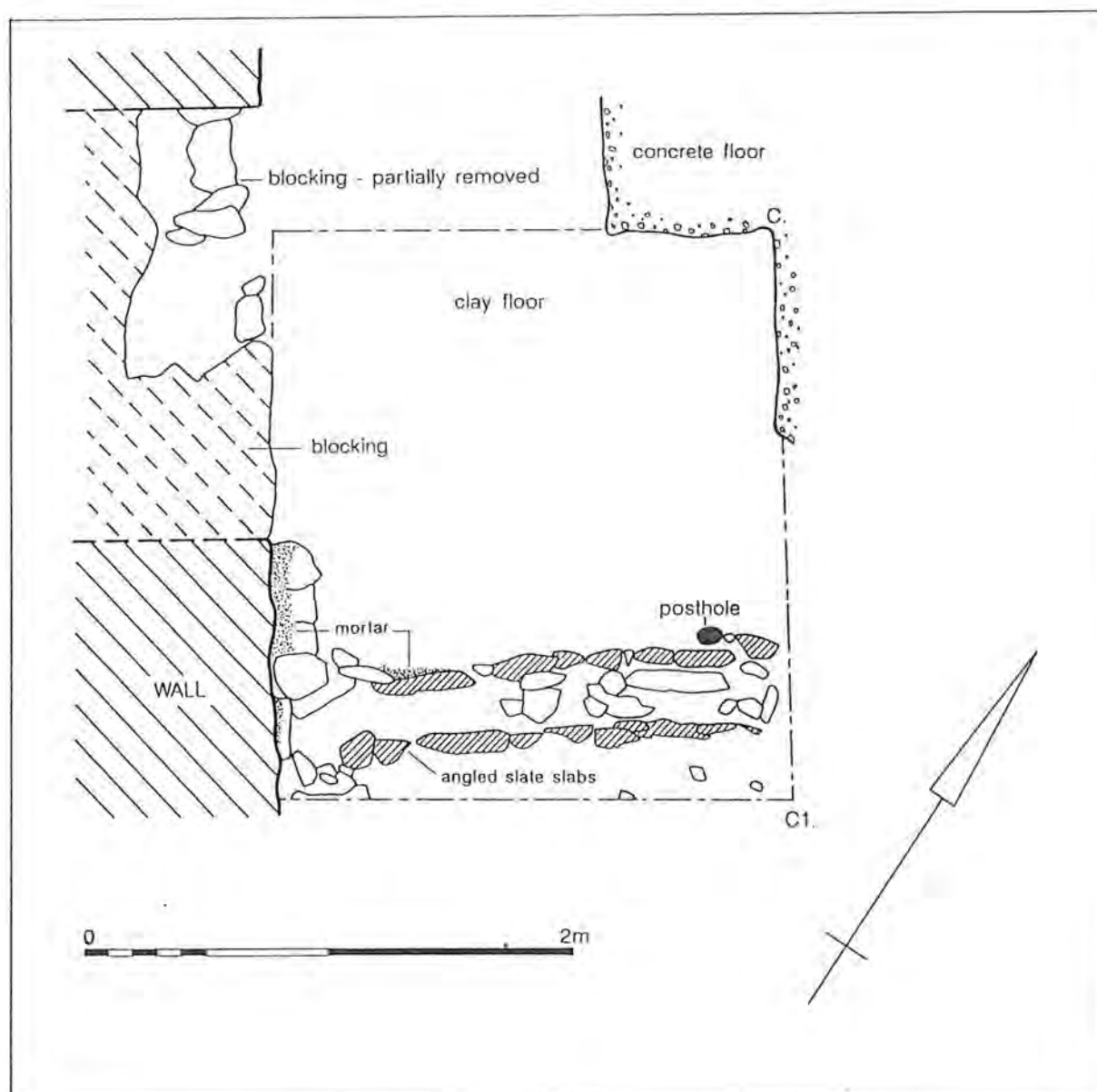


Fig. 7. Area C. Detail of excavation trench showing slate-lined drain.

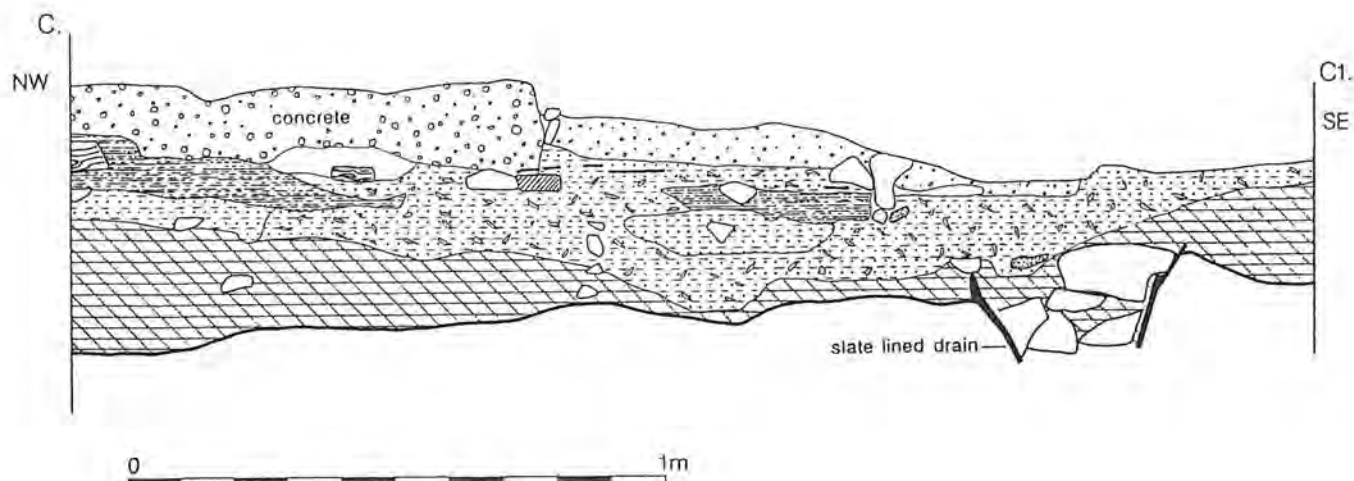


Fig. 8. Area C. Floor deposits and drain within barn.

The evidence of the standing structures

The house at Pen y Bryn comprises three elements: an original Snowdonia plan house at the east end (late 16th century), a central block, with cellar, of the early 17th century which truncates the west end of the Snowdonia plan house, and a tower at the west end. It has been suggested that the base of the tower might be medieval (the suggestion however is for a late medieval, 15th/16th-century, date: pers comm A J Parkinson). "There is at present no available structural evidence to refute the original interpretation that the tower is in fact later than the central block" (RCAHMMW 1956 vol 1 p3). The barn to the north-east has also been claimed to be medieval although the structure is incapable of being closely dated.

Conclusions

Pen y Bryn house and its outbuildings preserve an interesting sequence of 16th-century and later structures with modifications and additions. The structural history of the site is undoubtedly more complex than that yet established. Colt Hoare, in 1810, for example, recorded a further building to the north of the present main block which has yet to be identified and dated. The current limited excavations and the digging of the owners have demonstrated the potential for extending our knowledge of associated landscaping works contemporary with the post-medieval sequence. Walling and cobbled surfaces revealed during excavations in front of the house are thought to represent cobbled terraces. Excavation against the present standing structure might equally be capable of resolving certain debates concerning the structural sequence of the house.

Pottery Report

The collection of fragments submitted by the Trust (8. 1. 93) comprises largely post-medieval sherds and four pieces of bone. One rim fragment, of a late medieval - early post-medieval vessel (15th/16th century) (Trench A. Bag 7), appears to be the earliest sherd in the group. It is possible that this jug or narrow-necked storage vessel was still in use at the beginning of the 17th century, and is therefore almost contemporary with a high proportion of the other vessels represented, which consist of table wares and more utilitarian forms used by the household for storage etc. There is in this latter category more North Devon gravel tempered ware, but nothing that is obviously a part of the oven that the owner of the site brought for identification last year.

(ref) J Rutter

Postscript

Pen y Mwd

In January of this year the Trust undertook limited assessment excavation in a field next to the Norman motte at Aber. The identification of fairly substantial foundations of a rectangular building, in association with mid thirteenth-century pottery, is the first concrete evidence for settlement near the present village in the medieval period. The site had for long been identified as the location of the royal court before the more recent claims for Pen y Bryn. The vicinity of the Norman motte must now be the prime candidate for any future work on locating the *llys* at Aber.

