Evaluation of Scheduling Proposals 2013-14

Hen Gastell, Llanwnda





Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

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G2246 EVALUATION OF SCHEDULING PROPOSALS 2013-14 HEN GASTELL, LLANWNDA (PRN 584, SH 47135737)

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1. SUMMARY

Hen Gastell, Llanwnda is a small, atypical defended enclosure (PRN 584), with a ditch and bank around the northern side of the site. Further assessment was required on this site before Cadw could consider scheduling. Gwynedd Archaeological Trust carried out evaluation work in 2013, comprising a geophysical survey, followed by a trial excavation and a topographic survey. The work clarified the very substantial nature of the ditch and confirmed that the outer bank was also entirely man-made and probably accounted for the spoil from the ditch. Activity was detected inside the monument but its date and nature could not be confirmed. The inner bank around the interior was investigated and the remains of a possible building in the ditch were revealed. However further work is necessary to establish the date of the site and clarify its function.

2. INTRODUCTION

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (GAT) has carried out Cadw grant-aided scheduling enhancement surveys of different site types from the prehistoric to medieval periods. All monuments of each site type in Gwynedd were assessed and scheduling recommendations were made. In all of the projects there were sites of potential national importance proposed for scheduling that required further assessment before scheduling could be considered. Several of these sites have been evaluated in previous years by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust.

The defended enclosures project identified a wide range of sites. One site, an unusual defended enclosure known as "Hen Gastell" at Llanwnda (PRN 584), was found to be of potential schedulable quality but required further evaluation before a final decision could be made. The GAT assessment report identified the site as being suitable for geophysical survey. A survey was therefore carried out on 1st October 2013, and the information from this survey was to be used to locate an area of targeted trial excavation carried out between 21st and 25th October 2013. A topographic survey was also carried out to allow an improved interpretation of the site.

3. BACKGROUND

Hen Gastell is located at SH 4713 5737 on the southern edge of Llanwnda parish/community area, on the northern bank of the Afon Carrog (Figure 1). It lies on a narrow band of sedimentary bedrock composed of Lower Cambrian sandstones and conglomerates. This bedrock is overlain by moraines of glacial till with outwash sand and gravel deposits (Geology of Britain Viewer). Ridges of moraine probably account for the gently undulating nature of the landscape.

Hen Gastell is situated on the end of a low ridge and its southern side is defined by a steep bluff (plate 1). It is under improved pasture and currently well-grazed by sheep, keeping the grass short and making earthwork features easily visible. The site has been modified by stone revetment walls built to support the steeper slopes and clawddiau (earth banks faced with stone) and drystone walls run across the site, enclosing most of the monument within a small field.

The site is defined on the north side by a deep and wide ditch, which encloses a small sub-rectangular interior platform. Outside the ditch is a bank, described by the Royal Commission for the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) as "massive" (RCAHMW 1960, 225), but by George Smith as "not convincingly artificial" (Smith 2005, 10). The RCAHMW considered the site to be a "small promontory fort" (RCAHMW 1960, 225), but Smith considered it to be unconvincing as a defensive site. He speculated that it was an Iron Age settlement reusing an earlier feature, such as a henge, or that the ditch was a natural feature, perhaps a relict river meander (Smith 2005, 10). As the bank is outside the ditch and higher than the interior of the site this certainly makes it difficult to explain in defensive terms.

A farm-house has been built against the south-eastern corner of the site, and the farm is named Hen Gastell after the earthworks. There has been an assumption that part of the site was cut away to level ground for the farm, so creating the steep bluff, but this is not entirely convincing (see below). A quern of unknown type is reported to have come from the site (RCAHMW 1960, 225) and a single waste flint flake was collected from a molehill during a site visit associated with an assessment for the Penygroes/Llanllyfni Bypass (GAT 1993, 7).

The form of the monument in terms of what is natural and what is man-made was therefore unclear, and its date and function were essentially unknown. Although the most likely date for the site is Iron Age or Roman period its atypical form makes other dates a possibility. The evaluation was therefore designed to investigate these questions and attempt to come to some conclusions.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

The evaluation was composed of three main elements; geophysical survey, topographic survey and trial excavation. Evidence from the surveys was used to inform the location of the trial trench. This work was also supported by a metal detecting survey. The aim of this was to test the possibility of the site dating to later than the Roman period. The discovery of diagnostic metal artefacts had the potential to provide evidence of date and function.

4.2. Geophysical survey

Fluxgate gradiometer survey provides a relatively swift and completely non-invasive method of surveying large areas. It can provide information about buried archaeology down to a depth of about 1 metre and is ideal for detecting large-scale features such as ditches, banks and areas of occupation. The survey was carried out by David Hopewell and Jane Kenney on 1st October 2013 (plate 2). The grid was set out using a high resolution Global Positioning System (GPS). The site is in improved pasture that is subdivided by low banks and field walls. Some parts are steeply sloping and this will have added slight inaccuracies to the position of some readings on the survey. It was noted that there were a large number of ferrous objects in the area, broken fencing etc. mostly along the wall lines

Instrumentation

The survey was carried out using a Bartington Grad601-2 dual Fluxgate Gradiometer. This uses a pair of Grad-01-100 sensors. These are high stability fluxgate gradient sensors with a 1.0m separation between the sensing elements, giving a strong response to deeper anomalies.

These instruments detect variations in the earth's magnetic field caused by the presence of iron in the soil. This is usually in the form of weakly magnetised iron oxides which tend to be concentrated in the topsoil. Features cut into the subsoil and backfilled or silted with topsoil therefore contain greater amounts of iron and can therefore be detected with the gradiometer. This is a simplified description as there are other processes and materials which can produce detectable anomalies. The most obvious is the presence of pieces of iron in the soil or immediate environs which usually produce very high readings and can mask the relatively weak readings produced by variations in the soil. Strong readings are also produced by archaeological features such as hearths or kilns because fired clay acquires a permanent thermo-remnant magnetic field upon cooling. This material can also get spread into the soil leading to a more generalised magnetic enhancement around settlement sites.

Not all surveys can produce good results as anomalies can be masked by large magnetic variations in the bedrock or soil or high levels of natural background "noise" (interference consisting of random signals produced by material within the soil). It must be stressed that a lack of detectable anomalies cannot be taken to mean that that there is no extant archaeology. In some cases, there may be little variation between the topsoil and subsoil resulting in undetectable features. In other cases features may be too small to be detected (e.g. a building defined by stake holes) or cut features may be backfilled with subsoil (e.g. some graves).

The Bartington Grad601 is a hand held instrument and readings can be taken automatically as the operator walks at a constant speed along a series of fixed length traverses. The sensor consists of two vertically aligned fluxgates set 1.0m apart. Their Mumetal cores are driven in and out of magnetic saturation by an alternating current passing through two opposing driver coils. As the cores come out of saturation, the external magnetic field can enter them producing an electrical pulse proportional to the field strength in a sensor coil. The high frequency of the detection cycle produces what is in effect a continuous output (Clark 1990).

The gradiometer can detect anomalies down to a depth of approximately one metre. The magnetic variations are measured in nanoTeslas (nT). The earth's magnetic field strength is about 48,000 nT, typical archaeological features produce readings of below 15nT although burnt features and iron objects can result in changes of several hundred nT. The instrument is capable of detecting changes as low as 0.1nT.

Data Collection

The gradiometer includes an on-board data-logger. Readings in the surveys were taken along parallel traverses of one axis of a 20m x 20m grid. The traverse interval was 0.5 m. Readings were logged at intervals of 0.25m along each traverse giving 3200 readings per grid.

Data presentation

The data is transferred from the data-logger to a computer where it is compiled and processed using ArchaeoSurveyor 2 software. The data is presented as a grey-scale plot where data values are represented by modulation of the intensity of a grey scale within a rectangular area corresponding to the data collection point within the grid. This produces a plan view of the survey and allows subtle changes in the data to be displayed. This is supplemented by an interpretation diagram showing the main features of the survey with reference numbers linking the anomalies to descriptions in the written report. It should be noted that the interpretation is based on the examination of the shape, scale and intensity of the anomaly and comparison to features found in previous surveys and excavations etc. In some cases the shape of an anomaly is sufficient to allow a definite interpretation e.g. a Roman fort. In other cases all that can be provided is the most likely interpretation. The survey will often detect several overlying phases of archaeological remains and it is not usually possible to distinguish between them. Weak and poorly defined anomalies are most susceptible to misinterpretation due to the propensity for the human brain to define shapes and patterns in random background 'noise'. An assessment of the confidence of the interpretation is given in the text.

Data Processing

The data is presented with a minimum of processing although corrections are made to compensate for instrument drift and other data collection inconsistencies. High readings caused by stray pieces of iron, fences, etc. are usually modified on the grey scale plot as they have a tendency to compress the rest of the data. The data is however carefully examined before this procedure is carried out as kilns and other burnt features can produce similar readings. The data on some noisy or very complex sites can benefit from 'smoothing'. Grey-scale plots are always somewhat pixellated due to the resolution of the survey. This at times makes it difficult to see less obvious anomalies. The readings in the plots can therefore be interpolated thus producing more but smaller pixels and a small amount of low pass filtering can be applied. This reduces the perceived effects of background noise thus making anomalies easier to see. Any further processing is noted in relation to the individual plot.

4.3. Topographic survey

The topographic survey was carried out on 17th and 25th October using a Trimble Global Positioning System (GPS) with live connection to base data. The GPS was used to plot the tops and bottoms of scarps, field boundaries and other features. A profile across the site was also produced with the GPS. The survey was plotted out and hachures and annotations were added by hand to the plot in the field on 28th October 2013.

4.4. Metal detecting survey

A metal detecting survey was carried out by A Gillespie and CR Hughes between 17th and 25th October (plate 3). The site, especially the interior, was scanned with metal detectors for both ferrous and non-ferrous signals. When a signal was detected the object was recovered by excavating a very small hole providing that it was within the topsoil. The more significant finds from the interior of the site were located three dimensionally using the GPS.

Once the trial trench had been stripped by machine the area of the trench was scanned with a metal detector and the location of signals marked. As that area was excavated by hand the source of the signal was searched for and recovered with the aid of a metal detector as necessary. The location of the object was recorded on the hand drawn plans of the trench. The spoil from the trench was also scanned with a metal detector to recover any metal items.

4.5. Trial excavation

A trench measuring 15m by 3m was dug from the interior platform of the site, through the inner bank and into the edge of the ditch. The topsoil and ploughsoil was stripped from the trench using a mini-digger with a toothless bucket under constant archaeological control (plate 4). Machining reached natural in the interior but care was taken stripping over the inner bank where only the turf was removed by machine. The upper fills of the ditch were also removed by machine to a maximum depth of about 1m below ground surface in the bottom of the ditch. The topsoil and ploughsoil were stored by the trench side in separate heaps to allow for backfilling and at least 1m from the edge of the trench to prevent collapse into the trench.

The excavation was carried out between 21st and 25th October by Jane Kenney and a team of volunteers. The trench was cleaned by hand and any remaining overburden removed. Cut features in the interior were half sectioned, their sections drawn and then fully excavated. A slot was hand dug through the inner bank next to the north-eastern baulk of the trench so that the whole trench side could be recorded in section down to natural deposits. A feature was recognised cut into the top of the bank and this was almost fully excavated and the section in the south-western baulk of the trench where it crossed the bank was recorded to include this feature, which did not reach the north-eastern baulk. The edge of the ditch was cleaned by hand and the fills cleaned up at the level to which the machine had dug them. Against the north-eastern section a slot was dug by hand into the ditch fill for 0.5m with a narrower slot dug for a further 0.4m to test whether the ditch continued down.

A narrow extension 2.4m long was dug on the south-eastern end of the trench by hand to further investigate the interior and this trench revealed an additional feature.

All features were recorded by hand drawn plans and sections, context sheets and photographs. The trench plan was located by GPS, and the height of the Temporary Bench Mark used to calculate levels was also located by GPS.

All finds were retained except the metal detector finds that were clearly recent rubbish, especially the large ones. Soil samples were taken from contexts with visible charcoal.

5. **RESULTS**

5.1. Geophysical survey

The results of the geophysical survey were fairly clear with low levels of noise (random signals) from the soil and bedrock. There was a scatter of responses typically produced by stray iron and steel fragments across the site. These are visible as small half black and half white anomalies on the grey-scale plan (Figure 2) and are almost certainly the product of modern rubbish. The smaller ferrous anomalies were not transcribed.

A series of magnetic anomalies corresponding to buried features were detected. These are described below. The numbers refer to features shown on the interpretation plan (Figure 3).

- 1. Ferrous anomaly produced by a fence and a gate
- 2. Ferrous anomaly produced by a fence
- 3. Ferrous anomaly produced by a fence
- 4. Ferrous anomaly produced by a fence
- 5. A series of ferrous anomalies probably produced by objects rolling into the ditch
- 6. Ferrous objects on the boundary
- 7. A weak positive anomaly corresponding to a clawdd
- 8. A diffuse anomaly corresponding to the wide outer bank on the north side of the site
- 9. A weak positive anomaly along the edge of the platform at the centre of the site. The anomaly is quite well-defined and is best interpreted as the remains of a c. 3m wide bank or possibly a clawdd running along the break of slope.
- 10. A faint linear anomaly. There is insufficient evidence to allow a definite interpretation. It is however parallel to the current boundary and cut along the edge of the site and may be recent disturbance
- 11. A fairly diffuse linear anomaly. It is slightly curving and turns through 90 degrees. This is best interpreted as a former field boundary, perhaps a ploughed-out bank.

- 12. A linear anomaly parallel to the road to the west, possibly a modern feature associated with this.
- 13. A series of irregular linear anomalies, perhaps a former trackway or an area of vehicle erosion. They appear to lead to the gate in the corner of the field
- 14. A parallel pair of narrow linear anomalies. This appears to correspond to vehicle ruts in the field.
- 15. A series of faint anomalies probably plough scarring on the top of the subsoil/natural substrate

Notes: The ditch did not produce an anomaly, this could be result of the fill being a similar material to the surrounding soil.

5.2. Topographic survey

Figure 4 (letters in brackets below refer to this figure)

The site is located on the end of a slight ridge, which is probably a continuation of a longer ridge of fluvioglacial gravels cut through by the Afon Carrog. The excavation and inspection of eroded faces showed that much of this ridge was composed of gravels. The site consists of a level platform defined on three sides by steep scarps and on the fourth, northern side by the arc of a broad ditch. The ditch is emphasised by a bank on its outer, northern side. There are wide views from the site, especially from the top of the outer bank, with a good view over to Anglesey and the Abermenai entrance to the Menai Strait.

The survey revealed the form of the site in much more detail than previously recorded. It shows the outer bank (a) running in a short arc around only the northern part of the site with no trace elsewhere. Similarly the ditch (b) as an earthwork could only be seen on this side. The surface remains suggest that the ditch is about 10m wide and about 2m deep. However the excavation showed that there was a considerable berm between the inner bank and the ditch and that the actual width of the ditch was probably no more than 6m. The depth of the earthworks is also confusing because some of the apparent depth of the ditch is caused by the height of the banks. However the excavation showed that the ditch proper is much deeper than apparent on the surface.

The outer bank (a) has a rounded profile but on the north-western side it appears almost stepped (plate 5). This is partly due to material from a trackway cutting through the bank (e) having been heaped on top of the existing bank behind a revetment wall. The stepped effect is probably also due to sheep tracks worn across the face of the bank. While the limits of the bank are quite clear on the northern and north-western sides it is difficult to distinguish on the southern side between the base of the bank and the top of the ditch side, there being no berm on this side (plate 6). However the profile through the site (Figure 5) shows that the level of the ground surface to the north of the outer bank is similar to that of the original land surface surviving under the inner bank (see below). Nearly half of the apparent depth of the ditch when viewed from inside the monument is actually caused by the bank being built up to 1m in height. On a very rough estimate this would give a section of the bank the same volume as the corresponding section of ditch and suggests that almost all the material from the ditch was used in the construction of the outer bank, with possibly a small amount available to create the inner bank.

A low inner bank (c) is fairly clear along the northern edge of the platform (plate 7). This is about 3m wide and up to 0.3m high and can be seen to continue certainly along the eastern side and probably along the western side of the platform with even a hint along the top of the southern side, making it very likely that the platform survives largely intact with no significant loss to erosion, deliberate levelling or cutting away of the site. The platform (d) was therefore probably always an elongated sub-oval or sub-trapezoidal shape; never circular.

A trackway (e), running nearly north-south, cuts through the outer bank (plate 8). This runs from the current field gate and is visible as a levelled linear feature cutting through the bank. This has been revetted along most of the western side by a stone wall set into the bank material. It seems likely that the track and the field walls were constructed at the same time. The track originally led through a gap at the corner of the field walls (f), but this gap is now blocked by casually built stone walling. This blocking appears quite recent, although the present farmer remembers it always being like that, and the 25 inch maps show the gap blocked from at least 1889 (Figure 7).

Around the western side of the site is a slight terrace in the ground slope that also appears to be a trackway (g). This curves round the south-western end of the outer bank and seems to run to the present field gate. It is therefore likely that this is merely a field access track. However the area near the gate has been confused by recent dumping and the former existence of a fence. A slight, straight scarp in this area (h) is related to the fence and may not indicate the original line of the trackway (g). The Royal Commission suggests that the entrance was on the western side of the monument. This might explain the fairly neat end to the outer bank if there was an

original gap in the bank and ditch here. There is a possibly original gap (i) in the inner bank on this western side but a considerable ramp would have been needed to reach the interior and there is no trace of one having existed. If there was an entrance on this side the trackway (g) might have led to it.

On the eastern side of the interior platform the steep scarp was revetted with stone, but erosion by sheep has caused the revetment to collapse in two places (j). This erosion revealed the gravel deposits forming much of the ridge that the monument was built on (plate 9).

The south-east facing side of the monument is defined by a steep scarp nearly 3.5m high (k). This is currently very straight and revetted at its base by a low stone wall (plate 10). The land at the base of the slope is flat and used as a garden. The scarp was planted with trees by the present owner, but prior to that had been covered in grass.

The Royal Commission considered that the site was "partly mutilated by farm buildings" (RCAHMW 1960, 225). The original notes used to create the inventory (written in 1920 and held by NMR) explicitly suggest that the farmyard was cut into the southern side of the monument. On the 1918 25 inch map (Figure 7) the southern scarp (k) is shown as it is today, straight and regular with the garden wall at the base. However before that date there are no hachures indicating a scarp and the rectangular garden or yard does not yet exist. Right angle changes in the boundary on this side on the 1889 and 1900 maps suggests that there were other buildings built into the base of the slope at this side, which had been demolished by 1889 (Figure 7). Some regularising of this slope seems therefore to have occurred between 1900 and 1918 but it seems unlikely that the slope itself did not exist before then or that a large amount of gravel was removed to create the farmyard, when the farm could be repositioned to avoid this labour. It is therefore suggested that that the south side of the platform is largely as it was originally, although rather straighter. Similarly the eastern and western sides, although made vertical by the addition of revetment walls were probably not greatly different when the monument was created.

Whether the ditch and outer bank surrounded the entire monument is a different issue. It seems probable that these continued around at least the eastern and western sides but the 1889 25 inch OS map shows the earthworks exactly as they are today (despite the modern digital mapping indicating the continuation of the outer bank to the east), so any modification must have pre-dated the late 19th century. A manure heap (1) confuses the north-eastern end of the bank but the bank could not be seen to continue. The way the outer bank slopes away at the north-east and south-western ends does not indicate sudden truncation and it may be that the bank was only ever present across the width of the ridge. However it seems probable that the ditch did continue around the eastern and western sides of the monument and perhaps also round the southern side, even if it was less deep in these areas. Possibly the bank had been levelled into the ditch when the current field system was laid out.

5.3. Metal detecting survey

The majority of metal objects found were items typical of casual loss on a farm and iron rubbish discarded over the years. The latter included part of a bicycle and the blade of an entrenching tool. Most of this material was not retained but some of the smaller and more interesting items including buttons and a badge where retained to show to visitors and school children if the recommendations for work next year are agreed and to present an example of activity on the site up to the present day. There were also a collection of pennies and half pennies of different dates, the earliest being probably a penny of George III. These mainly came from the interior of the site which could have been a place of recreation for the farm workers, where perhaps they played games of chance for pennies or just lost their change from their pockets while resting on the grass.

There was, however, nothing to indicate use of the site in the medieval period, nor any nails and other items that might be associated with a timber building.

5.4. Trial excavation

Detailed descriptions of all contexts are listed in appendix I. See figure 4 for the location of the trench. See figures 6 and 8 to 13 for detailed plan of trench and sections.

Topsoil and natural

The trench was covered with about 0.1m of turf and topsoil (001). On the top of the inner bank this directly overlay the archaeology but over most of the trench there was a dark grey-brown stonier layer (002) beneath this

measuring between 0.12 and 0.37m in depth. This was a layer mixed by ploughing and demonstrated that most of the monument has at some time been ploughed. Most of the ploughing must have been concentrated on the interior platform as here soil layers buried under the inner bank had been removed and the depth of (002) increased up to 0.37m, largely as a result of ploughing cutting into lower layers and mixing them together. The sharp edge on the inside of the inner bank was also caused by this action of ploughing on the platform. However the presence of the same deposit across the rest of the trench and the rounded shape of the monument show that the inner bank and the ditch have been at some time also ploughed but less frequently.

The natural sub-soil was a very hard stony, clayey gravel. This was so hard that it proved impossible to dig far into it by hand to investigate it. Where this sloped into the ditch and had been less truncated by ploughing the upper part of this gravel was seen to be more orange in colour, more friable and siltier, as is normal where weathering has altered the surface of the natural deposits.

Interior

Two probable small postholes were found in the interior ([005] and [009]), but these were filled with material indistinguishable from the ploughsoil and [005] contained a small sherd of Buckley ware and a piece of clay pipe stem. It is therefore concluded that these were relatively recent features probably made during the life of the current farm. Other potential features were revealed on excavation to be hollows caused by roots and stones being pulled out by the plough.

There were three sub-circular shallow pits ([013], [015] and [026]) with brown gritty loam fills. These were all about 0.8m in diameter and up to 0.2m deep (plate 11). Although the fills were similar the section indicated that pit [013] cut pit [015]. These features had been truncated by the ploughing and it is likely that they were cut from the level of the buried soil seen below the inner bank and that they were originally up to 0.4m deep. They had fairly steep sides and flat bases and it is possible that these were not pits but postholes for large diameter posts. No packing stones or other evidence was present to prove this suggestion, but the firmness of the natural deposits may have meant that posts would not have needed deep holes. The relationship of [013] to [015] suggests that one of these features was replaced by another almost identical feature.

If these were postholes they could have supported posts about 0.5m in diameter. This theory could only be proved by extending the excavation and revealing more of the features in plan. If these formed a pattern consistent with a feasible building plan then it might be suggested that a large timber building stood on the interior of this monument. As it is the function of these features must be considered to be unknown.

Inner bank

The inner bank was formed of a yellow-brown gravel (019), up to 0.3m thick, containing numerous rounded stones dumped directly on the ground surface (plate 12). In places a layer of darker brown material (024), containing some angular burnt stones, was also used to build up the bank. Apparently cut into the top of the bank was a linear feature [018] with a very straight vertical north-west edge and a rounded, narrow north-eastern end. It ended before reaching the north-eastern baulk of the trench. The south-eastern side was not very clear as it cut into the buried soil below the bank and for much of its length seems to have been removed by the ploughing, making the original form of the feature difficult to ascertain but it seems to have been about 1.1m wide in the south-western section and narrowed to 0.4m wide at its north-eastern terminal. There was no trace of this slot, or of post or stakeholes associated with it, being cut into the buried soil below.

Although the north-western side of feature [018] was very regular and quite easily defined stones projected from it in a way that was hard to explain with a cut feature. This may suggest that this was not actually a cut feature but had been formed by the bank material being dumped against a structure made of organic material, probably wood, what has later rotted or been removed.

The slot or void was filled with a very dark brown sandy silt (017) containing about 70% angular burnt stones, frequent charcoal and fragments of burnt bone. The origin of this material is unknown but the presence of burnt stone within the bank make-up suggest that some activity on the site while the bank was being built produced burnt stones and deposits from this activity may have been stored nearby and were used to fill this feature.

It is possible that feature [018] held a timber palisade. This would require more than just the bank material to support it but it is possible that postholes for this lay beyond the limits of the trench. It is also possible that the inner bank was originally higher and that much of it has eroded into the ditch. However this would still leave very little material to support the southern side of this potential structure as it is unlikely that ploughing could have removed a large amount of bank material from this side without there being some trace. This feature would

require more investigation before its function can be securely interpreted but there is no reason to suppose that it was not an integral part of the bank.

Beneath the bank was a thin deposit of dark brown silty loam (021), which contained patches of charcoal fragments. This merged into a more orange brown silty deposit (046), which overlay the natural gravel. These layers are interpreted as surviving fragments of the original soil layer over the site before much of it was lost to ploughing. Deposit (021) is the buried turf line and topsoil and (046) is the B horizon beneath, developed on the glacial substrate over millennia.

Ditch

The ditch proved to be massive. Only the south-eastern side was investigated, but this side was seen to be steep and regular, cutting into the natural gravels (plate 13). For safety reasons the ditch was not excavated to its full depth, but a small slot revealed that even at 2m below the surface there was no trace of the base.

Much of the lower part of the ditch was filled with a brown homogenous deposit with some gravel (034), which resembled colluvium. Above this was a sequence of thin deposits, some stony and some distinctly orange-brown in colour. The latter was similar to the orange-brown silts that had developed over the natural gravels and these layers may represent erosion events, when the bank and lower soil horizons were exposed and eroded into the ditch. This suggests no stable vegetation cover and may indicate a period of ploughing over the inner bank and interior. The steepness of the ditch side suggests that the lower deposits filled the ditch fairly soon after its abandonment, so that the sides were not exposed to weathering for long. It is therefore possible that deposit (034) was deliberately backfilled into the ditch and the soily deposit above it (033) represents an early stabilisation of the ditch before later ploughing resulted in the deposition of the upper layers.

Cut [045] and the possible later building

Against the south-west side of the trench a deep cut [045] was seen to have been dug into the partly infilled ditch. This had a rounded south-eastern corner and a straight north-eastern side running south-east to north-west almost parallel to the side of the trench. This cut was very well-defined where it cut into the natural at the edge of the ditch but less clear where it cut through the ditch fill. The sides of the cut were very steep and the base, where it was exposed over a very small area in the south-eastern corner, was flat. Cut [045] was at least 4m wide and 1.45m deep, but as its length was obscured under the baulk the full size of this feature is not known. However the buried feature corresponded well to a slight surface features that defined a rough rectangle measuring about 15m long. It is proposed that this indicates the full size of cut [045].

Along the north-eastern side of the cut was a line of stones (022) (plates 14 and 15). The sub-rounded stones, up to 0.3m long, were laid in a straight line with a rough face to the south-west. The stones were built up to at least three rough courses high, but the feature was not excavated to full depth. Small stones were packed between the revetment and the side of the cut and the feature was more disturbed at the north-western end. It is suggested that this feature revetted the cut edge and that a building was built within the cut, the remains of which probably survive to the south-west of the trench. It is however possible that the stone feature is essentially part of the gable wall of a semi-subterranean building and that the weight bearing wall was built partly supported on the ditch fill. The later fills of the ditch overlaid the revetment stones, showing that if these later deposits represent ploughing it must have occurred after the proposed building was abandoned.

6. DISCUSSION

The current work has clarified many details of the site, but still leaves many other questions. The geophysical survey showed no trace of an outer ditch, but it also proved unable to detect the main ditch, probably because of the high iron content of the upper fills. This leaves the possibility that there was an outer ditch but close inspection for the topographic survey showed that there was no surface trace of such a ditch, making its existence unlikely.

The excavation demonstrated that the ditch is a genuine cut feature and not a relict river channel or other natural feature reused to form the site. It also showed that the ditch was even more substantial than it appears on the surface. The inability of the geophysical survey to detect the ditch meant that it was not possible to demonstrate whether it continues around the eastern and western sides of the site.

Comparisons of ground levels to the north of the outer bank with the level of the preserved ground surface under the inner bank showed the full height of the outer bank and proved that it was indeed a massive built feature. The outer bank at its full height before erosion and the ditch open to its full depth would have been very impressive, and would have posed a considerable obstacle to anyone trying to access the interior from this side. However the outer bank must originally have been considerably higher than the interior and this would have given a great advantage to attackers with missiles, making the design appear unlikely for a purely defensive function.

If the inner bank is an original part of the monument its presence around the southern side of the interior suggests that this was never circular and that very little of the interior has been lost. If the monument was originally circular a vast amount of gravel would have had to be removed to create the present farmyard. The outer bank would not only have had to have been levelled in the farm yard but also in the field to the west of the farmyard. This is presently an old orchard and is very low-lying with no trace of a former earthwork. Also a projected circular rampart would have extended beyond the present route of the river. This makes a completely circular monument improbable and even a circular interior extremely unlikely. The steep southern side was probably in origin a natural feature caused by the river cutting through the gravel ridge, although it has clearly been altered to some extent in the 19th and 20th centuries. The monument therefore was not originally a henge, as attractive as that possibility is, and may always have been similar in plan to what survives today, with a bank and ditch only across the ridge to the north.

The excavation shows that there was activity in the interior and that further remains are likely to survive, but the nature of this activity could not be established in the small area excavated. The presence of burnt stone, charcoal and burnt bone suggests activity producing this material nearby, presumably within the interior, at a time when the inner bank was being constructed.

The excavation also demonstrated later activity in the ditch. The large cut, the end of which was found, suggests a cut for a semi-subterranean building and the revetment found implies the support of loose ditch fills on this side. Although only the very end of this cut was found it appears large enough to have been for a substantial building such as a farmhouse. Many small farmhouses probably built in the 18th century in this area are set into banks or are otherwise semi-subterranean (Simon Simcox pers. comm.). The location in the ditch of the monument would have provided considerable shelter to the building. The exact form, nature and date of this proposed building cannot be known without further investigation, but it seems probable that it was a predecessor of the current farmhouse.

The digging of a trackway through the outer bank (Figure 4 (e)) seems an unnecessary expense of labour for field access when the bank could merely be avoided. It seems more likely that the track is related to the proposed building in the ditch, allowing direct access from both north and south. As the field walls seem to be contemporary with the track it is also likely that the small field over the monument was constructed as a paddock or garden area for the building. The revetment walls on the western and eastern sides of the monument seem designed to keep sheep out but not to keep them in, as they could easily jump out from inside. It would not be surprising therefore to find that the interior of the monument had been used as a garden, and this may explain the small postholes (cuts [005] and [009]), as well as the root or animal disturbance found in the interior.

Hen Gastell is clearly an unusual monument and it is difficult to find parallels to it. There are several defended sites in the area, mainly of Iron Age or Roman period date, but they are all larger and of a different character to Hen Gastell. If the present interpretation of the site is accepted the interior area at Hen Gastell is only about 30m by 14m and the overall dimensions of the site cannot be much more than 50m by 46m. Caer Engan (PRN 577), to the south in Llanllyfni community, is a small hillfort with two, possibly three ramparts, and an interior area measuring about 115m by 70m (Figure 14). Gadlys (PRN 585) 1km north-east of Hen Gastell is circular with a single bank and an internal area of about 66m diameter. About 850m to the west of Hen Gastell is the site of Dinas y Prif (PRN 593). This is smaller with an interior 40m by 40m, but it is nearly square in plan with mounds at the corners of the rampart, which may have supported towers. Further away, but perhaps more similar, is the site of Erw Goch, Eglwys Bach (PRN 2891). Like Hen Gastell this uses a steep scarp as one side of the defences and has a substantial bank and ditch around the others sides, although in this case the bank is inside the ditch. The interior is sub-rectangular, but larger than Hen Gastell, at about 57m by 36m. Also similar is Castell y Gaer (PRN 4919) at Llwyngwril near Towyn. This is on the end of a spur near Afon Gwril, so two sides are defended by steep scarps. It has two ditches with a substantial bank between and a trapezoidal interior measuring about 55m by 39m. If the outer ditch had been infilled this site might quite closely resemble Hen Gastell with the bank dominating the interior. This site has been surveyed in some detail by Bowen and Gresham (1967, 153-155) (see figure 15). Their survey shows that it also has a stone wall around the interior, not dissimilar in plan to the inner bank at Hen Gastell. Leading to a gap in the inner wall is a terraced trackway that curves around the end of the rampart, providing access to the site. This is similar to the track (Figure 4 (g)) at Hen Gastell, although here any

ramp leading into the interior, if it existed, has been removed by later remodelling of the site. However the closeness of the comparison does make it possible that there was originally an entrance in the south-western side of the site.

None of the sites discussed about have been dated by excavation. It is possible that Dinas y Prif is early medieval in date, although this seems largely to be based on a local tradition that it was the home of Gibor, a Goidel (Irishman) (RCAHMW 1960, 225). The other sites are assumed to be late Iron Age or used into the Roman period and similarities with Erw Goch and Castell y Gaer could place Hen Gastell in the same time period. However the site would also work as a partial ringwork around a small wooden keep. This is a very atypical site form for the medieval period but it is worth keeping this possibility in mind and if further investigation is carried out a medieval date should not be ruled out until proven otherwise.

7. FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1. Radiocarbon dates

The major question about this site is its date. The lack of relevant finds from the excavation and metal detecting means that this question was not answered during the current work. However soil samples were taken containing charcoal and possibly other charred plant remains which may allow the site to be dated using radiocarbon assay. The two soil samples with charred remains were recovered from the buried soil layer (021) under the inner bank and the fill (017) of the possible slot [018] in the top of the inner bank. Charcoal from a buried soil cannot be used to provide a precise date as its origin must remain unknown and its relationship to the bank building activity uncertain. However a date from this layer would provide a general terminus post quem date for the bank and should at least enable prehistoric activity to be distinguished from medieval. It would also provide a check and comparison for dates from slot [018]. This feature, while slightly disturbed on the SE side, appeared to be a straight linear slot dug into the top of the bank material, or possibly created by building up the bank material around a timber structure. The slot was filled with burnt stone and earth with a high proportion of charcoal. The origin of the stone and charcoal is so far unknown but it is assumed to be chronologically fairly closely related to the bank construction because burnt stone was also present in one of the layers forming the bank (024). While the uncertainty about the origin of the charcoal makes this deposit less than ideal for radiocarbon dating the possibility that it is quite closely associated with the construction of the bank is high and in the absence of better samples this this deposit should at least give an indicator date for the inner bank.

It is proposed to obtain two dates from each context, allowing for a check on the dates produced and identifying any contamination or other mixing of materials of different dates. The dates will be on short lived single items to avoid errors from old wood effect and combining items of different dates.

To obtain suitable items for dating the sample will first have to be wet sieved and floated to recover the charred plant remains. This process will also recover any small artefacts missed during excavation, which in the case of the sample from fill (017) is likely to include more burnt bone fragments. The charred material then needs to be identified. While it would be possible to identify only those pieces to be dated it is recommended that the full assemblages are assessed so that information from these can be recovered and the sampled items can be placed in a context. The charred plant remains themselves may contain some clues about the date of the site. For example oats became a common crop in the medieval period and emmer wheat becomes rare after the Iron Age, so the presence of one of these grain species could suggest a general period of use. The type and nature of the charceal may also give some indication of its origin and perhaps activities on site; oak may originate from charred structural timbers while small pieces of hazel and shrub species could indicate fuel-wood and the presence of cooking fires.

7.2. Further excavation

There remain many questions about the nature and use of this site. Some of these could be answered relatively easily by further, limited excavation. Use of the interior of the site was demonstrated by the current work but the nature of this use was not clear. It would particularly be useful to identify whether there was a structure within the interior and what type and size it was. In order to investigate this a trench covering nearly half the interior would be stripped of the ploughsoil by machine and any features revealed would be excavated by hand. The trench would be extended by hand to produce another hand-dug slot though the inner bank to allow another look

at this feature and see if the possible palisade slot can again be detected (see figure 4 for location of proposed trenches).

The current work demonstrated that the ditch is deep and well-defined and if it did continue around the site it is likely to survive even where the ground has been levelled. The continuation of the ditch could be most easily established by a trench dug into the flat ground to the east of the site. Ploughsoil would be stripped by machine and the trench hand cleaned to identify the edge of the ditch, which would only be excavated to a depth sufficient to establish its presence and to investigate the upper layers for evidence of the bank having been levelled into the ditch. Any surviving *in situ* traces of an outer bank would also be investigated.

A small hand dug trench would be cut into the northern side of the outer bank to study its make-up and confirm the level from which it was built.

The area opened and the variety of archaeology expected from simple features cut into natural in the interior of the site to complex stratigraphy in the building in the ditch would make it suitable for volunteers with a variety of levels of experience. It is proposed that the work will be carried out as a community excavation during the Festival of Archaeology 12^{th} to 27^{th} July 2014 with participation of local people and school children.

While it would be very interesting to investigate the possible building in the ditch this would not add to our knowledge of the original site and could potentially be very complex. It is suggested that if this feature is to be explored that this work is carried out as a separate phase using only professional archaeologist and experience volunteers able to excavate and record potentially complex occupation deposits.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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10. APPENDIX I: List of contexts

Context number	Description	Interpretation	Dimensions
001	Loose dark grey-brown gritty silt with few stones	Topsoil/active turf	0.16m deep
002	Loose dark grey-brown gritty loam with c.20% small stones	Ploughsoil	0.12-0.37m deep
003	Very firm pale yellowish-brown sandy clay with c.30% stones and gravel. Concreted and very hard.	Natural glacial gravels	
004	Soft dark grey-brown gritty loam with 20% small stones	Single fill of cut [005]	
005	Neat oval cut with steep sides and fairly flat base.	Probable posthole	0.25 x 0.23m, 0.1m deep
006	Soft dark grey-brown gritty loam with c.35% pebbles	Single fill of cut [007]	Â
007	Irregular hollow with undulating base.	Probably just root disturbance.	0.50m x 0.31m, 0.12m deep
008	Soft dark grey-brown gritty loam.	Single fill of cut [009]	
009	Circular cut with steep sides and tapering base with a shallower projection on one side.	Probable posthole	0.30 x 0.16m, 0.12m deep max.
010	Soft dark grey-brown gritty loam.	Single fill of hollow [011]	
011	Very shallow sub-circular hollow.	Probably just where a stone has been removed	0.16m x 0.13m, 0.05m deep
012	Soft mid brown silty loam with frequent pebbles	Fill of cut [013]	
013	Shallow sub-circular pit with fairly steep sides and rounded base	Pit or base of possible large posthole	0.8m diameter, 0.17m deep
014	Loose mid brown silty sand with few stones	Upper fill of cut [015]	0.1m deep
015	Shallow sub-circular pit with fairly steep sides and rounded base	Pit or base of possible large posthole	0.8m diameter, 0.15m deep
016	Soft mid brown silty sand with abundant pebbles	Lower fill of cut [015]	0.12m deep
017	Loose dark brown sandy silt with 70% stone, much of it heat-shattered.	Fill of cut [018]	0.25m deep
018	Linear cut apparently ending, with a rounded terminus, before NE baulk of trench. NW side is near vertical and very straight but not well-defined. Base is flat and SE side	Slot or trench dug along back of bank or feature created by soil build-up around a structural feature.	>2.5m long, 1.1m wide, 0.25m deep
019	Very loose, orange-brown silty sand with 80% stones and gravel.	Loose gravel dumped to form top of bank	>2.7m long, 1.5m wide, 0.3m thick
020	Ditch with steep SE side. Base and NW side not investigated.	Cut of main ditch	>2m deep
021	Soft dark brown silty loam with few stones. Contains patches of charcoal.	Buried soil under the bank	0.1m deep
022	Sub-rounded stones up to 0.3m long laid in a line with a rough face to SW. Up to 3 rough courses but not excavated to full depth.	Revetment wall or even wall of building	3.2m long, 0.5m wide max, >0.3m deep
023	Compact greyish brown sandy clay, with a high proportion of small stones.	Compact stony layer in main ditch [020]	0.05m thick
024	Fairly loose dark brown sandy silt with c.30% stones, many of which are burnt.	Deposit forming part of the bank	>1m long, 1.1m wide, 0.2m thick
025	Soft, mid brown gritty loam with occasional stones	Fill of [026]	1.1m long, 0.9m wide, 0.2m deep
026	Sub-circular cut with steep sides and fairly level base.	Shallow pit, or possibly a large posthole	1.1m long, 0.9m wide, 0.2m deep
027	Soft, mid brown sandy silt with c.30% rounded stones	Stony layer in top of main ditch [020]	
028	Soft, orange-brown sandy silt with relatively few stones	Thin, well-defined layer in upper fill of main ditch [020]	0.1m thick
029	Soft, mid brown sandy loam with c.20% gravel and small stones	Upper fill of main ditch [020]	0.35m thick
030	Soft, orange-brown sandy loam with c.30% grit and small gravel and c.10% small and medium stones	Erosion deposit in main ditch [020]	0.15m thick
031	Very soft mid brown sandy loam with some larger stones in the top but otherwise few stones	Soily deposit in main ditch [020] (same as 038?)	0.4m thick
032	Friable mid brown sandy silt with c.60% gravel and small and medium stones	Stony deposit in main ditch [020]	0.25m thick
033	Friable mid brown sandy silt with relatively few stones	Soily erosion deposit in main ditch [020]	0.2m thick
034	Loose gritty, mid brown sandy silt with c.30% gravel and 10% small and medium stones	Homogenous deposit forming lower fill in main ditch [020]	>0.65m thick
035	Very firm but friable pale grey brown clayey sand with	Natural glacial gravel	
036	Friable slightly mottled yellow-brown gritty clayey loam	Deposit filling top of cut [045]	0.25m thick

Context	Description	Interpretation	Dimensions
number			
	with occasional gravel and small pebbles		
037	Slightly greyish light brown clayey loam with occasional small pebbles	Upper fill of cut [045]	0.15m thick
038	Friable greyish light brown clayey loam with moderate gravel and pebbles	Main colluvial fill of cut [045]	0.4m thick
039	Friable greyish brown clayey silt with moderate gravel and pebbles	An upper fill of cut [045] over possible building	0.2m thick
040	Greyish brown clayey loam with c.80% gravel and small and medium stones	Gravelly deposit over possible building	0.25m thick
041	Friable greyish brown silty loam with occasional gravel and pebbles	Colluvial deposit over possible building	0.25m thick
042	Firm orange-brown silty sand, with occasional pebbles	Erosion deposit overlying part of revetment 022	0.2m thick max
043	Yellowish brown clayey loam with occasional pebbles and small and medium stones	Thick colluvial deposit over possible building	0.4m thick
044	Crumbly yellow brown clayey sand with occasional pebbles	Primary fill of cut [045]	
045	Cut with steep SE side and a flat base. A rounded corner of a possibly large sub-rectangular cut was seen in the trench.	Probably part of a large sub- rectangular cut for a building	>4m wide, 1.45m deep
046	Soft mid brown sandy silt with occasional stones	Former ploughsoil or B horizon of buried soil with 021 as A horizon. Only survives under the bank	0.15m deep

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Figure 1. Location of Hen Gastell and nearby sites











Figure 7. Hen Gastell shown on 25 inch Ordnance Survey maps, Caernarvonshire sheet XV.16



Figure 13. NE facing section through bank showing cut [018]



Figure 14. Hen Gastell and comparable sites reproduced from 25 inch OS maps (except Erw Goch from the OS 1:2500 map) (all shown at same scale)



Figure 15. Bowen and Gresham's survey of Castell y Gaer (Fig 62 in Bowen and Gresham 1967, 154) (NB north is to the bottom)



Plate 1. View of Hen Gastell from the west



Plate 2. Geophysical survey



Plate 3. Metal detecting survey



Plate 4. Mini-digger removing ploughsoil from the evaluation trench



Plate 5. South-west end of outer bank, from SW



Plate 6. Outer bank and ditch from interior, from SE



Plate 7. Inner bank on N side of interior, from SW



Plate 8. Track cutting through outer bank, with revetment walls, from S



Plate 9. Erosion on E side of monument, from E



Plate 10. Scarp defining S side of the monument, from SE



Plate 11. Cut [026] fully excavated, from SE



Plate 12. Section through inner bank showing gravelly bank deposit and buried soil underneath, from SW



Plate 13. Section dug into ditch [020], from SW



Plate 14. Cut [045] and revetment (022), from NW



Plate 15. Revetment (022), from SE



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