CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW SEA WALL AT ST. HYWYN'S CHURCH, ABERDARON

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING AND WATCHING BRIEF

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Report No. 221

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW SEA WALL AT ST.HYWYN'S CHURCH, ABERDARON

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prepared for Posford Duvivier

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Archaeological Recording at Aberdaron Church (G1389)

Introduction

Erosion by the sea on the south side of Aberdaron church has caused the sea wall separating the graveyard from the beach to slip southwards, taking with it part of the interior of the graveyard. This has revealed a section consisting of blown sand and buried soils, with occasional skeletal remains. It is intended that the sea wall should be rebuilt and the ground behind it consolidated.

Historical Background

The church at Aberdaron was formerly the principal parish church of Lleyn, and was probably monastic in origin. It is dedicated to St Hywyn, a 5th century saint, who is said to have accompanied Cadfan from Brittany to Lleyn. The present church consists of a 12th century nave, entered by a fine late romanesque west doorway, a 14th century chancel, and a south aisle and arcade added in the 16th century. The graveyard is shown on plans of the early 19th century as oval in shape, although the OS map of 1918 shows the present straightened wall, which is said to have been erected in the late 19th century. In 1906 the graveyard was extended to its present eastern limit. It is therefore clear that the existing wall south of the church cuts through the earlier churchyard.

Aims and Methods

The aim of the project was to record the sections revealed by the recent collapse before reconstruction work began, and to monitor any work which might reveal earlier deposits outside the 19th century wall. Because the church is an early *clas* site, remains of early structures may exist within the present churchyard. No Home Office licence had been obtained so the removal of material which would have included human remains from the section was not possible. Recording involved written descriptions and scaled section drawings at 1:10, scaled black and white photographs and colour slides at 35 mm format and was carried out by GAT staff between the 24th and the 26th April 1996

After consultation with the Rector it was decided to clear the slumped material from the base of two sections of the eroded area and, if possible, to cut back the section sufficiently to allow proper recording. This was done on the understanding that no inhumations would be disturbed. Most of the bone eroding out of the section came from a 0.2m - 0.5m thick layer of redeposited sand mixed with building rubble probably dating from the refurbishment of the church in 1900. The first section, 1.4m wide, was cut opposite the centre of the church. The second was 3.0m wide and was located to the east, on the edge of an area where the redeposited rubble was less evident.

To the south of the churchyard, the contractors intended to drive piles directly behind the present sea wall to support it. This process, however, was impeded by sub-surface features and it was decided to excavate a test pit to determined the nature of the obstacle. The test pit was located immediately to the west of section 02 and was excavated on the 5th June 1996, observed by GAT staff. The site was visited again on the 24th June 1996 to monitor the progress of the piling operation.

Results

Section 01.

The first section was cut to a depth of 2m revealing 15 contexts, the lowest of which was of clean sand (014) extending below the level of the section. Above this was a firm sandy clay containing organic matter degraded to carbon and occasional flecks of charcoal (001). This layer was visible as a level surface which extended for

approximately 1m in front of the section. The presence of organic material would suggest a former ground surface.

Above this, a linear drystone wall or revetment (015) was visible for 0.6m before running into the centre of the section. It was constructed of rounded stone from the sea shore and lay at an angle of c.20 degrees to the line of the section. A mid to dark brown slightly humic clayey sand (003, 004) was visible in between the stones which was in marked contrast to the sand found in front of the section. A few stones were removed from the wall at the edge of the excavation revealing a continuation of fairly uniform brown clayey sand and further rounded stones suggesting an established soil horizon. To the west of the exposed stones, the brown clayey sand continued at the same level, perhaps indicating that the revetment had collapsed. This was also reflected in a fall in height of the stones at this point in the section.

Overlying this was 0.3m of windblown sand (007, 008), below four dumped contexts overlain by 0.1m of gritty topsoil. These consisted of 009 - a 0.05m context of hard reddish brown clay; 010 - up to 0.2m of brown clayey sand; 011 - 0.4m of mixed and beach stones plus occasional pieces of roofing slate and broken human bone and 012 - up to 0.3m of sand, mortar, broken roofing slate, angular stone, brick and concentrations of broken human bone. It is known that during the refurbishment in 1900 the church floor was replaced and that a new sea wall was built, involving the removal of large amounts of soil which, according to the Rector, were mainly dumped to the north of the church. Context 012, the main dump horizon, is presumably associated with these events and could be traced along almost all of the exposed section

The west facing section at 90 degrees to this showed successive deposits of sand coloured by a range of humic contexts ranging from almost white sand to very dark brown sand with a somewhat greasy, high humic content possibly from seaweed. These were sloping down from the revetment and were probably windblown deposits. One fragment of bone, probably human, (part of a scapula) was recovered from the sand below the level of the base of the wall. Two human teeth, pre-molars worn down close to gum level, were recovered from in between the stones.

Section 02.

A second section, 3m wide and located to the east of the first was cut to a depth of 1.5m corresponding with the top of a context of hard reddish brown clay. Above this was 0.7m of fairly clean sand containing a small concentration of disarticulated human bone towards the west of the section. No cut was visible, suggesting that the bone was deposited as part of the context and was not an inhumation. Above this was a thin gritty context which could be traced for the whole length of the originally exposed section sealing all contexts below it and which appears in section 01 in a slightly more diffuse form at the top of context 011.

Above this was a continuation of 012, the dump horizon containing human bone, slate, mortar etc. associated with the 1900 works to the church. The west facing section cut at 90 degrees to this showed a cut into the clay at the base of the north facing section, presumably the cut for the building of the earlier sea wall, now collapsed.

Test pit

A trench approximately 5m by 4.5m was excavated by machine to a depth of 2m immediately behind (north) of the failing sea wall to the west of section 02. Because of the unstable nature of the stratigraphy, predominantly sand, and the depth of the trench it was not possible to clean the sections or to examine them closely. However, the observed sequence of stratified layers appeared to mirror the sequence recorded in section 02 and to a lesser extent, the sequence recorded in section 01 to the west.

The trench revealed that the foundations of the present sea wall sloped at an angle of some 60 degrees into the churchyard, being approximately 0.9m wide at the base. The lowest context appeared to be a light yellow clayey sand (?014), overlain by a layer of rounded pebbles with a matrix of mid-brown clay (?003). This layer, along with the angle of the sea wall foundations, explained the difficulties encountered in piling and appeared to be very

similar in character to the stone wall or revetment observed in section 01. Above the pebbles was a layer of firm reddish brown clay as identified in section 02, the upper half of which contained fragments of charcoal. No charcoal was observed towards the base of the section, although visibility was more restricted here. Directly above the clay was a layer of yellowish brown sand, the upper part containing a number of rounded and sub-angular stones as well as a quantity of human bones, notably the larger bones of leg and arm, along with ribs and a clavicle. No grave cuts were identified and the mixed nature of the deposit suggests previous disturbance. Sealing this layer was a thin dark layer, probably the dark gritty layer identified throughout the section above which was a mid brown silty sand containing building debris and a number of medium sized human bones, including the top of a skull. This context appears to be the debris layer identified with the refurbishment of the church in 1900. This in turn was sealed by the sandy topsoil and turf.

During the final visit to the site, it was observed that the sea wall had been removed to a depth of 1m along most of its length. One section of the wall, 5m in width, had been completely removed revealing contexts similar to those observed in the test pit. No earlier features or graves were observed, but a stony, voided layer was noted at the base of the section which could represent the drystone wall or revetment encountered previously.

Interpretation

In both recorded sections, the upper contexts 012 and, probably, 011 appear to be associated with the building of the sea wall in 1900 and the dumping of material from the church. Section 01 revealed windblown sand overlying a drystone revetment, presumably against erosion. No dating evidence was recovered but a 19th century or earlier date must be assumed. Beneath the revetment lay yet more windblown sand. Section 02 appeared to be broadly similar to section 01, however the hard reddish brown clay encountered at the base of the section was not thought to be boulder clay which, according to the test drilling carried out by the contractors, was located much lower down.

The test pit revealed that the construction of the present sea wall had caused considerable disturbance to the deposits immediately behind the churchyard, to the north. Adjacent to the foundations, the earlier wall or revetment was also hindering the piling process. The disturbed nature of the human remains in both the sandy and the debris layers suggest post-interment disturbance associated, in the case of the debris layer, with the refurbishment of the church at the beginning of this century.

Conclusions

The two recorded sections and the test pit excavated by the contractors revealed a series of windblown sand deposits overlain by debris layers associated with the refurbishment works to the church and the construction of the sea wall in 1900. The majority of the human remains came from these debris layers and the broken nature of the bone indicates the level of disturbance created by the work. The rounded beach pebbles interpreted as a drystone wall or revetment encountered in section 01, again in the test pit and possibly in the section revealed by the removal of the sea wall represent the only evidence for earlier structures on the site.

Bibliography

Published sources

RCAHM(W) 1964 An Inventory of the Ancient Monuments of Caernarvonshire Vol.III: West p.1-2

<u>Unpublished sources</u> Ordnance Survey 1918 25 inch map



Fig.1 Location Map 1:2500



Section 2

