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HAFAN, LON PARC, CAERNARFON

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

Report No. 249

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

HAFAN, LON PARC, CAERNARFON

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF (G1456)

prepared for Grŵp Ifanc Sengl Digartref (G.I.S.D.)

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1. PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Gwynedd Archaeological Trust was contracted to carry out a watching brief during the groundwork associated with the construction of a terrace in front of Hafan, Lon Parc, Caernarfon. Hafan lays within the Archaeologically sensitive Roman storage depot of Hen Waliau (Fig.1). An earlier archaeological evaluation carried out by Earthworks Archaeological Services identified deposits containing exclusively Roman finds dated to the mid first and second centuries AD. The trial trenching did not identify any structural remains but however only examined a small proportion of the site making it possible that features not detected during the assessment would be encountered during the construction work.

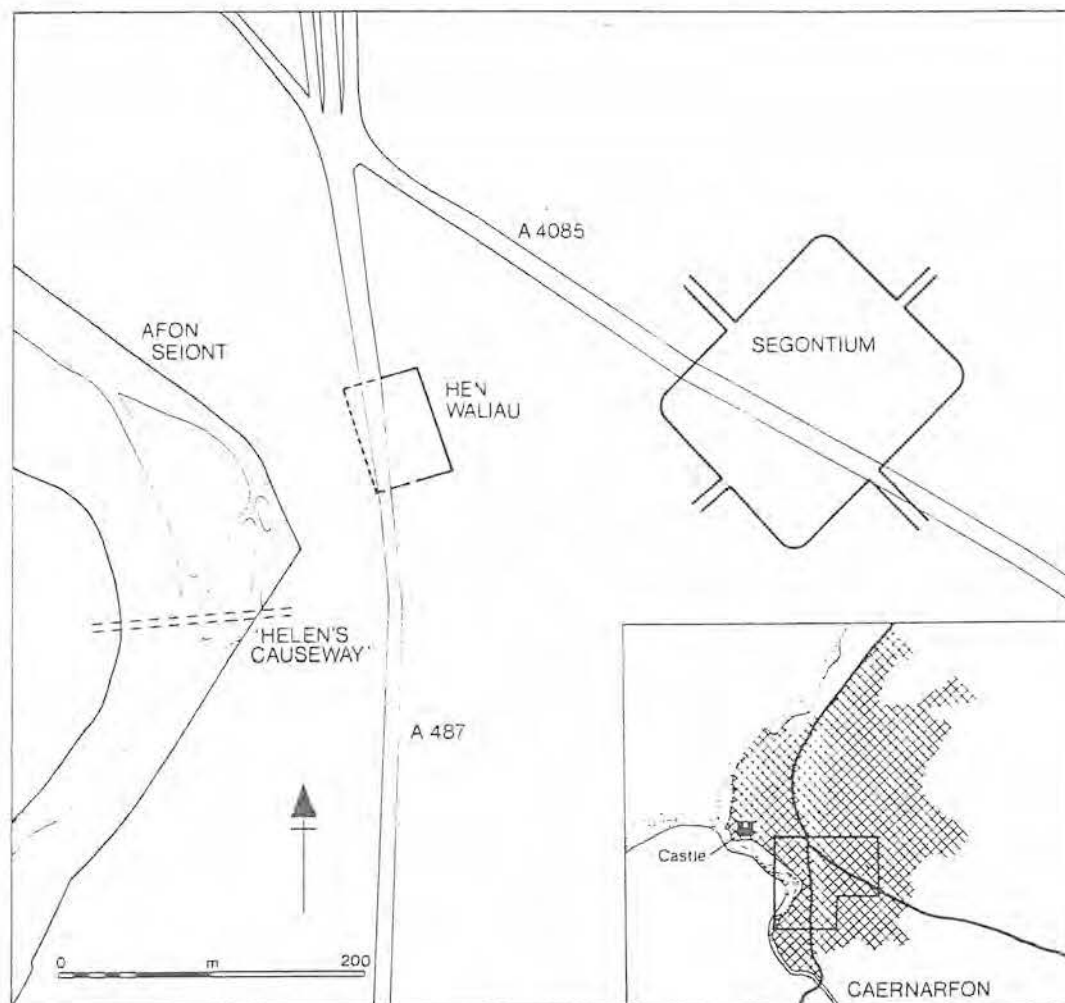


Fig.1 Location map (from Boyle 1991)

2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The unusually well preserved Roman walls known as Hen Waliau stand approximately 200m due west of the fort of Segontium. The walls form part of a rectangular enclosure and stand to a height of about 5m. Much of the original facing of limestone blocks has been lost but where it has survived the walls are about 1.9m thick. The eastern wall survives for its entire length of 70m but only 40m of the south wall and 17m of the north wall are now standing. The western wall has been completely lost but probably ran along the top of the steep 18m high scarp that runs down to the river just to the west of the site. The earliest surviving reference to the site is by Leland who wrote in 1536:

In the olde town of Cair Sallog, alias Cair saint or Segent, appere part of the old castel yn the old toune, of whiche castel is faullen into the haven salt water.

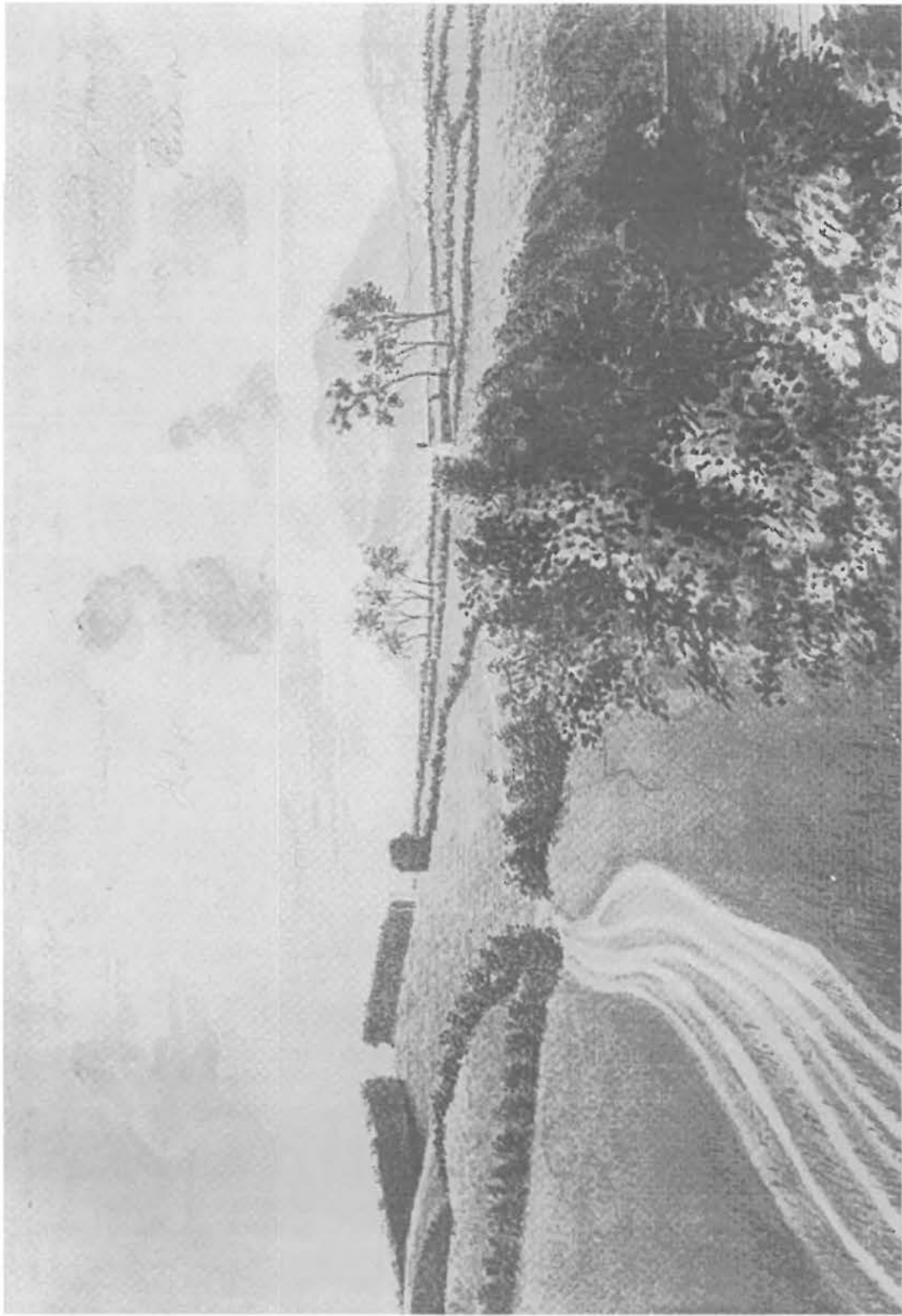


Plate 1. View of Hen Waiiau from the north-west (Moses Griffith, 1766)

Two eighteenth century references give a good impression of the site before it was built on. A painting by Moses Griffith in 1766 (Plate 1) shows the walls in open fields. Pennant described the walls in some detail in his *Tours in Wales* (1783):

Near the steep bank of the River Seiont, at a small distance from the castle is an ancient Roman fort. On two sides the walls are pretty entire; one is seventy four yards long; the other which points to the river is sixty four. The height ten feet eight inches. The thickness six feet. Much of the facing is taken away, which discovers the peculiarity of the Roman masonry. It consists of regular courses, the others have the stones disposed in a zigzag fashion. Along the walls are three parallel lines of round holes, not three inches in diameter nicely plaistered within, which pass through the whole thickness. There are other similar holes, which are discovered in the end of the wall; and seem to run through it length ways.... Near the corner of one of the walls a heap of stones, the ruins of a tower; for on digging, some years ago, the foundations of a round one was discovered. It was paved, and in it were found the horn of a deer and skeletons of some lesser animals. This place seems to secure a landing-place from the Seiont, at time of high water; and I was informed that in Tre'r Bebllic, on the opposite shore, had been other ruins the work of the same people.

It seems that the walls have deteriorated little since the 18th century. The two breaks in the wall visible on Griffith's painting have been infilled but elsewhere their appearance is very similar.

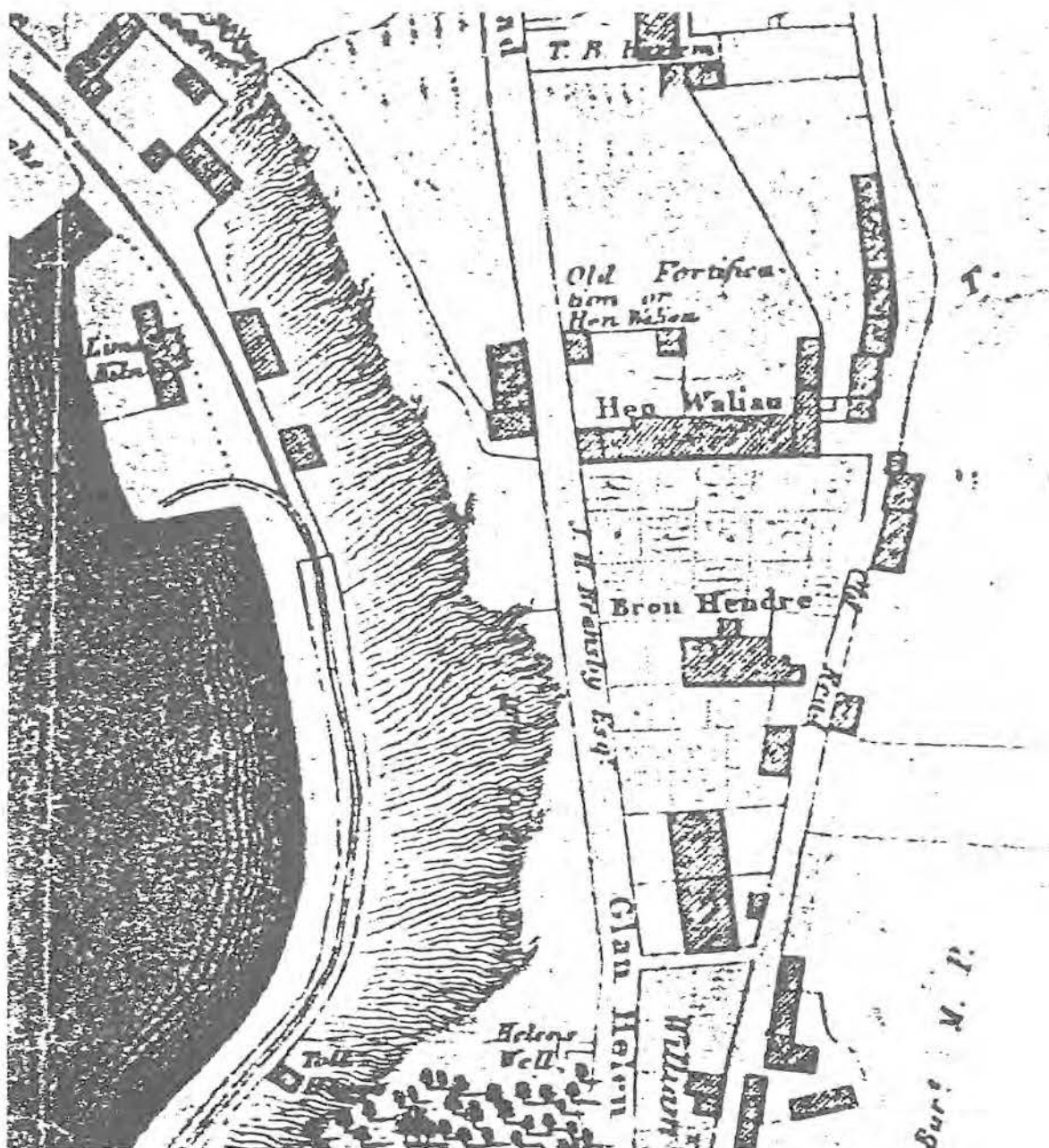


Fig. 2 Extract from plan of Caernarfon (John Wood, 1834)

John Wood's plan of Caernarfon that was published in 1834 (Fig. 2) shows Buildings against the walls, slates and bricks from these structures can still be seen embedded in the Roman masonry. The buildings were subsequently demolished and the present houses constructed during the second half of the 19th century. There was no record of any significant Roman discoveries during the construction of the houses.

There have been a number of excavations carried out within Hen Waliau from 1952 onwards; the position of the trenches is shown on Fig. 3.

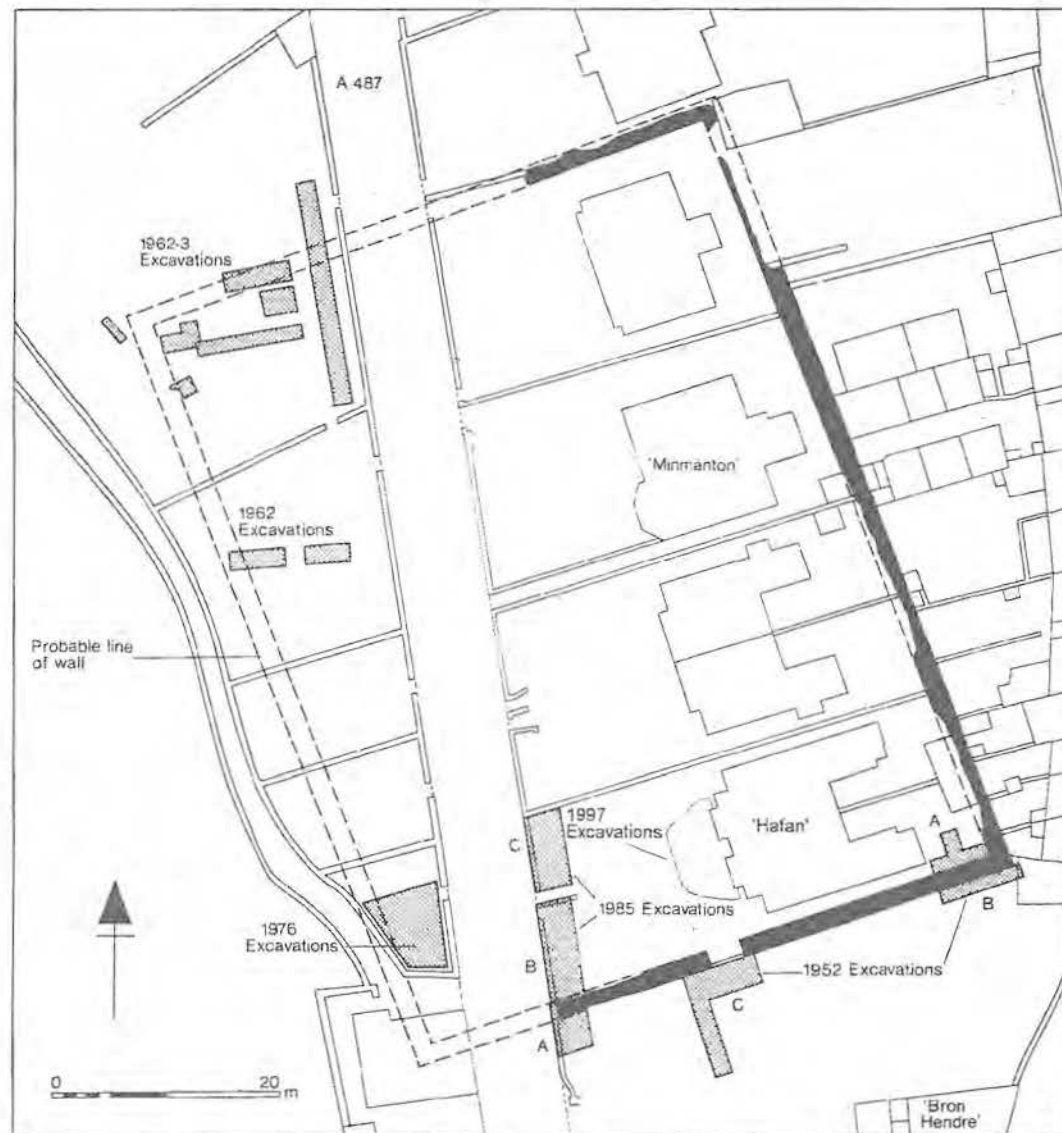


Fig.3 Excavation trenches from 1952 to 1997 (after Boyle 1991)

Hogg opened trenches both in the south-east corner of the enclosure and to the outside of the southern gateway. No features directly associated with the Roman activities at Hen Waliau were identified although a cobbled surface, dated by several sherds of pottery from its surface to no later than the mid second century, was found just to the west of the gate. There was a well preserved stratigraphic sequence in this area and the cobbled surface was shown to be earlier than the walls.

Seven trenches were excavated by R.G. Livens in 1962 in advance of the construction of a petrol station on the site of the presumed north-west corner of Hen Waliau. The line of the north wall was marked by the presence of a robber trench but neither the west wall nor any significant occupation deposits were identified.

The first tangible remains of the west wall were uncovered in 1963 in excavations during the construction of the petrol station. A steep cut containing foundation material similar to that found in both the 1962 and 1976 excavations was located.

A further small trench was opened up along the line of the west wall by R.B. White in 1976. The majority of the trench contained light brown charcoal flecked clay directly overlying the natural subsoil and sealed only by modern overburden. The robber trench for the west wall was however identified at the far west of the excavations.

A trench was dug along the west of the garden of Hafan, by S.D.Boyle of the Gwynedd Archaeological trust in response to a road improvement scheme in 1985. The area was much disturbed by modern activity but some Roman deposits were identified. A very limited area of relatively undisturbed deposits remained but these contained a small pit and two stake holes. Pottery recovered from the earliest deposit, a greenish brown clayey loam, included pottery of a fourth century date. This deposit was cut by the foundation trench of the southern wall. Several other features including 27 stake holes, a single course of drystone walling and a slate lined drain were identified to the south of the wall but these features were stratigraphical isolated due to a reduction in the ground level, probably in the late 18th century. No reliable date could therefore be assigned to these features but it is possible that there could be Roman contexts among them.

The two assessment trenches that were excavated by Earthworks Archaeological Services in advance of the current building works identified two 19th century wall foundations and an associated cobbled surface, along with a further 19th century metallised surface. These contexts sealed a compact grey brown silty clay and a softer lighter brown silty clay which yielded exclusively Roman finds dating from the late first and early second centuries. The compact layer was interpreted as being a possible metallised surface.

In summary, the walls of Hen Waliau have been dated to the fourth century (the Roman garrisons were withdrawn from Wales at the end of this century so a later date is unlikely) but none of the excavations located any structures within the compound. This may in part be due to the truncation of the deposits within the site by agriculture and landscaping. In many cases however apparently undisturbed soil containing exclusively Roman finds has been found to overlie the subsoil so there was no truncation of the deposits below this level. No features were cut into the subsoil suggesting that there were never any major structures present in these areas.

3. METHODOLOGY

As there was no access to the site for any machinery all earth removal was carried out by hand. The assessment excavations established that the site was covered in modern overburden to a depth of between 0.4m and 1.2m. This was removed by the building contractors with limited supervision by the writer. A continuous watching brief was carried out during the excavation of the lower contexts. It was possible to excavate parts of the Roman contexts in detail when the contractors were removing overburden. Remains of archaeological interest were recorded as hand drawn plans and sections at scales of 1:20 and 1:10 respectively. Detailed written descriptions were also made of all features. Finds were located by context only. A photographic record, taken on both monochrome and colour slide film, was kept.

4. RESULTS OF THE WATCHING BRIEF

The watching brief was carried out over several days in mid January 1997. An area of 8.5m x 5.3m was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.8m below ground level. The removal of all deposits was monitored down to the level of the natural subsoil which was close to the bottom of the trench. The site was criss crossed with service trenches some of which were cut through the early deposits. The bottom of the excavated area was planned (Fig. 4) and the SSE facing section was drawn (Fig. 5). The following contexts were identified:

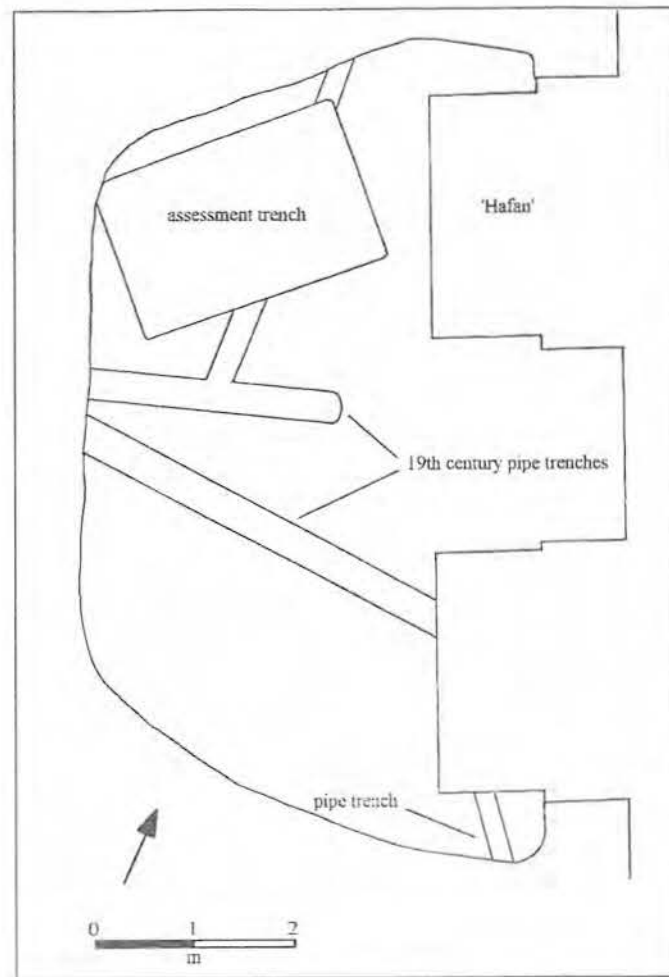


Fig. 4 Features cut into the natural subsoil

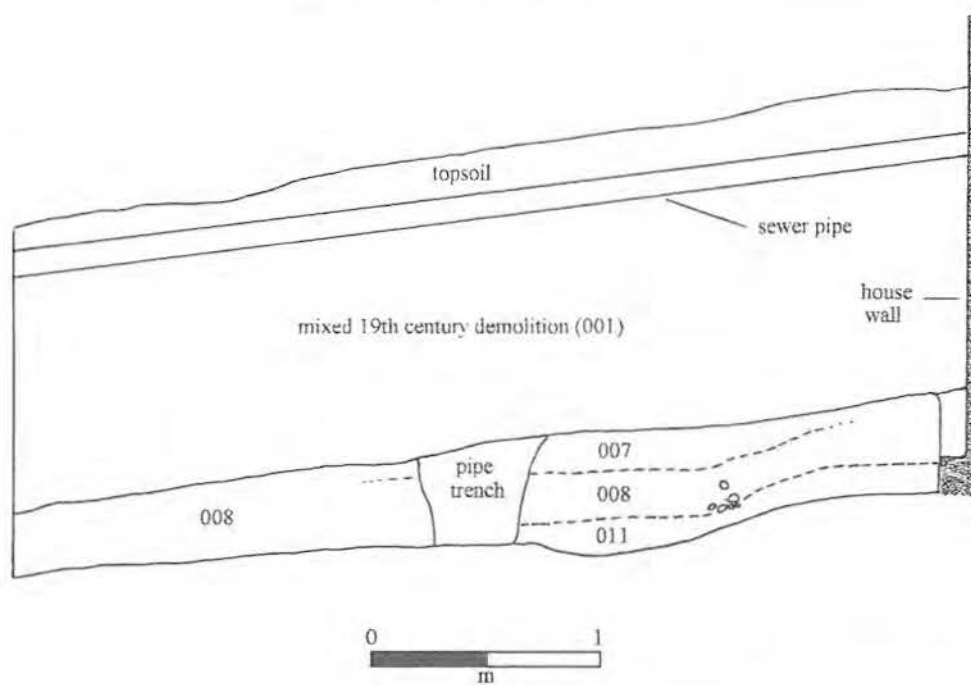


Fig. 5 The SSE facing section

Context 001

A 1.0m deep mixed demolition layer extending across the whole site. This context contained brick, mortar, stone and 19th century pottery and was presumably used to level the gardens of the present houses at the time of their construction.

Contexts 003 and 004

These contexts were continuations of the 19th century limestone wall (003) and cobbled surface (004) identified in assessment trench 1.

Contexts 009 and 010

A single course of a further limestone wall with some traces of mortar was revealed running 4.5m to the north of and parallel to 003. Immediately to the north of this was another cobbled surface. This was rather fragmentary and had apparently been repaired using broken bricks. The wall was clearly not structural and was very similar to 003. It is therefore probable that 003 and 009 were small garden terraces and 004 and 010 were cobbled paths associated with the buildings shown on John Wood's 1834 map.

Contexts 011 and 012

The final 19th century context identified was a continuation of the metalled surface (011) overlying a lead water pipe (012) that was revealed in assessment trench 1.

Context 006

A context of soft mid brown clayey silt beneath wall 009 was identified. This was about 0.2m deep and uniform. One amphora sherd was recovered from this context.

Context 007

This was a somewhat compact mid greyish brown clayey silt containing 25% small stones. The context was typically 0.15m deep and was only identified in patches across the whole of the site directly below the 19th century dump. It was not present below wall 009. It was very similar to the softer 008 which it blended into with depth. The ten sherds of pottery recovered from this context on initial examination appear to be Roman and include second century central Gaulish samian ware, second century colour coated ware and a late first/ early second century flagon handle.

The context did not appear to be a metalled surface but may well be compacted 008.

Context 008

This context was located directly below and occasionally at the same level as 007 which it closely resembled. It was a firm mid greyish brown clayey silt containing variable amounts of stone. Fifteen sherds of pottery were recovered from the context. All were of late first or second century date and included samian ware, orange ware and one sherd of decorated black burnished ware. This context was generally 0.3m deep and was overlying the natural clayey subsoil.

Context 011

There was a yellowish brown context of varying depth below 008 that was presumably a mixture of 008 and the subsoil 013.

Context 013

The natural subsoil was very mixed and mainly consisted of hard yellowish orange clay with patches of softer clayey sand. The only features cut into this were the modern pipe trenches shown on Fig 4.

CONCLUSIONS

No Roman structural remains were identified during this excavation. This may be in part due to the truncation of the contexts in this area in the late 18th century (Boyle 1991). The presence of small terraces dating from this time confirm that landscaping had taken place.

Contexts 006 007 and 008 can all be seen as variations within a deposit of somewhat variable brown clayey silt extending across the whole of the excavated area. This produced exclusively Roman finds. A similar context was identified in the 1976 excavation. The pottery recovered from these contexts consisted of small randomly distributed sherds. This is a characteristic of agricultural soil although the complete lack of post Roman finds, given the site's proximity to Caernarfon, suggests that any ploughing must have been early or that the soil was buried soon after the abandonment of the site. The pottery, as in many of the previous excavations, was of late first/early second century dates. This demonstrates earlier activity in the area presumably associated with the extensive activity to the north of the site in the late first and early second centuries (White 1985). The lack of pottery of a later date suggests that there was only limited occupation of the site in the fourth century.

A total of twelve trenches have been dug within the compound and none have provided any definite evidence of internal structures. The site slopes steeply towards the river, Griffith's painting gives a good indication of the extent of this before recent landscaping, but there is no evidence for any levelling of the site in order to make it suitable for building on. It is thus difficult to be sure of the function of Hen Waliau. There is no evidence for defensive works apart from the walls themselves. This is in marked contrast to the closest local parallel to the site at Caer Gybi, a possible naval yard at Holyhead which incorporated parapets and corner towers. The interpretation of Hen Waliau as a storage depot would explain its position between Segontium and the river and the lack of substantial internal features and fourth century finds. Access to the river 18m below could however, never have been straightforward. It is also possible that, given its late date, Hen Waliau remained unfinished when the garrisons were withdrawn from north Wales at the end of the fourth century.

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