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Archaeological Monitoring and Recording at

TOWYN Y CAPEL

(Capel St Ffraid - SAM A107)

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GAT Report No. 355

By
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Prepared for
Cadw:Welsh Historic Monuments

January 2000

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

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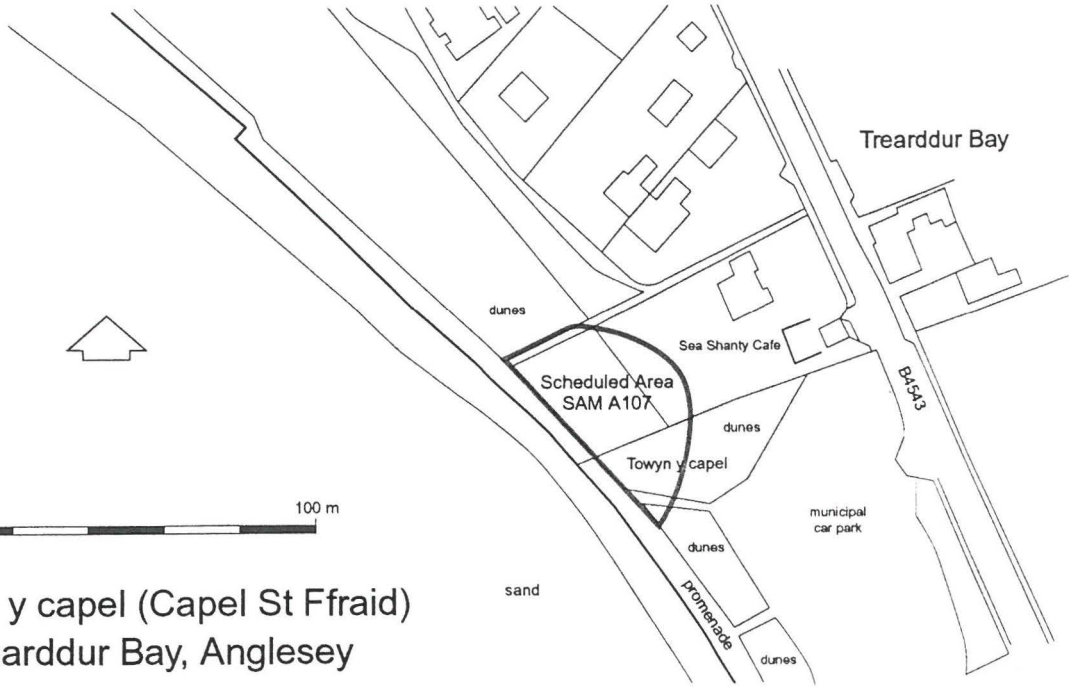
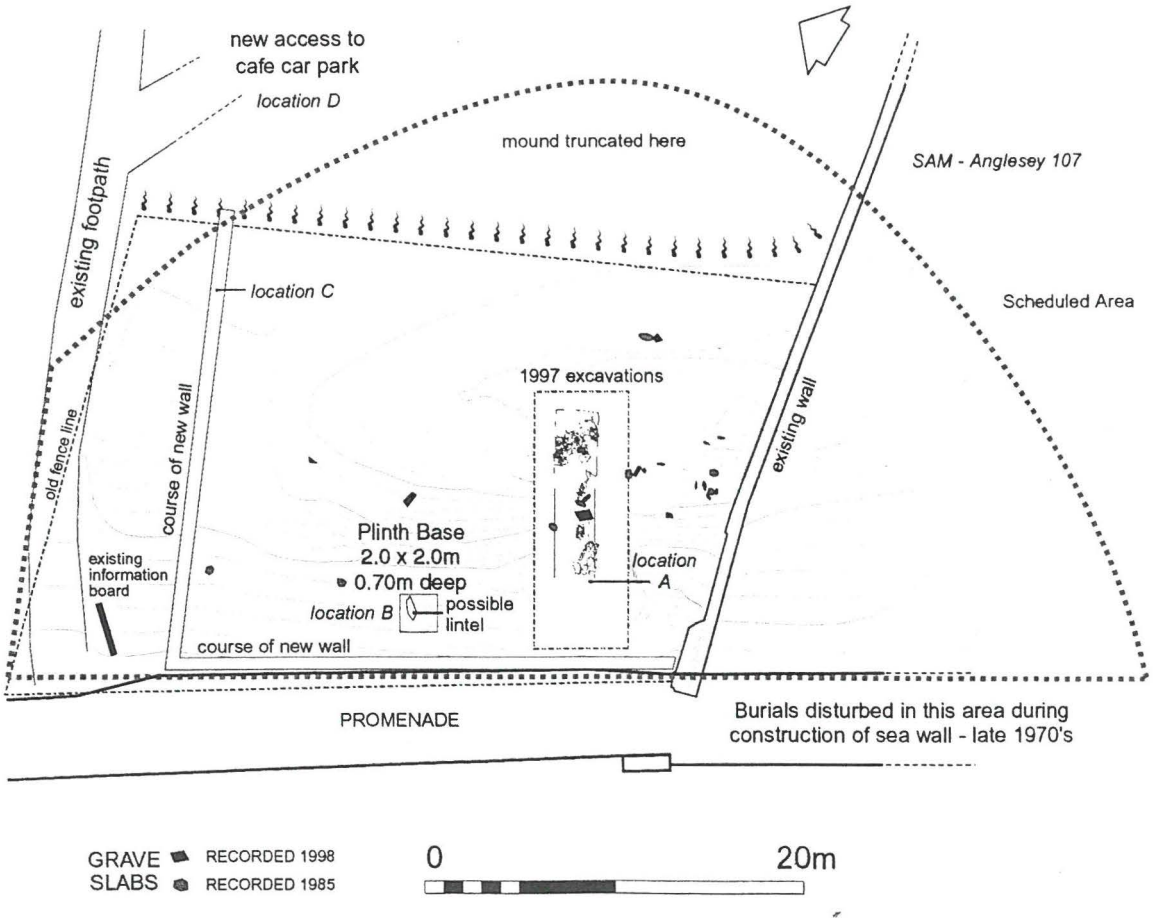


Towyn y capel (Capel St Ffraid)
Trearddur Bay, Anglesey



Archaeological Monitoring at Towyn y capel, Trearddur Bay, Anglesey.

January 2000

The former chapel and cemetery site at Towyn y capel, otherwise known as Capel St. Ffraid is located on the west coast of Holy Island, Anglesey, within the parish of Holyhead (SH526789). It has long been associated with St Bride (St Ffraid) who is said to have arrived here from Kildare in Ireland around 500AD and established a church on the site. The church subsequently became a focus for burial from at least the 7th to the 12th century, and, sporadically, probably as late as the 17th century. The church itself, depicted in a print of 1776 as a ruinous but still recognisable structure has long since been lost to the sea, as has much of the cemetery. The original height of the mound is apparently much reduced, being little more than 4.0 above present High Water and perennial erosion by wind and sea continues to expose further burials. Attempts to protect the monument from erosion have had only limited success and the problem is increasingly exacerbated. Eroding areas have been investigated and recorded on a number of occasions, both in antiquity, ie Stanley (1846) and most recently by Davidson (1997).

Today the site survives as a still substantial but low sand dune separated from the beach by a sea wall and promenade. The mound is 90% colonised by *marram grass* but is pitted by holes and gulleys. The landward side has been encroached upon by consecutive extensions to the Sea Shanty Café that borders the B4543 road.

The most elevated surviving part of the site is designated a Scheduled Ancient Monument (A107) although part of the original mound may well extend further south into the area now largely occupied by the municipal car park. At the outset of the works described below, the Scheduled Area was broadly defined by the promenade to the west, a fence and path to the north, the east edge of the Café car park and part of the mound that extends into the municipal car park. A modern path has been established across the northern flank of the mound by way of a shortcut from the Café car park to the beach, the problem of which can be addressed by the present works.

This report describes the results and implications of works carried out within the Scheduled Area under the auspices of the Trearddur Bay Millenium Group, to provide a monument to St Ffraid on the site.

The proposed works consisted of building a low, mortared stonel wall and erecting a monument in the form of a Celtic cross in front of the existing mound.

Accordingly application was made to Cadw for Scheduled Monument Consent, which was granted with a proviso that the work was subject to monitoring by an approved archaeological contractor. Gwynedd Archaeological Trust were contracted to undertake this work.

An additional application to Cadw for grant aid was successful on the grounds that the proposed walling would reduce the impact of wind erosion on the mound and afford some protection against high tides and waves.

Watching Brief

At the inception of the contract the client provided Gwynedd Archaeological Trust with full documentation and plans of the proposed works. Preparatory work started on January 27th 2000 and involved the excavation of an 'L' shape foundation trench for the proposed wall (27.5m x 25m x 0.8m wide, average 0.2m deep, maximum depth 0.6m at *location D* and a square plinth base (2.0m x 2.0m x 0.7m deep) at *location B.* (see plan). Both were dug by a small, tracked mechanical excavator.

The north-south oriented trench (*a*), parallel and immediately adjacent to the promenade appeared, not surprisingly, to cut through entirely secondary deposits, and was at no point greater than 0.2m deep and excepting modern detritus, was archaeologically sterile.

The east-west trench (*b*) was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.6m at its east, uppermost end *location C*. This was to ensure stable foundations for the terminus of the wall and a concrete end post at this point. The section revealed a clean yellow sand interspersed with two bands of darker sand that represent successive dune surfaces. The darker, humic layers are indicative of an organic component within make up of the mound. They are insubstantial however, compared to other, more established turf horizons identified during the 1997 excavations, interspersed between phases of burial. The newly observed layers would appear to occur at an elevation that is equivalent to the grave lintels sealing burial B16, recorded during the 1997 excavations. However, there was no evidence of any burial or other disturbance within the trench, nor any evidence to date these layers.

Marram grass and turf from this trench was subsequently distributed across the north-east flank of the mound and within the eroded hollow created by the latter path to assist conservation.

The square trench (*c*) at *location B* was close to the base of the mound, and the deepest of the excavated trenches (0.7m). This revealed two angular slabs of local *schist* within a matrix of clean sand. This type of stone, which cleaves relatively easily, was used in the construction of many of the graves previously investigated at the site. As both fragments appeared to be lying at random, it is unlikely that either were part of an undisturbed cist burial, and there was no sign of any skeletal remains. However, evidence from the 1997 excavation trench some 8.0m south of here demonstrate that burial did occur at this level (cf. B8/10/11) and that this location is at the present interface between surviving and eroding contexts.

Neither stone showed any unusual distinguishing marks although the larger of the two stones (1.27m x 0.54m overall) may, due to its size and roughly trapezoidal shape, be a displaced, single lintel.

As there were no archaeological deposits visible to record in either trench concrete was placed into the trenches the same day. This was introduced via a dumper truck running between the café car park and the promenade on the north side of the mound, following the course of the infilled path.

The stone for the walls was similarly introduced onto site the same day. The stone was of the same type as that occurring locally i.e. schist, and was apparently retrieved from a demolished chapel in Holyhead.

No further damage to the mound was sustained during these operations.

Additional works to the rear of the mound were deemed to lie outside the Scheduled Area but are described briefly. To avoid café patrons, and others, taking a shortcut across the north side of the mound from the car park a new access was created to link the car park with an existing public footpath bounding the north side of the mound.

In addition to this a mound of sand derived from earlier works in the car park area was redistributed across the back of the mound to both help prevent erosion and discourage public access.

Conclusions

The present works revealed no diagnostic archaeological deposits, although it might have been reasonable to expect some evidence of burial, disturbed or otherwise, in the east- west oriented trench on the north side of the mound. Although levels (heights above sea level)

corresponding to archaeological deposits recorded in the 1997 excavation trenches have been interpolated, no linking stratigraphy has so far been observed to verify these suggested juxtapositions. There is the possibility however that the concentration of surviving burials, may lie further to the south, and even outside the Scheduled Area.

The revised delineation of the site through the construction of the new walls and the distribution of material on the north side of the mound should help to prevent further erosion, allow sand to accumulate, and new vegetation to establish.

References

Stanley W O, 1846, Towyn y Capel, *Archaeological Journal*, 223-228

Davidson A F, 1997, Towyn y Capel Archaeological Evaluation, *GAT Report No.325*