

**TOWYN Y CAPEL**  
**Trearddur Bay, Anglesey**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING  
AND CONSOLIDATION**

Report number : 440

91714



Prepared for  
**CADW: WELSH HISTORIC MONUMENTS**

February 2002

A. Davidson

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd  
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

## TOWYN Y CAPEL, TREARDDUR BAY, HOLYHEAD

### REPORT ON STORM EROSION OCTOBER TO DECEMBER 2001 (G1714)

#### INTRODUCTION

In late September, 2001, during a visit to examine the peat deposits on the beach at Trearddur Bay, it was noticed that wind erosion was removing sand from part of the mound at Towyn y Capel, and that the skeleton of a young child was eroding from the front face of the mound. An application was made to Cadw for grant aid to record the skeleton, and to stabilise the mound in the immediate vicinity. The application was successful, and recording and stabilisation work took place in early October. Since then occasional monitoring has been undertaken to determine the success of the consolidation.

This short report contains details of the work undertaken, a general review of the current condition of the site, and proposals for future management.

#### LOCATION

The site is located on the west coast of Holy Island, Anglesey, in the parish of Holyhead (SH 526789). It lies just above high water mark in the centre of an indented sandy bay called Trearddur. The land is low lying in the immediate vicinity of the mound, although there are rock outcrops. To the east, there is a tidal inlet which stops only some 450m east of the chapel site, and which almost cuts Holy Island into two parts.

The mound presently measures some 40 m north-south and 20 m east-west. The top lies 4.42 m above the adjacent promenade, and 6.05 m above the beach. The promenade lies at about 4.5 m O.D., so the top of the mound is roughly 9 m O.D. The site is crossed from west to east by a stone wall, which was built in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Towyn y capel, or Capel St. Ffraid, is the site of a former chapel and cemetery situated adjacent to the beach at Trearddur Bay, Anglesey. It is now visible as a sand hill lying just above the high water mark, and separated from the beach by a promenade. Numerous antiquarian and modern records testify to the steady erosion of the mound and the loss of skeletal material from within.

The bay is mentioned in an Elizabethan survey of 1562 as "Sancte Bride from Barfroo (Aberffraw) iiii miles a creke for small pickards" (Baynes 1921). The site is clearly indicated as a chapel on Saxton's map of 1578 where it is called "Cap. Llanfanfraidd", and similarly on Speed's map of 1610. There is a print of the site dated 1776 (reproduced in Davies and Rowlands 1986), which shows the ruins of a stone building standing almost to eaves height, with an east window, the remains of a south window lighting the sanctuary, and a south door at the west end. Unfortunately it is not possible to recognise any dateable architectural detail. The chapel is shown situated on the east end of a high isolated mound, with a raised track passing to the east between the mound and the tidal inlet on the east side. The sides of the mound are shown as quite steep, particularly at the east end, and one would assume that the height was accentuated in the drawing, however Pennant, who saw the chapel in 1781 when it was ruinous, but still complete, offers a description that confirms the view in the drawing:

*Go over Towyn y Capel, a low sandy common, bounded on one side by rocks, which in high winds the sea breaks over in a most awful and stupendous manner, and are justly dreaded by mariners. In the middle of the common is an artificial mound, on which are the ruins of Capel St. Ffraid. I have no doubt but that, prior to the chapel, it had been the site of a small fort, for I never saw artificial elevations given to any but works of a military kind. (Pennant 1781, 274-5).*

The dramatic height is again confirmed by a sketch by Lewis Morris, and by W O Stanley (1846) in an article in the Archaeological Journal, by which time approximately one third of the mound had been washed away.

Stanley provides a number of measurements of the chapel and cemetery. The chapel was still partly standing, and he records its approximate dimensions as "about thirty or thirty five feet by twenty two feet six inches". The walls were four feet thick, and the foundations extended to a depth of eleven feet into the mound. The mound was 31 feet above the surrounding sward, and 36 feet above the shore. The top was 50 feet in diameter, and the diameter at the base was 250 feet. The graves in the mound were arranged in four or five tiers, and the implication is that these were mostly cist graves, although plain burials were also found.

A series of articles in the Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society (Baynes 1921; Baynes 1928; Thomas 1937; Thomas 1938) record the continued erosion of the mound, and the exposure of large numbers of burials.

In 1980 a bronze penannular brooch of probable 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century date was found during the strengthening of the sea wall close to the mound (Lewis 1982).

## **PREVIOUS CONSOLIDATION WORK AND FIELD EVALUATION**

### **1991 Consolidation work**

In 1991 consolidation work was carried out to the mound by Anglesey Borough Council with grant aid from Cadw. The work consisted of laying *tensar* mat (open weave plastic matting) along the front of the mound, covering it with earth and sand, and re-seeding the area. Areas on top of the mound were also covered with matting. A watching brief conducted during the work established that the construction of the promenade had disturbed an area at least one metre inside the line of the present concrete surface.

### **1997 Excavations**

Excavations were undertaken in 1997 to determine the condition and nature of the archaeology, and to stabilise an area of erosion in which burials were visible. A trench 2m wide and 9m long was consequently excavated (Davidson 1997).

Remains of 16 burials were excavated in a trench 2m wide by 9m long. The lower two burials were in stone lined cists, whereas the upper burials were in simple dug graves. Radiocarbon dating of one of the cist burials dated the remains to the 7<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> century, and a dug burial was dated to 11<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> century.

The excavations revealed that there are significant archaeological deposits within the remainder of the mound. These are of particular importance for a number of reasons:

- there is good skeletal preservation, which allows for radiocarbon dating, identification of age and sex, the possibility of DNA analysis, and the identification of family groups;
- there is an excellent stratigraphical sequence which is directly linked to a chronological succession of burials on the site;
- the site, unlike many Early Medieval cemeteries, continued in use from the 7<sup>th</sup> century at least until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and quite possibly beyond. This provides excellent potential for recording changing burial practices.

### **2000 Consolidation work**

In January 2000 a stone wall was erected around the site, and a stone cross was erected on the seaward side of the mound (GAT Report 355). Unfortunately heavy storms destroyed the wall facing the sea during February 2000.

## CONSOLIDATION WORK IN 2001

### Introduction

The work was carried out on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2001. It was decided to keep excavation to a minimum, as the area round the skeleton was well grown with marram grass, and therefore relatively stable. Removal of the marram grass would have contributed to even greater erosion. The skeleton was eroding from a steep scarp, and any cutting back would have left a high, exposed section, which would have been difficult to consolidate (plate 1). As a result the exposed bones were cleaned up, and the full skeleton was not excavated. The bones were left *in situ*, enabling the skeleton to be more fully investigated in the future, if necessary.

The bones were eroding from a point on the seaward face of the mound, north of the wall which cuts across its southern edge (figure 1). This places them just south of the evaluation trench dug into the mound in 1997 (Davidson 1997). The bones lie at a height of 2.045m above the level of the promenade, within a layer of sand some 0.22m below the present surface of the mound. This layer contained a higher proportion of grit and gravel than the sand above.

### The burial

The remains were of a young child, laid on its back, with the legs bent (plate 3). The policy of not exposing the full skeleton made the interpretation of the remains a little unclear in places. The head was not exposed, but the right scapula projected from the mound. The spine and ribs had been exposed by the sand erosion, and many vertebrae from the lower back had slipped out of place down the slope (plate 3b). Elements of the pelvis seemed to be in approximately the correct position, and the feet were articulated (plate 3a). The exact position of the legs was uncertain, as the femurs were not exposed. Two long bones could be seen, one of which was a tibia, but the identification of the other was uncertain. The position of the feet in relation to the torso, and the angle of the tibia, suggests that the legs were bent up towards the body. All visible epiphyses were unfused, making bone identification difficult to a non-specialist, but proving that this was the body of a young child. From the small number of bones recovered, especially the scapula, the age of the child has been estimated at between 5 and 7 years (Pepper 2001).

The body was orientated north-west to south-east, with the head at the south-east. While rather close to a north-south alignment, the orientation is not beyond that possible if it was aligned on the mid summer or mid winter sunrise, and so might be considered an east-west alignment. The head, in early medieval burials, is usually at the western end, so this burial is atypical in this respect. The burials excavated in the evaluation trench (Davidson 1997) were much closer to east-west in orientation, and all had their heads to the west.

The loose, eroded bones were collected, as was the projecting scapula, as it was too vulnerable to protect effectively *in situ*. These bones are stored at the Trust. The remaining bones were preserved *in situ* by covering them with an empty sandbag and a layer of sand. If further work is necessary in the area it should be possible to expose the full skeleton.

A flat, tapering iron object was found c. 34cm north-west of the feet of the burial, at a level c. 20cm above the bones. The curve of the slope meant that this was not far below the surface, even though it seemed to come from a sand layer free of modern artefacts. The object was considerably corroded, but this is not necessarily a sign of antiquity in a salty environment.

### Consolidation

When recording was complete the area was consolidated with sandbags built up against the exposed face. The sandbags were disguised by covering them with beach sand (plate 2).

### Subsequent monitoring

Following the consolidation work the mound has been monitored at regular intervals. The sand which had been placed over the sandbags had, by early November, been washed and blown away, leaving the sandbags exposed. This looked unsightly, but nonetheless, the area of erosion was still protected.



However, storms in December removed some of the lower bags which were replaced. These were followed by significantly greater storms in January 2002, in which high tides backed by a strong westerly wind caused huge waves to wash over the mound. The stone wall (which was already part demolished – see above) was completely destroyed along the sea front. All the sandbags were washed from their location, and the remains of several skeletons were visible eroding from different areas of the mound. An attempt has been made to cover the worst of the areas with sandbags, but this can only be a very temporary solution.

## CONCLUSIONS

The consolidation options attempted to date, including stabilising the site with tensar matting and constructing a stone wall around the site, have all failed to prevent erosion by heavy seas, which can wash over the site tremendous force. The conclusion has to be that either the site is excavated to obtain the evidence before it is washed away, or the evidence is lost through steady erosion. A project design for excavation of the site is appended to this report.

## REFERENCES

- Baynes E N, 1921, Capel St. Ffraid, Porth y Capel, (Trearddur Bay), *Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society*, 57-65
- Baynes E N, 1928, Capel St. Ffraid, Towyn y Capel, *Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society*, 61-67
- Boyle S, 1991, Survey and Excavation at Towyn y Capel, Trearddur Bay, *Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society*, 15-21
- Davidson A, 1997 Towyn y Capel archaeological evaluation, GAT report no. 325
- Davies J C and Rowlands J, 1986, *Holy Island Ynys Cybi*
- Edwards N, 1986, Anglesey in the Early Middle Ages: the Archaeological Evidence, *Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society*
- Lewis J M, 1982, Recent finds of Penannular Brooches from Wales, *Medieval Archaeology*, 151-154
- Lunt W E, 1926, *The Valuation of Norwich 1254*
- Llwyd A, 1833, *History of Anglesey*
- Newman R and Parkin L, 1986, Atlantic Trading Estate Barry, *Archaeology in Wales* Vol. 26
- Pennant T, 1781, *Journey to Snowdonia*
- Pepper, D, 2001 A report for Gwynedd Archaeological Trust concerning human remains found at Towyn y Capel (archived under project no. G1714)
- Price C, 1987, Atlantic Trading Estate Barry, *Archaeology in Wales* Vol. 27
- Robertson D J, 1998 *Osteological Analysis of the Human Skeletal Remains, Towyn y Capel, Trearddur Bay* Arcus 408
- Stanley W O, 1846, Towyn y Capel, *Archaeological Journal*, 223-228
- Stanley W O, 1868, On the Remains of Ancient Circular Habitations in Holyhead Island, *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 398-9
- Thomas W B, 1937, Capel St. Ffraid, Trearddur Bay, *Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society*, 183
- Thomas W B, 1938, St. Ffraid Burial Mound, *Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society*, 90

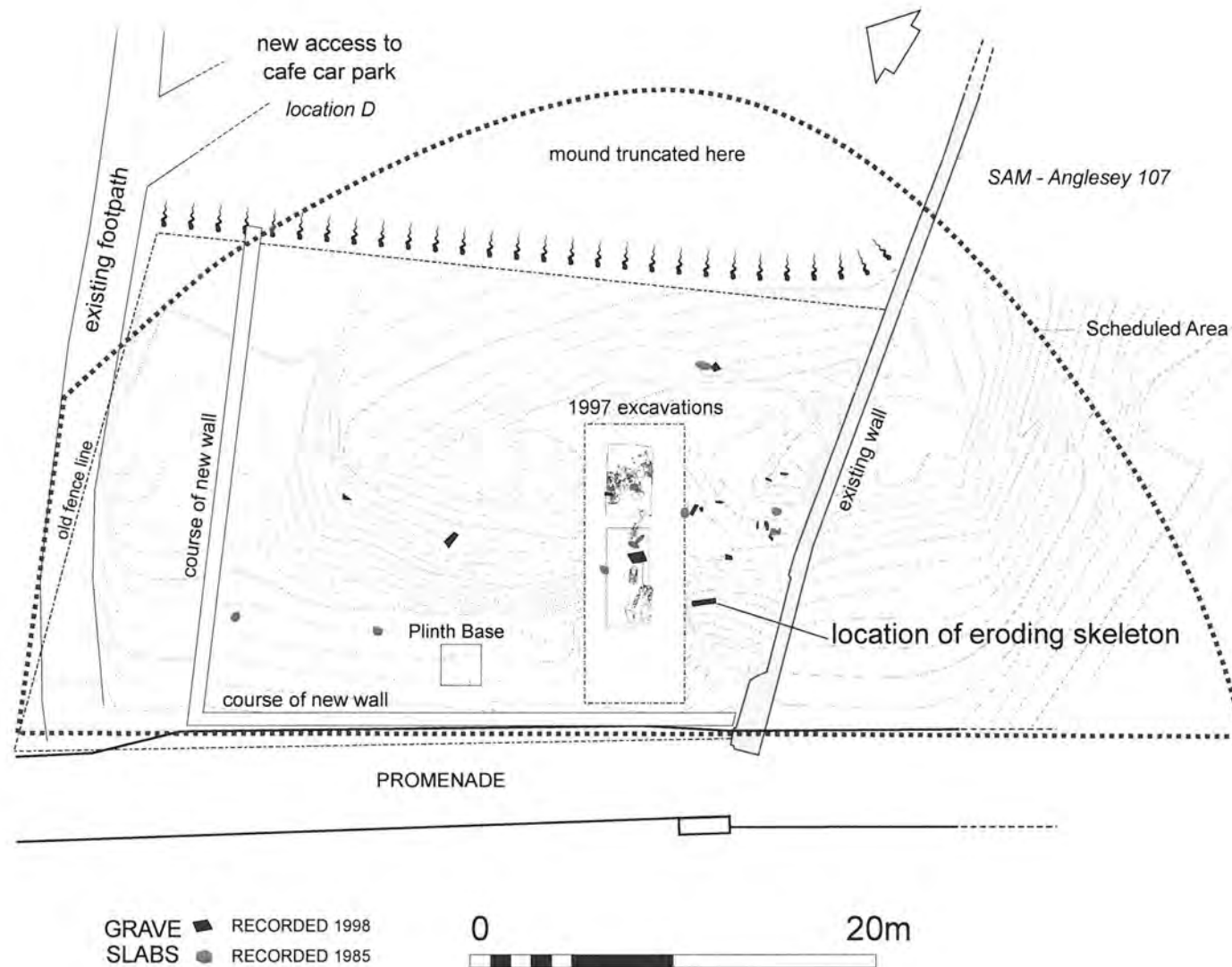


Figure 1: Towyn y Capel mound and location of exposed skeleton



Plate 1: Bones visible before investigation



Plate 2: Area after consolidation





Plate 3a: Detail of foot



Plate 3: Exposed skeleton after cleaning



Plate 3b: Detail of torso



[illegible]