ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION EXCAVATION AT THE SEA SHANTY, TYWYN Y CAPEL, TREARDDUR BAY, ANGLESEY

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GAT PROJECT G1846

Report No. 528

Prepared for
Mr J. Mabbs

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Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd
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1. INTRODUCTION

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust was asked by Mr J. Mabbs to carry out an archaeological evaluation excavation at The Sea Shanty, Trearddur Bay, Holyhead (Fig. 1). The work was required as part of the planning process as a result of an application to build one of three new dwellings in an area close to Towyn y Capel, the site of the Medieval chapel and cemetery of Capel Sant Ffraid, formerly a Scheduled Ancient Monument in the care of Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments (SAM A107).

2. SPECIFICATION AND PROJECT DESIGN

The requirement was to provide a field evaluation of the area of one of the three proposed new dwellings, being that nearest to the former Scheduled Ancient Monument, the mound of Towyn y Capel, which had contained the medieval chapel and burial ground.

The area investigated comprised the car park of a former café, The Sea Shanty, which had been demolished in 2003. This was a relatively new building that had replaced a smaller café building. This smaller building was still standing at the time when an earlier archaeological evaluation excavation of the area was carried out by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust in 1985, prior to the construction of the new café and an adjoining house (Boyle 1991). This earlier excavation concluded that there were no remains of archaeological value within the area now occupied by the car park. This area at that time comprised the gently sloping fringes of the mound on which the medieval chapel and burial ground had stood. This part of the mound was levelled to create the car park when the new café and house were constructed. Another trial excavation was carried out in 1997 on the seaward edge of the mound within the scheduled area to assess its nature and condition with a view to carrying out stabilisation and protection works. This demonstrated that there were several levels of burials and produced scientific dating evidence for the lowest levels of as early as the 7th century AD. Following these excavations protection work was carried out but continued damage by winter storms led to a programme of complete excavation of the burial ground on the mound in 2002 and 2003 designed to recover all possible information before its loss by erosion. These excavations showed that there was a buried land surface of about the 6th-7th century AD within the mound at a depth of some 2m and that this surface continued to the east sloping down to deeper levels as it did so. It was therefore considered possible that although the area to the east, comprising the south side of the café car park, had been levelled there might still be preserved remains at a greater depth because this area was closer to the core of the mound and to the medieval cemetery than the area investigated in 1985 (Fig. 2).

3. METHODOLOGY

The work was carried out on the morning of Wednesday 9th June 2004. The field evaluation comprised the excavation of one trench 6m long by 2m wide across the footprint of the proposed new dwelling. The trench was excavated by mini 360° excavator supplied and operated by Mr. Mabbs and directed by George Smith of Gwynedd Archaeological Trust. Excavation of the trench base and one section were then completed by hand. The trench position was measured in to adjoining boundaries, photographed, one section face drawn and described and then refilled.

4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Tywyn y Capel, or Capel St. Ffraid, is the site of a former chapel and cemetery situated adjacent to the beach at Trearddur bay, Anglesey. The chapel was dedicated to St. Ffraid (St. Bride/Brigid) of Kildare, Ireland and with probable origins in the 6th to 7th centuries AD. The site is now visible as a sand hill lying just above the high water mark, and separated from the beach by a promenade. There was once a more extensive mound that has since been washed a way by the sea. The chapel was still extant but ruinous in the later 18th century, recorded on an engraving of 1776. Some of the chapel still remained in the mid-19th century but this was finally destroyed in a storm in 1913. The remaining portion of the mound contains a number of burials and was a Scheduled Ancient Monument although erosion by wind, sea and visitor trampling continued. An assessment excavation was carried out by GAT for Cadw in 1997 (Davidson 1997). This identified two buried turf lines, representing periods of stable old land surface and separated by some 1.4m of blown sand. Simple dug graves were found inserted from the horizon of the upper turf line: stone slab lined long cist graves were found below the lower turf line and dated to between AD 555and 885. Despite the small scale of the excavations, a number

of points emerged which threw some light upon the nature of the remains. In about the 7th century AD the former mound was fairly low and some distance from the shore. The mound was covered in stable turf, and cist burials were placed in it. One of the burials from the upper land surface was dated to between AD 1030 and 1220. By the 12th to 13th century the mound had increased in height due to sand encroachment, and at about this time the stone chapel must have been built.

Following this excavation the mound was protected by a new wall and by ground netting. However, subsequent storms breached the adjoining sea wall, destroyed the protecting wall and again eroded the mound. It was then decided to excavate and record the remains before natural erosion removed all remaining evidence. Two seasons of work in 2002 and 2003 excavated and recorded the entire remaining extent of the mound, with its burials and other features. Removal of blown from above the upper of the two buried land surfaces revealed the entire surface of the surviving portion of the mound, as it existed in the second half of the 18th century when the ruins of the Medieval chapel still stood. A spread of large stone slabs was found along the eroded crest of the mound and scattered down its landward slope. These stones were associated with mortar fragments and probably represent a rough wall built around the chapel and shown in a 19th century engraving. Below this level thirty eight inhumations were excavated, forming the last major phase of use of the cemetery but not necessarily closely contemporary as some intercutting had occurred. These were simple dug graves, aligned east-west with the head to the west. Several burials survived only partially as a result of erosion of the mound or disturbance by later burial. Lower in the mound a number of stone-lined cist graves were found, again aligned east-west. These were well-preserved, buried by blown sand and in some cases a covering mound and edging stones survived. These graves had been inserted in a land surface which was shown to have been ploughed more than once and it may be that the cessation of ploughing was connected with deterioration in climate evidenced by the onset of sand deposition as the last ploughing had turned in a layer of clean, blown sand.

The excavations showed that the site was of great historical value. While a number of Early Medieval cemeteries are known from Anglesey skeletal evidence never survives in normal conditions. Here the alkaline nature of the shelly sand produced excellent preservation, providing an exceptional chance to study a sample of the medieval population. In addition the perfect preservation of the earthwork remains beneath the blown sand has provided valuable knowledge about the form of Early Medieval burial practices and demonstrated that there is a buried land surface here of great potential value for research.

5. THE EVALUATION EXCAVATION (Figs 3 and 4)

The uppermost layer in the excavated trench comprised about 200mm of compacted hardcore, being the surfacing of the existing car park. Beneath this was a layer of well humified sand about 140mm deep, comprising a buried topsoil, possibly that existing at the time the car park was constructed. Beneath this was a deep sequence of about 880mm of alternating thin layers of humic sand and clean sand representing periods of sand blows and short-lived stabilisation by vegetation growth. Beneath these layers, at a depth of 1220mm beneath the car park surface was found a more substantial buried soil layer, Context 5. This was only exposed in the deepest part of the trench at its east end and was exposed in section in a small hand dug trial pit (Fig. 5). This showed that it was a cohesive, well-humified dark brown sandy soil of about 220mm depth. At its base it merged into a lower layer of clean coarse sand. The surface of the buried soil was marked by a thin but distinct layer about 30mm deep of fine sand overlaid by coarse grit. The surface of this layer had a very thin ‘crust’. These features are interpreted as the result of a period of heavy rain and erosion that may have precipitated the start of a long sequence of renewed sand blows.

The only find from the buried soil was a small fragment of corroded iron, possibly a nail. There were also a few very small fragments of black material that were at first thought to be charcoal but which on closer study proved to be natural manganese concretions. There were then no finds that might suggest a date for the buried soil.

6. INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

The 1985 excavations at the north side of the car park revealed the following: ‘The stratigraphy consisted of up to 1m of sand mixed with a series of buried turf lines, and one lens of gravel, under which was up to 1.5m of clean yellow sand. Beneath this, and immediately above the water table (which was reached at 3m OD) was a

layer of grey sand 0.25m thick, undoubtedly a buried ground surface No graves or any other indications of either chapel or burial ground were discovered.' (Boyle 1991, 19).

The layers revealed in the 2004 trench can be identified as corresponding with those recorded in the top 1m of the 1985 excavation. A layer corresponding to the lower substantial buried soil found in 2004 was not specifically identified for separate comment in the 1985 excavation but a deeper soil layer, at the base of a sequence of thinner soil and sand layers is shown on the section drawing (Fig. 3).

In the excavations in 2002 and 2003 two major buried land surfaces were found during excavation of the mound, most of which consisted of layers of blown sand. The topmost buried soil was at about 1.4m below the top of the mound and has been identified as probably of 18th century date on the basis of pottery and clay pipes of that date on its surface. This land surface was interpreted as that existing at the time when the chapel and cemetery were abandoned but may have originated as that contemporary with the chapel itself, in about the 13th century. The lower land surface lay at about 0.9m below the upper land surface. It was shown to be the surface existing when a number of burials were made in stone-lined graves of Early Medieval type, expected to date to between 6th to 9th centuries AD.

These two land surfaces were of very similar colour and texture but were rather different in profile. The upper had a smooth, well-defined surface while the lower had an undulating and mottled surface. This was interpreted as the result of ploughing prior to the insertion of the graves and was confirmed when clear furrows were identified in plan. The buried surface found at the base of the trench in 2004 can be fairly confidently identified as equivalent to the upper surface found in 2002-3 because of its smooth and unploughed surface. It is possible that the land surface found at an even lower depth in the 1985 excavation, at approximately 2.5m below the surface, may be equivalent to the lower, Early Medieval land surface found in 2002-3. It was described as of 'grey sand' but the different colour can be ascribed to gleying of the iron in the soil because of the depth of the soil and waterlogging (Fig. 3).

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- As a result of the trial excavation it can be said that there are no horizons of archaeological importance within the top 1.2m below the car park surface.

- At 1.2m depth below the car park surface there is a buried land surface that is at least 18th century in date or possibly earlier. Although no graves, other features or artefacts were found in the 2004 trench, or in the equivalent layer in the 1985 excavations (Boyle 1991) the land surface may hold information about use of the area in connection with the chapel and burial ground.

- It is therefore recommended that there should be no disturbance lower than 1.2m below the present surface during any proposed construction work. This would ensure that any archaeological remains are preserved *in situ*.

8. DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

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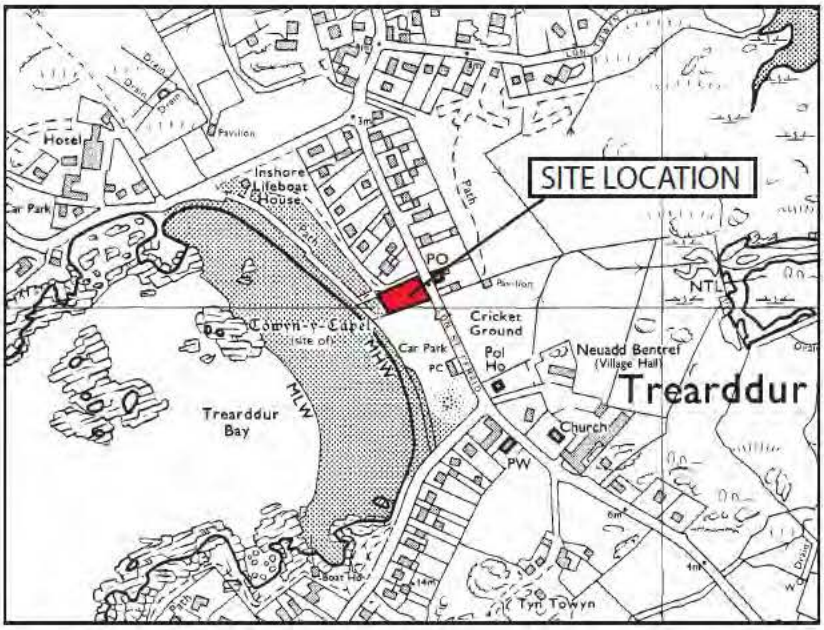
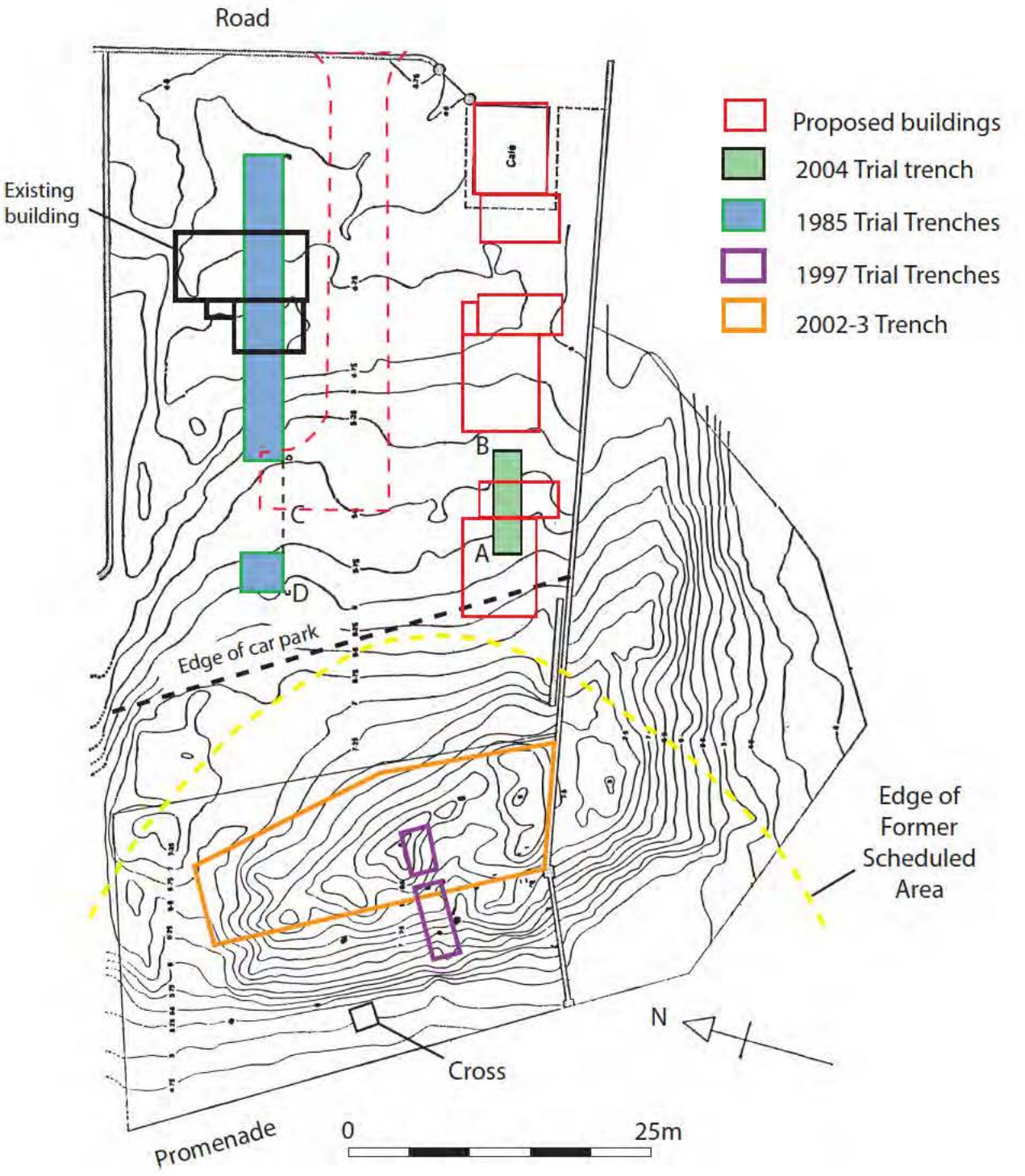
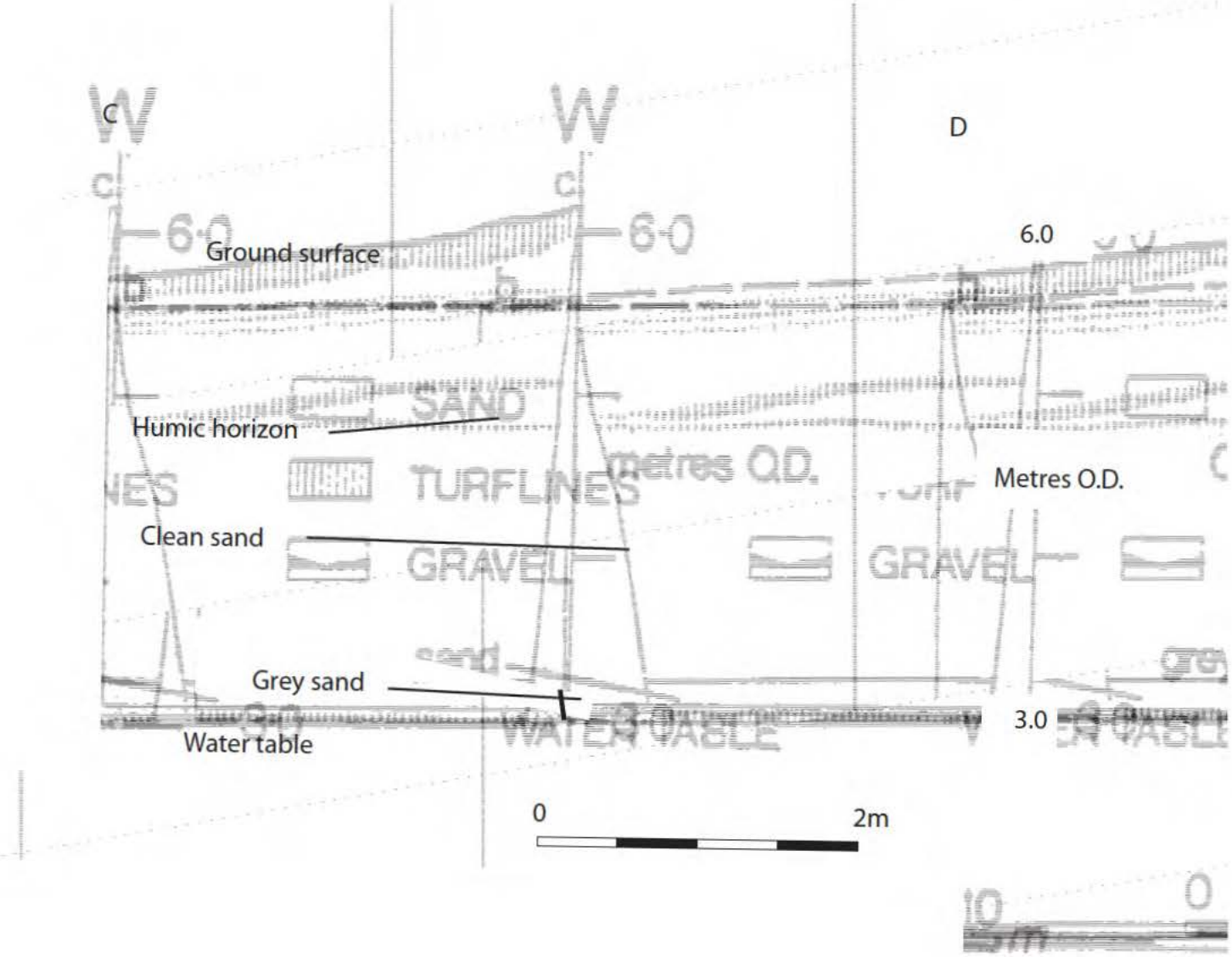
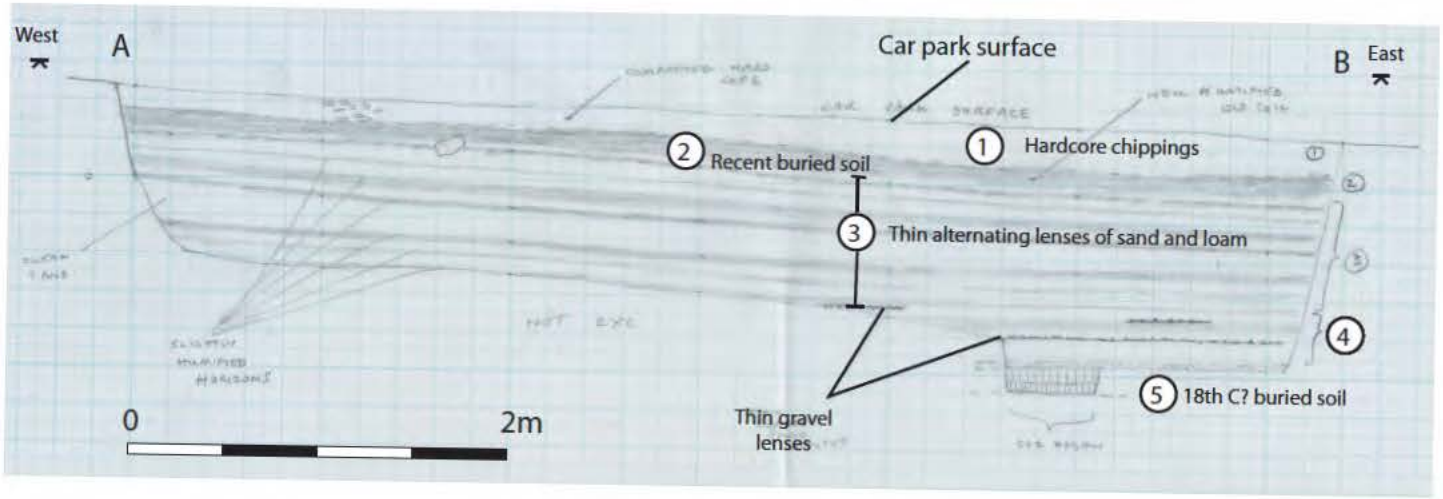


G1846 Trearddur: Fig. 1 General site location plan.
Based on OS 1:10,000 scale maps.



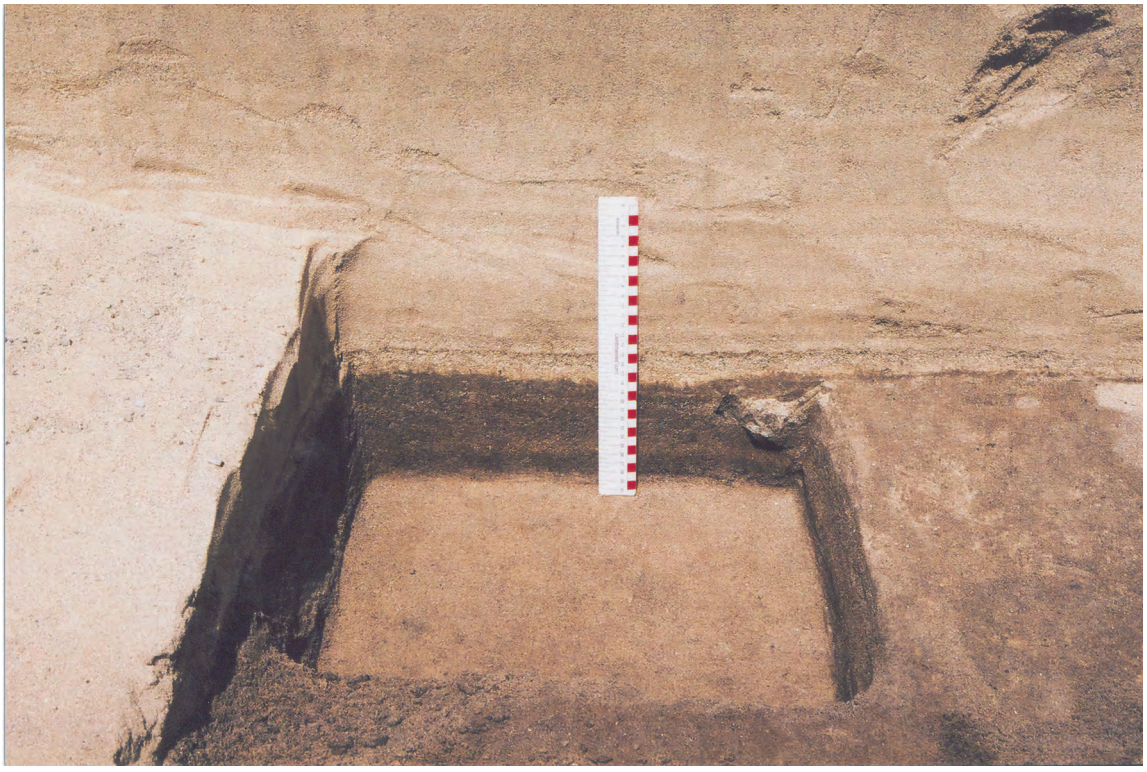
G1846 Trearddur: Fig. 2 Location of the 2004 trench in relation to the proposed development and to previous excavations on the site in 1985, 1997, 2002 and 2003. Based on the survey by S.D. Boyle (1991). Contours at 0.25m intervals.





G1846 Trearddur: Fig. 3a, Top: 1985 trial trench section
Fig. 3b, Bottom: 2004 trial trench section

G1846 Trearddur: General view of the excavated trench from the south-west. Scale with 20cm divisions



G1846 Trearddur: Fig. 5 Detail of the buried land surface, Context 5. Scale with 1cm divisions

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